

Capitalism without Capitalism. Fascism According to Žižek

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Recibido: 4 de agosto de 2020 / Aceptado: 18 de septiembre de 2020

Abstract. This article explores the theorisation of fascism across Žižek's oeuvre, from the 1980s to the present. It situates his Lacanian response to the problematic category of 'totalitarianism' in its original Yugoslav context, foregrounding the critical function of the aesthetic praxis of over-identification, embodied by the Neue Slowenische Kunst and Laibach, in Žižek's reflections. The article explores the manner in which Žižek provides distinctive answers to the classic topoi of critical theory's confrontation with fascism: the typology and taxonomy of fascisms; the nature of fascist fantasy; the perverted utopian content and popular impact of fascism. Above all, it investigates the central place that the theorisation of fascism has in Žižek's reformation of ideology-critique, especially in terms of the lessons it harbours about the functioning of the social law and the unconscious under capitalism.

Keywords: Fantasy; Fascism; Ideology; Nazism; Unconscious.

[es] Capitalismo sin capitalismo. El fascismo según Žižek

Resumen. Este artículo explora la teorización del fascismo en la obra de Žižek, desde la década de 1980 hasta el presente. Sitúa su respuesta lacaniana a la categoría problemática de "totalitarismo" en su contexto yugoslavo original, destacando la función crítica de la praxis estética de la sobre-identificación, encarnada por Neue Slowenische Kunst y Laibach, en las reflexiones de Žižek. El artículo explora la manera en que Žižek proporciona respuestas distintivas a los clásicos topoi de la confrontación de la teoría crítica con el fascismo: la tipología y la taxonomía de los fascismos; la naturaleza de la fantasía fascista; el contenido utópico pervertido y el impacto popular del fascismo. Sobre todo, investiga el lugar central que tiene la teorización del fascismo en la reforma que Žižek opera de la crítica de la ideología, especialmente en términos de las lecciones que alberga sobre el funcionamiento de la ley social y el inconsciente bajo el capitalismo.

Palabras clave: fantasía; fascismo; ideología; nazismo; inconsciente.

Sumario.

Cómo citar: Toscano, A. (2020). Capitalism without Capitalism. Fascism According to Žižek. *Res Pública. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 23(3), 367-373.

If capitalist ideology may be suitably defined as socially necessary false consciousness, how is philosophy to respond to a proliferating surplus of social illusions and to their coalescence into politically efficacious movements or organisations? The emergence of interwar fascisms has constituted a kind of generative impasse, or even trauma, for Marxism and critical theory –the realisation that, notwithstanding the instrumentality of this revolution without a revolution² for the reproduction of relations of exploitation amid organic crisis, *why* and especially *how* the socio-political contradictions of capitalism issue into the particular ideological *form* of fascism is something that an orthodox historical materialism found itself unable properly to account for. In the

twentieth century, fascism thus became the *locus classicus* for thinking the disjunction of the economic and the political, the asynchrony of base and superstructure, but also the rifts and asynchronies between the material and the psychic.

The symptomatology of interwar fascisms (especially their articulation with the experience of the war front, their distorted mimesis of socialist and communist mass movements, and their particular figures of leadership) make for striking dis-analogies with the present, and yet both the content of contemporary planetary reaction (fantasies of law and order, mythologies of racial superiority, desires for rebirth) and aspects of its form –its irreducibility to socio-economic causation, but also

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² Contrary to its rhetoric of intransigent radicality, fascism may be regarded as the paradigmatic "pseudo-event" in the field of the political (and the ideological), "a spectacular turmoil destined to conceal the fact that, on the most fundamental level (that of the relations of production), *nothing really changes*. The Fascist Revolution is thus the answer to the question: what do we have to change so that, ultimately, nothing will really change?" (S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso, 1999, p. 200).

many leitmotifs of its discourse and affective disposition— means that talk of fascism is not, *pace* the liberal mainstream, simply misplaced or, worse, hysterical. Elsewhere, I have tried to capture our ideological conjuncture through the notion of *late fascism*—a concept constructed both by resonances with and dis-analogies from some of the fundamental tenets that make up the legacy of critical theories of fascism. Unlike “classical” fascism, this late fascism is not inhabited by the non-contemporaneity or non-synchronicity that, according to Ernst Bloch, characterised the psycho-social bases of Nazism; if anything, it is nostalgic for the contemporaneity or synchronicity of industrial modernity (a kind of “white” Fordism). Contrary to Georges Bataille’s pioneering analyses of the psychological structure of fascism, contemporary reaction is not pervaded by reference to a heterogeneous, “sovereign” surplus that would be required to bolster the homogeneity of state and capital. And, against images of the totalitarian or even the “ethical” state, late fascism, moulded by the capillary influence of neoliberalism, is driven by a desire for the state but also by a hatred of government. Though it often fantasizes opposition to a fantastical red threat, in a kind of anti-communism without communists, late fascism reacts against what is already a (neo)liberal reaction to the revolutionary upsurges of the short twentieth century. In other words, late fascism is not primarily counter-revolutionary—and in that sense even less “necessary” or “instrumental” for a capital whose threat is principally endogenous. As I have put it elsewhere, “late fascism is not consolidated by a ruling class effort to use the autonomy of the political to deal with an external limit of capital but one of the offshoots of an endogenous protracted crisis of legitimacy of capital, in which the political is autonomous more at the level of fantasy than function”; it is “a symptom of the toxic obsolescence of the modern figure of the political, namely a «national and social state» in which citizenship is organised across axes of ethno-racial and gender identity, and articulated to labour”³.

For about four decades, the theorisation of fascism (and Nazism) has played a prominent part in Žižek’s work, often taking the guise of efforts to distinguish it from Stalinism, thus troubling or undermining the very category of “totalitarianism”. In this article, I want to explore some of the theses and insights that emerge from this sustained concern on Žižek’s part with fascist ideology, in view of evaluating the extent to which his thinking can contribute to the *aggiornamento* of critical theories of fascism in these “late fascist” times. As I hope to further detail below, the pertinence of Žižek’s thoughts on fascism for our own ideological interregnum originates at least in part from the specificity of the conjuncture in which his theorising developed, namely the Slovenia of the early 1980s. Theories of fascism (and Nazism), in their contrastive articulation with accounts of Stalinism, and within the broader purview of disputes about “totalitarianism”, emerged in the *sui generis* really-existing

socialism of what would be the final decade of Yugoslav self-management. The uses of theories of fascism, but also of fascist symbols (as in the proposals and provocations of the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* and Laibach, to which I’ll return), along with the possible lineaments of anti-fascism, are here articulated in a complex critical parallelogram: no longer the face-off between fascism and communism, or the shifting triangle of fascism, communism and liberalism, but the shifting fourfold of fascism (or Nazism) / Stalinism (or communism) / (capitalist) liberalism / “Really-existing Socialism” (Slovenia/Yugoslavia). It is from the “semi-peripheral” angle of vision of an outlier in the ambit of the “Second World” of postwar socialism, and in a decade marked by a profound ideological and social crisis (an uneven transition to liberal capitalism that would traverse the massacres of the civil wars, from which Slovenia itself was spared), that Žižek (alongside his philosophical comrade Mladen Dolar) would develop his characteristic claims regarding the need to supplement and shift the nostrums of the critique of political economy through Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Žižek’s inaugural conviction, which he shares with the arc of critical Marxisms from Horkheimer to Postone, is that fascism is fundamentally defined by its violent disavowal of its own continuity (or better, intensification) of the capitalist *status quo ante*. In an interview looking back at Laibach’s practical and aesthetic re-articulation of fascism, Žižek presents an admirably concise summary of the link between, on the one hand, the thesis that fascism is an intra-capitalist simulacrum of revolution and, on the other, the methodological imperative to draw on psychoanalysis in the theory of fascism, while also differentiating among fascisms—a task that remains crucial today. This takes place in four steps. First, the *Verneinung* of capitalism:

Fascisms are of different sorts. What unites them is a basic reflex: capitalism without capitalism. Fascism wants to preserve the basic relations of capitalism, but simultaneously to take away capitalism’s ideological and economic features, which bring individualism, disequilibrium, and so forth. The ideal of fascism is to have capitalism, in the sense of private ownership and relations of capital and labor, but capitalism that is liberated from all of its excesses: no class struggle, but rather cooperation between classes; no spiritless money, but rather patriarchal relations in which the capitalist is not a spiritless exploiter, but one who looks after the workers in a patriarchal and fatherly manner⁴.

Second, the wrenching contradictions latent in this disavowal, manifest in the wretched travesty of a third way between capitalism and socialism, and generating the indispensable mechanism of racial scapegoating:

Fascism’s goal is organic cooperation. Because this goal is impossible to reach, it is necessary to posit an enemy, onto whom the reason for the difficulty can be projected. Fascism is fond of corporeal metaphors for labor and cap-

³ A. Toscano, “Notes on Late Fascism”, in *Historical Materialism*, 2 April 2017, available at: <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism>

⁴ S. Žižek, “Everything Provokes Fascism” (interview with Andrew Herscher), *Assemblage* 33, 1997, p. 60.

ital, like “head” and “hand”; it likes to speak of society as an organism in which one social stratum is the head and another is the hand. Because fascism does not work and because the reason for its difficulties cannot lie in the antagonistic relations between head and hand, between capital and labor, the cause of the social disequilibrium is projected onto some cancerous formation, some external enemy. These are the Jews or an-other foreign people⁵.

Third, the plurality (and ultimately *duality*) of fascisms, opening up a controversial contiguity with reality-existing socialism⁶:

As analyses indicate, we have two types of fascism. The first type is a savage, self-annihilating fascism that cannot find an equilibrium and, at a certain point, goes crazy and has to destroy itself, burning itself up in self-annihilating wars (Hitler, Mussolini after 1940). The second type is a patriarchally peaceful, principled Catholic fascism (Dollfuss, Pétain in France, Mussolini through 1940) that lacks a self-annihilating dynamic and can peacefully persist to the end of time, as long as it is not buried by economic or other circumstances. Salazar was the longest ruling European dictator and president. Not only is this light fascism still rooted generally in Slovene consciousness, but Slovene self-management has also appropriated it for itself. In its struggle against the evil spirit of statist, evil, totalitarian socialism, self-managing socialism refers to and even reactivates a series of motives that are exceptionally close to light fascism⁷.

Fourth, the necessity of a psychoanalytic framework to excavate, traverse and inhibit the fascist fantasy:

The slogan of fascism is “enough of enjoyment, enough of debauchery: a victim is necessary”. The whole trick of fascism is certainly in an excess enjoyment, which itself produces the renunciation of enjoyment, the gesture of sacrifice. The Left was never ready to really confront this trauma. From this comes the Left’s persistent traumatization, how to kill fascism, and the persistent impotence of its abstractly enlightenment arguments against fascism, which simply do not function. The Left emphasizes as its great ascertainment that fascist ideology is irrationally authoritarian. Fascism tells you to obey, but it does not give reasons to obey. Obedience like this, however, has a mean-

ing. Fascism knows everything about this. The tragedy of the Left is that the more it criticizes those who are caught in fascism, the more it gives them arguments to be fascist.

This grounding insight into the psychic rationality of the irrational is at the heart of Žižek’s stress on the “impotence of the Left to confront what is, in psychoanalytic terms, the libidinal economy of fascism”⁸ – a statement that echoes a dissident strand of theorising about fascism, beginning in the interwar period with Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and Georges Bataille and reaching all the way to the 1970s and 1980s with the writings of Deleuze & Guattari or Klaus Theweleit. It is no accident, in this regard, that Žižek has defined the theoretical specificity of Lacanian psychoanalysis precisely by the way in which it distinguishes itself from the most sophisticated effort hitherto to combine –in a disjunctive synthesis or parallax as it were– the critique of political economy with the teachings of Freud, namely critical theory in its Adornian guise. The theory of fascism is both where Adorno’s appropriation of Freud’s theses on mass psychology shows its greatest promise and where it meets its ultimate “deadlock”. Žižek recognises and celebrates the superiority of Adorno’s work to all the impasses of an undialectical “Freudo-Marxism” incapable of grasping the negativity of the unconscious, or the operative antinomy of repression and sublimation. But he discerns in the German philosopher’s writing a tendency, in tension with his own critique of a normative bourgeois individuality, first, to draw from Freud’s theory a lesson about the need to strengthen and defend the *ego*, and, second, a correlated conception of fascism as fundamentally a matter of *manipulation*. A tendency to treat the manipulating subject of fascism as instrumental and its manipulated subject-object as a demolished ego prey to mass narcissism, results in a misprision regarding the very status of fascist ideology. For Žižek, this is encapsulated in the “pseudo-concept” of repressive desublimation (as opposed to Freud’s repressive *sublimation*), whereby the Id triumphs over the Ego in the same process by which society thoroughly subsumes, or indeed crushes, the individual. While repressive desublimation does foreground real processes and contradictions at work in “post-liberal” societies, the idea that behind fascist irrationality and the “de-psychologised” masses lies a kind of selfish calculation misses the specificity of fascism. The result, as Žižek notes, is that

Adorno refuses to treat fascism as an ideology in the proper sense of the term –that is, as a “rational legitimation of the existing order”. The so-called “fascist ideology” no longer possesses the coherence of a rational construct that calls for conceptual analysis and ideologico-critical refutation. “Fascist ideology” is not taken seriously even by its promoters; its status is purely instrumental, and ultimately

⁵ *Idem*. Elsewhere, Žižek terms this “the fundamental wager of fascism”, explaining it as the urge to preserve “the fundamental relation of capitalism (between Capital and labour), [so that] fascism wants to abolish its organic, anonymous and savage character; that is to say, to make of it an organic relation of patriarchal domination between the «hand» and the «head», between the leader and his escort, and replace the anonymous «invisible hand» by the will of the master. Now, insofar as we remain within the fundamental framework of capitalism, this operation does not work. There is always a surplus of the «invisible hand» that contradicts the design of the master” (S. Žižek, “The Fetish of the Party”, *The Universal Exception*, 2nd ed., London, Continuum, 2007, p. 85).

⁶ This distinction is also explored in terms of the broader thematics of social fantasy in “The Fetish of the Party”, p. 91. The article largely reproduces Žižek much earlier French article, “Le stalinisme: un savoir décapitoné”, *Perspectives psychanalytiques sur la politique, Analytica*, vol. 33, Paris, Navarin, 1983, pp. 57-83. The same volume also contains Mladen Dolar’s related “Prolégomènes à une théorie du discours fasciste”, pp. 39-54.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 62-3.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 63. Consider also the observation in “The Fetish of the Party”, according to which Marx “underestimated the importance of *fantasy* in the historical process, and the importance of inertia that does not dissolve due to its dialectization and whose exemplary intrusion would be what is called the «negative behaviour of the masses», who appear to be acting against their best interests and let themselves get entangled in diverse forms of the «conservative revolution»”.

relies on external coercion. Fascism no longer functions as a “lie necessarily experienced as truth” – the sign of recognition of a true ideology⁹.

The superiority of Lacanianism as ideology-critique to Adorno’s Freud-inspired theory of fascism lies then in the former’s capacity, based on the radical disjunction between ego-psychological categories and a concept of the unconscious grounded in a theory of the signifier, to move beyond “psychology” *stricto sensu*. What is at stake, therefore, is a different concept of “de-psychologization”: not the loss of the centrality and interiority of the ego analysed and mourned by Adorno, but the operation of a superegoic Law that stands in a signifying relation of exteriority to the subject. As Žižek observes,

the superego is a Law in so far as it is not integrated into the subject’s symbolic universe, in so far as it functions as an incomprehensible, nonsensical, traumatic injunction, incommensurable with the psychological wealth of the subject’s affective attitudes, bearing witness to a kind of “malevolent neutrality” directed towards the subject, indifferent to his empathies and fears. At this precise point, as the subject confront the “agency of the letter” in its original and radical *exteriority*, the signifier’s nonsense at its purest, he encounters the superego command “Enjoy!” which addresses the most *intimate* kernel of his being¹⁰.

This “extimate” working of fascism (to adapt a Lacanian notion), in which the social Law operates as a superego injunction, is for Žižek what repressive de-sublimation both gestures towards and misses. Lacan’s linguistic turn towards the “agency of the letter”, and to what Žižek pointedly calls “the strictly *non-psychological* character of the unconscious” is what allows the French psychoanalyst’s theory to capture the materiality of fascist discourse in a manner that critical theories of fascist manipulation do not. Similarly, the “distance” that a fascist subject may bear to his discourse is not a kind of instrumental mask – as Adorno’s notions of “simulation” or phony fanaticism may suggest – but an integral, and deeply troubling, dimension of fascist ideology itself. As Žižek notes, *contra* the very idea of ideology as manipulation:

“madness” does not turn on effectively believing in the Jewish plot, in the charisma of the Leader, and so on – such beliefs (in so far as they are repressed, that is, the unacknowledged fantasy-support of our universe of signification) form a constituent part of our ideological “normality”. “Madness”, however, emerges in the *absence* of such engaging beliefs, in the fact that “in the depth of their hearts, people *do not* believe that the Jews are the devil”. In short: madness emerges through the subject’s “simulation” and “external imitation” of such beliefs; it thrives in that “inner distance” maintained towards the ideological discourse which constitutes the subject’s social-symbolic network¹¹.

It is around this question of an inner distance that Žižek’s Lacanian theory of fascist ideology turns. Distance pertains to the functioning of social Law under fascist conditions; it is determined by the non-ideological kernel sustaining every fascist ideology; it allows us to identify the capture and colonisation of “popular” energies and desires by fascism; and, lastly, it is the target of that *sui generis* practical critique of fascist fantasy that Žižek, in his several writings on Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, terms *over-identification*. Let us consider these dimensions of distance in turn.

As Žižek details in his brief essay, “Why are Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* not Fascists?”, the social Law – which, as we’ve already seen, hinges on the superego injunction and the agency of the letter – cannot be considered as a homogeneous and complete whole. The Law, Žižek argues, is necessarily split, by virtue of its incompleteness, its being “not-all”, into “the written public Law and its underside, the «unwritten», obscene secret code”. This means that “explicit, public rules do not suffice, so they must be supplemented by a clandestine, «unwritten» code ... The field of Law is thus split into Law *qua* «Ego-Ideal», i.e., a symbolic order that regulates social life and maintains harmony, and its obscene, superegoic inverse”¹². It is in the obscene inverse of the written order, then, that any “rule of law” is supplemented (but also subverted) by a communal bond, whose substance is transgression:

What most deeply “holds together” a community is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community’s “normal” everyday rhythms, but *rather identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law’s suspension* (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of enjoyment). [...] The Nazi community relied on the same solidarity-in-guilt adduced by participation in a common transgression: it ostracized those who were not ready to assume the dark side of the idyllic *Volksgemeinschaft*, the night pogroms, the beatings of political opponents – in short, all that “everybody knew, yet did not want to speak about aloud”¹³.

It is worth noting here the shifts or hesitations in Žižek’s own accounts of the play of Law and distance in fascist ideology. In passages like the one above, it seems that fascism (in its Nazi guise), still operates across the two registers of public law and common transgression. Elsewhere, fascism seems to be marked by a peculiar

not capturing the coexistence of manipulation with integral, fanatical belief: “in spite of all his professed manipulation [as described in *Mein Kampf*], Hitler actually *completely believes his own views*”. S. Žižek, “Ideology, Cynicism, Punk” (1983), in *NSK – from Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst – an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer and Anthony Gardner, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2015, p. 103. For a lengthy discussion of Adorno’s work on fascism, which complements Žižek’s account with a deeper exploration of the differences between *The Authoritarian Personality* and the 1951 essay on “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda”, as well as a Lacanian reframing of Freud’s mass psychology, see, in the same volume, Mladen Dolar’s “Fascism through Psychoanalysis”, 1982, pp. 50-65.

¹² S. Žižek, “Why are Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* not Fascists?”, in *The Universal Exception*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-4.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁹ S. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London, Verso, 1996, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22. In an early piece on Laibach and NSK, Žižek instead briefly criticises Adorno’s notion of fascist manipulation, for

implosion of this distance, and the “fundamental trait of the totalitarian social link” is defined as “the loss of distance between the fantasy that gives the indicators of the enjoyment of the subject and the formal-universal Law that governs social exchange”¹⁴. Indeed, loss of distance is here the differentiating factor between the “two” fascisms (nihilist-accelerationist fascism or “pure totalitarianism”, on the one hand, and “light fascism”, on the other), which we already encountered above:

The fantasy is “socialized” in an immediate way insofar as the social Law coincides with the injunction, “Enjoy!” It begins to function as a superego imperative. In other words, in totalitarianism, it is really the fantasy that is in power and this is what distinguishes totalitarianism *stricto sensu* (Germany in 1938-45, the Soviet Union in 1934-51, Italy in 1943-45) from the patriarchal-authoritarian regimes of law-and-order (Salazar, Franco, Dolfuss, Mussolini until 1943) or from “normalized” socialism. Such pure totalitarianism is necessarily self-destructive; it cannot be stabilized; it cannot arrive at a minimal homeostasis that would allow it to reproduce in a circuit of equilibrium. It is constantly shaken by convulsions¹⁵.

Though Žižek does elsewhere go against the grain of the liberal-vindicationist theory of totalitarianism, here the dialectic of Law and fantasy, together with the collapse of distance, is seen to provide a theoretical definition of totalitarianism itself as “the social order where, although there is no law (no positive legality with universal validity, established in an explicit form), all that we do can at any moment pass for an illegal and forbidden thing. Positive legislation does not exist (or if it does, it has a totally arbitrary and non-obligatory character), but despite this we can at any moment find ourselves in the position of the infractor of an unknown and non-existent Law”¹⁶.

While maintaining an ambivalence about the workings of distance between Law and its underside in fascist ideology and fantasy, Žižek does identify another dimension of distance that provides an insight into the libidinal integument of fascist ideology, namely the distance between ideology and the non-ideological. Contrary to the (liberal) idea that Nazism or totalitarianism is defined by the integral politicisation of life, for Žižek the binding power of fascist ideology lies precisely in the specific way it mobilises a general feature of ideology’s efficacy, namely the idea that we can always maintain a distance from it, that beneath ideology there is something (human, natural, spiritual) that exceeds it, an irreducible *quid*. Commenting upon one of Hitler’s speeches, as well as the *Führer*’s preference for Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* over the composer’s more explicitly mytho-political operas *Die Meistersinger* or *Lohengrin*¹⁷, Žižek advances the following thesis about ideology in general and fascist ideology in particular:

in every ideological edifice, there is a kind of “trans-ideological” kernel, since, if an ideology is to become operative and effectively “seize” individuals, it *has* to batten on and manipulate some kind of “trans-ideological” vision which cannot be reduced to a simple instrument of legitimizing pretensions to power (notions and sentiments of solidarity, justice, belonging to a community, etc). [...] The point is thus not that there is no ideology without a trans-ideological “authentic” kernel but rather, that *it is only the reference to such a trans-ideological kernel which makes an ideology “workable”*... So, paradoxically, the dangerous ingredient of Nazism is not its “utter politicization” of the whole of social life but, on the contrary, the suspension of the political through the reference to an extra-ideological kernel, much stronger than in a “normal” democratic political order¹⁸.

This realisation also prepares an understanding of the third dimension of distance that Žižek identifies in the workings of Fascist ideology, namely its relationship to “utopian” possibilities. Following the path already traced by Bloch in *The Heritage of Our Times* and other texts, Žižek repeatedly counters the false liberal wisdom according to which all desires for community, collectivity or authenticity are tainted by their association with fascism. The under-determined character of the non-ideological kernel accounts for why “ruling ideas are *never* directly the ideas of the ruling class”¹⁹, making the domain of fantasy a field of political and ideological struggle:

Of course Fascist ideology “manipulates” authentic popular longing for a true community and social solidarity against fierce competition and exploitation; of course it “distorts” the expression of this longing in order to legitimize the continuation of the relations of social domination and exploitation. In order to be able to achieve this effect,

nian theory, to the distinction between gaze and voice, on the one hand, and writing and the matheme, on the other. As Žižek observes: “the Fascist discourse’s medium par excellence is the living speech that hypnotizes by its very performative strength, without taking into account its signified content. To cite Hitler himself: «All great events that have shaken the world have been provoked by speech and not writing». By contrast, the medium par excellence of Stalinist discourse is writing. The Stalinist is almost obliged to read his very discourses in a monotonous voice, clearly attesting the fact that we are dealing with the reproduction of a prior writing. [...] In Lacanian theory, the Real has two principal sides. One is the Real as a reminder that is impossible to symbolize, a scrap, the refuse of the symbolic, a hole in the Other (in other words, the Real aspect of *objet a* the voice, the gaze...; the other is the Real as writing, construct, number and matheme. These two sides perfectly correspond to the opposition fascism/Stalinism. The hypnotic power of Fascist discourse is supported by the «gaze» and especially the «voice» of the leader. The support of Stalinist discourse is, in turn, the writing” (S. Žižek “The Fetish of the Party”, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-1. Cf. also Dolar, “Prologomènes à une théorie du discours fasciste”, *op. cit.*, p. 42).

¹⁸ S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 2nd ed., London, Verso, 2008, pp. 27-9.

¹⁹ S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, *op. cit.*, p. 186. This resonates with Étienne Balibar’s argument, according to which the dominant ideology is “a specific universalization of the imaginary of the dominated”. Cf. “The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser”, in *The Althusserian Legacy*, E. Ann. Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (eds.), New York, Verso, 1993, p. 13.

¹⁴ S. Žižek, “The Fetish of the Party”, *The Universal Exception*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹⁶ *Idem*.

¹⁷ Though I cannot explore it in any depth here, the non-ideological kernel peculiar to fascism and Nazism is also associated, via Laca-

however, it none the less had to incorporate authentic popular longing²⁰.

That is why “the non-ideological Utopian character of this longing is to be fully asserted”²¹. In other words, the non-ideological is both indispensable for the functioning of (fascist) ideology, and the prize of its practical critique. Žižek, who repudiates the very category of the “proto-fascist”²², takes this to be the case not just for the longing for community, bodily discipline or the political aesthetics of the masses, but also, in the philosophical domain itself, for *decision*. This is the crux of his intervention into the debate over Heidegger and Nazism, where he presents the “second” decisionist Heidegger (the first being identified with the analytic of Dasein, the third with the *Kehre* and a depoliticising *Gelassenheit*) as both the one who threw his cards in with Nazism and the one who was closest to a true grasp of political subjectivity. Against a Habermasian criticism of Heidegger which treats the decisionist dimension of *Being and Time*’s account of the historicity of Dasein as proto-Nazi, Žižek regards it as simply a condition of the political that cannot be conceded to the right. Whence his assessment of the philosophical-political regression that Heidegger’s famous “turn” represented:

what Heidegger later dismissed as the remainder of the subjectivity transcendental approach in *Being and Time* is what he should have stuck to. Heidegger’s ultimate failure is not that he remained stuck in the horizon of transcendental subjectivity, but that he abandoned this horizon all too quickly, before thinking out all its inherent possibilities. Nazism was not a political expression of the “nihilist, demonic potential of modern subjectivity” but, rather, its exact opposite: a desperate attempt to avoid this potential²³.

We can see here once again the model of fascism or Nazism as a revolution without, or rather *against* revolution, a violent flight forward and away from true philosophical and political radicality, ultimately undergirded by the murderous displacement of class antagonism onto genocidal racial hatred²⁴.

Now, if ideology’s inner distance (from its non-ideological kernel) is both a condition of possibility for its efficacy and a site of political conflict (over the articulation of popular fantasy, so to speak), it is also the locus for the operations of ideology-critique. But if the rationalist-Marxist unmasking of fascist manipulations and the effort to restore the bourgeois individualist ego-ideal are doomed, what options remain open. In the particular ideological observatory and laboratory that was 1980s Slovenia, Žižek found this opening in the performances and interventions of Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, capturing them under the heading of *over-identification*. I am not so interested here in Žižek’s spirited defense of Laibach’s signifying strategies –which goes as far as ascribing to them a counter-intuitive anti-fascist valence²⁵– but in what it further reveals regarding the nexus of ideological “distance” and our relation to fascism. For Žižek, Laibach provides a model for acting upon (but also *with*) fascism not at the level of its instrumental intentionality, but of fantasy and enjoyment, welding Brechtian traditions of estrangement with an aesthetic-performative equivalent of the function of the Lacanian analyst. The “historical meaning” of the Slovenian group, according to Žižek, lies in “providing a model of that which in Lacanian terminology would be said to go beyond the fantasm. Laibach confronted us with a fantasmic logic, with fascist enjoyment, and simultaneously, they presented this in such a way as to defamiliarize it and enable us to keep our distance from it”²⁶. But perhaps “keeping one’s distance” is still a misleadingly Enlightenment, liberal formulation? For over-identification truly to operate it surely cannot simply amount to a vanishing mediator towards a position of enlightened lucidity; fantasies must be assumed and traversed, not merely named or performed “at a distance”. Here, we need to attend to the way in which over-identification is precisely pitted against “ironic” distance as a variant of that inner distance that according to Žižek, as we saw, defines the very efficacy of ideology. Reflecting on Laibach, Žižek asks us to explore whether variants of ideological distance do not in the end define *both* fascism as the supposed *nec plus ultra* of ideological fanaticism and a contemporary “post-ideological” condition defined by ironic or cynical distance towards publicly affirmed values.

What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense, the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: it “frustrates” the system (the ruling ideology)

community. The difference between fascism and Communism is thus “«formal-ontological», not simply ontic”. Cf. S. Žižek, “Prolegomena to a theory of Kolkhoz musicals”, in *The Universal Exception*, *op. cit.*, p. 127. For an elucidation for how this displacement of class onto race is analysed by Žižek through the framework provided by Lacan’s theory of the four discourses (Master, University, Hysteric, Analyst) –as well as how this theory allows for a critical discrimination between Nazism and Stalinism– cf. Chapter 2 of Jodi Dean, *Zizek’s Politics*, London, Routledge, 2006.

²⁵ Cf. especially his “Letter from Afar” (1987), in *NSK – from Kapital to Capital*.

²⁶ S. Žižek, “Everything Provokes Fascism”, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁰ S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-5.

²¹ *Idem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 139. Cf. also S. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London, Verso, 2008, p. 138, as well as the whole of Chapter 3, on Heidegger’s philosophical commitment to National Socialism.

²³ S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁴ “[T]he «Jew», in playing the role of the disruptive element and introducing «from outside» the surplus of class struggle, is really the positive repudiation of class struggle and of the notion «there is no class relation». It is for this reason that fascism, as distinct from socialism, is not a sui generis discourse, a global social contract, determining the whole social edifice. We could say that fascism, with its ideology of corporativism, of returning to the prebourgeois master, causes in some way an interference with Capitalist discourse without changing its fundamental nature – the proof being precisely the figure of the Jew as enemy” (S. Žižek, “The Fetish of the Party”, *op. cit.*, p. 84). Elsewhere, Žižek notes how Nazism displaces class struggle on to racial struggle and thereby obfuscates its true site. What changes in the passage from Communism to Nazism is the *form*, and it is in this change of the form that the Nazi ideological mystification resides: political struggle is naturalized into racial conflict, the (class) antagonism inherent to the social edifice is reduced to an invasion by a foreign (Jewish) body which disturbs the harmony of the Aryan

precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but represents an over-identification with it—by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency²⁷.

This suspension, however, is not an unmasking, but works rather by analogy with how a Lacanian analyst frustrates transference, making possible the irruptive realisation that the Big Other does not exist. This is the sense in which Laibach's over-identification with the fascist kernel of enjoyment underlying the ruling ideology (in their case, "really-existing socialism", i.e. an ideology grounded on official anti-fascism), "does not function as an answer but a question", compelling us "to take up our own position and decide upon our desire"—in what may ultimately be regarded as a Lacanian return to a Kantian definition of Enlightenment as emergence from (or at least interruption of) our self-incurred immaturity²⁸.

By way of conclusion, we can ask whether our current predicament gives the strategy of over-identification any real promise or efficacy. One of the most evident, and commented upon, features of our late fascism (in its "alt-light" and "alt-right" avatars) is the blurring, so to speak, of irony and fanaticism, the germination of something like fanaticism in the guise of irony—an operation on the inner distance of ideology that does not fully chime with Žižek's "classical" typological distinction between "light fascism" and totalitarianism. Further investigation of the way in which Lacanian theory can shed light onto the workings of late fascism would require thinking of the latter not just in terms of its dis-analogies from various instances of fascism in power but perhaps also in its ideological kinship with

fascism as an ideological movement that had yet to fuse with the state and the social Law. This is the fascism that Mussolini in 1921 presented as a "super-relativist" movement, in keeping with the modern supremacy, including and especially in the sciences, of relativity over objectivism. As he declared, with florid bombast:

For those who boast of always being the same as themselves, nothing is more relativistic than the fascist mentality and fascist action. If relativism and universal movementism (*mobilismo*) are equivalent, we fascists, who have always manifested our unscrupulous arrogance (*strafottenza*) towards the nominalisms to which the sanctimonious bigots of other parties nail themselves, like bats to rafters; we, who've had the courage of breaking into smithereens all the traditional political categories and calling ourselves, depending on the moment, aristocrats and democrats, revolutionaries and reactionaries, proletarian and anti-proletarian, pacifists and anti-pacifists, we are really the relativists *par excellence* and our action resonates directly with the most current movements of the European spirit²⁹.

To borrow from Hans Vaihinger, the post-Kantian philosopher whose reading of Nietzsche Mussolini leans on in this same article, this is a fascism of the *as if*, a fascism, so to speak, of the enjoyment of the very distance that makes ideology function. To the extent that shades of this reactionary relativism are a (more or less conscious) *leitmotiv* in the twenty-first century far right, they will test the capacities of both the Lacanian theory of fascism advanced by Žižek, and of the strategy of over-identification that accompanies it.

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²⁷ S. Žižek, "Why are Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* not Fascists?", *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁸ *Idem*. Parenthetically, it may be noted that Žižek's own interventions into the ideological field have been far more fruitful when he has

functioned as a question than when, in the stance of the "public intellectual", he has been tempted to provide answers.

²⁹ B. Mussolini, "Relativismo e fascismo", *Il Popolo d'Italia*, n. 279, 22 November 1921, p. 8.