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Abstract

This paper investigates Slavoj Žižek's pioneering work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* placing it at the center as a critical model for exploring the dynamic interaction between ideology, perception, and reality. Žižek's critique unpacks that ideology is not just a body of ideas but is indeed the structural power that orients our conception of existence and governs our desires. Through references to popular culture, specifically references to scenes in the film *They Live,* Žižek describes how people unknowingly consume ideology and, in the process, confuse their imagined freedoms with actual agency. This piece explores Žižek's neo-Marxist synthesis of Hegel's philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on the idea that ideological frameworks survive based on their attachment to unconscious enjoyment (jouissance). It claims that struggles to resist or overcome ideology are often followed by the development of new ideological configurations instead of liberation. Finally, the article underlines the persistence of Žižek's criticism in today's debate, and it encourages the reader to meditate on the paradoxes at the core of ideology and on the intricacies of contemporary identity and social formation.

Keywords: *Sublime, Object, Ideology, Jouissance, Lacanian Psychoanalysis*

"Beyond the fiction of reality, there is the reality of the fiction."
— Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing…,* 4.

In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology,* Slavoj Žižek borrows a scene from *They Live* (1988) to illustrate a fundamental truth about ideology: it is not merely a set of beliefs we consciously adopt but the very structure through which we perceive reality itself. In the film, the protagonist is given a choice—either put on special glasses that reveal the hidden messages of ideological control or continue living in ignorance. Žižek reinterprets this moment, suggesting that we are always already consuming ideology, just as one unknowingly eats from a trash can without recognizing its contents. When John Nada (Roddy Piper) said

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"*I'm giving you a choice either put on these glasses, or start eating that trashcan.*" Žižek antically replied:

> I already am eating from the trashcan all the time. The name of this trashcan is ideology. The material force of ideology makes me not see what I'm effectively eating. It's not only our reality which enslaves us. The tragedy of our predicament, when we are within ideology, is that when we think that we escape it into our dreams, at that point we are within ideology.[1]

However, a significant problem arises in contemporary political discourse: the illusion that we live in a "post-ideological" age. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, many have argued that we have moved past grand narratives into a realm of pure pragmatism. This paper argues that Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* remains the definitive refutation of this "post-ideological" myth. By synthesizing Marx's commodity fetishism with Lacan's "sublime object," Žižek demonstrates that ideology functions most effectively when it is disavowed.

This article is structured into four (4) parts: first, a look at the historical "end of history" backdrop that necessitated Žižek's intervention; second, an analysis of the "Sublime Object" as a theoretical tool; third, an exploration of how this manifests in popular culture and commodity exchange; and finally, a concluding defense of Žižek's position against contemporary critics who claim his psychoanalytic approach lacks a viable path to political liberation.

Critique of Popular Culture

Žižek's popularity has now reached the level of an academic institutionalization of his work, with the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* being the proof of serious engagement with his work. Regardless of whether he is viewed as a subversive visionary or as an entertaining charlatan, his ability to unsettle ideological comfort zones makes him an important thinker of our times. His provocative yet simple remarks are instances of his deconstructionist stance against ideologies and their sublime apparatuses.

> Let's turn to the high point of our consumerism let me take a drink still some of it, Starbucks coffee, I'm regularly drinking it, I must admit it but are we aware that when we buy a cappuccino from Starbucks we also buy quite a lot of ideology, which ideology? You know when you enter a Starbucks store? It's usually always displaced in some posters that their message which is 'yes our capuccino is more expensive than others' but and then comes the story; we give 1% of all our income to

1 *"The Pervert's Guide to Ideology (2012) - Slavoj Žižek."* n.d. YouTube. Accessed February 10, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBcFLmu_tlc.

> some Guatemala children to keep them healthy for the water supply for some Sahara Farmers (uh) or to to save the forests to enable organic growing on coffee… whatever whatever, now I admire the ingenuity of this solution. In the old days of pure simple consumerism you bought a product and then you felt that 'my God I'm just a consumerist while people are starving in Africa,' so the idea was 'you had to do something to counteract your pure destructive consumerism.' For example, I don't know, you contribute to charity and so on… What Starbucks enables you is to be a consumerist and be a consumerist without any bad conscience because the price for the counter measure for fighting consumerism is already included into the price of a commodity like you pay a little bit more and you are not just a consumerist but you do also your duty towards environment the poor starving people in Africa and so on and so on… it's I think the ultimate form of consumerism.[2]
>
> Seriously can i give you some fucking fruit juice? yeah, yeah, yeah, Coke, iced tea? So here it's included the cancer you get because it's zero; which means instead of sugar you get all those sweeteners.[3]

While Žižek is often perceived through his persona as a "mad scientist of theory," it is essential to look past the spectacle toward his substantive body of work, most notably, The Sublime Object of Ideology. Far from being a mere collection of abstract concepts, this text serves as a vital historical account of the 'afterlife of theory' in the late 20th century. To the uninitiated, the book may appear as a dense commentary on past thinkers and disparate ideas. However, when situated within its larger socio-political context, the work reveals itself as a rigorous synthesis of prior philosophy and psychoanalysis, reframing historical thought to address the complexities of the contemporary ideological landscape.

But there is a lot of relevance here that must be explored. This will, after all, be *The Sublime Object of Ideology.* Without trying to minimize the gravity of

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2 Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), YouTube, accessed February 12, 2025, 54:50–56:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBcFLmu_tlc>.

3 *"Superstar Communist Slavoj Zizek Is the Most Dangerous Philosopher in the West."* n.d. YouTube. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS_Lzo4S8lA>, 6:10–6:25. Nota Bene: Žižek's remark about fruit juice, Coke, and sweeteners reflects his critique of ideology and capitalism's deceptive logic. By pointing out that sugar-free drinks, marketed as healthier alternatives, contain hidden risks like artificial sweeteners linked to cancer, he exposes how consumer choices are structured by ideology—offering the illusion of freedom while masking deeper contradictions. This is in line with his concept of "decaffeinated capitalism," where pleasure is retained but the perceived evil is removed (decaf coffee, non-alcoholic beer, or sanitized political activity). Žižek, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, interprets such choices as *symbolic masks that veil the traumatic Real,* revealing how ideology works even in our most mundane decisions. His humor here is used as a philosophical weapon, unveiling the absurdities of late capitalism and making the otherwise complex critique accessible. We will elaborate further on this in the next sections.

this attempt. But there is a level of relevance here that must be explored. While these examples of Starbucks and pop culture illustrate how ideology functions today, they are symptoms of a theoretical shift that Žižek first mapped in the late 20th century. To understand why Žižek views ideology not as a "lie" but as a structural reality, we must look back at the time when his project began. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* was not written in a vacuum; it was a direct response to a world that believed it had finally moved "beyond" ideology following the global shifts of 1989.

Historical Backdrop

By the late 1980's it was rather obvious that the collapse of the USSR was impending; and so is the Berlin Wall. This was complete and clear, and a month later started the real dissolvement of the USSR.[4]

In the West, there was a sense of optimism-an ultimate, final sense of anti-antagonism. From this, developed the hope that we had moved into a post-ideological world, where direct ideological struggle in geopolitics no longer had the upper hand. George Bush, for instance, said in his 1989 inaugural address:

> For the first time in this century, for the first time in perhaps all history, man does not have to invent a system by which to live. We don't have to talk late into the night about which form of government is better. We don't have to wrest justice from the kings. We only have to summon it from within ourselves. We must act on what we know. I take as my guide the hope of a saint: In crucial things, unity; in important things, diversity; in all things, generosity.[5]

Many concluded, from this perspective, that ideology was at last dead. One American Political Scientist, Francis Fukuyama argued that *liberal democracy* represents the final form of government in human history. His central thesis is that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the triumph of Western liberal democracy, humanity has reached the "end of history"—not in the literal sense, but in the Hegelian sense that history, understood as the ideological struggle between different political systems, has culminated in liberal democracy as the ultimate and most rational form of governance.

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4 See Marco Marsili, "The Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Collapse of the USSR, and the End of the Cold War: A Chain of Surprises 'Too Big' to Be Predicted," *Political Reflection, Vol. VII, No. 1* (January 8, 2021): 57–64, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4316574.

5 *"Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States: From George Washington 1789 to George Bush 1989."* n.d. Avalon Project, Yale Law School. Accessed February 10, 2025. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/bush.asp.

> As mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty. Two hundred years after they first animated the French and American revolutions, the principles of liberty and equality have proven not just durable but resurgent.[6]

Sublime Object of Ideology: A Monumental Work

Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* emerges from this specific intellectual and historical backdrop. To engage with its argument fully, one must first consider the significance of its title. The concept of the *sublime* directly refers to Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime,[7] while Žižek's theoretical framework is deeply indebted to Jacques Lacan's concept of *objects*[8] and Karl

6 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992) 42.

7 The concept of the *sublime,* as referenced in Žižek's title, originates from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), where he distinguishes between the mathematical sublime and the dynamical sublime. Kant argues that the sublime arises when the mind encounters something vast or powerful that exceeds human sensory comprehension. While the sublime initially induces fear or vertigo, it ultimately reinforces the supremacy of reason as the subject recognizes that such overwhelming forces can never fully subjugate the rational self (Kant [1790] 1987, §§23-29). Žižek's use of the term signals an engagement with this philosophical tradition but also a critical departure—whereas Kant views the sublime as a moment of reason's triumph, Žižek recasts it within the ideological domain, suggesting that the sublime plays a role in structuring ideological fantasy. Žižek takes Kant's idea of the sublime and applies it to ideology. He argues that ideology operates like the sublime object—it is something that structures our perception of reality but remains beyond our full comprehension. Just as Kant's sublime overwhelms us yet reinforces our reason, ideology shapes our world but always appears just out of reach, sustaining our desire. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 99.

8 Lacan's concept of *objet petit a* (the unattainable object-cause of desire) is central to Žižek's interpretation of ideology. According to Lacan, human desire is always mediated by a symbolic order, meaning that subjects never fully attain their objects of desire but are instead caught in an endless cycle of pursuit (Lacan [1964] 1998, 92-95). The *objet petit a* represents that which is perpetually just out of reach, yet it sustains the subject's engagement with the world. Žižek applies this insight to ideological structures, arguing that ideology operates by presenting certain ideals or promises—such as freedom, happiness, or national identity—as objects of desire that can never be fully realized but nevertheless maintain their hold over individuals. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

Marx's critique of *ideology.*[9] These influences shape the book's central thesis and structure its broader philosophical orientation.

By synthesizing these intellectual traditions, Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* advances a novel interpretation of ideology. Rather than treating ideology as an illusion that can be dispelled through rational critique alone, he suggests that ideological structures persist precisely because they are tied to unconscious enjoyment *(jouissance).* This move complicates traditional Marxist accounts, which often assume that once people become aware of their material conditions, they will act to change them. Žižek, however, argues that even when individuals recognize ideological distortions, they may still derive satisfaction from participating in them, thus ensuring their continued reproduction.

> The only real obedience, then, is an 'external' one: obedience out of conviction is not real obedience because it is already 'mediated' through our subjectivity - that is, we are not really obeying the authority but simply following our judgement, which tells us that the authority deserves to be obeyed in so far as it is good, wise, beneficent ... Even more than for our relation to 'external' social authority, this inversion applies to our obedience to the internal authority of belief…[10]

With this certain operation of ideology comes rather than viewing ideology as simply a set of political beliefs or false consciousness (as traditional Marxism does), Žižek sees ideology as something deeper and more unconscious, shaping how people perceive reality itself.

> …ideology is not simply a 'false consciousness', an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as 'ideological' - 'ideological' is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence - that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals 'do not know what they are doing. Ideological is not the false

9 In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels argue that ideology functions to obscure the material conditions of social existence, allowing dominant classes to maintain their power by presenting particular historical and economic arrangements as natural or inevitable (Marx and Engels [1846] 1970, 64-66). Žižek builds upon this critique but reformulates it through Lacanian psychoanalysis, suggesting that ideology is not merely a set of false beliefs but a structure embedded in desire itself. He contends that ideological fantasies provide subjects with a sense of meaning and coherence, even when confronted with contradictions or failures within the system (Žižek 1989, 28-30). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).

10 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 35. (Will be cited as *SOI* hereafter.)

consciousness of a (social) being but this being itself insofar as it is supported by 'false consciousness.'[11]

At its core, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* represents a theoretical synthesis of psychoanalysis and Marxism—an attempt to reconcile the dynamics of the psyche with the social and political apparatuses that shape, and to some extent constitute, *subjectivity.* Žižek, following Lacan, observes that the analytical structures underpinning psychoanalysis bear a striking resemblance to those within Marxist critique, particularly regarding Marx's concept of the *symptom.* While Sigmund Freud popularized the notion of the symptom in psychoanalysis, Lacan and later Žižek argue that Marx, in form and structure, first identified the phenomenon.

A symptom, in its most basic sense, signals an underlying systemic issue. Take the example of a persistent cough: it may merely be a reaction to dry air, or it may indicate the onset of a more serious condition, such as pneumonia. Similarly, recurring headaches might result from dehydration, or they could be symptomatic of a deeper neurological issue. Freud, however, suggests a deeper meaning—the symptoms are caused by repressed content in the unconscious, be it trauma, desires, or unfulfilled wishes. According to this theory, the unconscious reveals itself primarily through dreams, and psychoanalysis attempts to uncover the latent content hidden behind symbolic distortions.[12]

Žižek, however, challenges this traditional psychoanalytic focus. He argues that the emphasis on deciphering latent thought—unconscious content hidden beneath symbolic expression—is ultimately misguided. Rather than treating repressed thoughts as mere clues to their origins, Žižek insists that understanding the subject requires an analysis of the form in which these thoughts occur and, crucially, the structural conditions that constitute subjectivity itself.[13]

Lacanian 'Symbolic Order'

Žižek's central concern is to interrogate the 'form' in which thoughts and desires manifest. Rather than merely deciphering repressed content or latent meaning, the crucial question is why thoughts assume a particular structure in the first place. This line of inquiry extends beyond psychoanalysis into economic theory, where a similar issue arises: instead of seeking the intrinsic value of a commodity, the more pertinent question is why commodities take on their

11 *SOI*, 15-16.

12 *SOI*, 35.

13 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 148-149.

specific forms within an elaborate system of abstractions. The historical focus of economists on uncovering the essence of value, much like the psychoanalytic search for latent thought, ultimately fails to address the structural conditions that generate these forms. Here, Žižek turns to Lacan's notion of the *symbolic order*—a system embedded in language that dictates the laws governing desire, belief, and communication.[14] This symbolic order does not merely mediate social interaction; it actively structures ideology itself. Rather than going into the intricacies of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the focus here is on Žižek's accessible reformulation: the symbolic order constitutes a broader system of meaning, encompassing language, discourse, economic exchange, and even political governance.

Because communication transcends the spoken, Lacan's symbolic order is a reminder of the structures that govern meaning. At the heart of this system is the *Super-Ego,* which, for Freud, is the internalized ideal image of the self—the standard against which one's actions, thoughts, and desires are measured. This symbolic order works just so: it defines the necessary parameters within which thought, reason, action, and most of all, communication itself are organized.

But if these symbolic structures impose a hierarchy on existence, the necessary question is: *what governs them?* If the symbolic order organizes perception and reality itself, what force determines the nature of these superstructures? This, for Žižek, is ideology in its purest sense. More than an ideological structure, this is where the heart of the *Sublime Object of Ideology* is located—a central concept in Žižek's work. Ideology, legitimized by the Super-Ego, the Big Other, and the operations of the sublime object, does not simply impose limitations but creates the very condition of belief and perception. As Žižek himself said so echoing Lacan's words:

> "There is no metalanguage" insofar as the speaking subject is already spoken, i.e., insofar as he cannot master the effects of what is he saying: he always says more than he "intended to say," and this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning puts into words the repressed content-in it, "the repressed returns." What are symptoms *qua* "returns the repressed" if not such slips of the tongue by means of which… the big Other returns to the subject his own message in its true form? If instead of saying "Thereby I proclaim the session open," I say "Thereby I proclaim the session closed," do I not get, in the most literal sense, my own message back in its true, inverted form?[15]

14 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998) 280. *SOI*, 13.

15 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 14.

Most importantly, sublime objects are not determinate objects; instead, they are symbols invested with ideological meaning. The U.S. Constitution is one, as it is both valued as the foundation of political legitimacy and decried as the source of systemic constraint—both shaping and limiting political discourse. Žižek also identifies the Communist Party in the USSR as another sublime object of ideology, representing both hopes and contradictions of the system it represented.[16]

Providing these explanations of structural concepts, particularly *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, serves to clarify the broader historical commentary embedded within Žižek's analysis. A deeper understanding of these ideas allows for more precise engagement with the critique Žižek advances.

When discussing the abstract forms of the commodity-form and commodities in general, it's important to stress that Žižek doesn't find the historical attempts at proposing a determination of intrinsic value based on these forms very useful. Instead, the emphasis needs to be on understanding the basic architecture that organizes these relations. Within this framework, several major questions emerge.

Take a real-life scenario: commodities are valuable entities that can be exchanged. But at an abstract level, the equation of labor with the value of a commodity renders labor itself an abstraction. This abstraction goes even further: it makes workers mere economic functions rather than real people. Such an abstract framework exposes systemic distortions — symptoms of a deeper ideological body. The symptoms of this structural problem include the commodification of labor, the degradation of workers' rights and the elevation of productivity above fair pay. These conditions consequently uncover both the fetishization of commodities and the ideological core upholding the system itself.

Abstraction of Commodity Fetishism

Employing a structural analysis of this kind sharpens focus, revealing even the most abstracted commodities as contingent upon their material form. Consider money: a physical representation of value. Money reigns supreme in economic relations, yet its material composition remains trivial, paper,

16 In a sense, these objects function analogously to Overton windows, subtly delimiting the acceptable parameters of ideological thought and discourse. Just as Overton windows shift the boundaries of political acceptability, sublime objects delineate the limits within which ideology operates, defining not only what can be believed but also what can be articulated and lived. In this sense, understanding the role of the sublime object becomes a retroactive key to deciphering ideology itself.

pressed metal, or a digital figure on a screen. Žižek observes that while this fundamental nature of money is widely acknowledged, a paradox emerges in the simultaneous recognition that money is *more* than mere material. This contradiction underscores its ideological function. As something both insubstantial and all-powerful, money, capital, and the commodity form itself assume the role of a sublime object of ideology.

With this all-encompassing power, the ideological function of money extends beyond economic transactions into modes of social communication. In business settings, individuals conform to an implicit code—aligning speech, demeanor, and aspirations with the pursuit of capital. Entire lives revolve around career advancement, requiring a self-presentation that signals competence and seriousness. The performative nature of this engagement, shaped by ideology, operates reflexively: an adopted persona, recognized as inauthentic, paradoxically reinforces the very ideology it seeks to navigate.

Consider the case of an individual disillusioned by these transactional relationships—witnessing networking lunches where connections are forged purely for professional gain. A realization dawns: these interactions lack authenticity, serving only as instruments of advancement. In response, rejection of the entire system appears as the logical course of action. Yet, even this rejection remains entangled within ideology, forming yet another ideological stance—a reaction that does not escape but rather reconstitutes the ideological framework.

A precommitment to total and honest authenticity, a refusal to dance to the tune of whatever ideological scheme requires you to work a pole for capital and career priorities, would seem like the real escape. An opposite structuring of life to these values seems radical in its own right. But such a rejection is simply replacing one ideological framework with another.[17] No one can avoid being influenced by a set of ideas that forms part of the toolset through which he or she perceives things and takes actions. To try to go beyond ideology is indeed an ideological act, because consciousness is rooted in socio-economic and political structures that produce the conditions for living.

This recognition brings back the discussion to the abstraction of commodities and the socio-economic systems that frame them. Money, the most

17 *SOI,* 45. N.B. Žižek argues that ideology is not merely a false illusion but the very structure that shapes our reality, masking deeper antagonisms (Laclau and Mouffe) and the unbearable Real (Lacan). Like Freud's dream analysis, where awakening is not into truth but an escape from the Real, ideology offers a structured reality to shield us from fundamental contradictions. Thus, attempts to "escape ideology" often reinforce new ideological fantasies, preventing us from confronting the deeper, traumatic Real.

abstract of all, represents value par excellence. Once more, money is apparently only stuff — the paper, metal or numbers as digits or bytes on a screen — but at the same time it is something greater than all that. So its physicality is of little importance when compared to its ideological role in that it regulates the social and economic relations. It is also in this paradox that money takes on the status of a sublime object of ideology: mundane but all-powerful; physical, but illusory; ideologically determined but an ideological structure in itself.[18]

Žižek finally notes that most people understand money to be just paper in their heads, of course, but deep down they as well recognize its power. The key fact, however, is that people continue to behave as if money is something beyond its material form. Not merely recognized as an abstraction, existence is ritualized in the ideological structure that supports its authority. The mystique of money lies not in its phenomenality but in the ideological commitment to it. You may understand money to be a construct, but that doesn't mean you can act like it's only that. Through the abstract rituals of exchange and purchasing and accumulation, money takes on the status of the *ultimate sublime object*— beyond reason, authoritative, making labor as such more and more empty vis-a-vis the system that offers it its very name, so to speak, to begin with.

Leave alone its material aspect, the market structures and social institutions show a peculiar anthropomorphism in their functioning and operation. Read this insight alongside Lacanian psychoanalysis, in which form and structure have a homogenous function across the political, economic, and psychological; and just as individuals are socialized by their interactions with the world, so does the engagement with the market structure deepen the ideological entrenchment. Each daily encounter with consumption, exchange and economic ritual not only reaffirms one's position within the system but perpetuates the illusion that the system has its own agency. Žižek contends that the subject and the market in this reciprocal process become reflexive entities that shape and legitimize each other. But he insists that once these abstractions and exchanges are fully and consciously perceived for what they are, ideology ceases to act as ideology. It is here in this paradox where Žižek pulls Sohn-Rethel, though, in his more contemporary sense, explains more clearly how absolute theistic recognition as positive makes ideological recognition absolute in its unavoidable nature.

> The crucial paradox of this relationship between the social effectivity of the commodity exchange and the 'consciousness' of it is that - to use again a concise formulation by Sohn-Rethel - 'this non-knowledge of the reality is part of its very essence': the social effectivity of the exchange

18 *SOI*, 12.

> process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality *whose very ontological consistency' implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants* - if we come to 'know too much', to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself.[19]

If Zizek and Sohn-Rethel are right, if we cut through our fallacious comprehension of our non-understanding on the abstractions that permeates our existence, if our actuality is the blindness of actuality — the actuality of sublime objects, the abstract exchanges, the psychoanalytical and market frameworks — we utterly lose actuality.

Consequently, by that time, ideology is no longer there. This is the exact departure Žižek makes from Marx in his account of ideology. No longer misrepresented as a kind of false consciousness or other idealized hoax, ideology becomes the very foundation of social reality itself—organizing relations, codifying functions, and, in a way, even enacting social thought itself. Whatever attempts one makes to flee or to fight ideology only generate yet another ideological construct. It is Louis Althusser who laid down the ground for these insights by claiming that ideology is never not in operation. His foundational 1970 text, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* established the orbit of ideology as an everywhere and nowhere force.

Even within ideology itself, cracks open and symptoms appear that expose its inner contradictions. To understand this better, Žižek, in his chapter *From Symptom to Sinthome,* describes symptoms as expressions of ideology at the symbolic level—visible but falsified signifiers of a concealed ideological structure. The symptomatic nature of ideology ensures that even disruptions or inconsistencies reinforce its persistence, operating as both the revelation and concealment of its mechanisms.

Exploring Lacanian psychoanalysis in impressive detail, Žižek ultimately argues that whatever you perceive at the symbolic level is the result of ideology. Ideology is not only informing perception—it is subjectivity itself. As a result, almost all phenomena occur as symptoms of ideological structures. With this clarification—that the symbolic order is in fact symptomatic—the debate shifts to ideological paradoxes.

Freedom as an ideological product

Žižek argues that an exception is inscribed in every ideology; there is a primal contradiction that is always part of the universality of its claims.

19 *SOI*, 15.

No ideology is more appropriate than another to set the current horizon of Western civilization, and all ideologies are operating under an inherent fissure. To illustrate this, Žižek takes the example of freedom, showing how it is contradictory in the dynamic in the following statement:

> ...freedom, for example a universal notion comprising a number of species (freedom of speech and press, freedom of consciousness, freedom of commerce, political freedom, and so on) but also, by means of a structural necessity, a specific freedom (that of the worker to sell freely his own labor on the market) which subverts this universal notion. That is to say this freedom is the very opposite of effective freedom: by selling his labor 'freely' the worker loses his freedom - the real content of this free act of sale is the workers' enslavement to capital. The crucial point is, of course, that it is precisely this paradoxical freedom, the form of its opposite, which closes the circle of bourgeoisie freedoms.[20]

The true ideological crux of this is that you are in the end, free to sell yourself to do slavery. Žižek does qualify this statement by saying that this happens in pre-capitalist societies also.

By exercising this so-called freedom, we paradoxically undermine it. The exercise of economic autonomy thus leads inexorably to subjugation—through labor, the individual is bound to capital, yet refusal precipitates destitution. The contradiction itself takes place under a set of parameters configured by the system. Notice how the paradoxes that sustain ideology, and the sickness symptoms thereof, are then at work here: ideology feeding itself through its paradoxical character engagement. Just as one can recognize and comment on the performative hypocrisies of capitalist business etiquette, the hyper-masculinities and ritualistic displays of power, Žižek extends this same analysis to *cynicism* itself, which is an ideological concept.

> We find, then, the paradox of a being which can reproduce itself only insofar as it is misrecognized and overlooked: the moment we see it 'as it really is', this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely, it changes into another kind of reality. That is why we must avoid the

20 *SOI,* 16-17.

> simple metaphors of demasking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality.[21]

Marx famously opens in his *Capital*, *"They do not know it, but they are doing it."*[22] Žižek does assert whether this insight but takes it farther with a crucial twist. It is not just that people are caught in an ideological box, blind to its force. Instead they see themselves, cynically, as having outgrown ideology completely. They see themselves as clear-eyed observers — unbound by ideological strictures, able to analyze the world with an objective detachment. But here is the deeper illusion: they remain trapped in ideology because they think they are free of it.

It is not just the blindness of ideologically conditioned subjects blindsided by their conditioning who do not know it, but rather of those who deceive themselves into believing they have transcended their conditioning. In this sense, Žižek's reworking preserves Marx's initial claim—*"But they do not know what they do"*—even as it shifts the emphasis a little. Their condition is not one of just skipping ideology but of self-deception, the self-deception of thinking that ideology is no longer the lord of their soul.

> Ideology functions actually in our daily life; what do i mean by this? Two things, I love in this scene. First its the opposite of what we would have expected. Usually we think ideology is as glasses which distort our vision, and to see reality you have to take off the glasses. I like this gentle-- sorry i mean refined reverse that here on the opposite it's the correct thesis of the phylum. Ideology is our natural state, and to see the truth, you have to put on the glasses.[23]

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21 *SOI,* 25. N.B.: Žižek's critique of Starbucks' charitable giving to Guatemala's children fits into a larger argument of his that ideology perpetuates itself through misrecognition — it works specifically because of those sorts of contradictions that people do not see as contradictions. He notes that Starbucks gives consumers the opportunity to engage in consumerism and still feel virtuous — you're not just buying coffee; you're "helping" poor Guatemalan children. Nonetheless, this is an ethical move that neither confronts the means of production that has bred such injustice, nor does it disrupt the smooth tenor of capitalism for it subsumes its criticism into its own flow. And this connects to his larger point, that certain ideological structures can survive only so long as they are misrecognized — once revealed, they evaporate or metamorphose.] The fantasy would crumble if consumers really understood that Starbucks' charity was not a gift but a marketing mechanism that perpetuates world inequalities. But ideology does not function through straightforward deceit; it functions by providing people with a sense of seeing through it while also keeping them trapped within it. This is why Žižek cautions against naïve metaphors of "demasking" ideology — because usually, beneath what appears to be an awakening is merely another layer of ideological reinforcement.

22 Quoted in *SOI*, 27.

23 SRF Kultur, *"Slavoj Žižek: Down with Ideology! | Sternstunde Philosophie | SRF Kultur,"* YouTube, accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm5tpQp6sT4.

This cynicism leads to what Žižek calls *Totalitarian Laughter,* which occurs when adherents become rigorously principled to the extent that one clings through thick and thin to his or her moral architecture. As life is, in fact, fluid and unpredictable, such a rigid attachment to an ideological "good" produces an almost self-parodying dogmatism. People who cling to this paradigm reject ambiguity or contradiction outright, demanding an apodictic moral clarity that in the end severs the elasticity needed for real ethical grappling.[24]

Thus, an ideological tendency. Zizek explicitly states that maybe we should not take the status quo ideology as serious, as ultimately we jeopardize our ability to adapt. Thus, we could run into a situation where the ends justify the means. And to Žižek that could be considered paradoxically evil. And Zizek being the fan of paradoxes that he is, he points something else out that is extremely interesting when it comes to *Totalitarian Laughter.* In states where there are robust systems of authority Zizek noticed that there was a central mockery around its authority in a sense. At least on the surface.

These governments developed standardized types of humor to create trust among the citizenries. This has been a theme in Žižek's lectures for some time. The ultimate implication, however, was an inability to take the winning ideology seriously—a condition that Žižek marks as intrinsically dangerous. This same phenomenon can also be found in the West, where government workers and the public sector at large are again taunted by Totalitarian Laughter.

> "We're being hunted." "We are smarter than them. Only the feeblest of men take jobs in the government." "I hope so." (*Red Dead Redemption 2,* 2018).

This widespread perception of government and larger systems of authority in the West as feeble and unserious—an object of ridicule and

24 In this sense, Totalitarian Laughter is not just entertainment but a darkly predictable form of ideological closure. It is the derisive laughter of those who imagine themselves above ideology, but in being so, slip all the more firmly into its clutches. Their dogmatism blinds them to the complexities of reality, and they deride, dismiss or suppress any fact that may complicate their rigid ideological framework. This, for Žižek, is one of the deepest dangers of cynicism—not that it has freed itself from ideology, but that it has fashioned a new, subtler form of ideological bondage. See *SOI,* 24.

cynicism—ultimately creates conditions that enable totalitarian actions by the prevailing order.[25]

These instinctive actions then give rise to Žižek's notion of the *ideological fantasy.* In Žižek's view, fantasy is not just a private mental dimension; it is performed in the external practices. He shows this through the example of money, commodities and the relations of economic interaction. While people know theoretically that money is just paper and is valueless, socially they show differently. As Žižek observes:

> The problem is that in their social activity itself, and what they are *doing,* they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishist in practice, not in theory. What they do not know, what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself and their social activity - in the act of commodity exchange - they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.[26]

This fantasy is not only imaginary; it is actualized in action. In this sense, Žižek evolves this idea into the notion of the objectivity of belief, where the internal regime of narratives and beliefs crystallizes into larger, social and political structures. He deals with the Lacanian notion of *belief,* which is an interior signifier, versus knowledge which can be exterior, and may be verifiable by way of the empirical mode, e.g. the scientific method.

The 'canned laughter'

Žižek argues that belief, quite the contrary, is radically external — the very condition of possibility of social structures, economic exchanges, and political orders. In this paradoxical formulation, belief shapes objectivity from outside itself, constituting the world we live in. Moreover, the orders of the symbolic which define what we should believe also come from outside. Žižek elaborates this via the figure of 'canned laughter' on television.

> After some supposedly funny or witty remark, you can hear the laughter and applause included in the soundtrack of the show itself- here we have

25 Think about militia groups in the United States. They arm, organize and train to protect the people from a tyrannical government. But their prevailing political orientation is anti-government and self-reliant. They do not take totalitarianism, nor the authority of the status quo, particularly seriously, paradoxically enough. But I want to ask: why did all these pro-Second Amendment militias remain glaringly silent when federal agents were sent into Portland, Oregon? See "Federal Agents Sent to Portland in 2020 Were 'Unprepared' to Quell Unrest, Watchdog Finds," *CBS News*, accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/portland-protests-2020-federal-agents-unprepared/.

26 *SOI*, 28.

the exact counterpart of the chorus in classical tragedy; it is here that we have to look for 'living Antiquity'.[27]

For example, after a witty comment on a TV show, canned laugh track echoes in the background. At first glance, its role seems simple enough: to signal when to laugh. But Žižek contends that this function is more complicated. The fact is that viewers do not, in fact, laugh most of the time, as empirical observation suggests. Instead, it acts as a surrogate for laughter, freeing them of the obligation to respond. Here, the *Lacanian Other*—the place where all so-called *Other* desire is deposited—is incarnated in the image of the television set. It meets a primal hunger: after a long and difficult day, all anyone wants is to decompress and experience a moment of levity. But this is only one aspect of the *Other's* role. The *Other* as well includes the wants of others — those who one quibbles with, the social norms governing when and the way to reply and, above all, the tv itself telling the viewer when to chuckle. Thus, via an externalized structure of desire, you can say that you enjoyed the programme even if you didn't actually laugh. The faith that one is enjoying is then not a matter within but radically external.

From here, we reach the primary relation of the subject; that of the singular to symbolic orders and ideological structures. Inevitably, for brevity's sake, some levels of nuance will be missed. The main aim here is to present the basic arguments of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in condensed form. This discussion is fundamentally about the ideological subject, or more specifically, the Žižekian subject, which is defined by an essential and complex internal division.

Slavoj Žižek builds upon the psychoanalytic notion that individuals are fundamentally split subjects. This division manifests between the levels of conscious awareness and the unconscious, a theme to which he devotes the final portion of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.[28] Žižek contends that subjects are perpetually divided between what they consciously know and articulate about political phenomena, and a set of largely unconscious beliefs concerning political apparatuses, individuals, and power structures.

Authority, ideology, and even the concept of the *Big Other* within the symbolic order serve to fracture the subject. Put simply, the subject exists in a perpetual division between conscious and unconscious forces, ultimately governed by the symbolic order—a structure comprising social rituals, customs, and norms. In this section of his work, Žižek juxtaposes the subject with the

27 *SOI*, 33.

28 *SOI*, 197.

structure of the *Real,* employing the latter as a means of explaining how the split subject emerges from the symbolic order.

The concept of the *Real,* however, remains notoriously difficult to define. It represents an order of existence that precedes symbolic representation, a state to which we are closest only in infancy. In the most rudimentary and necessarily imprecise terms, the *Real* is a realm of unmediated being, an abyss of nothingness. Lacan asserts that access to the *Real* is ultimately impossible, as language itself fractures and distances us from it. For the sake of clarity, the *Real* may be understood as the raw state of human existence, a fundamental void devoid of structure.

Despite this absence, a stable reality is indispensable for human functioning. This stability is achieved through codification—an assemblage of language, images, and other signifiers that construct meaning. Within this framework emerges the construct of the ideal 'I': the self as one imagines it to be, alongside representations of others, both actual and imagined. Reality, therefore, is a fiction designed to shield individuals from the vertiginous void of the *Real*. It is only through the *Real* that symbols and objects of desire can be constructed, allowing for the formation of the reality that subjects perceive.

For Žižek, law, as derived from ideology, plays a crucial role in this process. It provides the necessary structure for shaping desire, particularly through the Lacanian notion of *objet petit a*—the unattainable object of desire that sustains human longing. Laws, then, establish the very parameters within which desire is pursued, thereby conditioning both individual subjectivity and broader ideological frameworks.

Žižek says laws work on two levels. On some level, explicit laws—those that subjugate individual desires in the name of social cohesion. On one hand, there are written laws, such as the *Constitution and the United States Criminal Code.* On the other, there are invisible, pernicious laws—far more difficult to notice, and even more ingrained to our minds and ideologies. These unwritten rules govern how to be a responsible citizen but never end up on paper. These pressures are rooted in ideology and enforced by what Lacan names the *Superego;* the internalized voice that tells us what is acceptable and constantly questions and curtails our actions.

This unspoken, internalized law is also the most sinister. It is not just something that restricts, but rather something that drives subjectivity, producing people within ideological frameworks. *You* — the *subject* — arises out of the same ideology into which you were born. Your desires are formed through this order known as the *symbolic order* that guides you to conform to the social norms you are expected to hold. These norms are reinforced not just

by the pressure imposed upon you by others but also by how your own psyche operates, as well as by the "sublime objects" that are presented before you — ideals that thrill and guide your desire.

As Žižek's main claim in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* indeed concludes here when he quotes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel again, stressing that ideology does not simply impose rules, but in a certain way structures our experience of the real itself.

> It is manifest that beyond the so-called curtain of phenomena which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen.[29]

This is Žižek's ultimate position on *The Sublime Object of Ideology.* Regardless of whether a society is a theocracy, an oligarchy, or any other system, ideologies create these sublime objects—idealized concepts that shape how individuals perceive the world. These objects reinforce the belief that existing laws are beyond question, making it seem impossible to conceive of new social or moral structures outside the given ideological framework.

Even when individuals attempt to break free from this mold and challenge the system, they do not escape ideology altogether. There is no true *post-ideological* world; rather, any attempt to dismantle one ideology inevitably gives rise to another. Ideology is not merely an external force, it structures reality itself, making it inescapable even in moments of supposed liberation.

CONCLUSION

The academic work of Slavoj Žižek with his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* continues to serve as an essential text for modern political philosophy, but its academic impact depends on the ongoing scholarly disagreement about whether people can achieve political power. The work receives praise from scholars because it successfully combines Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics, but the main issue that people debate about Žižekian theories is whether his concept of "inescapable ideology" results in political inaction. Critics often argue that when people attempt to destroy an ideology, they create a new ideological system, which prevents them from experiencing true freedom. From this perspective, Žižek uses the "symptom" and "Real" concepts to provide an overly negative view of human existence, which keeps people stuck in a state of cynical rejection instead of showing them how to achieve complete social transformation.

29 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit,* 103. Quoted in *SOI,* 223.

The true value of Žižek's work emerges from its precise demonstration that 'post-ideological' beliefs exist only as a falsehood. I argue that Žižek does not offer a "cure" for ideology because ideology is the very condition of our social reality; it is the "reality of the fiction" that shields us from the traumatic void of the Real. The main argument of my position shows that Žižek delivers a demand which needs people to have advanced power comprehension instead of his defeatist approach. The worker makes free choices to sell their labor to capital, which shows that people experience what they think is "freedom" but this actual situation serves as their point of capture.

The reading shows how modern discussion needs to stop looking for spaces that exist beyond all ideological influence and start working on the complex process of "traversing the fantasy". Understanding that "cynical distance" is itself an ideological pose allows us to see how modern subjects remain "fetishists in practice" even when they claim to be "clear-eyed observers". By recognizing that the symbolic order is inherently symptomatic, we can address the structural conditions of subjectivity rather than merely reacting to visible distortions. Ultimately, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* encourages a radical form of ethical grappling, suggesting that the first step toward social change is the admission that ideology is not just a mask we wear, but the very way we perceive the world.

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