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“Tarrying with the negative”¹

Essentialism is a way to naturalize, as Bourdieu understands it, an identity choice. For example being a Romanian, French etc becomes something that is not related to an historical context but it's inferred in some kind of destiny that transfigures identity into a pure and substantial core.

In his book *Tarrying with the negative*, Slavoj Žižek responds, exactly, against this type of discourse. The book is structured in three parts covering the three major domains which were made autonomous by Kant: *theory*, the problem of knowledge, *practice*, the ethical issues and, finally, *aesthetics* in which is analysed the principle of pleasure. Moreover, these three parts reproduce the cartesian formula: “Cogito (the first part) ergo (the second) sum (the third)”, which subtly emphasizes the whole point of the book: the critique of Descartes and of all those who subscribe to an essentialist way of imagining identity.

Žižek's approach is a hybrid one: he mixes different kinds of thinkers from Kant to Hegel and Lacan because they all have in common the awareness that essentialism expresses not an ontological truth, something we can find after digging beneath the surface of reality, but a human projection. The kantian subject, also the hegelian and the lacanian one doesn't have access to the *Real* because this access is always mediated. In this context we can understand why the Real or the essence has only a regulative purpose, that is to say a function that helps in the process of knowledge but without any claim of an absolute truth.

In the last chapter of his book Žižek tries to put into practice these philosophical ideas in order to understand the rise of nationalism. Nationalism is not, as we are tempted to think, an anachronistic phenomenon, a violent pattern that in time will disappear after we reach democracy and capitalism. In fact, nationalism, but also other movements, expresses a pathology that is originated in the impulse to believe in substantial identities. Žižek describes national identity, following Lacan, as being structured by *jouissance*, a

¹ This formula appears in Hegel's writings meaning, in this context, a radical fracture in the subject that started with Kant. Hegel takes the kantian philosophy to its limits and builds, at least this is Žižek's interpretation, the identity on the negative. This means that Hegel is subversive against any kind of essentialist perspective, a perspective haunted by the image of light and by the aspiration to wholeness.

principle of pleasure; in this sense to be part of community doesn't mean that individuals experience perpetual pleasure protected by their common roof, but more that a community goes on dreaming about *jouissance*. Therefore, because the full access to this ecstatic condition is forbidden, as we have already seen, the only way left for an essentialist discourse, especially in times of crisis, to explain the lack of *jouissance* is to blame others for "stealing" it. For example, Jews are the perfect scapegoats: they have brought capitalism and the loss of our cultural identities, but they are also behind communism and all the suffering that we went through etc.

In conclusion, Žižek thinks that the only way to avoid this violence, legitimated in ideology, is to accept the fact that the subject is fundamentally fractured from the very beginning. Our identity looks more like a whole that we fill up with our own phantasies but the important thing is to be cautious about these phantasies by tarrying with the negative.