

**THE
SUBLINE**

**THE
SUBJECT
OF**

**THE
IDEOLOGY**

**THE
ESSENTIAL
ŽIŽEK**

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From the Master to the Leader

The problem is that we already find this notion of a sublime body located between the two deaths with the classical, pre-bourgeois Master: for example, the King – it is as if he possesses, beyond his ordinary body, a sublime, ethereal mystical body personifying the State.⁸ Where, then, lies the difference between the classical Master and the totalitarian Leader? The transubstantiated body of the classical Master is an effect of the performative mechanism already described by La Boétie, Pascal and Marx: we, the subjects, think that we treat the king as a king because he is in himself a king, but in reality a king is a king because we treat him like one. And this fact that the charismatic power of a king is an effect of the symbolic ritual performed by his subjects must remain hidden: as subjects, we are necessarily victims of the illusion that the king is already in himself a king. That is why the classical Master must legitimize his rule with a reference to some non-social, external authority (God, nature, some mythical past event . . .) – as soon as the performative mechanism which gives him his charismatic authority is demasked, the Master loses his power.

8 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959; Rado Riha, 'Das Dinghafte der Geldware', *Wo es war* 1, Ljubljana Vienna, 1986.

But the problem with the totalitarian Leader is that he no longer needs this external point of reference to legitimize his rule. He is not saying to his subjects: 'You must follow me because I'm your Leader', but quite the opposite: 'In myself, I'm nothing, I am what I am only as an expression, an embodiment, an executor of your will, my strength is your strength . . .' To put it briefly, it is as if the totalitarian Leader is addressing his subjects and legitimizing his power precisely by referring to the above-mentioned Pascalian-Marxian argument – that is, revealing to them, the secret of the classical Master; basically, he is saying to them: 'I'm your Master because you treat me as your Master; it is you, with your activity, who make me your Master!'

How, then, can we subvert the position of the totalitarian Leader, if the classical Pascalian-Marxian argument no longer works? Here the basic deception consists in the fact that the Leader's point of reference, the instance to which he is referring to legitimize his rule (the People, the Class, the Nation), *does not exist* – or, more precisely, exists only through and in its fetishistic representative, the Party and its Leader. The misrecognition of the performative dimension runs here in the opposite direction: the classical Master is Master only in so far as his subjects treat him as Master, but here, the People are the 'real People' only in so far as they are embodied in their representative, the Party and its Leader.

The formula of the totalitarian misrecognition of the performative dimension would then be as follows: the Party thinks that it is the Party because it represents the People's real interests, because it is rooted in the People, expressing their will; but in reality the People are the People because – or, more precisely, in so far as – they are embodied in the Party. And by saying that the People do not exist as a support of the Party, we do not mean the obvious fact that the majority of the people do not really support Party rule; the mechanism is a little more complicated. The paradoxical functioning of the 'People' in the totalitarian universe can be most easily detected through analysis of phrases like 'the whole People supports the Party'. This proposition cannot be falsified because behind the form of an observation of a fact, we have a circular definition of the People: in the

Stalinist universe, ‘supporting the rule of the Party’ is ‘rigidly designated’ by the term ‘People’ – it is, in the last analysis, *the only feature which in all possible worlds defines the People*. That is why the real member of the People is only he who supports the rule of the Party: those who work against its rule are automatically excluded from the People; they became the ‘enemies of the People’. What we have here is a somewhat crueller version of a well-known joke: ‘My fiancée never misses an appointment with me because the moment she misses one, she is no longer my fiancée’ – the People always support the Party because any member of the People who opposes Party rule automatically excludes himself from the People.

The Lacanian definition of democracy would then be: a sociopolitical order in which the People do not exist – do not exist as a unity, embodied in their unique representative. That is why the basic feature of the democratic order is that the place of Power is, by the necessity of its structure, an empty place.⁹ In a democratic order, sovereignty lies in the People – but what is the People if not, precisely, the collection of the *subjects* of power? Here we have the same paradox as that of a natural language which is at the same time the ultimate, the highest metalanguage. Because the People cannot immediately govern themselves, the place of Power must always remain an empty place; any person occupying it can do so only temporarily, as a kind of surrogate, a substitute for the real-impossible sovereign – ‘nobody can rule innocently’, as Saint-Just puts it. And in totalitarianism, the Party becomes again the very subject who, being the immediate embodiment of the People, *can* rule innocently. It is not by accident that the real-socialist countries call themselves ‘people’s democracies’ – here, finally, ‘the People’ exist again.

It is against the background of this emptying of the place of Power that we can measure the break introduced by the ‘democratic invention’ (Lefort) in the history of institutions: ‘democratic society’ could be determined as a society whose institutional structure includes, as a part of its ‘normal’, ‘regular’ reproduction, the moment of dissolution of

9 Claude Lefort, *L’Invention démocratique*, Paris: Fayard, 1981.

the socio-symbolic bond, the moment of irruption of the Real: elections. Lefort interprets elections (those of 'formal', 'bourgeois' democracy) as an act of symbolic dissolution of the social edifice: their crucial feature is the one that is usually made the target for Marxist criticism of 'formal democracy' – the fact that we take part as abstract citizens, atomized individuals, reduced to pure Ones without further qualifications.

At the moment of elections, the whole hierarchic network of social relations is in a way suspended, put in parentheses; 'society' as an organic unity ceases to exist, it changes into a contingent collection of atomized individuals, of abstract units, and the result depends on a purely quantitative mechanism of counting, ultimately on a stochastic process: some wholly unforeseeable (or manipulated) event – a scandal which erupts a few days before an election, for example – can add that 'half per cent' one way or the other that determines the general orientation of the country's politics over the next few years . . . In vain do we conceal this thoroughly 'irrational' character of what we call 'formal democracy': at the moment of an election, the society is delivered to a stochastic process. Only the acceptance of such a risk, only such a readiness to hand over one's fate to 'irrational' hazard, renders 'democracy' possible: it is in this sense that we should read the dictum of Winston Churchill which I have already mentioned: 'democracy is the worst of all possible political systems, the only problem is that none of the others is better'.

It is true that democracy makes possible all sorts of manipulation, corruption, the rule of demagogy, and so on, but as soon as we eliminate the possibility of such deformations, we lose democracy itself – a neat example of the Hegelian Universal which can realize itself only in impure, deformed, corrupted forms; if we want to remove these deformations and to grasp the Universal in its intact purity, we obtain its very opposite. So-called 'real democracy' is just another name for non-democracy: if we want to exclude the possibility of manipulation, we must 'verify' the candidates in advance, we must introduce the difference between the 'true interests of the People' and its contingent fluctuating opinion, subjected to all kinds of demagogy and confusion, and so on – thus finishing with what is

usually called 'organized democracy', in which the effective elections take place before elections and where the ballot has only plebiscitary value. In short, 'organized democracy' is a way of excluding the irruption of the Real which characterizes 'formal' democracy: the moment of dissolution of the social edifice into a purely numerical collection of atomized individuals.

So although 'in reality' there are only 'exceptions' and 'deformations', the universal notion of 'democracy' is none the less a 'necessary fiction', a symbolic fact in the absence of which effective democracy, in all the plurality of its forms, could not reproduce itself. Here Hegel is paradoxically close to Jeremy Bentham, to his *Theory of Fictions*, one of Lacan's constant references: the Hegelian Universal is such a 'fiction' as 'exists nowhere in reality' (there, we have nothing but exceptions) but is none the less implied by 'reality' itself as a point of reference conferring on it its symbolic consistency.