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Le grand Autre: The Symbolic Order of Ideology

Javier Padilla, 2010

On the 19th of April, 2008, after decades of seclusion and abuse, Elisabeth Fritzl and her six children were liberated from the basement of her father’s house in Amstetten, Austria. The kids had been born in confinement, and had never been out in the real world. The Police chief reported that “they communicated with noises that were a mixture of growling and cooing” that was unintelligible to others. The question this unsettling anecdote poses is why these children could not communicate. Had they been dislocated from their position to the Other? If so, what, who, or where is this Other? The Other is the place that interpellates the subject into the symbolic order of ideology.

But we seem to be getting ahead of ourselves. The only praxis that can solve the problematic nature of the Fritzl case is Psychoanalysis. The Fritzl children seem to exist in a pre-linguistic order, closer to the instinctive, unconscious drives of animals than to the sphere of human symbols. The discovery of Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud was the radical discovery that individual identity is based on the perpetual fragmentation or disintegration of the self wrought by the unconscious. As such, Freud’s contribution can be said to have inverted the Platonic world of ideas by locating them in the imaginary realm of distorted mirror images. Yet, for all of Freud’s contributions his theories have several loopholes and have been fraught with misinterpretations. Chief among these is the erroneous assumption that the unconscious is located deep within the confines of the individual’s brain. The unconscious is the place, according to popular psychology, where individuals hide their darkest desires. For ego-psychologists, for instance, the ego can be strengthened so that it can cope with the unquenchable unconscious. However, they fail to understand that desire is inherently the desire of the Other.

Constructing a framework whose aim is to save the radical elements of Freudian Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan holds that desire is intrinsically a social phenomenon that is articulated in language. 1 Yet, in order for the subject to enter this symbolic dimension of desire it must first go through what he calls the mirror stage:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image - whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently

indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term imago.²

As such, this narcissistic encounter with reflection is constitutive of the subject in the imaginary order. The child becomes a little man—Lacan calls it a hommellete—and mis-recognizes himself as a unified entity. Yet, this is an untenable illusion that at once constitutes and de-centers the human subject. After this extremely formative Meconnaissance in which the subject first ‘otherizes’ his own image, what role does the entrance of language into the human equation play? A very central one Lacan might answer. Reinvigorating Freud’s Oedipus complex, Lacan posits that the entrance of the Father signals a break in the child’s libidinal relationship with the Mother, and the child is “inserted into a structured world of symbolic meaning—a world that shapes all interactions between the self and others.”³ Yet, can he articulate his identity using a system filled with gaps and based on a play of differences and deferrals? Can the child mirror, as it were, the imaginary plenitude with these new sounds he has learned from the Other? Not at all, Lacan holds, and desire, insofar as it is the impossible search for imaginary completeness, becomes inscribed in language.

Consequently, the Symbolic order is that which is constitutive of the subject by means of the Other. The problem, however, is that Lacan himself refuses to define the Other in strict terms. And yet, this very fact signals one to a number of characteristics that describe it. Speaking about transference Lacan writes that “the Other, latent or not, is, even beforehand, present in the subjective revelation, It is already there, when something has begun to yield itself from the unconscious.” In other words, the Other is omnipresent in non-metaphysical terms. When a person interviews another person, for example, it is not as if an ‘other’ is interviewing an ‘other.’ They can communicate because the Other is there, already at work before they have begun speaking: “The Other, the capital Other, is already there in every opening of the unconscious.”⁴ In other words, the Symbolic order, constituted by the Other, is what places the de-centered subject in the chain of intersubjectivity. “The Other,” Lacan explains, “is the locus in which is situated in the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject.”⁵ Outside of the Other nothing can be made present. The Fritzl kids, having no relation to the intersubjective chain of the Other, could not communicate. Inhabiting a private language that does not ‘mean,’ they had entered into the realm of psychosis.

Indeed, the astonishing gesture of Lacanian Psychoanalysis is that it unveils the endemic symbolic quality of social life. Therefore, Lacanian theory lends itself to social and cultural theory, and this is precisely what Louis Althusser does. Combining Psychoanalysis and Marxist theory he

² http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/lacan.htm
⁴ Lacan, 130.
⁵ Lacan, 203.
holds that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects.” Ideology can be understood here as the inscription of the subject into the Law and language. Inherent in the nature of ideology is “the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.” It establishes an imaginary relationship between the subject and the symbolic social network. Inscribed in its nature is the very fabric of the imaginary-symbolic to the Other, and—much like the infant in front of the mirror—the subject misrecognizes himself in the Symbolic order of ideology. Like the Other, which is already there in every opening of the unconscious, ideological subjects are always already subjects participating, recreating, and inhabiting the omnipresence of ideology. As Althusser explains, ideology “has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality).” There is no reality outside the realm of ideology.

Nevertheless, once again we seem to be caught in the velocity of the Symbolic. One might ask how the subject becomes inscribed, interpellated in this overbearing Other. This is where things become problematic in Althusser’s argument. He holds that the “interpellation of individuals as subjects presupposes the ‘existence’ of a Unique and central Other Subject,” which makes the very idea of a pre-ideological subject an impossibility. The problem here is that Althusser presupposes the subject’s ability to recognize himself in the Symbolic order of ideology, and overdetermines the subject’s interpellation. As Anthony Elliot explains, in the Althusserian order “subjects are serenely inserted into the process of interpellation, and the possibilities for individual and political agency in turn vanish.” Thus, the objection is not merely political, but that the fragmentation of the self—constitutive to Psychoanalysis itself—is dangerously simplified or forgotten. Desire and lack are left out of the Althusserian equation of ideology with the symbolic order.

Faced with this problematic relationship between Marxist theory and Psychoanalysis, Slavoj Zizek proposes a new connection beyond the Althusserian interpellation. For Zizek “ideology is not something which just magically goes to work on individuals, assigning social identities and roles in the act of producing itself, but is rather an overdetermined field of passionate assumptions and commitments.” Ideology is ‘beyond’ in the sense that it is that which makes subjectivity possible, and can never be reduced to the cultural reproduction of meaning. In order to sustain this argument Zizek reformulates the idea of ideology by maintaining that it is an inherently paradoxical structure. The passage from the imaginary to the symbolic denotes a traumatic dimension that is never truly resolved and which is found in the nature

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. (Althusser’s emphasis.)

9 Ibid.

10 Elliot, 105.

11 Elliot, 108.
of ideology itself. As Robert Pfaller explains:

Since interpellation never seems to succeed totally, the subject seems to remain at a certain distance towards his/her “meaningful” identity given to him/her by interpellation, and precisely this meaningless remainder should be regarded as a condition of the subject’s submission to the “meaningless” command of the ideological rituals and apparatuses.\(^{12}\)

This gulf between the meaningless and the meaningful is that which constitutes the subject’s passage from the imaginary to the symbolic, and it is the paradox of ideological inscription. The relationship to the Other—for all its pervasiveness and omnipresence—is inherently fragile.

As such, one might be tempted to conclude that Zizek proposes a seductive ‘return to Lacan’ in his conception of ideological interpellation. Central to the Lacanian edifice is the concept of *Lanque*, or Lack, which Lacan himself translates to the English neologism ‘want-to-be.’\(^{13}\) Lack, is therefore ‘central’ to the formation of the de-centered subject in the sense that it entails the subject’s desire for the unity of his being. It follows that lack would be central to the ideological edifice of symbolic intersubjectivity. Ideology is that which satisfies the lack in the interpellated subject by providing a structure that paradoxically fulfills and denies unity. The result of this paradox is that “the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly virtual, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition,” for “It exists only insofar as subjects act as if it exists.”\(^{14}\)

This is why ideologies that seem to be fraught with contradictions—the American dream and the lack of social mobility, proletarian revolution and the lack of equality among workers, religious belief and the lack of religious piety—thrive, even in the midst of incompleteness. Ideology, therefore, is related to the Other insofar as it provides subjects “the ultimate horizon of meaning to their lives, something for which these individuals are ready to give their lives, yet the only thing that really exists are these individuals and their activity.”\(^{15}\) It is better to be mystified by the Other’s paradoxical truths than to inhabit the realms of psychosis.

Consequently, Zizek’s conclusion is a very dark one. It is ultimately a position that renders “the ideological world empty of meaning.” While it seems to offer a place for a potentially seductive attack on the apparatuses of ideology, “it offers no basis for understanding the richly ambiguous links between desire and social action.”\(^{16}\) By debasing the subject to the perverse will of the Other, Zizek eliminates the possibility of a meaningful place for human identity.

Yet, we must now return to Austria, and to the problem of the children dislocated from the Other. It has


\(^{13}\) Lacan, 281.


\(^{15}\) Zizek, http://www.lacan.com/zizciap.html

\(^{16}\) Elliot, 110.
been shown that, for Lacan, desire is decidedly shaped by a subject’s relationship to the Other’s desire. As such, the Austrian children can be said to lack the inscription in the intersubjectivity of the linguistic symbolic order. Moreover, Althusser would claim that they have not yet been interpellated into the ideology of the multitude. Zizek would elaborate on this and say that they have not yet been inscribed into the virtual, paradoxical world of the ideological Other. Lastly, one might be tempted to ask: why does their story frighten us? What is uncanny about someone not inscribed into the symbolic order? Perhaps they remind us of the fragility around our fiction. Perhaps their growls and coos tragically echo our own strivings for a unity that must remain elusive in order to exist. They remind us of a world without the ideological omnipresent, a-historical, eternal Other.

Works Cited.


