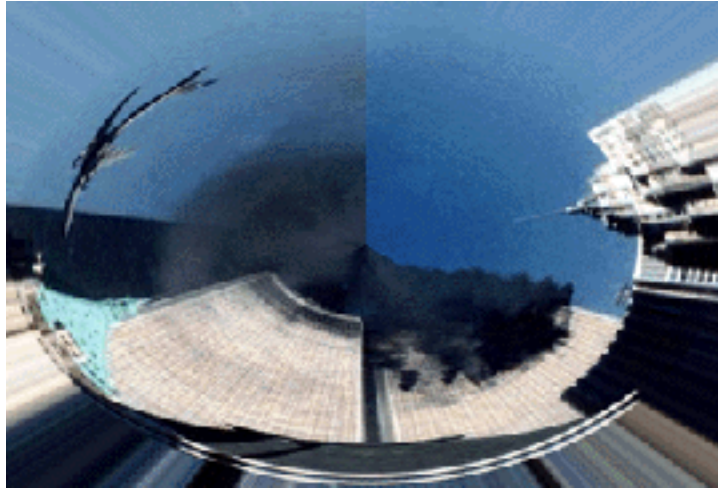


The Sociopolitical Limits of Fantasy: September 11 and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Ideology

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On Tuesday September 11th, those of us on the Eastern seaboard of Australia who weren't asleep or working late were probably thinking about turning in. Then, of a sudden, at some time soon after 10:47 p.m. (8:47 a.m. NYT) television stations crossed to live footage from New York. What the screens showed, to the accompaniment of perplexed and excited commentary, was the World Trade Centre North Tower, billowing smoke incongruously against the background of a perfectly still, perfectly clear New York morning. As commentators continued to speculate as to whether the first collision was an accident, a second plane appeared. As if in slow motion, it arched its way towards the South tower before plummeting into it with terrific force.

As the BBC commentator Alan Little remarked, it was above all this moment of the *second* plane colliding with the South tower that will stand as the defining one in the public memory. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that the collision of this second plane put paid to all speculation that the first crash had been the result of human error. The malign intent evident in the approach of the second United Air jet left no room for doubt. The second is that this second collision was sufficiently long after the first one for all of the world's television cameras to be focussed on the twin towers. Unlike the first strike, which rudely interrupted the calm of a normal New York morning, this was a perfect terroristic spectacle. In the hours and days that followed, innumerable different shots from different angles were procured. And the stunned audiences of the world were shown these different shots innumerable different times, as if none could ever

render fully the enormity of what had occurred -- as if somehow we would always need to see more, because we could never see It happening fully enough.

In this essay, what I want to do is examine the public mediatic reception of September 11 in the light of Slavoj Zizek's recent development of a revised theory of ideology, which he derives from an adoption of Lacan's theorisations of discourse and fantasy. Zizek himself was one of the first intellectuals to respond publically to the events, with his piece: "Welcome to the Desert of the Real". Zizek's subsequent responses to critics were then published on the net. While I shall look at these pieces, I want to take the mediatic reception of September 11 as the occasion to stage a wider consideration of Zizek's sociopolitical theory as a whole. What I want to argue in this paper is that an application of Zizek's tenets to the way that the September 11 attacks have been symbolised in the mainstream media (with more or less direct prompting from the U.S., Australian and British executives) illustrates both the undoubtable strengths, but also the limitations, of his appropriation of Lacan for the critique of ideology.

The essay proceeds in two parts. Part i. recounts the contours of Zizek's Lacanian theorisation of ideology. It shows the very significant light that I think his deployment of Lacanian categories can throw upon the ideological reception of September 11 terrorist attacks. Part ii. then questions how totally we can apply a Zizekian model to these events, and whether his psychoanalytic reading of ideology must not be supplemented by tropes taken from older Marxist formulations of politics and social conflict.

I

As the title of Zizek's 1989 book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* already indicates, even *the* contribution Zizek has made to the critique of ideology is to draw our attention to the importance of the category of the sublime to its theorisation. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, centrally in his chapter on Kant, Terry Eagleton has already drawn our attention to the aesthetical nature of how ideology functions. Yet Eagleton's focus remains on the notion of the beautiful in Kant. Like the beautiful object, Eagleton remarks, ideology serves to present us with a harmonious whole in which all dissonances have been cancelled. More importantly, by properly drawing attention to how aesthetic judgements in Kant's systems are reflexive judgements, Eagleton remarks how the consumption of an ideology intimates to subjects a *sensus communis*: a sense that they *themselves* belong to a harmonious collective above and beyond their sensuous individual particularity.¹

What Zizek has repeatedly argued since 1989, though, is that a hegemonic ideology can never succeed wholly in its task of creating a *sensus communis* without the adducing of sublime objects. These objects have what Derrida would term a "supplementary" ontological status. They are at once avowed by the ideology and necessary to it, yet they simultaneously intimate to subjects a *beyond* to what is usually publically avowed and exchanged. These objects will typically be the presupposed referents of such "master signifiers" as "God", or "the People", or -- differently -- "the Jews", or "the bourgeois". They are precisely objects that no interpellated subject can ever quite place in the fabric

of his/her usual phenomenological self-experience, and yet which are taken by them to be what give meaning and unity to this entire field.

Zizek's theorisation of the sublime is as indebted to Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, and his later theorisation of the logics of fantasy, as it is to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. His contention is that the object of fantasy in Lacanian theory -- the famous *objet petit a* -- is precisely a sublime object. The object of fantasy captivates the subject, and never ceases returning to haunt his/her phenomenological world. At the same time, though, the *objet petit a* precisely eludes the subjects' grasp in its role as object-cause of desire. Recall that the sublimity of sublime representations comes in Kant's estimation from how their very failure to phenomenally render the Ideas of Reason serves itself paradoxically to intimate the trans-phenomenal dignity of these Ideas. A failed representation in this way comes to stand as a metonym for the failure of representation *per se* before that which would always exceed it. Zizek draws on Lacan to argue that what, in a parallel way, is intimated by the object of fantasy is the mysterious wealth of the Other's unattainable *jouissance* (sexualised, transgressive enjoyment). He comments that, for this reason, we should add to Kant's list of sublime objects (a hurricane, a stormy sea, etc.) the archetypal Thing staged in what is called the "primal scene" in psychoanalysis: namely, the sight of a woman *enjoying* being coited.

Zizek's intervention in the theorisation of ideology thus amounts to the following position. Just as an individual subject's discursive universe will only ever be unified through the recourse to a fantasy (mis)representing the *jouissance* of the Other; so too the public-ideological frame wherein political subjects take their bearings can only ever function by the positing of what Zizek calls "ideological fantasies". These fantasies serve precisely to regulate subjects' access to the *beyond* of a hegemonic ideological enclosure. They broach what it can never fully avow about itself and its relation to the world, and/or to what it must take for granted as wholly beyond question, in order to reproduce itself. I will detail what Zizek thinks is involved in this further in Part ii.

At this point of my exposition, it is already possible to understand Zizek's central argument in "Welcome to the Desert of the Real". This was that the U.S. "got what it fantasised about" on September 11. *This* fact, he insisted, (like the rape victim whose trauma is increased insofar as she had fantasised unconsciously about it) "was the greatest surprise" to us in the first world, and what caused us the greatest dismay.² The first reference of Zizek's claim is, of course, the Hollywood "disaster film" blockbusters, wherein one or other U.S. landmark is catastrophically destroyed. An invariable comment of people who were "on the ground" in New York was exactly that the scene of the smoking towers, and/or their collapse, was "just like in a movie".³ Yet my argument here is that Zizek's entire theoretical positioning, and not solely this sociological observation, is what underlies his assessment of September 11.

In "Welcome to the Desert of the Real", Zizek makes clear his qualified agreement with commentators who have argued that September 11 ushered in a new world order, and was (as such) an event of comparable import to the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁴ The terrorist actions, he notes, aimed to introduce what he calls (borrowing from Hegel) "the

dimension of absolute negativity" into the calm ideological self-assurance of America, and (behind it) of the entire first world.⁵ Writing in the days following the attack, Zizek compared the ideological confusion of the times to the situation of the individual who has undergone some traumatic event that has shaken his/her most basic presuppositions about "how the world is", and what is possible within it. "It is as if we [now] dwell", he assessed, "in the unique moment between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact".⁶

The most obvious register of truth in Zizek's assessment, I believe, concerns the near-compulsive way in which the shots of the second plane ploughing into the South WTO tower were repeated in the ensuing hours and days. One of the crucial innovations that Zizek's deployment of Lacan brings to the critique of ideology is an increased emphasis on how ideology is never merely a deceptive misrepresentation of social reality. Insofar as ideology turns around its mastering of fantasmatic self-representations, Zizek holds that, like the subject's individual fundamental fantasy, it is also *ontologically constitutive* for a collective's way of seeing the socio-political world. It furnishes subjects with the interpretive frame which makes it possible for them to experience the socio-political world as a meaningful, consistent totality. As a result, what a Zizekian framework allows us -- better than other accounts of ideology -- to understand is the very evident truth that what collapsed on September 11 was not simply the twin towers. Americans' very sense of reality -- of *how the world is* -- was shaken to its foundations, like a subject who is rudely confronted with what he has only ever fantasised about as "of the Other". How can one avoid the observation that the repetition of the shots of the second strike on the twin towers was a phenomenon directly akin to the compulsive repetition evident in obsessional rituals, wherein the subject (as Freud showed) seeks to disavow his/her *own* innermost-threatening desires?

What was at stake in this stunned repetition of the hit on the South tower, I think Zizek's categories allow us rightly to understand, was the first attempts of the West to symbolise what had occurred on September 11. It was a question of gentrifying its traumatic impact; or of "coming to terms" with it, as we say, but on an absolutely *basic* level. Here, that is, we witnessed an exact exemplification of Zizek's quip against sound "common sense" realism: namely, that ultimately it is not the absence of actions accompanying words that is the most unbearable Thing. Rather, it is precisely an act that occurs in the absence of its symbolisation, and which contravenes all our previous expectations, leaving us with no semantic bearings to contextualise it at all.⁷

Recall my expository comment above that Zizek argues that it is in the service of this elementary need of subjects to give semantic unity to their experience, *no matter what*, that ideological fantasy primarily functions. This is what I want to emphasise in Part I. Particularly, Zizek argues, ideological fantasies serve this function by misrepresenting ideological systems' own internal and necessary limitations as merely contingent and removable obstacles.⁸ In line with this, he details, they prototypically posit an external "Other supposed to enjoy" the failings of the current system, and the consequent sufferings of subjects within it. His prime example is always the Nazi's ideological figuring of the Jew, upon whom responsibility was laid for the inability of the German people to attain to the *volkish* unity valorised in the National Socialist ideology. But one

can think of innumerable other, more contemporary examples. The ongoing conflict over Kashmir between the Indian and Pakistani governments, for example, sees each positing the other nation as an Other devoted to hatefully stealing the most precious piece of its Nationhood, without which it can never be complete.

My contention about the hegemonic response to September 11, then, is that *when the Bush administration did finally begin to string together a coherent response to the attacks, this response demonstrated exactly the phantasmatic logics that Zizek identifies as a universal feature of ideologies per se*. Zizek argued, in his response to Marco Mauas of October 10 2001 that: ". . . the worst thing to do apropos of the events of September 11 is to elevate them to a point of absolute Evil. . . ." ⁹ Yet, as we know, if there is even *one* word that George W. Bush has time and time returned to, in his public statements on U.S. foreign policy, it is precisely this loaded signifier "evil". The "war against terror" is a war of good versus evil, Bush has proclaimed. The three nations Iraq, Iran and North Korea whom his administration accuses of harbouring terrorists form an "axis of evil". And one could go on. The Zizekian point to make here is that what we hear in this ideological deployment of "evil" is a thorough externalisation of the cause of the trauma of September 11th. When Bush asked: "why do they hate America?", and the only public response his administration was able to muster was as thin as the naïve protest of the outraged innocent -- "they hate our freedom" -- the truth of the U.S. executive's ideological response to September 11th was crystallised, I believe. There was to be no soul-searching within the American nation. There was to be no questioning of the foreign policy propounded by the executive, or of the relation between the executive and the legislature. As we know, the most questionable curtailment of the elementary civil rights to speak one's mind and exercise *doubt* was rather demanded (and we in Australia need only think only of the Anthony Mundene affair, or the potential implications of the recently proposed anti-terrorist legislation). To ask what America might have contributed if not to *causing* September 11 then at least to creating such discontent with it as that which motivated the attackers was already, in one's very position of enunciation, to have begun to "think like terrorists". This, at least, is what we were warned.

Moreover, it was not simply the attacks of September 11 itself that was symbolised as absolute Evil in the hegemonic mediatic response. Behind September 11, the ideological machine elevated the dark figure of Osama Bin Laden. He, it was said, was the master-mind at work in what had occurred, and the inspiration of the murderous-suicidal hijackers.

What then does Zizek's revised theory of ideology have to say concerning the West's figuring of Bin Laden after September 11? The first thing to stress is that a Zizekian analysis does not focus on the factual accuracy or otherwise of the Bush and Blair imputation of guilt to Bin Laden and Al Qaida. ¹⁰ The thing that Zizek stresses about such figures painted by ideology as the wholly malign external agents is *our own libidinal investment* in them. Fantasies about the Others' enjoyment, Zizek argues repeatedly (via Lacan), are crucial to the way subjects and collectives have of structuring their own relation to the traumatic *jouissance* of the drives, and the innate transgressivity of human desire. ¹¹

One commentator in Australia has recently drawn attention to how oddly Christ-like are the images of Bin Laden we have been shown *ad infinitum* on our screens since September 11. Other writers have drawn the inevitable comparison with Hitler. Bin Laden is someone who at once horrifies and fascinates the hegemonic ideologues and the Western media. It is for this reason not hard to state which figure his construction can most readily be compared to in the Freudian-Lacanian *parlance* that Zizek deploys to construct his understanding of ideology. I speak of the so-called "anal" or "superegoic" father whose subjective positing supposedly dates from the time of the subject's Oedipal misadventures, and whom Zizek (after Jacques-Alain Miller) argues is also the figure whom Freud evoked in *Totem and Taboo* as the father of the primal horde: Bin Laden, as agent of absolute evil, is presented to us as someone wholly beyond the normal round of the pleasure and/or reality principle to which we are subjected as "civilised" beings. As Zizek observes, Bin Laden and his followers have been repeatedly charged with having impossibly embodied *both* the extremes of cowardice *and* inhuman self-sacrifice; the most sophisticated cunning *and* primitive barbarism.¹² The very fact that Bin Laden has been forced underground (literally, we are told), and been holed up in Afghanistan since 1997 only increases his mystique. Again, not dissimilar to the persecutor in the paranoid's universe, Bin Laden is someone of whom the very *absence* of any "plain as day" evidence of his involvement in the attacks is implicitly held in the hegemonic ideology to point *even more surely* to the sophistication of his malignity, and the indefinite extension of his reach.

I think we can see the most patent instancing of this phantasmatic investment of the West in Bin Laden in the lasting uncertainty of the U.S. regime that they have ever *killed* Bin Laden. As American Rear Admiral Craig Quigley said as recently as Wednesday April 17: "'Truth is hard to come by in Afghanistan, [and as for confidence on whether Bin Laden is alive or dead] you need to see some sort of physical concrete proof".¹³ In February of this year, the U.S. government went as far as asking the Bin Laden family to send D.N.A. when they had found the corpse of a "highly respected" "tall bearded man" amidst the carnage of Tora Bora. One is reminded of Hitler's angst in the final days of World War II to hurry through the work of the *shoah*, as if the *remaining* Jews (however few) posed an ever-greater danger to Germany the more their race had been decimated. One is also perpetually tempted to remind the U.S. executive of the elementary lesson of *Totem and Taboo*: namely, that it is above all the *dead* father-figure who can exert the most unambivalent authority upon his followers, as someone in whose *name* every sacrifice can be justified.

So my point in this Part i. is to stress how clearly fruitful a device Zizek's Lacanian theory can be for an analysis of both September 11, and the subsequent hegemonic symbolisation of its causes and perpetrators. To stress: the primary point that Zizek's Lacanian positioning allows him to make concerns less the *content* of particular assertions that the hegemonic ideologies make (these may be true *or* false, he avows). His Lacanian analysis instead emphasises how hegemonic ideologies in the last instance must have recourse to ideological fantasies that serve to structure interpellated subjects' bearing towards events that threaten to undermine its interpretation of itself and the larger socio-political world. What is decisive for Zizek, that is, is how *we* are placed, when we

adopt the abstract emotive terminology of ideological edifices, and accede to ordering our political understandings through reference to such sublime "good" objects as "nation", "good", "god" and "freedom", and such sublime "bad" objects as "terror", "terrorism" or "evil".

Looking again at September 11, we can see how it is almost trivially obvious that one can never propose a really feasible attack on "Evil" elevated to something like a theological Principle. But this is what the Bush administration is now clearly committed to doing, insofar as it is committed by the fantasmatic logics of its ideological projection. All we can do once we have thoroughly externalised the cause of our trauma is one of two things, as Žižek has repeatedly detailed. The first, as he comments in his "Response to Marco Mauas", is remain stuck in ". . . [a] debilitating awe " at the incomprehensible malignity of our attackers. This is where much of the Western public has clearly been since September 11, sustained in its passive position by the constant media subliming of the attacks, and the more or less implicit prohibitions against voicing dissenting opinion that have only begun to lift in the last few months.¹⁴ Or, secondly, we can vengefully strike out against those whom we accuse of having so unaccountably levelled a blow at everything that we hold to be Sacred. This is what the American-led coalition has clearly done in Afghanistan, and threatens now to do elsewhere, in what one commentator has dubbed accurately as at least potentially "an unending war".¹⁵

II

The question that I want to ask in Part ii. of this paper, by using the example of September 11 and its aftermath, is: what is it that is *occluded* from public debate and/or *debate-ability* by political ideologies? More particularly, my concern will be to ask whether specifically *Žižek's* account of ideology, by drawing upon Lacan's conceptions of discourse and fantasy, allows us to adequately understand the *politicality* of ideological formations, and what they serve to debar from subjects' consideration.

Žižek has staked out what he takes to be a set of prescriptions for challenging the hegemonic ideological response to September 11 in both "Welcome to the Desert of the Real", and his "Response to Marco Mauas". He says:

. . . the dialectical thing to do here is not to include these acts into some larger narrative of the Progress of Reason or Humanity which somehow -- if not redeems them, at least -- makes them part of an all-encompassing larger narrative, "sublated" them in a "higher" stage of development (the naïve notion of Hegelianism), but to make us question our own innocence, to render thematic our own (fantasmatic libidinal) investment and engagement in them.¹⁶

. . . the alternative is: will Americans decide to fortify their "sphere", or risk stepping out of it? Either America will persist in, strengthen even, the attitude of "why should this happen to us? Things like that don't happen HERE!", leading them more prone to aggressivity towards the threatening

Outside, in short: to a paranoiac acting out. Or America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival in the Real world.[17](#)

What Zizek suggests that the United States should do, in his Lacanian terms, is enact a "traversal" of its hegemonic phantasmatic self-representations. Rather than acting in a way justified by recourse to its existing ideological terms, he proposes that its executive should call these terms into question, and act in a way impossible given an acceptance of this ideological world-view. In the conclusion of "Welcome to the Desert of the Real", Zizek specifies that he believes America needs to make:

. . . the long-overdue move from "A thing like that should not happen HERE!" to "A thing like this should not happen ANYWHERE!"
America's "holiday from history" was a fake: America's peace was brought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere. Therein resides the true lesson of the bombings: the only way to ensure that it will not happen HERE again is to prevent it going on ANYWHERE else.[18](#)

We can recognise in Zizek's responses to September 11, then, a proposal made by several other notable Leftist commentators: namely, that America, as the only remaining superpower, needs to more actively pursue the principles that the glittering surface of its ideologies expound. By themselves, these suggestions sound eminently justifiable. It seems difficult to dispute that only something of this order would be required to prevent recurrences of terrorism in the U.S. and against its agents abroad. The theoretical problem that I am concerned to pose in this Part ii., however, is that (here as arguably elsewhere) it is less immediately clear what relation these Zizekian ethico-political prognostications bear to the Lacanian theorisation of ideology that is his undoubted contribution to contemporary political theory.

My point is not just that other political commentators, have repeatedly claimed similar things as Zizek now is doing concerning America, both before and after September 11 of last year. This, it is true, does indicate that a Lacanian framework is not *necessary* to come to such prescriptive conclusions as Zizek has. Even the much-reviled universalistic humanism of a Chomsky seems sufficient. My point is that, having accepted a Lacanian framework, it seems difficult to generate any such concrete and specific prescriptions as Zizek has made in "Welcome to the Desert of the Real", or in his responses to Marco Mauas and Peter Murphy.[19](#)

As I indicated in introducing Part ii., I think the telling question concerning Zizek's theorisation of ideology is: what is it that Zizek's deployment of Lacan to theorise ideology identifies as that which hegemonic ideologies *occlude* (or "repress" or "foreclose") from the consideration of interpellated subjects?

The first reason why I think this question is so important is that, put simply: what Zizek holds is in this way occluded by ideologies is what he is also theoretically committed to maintaining that a "traversal" of an ideological fantasy would allow us to

re-broach and re-politicise in any given socio-political instance. In terms of the specific case of September 11, my question translates into: *what is it that the Bush administration's use of terms like "evil" and "terror" to describe all those whom it accuses of being directly or indirectly involved in September 11 serves to render unsayable within the public spheres of the first world nations?*

The second reason why I think this question is so important is that, when one addresses it in such a specific way, I think the *limits* of Zizek's adoption of Lacanian-psychoanalytic categories for the theorisation of public political ideologies soon become clearly evident.

Recall that, as I commented in Part i., one of Zizek's central points is that ideologies ultimately serve less to delude subjects as to the nature of social reality, as give them a framework which allows them to symbolise this reality as a consistent unity *in the first place*. But Zizek articulates this claim through a deployment of one further crucial Lacanian category that needs to be expounded. This category is that of the Lacanian Real. Zizek's repeated claim, since the first chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, is that what ideologies serve to foreclose from subjects' consideration is this "Real".

The "Real", in Lacanian theory, names all that which a subject cannot fully symbolise or "subjectivise" about its *own* libidinal make-up, and so which *necessarily* returns traumatically to haunt his or her usual sense of self and world, in symptoms, dreams, slips and other parapraxes. This Real is, accordingly, strictly opposed by Zizek to what subjects experience as "reality". Access to this "reality" is conditioned by their having repressed the Real, and/or structured their relation to it in a fantasy that (mis)represents the objects of its own transgressive wishes as threatening intrusions that come to it contingently and fractiously from outside (like planes striking the twin towers, for example). This is why Zizek is at pains to repeat that we absolutely must not conceive the Real as some unattainable external-sublime register of Being, the anticipation of which would perhaps allow us the semantic distance from whence to critique hegemonic ideologies. To conceive of it in this way, he argues, is to duplicate the elementary logic of ideologies *per se*, as examined in Part i.

The Lacanian category of the Real ultimately names the points of *internal limitation* of hegemonic discourses, Zizek argues. Zizek's wager is thus that it can be applied to a consideration of political ideologies to name and delimit the contours of those points of "symptomatic" inconsistency *within* any hegemonic ideological edifice. In this way, he thinks it can form the basis of a Lacanian immanent critique of ideology, and of social reproduction more generally. Along these lines, Zizek has even ventured to identify the Lacanian Real with what he calls "social antagonism" (drawing on Laclau and Mouffe), or with "class struggle" (invoking the spectre of Marx).

Recall from Part i., in line with this, Zizek's argument that hegemonic political ideologies work by phantasmatically misrepresenting points of internal systemic inconsistency as the results of contingent external interruptions. In this understanding of how ideology works, at least stated at this level of generality, it is clear that Zizek's

position agrees with Marx's, and adds considerable categorical firepower to the arsenal of Marxist ideology critique. (I tried to show this in Part i.) What I want now to argue is decisive in separating Zizek's theory from a political theory like Marx's, though, is that the points of internal inconsistency in hegemonic systems that Zizek's Lacanism allows him to isolate are simply *in no way politically salient and/or contestable*.

The basic problem stems from how, as Zizek *himself* is at pains to stress whenever he details his undergirding ontology, even Lacan's central point in his later theorisation of the Real was that *no symbolic edifice can ever wholly gentrify It, since the Real is a necessary by-product of human symbolisation as such*. But you can see the implication of this, which is direct and logical. This is that, as Zizek acknowledges in *For They Know Not What They Do*, if we hold to his new theorisation of "ideology" as repressing this Lacanian Real (albeit now in a socio-political transmogrification), we are thereby committed to the position that *every understanding of the public-political realm must be "ideological"*, independently of its factual accuracy or inaccuracy, or of the values that it happens to propound or betray.²⁰

Zizek's critique of ideology, because of its more or less *wholus bolus* importation of Lacan to the task of political theory, indeed finally centres around the claim that what is most basically foreclosed from interpellated subjects by an hegemonic ideology is an *a priori* exigency that pertains to it as nothing more specific than an example of *a semantic system*.

The primal subjective fantasy as conceived through Lacan, Zizek explains, serves finally to occlude from subjects the radical inexplicability of their emergence into the physical and social worlds. It does this by figuring this emergence as an historical event (the "primal scene") staged before a fantasised, impassive subjective gaze. In this way, the subject him/herself -- as this object gaze -- is posited as (impossibly) having already been there to witness its own emergence, and the singularity of this emergence is narratively "smoothed over".

Zizek's argument is that it is in a directly parallel way that no political system can ever explain its own *genesis* except by spuriously presupposing that the logics that typify it were already at work in the historically preceding period, as with the capitalist myth of "primitive accumulation" that Marx attacked in Volume I of *Capital*. Accordingly, you can see that what he isolates as what is most basically and critically occluded by the production of a consistent ideological worldview is *the fact that this ideology can only have emerged through an historical act which, if it were repeated today, would contravene the order of Law and conventions that it set in place*. This act, he claims, corresponds to the usually overlooked dimension of "radical negativity" in history, whose bearer is political subjectivity. His theoretical position is that the inconsistencies that an ideology evinces whenever it is pushed to totalise its understanding of the world are the "symptomatic" indices of the irremovability of political subjectivity, conceived as the capacity of individuals to act to *change* the social and symbolic coordinates of their political communities, and thereby repeat and undo the violent gesture that each political system is necessarily founded upon. For Zizek, in a distant parallel to Kant, a conception

of ethical action is held to thus precede aesthetics: the elevation of the master signifiers and sublime-fantasmatic objects of ideology (as explained in Part i.) are there for him ultimately to conceal from subjects that it is only their continuing accession to the ideologies that sustains their hegemony, and that this accession can always be revoked.

And once this is laid out, its limitations as a political theory are easily demonstrated. When confronted with an event like September 11, if Žižek were to have remained true to his theoretical Lacanianism, his position could only have been that, when the Bush administration speaks of "good", "god", "freedom" versus "evil", "terrorists" and the chilling substantive "terror", what is being concealed from us is the inconsistency of America's foundational discourses. The ideologicity of the ideology comes from its concealing from us how the fact that the current hegemonic American self-understanding is not a fully self-consistent totality, but one whose perdurance in history depends on the continuing accession to it of really-existing political subjects in America and around the globe.

Let me be clear: I do not dispute that these *are* things that the wholesale adoption of the hegemonic pro-American way of seeing occludes from peoples' sight. America has a global reputation, particularly in the Middle East, for its arrogance, and the ignorance of its citizens of the fallibility of their institutions, executives, and foreign policies, which was only temporarily shaken by Vietnam. Equally, the proclaiming of "God bless America" is a studied example of the type of proposition that Althusser was concerned in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" to show serve neatly to veil how neither "God" nor "America" can be blessed by anything other than historical peoples. Yet can we feasibly maintain that this is *all* that the Bush rhetoric occludes? And: can we properly say that it is all of what contributes to our sense that the U.S. response to September 11 is an example *par excellence* of ideology in the strongest pejorative sense of that term? Is it, that is, the really decisive thing that we would want a political theory and specifically a theory of ideology to isolate?

In fact, what is evident from "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" is that Žižek *himself* does not think that it is. In this piece, as arguably when he has considered the Kosovo situation, Žižek in fact clearly reverts back to an older style of ideological critique. When Žižek comments on America's said "alternative" after September 11, indeed, he seems very clearly to be arguing that what these ideologies "foreclose" is not most importantly the Real of what cannot be symbolised *within and immanent* to the American hegemonic ideology. Rather, he agrees with numerous commentators that the pro-American symbolisation of September 11 is above all a ruse whose acceptance prevents the possibility of our calling into question the concrete historical actions of the U.S. in the Middle East and elsewhere since World War II, and in other areas of the world. When drawn to consider the reality of September 11 and the Bush administration's ideological response to it, that is, Žižek has shown himself eminently aware of how, *at least in addition to serving an ontological function*, we must continue to hold to the older notion that ideologies also serve to misrepresent aspects of historical *reality* and conflict, the public broaching of which would be politically compromising to the *realpolitical* agendas of hegemonic powers.

Conclusion

I hope now to have defended the two contentions I announced in my introduction. My contention in Part i. was that Zizek's turn to Lacan to theoretically formalise the elementary devices and functions of ideology provides us with useful heuristic devices to understand aspects of September 11 the event, and as an ideological trope. Decisive here, I claimed, are two incisive contributions he makes. The first is that ideology has an ontological function, structuring the way subjects experience the world "from the ground up". The second is that ideological fantasies serve to externalise the causes of socio-political trauma through the elevation of sublime "good" objects (in this case "America", "freedom") held to be under threat by what I have termed "sublime bad objects" ("evil", "terror", "Al Qaida"). My contention in Part ii., however, was that the attempt to deploy Zizek's Lacanian-psychoanalytic categories to try to understand what it is that historical ideologies serve to politically occlude shows how it cannot of itself be taken as a newly paradigmatic and total theory of ideology. An analysis of what the current hegemonic symbolisation of September 11 and "terrorism" serve to foreclose from public consideration, I believe, shows that what ideologies function to "repress" is never solely their own inability to repress the insistence of what Lacan designated as "the Real". If we are to properly speak of an ideology, I maintain, it is always something more than this, and something more *politically concrete*, that is at stake.

Note that, in developing my position, I am placing myself in parity with Elizabeth Bellamy's argument in "Discourses of Impossibility: Can Psychoanalysis be Political?". Bellamy comments of Zizek's critique of ideology using Lacan:

To say that society is not a unified totality . . . is to assert that society is inconsistent; [but] *it is this highly complex inconsistency that is not necessarily analogous to this Lacanian Real.*[21](#)

What I want to again stress in closing, though, is that the type of criticism of Zizek that I am proffering here is not a total one. As the title of this paper indicates, and as I have repeated, what I think we confront when we try to apply Zizek's adoption of Lacan to the critique of historical ideologies and their functioning, are the *limits* of this approach. To repeat: my assertion is only that, when we consider a concrete case like the hegemonic rewriting of September 11, we see that the notion of the "non-existence" of the big Other that Zizek imports from Lacanian psychoanalysis to political theory is at once ontologically too profound, and politically too *bloodless*, to do the work that we require of it. Older conceptions of ideology need also to be retained, which assert that ideologies work to hide from subjects' constructions of reality not simply the ontological finitude of their own political self-representations, but also how the historical actions set in place by hegemonic regimes produce some unpalatable consequences, at least when they are unjust.

What this indicates, I think, is not the complete obsolescence of Zizek's theory of ideology, nor its irrelevance as a proffered contribution to political theory. What it

indicates, I would instead hold, is how what we may need to venture, in the light of Zizek's very real contribution to political theory, is something like the formulation that:

There where a Lacanian theory of ideology detects symptomatic inconsistency in a hegemonic ideology, and there where we observe the externalisation of points of internal semantic inconsistency through the workings of ideological fantasy and the elevation of sublime objects of ideology, there also we should look to see the foreclosure from public debate of concrete historical injustice, past, contemporary, or anticipated.

A Zizekian style critique of ideology can only be taken to be wholly inconsistent with the older Leftist figurings of this *topos*, I believe, if we are stuck in a deleteriously transferential relationship with Lacanian theory.

Notes

- [1](#) Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell: London, 1990), ch. 3.
- [2](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" c/o www.lacan.com: p. 2; Slavoj Zizek, "Reply to Marcel Mauas", c/o www.lacan.com, p. 3.
- [3](#) Ibid.
- [4](#) *The Day that Shook the World* BBC: Great Britain, 2002.
- [5](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Reply to Marcel Mauas", c/o www.lacan.com, p. 1.
- [6](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" c/o www.lacan.com: p. 4-5. He further compared the immediate aftermath to September 11th to the uncanny moment when one has been deeply cut, but has yet to begin feeling the pain.
- [7](#) It was as if, in this time, that George Bush's stuttering enunciations, in their unusual punctuation, thus metonymically rendered the larger truth that the basic presuppositions that had structured the American "big Other" had been shattered.
- [8](#) See, for example: Slavoj Zizek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2000), p. 17.
- [9](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Reply to Marcel Mauas", c/o www.lacan.com, p. 2.
- [10](#) For the record, the subsequent video, in which Bin Laden is seen praising the attackers, and telling how he had warned people before September 11 to keep quiet, etc.,

seems telling evidence at least of his *foreknowledge* of the attacks, if not that he "gave the order".

[11](#) Cf. (eg) Slavoj Zizek, *Tarrying With the Negative* (Durham: Durham Uni. Press, 1993), ch. 6.

[12](#) Cf. Slavoj Zizek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" c/o www.lacan.com, p. 3.

[13](#) Report: US Concludes Bin Laden Escaped Tora Bora - Reuters (Apr 17, 2002).

[14](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Reply to Marcel Mauas", c/o www.lacan.com, p. 2.

[15](#) *The Day that Shook the World* BBC: Great Britain, 2002*. Cf. *ibid.*

[16](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Reply to Marcel Mauas", c/o www.lacan.com, p. 1-2.

[17](#) Cf. Slavoj Zizek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" c/o www.lacan.com, p. 5.

[18](#) *Loc cit.*, p. 3. "For the past five centuries", Zizek comments: ". . . the (relative) prosperity of the 'civilised' West was bought by the export of ruthless violence and destruction into the 'barbarian' Outside: the long story from the conquest of America to the slaughter in the Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these bombings is much more symbolic than real. The US just got the taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Grozny, from Rwanda and Congo to Sierre Leone. . . ."

[19](#) Slavoj Zizek, "Response to Peter Murphy", c/o www.lacan.com, p. 6.

[20](#) Slavoj Zizek, *For They Know Not What They Do* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 207.

[21](#) Elizabeth Bellamy, "Discourses of Impossibility: Can Psychoanalysis Be Political?" in *Diacritics* 23:1: 32 (my italics).

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