

“Ideology and Fantasy: Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Culture”

Paper for Richard A. Koenigsberg’s Masterclass (Nov. 8, 2017)

Zizekian Institute for Research, Inquiry and Pedagogy

I. Norman O. Brown

What is the relationship between the inner world and outer world? How does the outer world shape our inner world? And how does our inner world impact upon the outer world? In broadest terms, these are the questions that a psychoanalytic theory of culture addresses.

[In Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Interpretation of History](#) (1959/1985), Norman O. Brown stated that he wished to reshape psychoanalysis into a “wider general theory of human nature, culture and history” to be “appropriated by the consciousness of mankind as a new stage in the historical process of man’s coming to know himself.”

Building on Brown, I have written about “making conscious the unconscious on the stage of social reality” and of “awakening from the nightmare of history.” What would it mean to develop a psychoanalytic theory of external reality? How can we understand the relationship between the unconscious and the outer world?

Brown states that neurosis is “not an occasional aberration. Rather, neurosis is “in us, and in us all the time.” Neurosis, Brown says, is an “essential consequence of civilization or culture.” We must be prepared to analyze clinically as neurosis “not only the foreign culture we dislike, but also our own.”

I’ve written about the psychopathology of history. It is estimated that over [160 million people died in war in the 20th Century](#) (Scaruffi, 2009). Developing the concept of [democide](#), R. J. Rummel estimates that [262 million were murdered by governments in the 20th century](#). These numbers are mind-boggling.

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Isn’t it astonishing that psychiatrists in their [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder \(DSM\)](#) have developed a “[social anxiety disorder](#)” (shyness), yet have never written about a war disorder, or a genocidal disorder?

A fundamental question—a psychoanalytic question—is why we human beings have never addressed the *pathology contained within societies*. We “normalize” the massive, bizarre forms of violence that characterize politics. This is a central dimension of the nightmare in which human beings have been immersed—the nightmare of history—the question of *why we have not addressed this nightmare*. Why we continue to be fast asleep within it.

Our first step toward [awakening from the nightmare of history](#) (Koenigsberg) is to develop a theoretical framework for studying the relationship between the unconscious and the external world.

Freud stated that anything arising from within seeking to become conscious must try to transform itself into external perceptions. The repressed impulses must first find “real objects in the external world”—and attach themselves to these real objects “before their nature can become manifest to the subject.” This leads to the concept of transference.

The transformation of psychoanalysis into a project to change human culture, Brown says, is the “solution to the unsolved problem of the transference.” The transference was necessary because “the unconscious can become conscious only if it is transformed into an external perception;” and this perception had to be based on “enactment of actual love (or hate).”

Thus, the bedrock of Brown’s psychoanalytic theory of culture:

The unconscious can become conscious only through projection onto the external world. But human culture is a set of projections of the repressed unconscious. Like the transference, human culture is created by the repetition compulsion and constantly produces new editions of the infantile conflicts. Like the transference, human culture exists in order to project the infantile complexes into concrete reality, where they can be seen and mastered.

Brown goes on to say that human culture is “one vast arena in which the logic of the transference works itself out.” The fantasies that create the universal human neurosis

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cannot themselves be directly apprehended or mastered, but their “derivatives in human culture can.” Thus, “culture actually does for all mankind what the transference phenomena were supposed to do for the individual.”

The repressed unconscious can become conscious only by being transformed into an external perception—by being projected. According to Freud, mythological concepts are only “psychology projected into the external world.” Brown concludes that not just mythology, but the “entirety of culture is a projection.” In the words of [Stephen Spender](#), “The world which we create—the world of slums and telegrams and newspapers—is a kind of language of our inner wishes and thoughts.”

In short, the so called “external” world contains and conveys our fantasies. There is no clear line of demarcation between the inner world and outer world. Human beings project their fantasies into the external world. Thus, we may study unconscious fantasies by observing how they are contained within cultural ideas and fantasies. We are that.

II. Slavoj Zizek

One form of culture in which the unconscious manifests itself is that of ideology. Zizek writes in [The Sublime Object of Ideology](#) (1989/2008):

The fundamental level of ideology is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel.

In [Mapping Ideology](#) (1994/2012), Zizek presents this theory in nearly identical terms:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel. The function of

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ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality, but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.

[Douglas Ayling asks us to consider](#) how Zizek’s focus on fantasy helped him to develop the notion of ideology. Zizek argues, Ayling says, that the way fantasy constructs us as subjects is analogous to the way in which ideology interpellates us.

In [The Plague of Fantasies](#) (1997/2008), Zizek writes about the Althusserian notion of “[Ideological State Apparatus](#) (ISA)” —how the “external ritual materializes ideology.” The implication is that the “unconscious mind, operating through fantasy, makes us susceptible to ideology.”

Although ideology acts upon us from the outside, Ayling says, it “exerts a true hold on us because it resonates with the Real within our unconscious.” Whereas “fantasy works from the internal through the medium of dreams, and ideology works from the external, they both serve to hide the subject from the Lacanian Real of the unconscious.

III. Richard Koenigsberg

What is the relationship between fantasy and ideology—and the enactment of ideology as history? I’ve addressed this question for many years (see, for example, [“Why do Ideologies Exist?”](#)).

Ideologies, I theorize, exist as *modus operandi* for the expression of fantasies shared by members of a population. Ideologies become articulated as elements of social reality by harnessing latent desires, anxieties, conflicts and fantasies.

Ideologies act as if “funnels”—drawing forth energies bound to unconscious fantasies—making this energy available for reality-oriented action. Ideologies are societally defined discourses that transform dimensions of psychic experience into elements of culture.

The focus of my research has been Nazi ideology, anti-Semitism and totalitarianism ([Koenigsberg, 2009](#)). Hitler was the leader who conveyed Nazi ideology—that expressed the desires and fantasies of the German people. When Hitler spoke, listeners in the

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audience jumped to their feet and shouted, “Heil Hitler.” They were heiling because they were turned on by what Hitler said.

Nazi political theorist Ernst Rudolf Huber in [Constitutional Law of the Greater German Reich](#) (1939) stated that the Führer was the “bearer of the collective will of the people.” In the will of the leader, Huber said, the “will of the people is realized.” Hitler’s will was not the subjective will of a single man. Rather, the “collective national will” was embodied within Hitler.

A people’s collective will, Huber explained, is rooted in the “political idea which is given to a people.” The political idea is present in the people, but the Führer “raises it to consciousness and discloses it.” The leader, in other words, by disclosing a people’s political idea—brings into consciousness what had been unconscious.

The leader’s ideology reveals—crystallizes—a people’s shared fantasies. The leader invents images, metaphors and phrases to convey these fantasies. The leader processes his own fantasies and is receptive to the fantasies of his people. He “returns” this information to his audience—in the form of an ideology or societal discourse.

By virtue of being transformed into a societal discourse, energies and passions bound to unconscious fantasies are released for action. The ideology transforms latent desires and fantasies into the “collective will” to act. The will to act is generated by the wish to actualize or enact or to bring into reality fantasies contained within the ideology. The role of the leader, in short, is not only to bring into consciousness fantasies shared by members of society, but also to devise a plan or program allowing these fantasies to transform into reality.

Ideologies consist of interrelated propositions or theorems. They are “programs” capable of dictating forms of action. Political actions undertaken in the name of an ideology are based upon propositions or theorems contained within the ideology. Ideologies possess logic. Logic does not imply rationality. The logic of an ideology is based upon the coherence of the fantasy that is its source.

Historical actions manifest the logic of fantasies contained within ideologies. The Final Solution, for example, grew out of Hitler’s proposition that the German nation was an actual body (politic), and that Jews were bacteria within this body. Insofar as Jews were

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bacteria, *every single one of them* needed to be destroyed, lest they begin again to multiply and divide. The fantasy contained within Hitler’s ideology was the source of genocide.

IV. Materialization of Ideological Fantasies

[Zizek discusses how ideology materializes in practices](#), rituals and institutions. Religious conviction, he says, is not merely an inner conviction. Rather, the Church as an institution and its rituals (Prayer, baptism, confirmation, confession) “stand for the very mechanisms that generate it.”

What we see here is the relationship between a fantasy—and the enactment of a fantasy. Zizek emphasizes how behavior *constitutes* the fantasy. He cites Althusser, who repeats after Pascal: “Act as if you believe, pray, kneel down, and you shall believe, faith will arrive by itself.”

The logic of this argument, Zizek says, is: “Kneel down and you shall believe that you knelt down because of your belief;” that following the ritual is an expression of inner belief. In short, the external ritual “performatively generates its own ideological foundation.”

In [The Plague of Fantasies](#) (1997/2008), Zizek observes that in every ideological edifice, there is a “trans-ideological kernel,” since if an ideology is to become operative and effectively “seize” individuals, it *has to* build upon some trans-ideological vision that cannot be reduced to a simple instrument of “legitimizing pretensions to power.”

Is not an “authentic vision” discernible, Zizek asks, in Nazism—the notion of a “deep solidarity which keeps the ‘community of people’ together?” There is not ideology, Zizek claims, without a “trans-ideological ‘authentic’ kernel.” Indeed, it is “*only the reference to such a trans-ideological kernel that makes an ideology workable.*”

I would put this more strongly: there is no separation between a fantasy and the ideological movement expressing—generated by—this fantasy. The fantasy is the reason the ideology exists; what gives the ideology power. Without the fantasy, the ideology would be empty—could not exist.

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Nationalism means not only that individual identify with their own country, but that each individual identifies with every other citizen—and with the national leader. This fantasy of national unity is the dream that each and every person should fuse with his or her nation, with each other and with the leader. Under conditions of extreme nationalism (totalitarianism), the nation becomes an “omnipotent system”: Many fuse to create a single, unified body (politic).

The [mass rallies at Nuremberg](#)—where tens-of-thousands of Germans gathered together—convey the essence and apotheosis of Nazism. Hitler spoke at one of these rallies:

One day you all come into this city, leaving your small villages. You come from the small world that surrounds your daily fight for existence that you may, once in a while, gain the feeling that now we are together; we are with him and he with us, and we are now German! If a people is rent asunder, split up in classes, then it is essential that they should come to stand together and form one column on the march.

Then drum will join drum, flag will join flag, and at last the united nation will follow the mighty column. The people which once was torn asunder, it will then in these columns see its leadership, then it will render to this leadership its obedience.

Hitler was never more excited than when at the Nuremberg rallies These rallies actualized his fantasy of “national unity.” At these rallies, Hitler’s dream of *Gemeinschaft*—the community of the German people—materialized.

Observing soldiers standing and marching in unison, Hitler could see the nation with his own eyes. Germany was no longer an abstraction. Hitler felt that the German people had fused into a single, omnipotent body, controlled by his will. At these moments, speaking to his youth, he could say, “You are flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood. You are all one, belonging to me.” At the Nuremberg rallies, the German people came together to create a single, omnipotent organism. Many bodies fused to create one, gigantic body, with Hitler its head.

V. The Jew as Negation

Zizek states that the idea, “Society is a corporate body” is the “fundamental ideological fantasy.” At stake in this social-ideological fantasy is the desire to create a society “not split by antagonistic division” in which the “relationship between its parts is organic, complementary.” According to the “corporate vision of Society as an organic Whole,” society is a body in which the different classes are like extremities, members each “contributing to the Whole according to their function.”

How then does one take into account the fact that society is *not united*—in spite of the best efforts of so many? How may one account for *disunity* in the face of this desire to create and experience society as an organic whole? How do we take into account the distance between the corporatist vision of unity, and the “factual society split by antagonistic struggles?”

The answer, Zizek says, often is “the Jew:” an external body introducing “corruption into the sound social fabric.” The Jew is a fetish that simultaneously “denies and embodies the structural impossibility of ‘Society’.” It is as if in the Jew, this impossibility, “had acquired a positive, palpable existence.”

In other words, the idea of society as a unified, corporate whole—and the Jew—go hand in hand. Like love and marriage, you can’t have one without the other. The fantasy of society as a unified whole—and fantasy of the Jew as disrupter of this unity—cannot be separated.

Therefore, far from being the “cause” of social antagonism, the Jew is just “the embodiment of the blockage.” Far from being the positive cause of social negativity, Zizek says, the “Jew” is a point at which “social negativity as such assumes positive existence.”

What does it mean to say that social negativity assumes positive existence? We experience the idea of society in many ways. On the one hand is our positive experience—of society as good, beneficial, benevolent, etc. On the other hand, is our negative experience of society—as bad, malevolent and destructive. The Jew functions as container for our experience of the negative dimensions of society.

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The term “society” and term “Jew” constitute a “dual-unity.” The Jew exists to symbolize or represent perception of the evil, destructive dimensions of society—generating the wish to separate from society. The struggle against the Jew, therefore, is the struggle against our perception of the destructive experience of society—our desire to separate. The Jew contains the split off wish to abandon society.

This is the meaning, I think, of Zizek’s statement of how the negative, disruptive power of the Jew menacing our society—is “simultaneously a positive condition of it.” The Jew represents the repressed desire to abandon society, even to destroy this oppressive entity. As long as the Jew exists to embody the wish to abandon society, however, one doesn’t have to abandon society. We maintain our attachment to society by virtue of our struggle—the eternal struggle—against the Jew (our wish to abandon society).

VI. The Eternal Struggle

[The Eternal Jew](#) is the title of a 1940 Nazi propaganda film. In a 1935-6 propaganda booklet, [Heinrich Himmler](#) presented his view that struggles between Jews and nations had occurred throughout history. The “battle against peoples conducted by Jews,” Himmler declared, has belonged—so far as we can look back—to the “natural course of life on our planet.”

One could calmly reach the conviction, therefore, that the struggle of life and death—between nations and Jews—is as much a law of nature as “man’s struggle against some epidemic;” as the struggle of a healthy body against “plague bacillus.”

According to Himmler’s analysis, just as human beings throughout history always have been attacked by bacteria, so nations throughout history always have been attacked by Jews. The “life and death struggle” between nations and Jews, therefore, cannot be avoided. This struggle represents a law of nature that is part of the “natural course of life on our planet.”

The struggle by nations against Jews, in short, was an eternal struggle. As long as peoples sought to create homogenous, unified societies, the Jew would act to *block* this desire. As long as Jews were blocking this desire, there never would be the occasion to abandon the ideal of a perfect society. The ideal of a perfect society would perpetuate

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itself as the *eternal struggle to destroy the Jew*. The existence of the Jew meant that this fantasy would go on forever.

Jews for Hitler and the Nazis, I hypothesize, symbolized doubt—disbelief in the goodness of society—that generated the wish to abandon Germany. As long as doubt or disbelief was projected onto the Jew, the fantasy of the goodness or perfectibility of society did not need to be abandoned. The struggle could go on and on.

Of course, the Jew is only one idea or entity allowing us to maintain belief in the perfectibility of society—to perpetuate the struggle to create a unified national organism. The element perceived as “corrupting the sound social fabric” may be labelled a left-winger, a right-winger, a communist, a terrorist, a racist, or whatever. As long as there is an entity blocking—standing in the way of—one’s desire for a perfect society, then the struggle can be “eternal.”

VII: Perfect Unity, and the Desire to Destroy Perfect Unity

[David Mertz’s paper](#), “The Racial Other in Nationalist Subjectivations,” clarifies Zizek’s analysis of anti-Semitism. The Jew, Mertz says, is a symptom of “society’s anxiety over its own unity.” But this unity exists only “retroactively”—insofar as the Jew functions as the disruption of this unity.

An organic unity of society exists only in as much as this very organic unity “projects onto some fictive figure of alterity its own immanent contradictions.” The notion of alterity formulated by Zizek, Mertz says, radically contradicts the notion of a “simple loathing of cultural-racial differences.”

Cultures, Mertz says, do not exist independently of their “exclusion of Otherness.” A culture can only constitute itself in the same act that constitutes “the ‘cultures’ it excludes from its own definition.” In fact, these excluded cultures have “logical precedence over the cultures which create them.” The existence of the exterior group is “conceptually necessary for defining the interior group.”

The core of Hitler’s ideology was this dual-fantasy of a perfectly united society opposed by the Jew seeking to destroy perfect unity. Speaking to his people, Hitler fervently described the German *Gemeinschaft* he had brought into being:

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The words ‘community of the German people’ have found precisely in the poorest sons of our people the most lofty and glorious exemplification. Millions of women love this new state, makes sacrifices for it, work and pray for it. He who has the good fortune to come amongst this people will himself be seized and carried away the wave of boundless assurance, of utterly immovable confidence with which they all cling to this new Germany.

But then he described, just as passionately, the “other side of the coin:” those who blocked—sought to destroy—the perfectly united community:

And over against this positive world of the German spirit, there stands also, it is true, a small negative world. They take no part in their hearts in the work of German recovery and restoration. First there is the small body of those international disintegrators of a people who as apostles of Communism systematically incite the peoples, break up established order, and endeavor to produce chaos. Up and down the countries the flames of revolt run over the peoples. The individualistic propaganda of disintegration disturbs today nearly all.

By spreading “individualistic propaganda,” a small body of people sought to “break up established order” to produce “chaos.” Here, and throughout his speechmaking, Hitler refers to Jews as “disintegrators of peoples.” Jews represented negation of unity: a people whose very nature acts to break bodies politic into pieces.

According to Hitler’s totalitarian ideology, *every single human being had to be contained within the sacred community*. No one could exist under conditions of separation from this community. Hitler found the idea of individualism— “selfish individualism” as the Nazis called it—intolerable. Individualism meant lack of devotion and the desire to *separate* from the sacred community.

Rudolf Hess often introduced his Fuhrer at mass-rallies declaring, “Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler.” Hitler identified his being with the German nation, and thus experienced separation from Germany as disintegration.

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Hitler enjoyed the idea and experience of fusion with Germany. At the same time, Hitler—like every human being—experienced attachment to society as oppressive. Like each of us, a part of him wished to detach—be free of—the hegemony of society.

But Hitler could not allow himself to know that he hated and wished to destroy the entity that he had struggled to create—to which he had devoted his life. He could not bear to say—let himself know—that he wished to separate from Germany; be free of her.

In order to maintain his attachment to his beloved nation, Hitler *projected the wish for separation into the Jew*. Jews symbolized Hitler’s desire to be free of—abandon—Germany. Killing Jews represented Hitler’s desperate struggle to *destroy his desire to separate from Germany*.

Hitler created the Final Solution to demonstrate that there could be no escape from the national community; separation was not a possibility. By creating the Final Solution, Hitler sought to destroy Jews—symbol of the wish to separate from the nation-state. The Holocaust brought Jews back into the fold.