

## The future of Sociology and ideological critique: exploring Žižek and tolerance

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### Abstract

Postmodernism and poststructuralism largely eschewed ideology and ideological critique in Sociology. More recently, a renewed interest has emerged in the notion. One scholar who has been influential in the reascent exploration of ideology is Slavoj Žižek (variously regarded as cultural critic, philosopher and sociologist). The aim of this paper is to examine Žižek's notion of ideology and illustrate it by exploring how he conceives the social function of tolerance as an ideological category. The paper first outlines briefly the theoretical context of ideology, it then explores Žižek's approach to ideology, after which it demonstrates how the liberal notion of tolerance is an ideological category. The paper shows that Žižek's approach to ideology is nicely illustrated by his critique of tolerance and suggests that if Sociology is to continue its heritage of emancipation, then something like Žižek's notion of ideology will play a significant part.

**Keywords:** ideology, ideological critique, tolerance, Slavoj Žižek

### Introduction

Since the 1970s, the 'end of ideology' has been pronounced on several occasions. On the one hand, there was first Daniel Bell's (1962) sanguine pronouncement and then, three decades later, Fukuyama's (1992) assertion that, subsequent to the demise of centralist-state communism in Europe, conflict between nation states had diminished as the erstwhile communist states adopted capitalism and liberal democracy. Thus, capitalism and liberal democracy had emerged as the predominant modes of regime organisation. On the other hand, theorists, including Lyotard, Foucault and Baudrillard had previously rejected the notion of ideology and ideological critique. More recently, however, there is some evidence of a reascent interest in ideology, as

is exemplified in the work of a contemporary theorist, Slavoj Žižek (variously regarded as cultural critic, philosopher and sociologist).

This paper is the first in a project on Žižek and aims to analyse his notion of ideology and illustrate it with his critique of tolerance. This paper follows and relies on a recent work entitled ‘Tolerance as an Ideological Category’ (Žižek 2008a). It begins with a brief analysis of the notion of ideology, after which salient aspects of Žižek’s position on ideology are then analysed under several chosen themes and, subsequently, illustrated by using his ideological critique of tolerance. While the requirements of this conference paper militate against a detailed account of Žižek’s notion of ideology, it is hoped that some key aspects of his position can be investigated, and illustrated by concentrating on his work on tolerance. In order to contextualise this analysis, the paper begins by briefly examining ideology in social theory.

### **The decline of ideological critique**

In sociology and related disciplines, the starting point of ideological studies has been Marx’s critical notion of ideology as the systematic distortion of social reality, of illusions perpetrated in order to sustain unjust and inhuman economic, social and political orders (Marx and Engels 1976: 52, 42, 254, 299, 350, 354; Ellis and Fopp 2000: 2). This perspective was attenuated in 1929 by Mannheim’s notion of ideology which claimed that all thought (whatever its class location) had a social basis: ‘At this present stage of our understanding it is hardly possible to avoid this general formulation of the total conception of ideology, according to which the thought of all parties in all epochs is of an ideological character’ (Mannheim 1960: 69). For

Mannheim, ideology was not about the systematic distortion of social reality (*a la* Marx) but the social basis or origin of thought which characterised all groups.

Subsequently, theorists largely associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism, challenged the notion of ideology. For example, Foucault argued that ideology was ‘difficult to make use of’ because of three positions on which it was based and which he refuted: (1) the trait of distortion in ideology presupposed some notion of ‘truth’ beyond discourse, (2) it required a notion of ‘subject’ which assumed a non-existent disengaged and neutral observer and (3) it was the result of some ‘material economic determinant’ (Foucault 1991: 60). According to Jorge Lorrain (1994: 297-299), Lyotard initially maintained the idea of ideology as concealment but later came to associate all ideologies as totalising metanarratives (Lyotard 1984: 12-13, 36-37). He discerned a multiplicity of narratives between which it was impossible to adjudicate because there was no neutral metalanguage (1984, 64; 1984a: 81-82, 1992: 42). Baudrillard also rejected ideology because it presupposed a notion of real against which distortion and concealment were assayed. For Baudrillard, there was no such reality only signs, simulacra and simulations (Baudrillard 1999: 326-335).

While it can be argued that, contrary to their stated positions, the above trio invoked criteria which were similar to those they had jettisoned (Ellis and Fopp 2000: 5-6), they certainly repudiated the notion of ideological critique, that is, social criticism based on notions of ideology. It is of considerable interest then that Slavoj Žižek, who in some respects is regarded as coming from a similar field of inquiry (particularly Cultural Studies), and could be considered to continue their legacy in some ways, should engage openly with the notion of ideology and align himself with those who advocate ideological critique.

## **Žižek on ideology**

### ***What is ideology?***

Žižek complained that the ‘abandoning of the problematic or ideology involves a fatal weakness in Foucault’s work’ (Žižek 1999: 66). In its place Žižek advocates the critique of ideology which must be sustained in order to contribute successfully to ‘every emancipatory struggle’ (Žižek 2008a: 682). But how does he conceive ideology? In ‘categorically’ asserting ‘the existence of ideology’ he maintains that it ‘regulates the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between the imaginable and the non-imaginable, as well as changes in this relationship’ (Žižek 1999: 55). Thus, and contrary to most interpretations of Marx, Žižek argues that ‘*ideology has nothing to do with illusion*, with a mistaken, distorted representation of the social content’; a political idea can be true and yet ideological and vice versa (Žižek 1999: 60).

While the relationship between visible and invisible social phenomena is central to Žižek’s notion of ideology, he also expresses ideological phenomena in terms of ‘externalisation’ and ‘internalization’. Such terms may have Hegelian and Marxist overtones but Žižek seems to use them as ‘disclosure’ and ‘concealment’, respectively. Thus, among the procedures generally regarded as “ideological” is ‘definitely the externalization of some historical limited condition’ in which a particular or contingent event is elevated to some social ‘Necessity’ that, in turn, is used to explain a general or overriding social phenomena (Žižek 1999: 57). As Žižek explains, this occurs when, for example, rigid gender practices at the micro social level become the socially accepted explanation (ideology) for male dominated gender roles, or when a socially dominant explanation for a disease is based on the alleged

socially deviant behaviours of individuals, as in the (early days of) AIDS (Žižek 1999: 57).

According to Žižek - and here is his emphasis - a position is also ideological when the general, socially accepted explanation of social phenomena is also misdiagnosed, misunderstood, as a one-off event, and an exception to the social rule; ideology is the 'procedure of failing to notice the necessity, of misperceiving it as an insignificant contingency' (Žižek 1999: 58). It is characterised by the mystification that what counts socially as important is regarded as contingent, that social phenomena could have been, and could be, otherwise. This is the spectre (the fantasy) of ideology (Žižek 1999).

For example, more than a decade before the current so called 'global financial crisis', Žižek used an economic crisis to illustrate his point: '... the ideological procedure *par excellence* is to reduce the [economic] crisis to an external, ultimately contingent occurrence, thus failing to take note of the inherent logic of the system that begets the crisis ...' (Žižek 1999: 58). Thus, 'ideology resides in the externalization of the result of inner necessity' (Žižek 1999: 58); ideology is the social propagation of what might be literally (and devoid of Lyotard's connotations) called socially dominant meta-narratives which, while fantastic, are regarded as the social imperatives and pre-requisites of social cohesion and harmony but which, in turn, perpetuate social antagonisms and inequalities.

### ***The task of ideological critique***

Unlike Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard, Žižek analyses the social function and significance of ideologies. He called this ‘ideological critique’ (Žižek 1999: 58, 61). When ideology is defined as the knowledge which perpetuates what is regarded as necessary for a society to function, or as the propagation and legitimation of social beliefs and practices which mystify as normal and natural that which is contingent and socially constructed, then the task of ideological critique is to expose the social functions that the ideology performs. As Žižek expressed it: ‘the task of the critique of ideology ... is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency’ (Žižek 1999: 58) or, we might add, in what is socially *made to* appear as merely contingent.

Žižek detected in ideology the legitimation of unjust policies which were justified and sanctioned socially because they were regarded as contributing to peaceful co-existence, social harmony and cohesion. Ideology concerned ‘the very logic of legitimizing the relation of domination [which] must remain concealed if it is to be effective’ (Žižek 1999: 61) This was even more pressing because an ideology ‘exists only in order to efface the cause of its own existence, an effect that in a way resists its own cause’ (Žižek 1999: 74).

Thus, the ideology of a classless society, or the ideology which minimises class struggle, does not mean there are no antagonistic forces in a society. On the contrary, such ideologies, are a mechanism used to ‘efface’ the existence of unequal classes and systems in order to conceal such antagonisms. Thus, one of the tasks of the “postmodern” critique of ideology’ is ‘to designate the elements within an existing order which – in the guise of “fiction”, that is, of “utopian” narratives of possible but failed alternative histories - point towards the system’s antagonistic character, and thus “ estrange” us to the self-evidence of its established identity’ (Žižek 1999: 61);

the critique of ideology attempts to identify the mechanisms in an existing order which show its tensions, its conflicts, which seem foreign to citizens yet are rendered anodyne, and neutralised, by ideology.

### ***The paradox of ideology***

At least on four occasions in ‘The Spectre of Ideology’ Žižek (1999: 60, 63, 64, 68) emphasises that ‘the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it.’ He calls this the ‘reversal of non-ideology into ideology – that is, the sudden awareness of how the very gesture of stepping out of ideology pulls us back into it’ (Žižek 1999: 63). For example, those who declare the ‘end of ideology’ are ensnared in an ideology (Žižek 2004:5). Or, as Vighi and Feldner (2007: 146) note, the ‘distance we are encouraged to take from any form of traditional ideological beliefs is effectively the most convincing evidence of our being caught in the systems ideological loop’. According to Žižek, when Foucault challenged ‘top-down’ notions of power, or proposed his nodes of power, or the discretionary nature of power relations at the lower levels in the hierarchy, his position was no less ideological. In fact, it exemplified ideology because it mystified the source of hierarchical power relations (Žižek 1999: 66).

### **Tolerance as an ideological category**

The following applies Žižek’s concept of ideology to his analysis of tolerance (although in the first instance regarding definition Australian examples are used). The emphasis on the contingent being elevated into a justification for some broader social ideal can be seen when examples of individual or small group tolerance is adulated as normative. Conversely, the racist attacks, such as the Cronulla Riots or that directed

at Indian students, is condemned in terms of 'being un-Australian, because we are a tolerant nation.' The racist attacks are regarded as contingent, exceptional, not the norm, and elevated and used to explain and justify tolerance. Thus, tolerance provides examples of ideology as the social mechanism whereby the one-off event of intolerance is considered as contingent rather than a norm which is directly related to systemic and structural needs. That such attacks are seen as discrete, disconnected events, and denounced as such, even when there is a history of such events (albeit denied by socially perpetuated amnesia), exemplifies the tolerant nation and vindicates the belief that it is.

In this context, the task for Žižek is 'ideological critique' which also includes the task of identifying how tolerance both mystifies and legitimates what are regarded as necessary, natural and neutral social beliefs and practices. Žižek provides several illustrations. One concerns the way in which tolerance is the facade behind which racism is socially categorised. Equally, tolerance is the masquerade by which the ideology of racism effaces itself. In a lecture, Žižek (2008b) noted that the elevation of tolerance becomes the 'main category' by which racist phenomena is considered. In a recent article, Žižek began by asking 'Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, not as problems of inequality, exploitation, injustice? Why is the proposed remedy [for racism] tolerance [and] not emancipation, political struggle, even armed struggle?' (2008a: 660).

His argument is that political differences as they relate to racism, systemic inequality, discrimination, disadvantage, exploitation and oppression, have been translated into differences regarding cultural beliefs and practices, which are dealt with by the appropriate social mechanism, tolerance. In this process culture is elevated above the political, and is presented, not as something socially constructed, but as 'something

given' (2008a: 660). Yet, according to Žižek, it is culture itself which is the ultimate source of barbarism in the sense that 'it is one's direct identification with a particular culture which renders one intolerant to other cultures' (2008a: 661). This process is exacerbated as culture is regarded as personal and private but, for that, all the more receptive to tolerance as the social mechanism to deal with any conflict.

It is the underlying racist tendencies and fantasies that Žižek maintains are covered, even occluded, by the displacement of racism by tolerance. Žižek identifies the ideology of tolerance by detecting racism and its causes to be the prime source of conflict which necessitates tolerance. Tolerance might be the social mechanism by which racism is managed, but tolerance is a facade which mystifies diagnosis and remedy. Because of the ideological fantasy, tolerance is totally ill-equipped to change racist attitudes and, instead, is constructed and fantasised as the false location and mechanism for dealing with them.

There are many examples of seemingly intolerant attitudes. Žižek experienced it himself when those from the so-called tolerant West attributed ethnic cleansing and intolerance to the citizens of the Balkans. He notes that 'it is incredible how often those people who pretend to be ultra-tolerant and multiculturalist respond along the lines of "*maybe this [the accusation of ethnic cleansing and intolerance] goes on in your primitive Balkan*, but, sorry, here we are tolerant"' (Žižek and Daly 2004: 130; italics added). For Žižek, the racism exemplified in italicised part of the quotation is palpable. Another example from a western view, might be: 'We have freedom regarding marriage partners so we must be tolerant of those cultures in which women, for example, do not have such freedoms'. Yet it is also sheer fantasy, Žižek argues, to suggest that women in the West experience total freedom of choice. For example, it ignores the 'tremendous pressure' exerted on women to undergo a range of

procedures in order ‘to remain competitive in the sex market’ (Žižek 2008a: 662). This is ideology: pointing to the visible in other cultures; ‘The spectre (the racist fantasy) conceals what is truly at stake (the fundamental, primordially repressed’ fantasy of class divisions)’ (Vighi and Felder 2007: 43).

Žižek identifies a similar problem in the leftist penchant for multiculturalism, and the celebration of difference and identity politics. Advocates of such a position claim that members of minority groups have the right to expect their identity to be at least tolerated if not respected (perhaps as contributing to cultural diversity). While not opposed to multiculturalism, Žižek rejects the suggestion that the emphasis on difference and identity alone can facilitate social harmony and international order, pointing out that, rather than being antagonistic, multiculturalism and identity politics ‘fits perfectly’ with global capitalism (Žižek 2004: 3). Global capitalism reinvents itself and thrives on the construction of differences which become, inter alia, ‘key niche markets’ (Žižek 2004: 3). As Žižek put it in ‘The Spectre of Ideology’ (1999: 68):

the form of consciousness that fits late-capitalist “post-ideological” society – the cynical, “sober” attitude which advocates liberal openness in the matter of “opinions” (everybody is free to believe whatever she or he want; this concerns only his or her privacy), disregards pathetic ideological phrases, and follows only utilitarians and/or hedonistic motivations – *stricto sensu* remains an ideological attitude; it involves a series of ideological presuppositions (on the relationship between “values” and “real life”, on personal freedom, etc.) that are necessary for the production of existing social relations.

Finally, it will be recalled that ‘the paradox of ideology’ refers to the exposing and stepping out of ideology as the evidence of enslavement to it. We have previously shown how Žižek notes the consummate example of this is the claim that ideological conflict has come to an end; ‘the worst ideology today is post-ideology, where they [the proponents of post-ideology] claim we are entering a new pragmatic era,

negotiations, plural interests, no longer time for big ideological projects' (Žižek 2004: 5).

Thus, it may seem that Fukujama's 'end of history' thesis, and Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' are contradictory. Fukujama argued that, on the world scene liberal democracy and capitalism have overwhelmingly triumphed, thus ending ideological conflict. By contrast, Huntington argued that the world was embarking on a clash of civilisations. Thus, the two positions may seem to be antipodes on the 'end of ideology'/clash of civilisation spectrum. However Žižek (2008a: 661) sees it differently: 'The clash of civilisations *is* politics at the end of history' (Žižek 2008a: 661). By this he seems to mean that the so-called clash of civilisations is the ideological obfuscation which mystifies the reality of liberal democracy and capitalism as the dominant 'mode' of politics (Žižek 2008b). The 'clash of civilisations' is the dominant fantasy which seems to refute 'the end of ideology' which, in turn, survives and burgeons under the ruse of the clash of civilisations. Even at that point where we seem to have contradictory ideological tendencies, where one side or the other has stepped beyond ideology, Žižek argues that there is ideology, accentuated and reinforced.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to explore Žižek notion of tolerance as an ideological category. In order to undertake such a task it was necessary to briefly outline the ways in which the term has been used, after which salient aspects of Žižek's notion of ideology were outlined before being applied to tolerance itself. Regarding both Žižek's notion of ideology and tolerance we acknowledge that the analysis has been rather selective and introductory. Further, the paper has remained largely uncritical.

For example, it would have been possible to have compared in more detail Žižek's approach with more traditional Marxist's notions of ideology, or with Foucault's critique, or to have compared Žižek's approach to ideology or tolerance to other theorists, or to have teased out the influence of Lacan on Žižek's position. However, this paper was intended to be an introduction to Žižek work on ideology particularly as he has applied it to tolerance (with further publications to follow on the above topics).

It is important to note that Žižek does not reject tolerance (Žižek 2008a: 665; 2004: 3). Yet that does not prevent him from seeing the way tolerance operates socially to perform ideological functions. Moreover, Žižek is not opposed to challenging the ideological mechanisms (including those of tolerance) which produce and reproduce inequality, discrimination and oppression, racism and class society. His antidote is to 'set in motion the process of the rearticulation of actual socioeconomic relations by way of their progressive politicization' (Žižek 2008a: 669). Such a process does not begin with the slogan 'let us tolerate our differences' but rather 'let us share our intolerance of oppressive forces and join forces in the same struggle' (Žižek 2008a: 674).

But this is only possible, according to Žižek, if tolerance is discerned as an ideological category in which it is recognised as *more* than highlighting the disparity between appearance and reality (a position which Žižek seems to have attributed to Marx and Marxists). Further, for Žižek (1999) ideology is *not* an illusion which, inter alia, conceals intolerance (which he identified in Habermas; Žižek 1999: 62-64). For Žižek, the ideological fantasy of tolerance is no less real; it has an actual identifiable social function. Further, (*a la* Foucault according to Žižek) ideology is *not* one discourse among many equivalent discourses in which power operates horizontally at

the micro-level rather than in a vertical authoritarian mode (Žižek 1999: 66; Vighi and Feldner 2007: 34). Ideology is not what Žižek dubbed the ‘*quick, slick “postmodern” solution*’ which insists that to deal with ideologies as ‘symbolic fictions’, as ‘the plurality of discursive universes’, is never to deal with reality. Ironically, Žižek described this position as ‘*ideology par excellence*’ (Žižek 1999: 70).

As ‘quick’ and as ‘slick’ as the latter may be for Žižek, he conceded that there is ‘no clear line of demarcation [which] separates ideology from reality and, 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’ (Žižek 1999: 70). In our view, while it may be unpopular, Sociology is less likely to fall into the traps associated with ideology if it too keeps this tension alive. Only in such a project, or something akin to it, does Sociology have an emancipatory future.

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