

# AMBIGUOUS IDEOLOGY AND THE LACANIAN TWIST

*Yannis Stavrakakis*

After the so-called “End of Ideology” in the ‘50’s the last few years have signaled a growing interest for the theory and conceptualisation of ideology.<sup>1</sup> This renewed interest has even led to the launching of a new *Journal of Political Ideologies* and to the proliferation of the relevant debates in journals such as *Politics* and others. What is important here is that this new wave in the Ideology literature does not signal the coming of absolute analysis - if absolute analyses are ever possible - to the definitional and other problems long associated with the concept. On the contrary, what seems to be happening is the emergence of a delineated research area in which all problems are acknowledged and discussed. For it is the case that the interest in ideology is rather stimulated by all these problems. It is the fact that ideology resembles “a proud vessel that some do not recognise, others ram, and others again attach to their crafts as would a salvage ship tow a wreck”<sup>2</sup> that is associated with the new journal, while the discussion in *Politics* is centred around the limits and the ambiguity of the concept.<sup>3</sup> This generalised and institutionalised aporia surrounding the theory of ideology is coupled, in these last years, with the dynamic emergence, mainly in the prolific work of Slavoj Žižek, of a distinct Lacanian theory of ideology.<sup>4</sup> This confluence between Lacanian theory and the critique of ideology is not only beneficial for political theory but also for the psychoanalytic field since it enhances its social significance, something which always constituted a *point de capiton* in the discourse of both Freud and Lacan. This explains the enormous number of Žižek’s texts included in journals operating in the Freudian field (*Analysis*, *JCFAR* and others).

The majority of new texts are usually focused on some kind of conceptual history of ‘ideology’. In most of these cases, however, the traditional conception of history (and conceptual history in particular) that the authors share entraps them in a more or less traditional re-articulation of a theory of ideology. However, the authors who seem to be radically transcending the traditional conceptualisations of ideology, opening the road to the development of a Lacanian theory of ideology, like Žižek, do not seem to be at all interested in providing a historical account of the conception of ideology and linking it to their own project. What follows is an attempt to bridge this gap or, given the limitations of space, to suggest some possible steps in that direction. For it is my view that the success of the Lacanian theory of ideology depends on its ability to demonstrate its usefulness in transcending the problems of the theory of ideology, problems that only a genealogy of the concept can reveal in their true dimensions.

Odd as it may seem, the growing interest in the theory of ideology follows two major failures in our attempts to handle the concept of ideology: 1) the failure of modernist representationalist conceptualisations of ideology; 2) the failure of the post-modernist or post-structuralist rejection of the concept of ideology, a rejection that was thought to provide the absolute analysis of the highly problematic modernist use of the concept, both in theory and in politics.

The whole field of the theorisation of ideology belongs to the discursive universe of modernity. One might say that this is a common assumption. This, however, depends on the way one uses the term ‘modernity’. Beyond the unending

proliferation of standard definitions of modernity, most of which entail the ultimately impossible task of locating once and for all the essence of this historical period, one should realise that the core of modernity cannot be a positive essence. The modern epoch - in the minimal sense of the word - can only be understood through a *via negativa*, as initiated by the dislocation of the Christian tradition and of traditional discursive regularities in general. The more visible level of modernity comprises a set of strategies employed to fill the lack - the lack in the Other - created by this dislocation, by the 'Death of God'. The problem with these strategies is that they entail a re-occupation of the ground of God by Reason, as universal guarantor, but inside a culture that has erased the ontological preconditions for such a role. In that sense the history of modernity is also an overview of the failure of Universal Reason - and the idea, or rather the fantasy, of a rational and final representability of the social - to maintain its hegemonic role; but most importantly of the strategies used to sustain and reconstitute again and again this Imperialism of Reason.

All these strategies presupposed a repression of those moments that posed a threat to the modern universal: uncertainty and contingency belong to such moments, together with the irrational, the political and, of course, the *unconscious*. If ideology is a modern concept it is exactly because its purpose is to critique and eliminate all these 'ideological' particularities that resist their integration in the 'non-ideological/true', rational schema of representing the social. In that sense the emergence of the field of a science, or a theory of ideology, constitutes a condition of possibility for the modern project, for the - impossible - stabilization of the modern fantasy. Within such a framework, and in the texts of thinkers as diverse as De Tracy, Marx and Mannheim, to mention just a few, ideology is stigmatised as something false, untrue, as something opposed to truth, to the symbolically mastered reality of the social.<sup>5</sup> Foucault, Bourdieu and others have very clearly shown that ideology has always been conceptualised as opposed: 1) to an essentialist Cartesian idea of truth or true representation of the social; and/or 2) to an essentialist conception of true subjectivity or real consciousness; and/or 3) to a similar notion of material infrastructure or economic determinant within the framework of economic reductionism. In other words, within the enlightenment tradition, the condition of possibility for a discourse on ideology, for critical discourse, was the sharp distinction between false and true representations of the reality of the social. Of course, these true representations presupposed a direct access to the totality of the real, an access not mediated by discourse; in other words a total mastery of the Real of the social. During the last decades, however, we have witnessed the gradual but radical dislocation of these very strong representationalist truth claims. This has been largely due to the dynamic emergence of theoretical currents such as post-structuralism and deconstruction and to the "contamination" of more traditional strands of analysis by the idea of social constructionism, that is to say, by the idea that there is not nor can there ever be any direct access to an extra-discursive reality or truth which could form the basis for a critique of ideology. Berger and Luckman and other social constructionists (Holzner, Cohen, et al.) have successfully shown that our representations of social reality are not mirroring this reality, but are instead socially constructed through complex social processes entangled with power relations.<sup>6</sup> As Michel Foucault has pointed out, the definition of what is true and scientific and what is false is always a decision taken within a social context. Here Foucault's notion of "regimes of truth" becomes relevant. Each society has a regime of truth - or many regimes -, a whole politics of truth: discursive forms that are constituted and function as true, mechanisms of distinguishing what is true and what is false, means of sanctioning, techniques and procedures that regulate the acquisition of truth and define the *status* of those who "are saying what counts as

true”.<sup>7</sup> The post-structuralist or constructionist idea that reality and truth are always socially constructed, emerging at the level of discourse, reveals the modernist representationalist discourses on ideology as themselves ideological: “In the enlightenment tradition ideology stands for the blurred (false) notion of reality caused by various ‘pathological’ interests... for discourse analysis, the very notion of an access to reality unbiased by any discursive devices or conjunctions with power is ideological.”<sup>8</sup>

What followed all these major theoretical developments was the rejection of the concept of ideology. The conclusion was that for all the aforementioned reasons the concept of ideology was no longer operational. Foucault himself has argued that “this is a notion that cannot be used without circumspection”,<sup>9</sup> and he avoided using it, especially in his late work. Bourdieu, to give another example, has put it more strongly: “the concept of ideology has been so used and abused that it does not work any more.”<sup>10</sup>

It seems that within the framework of our current theoretical terrain there is no place for concepts such as ideology, misrecognition, etc. The negative consequence of this development, however, cannot be neglected. What is put into question is the condition of possibility for critical discourse itself; the only road left open is nihilism and crude relativism. Without some concept of misrecognition no critique can take place - not even the post-modern critique of the “naturalisation of meaning” and of the “essentialisation of the social”. As Ernesto Laclau has pointed out, even deconstruction rests on a certain notion of misrecognition: “the critique of the ‘naturalisation of meaning’ and of the ‘essentialisation of the social’ is a critique of their true character. Without this premise, any deconstruction would be meaningless.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, by not recognising any extra-discursive truth, by concluding that there is no demarcation between ideology and the real, by arguing that everything can be reduced to symbolic fictions - an unending plurality of discursive universes - post-modernism and/or post-structuralism collapses into a position that Žižek correctly calls ideological *par excellence*.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the only way forward for the theory of ideology is to retain the concept of misrecognition, to maintain the ideological/non-ideological distinction by simultaneously inverting its terms (in order to avoid a re-occupation of the modern schema). Now, beyond any representationalist problematic, the use of the concept of misrecognition must not imply the existence of a non-ideological, objective, real, ‘natural’ truth (which is misrecognised by ideology). The place from which we can denounce and critique ideology must remain empty, that is to say, not occupied by any positively determined representation of social reality.<sup>13</sup> The ideological can no longer entail the misrecognition of a positive essence, but rather the opposite: the ideological would consist of the discursive articulations through which society attempts to institute itself as such, on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences, of the misrecognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of misrecognising the impossibility of any ultimate suture.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the dynamism of discourse analysis and social constructionism we can now assert that no discourse, no symbolic articulation, no social construct can be eternal, embodying the true essence of the social and mastering the Real around which it is structured. All discourses are ultimately dislocated and this dislocation reveals the truth claims of all discursive forms as ideological. The centrality of the concept of dislocation in Laclau’s late work leads to the conclusion that what

characterises ideological discourse is its attempt to cover over, to suture its contingent character, its radical historicity, its ultimate susceptibility to dislocation. Such an attempt, however, is always doomed to failure - otherwise we would have reached the end of history, the constitution of an eternal and objective discursive order. But, as Claude Lefort has put it, ideological discourse has no safety catch, "it is rendered vulnerable by its attempt to make visible the place from which the social relation would be conceivable..., by its inability to define this place without letting this contingency appear..., without thereby making apparent the instability of an order that it is intended to raise to the status of an essence".<sup>15</sup>

In that sense post-structuralists, postmodernists and social constructionists are right to point out that what we encounter in our day-to-day experience of the social world is a plurality of limited, socially constructed discursive orders, each one replacing the other or competing with others, without any of them ever bringing this process to a stop. What is not articulated in such a view is that for such an account to be coherent one has to recognise the intervention of a constant extra-discursive moment working in this same world. This is the moment of dislocation. The anti-representationalist view of the social as an ensemble of social constructions through which society attempts to institute itself as such, presupposes the centrality of dislocation, meaning the moment of subversion of all social constructions - all systems of representation. Dislocation, by being in itself unrepresentable, is exactly what shows the limits of every discursive form, its inability to represent once and for all the essence of the social, to symbolise the Real of the social in a definite way. On the other hand, what is shown by the most elementary social observation is that dislocation, by producing a certain lack, generates continuous attempts, at the ideological level, to cover over that lack which is always re-emerging. Hence the dual character of dislocations: "If on the one hand they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are founded."<sup>16</sup>

Up to now I've been trying to show that the groundbreaking work of Laclau, and to a lesser extent, of Lefort, leads to a radical reorientation of the theory of ideology, a reorientation that moves beyond both the modernist and the postmodernist attitudes towards ideology. The purpose of this reorientation is to provide a basis for social critique, for the critique of ideology - something that is lost in the postmodern rejection of 'ideology' - a basis, however, situated beyond the problematic representationalism and essentialism of modern fantasmatic conceptions of ideology. Now, the basis for the critique of ideology is not our ability to master a true representation of an always escaping social reality, of the Real of the social, to which is opposed the falsehood of ideology. The only truth - an anti-representationalist truth - on which the critique of ideology can be based is the recognition of the fact that every representation is susceptible to dislocation and always constitutes an attempt to answer to such a dislocation, this moment of truth, the moment of dislocation, being unrepresentable *par excellence*. It is here that Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes essential for the analysis and critique of ideology. It can offer a whole ontology of dislocation beyond the level of a phenomenology of the social; in other words it constitutes the only theoretical intervention that offers a plausible answer to the question: why is all ideological - social - reality organised around the centrality of dislocation? Where does dislocation come from? This is because dislocation can only make sense if viewed as an encounter with the Lacanian Real. Here the Real is of course the part of our world, as revealed in our experience, which escapes all our attempts to symbolise and represent it in a final way. The Real is not social reality (which is organised through images and symbolic structures and belongs to the field of social construction) but,

as William Richardson has put it, the raw unstructured experience of what is not yet symbolised or imaged and, most important, of what, as such, cannot be symbolised. The Real is the impossible: impossible to represent it, to master it, but always calling for its symbolisation. The Real is revealed most clearly in our encounters with death, void, lack. Lacan, in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, presents noise and accident as metaphors of our encounters with the Real; in experiences that dislocate our representations of reality but also cause the construction of new representations that attempt to patch things up. The central role of dislocation, a role that is both destructive and productive, can only make sense if dislocation is viewed as an encounter with the Real, as something that destroys our imaginary/symbolic constructs. It is due to their inability to master and completely represent the Real, to foreclose the eruption of the impossible and guarantee the harmony they promise, that our ideological discourses are revealed as lacking, as always susceptible to dislocation. No ideological discourse can master the impossibility of the Real. If nothing is lacking in the Real as such, the order of ideology is characterised by its lack. Dislocation and the Real constitute the cause that governs its history. Dislocation, by producing a certain lack, by bringing to the fore again and again the lack in the Other, is what generates the articulation of ideological discourse. Again, dislocation is the fate of every ideological discourse, since the Real, according to the Lacanian dictum, always returns to its place. Furthermore, and largely due to the previous two points, dislocation and Real lack are inscribed in the structure of all ideological discourse.<sup>17</sup>

What I'm arguing here is almost identical with Žižek's point that there is a homology between Laclau's *antagonism*, as the unsymbolised traumatic impossibility around which the social is always structured, and Lacan's Real as impossible. Instead of the term "antagonism", however, I've been using the concept of "dislocation". This is not only due to the fact that in Laclau's most recent work dislocation becomes a central category replacing, up to a certain point, the category of antagonism. It is mainly because dislocation as an unrepresentable moment is much closer to the impossible Real than antagonism, which already implies certain attempts to symbolise this Real, to cover over the lack produced by dislocation. In other words, while dislocation brings to light again and again the lack around which the social is structured, antagonism has to do with competing attempts to suture that lack: "the response to the dislocation of the structure will be its recomposition around particular nodal points of articulation by the various antagonistic forces."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, dislocation is much more suitable for our purposes since it is much closer to the sense of an internal limit, an internal Real blockage, which is always inscribed in ideology itself, while antagonism implies a limit which is external, a limit between different competing symbolisations and not between a symbolisation and the Real. Žižek, of course, is very much aware of the problems entailed in the use of the concept of antagonism. That is why he introduces the distinction between *pure antagonism*, that is to say antagonism in its radical form, as the Real limit of the social, and antagonism in the usual sense of the word, as the relation between antagonistic subject positions, as a hegemonic struggle.<sup>19</sup> Any confusion arising from this rather inflationary use of the concept of antagonism can be solved by taking into account the centrality of dislocation in Laclau's late work, a centrality which, as I tried to show, makes sense only if dislocation is understood as an encounter with the Lacanian Real, as almost taking the place of what Žižek calls *pure antagonism*.

The centrality of dislocation in the constitution and 'life' of ideological discourses, the pure antagonistic nature of ideology, if you wish, means that, in order to constitute itself as a coherent and hegemonically appealing force, ideology has to rely on a

fantasmatic core. Ideological fantasy attempts the impossible, to cover over the lack around which all ideology is structured, the lack in the Other, to bring back the impossible, lost harmony of the social. In that sense ideological fantasy also entails the “primordial repression”, as Žižek has put it, of the centrality of dislocation in human experience, the repression of every trace of the Real of the social.

If, however, fantasy always entails the repression of the Real of the social, this Real always returns to its place. Here the concept of the symptom is essential. It is the (social) symptom that interrupts the consistency of the field of the ideological by embodying the repressed Real and, in doing so, never “ceases imposing itself (on us)”.<sup>20</sup> Within this framework the self-consistency of ideological discourse can only depend on the negation of the Real of the symptom. Fantasy gives discourse its consistency because it is opposed to the symptom. In The Sublime Object of Ideology, Žižek has described in detail how fantasy attempts to negate, to master the Real of the symptom. If social fantasy produces the self-consistency of a certain ideological edifice “it can do so only by presenting the symptom as an alien, disturbing intrusion, and not as the point of eruption of the otherwise hidden truth of the existing social order”.<sup>21</sup> The social fantasy of a harmonious social order can only be sustained if all the persisting disorders can be attributed to an alien intruder.

The generalisation of the logic of foreclosure in Lacan’s late work implies that every symbolic structure is structured around a void (a lack), around the foreclosure of the Real. But what is foreclosed in the Symbolic returns in the Real of the symptom. Against the conceptualisation of the symptom by fantasy as an external intruder that threatens the otherwise consistent discursive order, the symptom, as a kernel of the Real, is internal to discourse and to the social itself. Fantasy, by attempting to neutralise the symptom, “is a means for an ideology to take its failure into account in advance”.<sup>22</sup> Every critical discourse, as the critique of ideology, has to go through fantasy and detect in the projection of the symptom the lack, the split of our social reality. Let me illustrate this with Žižek’s example of Fascist anti-Semitism. In this discourse the radical impossibility of the Utopian harmony of the Fascist totalitarian order is projected, attributed, to the figure of the Jew.

If we look at it through the frame of (corporatist) fantasy, the ‘Jew’ appears as an intruder who introduces from outside disorder, decomposition and corruption to the social edifice – it appears as an outward positive cause whose elimination would enable us to restore order, stability and identity. But in ‘going through the fantasy’ we must in the same move identify with the symptom: we must recognise in the properties attributed to ‘Jew’ the necessary product of our very social system; we must recognise in the ‘excesses’ attributed to ‘Jews’ the truth about ourselves.<sup>23</sup>

Through Žižek’s example the goals of the “Lacanian critique of ideology” are also revealed. These can only be crossing/traversing ideological fantasy and identifying with the symptom of the social.

In his more recent texts, though, Žižek seems to be abandoning the analytical pair *fantasy* and *symptom*. In *Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology*, fantasy is replaced by the concept of “symbolic fiction” and symptom by “spectral apparition”,<sup>24</sup> while in his article *Between Symbolic Fiction and Fantasmatic Spectre: Towards a Lacanian Theory of Ideology*, Žižek introduces the distinction between what he calls “fantasy<sup>1</sup>” and “fantasy<sup>2</sup>”.<sup>25</sup> The relation between “fantasy<sup>1</sup>” and “fantasy<sup>2</sup>” seems to be analogous to the relation between fantasy and symptom as I have presented it. A similar relation exists between “fantasy<sup>1</sup>” and “fantasy<sup>2</sup>”, on the one hand, and

“symbolic fiction” and “spectral apparition”, on the other: “fantasy<sup>1</sup>” and “fantasy<sup>2</sup>”, “symbolic fiction” and “spectral apparition”, are thus like two sides of the same coin”.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately no reason is given for this conceptual play, which might even lead to a certain confusion. Furthermore, as a consequence of the ‘abandonment’ of the concept of the symptom, the connection between the critique of ideology and identification with the symptom is much weakened. Perhaps this is the reason for the *return to the symptom* that takes place in Zizek’s last book and which, to my mind, sets the record straight as far as the concept of the symptom is concerned: “The aim of the ‘critique of ideology’, the analysis of an ideological edifice, is to extract this *symptomatic kernel* which the official, public, ideological text simultaneously disavows and needs for its undisturbed functioning.”<sup>27</sup>

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> J. Thompson’s *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Cambridge: Polity 1990, A. Scott’s *Ideology and New Social Movements*, London: Unwin Hyman 1990, T. Eagleton’s *Ideology*, London: Verso 1991, and of course S. Zizek’s tour de force *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso 1989, are some examples of this trend.

<sup>2</sup> M. Freeden, “Editorial” in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. I, no. 1, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> The titles of the two papers recently published in *Politics* are revealing. I am referring to R. Gann, “The Limits of Textbook Ideology” in *Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1995, and A. Vincent, “The Ambiguity of Ideology” in *Politics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Zizek’s work belongs to a larger trend which is gradually being acknowledged as one of the most promising axes in political research. It should not go unnoticed that two Ph.D. theses that are articulated in a Lacanian framework were awarded Political Studies Association prizes during the last two years.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, De Tracy, who coined the term “ideology”, didn’t use it in order to describe false ideas. For De Tracy ideology was a science that formed the basis for the critique of false irrational ideas. Ideology in De Tracy’s vocabulary is identical with what we call today critique of ideology or theory of ideology. Nevertheless the schema remains the same. His distinction between ideology as a “critical” science and false ideas is analogous to the dominant modern distinction between theory and critique of ideology and ideology as false ideas.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Berger & Th. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, London: Allen Lane 1967, B. Holzner, *Reality Construction in Society*, Cambridge Mass: Shenkman 1968, A. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, London: Routledge 1989.

<sup>7</sup> M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, London: Penguin 1984, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> S. Zizek, “Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology”, in S. Zizek (ed) *Mapping Ideology*, London: Verso 1994, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> M. Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> P. Bourdieu, “Doxa and Ideology: An Interview with T. Eagleton” in *New Left Review*, no. 191/1992, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> E. Laclau, “The Impossibility of Society” in E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our time*, London: Verso 1990, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> S. Zizek, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> S. Zizek, *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> E. Laclau, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, Cambridge: Polity 1986, p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> E. Laclau, “New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time” in E. Laclau *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, London: Verso 1990, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> The lack that ideology, as an object of identification, attempts to fill is always reproduced within the order of ideology itself, thus constituting it as a split object. This structural split can be understood at least in four different ways: 1) As a split between the filling function and the concrete ideological content that actualises it. 2) It could be also due to the fact that ideological discourse, the object of identification, always belongs both to us (since it becomes part of our identity) and to the Other, to the Symbolic, this fact being a source of alienation and ambivalence. This alienation arises due to the fact that, as Lacan formulates it in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin 1979, p. 204-205), “The subject depends on the signifier but the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other” and is analogous to the alienation that follows the first jubilant phase of the Mirror Stage. 3) It could be argued that the structural split in ideological discourse serves a perverse pleasure -

associated with the logic of desire - that finds satisfaction in the ultimate failure of any identification, in the ultimate dislocation of every ideology. 4) It could be viewed as the split between fantasy and symptom to which I will refer later on in this paper. For a detailed argumentation on this issue see my paper "Split Subject and Split Object: Towards a generalisation of the Lacanian Logic of lack" in *Essex Papers in Politics and Government*, Colchester: University of Essex, no 7/1995.

<sup>18</sup> E. Laclau, *op. cit.*, p. 40

<sup>19</sup> S. Zizek "Beyond Discourse Analysis" in E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, London; Verso 1990, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> C. Soler, "Literature as Symptom" in E. Ragland-Sullivan and M. Bracher, *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, New York: Routledge 1991, p. 214.

<sup>21</sup> S. Zizek, *Looking Awry*, Mass: MIT Press 1991, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> S. Zizek, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 127-128.

<sup>24</sup> S. Zizek, "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology" in *Mapping Ideology*, London: Verso, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> S. Zizek, "Between Symbolic Fiction and Fantasmatic Spectre: Towards a Lacanian Theory of Ideology" in *Analysis*, no. 4, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> S. Zizek, "Invisible Ideology: Political Violence between Fiction and Fantasy" in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996, p. 29

<sup>27</sup> S. Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, London: Verso 1996, p. 3, my emphasis.