Ideology in a Post-truth World

Paper presented at Nottingham Trent University, 24th April 2018.

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Abstract

Is it still meaningful to speak of ideology in a post-truth world? If so, how does it operate? The paper begins with a discussion of the controversial topic of the veil and argues that ideology functions as its own kind of veil in reproducing the idea of the Other as a figure that is concealing a disturbing excess. Drawing on Hegelian and psychoanalytic thought, it then moves to a consideration of ideology’s ambiguous framing of Otherness and antagonism as reflected in such events as the liberal scandal over Lee Harper’s *Go Set a Watchman* and the recent responses to the 2017 New Year’s Eve assaults in Cologne. Finally the paper explores the emergence of Trump as a new type of figure that is indicative of the way in which ideology sustains itself through fake antagonism and the (regulated) violation of its implicit rules.

Is it still meaningful to speak of ideology in a post-truth world? In the contemporary era, where capitalism is largely accepted as the basic horizon of social organization, the power of ideology lays not so much with the mystification of underlying interests but rather with its ability to generate mystery itself, to create the very sense of the hidden. Ideology is not simply a mask but rather a process of masking that itself conjures the spectre of a disturbing excess. Freud picked up on this indirectly in his account of his patient, the wolfman. The wolfman recounts a dream he had about wolves sitting in a walnut tree outside his bedroom window. There were two especially strange qualities regarding the wolves’ appearance: ‘first, the utter calm of the wolves, their motionless stance, and, second, the tense attentiveness with which they all stared at him’ (Freud, 2002: 231). During the course of analysis, Freud establishes that the wolfman’s dream recalls an actual memory from when he was around eighteen months old in which he awoke in the same bedroom as his mother and father to witness them engaged in a sexual act (coitus a tergo). What Freud discovers in the dream is a dialectical reversal: the very motionless of the wolves as an indicator of the ‘violent movement’ of sexual congress (Freud, 2002: 233). This logic of dialectical reversal is similarly played out in the mask. In its very fixity of expression, the mask reflects an unspeakable agitation, an unbearable excess, that threatens the symbolic order. Put in other terms, the inexplicable blankness of the mask is something that evokes the (Lacanian) subject in all its horror of unfathomable desire: the horror of the gaze. This is what the character Ebenezer Scrooge found most terrifying about the final spectre, the ghost of Christmas future, in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. It was not any positive or particular about the figure but rather a negative excess of impenetrable gaze that was beyond any form of mediation:

 ‘It thrilled him (Scrooge) with a vague uncertain horror, to know that behind the dusky shroud, there were ghostly eyes intently fixed upon him, while he, though he stretched his own to the utmost, could see nothing but a spectral hand and one great heap of black’

The veil similarly reflects this power of symbolic disturbance and in this way continues to be at the centre of global tensions between the Western and Eastern cultures. In very general terms, both can be seen as different modes of response to a troubling excess that inheres within humanity – the persistence of the subject - but which tends to be externalized/projected onto womanhood (the figure of woman as both muse and mystery). In Eastern (orthodox Islamic) discourse, the veil can be seen as performing this function of closing off, and thereby reproducing the sense of excess as seen to be embodied in womanhood (desire, deception, infidelity and so on, threatening to explode the socio-moral order from within). Yet we should avoid the trap of viewing the veil as something that equates simply to female oppression (thereby lending tacit support to Western ‘freedom’). As Shirazi (2003) and others have pointed out, the veil has a nuanced history that reflects a range of meanings. In Algeria and Iran, for example, the switching from white to black veils and the wearing of the chador symbolized opposition to French and British/Western imperialism respectively. And if we add to this more recent phenomena such as *Pussy Riot*, the *Million Mask March* and the various *Black Bloc* movements we can see a process in which masking and anonymity can become a way of symbolizing universal struggle/rage against the particularism of an existing social order/power formation. The veil in this sense does not have an essential or singular meaning but depends rather on that fantasmatic economy that underpins and articulates it.

Something similar can be said about Western (liberal) discourse. Unveiling can indeed be seen as a way of overcoming repression along the lines of a long-standing tradition of feminist resistance against such things as ‘tightlacing’ (e.g. the Rational Dress Movement) and the restrictive female dress codes imposed by institutionalized culture. At the same time, we can also discern a process where projected female excess tends to be hidden in plain view. Through various media-generated idealizations the feminine is subjected to all kinds of (explicit and implicit) regulation/manipulation through the socio-sexual imaginary, the injunctions to enjoy female freedom (professional career, motherhood, consumption etc.) along with the various forms of the ‘new woman’ and so on. In both Western and Eastern discourses there exists clear tendencies to reproduce idealizations of the feminine that women then become guilty of not matching up to. These modes of projected excess are part and parcel of the so-called clash of civilizations. Looked at in this context, the veil appears as more ambiguous. The choice is not a straightforward binaristic one: either to wear the veil (e.g. to stand with Islamic resistance/dignity against Western imperialism and decadence) or to not wear the veil (e.g. to stand with Western emancipation/enlightenment against Islamic despotism and repression). There is a third option that effectively involves choosing the ambiguity itself beyond any cultural standpoint of interpretation: that is, to find ways of wearing, designing or indeed refusing the veil in ways that seek to undermine/disrupt the fantasmatic economy of projected female excess in all cultures.

This type of ambiguity is used to good effect in *Star Wars* and the contrasting figures of Darth Vader and Kylo Ren who in a way function as opposing versions of Oedipus. In *Return of the Jedi*, Darth Vader turns towards light side of the force by throwing down the Emperor and thereby saving Luke Skywalker. In the closing scenes of the film, Vader asks Luke to help him remove his mask so that he may look upon him with his own eyes. Although ravaged by age and a lifetime of commitment to the dark side, Vader’s face nonetheless appears as a warm and kindly one: father and son are thus reconciled in the light side of the force. In the *Force Awakens*, Kylo Ren is unmasked twice. In the first scene, Ren is interrogating Rey and trying to retrieve information from her regarding the missing piece of the map that shows the location of Luke Skywalker. Ren accuses Rey of still trying to kill him. She replies that it is hard not to want to kill a creature that is hunting her in a mask. Ren then removes his mask and they engage in a mind-force battle in which Rey eventually gets the better of Ren: ‘you are afraid that you are not as strong as Darth Vader’. Along the lines of the Vader/Skywalker scene, Ren is exposed as a vulnerable and essentially human figure prone to self-doubt and so on.

The second unmasking, however, is more interesting. On planet K2, Han Solo confronts Kylo Ren (who is also his son, Ben Solo) and tells him that he does not need the mask. Ren removes the mask and Han Solo implores his son ‘to embrace the light within’. Ren again appears vulnerable and subject to self-doubt. He asks Han to help him overcome this doubt by offering him his light sabre. Yet instead of releasing the weapon, Ren hardens his gaze as the light fades from the sky and activates the weapon killing his father in act of resolute patricide. As he dies, Han touches his son’s face in a paternal gesture of love as if once again to find his ‘real son’ Ben Solo behind the public façade of Kylo Ren. This gives the mask a different aspect. It is not that behind the abstract horror of the mask there awaits a warm authentic self that needs to be liberated (by the enlightened); the true horror is rather this authentic self as such without any depth or hidden human dimension. Here the mask effectively functions in reverse: instead of making Kylo Ren more terrifying, the mask serves as a way of commuting the oedipal rage and subjective violence more acceptable, screening its intensity. The removal of the mask, and the resulting intimacy of the gaze is something that renders the killing of Han Solo far more shocking. This familial intimacy is precisely the form of perverse trauma (with the Other) and becomes a way of affirming the unbridgeable abyss between father and son. The particularity of Ren’s face thus resolves into its own objective ‘mask’ (fulfilment) of evil.

Saabs and Volvos

The Unbearable Sameness of Being

Fredrik Backman’s Scandinavian bestseller *A Man Called Ove* narrates the story of an ageing curmudgeon, Ove, and his various encounters with the modern world. Ove’s neighbour is the equally curmudgeonly Rune with whom he has a lifelong unresolved relationship: ‘Ove wouldn’t exactly call Rune his ‘enemy’…or rather he would. Everything that went to pot in the Residents’ Association began with Rune’. After years of tormenting each other, the antagonism eventually appears to boil down to the fact that while Ove drives a Saab Rune drives a Volvo.Yet this arbitrary empirical difference serves only to underscore the fact that this precisely is not the nature of their antagonistic relationship. The difference in driving preferences is merely something that *becomes* a way of organising the antagonism. Ove and Rune are, in fact, extremely similar in their outlook and moral values and the Saab/Volvo opposition serves as a way of maintaining an acceptable proximity and also, crucially, as a way avoiding an encounter of unbearable excesses (obsessive compulsions etc.) within themselves - their similarity is the very cause of their antagonistic divergence. It is only towards the end of the novel, when Rune has fallen into a state of decrepitude, that a sufficient distance opens up for Ove to acknowledge his deep affection for Rune.

Looked at from this viewpoint, what we find in an antagonism is not so much one where ‘the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 125) but virtually the opposite: an over-confirmation of what is inside me, a repressed excess that is projected onto the Other: e.g. the disturbed fascination with the sartorial choices of Muslim women (recently, the burkini), the obsessive resentment of so-called Islamic fundamentalists towards Western (decadent) culture and so on. Antagonism possesses an extimate structure in this sense. It is something that is effectively ‘chosen’ as a way of avoiding the Real of an encounter – perhaps the primary example here is the ‘battle of the sexes’ as a way of avoiding the Real of human difference and the central impossibility/incompletion of human-ness. The notion of an external Other as the cause of my incompleteness should thus be regarded as the very first gesture of the ideological: i.e. as something that tries to conceal the traumatic knowledge that the subject is always already marked by its inherent incompleteness (the $ as void). In ideological terms, antagonism functions not as a denial of a given fullness but rather as a way of organizing inherent excess. Antagonism is secondary to the more basic dimension of anxiety: a primordial sense of out-of-jointness that signals the presence of an intractable Real. Lacan likens this experience of anxiety to that of a soldier advancing into hostile territory where the invisible enemy appears excessively present (lurking behind every rock, tree and so on). Once the enemy is identified, the soldier can then start to marshal his/her resources, formulate a strategy and so on. In providing a sense of focus, antagonism thus becomes a way of resolving anxiety and the unbearable proximity of the Real. We can see this logic at play in typical racist discourses where there is almost a sense of relief when a particular event occurs that provides seeming justification for mobilisation against ethnic groups. This happened recently in Cologne when during the 2015 New Year’s Eve celebrations where over five hundred women reported to the police that gangs of North African men had subjected them to assault and robbery. The far right group, Pegida, were quick to organise their demonstration and to start sloganizing about a ‘sex jihad’ against ‘blonde white women’. In this way the assaults provided a focus for social anxiety over immigration in which the message was clear: ‘now you see what they are really like’. Yet notwithstanding the general tendency to over-report (and sensationalise) crimes by immigrants and to under-report crimes against them, the experiences of these women should not be trivialised and/or submerged within a ‘greater’ anti-racist cause. The gangs that perpetrated these crimes should be pursued with the full rigour of universal law. Almost exclusively, the gangs targeted and isolated women not only to steal from them but also to sexually assault and humiliate them in an organized way. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, this level of orchestration is symptomatic of the way in which the sense of *jouissance* feeds into and directs antagonism. What can be discerned in these attacks is the projected figure of woman as an embodiment of exorbitant *jouissance*, a source of both fascination and anxiety who in extimate terms gives body to the very excess (of enjoyment) that inwardly thwarts homeostasis. Through this type of fantasmatic projection, the women were constructed as ‘fair game’ and culpable provokers. At the same time, the mode of enjoyment here is an intersubjectve one of theft/spoilage: what is enjoyed is the sense of taking away and/or ruining the enjoyment of the Other, the destruction of what is secretly envied/desired in the Other. The dynamics of fantasy are fully operative in such crimes. While there is nothing necessarily misogynistic about Islam (or any other religion) as such, there can be no doubt that the types of highly masculinized culture that have been developed in the name of Islam, systematically excluding women from public life, have a direct bearing on the development of a collective political unconscious that identifies woman as an embodiment of culpable excess/*jouissance* that needs to be socially regulated. We should not step back from a critical (universalist) analysis of those tendencies in Islamic socio-cultural discourse that foster this type of fantasmatic projection, provided of course that this is applied equally to the subordinating practices of Western culture - above all, its hypocrisy in supporting socio-sexual liberty at home while exporting economic unfreedom globally.

The liberal-left response was essentially one of confusion and guilt ranging from agonizing self-absorption (‘the fault is ours’) to counter-aggression against populist xenophobia. Stranger still was the ‘practical’ suggestions by the Mayor of Cologne, Henriette Reker, that women should stay in groups and always maintain ‘a certain distance of more than an arm’s length’ in order to avoid sexual assault/harassment. Here we move from a xenophobic view of immigrant/alien as threat to a more Spielbergesque view of the immigrant/alien as someone who is basically benign and that with more understanding, cultural acclimatization and a little behavioural accommodation/adaptation all will be well. Clearly this type of response contains its own implicit fantasy in which the Other is viewed as someone who, in their very cultural difference, cannot (or should not) be held to account by the existing socio-moral criteria and who thus needs to be kept at a certain distance in order to avoid provoking their uncontrollable urges. In treating the Other as morally inferior, this kind of public anti-racism becomes simultaneously a covert form of racism. The anxiety surrounding the idea that any criticism of the cultural practices/attitudes of the Other risks losing our sense of humanity turns into its opposite: a de-humanization that reflects an obscene grounding precisely in ‘our’ sense of superiority.

Go Set a Watchman

In highlighting the issue of proximity, where the Other is acceptable only insofar as an appropriate distance is maintained, the Cologne mayor unconsciously hit upon a basic class truth in respect of the bourgeois (and perhaps especially the liberal-left bourgeois) gaze. In demographic terms the subaltern classes are by definition screened off, consigned to the outskirts and/or low rent areas of affluent cities and where they do have a more mainstream presence it is usually as background service workers. The point is that while the bourgeois classes are prepared to indulge their ruminations about how existing society needs to be more open to other identities and so on, they tend to do so in the secret shared understanding that those identities should not come too close to cause any real social disruption to their day-to-day lives: i.e. that they should not transgress these implicit social (‘more than an arm’s length’) boundaries that serve to support and reinforce the social order as it stands. In this way we might say that the class struggle is effectively reproduced through the mode of its opposite: as a genteel agonism that continues to refine its letters and sensibilities of social conscience in beautiful soul terms. Here we see the veil of ideology (or one of its veils) as something that serves not only to screen out the Other but also to configure the dominant gaze in such a way that the Other is recognized in implicitly bounded/assigned terms. The Other is neither simply outside (as external threat) nor fully inside but exists rather in suspended or zoned terms as part of the populace but not people as such.

Something of this appears to be reflected in the scandal surrounding the recent publication of Harper Lee’s lost manuscript, *Go Set a Watchman*. In her best-selling *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee’s white liberal lawyer Atticus Finch agrees to defend a black man (Tom Robinson) who has been charged with raping a white girl in a climate of increasing racial tensions in the 1930s. In this novel Atticus comes across as a model of liberal progressivism and as someone concerned above all with equality before the law. Yet in *Go Set a Watchman*, Atticus is an altogether more ambiguous figure: he has been involved, at some level, with an organisation expressing racist views and in a conversation with his daughter he argues that black people in the South are not ready to exercise full civil rights. While it was originally promoted as a sequel, *Go Set a Watchman* is now generally viewed as an earlier and far inferior draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird* - a tentative prototype and/or distortion of the authentic masterpiece. But should we not argue the opposite: that *Go Set a Watchman* is precisely the truth of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a genuine supplement to rather than distortion of the latter that offers a rare insight into the underside of liberal humanism? What the new manuscript renders visible is the extent to which Atticus simultaneously reflects the prevailing political unconscious of a white liberalism that secretly privileges the bourgeois stance. In short, it reveals the very source of Atticus’ activism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: i.e. that he is prepared to act on behalf of black people but *not* in common solidarity with them. In this way the mode of anti-racist struggle becomes a way of reinforcing the very foundations of racial (and racist) separateness. Black people may be defended by enlightened white liberals, but only on condition that they should not try to become autonomous (right-holding) beings capable of advancing their own cause; that they should remain subordinate and not come too close to ‘us’. The interests of blacks should be represented but only insofar as the basic system of socio-cultural power remains undisturbed: in effect, accommodation without transformation. It is this type of implicit supplementary clause which is at play in the character of Atticus; a clause that is not so much a matter of personal pathology but rather a manifestation of the bourgeois liberal unconscious as such.

At stake here is what Hegel identifies as the logic of recognition in the unfolding of self-consciousness. The sense of self is something that develops as a process of negating intrinsic Otherness (the inconsistent alienated form of the ‘self’) through a kind of transposition of the latter onto other external selves. On this basis a more consistent sense of self is achieved in intersubjective terms through being recognized (or perceiving to be recognised) by others. The master, for example, achieves his/her identity as an authoritative ‘for-itself’ figure through a process of being (and/or perceiving to be) recognized as such by subordinates who, in turn, perceive themselves as dependent on the master. The independence of the master is sustained and reproduced through the sense of dependency inscribed within the subordinates (and *vice versa*). The subordinate aspires to and desires mastery as if it were an external thing of independence recognized through the fact of dependency and which thereby reinforces the notion of naturalistic hierarchy. For Hegel, independence can only be truly achieved through a negation of the negation; through a negation of the very process of externalising independence and dependence, as intrinsic qualities, onto the Other. In this second deeper negation, the very idea of independent mastery (and indeed subordination) falls and is shown to be fully dependent on the recognition of the subordinated Other: an anamorphic relational construction/distortion. It is the precarious contingent nature of this relationalism – where the roles of master and subordinate are suddenly reversed - that is the subject of various comedies such as *The Admirable Crichton*, *Trading Places*, *Freaky Friday* and so on. The John Boorman film, *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), offers some insight here. An American soldier (Lee Marvin) and a Japanese soldier (Toshiro Mifune) find themselves washed up on the same desert island during World War II. They engage in a struggle and through twists and turns both end up occupying the position of master and slave at various points. Eventually they find a way to work together to escape the island. Once they do so the antagonism resurfaces. The failure to reach a resolution is further reflected in the two endings of the film. In the original film both characters are killed by shelling and are thus saved from their own excess/antagonism. The American version, however, presents them as parting company in a resigned hostile manner. Both endings ‘fail’ in the sense that they could not overcome the sense of external recognition (the excess projected into the Other).The absence of any fixed/external identitarian content allows for a movement away from what might be called spurious recognition - where the gaze of the Other is mistaken for the Thing (of identity/independence) itself – to an authentic recognition in which, for example, both master and subordinate come to ‘recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other’ (Hegel, 1977: 112). It is only through a sense of non-identity, the dimension of negativity within self-consciousness itself, that a path to emancipation and reconciliation is opened. Independence is nothing positive, rather it persists as a negative power to break with dependency on the sense of externalised (substantial) Otherness. Reconciliation is thus achieved not through coming to terms with the Other ‘as they truly are’ but the opposite: an understanding of the Other in their non-identity as pathetic entities that try to resolve inherent Otherness through an externalization of it.

This logic of spurious recognition is key to understanding the latent racism of a progressive figure like Atticus. In rejecting full civil rights, Atticus expresses an implicit fear of losing his position of mastery as defined through black dependency. At play here is Hegel’s ‘loss of the loss’. What Atticus is afraid of is losing the very obstacle to social equality, of being deprived of social deprivation and cultural dependency. Atticus’ liberal humanism functions as a way of both eating and keeping the cake: (pre-) mourning the absence of a free society while at the same time maintaining a position of power and privilege on the basis of what is currently ‘practical’, ‘reasonable’, ‘prudent’ and so on. Liberal social conscience becomes precisely the mode of reproducing exclusive social power. It is this logic of recognition that is the target of Frantz Fanon in his compelling *Black Skins, White Masks* (2008). Drawing on Hegel, Fanon argues that the way to escape servitude/domination is not by reversing the positions of black subordinate and white master but by dissolving the very logic that seeks to stabilize/naturalize these positions:

‘There is no Negro mission; there is no white burden…No, I do not have the right to go and cry out my hatred at the white man. I do not have the duty to murmur my gratitude to the white man…The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.’ (Fanon, 2008: 178 & 180)

In expressing the view that blacks are not mature or developed enough to handle full civil rights (a view that was also common among apologists for South African apartheid), Atticus reveals an opposing anxiety. For what would be even worse for Atticus would be the idea of American blacks adapting all too well to the culture of right-holding and articulating their own rights in even more sophisticated and effective ways; his underlying anxiety is that black identity would break out of the very form of recognition that allows liberals to indulge in their fantasy of themselves (and of being looked upon) as universal humanists. We thus need to be alive to the ways in which the very attempts to identify/celebrate the cultural ‘specificity’ and/or ‘dignity’ of the Other can quickly become their own form of oppression (the recognition of the Other’s ‘way of life’ as something pre-ordained/circumscribed within an existing social order).

What runs throughout the more generalised/institutionalised forms of social exclusion is precisely this deeper anxiety concerning the perceived (extimate) excess of the Other that would potentially over-run existing forms of recognition and thereby ruin existing fantasies about ‘us’ in relation to ‘them’. This lies at the heart of fantasies about Otherness that are formulated in such paradoxical terms as ‘of course *x* is inferior, hopelessly inadequate, incapable…which is all the more reason that *x* should be highly regulated…that *x* needs to know his/her place’. Antagonistic exclusion does not result from an external Other deforming full internal identity, but rather an over-confirmation of what is already inside: the projection of inherent deformation/excess onto the sense of the Other. Far from designating a straightforward relation of denial, what needs to be emphasised is the degree to which the subject is invested in and achieves a certain sense of fulfilment through the antagonism itself. It is in this context that we should read such antagonistic couplings as Hector and Achilles, Dracula and Van Helsing, Holmes and Moriarty, Neo and Agent Smith, Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling, Bond and Blofeld and so on right through to the racists who organise and demonstrate their sense of social solidarity through their shared hatred of the Other. In short, what needs to be emphasised is the extent to which antagonisms are also enjoyed. This can be discerned in today’s fascination with the ‘clash of civilizations’ where the dimension of antagonism serves as a stabilizing identitarian force based on mutual (spurious) recognition in which, as Kipling put it, ‘never the twain shall meet’? A true project of emancipation should consequently ‘aim at the death of the other…for that other is to it of no more worth than itself; the other’s reality is presented to the former as an external other, as outside itself; it must cancel that externality’ (Hegel 1977: 114). And it is precisely this Hegelian insight that Kipling *does* connect with in the full version of his *The Ballad of East and West*:

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,

When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

A central question that arises in this context – but one which is not really explored by Hegel - is why is the externality of Otherness so difficult to cancel? In psychoanalytic terms this externality not only proves to be stubbornly persistent but is also something that is actively reproduced and sustained through ideological discourse and its manipulation of narratives concerning the loss and restoration of *jouissance*. Where ideology tends to succeed is in its ability to fantasmatically translate the sense of lost enjoyment into the theft of enjoyment (see Miller, 1985). In racist discourse, for example, the immigrant is someone who is precisely recognised as a figure of perverse excess: i.e. as too lazy (cheating/ruining the welfare system) and/or as too hard-working (taking jobs, working for low wages etc.) and who thereby steals/corrupts our enjoyment and our ‘way of life’. The Other is recognised in their capacity as external illegitimate holders of lost/stolen jouissance. In this way, ideology establishes a kind of twisted economy that not only sustains the myth of restoring full *jouissance* (taking it back from an identifiable Other) but which also provides a way of experiencing smaller hits of *jouissance* where what is enjoyed is the violence towards and/or humiliation of the Other in their (projected) status as external culpable target. While the Other is seen as denying us authentic enjoyment, it is paradoxically the sense of denial itself that is enjoyed. Enjoyment is strictly a by-product of repression: it does not exist in its own terms and thus cannot be restored. *Jouissance* is purely the effect of specular distortions and the fantasmatic sense of entering and/or transgressing a prohibited or illicit realm of excess. It speaks to a fundamental asymmetry, an out-of-jointness that can never be fully resolved: for example, the couple who continue to cheat on each other but who never quite seem to achieve parity of enjoyment. In this situation there is a lingering doubt that the other party might have enjoyed themselves more than you and/or that your enjoyment was not fully authentic, not quite as intense; which is often why the parties involved in such a relationship seek to authenticate their own enjoyment, and sense of themselves, through attempting to make the Other jealous. This lies at the root of the constant mutual provocations of the couple George and Martha (played by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor) in Mike Nichols’ film adaptation of Edward Albee’s dark melodrama *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Set over an evening, the film explores the destructive emotional games of George and Martha who have invited a younger (rather two-dimensional) couple for drinks. As the evening unfolds, George and Martha continue to up the ante in trying to humiliate each other through accusations and counter-accusations regarding failure, the lack of fulfilment and so on. Both aim at destroying the fantasmatic core of each other in ever more brutal ways to restore a sense of lost enjoyment. Finally George decides to act beyond the rules of their psychological warfare and kills off their fictitious son (and along with him the fiction of parenthood) in which both he and especially Martha are so deeply invested: ‘the one thing I tried to carry unscathed through the sewer of our marriage…the one light in all this hopeless darkness, our son!’. So what we have effectively is a dissolution of the Oedipal fantasy of obstructed completeness: George in his capacity as ‘father’ obliterates the phantom son who in his very absence and abstraction has become an idealized embodiment of lost fulfilment (i.e. something which one has only by being out of reach). Yet the final scene is surprisingly tender, with George reassuring Martha that their life will be potentially better without the figure of the son who in their relationship has served as an organisational focus for their antagonism. In this way, what opens up for the couple is a Hegelian space for true reconciliation where inherent asymmetry (lack/excess) can be accepted and not antagonistically projected onto the Other against a background of abstract idealization.

Ideology is a counter-movement to such reconciliation, maintaining instead an externalisation of the sense of the Other as a figure who is responsible for the loss/corruption of *jouissance*. To put it in the terms of the recent Bond movie, *Spectre*, ideology seeks to effect a certain corporeality for the spectre of excess (resulting from symbolic constitution/repression) by identifying the ‘author of all your pain’. According to time, place and context this author has various names: ‘Jew’, ‘Arab’, ‘Islam’, ‘Western decadence’, ‘Immigrant’, ‘Gay’ and so on and so forth. Ideology trades in this currency of impossible *jouissance* – an economy of pure specular movement – on the fantasmatic basis that, at some level, it can be fully redeemed. By giving a name to the blockage of the Real, ideology is able to translate the impossibility of Society into the theft/sabotage of Society; thereby sustaining the image of a naturalistic (pre-existing) unity that has been contaminated by independent Otherness, a foreign intruder. Yet it is precisely at the level of *jouissance* that we can detect a basic ambiguity in the relationship between ideology and the Real. Ideology effectively operates at two levels and makes two kinds of implicit promise. On the one hand, it can be said to promise to deliver us from the Real through sustaining the image of holistic unity in relation to a posited threat or figure of excess. But, on the other hand, ideology may also be said to promise the Real itself. Ideology functions through bribing the subject into accepting repression as a way of granting subliminal access to a surplus enjoyment, an extra enjoyment generated through repression itself, through the renunciation of everyday pleasures in the service of a ‘greater cause’ (see Žižek, 2012: 308-309). What is manifest in fascism, for example, is the way in which the subject derives surplus enjoyment through acts of sacrifice (renouncing personal enjoyment) in the name of doing one’s duty to the Nation. Repression is something that anamorphically produces, structures and recycles this dimension of *jouissance* qua Real. It is not simply (or not only) that repression generates the sense of a promised land of *jouissance* but that repression itself is directly enjoyed; it becomes a way of instilling a visceral consistency in the subject.

This is also what is so unique about modern capitalism. In the ancient world, repression tended to be externally imposed. With capitalism, however, repression is essentially inherent. This occurs not only as a result of what Marx knew well – i.e. the naturalization/neutralization of the repressive structure of production to which all are subject (there is no equivalent status of ‘freedmen’) – but also in the sense that the modern subject is constantly pressured into internalizing and embracing the repression directly as his/her own, as if s/he were responsible for any shortcomings in the capitalist system. This resonates with Walter Benjamin’s view of capitalism as a generalized cult based on the continuous reproduction of guilt. In today’s corporate capitalism, the job of management consists largely of regulating performance and of emphasizing those points where targets have not been met and/or where performance could/should be improved/exceeded – and if success is being achieved then ‘the bar’ is then raised further, and so it continues in such a way that workers are always placed behind the curve.

Corporate capitalism is based on a culture of permanent failure. In psychoanalytic terms, it is a culture based on superegoic logic in which capital appears as a Thing or abstract ideal that we can never live up to but which nevertheless demands more and more of us. From a Lacanian perspective, capital can be seen to stand here for the dark God of the (big) Other’s desire (Lacan, 1994: 275). As Lacan points out, desire is always ‘the desire of the Other’ (Lacan, 2002: 345); not in the sense of trying to meet any kind of clear or specific demand but precisely the opposite: the desire of the Other is so oppressive because we can never be quite sure as to its content or as to whether or not we have fulfilled it. This formative anxiety generates the sense of capital as a virtual (and even vengeful) God to which sacrifices must always be made in the (uncertain) hope of appeasement – in order to find favour (or at least avoid retribution), one should give more and more to corporate life. And thus, as Marx and Benjamin understood, today’s modern secularism is something that simultaneously functions as the highest form of theism. Nowhere is the more apparent than in today’s predominant response to (ongoing) economic crises: austerity. Austerity is something that accords with the contemporary mind-set of a world dominated by a vengeful capital-God presiding over a global cult of sacrificial *jouissance*; a cult where what tends to be enjoyed directly is subjective immersion within the very forms of obeisance and abjection. The power of this cult is so great that even where it makes sound economic sense to initiate anti-austerity measures these tend to be rejected dogmatically. This type of cultic logic dressed up as neutral reason is ideology at its purest.

A Post-Truth World

So where does ideology stand in today’s post-truth world? Does the idea of overcoming ideology and/or confronting power through truth and knowledge simply cease to have meaning? Two well-known books exemplify the problem: *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Picket, 2010) and *50 Facts that Should Change the World* (Williams, 2007). While being both well informed and well argued, these types of publications tend not to disturb the dominant imaginary of the existing socio-economic system (which is not to say that such texts are unimportant for social struggle). Both books provide startling information about inequality, disease, social deprivation and so on, basically demonstrating in clear empirical terms that capitalism is dysfunctional on a global scale. And yet it is clear that knowledge of these facts and data continue *not* to change the world. This is because of the fantasmatic mediation ‘we know very well that capitalism doesn’t work…but nonetheless we continue as if we do not know’; or, in the terms of the Williams book, ‘these are the facts which should change the world…but which nonetheless continue not to do so’. The facts are known but they have no real symbolic efficiency. The knowledge exists but it is placed into suspension, consigned to the background of ‘future problems’. Things are reported but they lack any real force, their impact is broken up among the ideological earthworks of the social formation and deprived of cathectic momentum (issues not been taken up further by experts, moralists, media pundits and so on) within the terms of the existing media and its implicit auto-correct filtering process.

The problem is further exacerbated in respect of the development of so-called post-truth politics. The essential idea here is that whereas in traditional politics assertion and opinion were held to account through the independent verification of facts by journalists, experts and so on, facts are now either ignored or manipulated in such a way as to fit in with assertion and opinion – the archetypal example here being Kellyanne Conway’s notion of ‘alternative facts’. In a shift from democracy to what might be called doxacracy, truth and facts have now become the handmaidens of political opinion. Yet things are not quite so simple. In the first place, the notion of post-truth appears almost inevitably as part of a wider sequential trend in contemporary reality - the names of which include postmodernism, post-ideology, the post-political and so on – within which the very idea of universal truth is being increasingly undermined. With the diversification of social, or perhaps one should say privatized, media there exists today a kind of Hobbesian condition of information wars in which there is no higher regulating authority. The age of information has simultaneously become the age of misinformation, disinformation and distortion; openness and transparency brings forth its own forms of opaqueness and obfuscation. What exists today is a widespread incredulity towards *any* kind of narrative, a new reign of Babel.

But is this especially new? Psychoanalysis is all too familiar with the problem of the subject’s babble and the ways in which knowledge and information can also function as a way of obscuring the truth; in particular, the truth of the gaze. This is what Lacan pointed out in respect of his example of the figure of the paranoid husband obsessively searching for knowledge/evidence of his wife’s infidelity. The fact of whether or not the wife has been unfaithful or not is not the real issue, it does not get at the truth. The real issue concerns the obsessive gaze of the husband and his inability to cope with the (imagined) *jouissance* of the Other. For psychoanalysis, truth is to be found in the register of excess; not only the excess of the gaze but also the voice. As Mladen Dolar points out, the voice is not simply the medium for the message but an excess that is indicative of an operative truth – there is always a surplus (a too little or too much) that comes out in the voice (Dolar, 2006: 147-48). This is why psychoanalysts attend not only to the spoken words but to voice as such: intonation, rhyme, gaps/silences and so on. The problem becomes even more apparent when we ask a question like ‘what is the truth about immigration?’ People draw on all kinds of (alternative) facts to support their particular gaze and give voice to it. So it is not as if there is some missing piece of the truth ‘out there’ that we simply need to gain access to through factual discourse. There is no external point from which truth might be accessed as a unity. Truth cannot be directly translated because it is always part of a mode of mediation that overflows it. This also points to the radical interiority of the Real. Without the warp of the Real, the constitution of a (relatively stable) mode of mediation, it would not be possible to generate any form of truth. In telling the truth, we also reveal a deeper (surplus) truth about this mode of mediation. The paranoid husband, for example, might be quite open about his anxiety and cite various evidential instances to justify this anxiety, but precisely in so doing reveals more about his obsessive mediation. Thus what always needs to be taken into account is the very inscription the subject’s excess, their gaze and voice, in relation to truth. In this sense, the world has always been a post-truth world wherein political ideology serves as a way of fantasmatically organizing excess.

At the same time there is also something new and far-reaching here, and that concerns the way in which corporations are openly attempting to stage the gaze, and return the voice, of customers through social algorithms. It is well known that Facebook, for example, uses networked algorithms to establish not only the consumer profile of its users (so that tailored adverts pursue us across the internet) but also the politico-cultural profiles. By logging the interests of its users, Facebook is able to create a ‘feedback loop’ or ‘filter bubble’ such that stories with content that match users’ profiles continuously emerge in their newsfeed – their gaze/voice is effectively returned to them. News and information are being increasingly curated in ways that reflexively support personalized psychosocial configurations that can be calculated and crucially predicted. This opens up a whole new area of direct manipulation. Through demographic profiling, users can be exposed to ‘spontaneous’ (dis-) information that is designed to influence social and political behaviour. Depending on political profile, either a left or right wing narrative could be deployed to support/discredit a particular candidate or proposal. According to the BBC documentary, *Panorama*, 1 this is precisely what happened in the cases of Brexit and the US Presidential election. In the longer term the use of such algorithms may well have even more insidious effects in closing down public discourse, undermining journalistic authority and its potential to hold the powerful to account (a cornerstone of liberal democracy) and more widely the possibilities for critical thought and engagement.

The Trump Identity

Fake News and Fake Antagonism

With Trump, the turn towards post-truth politics has been even more explicit. This is especially reflected in his relationship with the established media. By making direct appeal to ‘the people’ through Twitter, political rallies, highly regulated television appearances, press conferences and so on, Trump has proved extremely effective in manipulating the way people identify with information. At the same time, he regularly targets the ‘dishonest media’. By shifting the ground from knowledge to belief – repeatedly stating the injunction ‘believe me’ and/or posing the question ‘who do you trust?’ – Trump has consistently outmanoeuvred the media. The success of Trump largely derives from his ability to engage and (re-) stage the popular gaze and to mobilize a new kind of discourse that challenges the authority and integrity of the media along the following lines: ‘yes, you (the media) may have all kinds of facts and information but nonetheless…where is your commitment to the truth?’. In this way, Trump is able to identify the media with the establishment/old regime and to place himself firmly on the side of ‘ordinary Americans’.

So what does Trump represent? A common view is that there is no real consistency to Trump, that he is an unashamed opportunist and/or assemblage of incompatible and even conflicting politico-ideological elements. While there is undoubtedly some truth in this view, there are nonetheless some basic themes that are beginning to take shape. At one level, Trump can be seen as a symptom of the deepening crises of capitalism. In Trump’s discourse, the endemic problems of structural poverty and unemployment, for example, are presented as imperatives to free up the corporate sector and to combine this with a programme of de-welfarisation: an emphasis on austerity, the naturalisation of individual culpability and so on (the system in breakdown requiring even more commitment to the system). Environmental and ecological issues tend to be downplayed and /or outsourced to the industrialising world and future generations. Widening social division and disorder is confronted as a problem of externalisation: anti-immigrant measures, the downgrading of universal human rights, the building of more walls and remote detention centres, an increasing emphasis on securitisation and the para-militarization of policing. And this is a pattern that is being repeated globally from Brexit and the rise of the populist right in Europe through to the political leadership of figures such as Putin, Erdogan, Duterte and Modi. The Cold War landscapes are now giving way to a new era of superpower pragmatism that is thoroughly integrated into global capitalism and which is shaping and intensifying a world of radical exclusions on a hitherto unknown scale.

Yet there is also something deeply suspicious about the nature of some of the mainstream opposition to Trump. From the barrage of television satire to public denunciations by leading media figures to the recent case of the comedienne, Kathy Griffin (who held up a model of the severed bloody head of Trump for a promotional video), the moral outrage of the liberal establishment reflects an obscene enjoyment in which the execration of Trump has become an almost standard trope of cultural engagement. The solidifying effect of this unity-through-denunciation produces two further results for the liberal establishment: first, it becomes a way of avoiding any critical self-reflection; and, second, it gives implicit license to vilify ‘unenlightened’ Trump supporters. To some extent this has only provided fodder for Trump’s populism, allowing it to draw an even clearer distinction between the perception of a comfortable elite world of self-congratulatory liberalism and the harsh realities of America-in-struggle. At the same time, the very excess of the liberal response to Trump is also indicative of the nature of the political threat that he does pose for the existing power matrix. What Trump has effectively disturbed is a Real, a silently functioning violence at the heart of liberal culture: fear of and antagonism towards any kind of real social change. This was clearly evident in the Democratic Party’s instrumental marginalization of Bernie Sanders and his politics (despite strong popular support for his programme). But it was also reflected in Clinton’s contemptuous characterization of Trump supporters as ‘the deplorables’ and more widely in the type of liberal corporate-media orientation that routinely affirms its solidarity with sexual and cultural identity political campaigns but which tends to remain silent with regard to the 43 million plus Americans living in poverty. What Trump has exposed and manipulated to his own advantage is precisely this violence of silence.

Žižek makes two important observations apropos Trump: (i) Trump is not a fascist threat (American civil society is too developed and diverse to be prone to this); (ii) the real danger for emancipatory politics lies with continuing to support the liberal consensus against the (unifying) figure of Trump-as-villain (Žižek, 2017: 261 & 268). I would add a couple of points here. Trumpism is certainly not fascism, but (post-) modern capitalism no longer needs fascism to resolve its crises – the organizing power of the state in the global age is considerably reduced, limited mainly to infrastructural and welfare provision of some kind and to making legal adjustments to monopoly markets to prevent them from imploding. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the type of threat that Trump does represent. This needs to be looked at in the context of the way in which capitalism is driving forms of exclusion and displacement on a global scale. The breakdown of traditional forms of (cultural-geographical) social cohesion becomes the very breeding ground for reactive forms of ethno-identitarian politics. In this way, the dislocatory effects of globalisation give rise to an opposing populist response in such terms that capitalism can reproduce itself as a totality. The type of threat that Trump and the populist transformations taking place today can be seen consequently as a reflection of an emerging form of authoritarian capitalism. Right-wing populism thus becomes part of the social reproduction of economic power: that is, a way of purging and misdirecting surplus political rage and energies, steadily eroding democracy from within (governance without public accountability, the transfer of power from the state to the corporate sector, the attack on human rights and so on), while simultaneously enabling a global corporate plutocracy. So in this context we should perhaps view Trump as a kind of relatively acceptable mask for the likes of Ted Cruz and the type of fanatical capitalism that he represents.

In the context of today’s superego capitalism (austerity, obeisance, infinite debt and so on), Trump can be seen as a figure of the Id: an embodiment of freedom and transgression who is unrestrained by social convention and/or political correctness. He is an anti-Oedipus in this sense of shamelessly flouting the rules, mocking disability, openly flirting with his daughter and so on. And this is increasingly the pattern today: a globalized superego capitalism that gives rise to, and is sustained through, Id forms of leadership as reflected in Trump and Trump-like figures. Increasingly what we have today is the spectacle of change as Id outbursts that are then quietly reabsorbed back into the system. In operating beyond the strictures of the liberal consensus and the perceived hypocrisy of its politico-ethical agonizing over problems concerning only the privileged, Trump divides the establishment and confronts the liberal obscenity of class/poverty silence with his own racist and sexist obscenities. This confrontation is ultimately one of shadows – a fake antagonism reflecting Trump’s own repeated charges of fake news - because at a deeper level Trump can also be seen as the truth of the liberal consensus. Trump is effectively the spoilt child of a world of (liberal) wealth and privilege who is unashamed, ostentatious even, in giving expression to that world: open in his contempt of immigrants (rather than consigning them to the periphery), transparent in his support for corporate America (rather than paying lip service to liberal good conscience), directly opposed to ecological concerns (rather than trying to balance the latter with ‘the needs of the economy’) and so on. This is illustrative of how ideology, as part of its overall reproduction, is able to oppose itself and violate its own rules. Trump says the unsayable and enacts what from the liberal perspective is impossible. But the contrivance is that in enacting the impossible he precisely maintains and reinforces the idea of what is regarded as truly impossible: i.e. the impossibility of overcoming capitalism as the basic horizon of reality. The politico-ideological furore and the ‘battle for the soul of America’ continue precisely so that the underlying imaginary of capitalism can remain in place.

Notes

1) BBC, *Panorama* (2017), ‘What Facebook Knows about You’ (8th May 2017),

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