VICHY MEMORIES

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Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1991. £29.95 cloth.

As the postwar political legacy in Europe fades into history, the European agenda for the 1990s is being rapidly revised. '1992' was supposed to see the launch of a new Euro-club: the consolidation of a limited number of nation-states into an economic – and to a lesser extent, political and cultural – union. While that project is still being pursued (amid local tumult and histrionics), the pace of events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has exposed its erstwhile aims as too restrictive and introspective. The countries of East-Central Europe are knocking impatiently at the door demanding EC membership while member states have been compelled to assume a collective political role in an attempt to contain the explosive situation in Yugoslavia.

When Europe is being plunged into the future with such a vengeance, we might well ask why its citizens continue to be so preoccupied with the past, and in particular with the period surrounding the Second World War. At the very moment when the postwar *status quo* has been so decisively repudiated and the political division of Europe overcome, collective memories of the Continent's most traumatic conflict are awash in the European landscape and are constantly invoked to explain, justify or condemn conduct in the present. Nowhere is this more starkly illuminated than in the current civil war in Yugoslavia where historical memories of the Second World War – of genocide committed by the fascist Ustase and subsequent revenge killings by Serbian Chetniks – are helping to underpin the continuing resort to bloodshed on both sides. Old scores are being settled in pursuit of present political goals.

That, of course, is the key. To recall an image of Marshall McLuhan's, we drive into the future with at least one eye on the rear-view mirror of the past. Memory, whether individual or collective, is more often a way of dealing with present and future needs than a mere testimony to the past. We could say that memory is less a recovered content than a *mechanism* that organizes fragments of the past as they are remembered into a coherent framework of understanding in the present.

But memory does something more. It inscribes the individual or collectivity into its explanatory narrative. Memory is thus intimately bound up with *identity*. *How* individuals and collectivities remember their past will determine the kind of present identities they lay claim to. Memory attempts to stitch the recollected events of an individual or collective past into a seamless continuity. But in order to perform this cohering task, mending the fissures and gaps that inevitably punctuate this narrative, memory, as we all know, frequently resorts to deception, evasion and censorship. Selecting, editing,

embellishing and even (especially) deleting the material it makes available are all part of memory's job. All the more reason, then, that versions of the past which rely on memory need to be treated with considerable caution.

It has been a feature of postwar Europe that collective memories of the Second World War have assumed primarily a *national* character. In part this is explained by the very nature of the conflict – one conducted between two broad politico-military alliances composed largely of European nation-states and fought primarily on their soil. However, the continued salience of national memories of the Second World War in contemporary European politics should lead us to look more closely at the assumed link between historical memories and national identities.

An increasing number of historians and other scholars have been doing just that. And it is not surprising that German historical memories have thus far claimed most of their critical attention.[1] Every political initiative that Germany has taken in the postwar period has prompted allusions to its troubled past. To take only the most recent examples: German participation in the EC has been accompanied by worries from some quarters about the desirability of its economic dominance; reunification has stirred lingering anxieties among many Europeans about the political ambitions which might resurface in a greater Germany; and indeed many Serbians have interpreted Germany's recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as motivated by expansionist intentions regarding East-Central Europe. It is Germany's fate that as the country responsible for Nazism and the Holocaust, it continually provokes historical memories that colour judgment of its present political behaviour.

Inside Germany, this same surfeit of inadmissable historical memories has until now thwarted the affirmation of a postwar national identity based on German traditions, values and rituals. Unlike the glorious past that most collectivities summon to shore up their claims for national distinctiveness, Germany must incorporate its memories as a 'negative possession' and forge a contemporary identity based on this negation.[2] For someone like Jürgen Habermas, it is imperative that Germans 'keep alive the memory of the suffering of those murdered at the hands of the Germans', as a continual reminder of the 'form of existence' which made Auschwitz possible. Keeping such memories active and circulating in the present is for Habermas both a commemorative gesture – an act of penance for 'that which cannot be made good' – and a reminder of those features of Germany's life-world which render the contemporary desire for national identity so treacherous.[3] However this desire has proven stronger than Habermas' moral opposition to it. The *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) of the 1980s, while seemingly an academic dispute concerning new interpretations of the Nazi past, was an indication of a more general desire for a contemporary German identity based on family, *Volk* and nation, dissociated from its Nazi predecessor. It was an attempt to circumnavigate Germany's legacy of negative memories by rehabilitating the memories themselves. The crimes of Nazism were not denied or absolved, but the explanations for their occurrence offered by a number of revisionist historians did serve largely to exonerate German national and political culture of the historical responsibility that Habermans is insisting upon.[4]

1. See Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1988, and in the journal *History and Memory*.

2. Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry made this observation in his essay, 'Resentments', in *At the Mind's Limits*, Schocken, New York 1990.

3. Jürgen Habermas, 'Concerning the Public Use of History', *New German Critique*, no. 44, Spring/Summer 1988, pp40-50.

4. Useful documentation on the *Historikerstreit* is contained in Maier, *op.cit.*: Richard Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past*, Pantheon Books, New York 1989: Shierry Weber Nicholsen (ed.), *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate*, MIT Press Cambridge, Mass.; special issue of *New German Critique* on the *Historikerstreit*, no. 44, Spring/Summer 1988.

With reunification, Habermas' continued denunciation of efforts to revive the category of the German nation has met with stiffer resistance – both at a popular level and among his academic contemporaries. Popular feeling is not inclined towards the commemorative disposition which Habermas advocates, nor were the unity celebrations short on national sentiment. Meanwhile, in scholarly and political debate, German historical memory is once more being recruited – though this time to reach back beyond the fascist period in order to identify and reclaim the heritage of a German 'spiritual' nation for the foundations of a new national identity.[5]

Though Germany is clearly a special case, the alignment of national identity with the particularly traumatic historical memories associated with the Second World War in other European nation-states has by no means been rendered obsolete by Europe's reconfigured political landscape.

The nature of France's obsession with this period is the subject of Henry Rousso's book. His contention is that 'Vichy' – that is, memories associated with the German Occupation of 1940-44 – is the historical memory that continues to haunt and dominate French political culture. Indeed the title of his book suggests that Vichy is not only going to be treated as a historical memory but also as a pathological condition – a 'syndrome' that occupies the body politic in much the same way that its psychological manifestation dominates the psychic landscape of the individual. Rousso's recourse to a psychoanalytic analogy is deliberate and explicit: 'The Vichy syndrome consists of a diverse set of symptoms whereby the trauma of the Occupation, and particularly the trauma resulting from internal divisions within France, reveals itself in political, social and cultural life.' (p10). The task Rousso sets himself, then, is not that of the traditional historian who rewrites the history of an event from a particular interpretive standpoint. Like an analyst who identifies in bodily gestures the signs of a psychic disorder, Rousso identifies in postwar French political culture a continuing obsession with the memory of 'Vichy'. He takes social and cultural practices directly bearing on or alluding to the Vichy past as 'mnemonic' symptoms and charts their evolution and vicissitudes through all their diverse and conflicting incarnations. What he thus undertakes is not the history of Vichy France, but a history – perhaps more accurately, a 'diagnosis' – of the *memory* of 'Vichy'.

Rousso's historico-analytic method is two-fold. He relates the collective memories of Vichy chronologically, starting with the immediate aftermath of the demise of Pétain's Vichy regime from 1944 onwards and ending with the present. But he also carves up this periodization into four distinct phases, each with its own particular symptomatology.

The first phase, 'Unfinished Mourning', covers the years 1944-54. Again the comparison with Germany springs to mind. It has often been observed that postwar German society showed an 'inability to mourn' both its humiliating defeat and the loss of the charismatic leader in whom it had invested so many narcissistic aspirations. Psychic and physical energies were instead immediately channelled into the anticipated successes of the Economic Miracle. But like anything that is repressed, this failure to mourn eventually found expression in the second generation's own questioning of

5. See especially Karl Heinz Bohrer, 'Why We are Not a Nation – And Why We Should Become One', *New German Critique*, no. 52, Winter 1991, special issue on German Unification. The filmmaker Hans Jürgen Syberberg has also argued for a return to the 'romantic heritage, from Hölderlin to Richard Wagner', a return which should refuse to pass through German guilt ('the Auschwitz of the Sunday preachers'). See Alain Auffray, 'Doing the Reich Thing', the *Guardian*, 14 December 1990.

their parents' complicities with Nazism and in the radical breach between the generations which ensued and which in the 1970s often took violent form. So what is the unfinished business to which Rousso is referring? France not only suffered a crushing military defeat during the war but was subsequently occupied by a foreign power with whom, for four years, it established a *modus vivendi* – Pétain's Vichy government. France was thus the scene of a struggle pitting Frenchman against German, but also Frenchman against Frenchman – a civil war or '*guerre franco-française*'. With the collapse of the Vichy government in 1944, came a purge, the so-called *épurations* of those who allegedly collaborated with the occupying powers. In Rousso's view, the compression of these traumatic defeats, losses and struggles into such a short period of time radically curtailed the mourning process to which each was due: 'the French had no time to grasp, come to terms with, and mourn what had befallen them in one catastrophe before they found themselves caught up in yet another.' (p5) It was not only that the period of mourning was foreshortened. The very nature of what was being mourned – loss of life, loss of national sovereignty and loss of national unity – failed to find adequate expression in the immediate aftermath of 1944. France's postwar political culture was thus unable to come to terms properly with the implications of its *internal* war and this was what made France's experience of the Second World War so different from the First World War. The glorification of the Resistance was certainly in full swing, but the profound ideological division within the nation, the fact of collaboration with the Nazi regime and complicity in the genocide, were not assimilable into a common experience of mourning. If the German nation was unable to mourn, France was unable to mourn *as a nation*.

In contrast to this failure of collective mourning, and largely because of it, the Resistance assumed increasingly mythical proportions as the one redeeming feature of an otherwise traumatic sequence of events. However, Rousso shows how under de Gaulle's tutelage, 'this myth did not so much glorify the Resistance (and certainly not the *résistants*) as it celebrated a people *in resistance*, a people symbolized exclusively by the "man of June Eighteenth" (de Gaulle), without intermediaries such as political parties, movements, or clandestine leaders.' (p18) For postwar citizens, too, the abstract but 'reassuring image of a resisting France' served to overshadow the still fresh memories of acquiescence, partisan rivalries and last-minute conversions to the Resistance cause. With the ascendancy of the Gaullist 'resistancialist' myth, an official memory of the war may have gained the symbolic upperhand, but the hasty repression of its unofficial counterpart was thereafter to stalk the political unconscious of postwar France. The French courts colluded in consigning unofficial memories to a subterranean existence by granting amnesties in the early 1950s for crimes committed during the Occupation and imposing silence on all judgments covered by them. Again, showing the disposition of a true analyst, Rousso observes that this misconceived will to forgive, reconcile and forget on the part of both officialdom and the courts 'clashed with an urgent need to deal with the spontaneous return of repressed material'. (p58)

Although Rousso designates the years 1954-71 as the period of 'Repressions', they are characterized by a fairly noisy *mise-en-scène* of enduring memories and conflicts.

Rousso shows how the political legacy of the Occupation became imbricated with the internal conflicts generated by the Algerian War. He is careful to acknowledge that the Algerian conflict had its own colonialist conditions of existence and dynamism and was not a mere reply of the politics of the Second World War. But he maintains that the latter was nonetheless made manifestly present *by analogy*, so that invocation of a resistance past came to stand for loyalty to a certain idea of French national interest vis-à-vis the Algerian conflict. Meanwhile, under de Gaulle the Resistance continued to be subject to an 'epic and edifying abstraction', culminating in 1964 in the President's carefully choreographed ceremony for transferring Resistance hero Jean Moulin's ashes to the Pantheon. Rousso offers a vivid reconstruction of the two-day reburial – or rather 'deconstruction' in the sense that he deciphers all the elements which went into it as political 'signs' in their own right. The temporal unfolding of the ceremony, the route of the parade, the choice of delegates and their positioning, the oration delivered by André Malraux – all these commemorative rituals were orchestrated so as to confer honour not only on the dead hero Jean Moulin, but 'to honour even more the living head of state' who had devised them. Here an act of public commemoration functioned simultaneously as a political statement, establishing a consensus around de Gaulle's version of the Resistance which in turn secured his continued political legitimacy. Whether at the Empire's outposts, or in the very heart of the nation, memory was clearly being recruited for the needs of a political present.

The period 1971-74 marks the breakdown of a consensual, national memory and the rupturing into political consciousness of hitherto repressed memory traces. In Rousso's account, the agents of this disruption were not ageing partisans, nor did these dissident memories issue from the corridors of officialdom. If the unfolding of historical memories can be said to have 'neuralgic' points when exposure of sensitivities suddenly releases a flood of pent-up pain and anger, then Rousso attributes such force to the release of Marcel Ophuls' 1971 documentary film, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le Chagrin et la Pitié*), which deliberately set out to demythologize the Resistance and expose the extent of Franco-German collaboration.

Ophuls made the film with German and Swiss financing when French television shied away from his proposal and indeed kept it off French television screens for a decade. But the film was shown in French cinemas and the controversy it generated far exceeded what the relatively small viewing numbers would otherwise suggest. The film's impact is in fact best summed up by Jean-Jacques de Bresson, head of ORTF in 1971 (and erstwhile *résistant*) who is cited as pointing out to a Senate committee on cultural affairs that the film 'destroys myths that the people of France still need'. (p110)

Rousso himself is not uncritical of the film's own demythologizing strategies. He points out that its talking-heads' format with former collaborators and *résistants* adopts the posture of 'catching a witness in the act of telling a lie' as if its verdict on the truth was decided in advance; that it downplays the extent to which the Resistance did function as an alternative state and hence a source of political legitimacy for those demoralized by the collaborationist nature of the Vichy regime. He realizes that the

film's thematic focus on collaborationism and fence-sitting potentially locked onto the cynical agenda of the Giscardian right whose discrediting of the Resistance was motivated by party-political aims and he wonders whether the film's challenge to the image of a France united in resistance was not merely supplanted 'by the image of a France equally united in cowardice'. (p112) And yet ... Rousso is adamant that *The Sorrow and the Pity* can be credited as the first film to confront directly the *memory* of Vichy and the Occupation. It spoke especially to the postwar generation whose more troublesome questions about the period had met (like those of their German counterparts) with silence or obfuscation. This was the moment when 'the mirror was broken' and the nation's historical memories could no longer bask in a singularly flattering self-reflection but were confronted with their own riven character. For the postwar generation, *The Sorrow and the Pity* represented the first genuine attempt at a thorough excavation of France's memory terrain. *Résistants*, on the other hand, 'ensnared' in long-suppressed memories of their own, which in any case had been subsumed into the consensual Gaullist ur-myth of the Resistance, reacted against the film's candid revelations.

The importance Rousso ascribes to this *cultural* intervention into the politics of memory in the early 1970s dovetails nicely with recent writing on the role of German film and television in activating German historical memories.[6] It reminds us that popular culture, rather than scholarly debate, has been the key site of memory politics in the postwar world. But it also invites another analogy: that of film and memory. More precisely, film claims to be a *vehicle* of memory – weaving images and sounds relating to the past into historical narratives. Film also invites the viewer to identify with the memories on offer – to embrace its memory-images as the viewers' own. Therein lies both its social significance – its ability to respond to a desire for images of the past with which individuals and collectivities can identify – and its deceptive charms.

While the cultural sphere was issuing challenges to conventional representations of the past, offering new modes of expression for historical memories, other spheres were having their own distinct impact on memory politics. In May 1972 Pompidou handed down a presidential pardon on Paul Touvier, former official of the Vichy Milice, for 'secondary penalties' associated with his Vichy activities. The following year charges of 'crimes against humanity' were filed against Touvier by former *résistants*, the first such charges to be filed after a 1964 law which suspended the statute of limitations for these crimes. (Touvier went into hiding and was sheltered by a network of Catholic clerics until his arrest in 1989.) The filing of charges signalled an unequivocal reaction against official acts of leniency and indeed gave rise to a series of subsequent court actions aimed at bringing known *French* war criminals to justice.

The final phase of Rousso's mapping of memory again has psychoanalytic resonance. France after 1974 is described as a nation 'obsessed' with the Vichy legacy. French Jews mobilized for an acknowledgement of the Vichy regime's complicity in deportations and crimes committed in connection with the Final Solution. The specifically genocidal nature of the war, and the return of survivor-witnesses from the Nazi concentration camps, had been 'the event most quickly effaced from memory'. (p25)

6. See especially Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1989; Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1990.

A reawakening of Jewish memory throughout the 1970s, accompanied by an increasing number of anti-Semitic attacks culminating in the rue Copernic bombing in 1980, put the Anti-Semitic traditions in French political culture at the heart of political debate.

Elsewhere, sightings of the ghost of Pétainism began to erupt into French political life at regular intervals and the identification of its various disguises became a sport indulged in by politicians across the ideological spectrum and especially during election campaigns. Far from 'routing the enemy', this sparring gave the extreme-right confidence to reassert its presence in the political landscape and to reclaim for itself the heritage that others were so fervently disavowing. Scornful of Resistance nostalgia and undermined to give the values associated with Vichy – *Travail, Famille, Patrie* – a new political legitimacy, exponents of the extreme right have used the conjured spirit of Pétainism as a rallying point for anti-democratic, xenophobic and nationalistic tendencies in the population at large. The darkest manifestation of this new right-wing self-consciousness has been the continuing public presence of Robert Faurisson and what Rousso calls the 'negationist' position which denies the existence of the concentration camps and the facts relating to the Final Solution. As is well-known, Jean-Marie Le Pen now gives this racist discourse and other extremist views a populist, party-political platform.

Rousso's periodization culminates with an account of recent war crimes trials and their activation of painful and competing memories. Throughout the 1980s, the French courts were increasingly called upon to advance prosecutions for crimes against humanity and to extend their field of application *for the first time* to French citizens who assisted in deportations under the Vichy regime. But it was the trial of the German Klaus Barbie in 1983 that showed how ambivalent this legal victory could turn out to be, especially when memories working on behalf of seeing justice done could at the same time be turned against the very witnesses who elicited them at such painful cost.

This is the most riveting and poignant section of Rousso's book, where the treacherous nature of historical memories is dramatically revealed. To grasp this, we need to do a bit of legal backtracking. The text of Barbie's indictment made a distinction between Barbie's crimes against humanity – that is to say, his persecution of civilians and involvement in the Final Solution – and crimes against the Resistance. While the statute of limitations had been suspended in the case of the former, it was still in effect in the case of the latter. The court was therefore unable to prosecute Barbie for either the death of Jean Moulin or his responsibility in the death and torture of partisans in the Lyons area. Rousso maintains, however, that the French government had brought Barbie to trial precisely to answer for his crimes against the Resistance, to show itself as a government eager to distinguish itself from its reconciliatory predecessors and to have a direct hand in the vindication of popular memories of the Resistance.

It was in this context that Barbie's defence lawyer, Jacques Vergès, took a breathtaking gamble: he asked that the definition of crimes against humanity be extended to include Barbie's implication in Jean Moulin's death. Vergès' logic was cunning and

simple. He hoped to prove that Moulin was betrayed to the Germans by members of the French Resistance. The Appeals Court granted Barbie's request, thereby including for the first time within the interpretation of crimes against humanity certain acts committed against *résistants*. A new indictment was issued, the prosecution had to rebuild its case, and Vergès proceeded to put on trial the memories of the Occupation that Rousso has shown were, from the outset, marked by the traumatic and divisive circumstances of their origin. Moreover, Jewish memories and Resistance memories, which Rousso insists were 'two socially and historically distinct forms of memory', became rivals for legal and public attention. Though Barbie was eventually convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, Rousso maintains that the legal victory was bittersweet since the trial 'undeniably undermined the principle of the uniqueness of the Final Solution and genocide of the Jews'. (p212) He concludes his account of the Barbie trial by asking whether commemoration of war crimes is best achieved in the courts – i.e., whether the needs of the juridical system are not ultimately opposed to those of bearing witness. Significantly, Rousso gives the final words on this question to filmmaker Claude Lanzmann (director of the astounding testimonial film *Shoah*): 'What counts is not education, which is the teaching of lifeless knowledge. It is transmission, resurrection, abolition of the distance between the past and the present. Trials are not memorials.' (p215) A second section of Rousso's book then uses Lanzmann's remark as a springboard to look at the different modes of transmission of the memories of Vichy, whether in the form of academic scholarship, films or public opinion polls.

As Rousso draws towards a conclusion, it seems to me that he risks losing sight of the critical issues that make his account of the memory of Vichy so utterly compelling. He restates his initial hypothesis that the legacy of Vichy remains the deep and unresolved internal division within French political culture. His final analytic turn is to try to locate the deeper roots of this cleavage in the 'antagonistic values' structuring French political life prior to the Vichy crisis: the enduring power of a counter-revolutionary Catholic tradition, the nature of traditional left-right divisions in France, and 'the existence of a political, non-religious, anti-semitic tradition'. (p300) But isn't the question that really matters for his account not the political preconditions of Vichy, but whether the Vichy 'syndrome' continues to impair French political life and a sense of collective identity? To extend his psychoanalytic analogy further: if the aim of any diagnosis should be to relieve the patient of dysfunctional symptoms, then Rousso should be asking whether France – or indeed other European nation-states suffering from traumatic memories of the Second World War – can be 'cured' of their debilitating effects. Instead, Rousso is content to note that even though France experiences the continual resurgence of conflicting popular memories, French society has nonetheless 'little by little rediscovered areas of consensus'. (p306) Without elaborating on *how* this has been achieved *despite* the absence of a unified national memory, Rousso is in danger of demoting the very power of the historical memory he has so convincingly mapped out.

There are several paths Rousso might take here. One would be to return to the nexus of memory and national identity and to consider whether French society still needs a unified national memory in order to experience itself as socially cohesive. The fact that France has been able to admit into national consciousness conflicting, even contradictory, memories without undergoing a corresponding process of social dissolution suggests that it doesn't. At the beginning of his book, Rousso signals his agreement with historian Pierre Nora's observation that the 'memory nation was ... the last incarnation of the unification of memory and history'. According to Nora, 'society' has replaced 'the nation' as the organizing principle of identity and, in his view, 'legitimation by the past and therefore by history yields to legitimation by the future.'[7] This prognosis seems to echo Habermas' promotion of European *civil* values over national traditions as the foundation for contemporary identities (Habermas calls these 'post-conventional identities'). Habermas' approach to memory goes even further by proposing that a collective process of painful remembering – in short, mourning – may itself serve a socially cohesive purpose and at the same time loosen the hold of traditional values of family, *Volk* and nation which shore up national identity.[8]

Of course, these remain only potential, or partially realized features of European identity since, as we are well aware, the 'allure' of identities based on the nation in contemporary Europe is showing itself to be more durable than the arguments of social theorists concerning its historical obsolescence. To take account of the strength and persistence of this desire, we would need to look at the psychical investments that individuals continue to make in collective identities based on claims of national distinctiveness (over and above those of a local, regional, religious or ethnic nature). In other words, Rousso could make more than an analogical use of psychoanalysis in relation to the Vichy syndrome. After all, his own scrupulous delineation of the memory of Vichy betrays a kind of personal obsession with this particular 'site of memory'. To turn to the insights of psychoanalysis is not to reduce historical memory to the level of the individual, but to recognize how individual memories feed into the social arena and then coalesce into particular collective images, narratives and fantasies of the past.

7. Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', in *Representations*, no. 26, Spring 1989, p11. Nora's article is a rich (if to my mind, at times, slightly nostalgic) account of how '*lieux de mémoire*' ('sites of memory') have come to replace the 'environments of memory' of more traditional societies.

8. Eric Santner's *Stranded Objects*, *op.cit.*, offers a very suggestive account of the constitutive dimensions of mourning for the individual and for social life.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND MARXISM:
TOWARDS SUTURE?

Andreas Bjørnerud

Slavo Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Verso, London 1991; £32.95 cloth, £11.95 paper; and *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1991; £22.50 cloth, £9.95 paper.

Last year saw the publication of two new works by the Slovenian thinker, Slavoj Žižek, works which both extend and expand upon his earlier *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.[1] If *The Sublime Object* offered its reader a challenging use of Lacanian theory in the domain of ideological analysis, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* investigates ideological representation as it is found, for instance, in the detective novel and film noir, while – in a switch from 'low' to 'high' that is almost Žižek's trademark — *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, demonstrates how Žižek's reading of Lacan stems from his re-interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic.[2]

The very juxtapositions should be sufficient to indicate that a substantial remapping of the contemporary conceptual terrain is under way. Hegel, for so long the authoritative logos *against* which postmodern thought has defined itself, now supplies the impetus for Lacan, doyen of a psychoanalysis that is taken to be the epitome of ahistorical idealism, to provide the tools for a necessarily historical analysis of ideological representation in politics and culture. How is it that Žižek, who carries paradoxicality even to the point of being not only a theorist but also a politician and who stands in his country for a leftist democratic alternative to both an outworn Communist bureaucracy and a nascent nationalist populism, is able to base his praxis in the thought of Lacan? This conjuncture seems, potentially at least, to be Žižek's major contribution to contemporary political and critical debate, and it is upon this articulation of psychoanalysis and politics that this review will focus.

As is well known, there have been numerous attempts to harness the analytic power of psychoanalytic theory to a political praxis, to combine the psychic and the social, especially in the wake of the so-called 'new movements' which seek precisely to reintroduce the supposed personal and private into the political and public. However, the general consensus would appear to be that while the insights of psychoanalysis are not to be foregone, they are not theoretically compatible with a materialist analysis of the social. For instance, it would seem that even if both psychoanalysis and cultural criticism are both interested in the construction of the subject and its (mis)representation of the real that is ideology, the 'real' that is supposed in either case remains fundamentally different – that is, in the first case, a real of (internal) desire; in the second, a real of social (institutional) power – a distinction crystallized in Foucault's contention

1. S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London 1989.

2. These three works are those so far available to the English reader. However, the French reader will already be aware of Žižek's mingling of popular culture and philosophy, of Hitchcock and Hegel, through S. Žižek, *Le plus sublime des hystériques – Hegel passe*, Point-hors-ligne, Paris 1988 and S. Žižek (ed.), *Tout ce que vous avez toujours voulu savoir sur Lacan sans jamais oser le demander à Hitchcock*, Navarin, Paris 1988 – both of which are as yet unavailable in English, although the second is due to be published by Verso in 1992.

that psychic desire is only a means to social power's end of subjection/subjectivation.

Foucault 'solves' the problem by making the psychic an effect of the social and thereby asserting the latter's primacy, and it might seem that the only position open to Žižek would be to reverse this and make the social an effect of the psychic, a move with which psychoanalysis is often reproached when it is said to be ahistorical. *A priori*, however this would not appear to be the case insofar as Žižek, right from the start (at least in his English publishing history) has claimed that his Lacanian theorizing of the political was stimulated by the post-Marxist/poststructuralist work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.[3] In this, he does not subordinate the social to the psychic but suggests the possibility of their co-operation, a possibility which Laclau would seem to confirm, for even if *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*[4] had at first sight little to say with regard to the psychic, his latest collection *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*[5] explicitly endorses Žižek's claim, as it points to 'the way in which a possible confluence of (post-)Marxism and psychoanalysis is conceivable, either as the addition of a supplement to the former by the latter nor as the introduction of a new causal element – the unconscious instead of economy – but as the coincidence of the two, around the logic of the signifier.'[6]

What, then, is this logic of the signifier where post-Marxist and Lacanian can co-exist? The canonical account, acknowledged by Žižek as such, is that of Jacques-Alain Miller in his '*La suture (éléments de la logique du signifiant)*'.[7] Centrally, Miller highlights the shift from metaphoric substitution to metonymic slide in the coming into being of signification. If it is a commonplace in a post-Saussurean world that signification is a differential chain where meaning slips indefinitely without ever coming to rest (metonymy), it is less often seen how this comes to be so (metaphor). That is, if metonymy concerns the indefinite deferral of one signifier into another (the typical example being the dictionary which precisely defines one signifier by another), metaphor concerns the very condition of signification – the coming into being of the signifier. The being of the signifier, its presence, of necessity implies the absence of the real. For the signifier to exist, there must be a gap in the real, a negativity which opens up the very possibility of a space of representation and signification which makes of the signifier a metaphoric substitute for the real. Insofar as it is such a substitute, the signifier's presence is always already the possibility of its absence. From the moment the signifier fills and thereby opens a gap in the real, it proclaims the principle of difference – for its presence, its identity depends on its absence, its difference from itself – which ensures that meaning is already caught in a metonymic slide right from the very moment the metaphoric substitution has taken place.

Although it would seem to have little to do with either psychoanalysis or politics, the above perception is nonetheless central to Žižek's reading of Lacan, just as it is the point of departure for his re-reading of Hegel and his 'coincidence' with Laclau. This becomes clearer if one re-translates the formula into the more familiar conceptual terminology of these thinkers. To take first the Oedipal language one expects from psychoanalysis, one could recast the above as the following: the child is unable to remain in an imaginary condition of plenitude with the mother alone, because the

3. Thus *The Sublime Object* is prefaced by Laclau, while Laclau's own *New Reflections* contains contains Žižek's review of the earlier *Hegemony*.

4. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, London 1985.

5. E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Verso, London 1991.

6. *Ibid.*, p96.

7. J-A. Miller, *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, 1966, p39-51.

child is unable to be all that the mother desires – the mother's desire is elsewhere. A lack is thus introduced into the dyad, a lack which is the Name-of-the-Father. This is the necessary intervention of the third term that is the intersubjectivity of the Symbolic, a Symbolic whose very condition is lack but which lack it will never fill since its existence depends upon that lack – a situation which precipitates the child upon the forever shifting path of unsatisfied desire.

This movement of desire as the search for an immediacy that always was and will be lost is strictly itself the very movement of the dialectic, at least according to Žižek's non-teleological reading of Hegel. The dialectic, then, has its founding moment in the effort to determine being, an effort that is always already implicit in being, since once one has being, one necessarily has the negativity which permits that very determination. Such a negativity – if it is the condition of being – is also its undoing, since it condemns being to an impossibility of self-identity, to the impossibility of being, rather, it always depends on and is thus subverted by the negativity that constitutes it precisely because it was never being but was always lacking. In other words, the normative reading of the *Phenomenology*, whereby the dialectic recuperates an original immediacy of being via the detour of a reflective negativity, is here reversed, and the negativity becomes primary, making of the dialectic's supposed telos only a self-reflective awareness that this negativity is both being's condition and its failure.

It is then this primary negativity which Laclau, who terms it antagonism, employs to undo the traditional Marxist narrative. For, if the orthodox Marxist narrative employs the familiar Hegel of teleological reconciliation in order to claim an ontological certainty in its location of class identity and an epistemological certainty in its narrative of class struggle, Laclau emphasizes in contrast the struggle in class struggle. In other words, rather than allow Marxism to be the voice of scientific truth, of being, Laclau stresses the way in which its attempt to map the social is precisely that, an attempt which must presume, as a representation of the social, that which it would later efface – namely a founding lack, a negativity, in the social which is the very condition of any such representation, even as it condemns all representation to a fundamental inadequacy. Class struggle then becomes exactly that: a struggle to narrate the social in terms of class – a point which incidentally does not invalidate Marxism, but only reframes it as political and critical praxis rather than 'objective' truth.

What these accounts share is not an analogous thematic – their content is in each case very different – but an initial presumption, the impossibility of the real, which is what constitutes them properly within the logic of the signifier. The very existence of signification presumes the impossibility of the real, just as it thereby condemns itself to the impossibility of ever definitively describing that real, that is the impossibility of any totalized meaning, even as it paradoxically aspires to fill the gap it is.

This notion of the impossible kernel that is the real, of a primary negativity, is the crucial contribution of such theory to contemporary debate. Joan Copjec sums up the main issues:

> The necessary failure of social discourses in their representations of the subject is

not taken by psychoanalysis – as it is by Derrida – as the subversion of the subject's identity. Rather this failure, the very *impossibility* of representing the subject to the subject, is conceived as that which *founds* the subject's identity. *The failure of representation produces rather than disrupts identity.* That missing part which representation, in failing to inscribe, cuts off is the absence around which the subject weaves its fantasies, its self-image, not in imitation of any ideal vision, but in response to the very impossibility of ever making visible this missing part. We are constructed, then, not in conformity to social laws, but in response to our inability to conform to or see ourselves as defined by social limits. Though we are defined and limited *historically*, the absence of the real, which founds these limits, is not *historicizable* [... which] allows us to think the construction of the subject without thereby being obliged to reduce her *to* the images social discourses construct *of* her.[8]

8., In T. Brennan (ed.), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London 1989, pp227-46.

I have cited Copjec at length because she seems to me to introduce in a brief space the major elements of Žižek's thought as it is constructed around the logic of the signifier. Given the impossibility of the real, signification opens up a space which is first the space of history: for if the real is radically unavailable to historicization, the signifier is precisely the historical response to such unavailability. Second, this is the space of fantasy/ideology, insofar as fantasy, Žižek's term for ideology, represents the given historical staging of desire that is the attempt within signification to cover over the impossibility of the real. Third, this is the space of identity and its subversion, since the very positing of the signifier supposes a unitary filling in of the gap in the real which is, however, always already subverted in its given difference from itself. The field of the signifier thus offers itself as the historical space of ideology and identity's effort to cover over a primary, transhistorical negativity which is the condition of history – the condition also, (and fourthly) of subjectivity.

Hence Lacan: 'a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier',[9] and Miller: 'suture is the name for the subject's relation to the signifying chain of his discourse'.[10] In other words, once the space of signification is opened, so too is the space of representation, a representation which is never a mimesis of the real but only an answer to the real, a fantasy which stages desire. Such fantasy/ideology is the subject's historical being within the symbolic, culture and history, but the subject is, as Copjec stresses, never thereby reducible to such a subject-position, for the condition of subjectivity is that metonymic chain of signification where meaning always slips. Put another way, the subject is Miller's suture, which is the logic of the signifier. And indeed, in clarifying this notion of suture, one can also distinguish Žižek's strictly Lacanian position from others within the field of contemporary theory.

9. Quoted and discussed in S. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, *op.cit.*, p21.

10. J-A. Miller, *op.cit.*, p39.

Thus suture, as Žižek points out, is not coterminous with the closure of signification, as it is often taken to be in the English-speaking world. Rather it is, as Miller has it, the very logic of the signifier: that is, insofar as the signifier is posited, it is the supposition of identity, but insofar as the signifier is differential, it is the failure of identity. This notion of suture as the self-subverting thesis of identity enables one to mark

Žižek off from the Derridean and Foucauldian positions on subjectivity. In contrast to Derrida, Žižek stresses not how identity always fails within the differing deferral of meaning, but how the failure of meaning is the enabling condition of identity. This is only a shift of emphasis, but it is one which highlights positively the manner in which the dissatisfied desire characteristic of signification is always a desire not to desire, that the signifier is always a positing of identity as it is also its failure, and suture is always a desuturing. This, in turn, rescues Žižek from the Foucauldian critique of psychoanalysis' notion of desire, for Foucault would claim that such desire is always a transgression in relation to a law which it thus, by the logic of transgression, serves to confirm rather than undo. This would make of the psychoanalytic exploration of identity only a means to an end in a social power's desire to construct subjectivity. However, the terms of Foucault's critique have now clearly been displaced, for according to the Lacanian model, desire is the law: it is desire which causes the law to come into being even as it shadows desire with its absence; and it is this imposition that is also an imposture which allows the subject never to be reducible to a subject-position such as Foucault would suggest.

This capping of Foucault may make it seem as if Žižek is doing exactly what it was suggested he might have to, namely subordinating the psychic to the social. However, it should become clear if one shifts from a logic to a politics of the signifier, that he rather allows the two to negotiate an alliance. That there is a politics to the signifier should be clear in that there is certainly an ethics. In other words, if the logic of the signifier decrees that identity always be assumed, it also always subverts that identity, for it is only ever an attempt to cover over the lack in the real that is signification, itself always lacking. Therefore

> the maxim of psychoanalytic ethics as formulated by Lacan ('not to give way on one's desire') coincides with the closing moment of the psychoanalytic process, the 'going through the fantasy'. The desire to which we must not 'give way' is not the desire supported by fantasy but the desire of the Other [the signifier] beyond fantasy. 'Not to give way on desire' implies a radical renunciation of all the richness of desires based upon fantasy-scenarios.[11]

The subject is called upon to re-mark indefinitely the impossibility of the real, its lack which is the lack that grounds the Other of the symbolic whose supposed coherence is only ever illusion, leading Žižek to his latest conclusion that 'the Left must not "give way"'.[12] But how has the shift been accomplished from the psychoanalytic 'cure' to the politics of the Left?

It is important to recognize here that this is not a question of any opposition between a private therapeutic practice and a public institutional domain. Psychoanalytic praxis like the political is discursive, and it is thus a question not of incompatible spaces but of articulations within a common field of discourse. In short, it is a question of suture, of posing an identity which is always provisional. It will be argued here that the historical identity within which Lacan and (post-)Marxism can be

11. S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *op.cit.*, p118.

12. S. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, *op.cit.*, p273.

articulated is that of Laclau and Mouffe's 'radical democracy'.

In their *Hegemony*, they describe the field of the 'social' as decentred and impossible to totalize: that is, discourses of power and knowledge and law may always be set up within the social, but their grounding is always in the final analysis arbitrary and contingent; the social offers them no ultimate guarantee. The social is thus always traversed by attempts at suture – Lacan's quilting-points (*points de caption*) – but whose necessity is only ever retroactive, self-grounded. The *point de caption* attempts to act as metaphoric filler for the lack in the social/real, but as substitute it always declares its own lack even as it effaces it. To this extent, Laclau and Mouffe argue within the logic of the signifier, but for them this logic finds its political relevance within the context of democracy.

13. An issue which could be taken as an example of the work of a Žižek/Laclau school, combining Lacan and politics.

If one thing emerged from the recent issue of *New Formations* 'On Democracy',[13] it was that democracy exists only by virtue of a constitutive tension. Thus Mouffe and Copjec pointed out the irreducible contradiction between the universal homogeneous character of the subject presupposed by democracy and democracy's paradoxical claim to represent the individual particularity of this subject, even though it was precisely such particularity that it was obliged to abstract in order to exist. However, far from drawing the conclusion that democracy should therefore be abandoned as irresolvable failure, they argued that it was this tension between public abstraction and private difference that constituted democracy's value and radical potential, and which it was therefore necessary to defend. They thereby assimilated the logic of democracy to the logic and ethics of the signifier.

The main thesis behind this strategy is that of Claude Lefort, who also works within a Lacanian frame compatible with that of Žižek. Lefort argues for the fundamental impossibility of democracy as such: that is, within democracy, no one can claim to represent the whole, for the whole can never be totalized by a representative who is always necessarily lacking in relation to what s/he would represent (except, of course, in democracy's underside which is the totalitarian fantasy of the embodiment of the universal will in the leader/party). Every representative is thus always a usurper with respect to the democratic frame; power is always a contingent imposition which can be subverted in its supposed consistency. Thus a democratic ethics arises whereby the contingent power must always be put to the question, returned to the impossibility of the democratic project. In other words, the 'public' that is given at any point in time must always be re-submitted to the question that is its contradiction with the private. Thus the public becomes the scene of a shifting renegotiation and articulation of identity. One such is precisely the articulation of a psychoanalytic and democratic ethics, a suture which inevitably alters each in the conjuncture, remaking the psychic as social, the social as psychic – as the abstract universals posed by identities are tested and recast against particular determinations, and vice versa, in a Hegelian dialectic which now stresses negativity over reconciliation.

A logic and ethics of the signifier is therefore compatible with, even the proper space for, a logic and ethics of democracy. Moreover, it is perhaps important to realize that this is not just a question of a critical and interrogative politics in general, but also

one of more immediate concern, that is to the Left in a more orthodox sense. For in the present context of the fall of Communism, to urge democracy to return to its impossibility is to dislodge it from any complacent sense of a victory for the capitalist system over its hereditary enemy, and rather to return democracy to the question of capitalism and its problematic relationship to the democratic project. Further, it is also to undo the usual way in which the universal/particular dilemma is resolved in Western democracy, namely by the fantasy of the nation in which the abstract universal citizen is supposedly guaranteed representation according to his or her national 'particularity'. The critique of the nationalist fantasy and its attendant racism must appear ever more pressing for Žižek, in the light of the ethnic warfare in Yugoslavia, and, for Laclau and many of us, the 'Little Englander' mentality, together with its complement 'Fortress Europe'. At present these dominate and block any radical democratic project in favour of a suture of race-family-masculinity that has always taken its identity for inarticulable (inarticulate?) essence.

In brief, Žižek and those other theorists working within a Lacanian logic of the signifier promise not only a psychoanalysis that can be articulated with politics, but also, and unusually so for contemporary theory, a politics for today.