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(L14)

Linguistic harmony Bad

A. Their harmony of linguistic inevitab.

harmony disintegrate.

[Stavrakakis] Lacan and the Political, [99]

[161-167]

We can also approach this constitutive play between possibility and impossibility through the example of communication. What Lacan argues, and here his difference from Habermas is most forcefully demonstrated, is that it is exactly because total communication is impossible, because it is exposed as an impossible fantasy, that communication itself becomes possible. Lacan

> starts from the assumption that communication is always a failure: moreover, *that it has to be a failure*, and that's the reason we keep on talking. If we understood each other, we would all remain silent. Luckily enough, we don't understand each other, so we keep on talking.
>
> (Verhaeghe, 1995: 81)

The utopian fantasy of a perfect universal language, a language common to all humanity, was designed to remedy this lack in communication insofar as it is caused by the different idioms and languages in use (Eco, 1995: 19). The perfect language was conceived as the final solution to this linguistic confusion, the *confusio linguarum*, which inscribed an irreducible lack at the heart of our symbolic universe, showing its inability to represent the real. It entailed a fantasmatic return to a pre-confusion state in which a perfect language existed between Adam and God. This was a language that mirrored reality, an isomorphic language which had direct and unmediated access to the essence of things: 'In its original form...language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated....This transparency was destroyed at Babel as a punishment for men' (Foucault, 1989: 36). Human imagination never stopped longing for that lost/impossible state when language, instead of the agency of castration, was the field of a perfect harmony; hence all the attempts to construct a perfect language, to realise fantasy: Umberto Eco in his *Search for the Perfect Language* recounts the history of all these attempts within European culture, from St. Augustine's fantasy, in which the distance between object and symbol is annulled,[17] up to Dante, *a priori* philosophical languages and Esperanto. This history is, of course, a genealogy of failures, the history of the insistence on the realisation of an impossible dream, a dream, however, that was designed as a perfect solution to the inherent division of the social. As Eco points out, linguistic confusion is conceived as standing at the root of religious and political division, even of difficulties in economic exchange (Eco, 1995: 42–3). In that sense, the achievement of perfect communication is articulated as the perfect solution to all these problems. This is clearly a utopian problematic. Alas, as Antonio Gramsci points out in his text 'Universal Language and Esperanto', no advent of a universal language can be planned in advance:

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> the present attempts at such a language belong only in the realm of Utopia: they are the product of the same mentality that wanted Falangists and happy colonies. In history and social life nothing is fixed, rigid and final. There never will be...this flow of molten volcanic matter, burns and annihilates the Utopias built on arbitrary acts and vain delusions such as those of a universal language and of Esperanto.
>
> (Gramsci, 1975: 33)

The main point here is that society and history are all the time constituted and reconstituted through this unending play between possibility and impossibility, order and disorder: 'society is nothing but a web of social relations that is constantly being spun, broken, and spun again, invariably (unlike a spider's web) in slightly different form' (Wrong, 1994: 45). As we have already seen in Chapter 2, our encounters with the real, the moments of failure and dislocation of our discursive constructions, have both a destructive and a productive dimension. Baudrillard even argues that catastrophes, crises and dislocations might be a certain strategy of our species. By bringing to the fore the possibility or the idea of a total catastrophe they stimulate a series of processes – in the economy as well as in politics, art and history – that attempt to patch things up (Baudrillard, 1996: 81). Homer is correct and consistent with his psychoanalytic framework when he argues that the filling of the gap in the social field will always be the aim of numerous discourses and ideologies; this is the way things generally work. It is also true that if no psychoanalytic ideology emerges to (try to) suture that gap, other discourses and ideologies will.

Since, however, Lacanian political theory aims at bringing to the fore, again and again, the lack in the Other, the same lack that utopian fantasy attempts to mask, it would be self-defeating, if not absurd, to engage itself in utopian or quasi-utopian fantasy construction. Is it really possible and consistent to point to the lack in the Other and, at the same time, to attempt to fill it in a quasi-utopian move? Such a question can also be posed in ethical or even strategic terms. It could be argued of course that Homer's vision of a psychoanalytic politics does not foreclose the recognition of the impossibility of the social but that in his schema this recognition, and the promise to eliminate it (as part of a quasi-utopian regulative principle) go side by side; that in fact this political promise is legitimised by the conclusions of psychoanalytic political theory. But this coexistence is nothing new. This recognition of the 'impossibility of society', of an antagonism that cross-cuts the social field, constitutes the starting point for almost every political ideology. Only if presented against the background of this 'disorder' the final harmonious 'order' promised by a utopian fantasy acquires hegemonic force. The problem is that all this schema is based on the elimination of the first moment, of the recognition of impossibility. The centrality of political dislocation is always repressed in favour of the second moment, the utopian promise. Utopian fantasy can sound appealing only if presented as the final solution to the problem that constitutes its starting point. In that sense, the moment of impossibility is only acknowledged in order to be eliminated. In Marx, for instance, the constitutivity of class struggle is recognised only to be eliminated in the future communist society. Thus, when Homer says that he wants to repeat Marx's error today he is simply acknowledging that his psychoanalytic politics is nothing but traditional fantasmatic politics articulated with the use of a psychoanalytic vocabulary.

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B. As the fantasy disintegrates, this excess is hysterically stigmatized & eliminated as we attempt to recooperate the fantasy, ending in genocide. Stavrakakis, Lacan & the Political, 1999,

Utopian fantasies inevitably end in violence against [illegible]

In order to answer these questions it is crucial to enumerate the conditions of possibility and the basic characteristics of utopian thinking. First of all it seems that the need for utopian meaning arises in periods of increased uncertainty, social instability and conflict, when the element of the political subverts the fantasmatic stability of our political reality. Utopias are generated by the surfacing of grave antagonisms and dislocations in the social field. As Tillich has put it 'all utopias strive to negate the negative...in human existence; it is the negative in that existence which makes the idea of utopia necessary' (Tillich in Levitas, 1990: 103). Utopia then is one of the possible responses to the ever-present negativity, to the real antagonism which is constitutive of human experience. Furthermore, from the time of More's *Utopia* (1516) it is conceived as an answer to the negativity inherent in concrete political antagonism. What is, however, the exact nature of this response? Utopias are images of future human communities in which these antagonisms and the dislocations fuelling them (the element of the political) will be forever resolved, leading to a reconciled and harmonious world – it is not a coincidence that, among others, Fourier names his utopian community 'Harmony' and that the name of the Owenite utopian community in the New World was 'New Harmony'. As Marin has put it, utopia sets in view an imaginary resolution to social contradiction; it is a simulacrum of synthesis which dissimulates social antagonism by projecting it onto a screen representing a harmonious and immobile equilibrium (Marin, 1984: 61). This final resolution is the essence of the utopian promise.

What I will try to do in this chapter is, first of all, to demonstrate the deeply problematic nature of utopian politics. Simply put, my argument will be that every utopian fantasy construction needs a 'scapegoat' in order to constitute itself – the Nazi utopian fantasy and the production of the 'Jew' is a good example, especially as pointed out in Žižek's analysis.[4] Every utopian fantasy produces its reverse and calls for its elimination. Put another way, the beatific side of fantasy is coupled in utopian constructions with a horrific side, a paranoid need for a stigmatised scapegoat. The naivety – and also the danger – of utopian structures is revealed when the realisation of this fantasy is attempted. It is then that we are brought close to the frightening kernel of the real: stigmatisation is followed by extermination. This is not an accident. It is inscribed in the structure of utopian constructions; it seems to be the way all fantasy constructions work. If in almost all utopian visions, violence and antagonism are eliminated, if utopia is based on the expulsion and repression of violence (this is its beatific side) this is only because it owes its own creation to violence; it is sustained and fed by violence (this is its horrific side). This repressed moment of violence resurfaces, as Marin points out, in the difference inscribed in the name utopia itself (Marin, 1984: 110). What we shall argue is that it also resurfaces in the production of the figure of an enemy. To use a phrase enunciated by the utopianist Fourier, what is 'driven out through the door comes back through the window' (is not this a 'precursor' of Lacan's *dictum* that 'what is foreclosed in the symbolic reappears in the real'? – VII: 131).[5] The work of Norman Cohn and other historians permits the articulation of a genealogy of

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this manichean, equivalential way of understanding the world, from the great witch-hunt up to modern anti-Semitism, and Lacanian theory can provide valuable insights into any attempt to understand the logic behind this utopian operation – here the approach to fantasy developed in Chapter 2 will further demonstrate its potential in analysing our political experience. In fact, from the time of his unpublished seminar on *The Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan identified the utopian dream of a perfectly functioning society as a highly problematic area (seminar of 18 June 1958).

The historical argument

In order to realise the problematic character of the utopian operation it is necessary to articulate a genealogy of this way of representing and making sense of the world. The work of Norman Cohn seems especially designed to serve this purpose. What is most important is that in Cohn's schema we can encounter the three basic characteristics of utopian fantasies that we have already singled out: first, their link to instances of disorder, to the element of negativity. Since human experience is a continuous battle with the unexpected there is always a need to represent and master this unexpected, to transform disorder to order. Second, this representation is usually articulated as a total and universal representation, a promise of absolute mastery of the totality of the real, a vision of the end of history. A future utopian state is envisaged in which disorder will be totally eliminated. Third, this symbolisation produces its own remainder; there is always a certain particularity remaining outside the universal schema. It is to the existence of this evil agent, which can be easily localised, that all persisting disorder is attributed. The elimination of disorder depends then on the elimination of this group. The result is always horrible: persecution, massacres, holocausts. Needless to say, no utopian fantasy is ever realised as a result of all these 'crimes' – as mentioned in Chapter 2, the purpose of fantasy is not to satisfy an (impossible) desire but to constitute it as such. What is of great interest for our approach is the way in which Cohn himself articulates a genealogy of the pair utopia/demonisation in his books *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and *Europe's Inner Demons* (Cohn, 1993b, 1993c). The same applies to his book *Warrant for Genocide* (Cohn, 1996) which will also be implicated at a certain stage in our analysis. These books are concerned with the same social phenomenon, the idea of purifying humanity through the extermination of some category of human beings which are conceived as agents of corruption, disorder and evil. The contexts are, of course, different, but the urge remains the same (Cohn, 1993b: xi). All these works then, at least according to my reading, are concerned with the production of an arch-enemy which goes together with the utopian mentality. 100-2

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Trying to change harmful language only causes bias to shift to more paternalistic & destructive labels, preserving the original label offers a chance of reclaiming.

Zizek, Plague of Fantasies, 1997, pg 25

Outside the confines of military life, do we not encounter a strictly analogous self-censoring mechanism in contemporary conservative populism, with its sexist and racist bias? Recall the election campaigns of Jesse Helms, in which the racist and sexist message is not publicly acknowledged (on the public level, it is sometimes even violently disavowed), but is instead inarticulated 'between the lines', in a series of double-entendres and coded allusions. The point is that this kind of self-censorship (not openly admitting one's own fundamental message) is necessary if, in the present ideological conditions, Helms's discourse is to remain operative: if it were to articulate its racist bias directly, in a public way, this would make it unacceptable in the eyes of the predominant political discursive regime; if it were effectively to abandon the self-censored coded racist message, it would endanger the support of its targeted electoral body. Conservative populist political discourse is therefore an excellent example of a power discourse whose efficiency depends on the mechanism of self-censorship: it relies on a mechanism which is operative only in so far as it remains censored. Against the image, ever-present in cultural criticism, of a radical subversive discourse or practice 'censored' by Power, one is even tempted to claim that today, more than ever, the mechanism of censorship intervenes predominantly to enhance the efficiency of the power discourse itself. 25