2013

The Twilight of Liberal Democracy: A Symptomatic Reading of Depoliticization

Michael Hauser

The Twilight of Liberal Democracy: Symptomatic Reading of the Depoliticization

Michael Hauser

Summary:

    This article concerns the depoliticization of liberal democracy in general as well as from the perspective of Central Europe. It attempts to prove that the political theory of Rawls-Habermas does not adequately characterize this depoliticization and that, in contrast, it is possible to use Althusser's symptomatic reading to understand it. I claim that a symptomatic reading was applied to political theory by Badiou and Rancière, but that there remains a hidden problem: how to put this reading into practice today, in the absence of a "Truth-Event." I propose to address this problem though Žižek's theory of the subject.

    A symptomatic reading of liberal democracies (perceiving their critical junctures) is hindered by the production of a consensus, which creates the widespread appearance of its "naturalness." I attempt therefore to link Adorno's description of cultural industry and Žižek's concept of fantasy. In particular, I consider one of the main elements of consensus to be the fantasy of consensus. Due to the production of consensus, emancipatory politics cannot directly rely upon the agreement (disagreement) of the majority — the majority ultimately might agree with an authoritarian regime (I cite, for example, Putin's Russia). It is here that the tautologies of liberalism appear.

    It is possible to construe the war on terrorism as part of the production of a new consensus. Its surrogate or supplement in the countries of Central Europe is "belated anticommunism." It is possible at the same time to understand this war as an attempt to restore the dwindling legitimacy of postcommunist liberal capitalism.

    The real question, however, is whether liberal democracy itself isn't starting to appear as something "unnatural."

Michael Hauser
Democracy without demos

At the beginning of the 1990s, in the euphoric times after the fall of "communism," Jacques Derrida argued in *Specters of Marx,* specifically in the course of his polemic with Fukuyama, that after the triumph of liberal capitalism it is necessary more than ever to cultivate the "spirit of Marxist criticism," reminding the glorifiers of this triumph that the victory of liberal capitalism and its alliance with liberal democracy is critical, fragile, threatened. (Derrida 1994: 68) The triumph of liberal democracy at that time seemed like Fukuyama's end of History, like the "good news" of the freest, most rational and most natural order of human affairs that it is possible to attain: as it it were the end of the evolution of ideology and the solution to the primary problems of human existence. Today it has become an intellectual fashion to distance oneself from this gospel, but isn't it ultimately also the case, as Žižek says, that everyone agrees with Fukuyama, even though we don't wish to admit it? Who today can imagine something other than liberal democratic capitalism? Hasn't liberal democratic capitalism become so self-evident and natural for us that not even its greatest critics take searching for an alternative too seriously? It is as if Marx's specters and the spirits that Derrida tried to summon as a condition for the opening of the horizon have remained far away from us on another planet.

Twenty years after its triumph, it has become obvious that the gap between the ideal of liberal democracy, the "principle of popular sovereignty and the guarantee of basic rights under a rule of law," which according to Fukuyama it is not possible to improve upon, and the sociopolitical reality has not disappeared and in several respects has widened. Fukuyama recognizes this gap already in his introduction to *The End of History,* where he writes that "contemporary democracies face any number of serious problems, from drugs, homelessness and crime to environmental damage and the frivolity of consumerism." These problems, however, according to Fukuyama, "are not obviously insoluble on the basis of liberal principles, nor so serious that they would necessarily lead to the collapse of society as a whole." (Fukuyama 2002: By Way of an Introduction)

The main issue regarding the fate of liberal democracy is, however, precisely this gap between its ideals and its phenomena, which indicate movement in the opposite direction: ranging from restrictions on the sovereignty of the people and the rule of law, beginning with the often described symbiosis of a representational

government and economic special interest groups (for example, see Broder: 2000), through the nondemocratic character of institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to the ACTA agreement, which in the name of intellectual property limits free dissemination of information on the internet.

Generally, within liberal democracy there is a dwindling of the space that is *political,* the space of political struggle, in which decisions are made that affect society as a whole. If, like Chantal Mouffe, we differentiate between a liberal and an agonal democracy, then what we see is the disappearance of the agonal element of liberal democracy. Jacques Rancière would say that in liberal democracy the spaces "of politics" have disappeared, where the "uncounted" part of society can alone appear, those without a place in society (the "part without part"), who stand for universality, the embodiment of the entire society in the manner of the ancient Greek *demos.* This depoliticization then means a transformation of politics into postpolitics, whose task is "an opportune adaptability in terms of the demands of the world marketplace and the equitable distribution of the profits and costs of this adaptability." (Rancière 1999: viii) Postpolitics is connected with postdemocracy, the situation when the idea of "the people" becomes a myth and society is only "a contract of free individuals" ensured by liberal democratic institutions. The paradox, which Rancière highlights, is that after the triumph of liberal democracy and the disappearance of the struggle for these institutions, which was led by the people, there has been a weakening of liberal democratic institutions, a weakening of "formal democracy." (Rancière 1999: 97)

The rapid appearance and disappearance of today's resistance movements, such as "Occupy Wall Street" or the "Indignados", suggests that agonal space is displaced from liberal democracy: it arises as something heterogeneous and therefore only ephemeral. It is ephemeral agonal space.

In the Czech Republic and in other postcommunist countries, the perspective was the converse until recently. The concept of "the people" aroused suspicion because it was tied to "actually -existing socialism," in which it had been used to legitimize the apolitical "police order," the indisputable and "natural" power of the Party as the representative of the people. The basic constitutional principle had been: "all power in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic belongs to the working people." Because the historical memory and the

structure of political perception here were determined by experience with "people's democracy," liberal democratic institutions appeared as an indisputable barrier against the self-will of the "people," who might threaten the rights and freedoms of the individual. In the postcommunist space, it was therefore the first task of radical democratic critics as well as politics to rip the signifier of "the people" from the fabric of real-existing socialist ideology, thus carrying out an act whose opposite is "the suturing" about which the radical democratic theoreticians Laclau and Mouffe write. One of the features of postcommunism is that the disappearance of "the people" brings a feeling of relief and liberation among the general population.

Liberal democracy begins to depoliticize at the moment of the erosion and disappearance of the "*demos,*" which had disrupted the apolitical administration of the existing order by struggling for its rights. Thus the space of political struggle where debate about the whole shape and direction of society took place, not just items in the budget withers away in liberal democracy. It is ever clearer that its erasure was caused by a combination of three factors: the breakdown of traditional social movements (radical unions, workers' movements and so on) in connection with the debacle of "actually-existing socialism"; the doctrine of neoliberalism, which is, according to Soros, the successor to totalitarian ideology ("the market" represents the indisputable, ultimate truth of politics); and finally the new form of capitalism, in which traditional collective identities dissolve (not only the people but also the nation or even society) and in place of them appears the "flexible" individual. To maintain a liberal democracy, it is held to be strictly essential that there exist a space for political struggle, because without this outlet it might lose its legitimacy in moments of crisis, periods of social unrest, mass dissatisfaction or far-right populism. Whoever wishes to see the preservation of liberal democracy should fight to maintain a space for political struggle and protect it from forces that would eliminate it.

Depoliticization concerns that which is traditionally designated as the empirical content of democracy, which differs from the form of democracy as a framework in which this content moves. The question is whether the liberal form is separable from its empirical content and independent from it, or if the form conforms to its content and a de-formation can occur, and consequentially the breakdown and disappearance of the form.

A Phenomenal reading of depoliticization

From the perspective of liberal political theory it seems as though there are normative ideals here, as formulated by Rawls or Habermas, and a set of "normal" societal phenomena — economic, social, political — which more or less operate along the lines circumscribed by normativity. Alongside it, there then appears something disruptive and dark, which is interpreted as an irrational manifestation of resistance against normative ideals. Depoliticization from this angle appears as an increase of spheres in which the dark matter of "abnormal" phenomena operates. They are on the rise because normative ideals are not sufficiently implemented, or their implementation is accompanied by a set of circumstances and unforeseen events that elicit waves of irrationality in individuals, social groups or ethnic communities. This dark matter in the body of a liberal democratic society, however, can not alone refute the Rawls-Habermas theory.

If the dark matter appears, for instance the growth of racism in some black and white communities where so-called busing took place (transporting black children to white schools in the United States, with the goal of eliminating mutual racial prejudices), which fulfilled the conditions of Rawls' distributive justice (it would stand up against the requirement of a "veil of ignorance," Žižek 1993: 215), the Rawlsian theoretician, if asked why the result of the application of his theory is the reverse of the intended goal, most would reply something to the effect that disruptive circumstances weren't adequately eliminated (the communities were influenced by those who refused to take part in the experiment or by other communities).

Every dominant theory has a tendency to downplay disruptive phenomena or to overlook them. Its essential frame of mind is optimism of the intellect (the opposite of what Gramsci termed pessimism of the intellect), thanks to which it so easily gains adherents and tars opponents as pessimists. Political theories that start to become dominant, however, never express merely a desire for recognition and optimism of the intellect, for they also have a legitimizing function: They justify the existing political structure or its components, in the case of the Rawls-Habermas theory the structure of liberal democracy. (Rancière concludes from this linking of political theory and the dominant order that "there is no such thing as political philosophy." By that he means the unceasing effort of

political philosophy to rid itself of the scandal of "politics," the impossibility of incorporating its disagreement paradigm of thought and perception into the existing "police" order. Rancière 1999: xii) There is a hidden tautology here, which is the basis of every ideology: Phenomena are a priori interpreted within it so that they can't call it into question or undermine it. The dominant political theory is justified in and of itself: It is valid because it is valid. As Adorno says, it is valid because it is the expression of the given and it appears natural. Depoliticization within it necessarily looks like a phenomenon indicative of its own lack of fulfillment. It doesn't call it into question, but on the contrary urges a more invigorated effort to fulfill it.

Symptomatic reading and its transposition to the symbolic order

Depoliticization can, however, also be connected with Althusser's symptomatic reading. Althusser discovered this approach while reading Marx's *Capital,* and he credited its discovery to Marx. In his reading he perceived that in a classical political economy, which Marx was stemming from while writing *Capital,* it is always a matter of what the economy sees and what it doesn't see, or more precisely put, the economy sees it, but it isn't visible for it. As Althusser says, **"**non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision**.**" (Althusser 1970: 21) It is for this reason that every system of thought has its own "problematic," a given field of problems that determines what questions it can ask itself. If a new problem appears within the system, it isn't visible, because it is connected to old questions. It's true that the new problem is produced by this system, but the system is "necessarily blind to what it produces." (Althusser 1970: 24) The production of a new problem is the signal of the beginning of change in its terrain and horizon, and the coming of a new problematic. A system of thought as well as science can present problems only on the level of a certain theoretical structure and its problematics, "which constitutes its absolute and definite condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of *the forms in which an problems must be posed*" (Althusser 1970: 25) The field of the problematic structures what is visible and what is necessarily excluded as invisible. In order to be able to behold the invisible and discover the

gaps in the fabric of the text, we need a new text, produced by the reflections of "the change of terrain." The subject must occupy its new place in this new terrain. (Althusser 1970: 27)

Althusser distinguishes between two types of reading, which presuppose the existence of two texts. In the first reading, the second text (Marx's) is superimposed upon the first text (Smith's, for example) so that the similarities and differences become apparent. This is a "retrospective theoretical reading," during which, on the basis of the second text, we see the errors, oversights and gaps of the first text (Althusser 1970: 18) Only then is the second reading symptomatic. In this second reading, the errors, oversights and gaps of the first text are interpreted as symptoms of a new problematic and a change in the terrain of the first text, which is unconsciously present in it. The first text is put in relation to the second text so that the second text was "present as a necessary absence" (Althusser 1970: 28) in the first text. The second text is read in relation to the gaps and errors of the first text as to symptoms of its unconscious presence. In this way, the "unconscious thoughts" contained in the first text, which on the visible level of the first text were present in the form of their absence, start to be visible. (Althusser 1970: 32) This reading is aimed at what is invisible in the first text, its latent content.

Can this concept be applied to anything other than theoretical or literary texts? Maybe it's similar to Lacan´s psychoanalysis. Initially Lacan was focused on language and speech, and it enabled him to form concepts such as the symbolic order or the big Other. But then he expanded its scope and transposed them to other social and cultural instances. Perhaps symptomatic reading can be similarly conceived. Althusser discovered symptomatic reading and the notion of latent content, but he did not have a conception that would allow him to transpose them out of the textual field. What he lacked was precisely the Lacanian conception of the symbolic order. This conception was based on , but not limited to, the structures of language and speech The symbolic order is similar to the Althusser´s textual field:both are based on linguistic structures, and this similarity allows us to link the symptomatic reading and the concept of the latent content to the symbolic order.

The latent content as part of the symbolic order recalls of the Lacanian Real: it is what acts as gaps or void places. But there is a crucial difference. As Žižek writes about gaps or void places in the symbolic order, he connects them with the Real, itself characterized

by being ever present and irremovable. In advance, the concept of the Real ensures that the Symbolic is always incomplete and incoherent. Although many concrete examples of the Real are given to us, they are revealed only inthe relationship between the Real and the Symbolic. The question here is how these gaps change the symbolic order, and what is their content. If we say that it is a void, then these gaps have only one function: to disrupt the coherence of the symbolic order. That their content may become the cornerstone of a new symbolic order is determined not by these gaps but by the latent content.

If the Symbolic is too quickly connected with the Real, it is quite difficult to explain how and why changes in the Symbolic occur only in terms of the Real. What is lacking here is how to capture the dynamics of the Real, how to historicize it. The Real has no content that would somehow change:, it has no history. And here is the place for Althusser´s latent content. This could be understood as the content of the Real, as a gap in the Symbolic containing the invisible content. For example, the political order has a a symbolic order.

It produces what is visible in it and what forms the content of knowledge (facts, statistics, opinions, theories), which is derived from it. But this symbolic order also produces what is invisible for it, what it necessarily excludes because of its limits. Because these boundaries are internal, not external, the knowledge associated with a given symbolic order can continually expand without diminishing the invisible field. This produces a latent content within the symbolic order, which induces the invisible transformation of its terrain and horizon (a *décalage*). These contents show themselves as symptoms of gaps in the knowledge. They can be identified by reading the "first text", thus focusing on the immediate content of the knowledge connected to a given symbolic order.

In the symbolic order, a second level appears as referred to its potentiality. The symbolic order is divided into the explicit content and the latent contentproduced by its practice and containing a "new problematic". This is invisible for it, even though, so to speak, it is in its sight. The symbolic order produces a latent content, analogous to the Real, but unlike the Real it comprises what may be a new horizon of the symbolic order. The concept of the latent content thus completes Žižek´s theory, but this complement changes its tone. If Žižek understands his thinking as dialectical materialism, characterizedby the irremovability of the Real, by introducing latent

content, we arrive at historical materialism as a theory of changes in the symbolic order.

The Problem of the "two texts": Badiou, Rancière, and Žižek

Symptomatic reading has already been applied by Badiou and Rancière beyond the realm of the text even though the concept can only be located with difficulty in their work, and it appears as if there were a complete rupture between them and Althusser. But we can identify in both the distinction of two levels, the second of which is attached to the first as the appearance of what has been invisible.

In place of the first text, Badiou and Rancière insert the existing sociopolitical configuration: for Badiou it is the "State of the Historical-Social Situation," (Badiou 2005: 104nn); for Rancière it is the "police" order, the existing system of the distribution of social positions and roles, and its legitimization. (Rancière 1999: 28) The second text is for Badiou the "Truth-Event", which is attached to the "State of the Historical-social Situation," and only then "evental sites" are to be revealed. For Ranciere it is "political subjectification, which is attached to the "police order," rendering the "part without part" visible.

If we look at the sociopolitical situation (the State of the Situation; the police order**)** from its own perspective, it seems coherent and self-evident — analogous to the first text read in relation to its own "problematics." In this method of reading, all errors, oversights and gaps necessarily have the form of secondary, peripheral phenomena, which are unrelated to the structure of the existing situation itself. They are visible only to the degree to which it is possible to interpret them as negative side-effects or a temporary deviation from the existing order of things. Their perception and interpretation is circumscribed by the structure and scope of the existing situation, replicated in the dominant theories. An example might be the perception of the financial crisis by Czech neoliberals. If they accept that a crisis exists, then they see it as a "flu virus" (Czech ex-President Václav Klaus), which will pass away by itself. A real crisis, which could cause destruction of the market economy, is ruled out a priori. If we ask why, the response is a tautology: Because an unregulated market economy creates a state of equilibrium (between supply and demand) in *principle* it cannot collapse. A market economy cannot fail, because a market economy cannot fail.

But doesn't something similar happen in the liberal democratic paradigm as well? From its perspective, aren't all unsettling phenomena, like the failure of multiculturalism, outbreaks of violence in the suburbs of European metropoli, the spreading of racism and xenophobia, the rise of the far right, finally nothing more than a "flu virus" for liberal democracy, which will pass with time or will be cured by a still greater empowerment of the existing sociopolitical practices? Racism, xenophobia or religious fundamentalism don't signal the failure of liberal multiculturalism, but rather that there wasn't enough multiculturalism. In the same way, in this paradigm the gradual constraint or circumvention of liberal democratic institutions (especially those that contain elements of Rawls-Habermas' procedural democracy — in the Czech Republic, the reluctance of the government to hold a referendum about the placement of an American antimissile base here) cannot appear except as analogous to a flu virus, or, perhaps to more critical minds, pneumonia, but in any case an illness which it is possible to treat with known remedies.

Badiou and Rancière show under what conditions these "peripheral" phenomena start to act as symptoms of errors, oversights and gaps of the existing situation or order, as symptoms of "unspoken thoughts." A peripheral phenomenon thus changes into a symptom when a Truth-Event appears, as for Badiou (the example is the French Revolution, after which arose the fidelity to this Truth-Event, and this fidelity rendered visible what was in invisible in the "old regime," its injustice, wantonness, tyranny), or political subjectification, in which the universalization of the "part without part" occurs: The part without a place in society begins to represent the Whole, like the demonstrators against the "communist" dictatorship in the waning days of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) chanting "wir sind das Volk," "We are the people." A phenomenon becomes a symptom only retroactively, after the act has taken place and perspective is established, which it isn't possible to conclude from the parameters of the existing order.

The retroactive transformation of a phenomenon into a symptom shouldn't mean, however, that there is a radical gap between the interpretation of a given phenomenon before and after the act. If the symptomatic phenomenon appeared from all positions in the existing order as only a temporary failure, then the entire interpretation would be regulated by historical (over)determination

within the existing order, i.e. before introducing the "second text" (the Truth-Event; political subjectification), no phenomenon could be explained as a symptom. This means that prior to an Event it would not be possible to construe any phenomenon as a symptom. Badiou reckons with this problem by introducing the concept of the "evental site," which is found at the edge of the void or gap of the existing situation. Evental sites are those in which "radically transformative events" could begin. (Badiou 2005: 176)

I believe nonetheless that this too remains a weak point of Badiou's (and by analogy also Rancière's) theory, since the question of how exactly the agent of a transformative event interpret the "evental site" as evental when there has not yet been a Truth-Event or "evental situation" remains unanswered. The question of a pre-evental interpretation is, however, crucial for our times, in which a Truth-Event is absent and there appear only its ephemeral signs in the form of "color" revolutions or resistance movements such as "Ocupy Wall Street" or "Indignados." There are then nothing more than memories of past Truth-Events, which cannot function again if for no other reason than that they mostly ended in disaster (désastre). The October Revolution, fulfilling the criteria of a Truth-Event, ended in the disaster of Stalinism; Prague Spring, which can at least partially be regarded as a Truth-Event,[1] ended in the disaster of Husák's Normalization. Badiou's weak point can be specified thus: If a Truth-Event is absent, and there is only an uneventful situation in which there are at most hypothetical evental sites,[2] how do we make the shift that enables us to occupy the position of the "second text" which would allow the interpretation of phenomena as symptoms and the revealing of evental sites? The answer to this dilemma does not come from Badiou's concept of the subject as a point set apart from

---

[1] The Prague Spring triggered an exceptional politicization of society and revealed an unexpected social dimension, which was not possible to "calculate" from the previous situation of the Novotný regime, in which political apathy was "normal." At the same time, it wasn't fully a Truth-Event, for its agents merely reformed the previous regime and did not establish a gap. From a formal perspective, the Prague Spring was only a half Truth-Event. Nonetheless, it is true that its agents and a significant part of the politicized society invoked the Truth-Event of the October Revolution, as slogans appeared like "Lenin wake up, Brezhnev's gone mad." From this perspective the Prague Spring appears as a Truth-Event rejuvenating the paradigmatic Truth-Event in that it invokes, even though it is in a completely different historical situation.

[2] Slavoj Žižek states that one of these places today could be the ever-expanding slums around large cities in the Third World. Their residents are beyond the reach of the state and live without any kind of social, health or old-age security, and at the same time they are in many ways connected with the global economy. Circumstances force them into a situation of minimal self-organization. Even though there are major differences between them and Marx's "working class" (defined by precisely circumscribed economic exploitation), if there is any candidate today for a new proletariat, it is exactly them. (Žižek 2008: 424)

the existing order, which Badiou connects with fidelity to a Truth-Event.

The answer may come from a different theory, however, one in which the subject is always-already "dislocated" and is never completely identical with the existing order: the Lacan-Žižek theory of the subject as *$ (sujet barré,* or barred subject; for its most detailed explanation, see Johnston 2008). This subject is in and of itself the evental site, because with regard to the symbolic order it represents a void, albeit a void filled with a fantasy originating in relation to this order. But it isn't just a fantasy. The subject, precisely to the extent that it is a void, does not become the result of functions of a power discourse. Then it is possible to ponder whether, even though a Truth-Event or political subjectification is absent and we are still inherently in a postpolitical situation, we can begin here and now to read phenomena such as depoliticization as symptoms that reveal the voids and fissures in the existing liberal democratic order and draw attention to those voids and fissures as a new "problematic," as a new political terrain and horizon, which is "present in its absence" in the liberal order.

Žižek's concept of the subject here is crucial: It makes it possible to see the "dislocation" of the subject accompanied by the fundamental incoherence of the big Other. Even though a Truth-Event is absent, all problematic phenomena change into symptoms of the incoherence of the order. The gaps in the "first text" become visible, even though there is no "second text" here, because every text is constituted of its voids.[3] Every problematic phenomenon is the symptom of the Real of the dominant order — its irremovable gaps and voids, which the dominant order must conceal in order to govern.

---

[3] However, symptomatic reading without the "second text" can be found in Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*. Macherey argues that the literary work includes the absence of speech, what must not be said so as something can be expressed (Macherey 1978: 83). Macherey calls this the unconscious of the work which, however, is not a second, deeper level, but what occurs in the production of the work. (92) The unconscious of the work is here understood as a series of determinations, ruptures and gaps given by a relationship to the outside, e.g. to the ideological project of the "conquest of nature" in the novels of Jules Verne, and what must be foreclosed so the work could say what it wants to say (Macherey 1978: 94). At the level of representation, however, the work is relatively homogenous and consistent (Macherey 1978: 194).

In the Macherey´s symptomatic reading, instead of the "second text, " an activity appears. It is the questioning of the complexity of relationships to the outside present in the work itself. The question is thereby being produced by the answers that the work gives, without knowing the question. Literary criticism thus produces the object of the work, which it is not given immediately. It is the process of producing the object that allows to read the symptoms of what the work wants to say but cannot. Macherey combines two of Althusser´s concepts: symptomatic reading and knowledge as a theoretical practice.

One of the main ways in which the dominant order veils its incoherence is the production of consensus.

Against consensus

Žižek breaks through one vexing vicious circle of "critical theory" (first generation) and (neo)Marxism, including Althusser's: Given that the subject is (over)determined by the historical situation, and its consciousness, unconsciousness, self-perception as well as behavior are shaped by the repressive and ideological mechanisms of late capitalism, where is the space for criticism of society, of capitalism, of repression, of depoliticization? (Althusser tried to reckon with this difficulty by implementing a radical critique of humanism, and he rejected the self-perception and immediate consciousness of the "human personality" as a form of ideology, thus he took a step similar to that of Foucault, who viewed humanism as part of the discourse of power.) If this space disappears (by integrating wage laborers, labor unions, or groups or movements that expressed opposition to the system, such as the Western student movement of 1968), it is easy to brand social critics as pro-totalitarian, antidemocratic and elitist "dinosaurs." After the disappearance of such oppositional agents, it is possible to dismiss every criticism of society, as well as criticism of depoliticization, as the expression of hysterical and irresponsible individuals. The authorities of the existing order (the power elite, media, teams of experts sponsored by large corporations)[4] can then without any great difficulties produce consensus.

The production of consensus has two layers, the first one material and the second one fantasy. The material layer is composed of the system and nature of information, interpretations, images, "personalities" who are connected with what is traditionally called the cultural industry or consciousness industry.[5] The fantasy layer is

---

[4] It is necessary to differentiate the ruling class and the power elite, which according to the classic definition of Pareto and Mosca is made up of those who take part in the formation and acceptance of government decisions, those who influence the decision-making agents, or who themselves participate in the decision-making process. The elite, it's true, is limited by class domain (certain questions which are connected with the economic domain, such as the production process, are outside this discussion), but at the same time has a certain autonomy from it.

[5] See Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, chapter "The Cultural Industry," in which there is a detailed analysis of "the a priori schemata of perception and thought" that produces and is instilled in the cultural industry. (Adorno-Horkheimer, 1979) In Debord we read that the production of goods is connected with the production of spectacles, and that every type of good has its own spectacle.

harder to pin down, but it is no less important: it is the fantasies that are connected with the previous layer, but which can't be assigned to it. The first layer on the one hand presents the texture of the big Other, and it has the function of Law (it instills models of thought and perception), but at the same time has its obscene supplement, the sphere of the superego, in which fantasies originate which aren't the immediate contents of the products of the industry of consciousness. The production of consensus, which plays out on the first layer, is supported by the second layer, which can act as a negation of the contents of the first layer. An example of such a fantasy might be the right-wing fantasy of "the unemployed," which originates in response to the question, "what does the Other want from me?" and is personified in images, information, "personalities" of the first layer. This fantasy presents "the unemployed" as an idler who lives off social support and exploits the taxpayers. It is similar with the consensus about "Czech national interests," which the Civic Democratic Party (a neoliberal party with features of populism) tries to produce in the Czech Republic. Here too must be the fantasy of the European Union as the last bastion of socialism, wanting to deprive us of our national enjoyment *(jouissance).*

The first layer has to do with the contents of consciousness, and the second, the fantasy layer, of unconscious desire. Existence of the second layer is possible under the proviso that the first layer isn't entirely coherent, that there are gaps in it, which gives rise to the creation of a fantasy to fill them. The first layer at the same time represents what Althusser and Žižek call the material existence of ideology, which is connected with mundane practices like reading a tabloid newspaper.[6]

The trap of "critical theory" is that it stems from this consensus as something given, or more precisely, identifies the content of the material layer with the content of desire because it lacks the concept of fantasy, which makes it possible to see the gap between the industry of consciousness and the psychosocial life of individuals and

---

These spectacles are thus extremely inconsistent, but at the same time are integrated "in the universal system that contains them: […] capitalism." (Debord 2006: par. 56)

[6] See for example Žižek 1997: 6. Fantasy, which operates during the production of consensus, corresponds to the narrative form of fantasy, which obscures some traumatic event by categorizing its elements into a particular chronological sequence. The example is the sociopolitical myth of primitive accumulation, about two workers, one lazy and the other one industrious (and who became rich), which obscures the trauma of fundamental societal antagonism. Žižek 1997: 10n. Description of the mechanism whereby fantasy originates, see Žižek 1997: 32n.

communities. The fantasy layer never coincides with the layer of consciousness: It is never possible to precisely calculate it; it is its *spectral* supplement.

Using Žižek's concept of fantasy, it is possible to achieve another slight shift of perspective: A part of the production of consensus is also the production of the fantasy of consensus. One of the primary ways to produce consensus is to create the illusion that the presented contents and attitudes are shared by the majority, and whoever doesn't share them is in the minority or is even a solitary eccentric, a romantic dreamer or an extremist who is unwilling to accept the "reality" of the majority consensus. Whoever doesn't accept the *majority* consensus, which it is possible to easily pass off as the will of the majority, is a potentially dangerous elitist or an authoritarian contemptuous of democracy.

That doesn't mean that the production of consensus isn't efficacious. In the field of sociological research, especially that which poses questions in a biased way, the statements are often in accordance with consensus, but Žižek's theory makes it possible to differentiate between public self-presentation in polls and sociological research and the fantasy framework in which this self-presentation plays out. The great merit of Althusser, Lacan and Žižek's "theoretical antihumanism" is that it succeeds in eroding the "myth of the given" (Adorno), thus preserving one of the essential theoretical imperatives of "critical theory" of the first generation, which Habermas replaced with the imperative of communication, which comes from the manifest content of the statements of the participants.

This "antihumanistic" embrace of consensus then can be connected with the issue of the dominant theory or discourse. Its dominance is always connected with the production of consensus, for the theory or discourse becomes dominant only when it succeeds in producing consensus, a part of which is the fantasy of consensus. The dominance of the theory or discourse rests upon this fantasy element. The dominant theory or discourse loses power over us, if we succeed in discovering and barring this fantasy element. Its barring leads to a situation in which our interpretation is not driven by consensus, by our fantasy of consensus, but rather by the voids in the dominant theory or discourse.

If we are coming from a liberal democratic conception of consensus, depoliticization itself is ambiguous — the problem in some respect becomes the problem itself. If this consensus begins to drive

our interpretation of depoliticization, we are snared by the question-trap: What happens when depoliticization meets with consensus? In the name of whom or what do we criticize depoliticization? Isn't it possible that the majority wishes to live their private lives and they perceive depoliticization as freedom from politics? In this way criticism of depoliticization gets into the position of authoritarian enlighteners, who view the desires of the majority from on high and see in them manifestations of irrationality. It is possible to avoid these traps by letting our point of departure be not consensus, but rather a symptomatic reading, which in the "reality" of consensus sees its Real, its incoherence, gaps and contradictions.

A symptomatic reading of depoliticization

How is depoliticization usually defined? A definition that takes into account a distinction between the ruling classes and the power elite might look something like this: Depoliticization is the process by which increasingly only the power elite participates in the formation and acceptance of decisions that have a direct or indirect impact on society as a whole. During this process there is generally a restriction of civil rights and freedoms. As the space for decision-making is closed off from the majority of citizens, it is increasingly difficult for the majority to reverse this process with lawful means.

This and similar definitions assume that the excluded majority disagrees with the process of depoliticization, which means that the production of consensus fails, and in place of consensus the general mood of the majority becomes one of disagreement. This concept of disagreement corresponds to the liberal understanding of consensus — disagreement can be, simply put, just as much a fantasy as consensus is. It comes from the notion that a breakdown or restriction of liberal democratic procedures automatically triggers the opposition of the majority, and thus it is an extension of the basic utopian construct of liberalism: that the majority agrees with the procedures and principles of liberal democracy because the people are free and rational beings. If the majority freely rejects liberal democracy, for example by voting for the Nazi Party or the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (which won in free elections in 1946), then liberalism sees the manipulated masses — the majority of voters are not acting as free and rational beings. A person is a free and rational being only when he accepts liberal democracy.

The scenario then becomes quite clear: The power elite, which limits the majority's access to decision-making, isn't capable of producing consensus and it loses legitimacy. Thus the gulf grows wider between the increasingly powerful handful and the increasingly powerless majority. During this process, the powerful handful veers more and more toward the use of violence against its opposition, and there is a spiraling loss of legitimacy: When it loses legitimacy, it can hold onto power only through violence, and if it uses violence, it loses even more of its legitimacy. This state is unsustainable in the long run, and two possibilities remain: either the overthrow of the handful by the majority, or the implementation of self-restraint and a partial redistribution of power. (The inclination toward partial self-restraint of power appeared toward the end of real-existing socialism with "perestroika." From the perspective of the logic of power, it is possible to interpret perestroika and its accompanying political liberalization as self-restraint of power for the purpose of retaining it. For radical opponents of the regime, it must have been their worst nightmare that perestroika would be successful, for it would have meant a stabilization of the regime.)

But things aren't necessarily so simple. Žižek speaks of a much more effective means of creating agreement with the regime than the concept of legitimacy. Every regime presents a particular form of the organization of enjoyment (jouissance), corresponding to one of Lacan's four discourses. For example, Nazism organized enjoyment by means of the obscene supplement, which was the persona of the Jew, who stood in the way of its attainment: If there weren't any Jews in Germany, problems would disappear and Germans would finally create a society of solidarity.[7] There are also other ways to create agreement, such as the aestheticization of evil or the shared awareness of a crime as a common dark secret, which is evinced by the fact that Nazism could rely on the agreement of the majority.

The problem of depoliticization itself is thus seen in a different light. With both of these undemocratic regimes of the 20th century there was a far greater politicization than there is today in liberal democratic countries. At first glance it is possible to say that Nazism as well as "communism" (in several periods) were regimes during which liberal democratic depoliticization (pursuing private interests,

---

[7] The basic premise of Žižek's concept of enjoyment (jouissance) as a factor that creates agreement with Nazism and Stalinism, see Dean 2006: 47–93.

consumerism) alternated with unprecedented repoliticization (a hard-to-ignore number of people who often voluntarily participated in building a "new world," the growth of membership in unions and the party, public rallies, the politicization of thinking). After the regimes' demise came depoliticization: people retreating into private life and indulging in a consumerist lifestyle.

Politicization can be connected with the accession of an authoritarian dictatorship and depoliticization, by contrast, with the accession of liberal democracy. Neoconservative theoreticians and politicians therefore can proclaim that depoliticization is the hallmark of a free democratic society, whereas politicization breaks out wherever some enemy of democracy appears. Politicization and depoliticization therefore can't be appraised independently of the sociopolitical framework in which they play out. Politicization can mean either the accession or the side-effect of an authoritarian dictatorship or the manifestation of opposition to it.

But what's happening today? How exactly do we describe the contemporary depoliticization, and what is the symptom? If we proceed from the aforementioned definition of depoliticization as the closure of political space, we should add to it the problem of consensus. The question then becomes whether the closure of political space isn't accompanied by the production of consensus. In other words, if depoliticization can't be consensual — if the production of consensus is not successful. That would mean that it isn't possible to immediately rely on the disagreement of the majority to oppose depoliticization, because the majority might accept the produced consensus. We see this phenomenon today in Russia, where in free elections the majority supported Putin, even though he advocates a centralization of power and depoliticization in the sense of closure of the political space, which of course doesn't preclude an "authoritarian" form of politicization.

How to describe the current production of consensus in connection with politicizationdepoliticization? The production of consensus again has two layers: material and fantasy. On the one hand there are mobilizing slogans, such as the war on terrorismwhich, as Žižek demonstrates in his book about Iraq, are quite inconsistently substantiated: There are missing links in the chain of evidence or this chain is absent altogether. (Žižek 2004) On the fantasy layer arises the figure of Islam which threatens "Western civilization," our way of life and our form of enjoyment (jouissance).

In the postcommunist countries of Central Europe, in which the slogan war on terrorism doesn't resound very strongly due to geopolitical reasons, its supplements or surrogates appear, above all so-called belated anticommunism. Its fantasy is the persona of the communist, who plots and plans to grab power and undermine freedom and democracy. It would be possible to show that belated anticommunism relies on a similarly incoherent chain of arguments as the war on terrorism: It assumes that we are living at the beginning of the "Cold War," not after its end, or that the communists could again carry out a "proletarian revolution," even though no classical proletariat exists. Anticommunists who today fight against communism as the destroyer of liberal democracy refuse to see the real threat to liberal democracy, which comes from global capitalism, economic crisis or the war on terrorism. Another fantasy that underpins consensual depoliticization is that of "troublesome" immigrants or ethnic minorities, who start to appear as the root of our problems and trigger a yearning for a "firm hand," which replaces the dysfunctional "invisible hand of the market."

If the production of consensus is successful, then all of these themes stop being a question about where the political struggle is heading and become the myth of the given: It is senseless to doubt what is perceived as self-evident. What was not obvious, becomes obvious and "natural," "second nature" (Lukács). ("Second nature" is the result of some type of production, which appears as something natural.) Precisely this naturalization is the primary result of the successful production of consensus.

One of the main questions now emerging, however, is the converse: Isn't liberal democracy and its "a priori" principles affected by the converse process? Doesn't it happen that what was obvious becomes unobvious and unnatural? Why should citizens decide about important issues when ... (they aren't experts, they have no responsibility, they think only about themselves, and so on)? The reasons here are unimportant, what's decisive is whether a fantasy framework has begun to be created, without which these reasons will not have an effect. In other words, isn't it the dawn of the denaturalization of liberal democracy? It isn't so difficult to imagine that the fundamental principles of liberal democracy ("man is a free and rational being and has the right to decide about that which in some way affects him") could be gradually forgotten and in their place would emerge other principles that adhere to the production of

consensus. Or the obscene supplement of the officially recognized liberal discourse in that this would be interpreted in terms of it ("yes, man is a free and rational being, but only if he is native-born French, German, Czech …").

It is possible then to read the denaturalization of liberal rights and freedoms as the symptom of the "absent", latent content, which is, of necessity, suppressed so that this denaturalization can proceed. What is this suppressed content? It is a crisis of the liberal democratic framework in which this process takes place: the de-form(ation) of form by its content. If its effective publication occurred — if it became a topic for the mass media, teams of experts, politicians — it would mean that depoliticization had become the political issue, and that the very politicization of depoliticization would have occurred. Drawing public attention to it would rid this process of its self-evidence and naturalness and it would render it an object of political struggle, which would begin to divide society into its supporters and opponents, for example into autocrats and democrats. Put differently, a naturally occurring depoliticization would stop and its politicization would begin. But it isn't possible to count on this, because the mass media, experts and politicians, insomuch as they act as components of the existing order (Rancière's "police" order), are forced to not-see its crisis, and the only exception are far-right politicians, who speak openly about the crisis of liberal democracy, but only in order to try to create a majority agreement with further political restrictions on the majority. All of this is continually playing out within the framework of liberal democracy, which inhibits the visibility of its crisis, because as the dominant order it must conceal its errors, oversights and gaps. If this process continues as "natural," their exposure and publication will take place only when this framework will be replaced by another framework, within which their invisibility already will be beside the point, or will be one of the sources of legitimacy.

The example might be postcommunist liberal democracy, which draws a sizable part of its legitimacy from exposing and publicizing the "crimes of communism." To paraphrase Masaryk's famous assertion that "states are upheld by the ideals of which they were born," then it is possible to say: Postcommunist states are upheld by the communism of which they were born, as its obscene supplement. If the experience with "communism" withers away, it is necessary to revive it again. Belated anticommunism is the attempt to restore the dwindling legitimacy of postcommunist liberal capitalism. A full

exposure and publication of concealed voids and crisis points always happens retroactively and, as we see in postcommunist countries, this exposure and publication can have the traits of an "eternal return of the same."

All this of course does not imply that the process of depoliticization acts as an irreversible historical determination. As Immanuel Wallerstein says, the current situation is the situation of the protracted transition to another socioeconomic configuration, to another "world-system." It is not possible to assume how this would be from the components of the existing situation, because "not paradoxically, it will also be a period in which the 'free will' factor will be at its maximum, meaning that individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the future structuring of the world than such action can have in more 'normal' times, that is, during the ongoing life of a historical system." (Wallerstein 1998: 35) Due to structural reasons, the result isn't determined beforehand — it is a matter of political struggle. Nor is naturalization and depoliticization itself a process that takes place "behind our backs" with natural necessity, for there always must be political agents here who promote and produce naturalization and depoliticization.

The most serious consequence of naturalization and depoliticization is the disappearance of the demarcation lines between the proponents of the emancipatory potential of liberalism (universality of rights and freedoms) and those who promote "liberalism" without the emancipatory core or who try to produce the consensus that universal emancipation is unnatural, unwanted or reserved for privileged groups or citizens. The main problem is that the production of consensus establishes demarcation lines that follow completely different criteria (an attitude toward a "clash of civilizations," toward the "war on terrorism," toward "political extremism," toward "totalitarianism"). The main response to the current depoliticization should therefore be the drawing of clear lines of demarcation that divide the side of emancipation from the side of "order."

Literature:

Adorno, T.W.– Horkheimer, M.: Dialectic of Enlightenment. London, New York 1979.

Althusser, L.– Balibar, E.: Reading Capital. London, New York, Verso 1970.

Badiou, L.: Being and Event. London, New York, Continuum 2005.

Broder, D.S.: Democracy Derailed: Initiative Campaigns and the Power of Money. San Diego, New York, London, Harvest Books 2000.

Dean, J.: Žižek´s Politics. London, New York, Routledge 2006.
Debord, G.: The Society of the Spectacle. Oakland, AKPress 2006.
Derrida, J.: Specters of Marx. London, New York, Routledge 1994.
Ferretter, L.: Louis Althusser. London, New York, Routledge 2006.
Fukuyama, F.: The End of History and the Last Man. London, Penguin 1992.
Johnston, A.: Žižek´s Ontology. A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity. Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press 2008.
Macherey, P.: A Theory of Literary Production. London, Routledge 1978.
Rancière, J.: Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy. Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press 1999.
Wallerstein, I.: Utopistics, Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century, New York, The New Press 1998.
Žižek, S.: In Defense of Lost Causes. London, New York, Verso 2008.
Žižek, S.: Iraq. The Borrowed Kettle. London, New York, Verso 2004.
Žižek, S.: The Plague of Fantasies. London, New York, Verso 1997.
Žižek, S.: Tarrying with the Negative. Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology. Durham, Duke University Press 1993.