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The Affective Bases of Domination:  
Beyond Marxism and Psychoanalysis

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Some have attempted to address the popular acceptance of irrational ideas like fascism or capitalism through various combinations of the work of Marx and different forms of psychoanalysis. Some of the better-known attempts in this regard are Erich Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis, Wilhelm Reich's discussion of the role of repressed sexuality as a control mechanism, and today, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek's explanation via Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and Lacan's psychoanalysis.

Reich's work can be considered an inadequate tool for understanding the current reality, since, although the restriction of sexuality once played an important role as a system of social control, we now witness the opposite phenomenon: its commercialization.

We can see an advance in Fromm's incorporation of an interactive conjunction between ideology, concrete socioeconomic conditions, and individual psychology, forming a cultural psychoanalysis; however, in an attempt to leave behind Freud's biologism, he neglects the biological and affective dimension that Reich had already pointed out, abstracting it into two forces, one oriented toward life (biophilia) and the other toward death (necrophilia).

Žižek partially takes over the objections made to Fromm and Reich, incorporating a Lacanian psychoanalysis that is quite different from the versions of psychoanalysis cited above, but he falls back into the same dilemma concerning the need for domination and submission which appears in Fromm's work. Žižek represents it as a conflict between accepting our vulnerable condition as living beings or turning it into an all-powerful guarantor of a supposedly absolute and true morality. For this author, capitalism by means of commodity fetishism breaks up all human relationships, turning them into economic relations, with nationalism surviving as a pathological form that attempts to substitute itself for the exposure to this cultural vacuum, forcibly re-creating a myth of community.

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“Late” capitalism introduces a modification, avoiding identification with an omnipotent leader in favor of an anonymous and apparently neutral techno-science in which is exacerbated the transgression of what was previously forbidden (sexuality, lifestyles prior sanctioned, etc), producing a biopolitics which administers individuals’ desires, but which also strips them of their initiative, turning them into passive subjects who give themselves over to the administration of this anonymous techno-science. An idea quite similar to Guy Debord’s notion of the diversification of the image of the leader into a panoply of commodities, supposedly able to satisfy every illusion possible, which he describes as the passage from a *concentrated* to a *diffuse* spectacle.

Thus, Žižek points out that the discourse of egalitarianism that capitalism presents, through formal democracy, is a form of totalitarianism to which both the individual and the universal succumb, as the ties that bind us are broken and the aspects that differentiate us disappear, to which Žižek opposes a vision in which the universal is the pursuit of what we have in common starting from what makes us unique.

Žižek’s understanding of the current situation seems to me adequate in the sense that, while he repeats the dilemma raised by Fromm, he makes a sharp critique of the idea of egalitarianism; however, in using a Lacanian psychoanalysis focused exclusively on language and the symbolic, Žižek reproduces the same mutilation of the human being we find in postmodernism, this conversion of human beings into a symbolic artifact ramified into a series of ideas, which, in my opinion, serves to limit the chances for a complete emancipation of human beings, since the unit of analysis is an abstraction.

The obvious question is: what is being mutilated? And the answer, as Reich anticipated, is our body and affectivity, the concrete terrain on which biopolitics is administered; however, the restriction of sexuality is not a primary mechanism of coercion right now. This inconsistency is resolved at the level of the most concrete, the affects, which are a psycho-physiological phenomenon at the root of all forms of social relations, from the restriction of sexuality to the fetishism of commodities.

This detail is what allows us to think of a more radical transformation than Žižek can imagine in his most humanitarian visions of a possible administrative system. Let me explain. In the work of Žižek, the central image of psychoanalysis persists: a human being fractured between unconscious and irrational desires that must be harmonized with an external reality. In the case of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this fragmentation operates at a “real,” “symbolic,” and “imaginary” level, where these three categories are all combined in an interdependent way like three linked rings (the Borromean knot).

These units of analysis, based on the symbolic and on the unconscious and conscious, can be considered fictitious, basically because contemporary neuroscience has discovered that there is nothing like a separation between mind and body, our body being that which by acting mobilizes decentralized groups of neurons, from which emerges a phenomenon that is our mind.

The neurobiologist Francisco Varela describes it by comparing it to a nation which only exists as a phenomenon when its members interact, while the concept of nation cannot be located anywhere when it lacks a concrete embodiment. In this way, our brain and body function like a symphony in which each instrument harmonizes with the others.

This unity of mind and body achieves continuity in action, according to scientific research, but varies constantly in terms of its content, breaking neural connections at one moment and switching to others, as if the melody of the symphony were to change every second. All this continuous movement gives us a sense of identity; if not for this movement, we would be as completely rigid as corpses.

When we are reproduced by a culture, whether based on the coercion or the administration of desires, what we incorporate, not “mentally” but in our actions, is a script or repertoire of limited behaviors which “stiffen” us – that which has wrongly been called “alienation,” because it is simply a behavioral, affective, and perceptual pattern, but one of which the particularity is not to produce a sense of “self-estrangement,” but which limits our intrinsic capacity for spontaneity.

Taking quantum physics as a model, Žižek thinks that these symbolic levels of Lacan aim to protect us from the total void, so that love or cultural constructs emerge from this general homogeneity as “anomalies” shielding us from these “unconscious” fears. In reality, making a theoretical cut in this void is like trying to understand the idea of a symphony by freezing it and examining how the instruments work one by one, as if *that* were the fundamental reality. In contrast to physics, which goes from an inert universe to a living universe, Varela’s neurobiology considers the phenomenon of life to be a movement intrinsic to the universe itself.

This difference in understanding the mind as an emergent property of our concrete activities from an affective tonality, giving a motivational framework to our thoughts, in contrast to the idea of a mind fragmented into a maze of levels from which certain symbols must be extracted from the outside in order to reach an agreement on them with others, produces different results at the moment when reality is transformed, because if we have a human being split [*conflictado*] between rationality and irrationality or between the conscious and unconscious, the chances for comprehensive emancipation are quite modest.

However, if we rely on experimental evidence, we find a mind-body unity which can be modified at the level of its deepest affects if its own action is altered, while it breaks with this fragmented view of the human being present in psychoanalysis, and we recover a human being which is neither internally nor externally conflicted, since it can peacefully direct its attention to its affects and the ideas that emerge from them.

A human being capable of using its senses in the immediate present demolishes symbolic constructs, thinking from an affective rationality, this phenomenon of being located in the concrete present, totally emptied of previous concepts, in order

to perceive and feel a phenomenon, regains its spontaneity and critical reasoning; it is the human being which perceives all ideological controls as a fiction, and which, therefore, is able to recognize its own individuality and that of others, becoming conscious of their interdependence through empathy.

The experience of mind as a fragmented phenomenon distinct from the body, as described in one way or another by all of the psychoanalysts, is not our natural condition, but the effect of cultural programming, at the origin of which is an attempt to resolve the very condition of helplessness of the human being in the face of its own finitude within an environment that is always difficult to predict. There are no contradictions between conscious and unconscious phenomena; rather, we have a faster or slower attention to respond to the affects that disturb us at every moment, and every ideology forcibly focuses on certain aspects, intended to limit a perception and an action other than what is imposed, so that the sensation of conflict is a need for sensory-perceptual decentering, which allows us do something different, a capacity which, over time, can atrophy almost completely until submission is attained, annihilating the critical capacity.

The possibility of change is rooted in the fact that from every human individual, community, etc, a phenomenon emerges in the form of a system which is the product of its concrete social relationships and affective basis; thus, affirming other kinds of social relations based on mutual aid alters this emergent system, and this alteration of the system in turn alters other components of the system in this direction. This change begins when we change our action, which produces an affective restructuring enabling the affirmation of a communist or anarchic society. This provides the affective basis that makes it unnecessary to adhere to hierarchy or hegemonic ideology, because it resolves our condition of helplessness, affirming an interdependent individuality that recognizes both what makes us each singular and what we have in common with others.

In this way, rather than face the false dualisms of the rational versus the irrational, the conscious versus the unconscious, the symbolic versus the concrete, we restructure our affectivity, through forms of dynamic attention that allow us to look and act both inwardly and outwardly at will. From this flexibility in acting, thinking, and feeling there emerges a different human being, because it changes what we are structurally by beginning to change things concretely. This points to the need for a libertarian pedagogy incorporating this emotional education – clearly not in the form of corny self-help books, but as an education in thinking by using our senses, emptying ourselves of preconceived notions when confronting a phenomenon, thinking through each situation in the present moment, i.e., using our faculties in sync with our own biology. A failure to do so lies at the root of any system of domination.

Again, it is important to note that what we intend to describe here, from a libertarian standpoint, is a way to produce an autonomous cultural and material basis from which to oppose the system of domination, which, on reaching a critical mass, breaks the consensus of the dominant ideology, but which in no way excludes violent

confrontation, since obviously the ruling class will not voluntarily relinquish its privileges. However, it may contribute to affirming a different world from the innermost depths of individuals, while reducing violence, as a means to an end, as much as possible.

See: <https://tinyurl.com/ya4nkppo>

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