The grip of ideology: a Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology¹

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ABSTRACT Is it possible to say something about how an ideology grips subjects that goes beyond today’s sophisticated accounts of how particular socio-political traditions have been contingently constituted? This paper explores how a Lacanian conceptual framework provides the resources with which to offer an affirmative response to this question. In outlining such a response, I rely on Slavoj Žižek’s political re-articulations of psychoanalytic categories and on Ernesto Laclau’s hegemonic approach to ideology. I begin by situating the hegemonic approach to ideology in the context of other contemporary approaches. I then offer a reading which suggests that Žižek’s Lacanian approach can be seen as a particular version of the hegemonic approach to ideology. Crucial to the former are the concepts of desire, fantasy, and enjoyment. I suggest that a Lacanian theory of ideology offers us a set of concepts drawn from the clinic that provoke interesting insights for the analysis and critique of ideology.

The Lacanian intervention into the field of ideological analysis and critique can be seen as a special version of a more general hegemonic approach to ideology. And both can be understood against the background of a question that has come to dominate contemporary normative political theory in general, and post-structural political theory in particular. Given a context in which an emphasis on contingency has dealt a severe blow to the credibility of moral and political claims to ‘universal and objective truth’, is it still credible to speak of ideological critique?

A hegemonic approach suggests that ideology can, and should, be retained as a potentially fruitful political category with considerable analytical and critical value. It relies, however, upon a suitably revamped understanding of ideological misrecognition, a revamped understanding shared by post-structural approaches to ideology. Here contingency is taken as constitutive of the process of discursive construction, thereby making the invisibility of contingency constitutive of ideological misrecognition. Rendering contingency visible, therefore, grounds the process of ideological critique.
One crucial consequence of taking contingency seriously is the need to engage in detailed historico-contextual analyses. This is because it is felt that such detailed analyses help make visible the contingent nature of processes of social construction. Accompanying this revamped understanding of ‘misrecognition’, however, is a very important shift in focus that a hegemonic approach to the theory of ideology emphasizes: its capacity to account for an ideology’s grip, its power to transfix subjects.

The link between ideology and power is generally taken for granted. More and more, so too is the link between power and systems of meaning. It is no longer uncommon to find analyses of ideological power conducted in terms of the ‘naturalization’ of meanings and patterns of meaning. Such naturalizations effectively conceal the political moment in which decisions could have been otherwise made on account of the irreducible contingency that inhabits the dynamics of socio-political discourse. The crucial question from a hegemonic perspective is the following: Is it possible to say something about how an ideology grips subjects that goes beyond today’s sophisticated accounts of how particular socio-political traditions have been contingently constituted?

The answer to this question is by no means obvious. Among other things, it forces a reconsideration of the very role and function of theory in the study of ideology and political phenomena more generally. For those political and social analysts that have taken to heart post-positivist insights, such a question cannot but raise the twin spectres of essentialism and dogmatism. Nevertheless, I would like to explore how a Lacanian conceptual framework provides the resources with which to make possible an affirmative response to the above question, without abandoning anti-essentialist presuppositions. In outlining such an approach, I rely on the work of Ernesto Laclau and, more heavily, on the work of Slavoj Žižek.

I begin by situating the hegemonic approach to ideology in the context of other contemporary approaches. Central in the elaboration of a hegemonic approach to ideology is the work of Ernesto Laclau who, I suggest, effects a shift from treating ideology in epistemological terms to treating it in ontological terms. I offer a reading which suggests that Žižek’s Lacanian approach can be seen as a particular version of the hegemonic approach to ideology. In this reading, the hegemonic approach is presented as the genus of which a Lacanian theory of ideology is a species. I provide a sketch of the conceptual framework against which the Lacanian intervention can be understood. Crucial in this regard are the concepts of desire, fantasy, and enjoyment (jouissance). I suggest that a Lacanian theory of ideology offers us a set of concepts drawn from the clinic that are of potentially insightful relevance for the analysis and critique of ideology.

**Hegemony in the context of contemporary approaches to ideological analysis**

Contemporary perspectives on ideology are split. On the one hand, there are those who announce the end of ideology or the end of history, implicitly
branding similar declarations of 1950s and early 1960s as either premature or simply erroneous. Here, the increasingly widespread acceptance of capitalist liberal democratic ideals is usually offered up as definitive proof of these ‘ends’. On the other hand, there are those who are keen to reassert the pertinence of ideology often precisely because liberal capitalism’s ideals are becoming ever more naturalized and thus invisible. In this view, the fact that there is a widespread feeling that we have finally arrived at an end is itself usually counted as evidence indicating ideology’s presence and strength of hold. My selective overview of contemporary approaches to the theory of ideology will focus on the latter group.

The positions of those who accept the presence of ideology can by no means be characterized as homogeneous. Their differences turn not on whether we live in an ideologically-imbued society but on whether and how ideology can be retained as an analytically and critically useful theoretical category in studying many political phenomena. So, while ideology is still seen as fully operative in contemporary societies, such commentators—whether Marxist, post-Marxist, or non-Marxist—wish to investigate its value as a theoretical category with the aim either of abandoning it in favour of other conceptual tools or of revamping it by means of an alternative articulation.

But what exactly motivates this renewed interest in, and debate over, ideology? At least one important motivational source is to be found in philosophy’s ‘linguistic turn’ in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Wittgensteinian language games, Heideggerian post-phenomenological hermeneutics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction, and Foucaultian archaeologies and genealogies, have all in their way contributed to today’s so-called era of ‘post-foundationalism’. It is only relatively recently that such anti-essentialist insights have seeped into the humanities and social sciences, instigating a re-articulation of traditional categories such as object and subject, or structure and agency. The importance of language’s constitutive nature is appreciated more and more beyond the disciplinary boundaries of (post-analytical and continental) philosophy and literature, often resulting in a shift of analytical emphasis toward systems of meaning and identity, discursive conditions of possibility, and the specificity of socio-historical contexts.

The significance of this ‘linguistic turn’ for ideological analysis is not too hard to apprehend. No longer can the category of ideology be propped up by the traditional dichotomy which pits ‘misrecognition’ or ‘false-consciousness’ against a ‘true objective knowledge’—a knowledge that can be grasped by means of a seemingly transparent linguistic medium. It is in coming to terms with the constitutive nature of language and, more generally, discourse, that several of the positions in the debate over the critical productiveness of ideology as a theoretical category may be mapped. In illustrating how these positions can be conceived in terms of their stances toward the role of language and meaning.
in ideological analysis, I will canvass the works of Michael Freeden and Michel Foucault in order better to place into context the interventions of Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek.

Michael Freeden has been led to investigate not ideology as such but (political) ideologies, in the plural. ‘[I]n opposition to traditional studies of political thought which focus on “truth and epistemology, ethical richness, logical clarity, origins and causes”, and aim to direct or recommend political action, [Freeden suggests the need] to develop a form of conceptual analysis of ideologies that is sensitive to concrete political language and debate.’⁵ Here, ‘[t]he focus is not simply on logical and abstract conceptual permutations; rather, it is on the location of political concepts in terms of the patterns in which they actually appear’,⁶ thereby generating complex conceptual morphologies that are delimited through decontestation and that are sensitive to concrete, historically-situated ideologies.

In this way Freeden is able to establish a powerful demarcation criterion with which to identify those discursive formations that qualify as ideologies. Nevertheless, as Aletta Norval points out, Freeden’s demarcation criterion relies very heavily on the fact that ideological formations need to exhibit both sedimented stability and a fairly high degree of conceptual complexity.⁷ This is because Freeden’s approach, though post-positivist in spirit, focuses on, and generalizes from, the positive features of candidate ideologies.

One consequence of this focus is to exclude discursive formations which exert power over subjects but which are not recognized as ideological because they do not possess the requisite degree of conceptual complexity or sedimentation. And yet if one were to relax his demarcation criterion and simultaneously make it applicable not simply to the domain of political meanings but to meaning systems generally, we would no doubt find that a myriad of other discursive formations would suddenly qualify as ideological. We would be faced with an ideological ubiquity that would threaten the specificity of the ideological, thereby putting into question its analytical value. Indeed, it is this enlarged scope of ideology, conceived as a function of meaning systems generally, that led Foucault to abandon the category of ideology.⁸ It appeared to him of greater analytical promise to adopt the model of war and battle rather than that of language and signs. As he put it, ‘[t]he history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of language: relations of power, not of meaning’.⁹ It was crucial to Foucault, therefore, that he supplement his archaeological studies of discourse with genealogical studies of extra-discursive power, the generation of truth regimes (rather than the discovery of an objective Truth), and the correlative production of subject positions.

In contrast to traditional Marxist analyses of ideology (conducted in terms of struggles between well-defined class agents and objective laws governing the historical evolution of social totalities), and Althusserian structuralist analyses of ideology (conducted in terms of ‘overdetermined contradictions’ and the ‘inter-
pellation of individuals as subjects’), Foucault sought to demonstrate how ideologies emerged and gained stability through a more decentralized and diffuse microphysics of power. What Foucault and Freedon share is their attention to socio-historical detail; but whereas Freedon’s main principle of ideological analysis is founded primarily on sedimented meaning systems that display the requisite degree of organized complexity (conceptual morphologies), Foucault wished more explicitly to emphasize the extra-discursive dimension of power relations.

We can now try to map the positions of Laclau and Žižek. Both Laclau and Žižek affirm the importance of concrete meanings and socio-historical specificity in ideological analysis. Nevertheless, they both insist that contextual detail cannot alone, or even primarily, exhaust the category of ideology. Both feel that attention to meanings, systems of meanings, and socio-historical detail go a considerable way toward uncovering the force of power relations. In their view, however, a lot more can be said about ideological mechanisms at the level of theory before turning to the socio-historical specificity of meaning systems, and without appealing to a dimension external to discourse. Laclau and Žižek raise the stakes in the debate over theories of ideology by arguing, effectively, that a theory of ideology should not stop at the description of an ideology’s content and contingent construction, however complex and illuminating this might turn out to be. In this view, a theory of ideology must also struggle to offer us an account of how ideology grips its subjects, of how ideology exerts its hold over us, given the specificity and contingency of socio-historical traditions and their systems of meaning.

**From epistemology to ontology: empty signifiers and the impossibility of closure**

What then, beyond meanings and context-bound contents, do Laclau and Žižek offer us to explain the power–grip of ideologies? Both Laclau and Žižek do not, as Foucault does, seek to locate the force and power of a discursive formation outside discourse. Their theories maintain a definite link to discourse, but while the ideological force of a discourse might be internal to discourse it is nevertheless irreducible to it. This somewhat paradoxical position is sustained by a postulate that governs their social ontology, namely, the ‘impossibility of closure’, a fundamental dislocation which is meant to characterize every social totality. This postulate—the Lacanian name of which is the ‘lack in the symbolic Other’—is axiomatic in the sense that it is not susceptible to empirical proof—at least not in the positivist sense of the term. Its value can only be judged on the basis of its theoretical and analytical productiveness. As regards the social subject, then, the properly ideological moment is defined as the illusion of closure.

Here it is important to note the re-introduction of illusion to characterize ideology. Earlier I noted how the linguistic turn had the effect of discrediting the typically negative connotations associated with ideology—connotations of ‘mis-
recognition’ and ‘false-consciousness’. Laclau, however, is adamant that such connotations cannot be eliminated: ‘We cannot do without the concept of misrecognition, precisely because the very assertion that the “identity and homogeneity of social agents is an illusion” cannot be formulated without introducing the category of misrecognition. The critique of the “naturalization of meaning” and of the “essentialization of the social” is a critique of the misrecognition of their true character. Without this premise, any deconstruction would be meaningless’.

The issue then is not how to eliminate terms such as illusion and misrecognition, but how to redraw their boundaries through an articulation to a new ontology—an ontology which involves positing the socio-symbolic order as lacking. In this view, society lacks an ultimate signifier with which to make it complete: ‘[W]e can maintain the concept of ideology and the category of misrecognition … by inverting their traditional content. The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture’.

This re-formulation of the critical ingredient of ideological functioning by Laclau, though simple, carries consequences. It involves nothing less than a fundamental shift in the theoretical status of ideology. He effectively moves questions of ideology from an epistemological plane to an ontological plane, making distinct his position from a classical Marxist approach to ideology on the one hand, and what we can call a liberal approach to ideology on the other. In the case of classical Marxism, a positively defined essence of society exists, the truth of which is accessible through scientific investigation. This perspective derives from an interpretation of Marx’s theory of history that privileges the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production at the expense of strategic will-formation in class-struggles. This reading is based on Marx’s Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production …. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production …. Then begins an epoch of social revolution …. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

In this view, the objective laws of history can be known with the certainty of natural science. These laws make possible the prediction of positively describable stages of history (communism follows capitalism follows feudalism, etc.) and determine the necessary relations between revolutionary tasks and positively identifiable agents (only workers can bring about the overthrow of capitalism). This particular view is sustained by an epistemological infallibilism which suggests that anything that denies the true essence of society embodied in such scientific knowledge is ideological. Here, ideological critique involves an episte-
mological operation whereby one substance (positive appearances) is dissolved to reveal another substance (the positive essence of what society is and will be). Ideological critique involves displacing false knowledge by true knowledge.

A particular strand of liberalism can also be said to appeal to a substantive ‘truth’ concerning the way society is organized or how it can best be organized. This knowledge, however, is not immediately accessible with the desired certainty. Governed by a fallibilist epistemology of the (J.S.) Millian sort, and in contrast to the above-described Marxian infallibilist epistemology, such a liberal approach effectively collapses ideology into just another perspective that might or might not be true, relegating it to the private sphere of social and market relations. The most promising way forward, in this view, is to allow as many views as possible to compete in the hope of approximating the truth as closely as possible. Only when an emergent truth achieves the requisite consensus can it be adopted by public institutions. Here, ideological critique again involves an epistemological operation whereby a view is declared ideological if it seeks to promote itself as a truth for which consensus is lacking. Like the Marxian viewpoint, such a liberal approach posits the existence of a substantive truth about society. But it does not share the epistemological certainty of the former. Nevertheless, in both cases ideological critique is an epistemological issue concerning knowledge and our capacity to access it.

In contrast to both these approaches, Laclau treats society not as something whose true substantive nature we can access directly through careful scientific scrutiny or asymptotically through the free competition of different views, but as constitutively lacking. In order to understand this it is important to recall that his conception of society is a discursive conception. It is here that the full force of the constitutive nature of language is brought to bear: all meaningful conceptions of society, in this view, are discursive. From this perspective, the opposition is not between representations of society on the one hand and society as such on the other, but between representations of society and the failure of representation itself. Or: the opposition is not between substantive truth on the one side, and a ‘false’ or ‘approximately true’ ideas on the other, but between substance and non-substance. Here, in other words, epistemological incapacity is transformed into the positive ontological condition of politics and political subjectivity. It is because our symbolic representations of society are constitutively lacking that politico-hegemonic struggle is made possible. The elimination of ideological misrecognition therefore involves not uncovering a true substance beneath a false substance, nor the progressive approximation to a true substance, but revealing the non-substance that marks all substance. In short, nothing positive can be said about the ‘truth’ of society except that it is incomplete—in Lacanian terms, that there is a ‘lack in the symbolic Other’. Thus, society exists as a totality only insofar as the social subject posits its existence as such through the mediation of empty signifiers.

In explaining this Laclau has recourse to the Lacanian process of symbolic identification. Earlier I noted how society is lacking an ultimate signifier that would render the socio-symbolic order complete. This was an ontological
postulate. This means that any signifier that claims to close off this field will never be adequate to the task, and will play the role of an impostor. Ideology describes the situation in which the social subject misrecognizes the lack in the symbolic Other by identifying a particular concrete content with what Laclau calls an empty signifier (in Lacanian terms, the ‘master’ signifier). A social subject identifies with, for example, the signifier ‘Justice for All’ insofar as the latter carries a content that appears to promise a fullness, insofar as it promises to resolve issues that are perceived as directly affecting the social subject. I conclude this section with Laclau’s description of the hegemonic logic:

Let us consider the extreme situation of radical disorganization of the social fabric. In such conditions—which are not far away from Hobbes’s state of nature—people need an order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. ‘Order’ as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something, i.e., exactly to carry out this filling function. (We have spoken about ‘order’, but obviously ‘unity’, ‘liberation’, ‘revolution’, etcetera belong to the same order of things. Any term which, in a certain political context becomes the signifier of the lack, plays the same role. Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers.)

Contingency and the visibility of contingency: tropological and fantasmatic approaches to the theory of ideology

Laclau thereby shifts the debate on ideology away from epistemological issues of how we can come to know the positively defined substantive ‘truth’ about society to ontological issues concerning mechanisms of closure—mechanisms by which the substanceless ‘lack in the symbolic Other’ is concealed.

Apart from the ‘lack in the symbolic Other’ and the ‘empty signifier’, crucial in the elaboration of a hegemonic social ontology is the category of contingency. It is crucial because it will permit me to situate better the relation between Laclau and Žižek, and to extend my exploration of ideology beyond the field of ontology to the field of ethics.

We saw above how the empty master signifier acts as a kind of stand-in for the lack in the symbolic Other. The question here is: how does it sustain itself? How does it pull off this ‘trick’ whereby it sustains its emptiness and simultaneously promises fullness? The answer to this question comes in two stages. First, a particular concrete content must present itself as ‘filler’ in relation to the empty signifier. Consider the case in which environmental degradation is perceived to be the central cause of our grievances. Here, ecological degradation gives a concrete meaning to what we are lacking as a social subject, and points us in a direction that will make possible the fullness of ‘Justice for All’. Secondly, precisely because the master signifier is empty, any concrete content
will bear no necessary relation to it. In this sense the link between concrete content (ecological concerns) and empty signifier (‘Justice for All’) is contingent. This means that ideology persists so long as this contingency remains invisible to the social subject.

From this perspective, the study of ideology involves theorizing the ways in which contingency is made invisible; while ideological critique involves ways in which contingency can be made visible. In his most recent work, Ernesto Laclau considers a particular species of the general hegemonic approach to ideology. He suggests we explore this avenue through the development of different forms of hegemonic identification in terms of a typology of tropes—a kind of ontological ‘tropology’. Such a tropological approach would begin with catachresis, a trope which describes the process in which a word or signifier is improperly used in the sense that the figure it evokes does not correspond to anything in the literal world. Consider, for example, the metaphor ‘the inexhaustible smile of the sea’. Here, the figural smile corresponds to something positively identifiable: the literal wave. On the other hand, when I speak of ‘the wings of the building’, ‘the difference with a proper metaphor which fully operates as a figure, is that there is no proper designation of the referent. I am not free to call the “wing” in any other way’. In a similar way, then, the empty master signifier does not correspond to anything positive; and insofar as a positive content does hegemonize this empty signifier, this is strictly contingent. The master signifier is empty because it corresponds to something that has no positive content: the ‘lack in the symbolic Other’. A tropological approach, therefore, seeks to develop a typology of tropes which describe the mechanisms with which this irreducibly contingent—catachretic moment is arrested, fixed, all the way from the metaphoric pole to the metonymic pole. It suggests not only that different mechanisms of closure are possible, but also that at least one kind of tropological fixation could be regarded as more authentic or ethical than others—those, in other words, that register contingency as constitutive.

The central question that both Laclau and Žižek attempt to answer is the following: what accounts for the power with which a hegemonic (ideological) formation exercises its hold over a subject? Crucially, any such theory, in order to be considered adequate, must be theoretically differentiated enough to furnish us with the tools to explain the resistance encountered in any attempt to conduct a critique of ideology. Let us assume that contingency is constitutive of the hegemonic process. Let us accept, in other words, that identities are contingently constituted and partially-fixed by the historically-specific traditions enveloping the subject. The question then becomes: what accounts for the resistance encountered in making this contingency visible? Why is it that patterns of (oppressive) behaviour persist even when the contingency that underlies sedimented power relations has been pointed out? As we have seen, in his approach to this question Ernesto Laclau takes hegemony as a central category and attempts to flesh out a theory of ideology in terms that are structurally modelled upon rhetorical tropes. Žižek’s Lacanian approach also takes hegemony as central. Instead of taking the tropological route, however, he attempts to flesh out
a theory of ideology in terms that structurally reproduce the clinical category of fantasy. This is not to suggest that the tropological and fantasmatic approaches to a theory of ideology do not share many affinities that deserve a fuller exploration. On the contrary, such an investigation promises to be a potentially very fruitful research area in the theory of ideology. I simply present them as two species of the genus of a general hegemonic approach to ideology as an expository device. It is not my intention, therefore, to explore the tropological approach to a hegemonic theory of ideology any further here. The main focus of my essay is more limited. It is to situate better and explore the Lacanian approach to a hegemonic theory of ideology.

In concluding this section I would like to make two points. First, it is worth emphasizing that what remains important for both Laclau and Žižek is the attempt to offer a more theoretically differentiated account of the ontological landscape of socio-politics. The aim is to clarify what ethical moves are available to the social subject when engaging in a hegemonic struggle over the content of an empty signifier. Here, ethics is linked to the visibility of contingency, the confrontation with the lack in the symbolic Other. Secondly, though the theoretical inquiry they have embarked upon is conditioned by the traditions they draw on, it should be pointed out that their theories are independent of the particular, socio-historical contexts they articulate themselves to. At the level of theory, Laclau and Žižek can only speak of empty signifiers, tropes, and fantasies as such. It is only at the level of concrete ideological analysis and critique that one can begin to speak of this particular instantiation of a trope or fantasmatic object.

I now turn to explore in greater depth how Slavoj Žižek appropriates the psychoanalytic category of fantasy in giving a more differentiated account of ideological hegemony. In order to appreciate the relevance Žižek wishes to attach to fantasy for purposes of ideological analysis and critique it is worth pausing to consider how fantasy is conceived from a Lacanian perspective.

The clinical category of fantasy

For Lacan, fantasy is what sustains desire. Fantasy sustains the subject as a subject of desire, where desire is reducible neither to need, nor to demand. When a child demands to be fed, for example, desire is what emerges in the dissatisfaction felt when the demand is actually met. In Lacan’s words, desire is ‘what is evoked by any demand beyond the need that is articulated in it, and it is certainly that of which the subject remains all the more deprived to the extent that the need articulated in the demand is satisfied’. Of central importance, here, is the idea that what characterizes the subject most succinctly is its status as desiring.

Fantasy is intimately linked to this conception of the subject as desiring. In this schema, the aim of fantasy is not to enact the fulfilment of desire. Rather, fantasy’s primary aim is to sustain the subject’s desire by telling it how to desire. On a fairly simple level, we could say that when faced with the question of why
this person arouses our desire, we can answer: because he or she possesses the positive features occurring within our fantasmatic frame.  

Lacan’s formula for fantasy is $\$ \diamond \ a$, where the lozenge can be taken to denote a relation of impossibility. It tells us that fantasy stages the impossible relation between subject as lack, as desiring, on the one hand, and fantasmatic object of desire on the other. We know that there is no subject without the empty master signifier, without the symbolic order. It is on condition that a subject identifies with an empty signifier that its desire can be aroused in trying to give it content. The positing of fantasy as fundamental to the subject suggests that, in addition, ‘there is no symbolic representation without fantasy, that is, the subject ($) is constitutively split between S1 [master signifier] and a [fantasmatic object]; it can represent itself in S1, in a signifier, only in so far as the phantasmatic consistency of the signifying network is guaranteed by a reference to [the fantasmatic object]’. This means that if fantasy is disturbed or radically put into question, this will have repercussions for the consistency of our symbolic reality; at the extreme, this means that the disintegration of one’s fantasmatic frame will coincide with the feeling of a ‘loss of reality’. In short, we have the idea that fantasy supports our symbolically-constituted reality. But how exactly? In order to explain this, we need to put into question an aspect of fantasy that I passed over fairly quickly: why does the fantasmatic narrative stage an impossible relation?

The impossibility is linked directly to the paradox of the subject conceived as a subject of desire. For what can it mean to be a subject of desire? What can such a subject actually desire? The only possible answer to this question, if the subject is to retain its status as desiring, is not to satisfy its desire and, in this sense, to remain empty: we desire not to satisfy our desire. In other words, desire’s very existence relies on its being forever dis-satisfied. The point is that the subject of desire can never encounter its truly desirous (i.e., lacking) object because this is what, by its very extraction from our symbolically constituted reality, grounds the subject as desiring; indeed this necessarily extracted object is the subject in its objectal form—the subject is divided between itself as represented in a master signifier and itself in the form of an objectal remainder. As Žižek puts it, ‘fantasy, at its most elementary, is inaccessible to the subject, and it is this very inaccessibility which makes the subject “empty”’. If the subject were ever to come too close to realizing its fantasy, it would experience an unbearable anxiety as a result of suddenly being confronted not with lack (since it is upon this very lack that desire is founded), but with the lack of a lack. In Žižek’s words, ‘I become a desiring subject only in so far as I am deprived of “what matters to me most”’. This is the paradox fantasy is designed to sustain, a paradox that also accounts for the stabilizing function of fantasy. It sustains the subject as a desiring subject by providing it with a way of enjoying, a mode of jouissance. Jouissance is the enjoyment a subject experiences in sustaining his or her desire. And since sustaining desire ultimately involves sustaining desire as unsatisfied, this jouissance is often experienced as a
suffering. From a psychoanalytic point of view, it is possible to say that someone enjoys their suffering. 

**Fantasy and desire: from the clinic to the social**

How, though, might we translate this clinical formulation into socio-political terms? In other words, what phenomenic instantiations might structurally reproduce this impossible relation between the master signifier and the singular object of fantasy? As we have seen, fantasy is burdened with the impossible function of mediating between the empty symbolic structure indexed by the master signifier and the concrete meanings of ordinary symbolic reality; and it does so through a reference to an object that is necessarily extracted from this ordinary reality. Fantasy is, therefore, inherently transgressive of the symbolic order. And here it is important to note that it is *qua function* that fantasy is inherently transgressive, not necessarily *qua* content. In other words, its content simply comprises the usual elements of a fascinating Thing *qua* object of desire (whether beatific or horrific) and the narrative context, including the obstacle preventing access to the desired Thing. The more distant the object of desire, the more enticing; the more accessible it becomes, the more it turns into something horrible. *Qua* function, the fantasy conceals—evokes the ultimate horror of the real deadlock characterizing the constitutive incompleteness of the symbolic order. Take a Jewish conspiracy theory, for instance. Here, fantasy structures the social subject’s desires and actions in the sense that it believes that but for the Jew a finally complete and harmonious society would follow. However, what this fantasy conceals, thereby misleading the subject *vis-à-vis* its ‘true’ desires, is not that it falsely represents reality—that, for instance, there are other discernible forces at work which can explain the present state of affairs. Rather, it conceals the immensely more troublesome fact that there is no plotting agency pulling the strings behind the scene; and this not because of some empirical deficiency that can be remedied as our technological powers of detection improve, nor because of a chaos theoretic sensitivity to initial conditions. Rather, it is strictly ontological: society is constitutively lacking—inconsistent.

Thus, in a first approach, we could map the relation symbolic order/fantasy onto the relation official public law/social fantasy. The point is that fantasy is inherently transgressive of the law, of public discourse, not necessarily because of its content (it may, for instance, prohibit what the public law permits), but because of its function which, paradoxically, is to sustain the consistency of public discourse. And so for this very reason social fantasy, and the superego it fuels, must remain implicit, between the lines, so to speak; it must do so in order to retain its status as that which simultaneously escapes—transgresses and supports (through this very transgression) the symbolic order.

This insight, therefore, opens up a theoretical space for supplementing the notion of symbolic identification, the idea that we identify with a master signifier. While this remains the case, the point to emphasize here is that there is a further dimension to identification which acts as the very support of this
public identification. In short, ‘[w]hat “holds together” a community most deeply is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community’s “normal” everyday circuit, but rather identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the law’s suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of enjoyment)’.  

It is clear that fantasy and desire are governed by a paradoxical logic. Nevertheless, desire’s constitutive paradox is a theoretically productive one, for it explains why the subject must be prevented from gaining access to what it desires most. This conceptual framework gives a rationale to what is a not uncommon observation, namely, the intimate link between the prohibitions articulated by official public law and the emergence of objects of desire. In addition it might explain why, invariably, once we are given full legal, political, and technological access to our objects of desire we either recoil in horror, or postpone–procrastinate, or systematically arrange things so as never to approach them too closely. Our commonsense view predicts that the removal of social and technological barriers will result in a healthy burgeoning of pleasurable experiences. This is what a permissive liberal-capitalist ideal might be seen to promise. But, due to the impossibility inherent to desire, we have an alternative and plausible model with which to explain why the removal of obstacles may lead to a far more oppressive state of affairs in which we are threatened with the very extinction of our desire, and therefore of ourselves as subjects of desire. This occurs precisely when we are suddenly presented with the real possibility of actually fulfilling our fantasy. The prediction is that the kind of actings-out this type of threat elicits is of a potentially much more violent sort than one in which our self image or public ideal is blocked or under threat. Why? Because what is at stake is our very being, that which sustains us as fundamentally desiring.

Pursuing this line of thought can generate further plausible hypotheses. The articulation of these theoretical categories (fantasy and desire) to the social might suggest, for example, that today’s rise of racist violence in Western societies does not signal a regression to primitive forms of violence etched in our genes or latent in our tribal cultural traditions. Maybe it is a specifically modern racism, in the sense of being a direct product, symptom even, of a liberal-capitalist permissive polity.

On the status of theory: potential objections to hegemonic theories of ideology

The reductionist charge

At this point in my account, it is perhaps worth making explicit a certain unease that often accompanies discussions of psychoanalytic approaches to socio-political analysis. This discomfort is typically indexed by the apparent ease with which authors, such as Žižek, flit back and forth between clinical, cultural, and quotidian expositions involving individual subjects on the one hand, and social analyses involving social subjects on the other. Even if we accept as satisfactory
a clinical account of fantasy, we must remain sceptical about the transfer of clinical categories and insights to the socio-political level, for it may render such analyses vulnerable to the charge of reductionism.

I would like to make two points here. First, it is worth putting into question the assumption that a charge of reductionism, even if upheld, should automatically be treated as something to be avoided at all costs. The charge has acquired so many different senses, most of them negative, that it has come to function as a stand-in for a bare term of abuse. From a Lacanian point of view, it is the formal nature of psychoanalytic theory that provides an initially plausible justification for the movement from the clinic to the social. Articulating different concrete clinical and social configurations to the same formal structure is not what we normally mean by reductionism. By reductionism, rather, we usually mean that the properties of a system can be derived and/or predicted from the properties of its elements. If we had a database comprising the psychological dispositions of members of a community, for example, we could attribute a psychological state to the community itself based on a calculus of individual psychological states. If this is what we mean by reductionist thinking, a Lacanian approach to ideological analysis can wash its hands of this charge.

The second related point involves emphasizing that a Lacanian approach to social analysis seeks to develop a strictly formal theory of ideology. This point can be made more forceful by drawing a distinction between formalization on the one hand, and generalized abstraction on the other. Whereas abstraction proceeds from particular instances to generalizations either by isolating a set of commonly shared positive properties or by generating a typology of family resemblances, formalization involves the construction of a contentless structure that, though it exists independently of its particular instantiations, is articulated to concrete exemplifications (which add nothing to the formal theory), whether clinical or social.

In this view, one would have to maintain a structural homology between clinical and social analysis. Thus, for example, while the individual subject is correlated with the social subject, the subject’s fantasy is correlated with social fantasy. At this point, however, it might be thought that the structural affinity breaks down. For if we accept that clinical experience teaches us that it is extremely difficult for an individual subject to reveal his or her innermost fantasies not simply to the analyst but to him or herself, how shall we think of this at the level of the social? As I will explain in the following section, the structural position of social fantasy can be maintained if one accepts that it is kept secret—and in this sense private—from what we can call ‘public official discourse’, not public discourse tout court.

It is by articulating clinical categories to different contexts that a psychoanalytic theory of ideology can be fashioned, one that is suited to its particular area and level of study. We can already see how the above articulation of the psychoanalytic category of fantasy as social fantasy carries with it some weak but instructive methodological implications. It suggests that evidence for social fantasies might be found at the margins of ‘public official discourse’: many
The charge of formalism and ahistoricism

So far I have stressed the formal nature of psychoanalytic theory and how this makes possible a non-reductionist approach to socio-political analysis. But no sooner has this claim been made than we have opened up another possible objection: an objection to the overly formal nature of such a theory. This is not an infrequent charge, and for this reason worth pausing to consider in greater detail. Since this tendency toward formalization is also shared by Laclau, I will consider Žižek and Laclau together in discussing this objection.

I propose that such an objection is based fundamentally on a misunderstanding. This misunderstanding usually expresses itself in the form of accusations levelled at both Laclau and Žižek—accusations of formalism, ahistoricity, acontextuality, universalism, metaphysics, etc. Judith Butler, for instance, has frequently expressed fears of this kind, opposing their formalism to a more culturally-sensitive approach. Thus, ‘where Žižek isolates the structural features of linguistic positing and offers cultural examples to illustrate this structural truth, I am, I believe, more concerned to rethink performativity as cultural ritual, as the reiteration of cultural norms, as the habitus of the body in which structural and social dimensions of meaning are not finally separable’. For Butler, ‘[t]he incommensurability between the generalized formulation and its illustrative examples confirms that the context for the reversals [of retroactive performativity] he identifies is extraneous to their structure’. In a homologous fashion, Butler suspects that Laclau’s ‘approach separates the formal analysis of language from its cultural and social syntax and semantics. And this further suggests that what is said about language is said about all language-users, and that its particular social and political formations will be but instances of a more generalized and non-contextual truth about language itself’.

Anna Marie Smith expresses similar concerns. She claims, for example, that ‘Žižek offers a purely formal model of the relationship between trauma, fantasy and desire. For Žižek, any fantasy could provide the crucial suturing effect at a given moment’. She cites with approval Joan Scott and Dominique LaCapra who also air reservations of this type. Similarly, Smith laments how ‘[i]n his more recent theoretical writing, Laclau has moved closer to Žižek’s Lacanian formulations’, especially as concerns the process of identification. ‘According to this analysis, it is primarily the formal character of a political discourse that makes it a compelling site of identification.’ ‘From Žižek’s perspective, each of the traumatic moments in which the real erupts in history are, in a formal sense, equivalent and substitutable …. It could be further argued that the Lacanian tendency toward formalistic arguments and transhistorical laws flows precisely from this quarantining of historicity.’ Moreover, ‘[l]ike Žižek, La-
clau ... contend[s] that the content of a political discourse is almost irrelevant, for it is really the formal framework of a political discourse that makes it compelling for “the people”. Various political signifiers may appear to operate differently, but they are all “empty signifiers”, blank spaces whose organizational form—and not its content—compels phantasmatic investments’.

At this point it is tempting to dispel such misunderstandings by demonstrating how both Laclau and Žižek do emphasize the importance of sensitivity to historico-contextual specificity, meanings, and content. Laclau, for example, explicitly links the very possibility of historicity to his theoretical emphasis on contingency. For ‘[i]f history were the theatre of a process that has been triggered off outside men’s contingent decisions—God’s will, a fixed world of essential forms, necessary historical laws—this would mean that democracy cannot be radical, as the social would not be constructed politically, but would be the result of an immanent logic of the social, superimposed on, or expressed through, all political will’. But while it is possible to provide plenty of evidence in the work of Laclau and Žižek to support their recognition of the unavoidable contamination of every formalism and universal claim by remainders of particularity, such a strategy would leave untouched the proper source of the misunderstanding. Here, the misunderstanding is not to be found in what Laclau and Žižek actually say and do in relation to notions of socio-historical specificity. Rather it is linked to a basic disagreement over the function and role of theory.

Perhaps we can approach this disagreement, at least in the context of our present discussion, by locating it in a tendency to conflate theory of ideology on the one hand with ideological analysis and theoretical development on the other. While the first is quasi-transcendental and formal in character, the latter is typically characterized by a kind of dialectic between theory on the one hand, and concrete historical analysis on the other. What both Laclau and Žižek effectively suggest is that it is the theory that does the explaining, not the ideological phenomena one is analysing. The role of theory here shares a certain affinity with the role of theory in the natural sciences. In the latter case, one’s theoretical frame of reference is formal in the sense that it is independent of the multitudinous examples it explains: the angular motion of a pendulum, the apple falling from a tree, and the elliptical movement of planets are explained primarily through a reference to formal equations of motion and gravitation, not to the heterogeneity of their differing concrete instantiations. An example, Laclau insists, ‘in order to be an example, should add nothing to what it is an example of, and should be substitutable by an indefinite number of other examples’. And while it is true that theory itself has specific historical conditions of possibility, and while it is true that it is subject to revisions, displacements and overthrow, the metaphysical dimension of theory is ineliminable. As Derrida emphasizes, a critique of metaphysics does not and cannot result in its eradication. Formal theories can be internally displaced, but only through detailed critical engagement, not outright dismissals that rest content with the mere ‘fact’ that it is metaphysical.
In this way, then, criticisms aimed at Laclau and Žižek’s apparent ahistoricity, acontextuality, metaphysics, etc., miss the mark.\textsuperscript{43} Indeed, such criticisms threaten to stifle developments in the theory of ideology. While one can understand the impetus driving such criticisms (how, for instance, certain metaphysical notions enabled and sustained Western colonial urges or the subordination of women, blacks, gays, lesbians, etc.), they nevertheless risk overtaking themselves to the point of transforming the critique of metaphysical formalisms into an end in itself. It is far more productive, it seems to me, to engage in a debate over specific problems facing theories of ideology, rather than attempting to dismiss social ontologies simply because they are formal. After all, many theories of discourse and ideology today aim precisely to give a formal account of the process by which universal claims are always contaminated by remainders of particularity. Many debates concerning the nature of ideology these days are, in effect, about which theory provides a more productive and satisfying account of such a process. In this sense these ‘metaphysical’ theories are more accurately qualified as post-metaphysical: they are not simply post-metaphysical, they are also post-metaphysical. Of course, the formal nature of theoretical speculation implies its own remainder of particularity. But recognizing this cannot serve as an excuse to stifle theoretical elaboration. One cannot disqualify theoretical formalization in advance. The only way that the contours of a theory’s remainder of particularity will eventually become visible is retrospectively. As Hegel puts it, ‘[t]he owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk’.\textsuperscript{44}

Instead of pointing to Laclau’s and Žižek’s recognition of the importance of historical particularity one should fully assume the (post-)metaphysically formal nature of theory—an insight shared by a strand of philosophers and historians of science stretching from Bachelard, Meyerson, and Koyre, all the way to Kuhn. Attention to concrete contexts is important and crucial for ideological analysis, but it is the business of theory both to guide systematically our observations by highlighting what in any concrete situation counts as relevant evidence in our analysis, and to explain ideological phenomena. In this view, ideological analysis involves the painstaking articulation of concrete content to the formally empty variables of theory, thereby generating not only a more sophisticated understanding of both, but also a host of anomalies that may force a re-articulation of the theory itself.

I will now return to my exposition of the Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology.

**Social fantasy and ideological analysis**

I have suggested that taking the psychoanalytic category of fantasy seriously has consequences for ideological analysis. In an attempt to think these consequences a little more systematically it is worth recalling how one of the fundamental characteristics of the fantasmatic object was, precisely, its fantasmatic nature; how, in other words, it lived in the interstices of the socio-symbolic order. The
crucial point is the psychoanalytic thesis that it is precisely its fantasmatic character that sustains the grip of an ideological formation. Since this fantasmatic object eschews the order of the symbolic signifier, since it fulfils its sustaining function only insofar as it keeps out of official public view, this points to the kinds of facts that qualify as evidence of such an object. What we should be on the lookout for are specific phenomena or opinions, that tend to resist official public disclosure, that prefer to be kept secret.

Now, by official disclosure is meant public admissions of things fantasmatic by persons in positions of authority—a judge or politician for instance. It is important to note here that these persons should be speaking in their symbolically allocated role, as spokespersons for a publicly authorized institution (such as law or government). Of course, such admissions can and are uttered in their private capacity. But, in order not to lose immediately their public support, they can never explicitly utter certain words when speaking in their institutional capacity. This follows structurally from our analysis of fantasy: the fantasmatic object must remain hidden so that the symbolic order can retain its consistency and hegemonic hold.

In order to see how this theoretical matrix can be invoked in the service of ideological analysis, I will refer back to the example concerning the empty master signifier ‘Justice for All’. There, we saw how the emergence of such a signifier functioned as a condition for the hegemonic struggle over its (by definition contingent) meaning. The social subject’s symbolic identification with this master signifier coincided with a search for its meaning. In this view, ideological misrecognition aims to capture the situation in which a particular meaning hegemonizes the empty signifier, rendering their contingent link invisible.

The category of social fantasy is introduced as a way to explain the process by which this invisibility is maintained. One way to understand this is to view hegemonic meaning as setting the terms of the debate over what policies could achieve ‘Justice for All’. Ideological meaning, in other words, is that concrete meaning that structures the terms in which ‘Justice for All’ is discussed and, in this sense, is taken to be universal, a universal ideological notion. If environmental degradation, for example, becomes hegemonic, this means that it sets the terms of debate over what policies will be best placed to materialize ‘Justice for All’. Given this background, Žižek argues that what sustains the hegemonic status of a particular ideological meaning is not to be found in the way this meaning was contingently constructed or the way it relies on an overarching system of meaning of which it is a differential element. Rather, what sustains this meaning as ideologically hegemonic is fantasy. This is why Žižek argues that ‘it is crucial to avoid confounding fantasy that supports an ideological edifice with ideological meaning’.

We can illustrate this shift of emphasis from systems of meaning to fantasy with an example Žižek invokes:

In the rejection of the social welfare system by the New Right in the US … the universal notion of the welfare system as inefficient is sustained by the pseudo-concrete representa-
tion of the notorious African-American single mother, as if, in the last resort, social welfare is a programme for black single mothers—the particular case of the ‘single black mother’ is silently conceived as ‘typical’ of social welfare and of what is wrong with it. This specific twist, a particular content which is promulgated as ‘typical’ of the universal notion, is the element of fantasy, of the phantasmatic background/support of the universal ideological notion. As such, this phantasmatic specification is by no means an insignificant illustration or exemplification: it is at this level that ideological battles are won or lost.

In the terms we have been using, the universal ideological notion (the welfare system as inefficient) acts as the concrete meaning which fills in the empty signifier of ‘Justice for All’. The idea that the welfare system is inefficient is taken for granted in any serious discussion of possible policies offered in furtherance of ‘Justice for All’. Within this framework, policies are offered in an attempt either to reduce the welfare state apparatus or to eliminate it. Different policies compete against the background of an accepted universal ideological notion. It is ideological insofar as its meaning (the welfare system is inefficient) is viewed as necessary to ‘Justice for All’, rather than contingent. However, Žižek wants to argue that the invisibility of this contingency is sustained by an underlying fantasmatic content, which cannot be acknowledged as such by official spokespersons of the New Right. This might be, for example, the idea that single African-American mothers drain the welfare resources that we pay for through our taxes.

The crucial point, here, is that it is immaterial whether such fantasmatic content is ‘true’, at least within the confines of traditional correspondence theories of truth. It is sufficient that such an image is secretly accepted as ‘typical’ of the situation in a way that enables it to play a fantasmatic role. Ultimately, it is this fantasmatic content (corresponding to the objet petit a in formal psychoanalytic terms) that must be displaced—disturbed in any attempt to conduct a successful ideological critique. Žižek implies that an ideological critique that aims to displace the fantasmatic element is far more effective than any attempt directly to demonstrate how a particular and contingent ideological notion (‘welfare system is inefficient’) masquerades as a necessary constituent of the universal (‘Justice for All’). The effect of this displacement, he suggests, is nothing less than a transformation of the very terms of the debate. The universal ideological notion that the welfare system is inefficient dissolves to reveal its contingent link to the empty master signifier ‘Justice for All’, opening up the possibility of introducing new terms to structure the debate over ‘Justice for All’.

This does not mean, of course, that the displacement of the background ideological fantasy is any easier than displacing ideological meaning. All a Lacanian approach to ideological analysis can suggest is that the former acts as a condition for the hegemonic sway of the latter. In addition, however, it offers up a reason for the resistance to any such displacement. And this explanation comes in the form of the psychoanalytic category of jouissance. In this view, what sustains ideological meaning is not simply symbolic identification with the
empty master signifier but, most importantly, identification with the *jouissance* procured through collective transgression of publicly accepted norms. It cannot be *officially* admitted that single African-American mothers are believed to be the cause of the injustice we suffer even though it is unofficially sustained; and so we procure a certain enjoyment in secretly taking part in this common transgression.

In this view, the social subject’s position is sustained by its *jouissance*, by its own form of transgression—a form of transgression or enjoyment whose paradoxical (but highly significant) effect is the maintenance, *even buttressing*, of the (potentially oppressive) order it transgresses. Psychoanalytic theory therefore puts the lie to the idea that transgression is intrinsically subversive. The idea here is that the social bond, the glue binding society together, at its most fundamental, is to be located at this level, at the level of *jouissance*—transgression. This is what constitutes the ultimate support—*grip*—of a public order, of our symbolic identification with a master signifier and the universal ideological meaning that hegemonizes it. Žižek makes explicit the potential contribution of psychoanalysis in this respect:

> What psychoanalysis can do to help the critique of ideology is precisely to clarify the status of this paradoxical *jouissance* as the *payment* that the exploited, the servant, receives for serving the Master. This *jouissance*, of course, always emerges within a certain phantasmic field; the crucial precondition for breaking the chains of servitude is thus to ‘traverse the fantasy’ which structures our *jouissance* in a way which keeps us attached to the Master—makes us accept the framework of the social relationship of domination.

**From ideological analysis to the critique of ideology**

What then might we take away from the above discussion that is relevant to the debate over the critique of ideology? Perhaps we can approach this question by noting the displacement that has informed the Lacanian intervention, as I have described it. In effect, Žižek’s Lacanian approach tries to effect a displacement from the epistemological opposition illusion/reality to an ontological opposition symbolic Other/lack in the symbolic Other, between fantastically-structured reality on the one hand, and the impossibility of a fully consistent reality on the other. In this view, fantasy and reality are on the side of ideology; whereas the lack in the Other, which *appears* in the form of its opposite (the fantasmatic side of the *objet petit a*), is on the side of non-ideology.

The idea is that a traditional critique of ideology, whether it tolerates the effect of *aletheia* (unveiling) as proceeding in the direction of necessity to contingency or in the direction of contingency to necessity, has functioned to uncover one (positive) substance beneath another (positive) substance. Whether the illusion consists in an ‘internalization of external contingency’, whereby the ‘actual’ contingency is misperceived as a moment within a higher necessity, or in an ‘externalization of the result of an inner necessity’, in which the ‘actual’ necessity is misperceived as contingent, they both constitute mechanisms of avoiding the *objet petit a qua* empty void. As Žižek notes,
although no clear line of demarcation separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as ‘reality’, we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive … ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality—the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology.52

In order to refine the character of this empty place, it is worth emphasizing that a psychoanalytic critique of ideology cannot stop at the level of ideological symptoms qua meanings. It is not sufficient, for example, to denounce the category of woman as contingently over-determined by a whole series of meanings from the virgin, to the sex object, the primary care-giver, the domestic worker, through to the whore, all of which serve as justifications—pretexts for her subordination, her relegation to the private sphere, etc. It is not sufficient to show the contradictions implied by these determinations, nor the arbitrary nature with which they are used as justifications of one rather than another status. A psychoanalytic approach suggests supplementing such analyses with a category which reflects not only how the subject is empty but how it is split between its emptiness (as indexed by the master signifier) on the one hand, and the void of the objet petit a (as indexed by the imaginary fantasmatic object) on the other. This category is fantasy. Thus, a subject suffering from a symptom may genuinely and wholeheartedly wish to modify his/her behaviour; s/he may also agree with its contingent and over-determined character, i.e., the multiplicity of narratives that serve to explain it. Nevertheless, the symptom persists. Why? The answer, according to psychoanalysis, is directly linked to the fantasmatically-structured enjoyment that is derived from the symptom. A Lacanian intervention thus aims to effect a displacement of jouissance, of the real topology of the subject, not simply—or even necessarily—of its contingently-constituted symbolic renditions qua symptoms.

The place the social critic occupies in conducting his or her ideological critique is therefore not only not another ‘reality’ or ‘mere’ ideology, but also not (only) the empty place conceived as the subject of the signifier, in other words, the place from which it is demonstrated that all meaning is partially fixed and precarious. This is especially the case in which the subject is the ‘enlightened’ cynical subject, the post-modern subject who openly acknowledges the fragmentation and relativity of meaning and the historically-contingent constitution of identities. According to the psychoanalytically-informed critic of ideology, therefore, though the place she or he occupies must indeed be empty, it is the emptiness of an indivisible remainder, an empty place conceived as the object of the subject of desire—the objet petit a—not the empty symbolic subject as indexed by its stand-in, the master signifier. This, then, explains why for Žižek ‘[o]ne of the most elementary definitions of ideology … is: a symbolic field which contains such a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility, while simultaneously disavowing this impossibility …. The (anti-Semitic figure of the) “Jew” is not the positive cause of social imbalance and antago-
nisms: social antagonism comes first, and the “Jew” merely gives body to this obstacle’.  

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to present a basic exposition of the aim and elements of a Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology. Central in Žižek’s Lacanian approach to ideology is his effort to develop a theoretically differentiated account of socio-political ontology. Within the context of this framework I have argued that what does most work in explaining the grip of ideology—the power it exercises over the social subject—is the elements of a formal theory of ideology: social fantasy and the jouissance the social subject procures therefrom. The crucial insight that emerges from this formulation is how the social subject is responsible for this enjoyment and thus for the power an ideology holds not only over others but over itself. The critique of ideology, therefore, becomes a question of social ethics and involves what Žižek calls the ‘crossing of the social fantasy’.

Notes and references

1. For very helpful critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I thank Yannis Stavrakakis, Ernesto Laclau, Sheldon Leader, and Michael Freeden.
2. F. Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), S. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Aletta Norval comments that ‘[f]or Fukuyama, the end of history, inaugurated with the fall of the Berlin Wall in the summer of 1989, marked not only “the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” over all competitors; “not just the end of the cold war, or the passing of a particular period of history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end-point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. For him, the final conceptual framework in which future events will be placed has now been achieved. Neither religious fundamentalisms nor the re-emergence of new forms of nationalism pose a challenge to this thesis. While also proposing an end to superpower ideological rivalry, Huntington argues that the future will be shaped by clashes of a new kind: “The dangerous clashes of the future are likely to arise from the interaction of Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and Sinic assertiveness”. Wide-ranging civilizational/cultural antagonisms will increasingly come to displace the world of bipolar ideological conflicts between superpowers, and will come to be the greatest threat to world peace’; A. Norval, ‘De/Contestations: reflections on contemporary theories of ideology’, unpublished paper, IDA PhD Seminar, University of Essex, 1998. As to previous declarations of the end of ideology, see S. Lipset and M. Lipset, Political Man (London: Heinemann, 1960); D. Bell, The End of Ideology (New York: Free Press, 1960).
4. Here it is worth remembering that, as Stavrakakis points out, the inventor of the term ideology, Antoine
Louis-Claude De Tracy (1754–1836), ‘didn’t use [the term ‘ideology’] in order to describe false ideas. For De Tracy ideology was a science that formed the basis for the critique of false irrational ideas. Ideology in De Tracy’s vocabulary is identical with what we call today critique of ideology or theory of ideology. Nevertheless the schema remains the same. His distinction between ideology as a “critical” science and false ideas is analogous to the dominant modern distinction between theory and critique of ideology and false ideas’: Y. Stavrakakis, ‘Ambiguous ideology and the Lacanian twist’, Journal of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, 8/9 (1997), pp. 117–130, at p. 120, n. 108. See also E. Kennedy, The Origins of Ideology (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1978). For a recent account of the genealogy of ideology, see Y. Stavrakakis, op. cit., Ref. 3.

5. A. Norval, op. cit., Ref. 4, p. 4.
7. Norval, ibid., p. 15.
8. The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant, etc. For these three reasons, I think that this is a notion that cannot be used without circumspection. See M. Foucault, The Foucault Reader, edited by P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 60.


13. Laclau, ibid., p. 27.


23. The subject of desire is equivalent to the subject as lack in the sense that it is a lacking subject that desires (what it lacks).
25. See also Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 22, p. 66.
27. Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 24, p. 178, note 37.

29. Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 22, p. 18; ‘[F]ar from undermining the rule of the Law, its “transgression” in fact serves as its ultimate support. So it is not only that transgression relies on, presupposes, the Law it transgresses; rather, the reverse case is much more pertinent: Law itself relies on its inherent transgression, so that when we suspend this transgression, the Law itself disintegrates’, Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 22, p. 77.


34. J. Butler, ‘Re-staging the universal’, op. cit., Ref. 33, p. 34.


38. Smith, ibid., p. 79.


41. On this point, see E. Laclau, Ref. 32, p. 64.


43. For a debate that covers this theme in detail, see J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Žižek, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 11–43, at p. 29 (emphasis added).


45. Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 30, p. 56 (emphasis added).


47. On the relation between the psychoanalytic notion of transgression and Foucault’s elaboration of it in terms of power and resistance, see Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 22, pp. 26–27. On Foucault’s notion of power from a Lacanian perspective, see also M. Dolar, ‘Where does power come from?’, New Formations, 35 (1998), pp. 79–92.

48. See also Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 30, p. 55, for an example in relation to the Ku Klux Klan.


50. Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 22, p. 48.


52. Žižek, ibid., p. 17.

53. Žižek, op. cit., Ref. 22, pp. 75–76.