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Beyond Naïve Leftist Philosophy in Education – On Žižek’s Lacanian Politics and Pedagogy

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Abstract

If Slavoj Žižek belongs to a rather later generation of thinkers influenced by French philosophy, his allegiance to a Lacanian conceptual framework both aligns him and distinguishes him from the lineage of Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze etc. In this sense, the significance of Lacan's thought for education is still to be properly considered and its contemporary articulation in the work of Žižek seems a good place to register this understanding and analysis. What marks out Žižek's work and the relation to the Former Yugoslavia is the way in which the internal dialogue of Marxism evolves in a very particular way in the latter context, with an allegiance emerging between Marx, Lacan and a radical form of psychoanalysis.

In this essay, I foreground how Žižek's work polemically takes us away from a (utopian and all-too-easy) resolution to the contradictions of contemporary society, politics and education. Rather, in society as in the educational sphere, a Žižekian and (Lacanian) psychoanalytical critique of ideology is one where a certain 'deadlock' must be borne, both at the level of subject and at the societal level. This emphasis on the recalcitrance of ideology and a certain irreducibility of alienation, both societal and pedagogical, would be at least one of the lessons we might take from Žižek's recent work and the wider discourse of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis.

Contributor Note

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Introduction

What is the importance for educational theory and practice of Slavoj Žižek's (Žižek 2006a, 2006b) renewal of Lacanian psychoanalysis? Recent discourse in education has demonstrated the renewal of theory, for example in the Philosophy of Education, as against what has been termed a more 'managerialist' tendency (Blake et al 2003). The discipline of the Philosophy of Education has itself undergone significant transformation in terms of its theoretical framework, emerging in the late 1960s as an analytical and conceptual field of study (with Hirst and Peters) (Blake et al 2003) and taking on a more 'Continentalist' influence in the 1990s (Irwin 2012). One sees here most especially the influence emerging of the post – Sartrean generation of French thinkers, such as Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault (Derrida 1978; Lyotard 1993) and Latin American thinkers such as Paulo Freire (Freire 1996; Irwin 2012).

If Slavoj Žižek belongs to a rather later generation of thinkers influenced by French philosophy, his allegiance to a Lacanian conceptual framework (Žižek 1989, 2006, 2008; Lacan 1998; Lacan 1994) both aligns him and distinguishes him from the lineage of Derrida et al (Irwin and Motosh 2014; Motosh 2012). Although contemporaneous with the latter generation, the work of Jacques Lacan always remained quite distinct and singular, perhaps because of its more psychoanalytical bent (Lacan 1994; Žižek 2006). In this sense, the significance of Lacan's thought for education is still to be properly considered and its contemporary articulation in the work of Žižek seems a good place to register this understanding and analysis. We will also see, in this essay, how Žižek's work maintains strong

connections to what has been referred to as the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, especially the thinking of Alenka Zupančič and Mladen Dolar (Zupančič 2000; Zupančič 2008; Dolar 1989; Dolar 1998).

If we consider the earlier analytical context of philosophy of education, the move towards a more Continentalist approach in the 1990s can be seen as a move from a conceptualism to a more socio-political understanding of education as a process (Freire 1996; Blake et al 2003; Irwin 2012). Primary here is what, in simple terms, might be described as a transition from a paradigm of Kantianism to a paradigm of Marxism. What marks out Žižek's work and the relation to the Former Yugoslavia is the way in which the internal dialogue of Marxism evolves in a very particular way in the latter context, with an allegiance emerging between Marx, Lacan and a radical form of psychoanalysis. The socio-political importance of this theory and praxis can be traced clearly in the Slovenian situation (Irwin and Motosh 2014). It will also, as we will see, emerge as a distinctive vision of the relation between education, society and politics, and effectively as a renewed understanding of the philosophy of education (Blake et al 2003).

Žižek in Context

The publication in English translation in 1989 of Žižek's text *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (with a foreword by Ernesto Laclau) (Žižek 1989; Laclau 1989) represents the beginning of his influence on contemporary Western philosophy, but the evolution of his own thinking in Slovenia and the wider Former





Yugoslavia prior to this date is just as significant. The context of this earlier transition as part of an 'internal critique' of Marxism in the Eastern and Central European communist states is a distinctive story, emphasizing what Dolar refers to as a 'nondogmatic Marxism' (Irwin, Motoh and Dolar 2014; Motoh 2012). This key distinction, between 'dogmatic' and 'nondogmatic' forms of Marxism, was first employed to distinguish between more humanist and scientific forms of Marxism in general but came to be used by the theoretical orientation in Slovenia, as a distinction between Marxism which could connect to radical psychoanalysis and Marxism which could not (Irwin and Motoh 2014). One can relate this dissident strain of Marxist and Leftist thought to the Praxis movement in the Former Yugoslavia, especially in Belgrade and Zagreb, and to analogous political critique in the Soviet states, for example in the work of Karol Kosik in Czechoslovakia (Kosik 1976). The *Praxis* movement was a group of intellectuals who pointed to the crisis in the bureaucratization of Yugoslav socialism and advocated for the theoretical return to the 'young Marx' (Marx 1992a; Marx 1992b; Motoh 2012) and the idea of praxis. Kosik, in a similar vein, developed an existentialist humanism as an antidote to the economism and positivism of state socialism under the Soviet communist regime in Central Europe, Kosik's work was developed as a dissident in Prague, often under strict surveillance and repression (Kosik 1976).

What marks out the Slovenian example as unique is the Lacanian dimension of its articulation. Even respected commentators on the original work of Jacques Lacan admit that, at least to the uninitiated, his writings can appear almost impossibly daunting (Macey 1994;

Lacan 1994, 1998). Given this fact, one of the most curious aspects of the subsequent influence of Lacan's work is that such an esoteric example of the original movement of French structuralism, the term constantly invoked by Žižek et al to denote that emergent philosophy of the '60s, (Irwin, Motoh and Žižek 2014; Motoh and Irwin 2014) will come to have such a significant impact not simply intra-theoretically but also in a practical-political context, on succeeding thought and history. The influence of Lacan and Lacanianism on succeeding radical political thought in France and beyond has been immense. From within France, there are the influences, for example, on Badiou, Balibar and Rancière (Rancière 1991; Badiou 2000; Balibar 2007). Within the ambit of post-Marxist theory, there is the influence on Mouffe and Laclau, amongst others (Laclau 1989). And, finally, in the Former Yugoslavia, we see this influence which, as Močnik has shown very well, also extended to an interventionist relation to the wider political and social movements in Slovenia (Močnik 1993). Philosophically in the Yugoslav context, the Lacanian strain of thinking is distinguished from the *Praxis* group by its emphasis on a certain 'anti-humanism' (Dolar 1989). Given the exposure of Žižek to not simply Lacan, but Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and the whole gamut of what they term the original movement of 'French Structuralism' (Dolar, Irwin and Motoh 2014), why was Lacan to become such a dominant influence, to the extent that Žižek refers to his own work as an 'orthodox Lacanianism' (Žižek 2014)? As his compatriot Dolar has observed in an interview, perhaps this was because Lacan 'took it further than any other like thinker ... brought philosophy to its ultimate conclusion' (Dolar, Irwin and Motoh 2014).





Within Žižek's own particular milieu, we can point to the significance of what he describes as the 'troika' of Lacanians, including himself and Dolar. Through the anthologies in the 1990s and up to the monographs in 2000 and after, mostly under Žižek as series editor (for example, Zupančič 2000; Dolar 2006), the Ljubljana Lacanian troika has become an established entity internationally. As Žižek has noted regarding this nomenclature, 'Here again you have your KGB Stalinist troika; you know how communists were always organised as troika, as units of three, to liquidate people? It's strictly a troika now; with Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar, and myself' (Žižek and Daly 2003: 37).

The socio-political critique of ideology in this Ljubljana troika is evinced for example in the following joke told by Zupančič:

A man believes that he is a grain of seed. He is taken to a mental institution where the doctors finally convince him that he is not a grain of seed, but a man. No sooner has he left the hospital but he comes back very scared, claiming that there is a chicken outside the door and that he is afraid that the chicken will eat him. 'Dear fellow', says the doctor, 'you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man'. 'Of course I know that', replies the patient, 'but does the chicken?' (Zupančič 2008: 15)

In Seminar XI on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 1994), Lacan puts forward a critique of psychoanalysis as an 'idealism' or a science concerned simply with the internal effects of 'narcissism' and rather his passionate avowal of psychoanalysis

as contributing to an 'encounter with the Real' (Lacan 1994). For Lacan, psychoanalysis of the most authentic 'return to Freud' is one which can and must intervene in not simply individual lives but also socio-politically. This is also Zupančič's claim here for psychoanalysis, through the method of comedy. As she notes, 'what is at stake in psychoanalysis is not simply becoming conscious of the unconscious, and all that often painfully determines [our] actions and experiences... This is insufficient: the main problem is how to shift and change the very symbolic and imaginary structures in which this unconscious is embodied outside [ourselves]' (Zupančič 2008a: 16).

This allows us to foreground what we can refer to as a 'psychoanalytical politico-education' in Žižek's own work. In Ljubljana, this socio-political and pedagogy critique evolves from the counter-culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from Slovenian punk through to the aesthetic FV and video art and finally, and more internationally, to the work of Laibach, IRWIN and the NSK (Ganter 1993; Graziano and Bilic 1993; Monroe 2005; Motoh 2012). As a student of Žižek and Dolar, Zupančič's critique of ideology evolves from this cultural space (Irwin and Motoh 2014).

In his preface to Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Laclau outlines one of the most 'original features' of the 'Slovenian Lacanian school' as its 'insistent reference to the ideological-political field' as well as its outline of 'the main characteristics of radical democratic struggles in Eastern European societies' (Laclau 1989: x). Zupančič's emphasis on comedy takes its cue from Žižek's pre-established neo-Lacanian framework of interpretation. One instructive concept in this context is





the concept of 'ideology', a notion which has been central to the Marxist tradition of critique and which has also been important in the socio-political turn in the philosophy of education.

In the texts of Freire, for example, such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* we see the attempt to develop an original critique of ideology in education, with his emphasis on the problem of 'banking education' (Freire 1996). In related ideology critique, for example in theories of education that develop from Freire's work, such as Critical Pedagogy, there appears to be a reliance on a rather traditional Marxist designation of 'false consciousness' (Blake et al 2003; Irwin 2012). Nonetheless, it is also clear that more recent Critical Pedagogy texts and analyses show dissatisfaction with what is now seen as a certain reductive tendency to critique popular consciousness. The Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), especially the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Willis (Willis 2004), mark this problematic in important ways, and we can trace related evolutions of the critique of ideology in thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard (Lyotard 1993; Irwin 2015) and Jacques Rancière (Rancière 1991) and, in both latter cases, their readings of ideology have been directly applied to the educational sphere.

Žižek's own work shows similar tensions in its elaboration of the notions of 'ideology' and 'critique of ideology'. Already in 1989, Žižek was signalling an important move away from the 'false consciousness' notion of ideology: 'ideology is not simply false consciousness as an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived of as ideological; ideology is a social reality

whose very existence implies the nonknowledge of its participants as to its sense' (Žižek 1989: 21). In his introduction to his edited volume *Mapping Ideology* (Žižek 1994a), entitled 'The Spectre of Ideology' (Žižek 1994b), Žižek continues to argue for the 'pertinence' of the notion of ideology: 'we are within ideological space proper the moment (whether true or false) a content is functional with regard to some relation of social domination ("power", "exploitation") in an inherently non-transparent way' (Žižek 1994b).

In successive versions of *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (Žižek 1992), Žižek relates the concept of 'ideology' to Lacanian (and Marxist) notions such as 'fetish' and 'symptom' itself. In a preface to the 2008 edition (Žižek 2008), entitled 'Enjoy your Symptom – or Your Fetish?', Žižek generates a certain ambiguity between the original concept of 'symptom' and the newer concept of 'fetish'. Can one concept replace the other in the Žižekian analysis? The related notion of 'sinthome' also comes to have significance in the later Lacan's work and in Žižek's own analysis (Bowie 1991; Dolar 1998), complicating matters further.

What is at stake in these theoretical manoeuvres? If the earlier conception of 'ideology' (and in the Marxist tradition, 'false consciousness') seemed to elaborate a (utopian) resolution to the contradictions of contemporary society, politics and education, the later conceptions point rather to a notion of ideology where a certain 'deadlock' must be borne, both at the level of subject and at the societal level. For example, the conception of 'fetish' is described as follows in its difference from the 'symptom', this from the 2008 preface: 'Fetish is effectively the reversal of the



symptom; that is to say, symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance; the point at which the repressed other scene erupts. While fetish is the embodiment of the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth' (Žižek 2008: ix). This emphasis on the recalcitrance of ideology and a certain irreducibility of alienation seems, in the context of the readings of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis to hark back to the rereading of the 'symptom' in the punk *Problemi* situation which Dolar and Žižek put forward, back in 1981-1982 in Ljubljana (Žižek 1981, 1984; Dolar 1989). There, Dolar and Žižek argued against the whitewashing by Tito's state socialism of conflict, pointing to a far more messy, complex ideological reality under Yugoslav socialism.

Although each of these successive notions can be seen as Lacanian (and indeed Freudian), there is also a strong connection back to the Marxist understanding of these concepts, as Žižek notes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 'How Marx Invented the Symptom' (Žižek 1989). But the Marxism presented here is crucially of the 'nondogmatic' perspective, wary and even hostile to a more (utopian) resolution to the contradictions of contemporary society (Dolar 1989). Instead, for Žižek, the theoretical matrix of Marx-Lacan rather points away from utopianism to a fundamental 'failure', something which he identifies particularly with Lacan's Seminar XX: 'Seminar XX [Encore] stands for his ultimate achievement and deadlock; ... in the years after, he desperately concocted different ways out [the sinthome, knots etc] all of which failed; so where do we stand now?' (Žižek 2012a: 18).

This last phrase foregrounds the somewhat apophatic and aporetic method of Žižek, an approach shared by Dolar and Zupančič. It is in such an aporetic style that we might best summarise the significance of such a neo-Lacanian perspective for the contemporary context of education.

Whither Pedagogy and Education Now?

We described above the continuing pertinence of the 'critique of ideology' in relation to the contradictions of contemporary society, politics and education. We located this conception of ideology especially within a Marxist tradition of thinking. We also identified the significance of this (neo-) Marxist critique of ideology for education and pedagogy, especially as it related to the paradigm shift in the discipline of the philosophy of education from a more (Kantian) conceptualism to a more (Marxist) socio-political critique (Freire 1996; Blake et al 2003; Irwin 2012).

But if Žižek's work and the wider work of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis signals a maintenance of the critique of ideology and a continued foregrounding of the legacy of Marx, it also subjects certain vulgarised versions of Marxism to rather savage satire. One shouldn't forget that it was precisely such a Marxism which sought to maintain the dogmatism and totalitarianism of the Former Yugoslavia, described so well by Ganter et al, where it is clear that such totalising politics was often operationalised through 'apparent liberalism' (Dolar 1989; Ganter 1993). Here, the contrast between the more repressive Soviet controlled states versus the experience of societies under the apparently more



liberal Yugoslav federation is paradigmatic [Dolar puts this well; 'we cannot claim we were Czechoslovakia' (Dolar, Irwin and Motoh 2014)]. Dolar brilliantly satirises this situation in his essay from 1989 in the journal *Mladina*, 'The Unconscious is Structured as Yugoslavia' (Dolar 1989; Motoh 2012). We could no doubt apply a similar satire to other sites of pseudo-Leftism from Drumcondra to Paris to UCLA. Ganter, in a related key, in his 'Discussions on Civil Society in Slovenia' speaks of the political colonisation of the life world in Yugoslavia under a misguided version of (vulgar) Marxist ideology, which 'effectively obliterated civil society' (Gantar 1993: 358). According to Gantar, 'they [the regime] were not satisfied with economic and political subordination of the population but set about cultural subordination and the capturing of souls, bedrooms and social life as their next goal' (Gantar 1993: 357). In such a context, the new forms of social movement or alternative culture 'actually signified a new form of society, not infected by official ideology and politics' (Gantar 1993: 357).

Unfortunately, certain related Leftist thought systems have failed to learn the lessons of such earlier political and theoretical contexts. Such contemporary Left ideologies, of the reductive and naïve variety, remain very powerful in the discourse of education, often under the guise of emancipatory education or 'equality in education'. The analyses of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis are unsparing in their exposure of the posturing utopianism (often masking a self-aggrandising instrumentalism), in such views. Žižek's work challenges us to thus go beyond such naïve Leftisms in contemporary education.

In this, we might see his work as having a strong connection to, for example, the similarly iconoclastic work of a Freire or a Lyotard, both in politics and in education. Lyotard's work especially casts light on the complexity of the 'postmodern' situation of education, where increasing recourse to rhetoric of 'emancipation' and 'empowerment' can often mask a more overarching managerialism, which is highly conservative (Lyotard 1993; Irwin 2012). Freire's work on literacy education, while accused of utopianism, focuses on a more micro- and generative level of educational and student change, which eschews more macro- and top-down models of education and literacy (Freire 1996; Blake et al 2003; Irwin 2012; Irwin 2015). Both of these educational critiques (of a certain supposedly 'progressivist' ideology) also demonstrate the need to connect theory, practice and policy in education. Freire's work especially has made important interventions in, for example, policy on curriculum development or in critiquing narrow notions of literacy pedagogy. We might relate this to the experience in Slovenia of translating Lacanian theory into a method (an orthodox Lacanianism) which had a significant influence, through the social movements such as NSK, on the more mainstream political developments (Gantar 1993; Motoh 2012; Irwin and Motoh 2014).

So we asked, whither education or pedagogy now, if we are to take it in a Žižekian or neo-Lacanian direction? Once more, we might reiterate: let us move away from a (utopian and all-too-easy) resolution to the contradictions of contemporary society, politics and education. Rather, in society as in the educational sphere, a Žižekian and (Lacanian) psychoanalytical critique of ideology is one where a certain

'deadlock' must be borne, both at the level of subject and at the societal level. As against the over-simplicity of the diagnostics of the symptom, we should rather foreground the diagnostics of the 'fetish': 'Fetish is effectively the reversal of the symptom; that is to say, symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance; the point at which the repressed other scene erupts.

While fetish is the embodiment of the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth' (Žižek 2008: ix). This emphasis on the recalcitrance of ideology and a certain irreducibility of alienation, both societal and pedagogical, would be at least one of the lessons we might take from Žižek's recent work and the wider discourse of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis.

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