

Abjection, Disavowal and the Masquerade of Power

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In our daily lives, we deal with what Julia Kristeva calls ‘abject’ in a variety of ways: ignoring it, turning away from it with disgust, fearing it, constructing rituals made to keep it at a distance or constraining it to a secluded place (toilets for defecation, etc.). Disgust, horror, phobia... but there is yet another way to deal with abjection which is to enact a split between abjectal objects or acts and the symbolic ritualisation meant to cleanse us from defilement, i.e., to keep the two apart, as if there is no shared space where they may encounter each other since the abject (filth) in its actuality is simply foreclosed from the symbolic. Kristeva evokes the case of castes in India where the strong ritualisation of defilement (numerous rituals, prescribed in painful details, that regulate how one should purify oneself) appears to be accompanied by one’s being totally blind to filth itself, even though it is the object of those rites. It is as if one had maintained, so to speak, only the sacred, prohibited facet of defilement, allowing the anal object that such a sacralisation had in view to become lost within the dazzling light of unconsciousness if not of the unconscious.

V. S. Naipaul points out that Hindus defecate everywhere without anyone ever mentioning, either in speech or in books, those squatting figures, because, quite simply, no one sees them. It is not a form of censorship due to modesty that would demand the omission in discourse of a function that has, in other respects, been ritualised. It is blunt foreclosure that voids those acts and objects from conscious representation. A split seems to have set in between, on the one hand, the body’s territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand, a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play – the order of the phallus. Such a split, which in another cultural universe would produce psychosis, thus finds in this context a perfect socialisation. That may be because setting up the rite of defilement takes on the function of the hyphen, the virgule, allowing the two universes of *filth* and of *prohibition* to brush lightly against each other without

necessarily being identified as such, as *object* and as *law*. On account of the flexibility at work in rites of defilement, the subjective economy of the speaking being who is involved abuts on both edges of the unnameable (the non-object, the off-limits) and the absolute (the relentless coherence of Prohibition, sole donor of Meaning).¹

Do we not find similar cases also in Christianity as well as in Islam? When, a decade ago, the (then) Iranian president Ahmadinejad visited New York to attend a UN general assembly session, he was invited to attend a live debate at Columbia University. When asked about homosexuality in Iran, his reply was rudely mistranslated into English as if he claimed that in Iran they have no problem with homosexuals since there are none there. An Iranian friend (very critical of Ahmadinejad) who was there told me that Ahmadinejad's reply was in reality much more nuanced: what he hinted at was that in Iran they don't talk about homosexuality in public, they condemn it officially and mostly ignore its actual occurrences, thereby 'allowing the two universes of *filth* and of *prohibition* to brush lightly against each other without necessarily being identified as such, as *object* and as *law*'. And does the same not hold for paedophilia in the Catholic church? Paedophilia is publicly condemned while (till recently, at least) tolerated by being ignored in practice, as if public Law and material practice of sinful filth belong to different domains. This logic at work in Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism should not be confused with repression: nothing is 'repressed' or 'unconscious' about filth or homosexuality or paedophilia, the filthy act in question is practiced more or less openly and without any qualms, its practitioners are (mostly) not traumatised by their perverse desires or haunted by any deep guilt feelings, they just simply keep the two dimensions apart. Our problem today is that, within the predominant logic of Political Correctness, such a procedure of keeping the two domains apart no longer functions: the PC stance by definition collapses the two dimensions since it aims precisely at directly controlling and regulating 'the body's territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature'. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 74). In other words, there is no domain left unseen, ignored by the PC law – its law tolerates no unwritten rules, there is no space here for a transgressive behaviour that violates explicit

rules and is precisely as such not only tolerated but even solicited by the law. This is how the paternal prohibition functions:

In fact, the image of the ideal Father is a neurotic's fantasy. Beyond the Mother /.../ stands out the image of a father who would turn a blind eye to desires. This marks – more than it reveals – the true function of the Father, which is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law.
(Lacan, 2004 [1966], p. 698)

While prohibiting the son's escapades, father discreetly not only ignores and tolerates them, but even solicits them. It is in this sense that Father as the agent of prohibition/law sustains desire/pleasures: there is no direct access to enjoyment since its very space is opened up by the blanks of the Father's controlling gaze. And does exactly the same not hold for God himself, our ultimate father? The first commandment says: 'You shall have no other gods before me'. What does the ambiguous 'before me' refer to? Most translators agree that it means 'before my face, in front of me, when I see you' – which subtly implies that the jealous god will nonetheless turn a blind eye to what we are doing secretly, out of (his) sight... in short, God is like a jealous husband who tells his wife: 'OK, you can have other men, but do it discreetly, so that I (or the public in general) will not notice about it and you will not put me to shame!' The negative proof of this constitutive role of the Father in carving out the space for a viable enjoyment is the deadlock of today's permissiveness, where the master/expert no longer prohibits enjoyment but enjoins it ('sex is healthy,' etc.), thereby effectively sabotaging it. Is the mechanism described here not a case of so-called fetishist disavowal? Kristeva locates the most radical fetishism, fetishist disavowal, into language itself:

But is not exactly language our ultimate and inseparable fetish? And language, precisely, is based on fetishist denial ('I know that, but just the same', 'the sign is not the thing, but just the same,' etc.) and defines us in our essence as speaking beings. Because of its founding status, the fetishism of 'language' is perhaps the only one that is unanalyzable.
(Kristeva, 1982, p. 37)

Kristeva locates the fetishist dimension of language into the implicit overcoming of the gap that separates words (signs) from things: 'I know that words are only signs with no immanent relation to things they designate, but I nonetheless... (believe in their magic influence on things)'. But where, exactly, is here fetishism? In his classic text, Octave Mannoni (Mannoni, 2003 [1968]) distinguishes three modes of *je sais bien, mais quand meme...*, and reserves the name 'fetishism' only for the third one. The first mode is the standard functioning of the symbolic order, namely the relation between the symbolic title of a subject and his/her miserable reality as a person: 'I know very well that this guy in front of me is a miserable stupid coward, but he wears the insignia of power, which means that it is the Law which speaks through him...' Is it, however, accurate to characterise this basic 'alienation' in a symbolic title that changes our perception of an individual as a case of fetishism? Not yet, for Mannoni. Then there is the mode of falling into one's own trap, like a guy who, in order to calm his small child when a storm is ravaging around their house, draws a circle on the floor with a chalk and assures him that one is safe if one stands inside the circle; when, soon thereafter, a lightning directly strikes the house, he in a moment of panic quickly steps into the circle, as if being there will protect him, ignoring the fact that he himself concocted the story about the magic property of the circle to calm down the child. For Mannoni, this is also not yet fetishism proper which only occurs when we have no need for any belief at all: we know how things really stand, plus we have the object-fetish with no magic belief attached to it. A foot fetishist has no illusions about feet, plus he simply has a strong libidinal investment in feet, playing with them generates immense enjoyment. So which among these three versions pertains to language as such? Maybe, all three are activated at different levels. First, there is the disavowal that characterises the symbolic mandate ('I know very well that you are a miserable individual, but you are a judge and the authority of the law speaks through you'). Then, there is the self-deception of a manipulator who, as it were, falls into his own trap. In his *Anthropology*, Kant (Kant, 2006 [1798]) explores how the love of the illusion of the good can lead to the love of the good itself: if one loves the illusion of the good and enacts this illusion in social intercourse, one might come to appreciate its worth and to love the good itself for its own sake. Correlatively from the point of view of

the spectator, loving the illusion of the good in others may make us be polite in order to become lovable, which, in turn, exercises our self-mastery, leads us to control our passions and, eventually, to love the good for its own sake. In this sense, paradoxically, by deceiving others through politeness and social pretence, we in fact deceive ourselves and transform our pragmatic, polite behaviour into virtuous behaviour.

A strange thing happened in Brazil in 1945: when, in August, media reported on the surrender of Japan, Shindo Remnei, a secret Japanese organisation, was founded in São Paulo. For its members, the news about Japan's surrender was a fraud, a propaganda coup staged by the Western powers in order to break the Japanese pride. How can Japan be defeated when, in its entire history of 2600 years, it never lost a war? In a couple of months, the entire community of Japanese immigrants in Brazil (altogether about two hundred thousand people) was divided into *kachigumi*, the 'victorists' of Shindo Remnei, and *makegumi*, the 'defeatists' who recognised Japanese surrender. A true civil war exploded between the two groups, once the *tokkotai*, the killers of Shindo Remnei, started to exterminate ruthlessly the leading 'defeatists' as traitors to their nation; the war was over only when, after thousands of dead, the state directly intervened, deporting the leading 'victorists' to Japan. What makes this accident truly weird is the measures taken by Shindo Remnei to sustain the illusion of Japanese victory: they went up to producing fake issues of the *Life* magazine with reports and faked photos of the surrender of the Pacific US forces to Japan, with General MacArthur bowing to the Japanese officers, etc. (Morais, 2001). We have here the fetishist denial brought to its extreme: the very perpetrators of the hoax fanatically stuck to it, ready to sacrifice their lives for it – they *knew* their denial of Japanese surrender was false, but they nonetheless refused to *believe* in Japanese surrender.

The difference between this and the first mode of disavowal is obvious: in the first mode, we are dealing with the straight confusion between an object/person and the properties that belong to it only on behalf of its inscription into a symbolic network (to paraphrase Marx, a king is a king only because his subjects treat him as a king, but it appears to them that they treat him as a

king because he is in himself a king), while in the second case, the illusion is generated purposefully and consciously (the subject produces an appearance in order to dupe another, and then he ends up falling into his own trap and believing in it himself). One should note how, although the cynical manipulator consciously cheats and is in this sense less naïve than the subject of the first mode of disavowal, he ends up believing in a much more direct and naïve illusion: he fully falls into his own trap, in contrast to the first mode in which the subject retains to the end the distance towards his belief ('I know very well it's not true...')

The third mode brings the paradox to its extreme: there is knowledge of how things really stand, this knowledge is assumed with no distance or disavowal, and then there is the fetish-object, its mute presence totally external to the subject's knowledge. As such, a fetish can play a very constructive role in allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly 'realists', able to accept the way things effectively are – since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality.

To further clarify these mechanisms of disavowal, we have to elaborate how the insignia of power transubstantiate our miserable bodily reality into the vehicle of another dimension, so that what we 'really are' is magically transformed into a medium of power. Recall the classic scene (so powerfully staged by Shakespeare in his *Richard II*) of the deposed king, a king deprived of his royal title: all of a sudden the charisma dissipates and we have in front of us a weak confused man... But are we, really, just what we are, miserable individuals? What remains of Richard II after he is deprived of his insignia of royal power? Not an ordinary miserable person but a subject *traumatised by the void of what he is now*.² When he is deprived of his royal title, his bodily and psychic existence appear to him broken, inconsistent, lacking any firm ground or foundation, so that it is as if his symbolic insignia were not masking the miserable reality of a person to whom these insignia were attributed but the void or gap of subjectivity, of the Self irreducible to physical or psychic properties.

With regard to bureaucracy, this is why a perfect administrator, the one who clings fully to the letter of the Law, meticulously meeting all its particular demands, is simultaneously the most obscene and ridiculous one, displaying a filthy *jouissance* that undermines his universal symbolic function. This is why the true undermining of a symbolic authority does not occur when a ridiculous contingent little piece of the real intervenes (a bureaucrat delivering a high speech slips, emits a flatulence...), but precisely when a bureaucrat fully identifies with his role. Towards the end of Lars von Trier's early masterpiece *Zentropa*, which takes place in Germany in the Summer of 1946, there is a scene which exemplifies such bureaucratic *jouissance* at its most obscene. On a night train in which the hero expects a bomb explosion planned by the Nazi underground, he is submitted to the exam for the job of the night porter on a sleeping car; while all our attention is directed at the bomb threat, the examiner calmly and with obvious self-satisfaction proceeds with his work, insisting with ridiculous punctuality on the most nonsensical details, asking where one should put the passenger's sleepers, etc. – this is what bureaucracy is about.

In the classic disposition of power, symbolic castration is the price to be paid for its exercise – how, precisely? One should begin by conceiving of the phallus as a signifier – which means what? From the traditional rituals of investiture, we know the objects that not only 'symbolise' power, but put the subject who acquires them into the position of effectively *exercising* power – if a king holds in his hands the sceptre and wears the crown, his words will be taken as the words of a king. Such insignia are external, not part of my nature: I don them; I wear them in order to exert power. As such, they 'castrate' me: they introduce a gap between what I immediately am and the function that I exercise (i.e., I am never fully at the level of my function). This is what the infamous 'symbolic castration' means: not 'castration as symbolic, as just symbolically enacted' (in the sense in which we say that, when I am deprived of something, I am 'symbolically castrated'), but the castration that occurs by the very fact of me being caught in the symbolic order, assuming a symbolic mandate. Castration is the very gap between what I immediately am and the symbolic mandate which confers on me this 'authority.' In this precise sense,

far from being the opposite of power, it is synonymous with power; it is that which confers power on me. And, one has to think of the phallus not as the organ that immediately expresses the vital force of my being, my virility, etc., but, precisely, as such an insignia, as a mask which I put on in the same way a king or judge puts on his insignia – phallus is an ‘organ without a body’ which I put on, which gets attached to my body, without ever becoming its ‘organic part,’ namely, forever sticking out as its incoherent, excessive supplement.³ However, this gap between the symbolic title (its insignia) and the miserable reality of the individual who bears this title tends to function today in a radically different way: it underwent a weird reversal noted by Badiou apropos Jean Genet’s *Balcon*:

We encounter here an imaginary feature of democracy. Democracy means precisely that there are no costumes. Inequality no longer wears a costume/dress. There are dramatic, gigantic inequalities, but their laicisation leaves them without a costume.

(Badiou, 2013, p. 37 [my translation])

On a simple descriptive level, this means that, in a democratic-egalitarian society, masters (those who exert power over others) no longer have to wear insignia or costumes that would performatively constitute them as bearers of power: they can dress and act ‘naturally’ like everybody else, renouncing all dignity. The message of the way they dress and act is: ‘See, we are common people like you, with all weaknesses, fears and limitations like everyone else!’ In short, their ‘castration’ is no longer covered up by the splendour of their insignia but is openly displayed. However, this ‘honest’ operation should in no way deceive us: for all their common appearance they continue to assert their full power, perhaps even more directly than the traditional master:

Let the image be castrated in all possible ways, while I can do more or less whatever I want... In a strange reversal of the classic logic of castration (as a means to access symbolic power), we are dealing here with the castration of the symbolic (public) image as a means to execute and perpetuate limitless power.⁴

Castration (the display of weakness) thus 'becomes part of the public image', but not in the simple and straight sense that it simply masks the actual exercise of ruthless power – the point is rather that *this mask of castration is the very means (instrument, mode) of how power is exercised*. The mystification is here redoubled: beneath the gesture of de-mystification ('You see, I dropped all masks and costumes, I am an ordinary guy like you!'), the exercise of power (which is a symbolic fact, not a 'real' property of its agent) remains intact. When confronted with a boss who talks and acts as an ordinary man, his subordinate would thus be fully justified in addressing him with a paraphrase of the well-known Marx-brothers phrase: 'Why are you talking and acting as an ordinary man *when you really are just an ordinary man?*' (The paradox is that, if the agent of power were to put on the masks of insignia, this would not increase his power but undermine it, making it appear ridiculously pathetic.) The matrix of *je sais bien mais quand meme is given* here a specific twist formulated by Zupančič: it is no longer just 'I know very well that you are an ordinary weak guy like me, but I still accept you as a master', it is rather something like 'I know very well you are a miserable weak guy like me, and for that very reason I can continue to obey you like my master...' Knowledge is here not an obstacle to be suspended but a positive condition of the functioning of what it discloses in its gesture of 'demystification'. The mystification persists not in spite of its denunciation but *through it, because of it*. (In a strictly homologous way, Freud demonstrates how repression can persist through the very knowledge (conscious awareness) of the repressed content – repression remains active even when we 'know it all'.)

This paradox characterises cynicism as the hegemonic form of today's ideology: in it, the fetishist denial acquires a new form – it is no longer the belief which persists in our actual practice in spite of our knowledge (I know very well, but nonetheless...), like 'I know there is no god, but I continue to participate in religious rituals out of respect for my culture'. In today's cynicism, the disavowal (of knowledge) is not embodied in a fetish-object; things are brought to a self-referential extreme, so that the fetish (which enables us to disavow knowledge) is knowledge itself – knowledge functions as the obstacle which prevents – what? Seriously accepting and assuming knowledge itself.

It is true that we didn't really learn from Snowden (or from Manning) anything we didn't already presume to be true – but it is one thing to know it in general, and another to get concrete data. It is a little bit like knowing that one's sexual partner is playing around – one can accept the abstract knowledge of it, pain arises when one learns the steamy details, when one gets pictures of what they were doing... This is why the most perfidious defence of those in power is not to deny the Wikileaks accusations but to say: 'We are not naïve, we already knew or suspected all of this. Do you really think we are so stupid that we didn't know it all along? So why all the fuss?' With this operation, those who disclosed the problematic data that should worry and annoy us become themselves a source of annoyance... So if we all already knew it, who didn't know it? The Lacanian answer is: the big Other. If the big Other doesn't know it, we can act as if we also don't know it.

notes

¹ See Kristeva, 1982, p. 75.

² I rely here extensively on Alenka Zupančič Žerdin, 'Kostumografija moči' (manuscript in Slovene, July 2014).

³ In September 2006, the media reported that the first successful penis transplant was done by Chinese doctors in the General Hospital of Guangzhou: in an operation which lasted 15 hours, a 44 years old married man who lost his penis in a non-specified 'accident' was given the penis of a 22 years old man who unexpectedly died of cerebral haemorrhage. However, although the operation was medically a success and the penis was not rejected by the recipient's body, they removed it again for psychological reason: it was too much of a trauma for both the man and his wife to have sex with a penis which was not his own... This incident reconfirms the truth known long ago by the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris: after his evil brother Seth killed him and cut his body into pieces, the faithful sister-wife Isis re-assembled all the pieces and breathed life into them – all pieces except the penis which she was not able to locate and had thus to replace it with an artificial wooden one. What this myth articulated is the fact that, in the symbolic economy of man's body, phallus is not part of the body, but an artificial supplement which doesn't fit it, which 'sticks out'. Maybe the Chinese couple rejected the new penis because it rendered this fact all too visible, impossible to ignore... or, as

a well-known seducer used to say: 'A penis mightier than the sword!'

⁴Alenka Zupančič, op.cit.

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