

## Saint Augustine and the Theological Critique of Ideology

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I shall use the ideas of Saint Augustine and John Milbank to put forward a theological conception of ideology. I will argue that ideology is our destructive attachment to what St Augustine calls the 'Earthly City'. I shall then use this conception to analyse and criticise the work of Slavoj Žižek who, as one of the most influential theorists in the contemporary anti-capitalist movement, is representative of the shortcomings that continue to affect that movement. I begin by explaining the theoretical basis for this conception and then, through my critique of Žižek, I shall outline the three key elements of this ideology: 1) the presupposition that politics is necessarily and ultimately founded and constituted by violence; 2) the voluntarist understanding of political action, which exalts the authority of individuals' self-assertive will, and the associated repudiation of ethical and moral deliberation about the ends of political action; 3) and a general desire to reject not only normative considerations but also all claims of linguistic 'meaning' that could bridge the gap between our experience and reality.

I shall build my understanding of ideology upon the foundations of Milbank's theological critique of modernity. Despite engaging in debate with Žižek on several occasions<sup>1</sup>, Milbank has not endeavoured to propose a critique of ideology that could rival Žižek's own critique. However, I argue that Milbank's ideas can provide the basis for such an alternative understanding of ideology, which can then be used to reveal the inadequacies of Žižek's theory.

Milbank claims that modernity was only able to emerge once the orthodox tradition of Christian theology was subtly subverted in Europe in the thirteenth-century by the heretical innovations of Duns

<sup>1</sup> John Milbank, 'Materialism and Transcendence' in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, & Creston Davis, eds., *Theology and the Political: the New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005a), pp. 393-426; John Milbank & Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, Creston Davis, ed., (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 110-233; John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek & Creston Davis, *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010).

Scotus<sup>2</sup>. This theological tradition had its origins in the second century during the Patristic period, and rose to its peak of intellectual erudition at the time of Thomas Aquinas during the High Middle Ages. According to it, there was no region of thought or practice, nor any realm of nature or culture, which could claim to be autonomous or independent of the divine. This was based upon the metaphysics of Christianised Neoplatonism, which regarded the attributes of all created things (such as being, goodness, truth, etc) as having any existence only insofar as they participated in the perfect attributes of God<sup>3</sup>. All created things had a radically contingent existence, as they relied completely on being given the gratuitous gift of existence by God<sup>4</sup>. Hence Milbank writes: “Once, there was no ‘secular’”<sup>5</sup>. This is because to define an area of thought or action as being secular, i.e. independent of God or of theological considerations, would have been seen by this tradition as conceiving of something “grounded literally in nothing”<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, the participation of creation in the divine meant that created things participated in the “eternal peaceful difference”<sup>7</sup> of the Holy Trinity, the perfectly peaceful co-existence of Three Persons in one substance, an exemplar of unity-in-difference in which all of creation shared; hence, for this tradition, the “cosmos, Church and society are understood to be composed of a hierarchy of harmonious differences of natures, talents, characters, wills, desires and so on”<sup>8</sup>. Therefore this tradition understood “the real as ontological peace”<sup>9</sup> from which we are only “contingently sundered”<sup>10</sup> by the “intrusions”<sup>11</sup> of violence and conflict into “a created order in which peace is ontologically basic. Proper society was one which reflected such primordial peace”<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> John Milbank, ‘Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi’ in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, & Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Oliver, ‘Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: from participation to late modernity’ in John Milbank, & Simon Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 2nd Edition), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, & Graham Ward, ‘Introduction’ in *idem*, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver, 2009, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> John Milbank, ‘The Invocation of Clío: A Response’, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2005b), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Oliver, 2009, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet, once this metaphysics of participation was rejected by Scotus, then “violence and conflict are seen to be basic characteristics of society and nature which we tame by the competitive exercise of power”<sup>13</sup>. This can be most plainly seen in Thomas Hobbes, one of the first quintessentially modern political theorists, when he writes that men “have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal [sic] of griefe) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all”<sup>14</sup>; he claims that this is because of the “generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power [sic]”<sup>15</sup>. It is also no surprise that social contract theories should emerge only in the modern period (especially the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries), since such theories must presuppose that society is not “participatorily enfolded”<sup>16</sup> in a harmonious cosmic hierarchy; they must instead treat the political order as being the artificial nominalist creation of individuals’ will, haphazardly (and even violently) constructed for the purpose of securing the liberties and property rights of those competitive individuals. Hence the political theorist Pierre Manent has argued that the key founders of liberalism (such as Machiavelli, Hegel, Montesquieu, etc) assumed “the primacy of evil”<sup>17</sup> and regarded politics as being the pragmatic and contractual regulation of that evil.

This difference between the priority given to either “ontological peace”<sup>18</sup> or the “ontology of violence”<sup>19</sup> can easily be translated into St Augustine’s notion of the two cities and thence provide the groundwork for a new understanding of ideology. In *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine distinguishes between the Earthly City (*civitas terrena*) and the City of God (*civitas Dei*). These are not to be identified with any particular society or political structure or church; instead they refer to all those “dispersed in time and space”<sup>20</sup> who nonetheless share certain “fundamental orientations”<sup>21</sup> of the will. Augustine argues that the will of fallen man is divided between either loving

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Richard Tuck, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> John Milbank, ‘Political Theology and the New Science of Politics’ in John Milbank & Simon Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> John Milbank, ‘The Gift of Ruling: Secularization and Political Authority’, *New Blackfriars*, vol. 85 no. 996 (2004), p. 215; Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, Rebecca Balinski, trans., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp 10-20.

<sup>18</sup> Milbank, 2006, p. 442.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Weithman, ‘Augustine’s political philosophy’ in Eleonore Stump, & Norman Kretzmann, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 236.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

those things that cannot give it happiness, eg. “pleasures of the flesh, transient glory, enduring reputation, and, especially, *power over others*”<sup>22</sup>, or loving God, who can grant this happiness because he alone is “worthy of being loved entirely for its own sake”<sup>23</sup>. The Earthly City refers to those guided by the former kind of love, whereas the City of God refers to those guided by the latter.

Therefore, using Augustine’s psychology of the will, we can see that the ‘ontology of violence’ promoted by modern thought entices our disordered passions because it promises to us an understanding of politics that glorifies (or at least accepts) our “lust for domination”<sup>24</sup>. As it leads to the unhappy frustration of our deepest desires and prevents our true flourishing, it can therefore be called an *ideology*. Similarly, the pre-modern tradition attempted to bring peace to our conflicted will by ordering it to the right worship of God, by giving us a place and role within the context of a universe of peacefully co-existing differences. Hence I argue that the critique of ideology should progress by revealing that in thought and practice which keeps us attached to the Earthly City, i.e. to a nihilistic vision of society and nature reducible to the competitive self-assertions of individuals’ mutually-antagonistic wills, according to which: “meaningful action is successful action ... meaning is power ... and any discourse of justice is illusory”<sup>25</sup>.

This approach to ideology does share one feature with that of Slavoj Žižek. He does not locate ideology at the level of consciously-held beliefs and normative principles, but instead he relies on Marx’s definition of ideology: “They do not know it, but they are doing it”<sup>26</sup>. To locate the origins of ideology at the “fundamental orientations”<sup>27</sup> of the will similarly entails that it is not reducible to ideas or knowledge but encompasses all pre-reflective motivations and the actions that follow therefrom.

However, I argue that, when we apply this Augustinian understanding of ideology to Žižek, we see that he accepts entirely the ‘ontology of violence’ espoused by modern thought, and hence we should be justified in claiming that his critique of ideology is itself ideological.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 237.

<sup>25</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Introduction’ in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, & Creston Davis, eds., *Theology and the Political: the New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Weithman, 2001, p. 235.

Žižek radicalises the Marxist principle that the “history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”<sup>28</sup>. Žižek argues that this presupposition of an inherent antagonism is often reduced by Marxists “to a conflict between particular agents within social reality”<sup>29</sup>. Instead he proposes Laclau and Mouffe’s anti-essentialist notion of antagonism<sup>30</sup>, according to which “society does not exist”<sup>31</sup> because, rather than being a transparent totality of intelligible parts, the ineradicable lack of harmony and stability in our understanding of society leaves it always open to redefinition; thus society is forever affected, not primarily by the antagonism of objective classes and agents, but by the antagonism that prevents us from giving it a determinate meaning; class struggle refers to the “point of subjectivization”<sup>32</sup> through which the subjective understanding of this antagonism gives rise to actual classes and social groups: hence, contrary to orthodox Marxism, class struggle “paradoxically precedes classes as determinate social groups”<sup>33</sup>. Thus Žižek regards the archetypal ideological claim to be the disavowal of this antagonism, and the displacement of it onto some foreign intrusion (eg. an immigrant, a Jew, etc), whose removal is sought to permit society to re-acquire its lost harmony and wholeness<sup>34</sup>.

Yet I argue that in fact this is ideology at its purest. Žižek’s claim that society is radically unstable and indeterminate presupposes an understanding which has already denied any underlying harmonious substance or nature to such a collective, beyond what has been constructed by individuals for their inescapably-conflicting interests; society is instead seen as merely the shifting myths and fantasies of agonistic individuals, who have no real connection between their own desires and the collective interest. We can see that Žižek follows modern political thought in its “resignation to real ontological violence ... and the yet bleaker nihilist vision of the endless interchange between nothingness and its masks”<sup>35</sup>.

This is a problem which is not isolated to Žižek but is in fact shared by many contemporary anti-capitalists. For this reason, I argue that the Vatican was entirely justified in its ambivalence towards the Marxist influence on liberation theology; Cardinal Ratzinger, by

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Middesex: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 201.

<sup>30</sup> Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001, 2nd ed), pp. 95-96.

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, 2010, p. 198.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>35</sup> Milbank, 2005b, p. 4.

upholding the pre-modern Christian perspective, was able to identify the ideological nature of this Marxist influence: “The fundamental law of history, which is the law of class struggle [according to the liberation theologians], implies that society is founded on violence”<sup>36</sup>. Hence it would follow that, to “the violence which constitutes the relationship of the domination of the rich over the poor, there corresponds the counter-violence of the revolution, by means of which this domination will be reversed”<sup>37</sup>. The difference between the Marxist liberation theologians and Žižek is that the former believe that revolutionary violence can be used to achieve a peaceful classless society; Žižek, on the other hand, would regard the antagonism of society as being ineradicable and hence society will forever be incapable of achieving peace or harmony.

The Vatican’s censures provide a suitable opportunity to pass onto the second aspect of the Earthly City and hence the second ideological aspect of Žižek’s work: the voluntarist understanding of political action, which exalts the authority of individuals’ self-assertive will, and a repudiation of ethical and moral deliberation about political action. Ratzinger writes that the Marxist presupposition of antagonism leads to a “political amorality”<sup>38</sup> where “any reference to ethical requirements calling for courageous and radical institutional and structural reforms makes no sense”<sup>39</sup>. His intention was to criticise the supposedly ‘scientific’ claims of Marxism and its amoral legitimisation of the “necessary violence”<sup>40</sup> of revolution. Yet his remarks could also apply to Žižek’s voluntarist conception of political action, which also serves to exclude ethical considerations. This is ideological because the Earthly City relies on a voluntarist notion of freedom to legitimise the violent self-assertions of its adherents.

Žižek’s claim is that society is forever antagonistic because there will always be an excluded or “supernumerary”<sup>41</sup> element that destabilises our understanding of society; rather than isolating that element as some foreign intrusion and seeking to eradicate it in the hope of restoring harmony, Žižek argues that emancipatory politics engages in class struggle by intervening directly from the position of that excluded segment of society; this occurs when the members of that

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, ‘Instruction on certain aspects of the “Theology of Liberation” – *Libertatis nuntius*’ (1984) section VIII:6, retrieved on 05/09/2015 from the website of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, section VIII:7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 127.

excluded element, “those with no fixed place within the social edifice”<sup>42</sup>, claim for themselves the right to speak on behalf of the entire society as such; his examples of this include the demands made by the *demos* against the oligarchs and aristocrats in Ancient Athens, the struggles of the Third Estate against the aristocracy and clergy in Revolutionary France, and resistance groups against the communist bureaucracy in the Eastern Bloc<sup>43</sup>.

Moreover, Žižek’s claims about the revolutionary interventions of this excluded element are influenced by Lacan’s notion of the Act and Badiou’s concept of the Event. Such an intervention is an Event because it is “an intervention that cannot be accounted for in terms of its pre-existing ‘objective conditions’”<sup>44</sup>, i.e. an intervention that is not only unexpected but also unintelligible from within the current situation’s frame of reference; therefore the Event of political action can only be recognised as such by a subject already committed to it, whose fidelity to that Event can (if successful) change the situation entirely. It is also an Act in Lacanian terms because, just like the analysand at the end of analysis, the agent of a political intervention must act without relying on a “‘big Other’ who would guarantee the final success of our endeavours”<sup>45</sup>, i.e. there is no predestined fate or historical necessity guiding and guaranteeing the success of the emancipatory movement, as Marxists have often assumed. Instead we must confront without *mauvaise foi* our inalienable responsibility and freedom, because our only hope is in “*pure voluntarism*, in other words, our free decision to act against historical necessity”<sup>46</sup>.

The amorality of this voluntarist account of political action becomes clear when Žižek claims that one cannot easily distinguish between this notion of intervention and a violent outburst or ‘acting-out’ (in Lacanian terms, *passage à l’acte*). This is because, he argues, there is no way of foretelling, *ex ante*, whether a political intervention will be a true Event; we must only hope that, *ex post facto*, the “violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization [but] there is no short cut here, and no guarantee of a successful outcome either”<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, Žižek’s understanding of political

<sup>42</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Introduction: Robespierre, or, The ‘Divine Violence’, of Terror’ in Jean Ducange, ed., *Slavoj Žižek presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror* (London: Verso, 2007), p. xxix.

<sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘A Leftist Plea for “Eurocentrism”’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24:4 (1998), p. 989.

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 117.

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, 2010, p. 401.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek, 2009, p. 154.

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Afterword: Lenin’s Choice’ in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Revolution at the Gates: Selection Writings of Lenin from 1917* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 225.



action has foreclosed any possibility of ethical or moral deliberation about how we ought to act. In fact, if political intervention is understood along the lines of Badiou's Event, then after an intervention has occurred, there are not even any objective means for us to know if it has constituted a genuine intervention or not; we can only exercise an arbitrary fidelity to it in the blind faith that it will retroactively be recognised as a genuine rebellion from the established situation.

Therefore, this voluntarism only causes Žižek to collude with the ideology of the Earthly City. This is because, by arguing that the "first reaction to an ideological double-bind has to be a blind "violent" *passage à l'acte*, which can only later, in a subsequent move, be properly politicized"<sup>48</sup>, he accepts the Earthly City's frame of reference, which presupposes the priority of violence and the reduction of political action to self-assertion. The ideological consequences of this for contemporary anti-capitalism are twofold: some might interpret Žižek's work as giving licence for acts of heedless political terrorism, perhaps in imitation of the various European left-wing terrorist organisations from the 1970s and '80s; however, the more likely influence of Žižek's ideas is that they will motivate ineffectual, sporadic and leader-less 'horizontal' protests in the manner of Occupy Wall Street.

But one could object: how can Žižek be accused of ignoring ethical considerations, when he has written so often about radical politics as one of the leading theorists of contemporary anti-capitalism? Surely such political involvement is indicative of the normative commitments that underlie his work? I should respond by arguing that this is a contradiction in Žižek's ideas: on the one hand, he seems to advocate a committed activist position against capitalist exploitation and injustice; on the other hand, he seems to ignore normative discourse altogether and casts suspicion on it as the ideological temptation to find 'meaning' in political events.

For this reason, I shall finally argue that Žižek's repudiation of ethical and moral deliberation is part of his broader suspicion of 'meaning' as such. This marks the third aspect of the Earthly City. Žižek accepts the post-structuralist understanding of meaning according to which we do not directly intuit and understand the fullness of reality by our language, but instead the illusory presence of meaning is produced by the arbitrary interactions of signs and signifiers<sup>49</sup>. Therefore, there is always a disjunction between what we mean with our words and that extra-symbolic reality which they attempt to signify.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, 2nd ed.), pp. 110-116.



Žižek brings to this poststructuralist perspective the added categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis; hence he would regard the plentitude of meaning promised by words to be part of the Imaginary order's fantasies of wholeness and identity, whereas the arbitrary relation between signs and their meanings takes place in what Lacan called the Symbolic order. The upshot is that Žižek dispenses with any kind of ethics that claims to have a rational (and hence neutral) standard of the Good which could guide political action. He regards any such ethical discourse as having only the illusory rationality of the Imaginary order: "The ethics of the Imaginary is founded upon the reference to some supreme Good ... Lacan addresses ... to the philosophers who advocate an ethics of the good: 'For the good of whom?' There is no neutral Good; every positive determination of the 'Good' involves us in an inescapable deadlock"<sup>50</sup>.

How is this related to the ideology of the Earthly City? Recall that the tradition of Christian thought preceding modernity (which I allied with the City of God) grounded all reality in the transcendent deity. Once this has been rejected, the brute existence of reality seems to be groundless and to lack any meaning. There then appears to be an irreducible gap between our linguistic interpretation of reality and inert reality itself. This is the context in which Žižek can argue that psychoanalysis does not favour:

"the universe of a harmonious correspondence between the human microcosm and macrocosm ... the pre-modern subject living in a universe in which 'everything has a meaning'; for Lacan, on the contrary, the analysand is ... living in a 'disenchanted' world, ... deprived of his roots in the universe of Meaning, confronted with an inherently 'incomprehensible' universe"<sup>51</sup>.

Therefore, I argue that the third element to the Earthly City is the disconnection between reality and our meaningful interpretation of it. The consequence of this is that the members of the Earthly City declare in a nihilistic fashion that "any discourse of justice is illusory"<sup>52</sup> and fundamentally motivated by the "lust for domination"<sup>53</sup> because the only true "meaning is power"<sup>54</sup>. A critique of this element of the ideology, I argue, would need to affirm that the only way to prevent this slide into nihilism is to ground language in a transcendent source; this is the substance of Catherine Pickstock's argument in *After Writing*: she argues that "the event of transubstantiation in the

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 168.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Weithman, 2001, p. 237.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, 2005, *ibid.*

Eucharist is the condition of possibility for all human meaning”<sup>55</sup>, i.e. the consecration of bread and wine in the liturgy of the Catholic Mass, and their subsequent transubstantiation into the body and blood of Christ prevents the nihilism of post-structuralist claims about language. This is because, if we can be certain that the contingent signs of the bread and wine convey the real presence of Christ, then we can be equally certain that our own signifiers really do possess the meaning of what they signify. Similarly we can be certain that normative concerns about ethics are not reducible to the mere surface play of words, but they really do concern the objective properties of things and actions (eg. goodness, evil, justice, etc), properties whose ultimate ontological support lies in their participation in the attributes of God.

In summary, I have argued that ideology consists of our attachment to St Augustine’s notion of the Earthly City, i.e. to a horizon of thought engendered by the orientation of our will to the “lust for domination”<sup>56</sup>. I have argued that this ideology has three components: 1) the assumption that politics is originated and constituted by violence; 2) that political action is reducible to the self-assertion of individual will, uninhibited by ethical or moral considerations; and 3) that the constitutive gap between reality and our linguistic interpretation of it means that any normative discourse is only the illusory mask for relations of power.

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<sup>55</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. xv.

<sup>56</sup> Weithman, 2001, *ibid.*