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BOOK REVIEW: ŽIŽEK AND THE OTHERS. IDEOLOGY IN A POST-IDEOLOGICAL AGE

L'uboš Lietava*

TAKÁČ, P.: *Žižek a tí druhí. Ideológia v postideologickej dobe [Žižek and the Others. Ideology in a Post-Ideological Age]*. Bratislava: Horská lucerna, 2023. 114 s. ISBN 978-80-9744-056-5.

The book *Žižek and the Others* was published in 2023 by Horská lucerna, in Košice. Written by **Peter Takáč**, the book explores the ideas of Slovenian philosopher **Slavoj Žižek**, his exploration of ideology, related concepts such as democracy and totalitarianism, or the future of liberalism.

The book is divided, apart from the author's introduction and appendix, into 17 chapters.

In the first chapter, entitled „*The End of History – The End of Ideology*”, the author describes **Fukuyama's** idea that liberal democracy is the last phase of political development in human history. However, liberal democracy is not widespread in all states, especially in Islamic states. Islam represents a different ideology for today's world, but as the author notes, it is not an alternative to Western liberal democracy. The problem with liberal democracy is that it represents the final order and cannot be overcome, but only perfected, but only within its framework, by means of the tools at its disposal. Today's social pressure is oriented towards profit and progress in the form of consumer pleasures, but society is not concerned with the future. In this connection, the author uses a quotation from **Jean-Francois Lyotard**, who addressed the issue of selling information for profit in his writings. The author discusses information from the perspective of postmodernism – its creation for profit. At a time when information may not be true and we have the impression that we no longer live in ideologies,

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the author points to questions that also interest **Žižek**: what do we believe at the end of history – at the time of the end of ideologies? In society, the fear of revolutions and of big projects prevail, and we love comfort, security and fun. Society does not see its current state as problematic, but neither as something that needs or can be changed (pp. 14-18).

In the second chapter „*Ruling Ideas Today Are Not the Ideas of the Rulers*” the author describes society's distrust of state institutions. The school, the police, the army, the church or the authorities used to ensure the production of subservient and consenting subjects, but today people cannot rely on them because of the dysfunctional state. Therefore, ideology has to create other forms of domination. Here the author uses a quote from **Žižek** in which he points to the presence of ideology, which we have trouble realizing. Nowadays, systemic ideology creates a politically coloured preconception that we apply even before we consciously accept something. The author also points out the paradox that situations arise „*where, subjectively, no one has to believe, but objectively everyone shares in the belief*” (p. 21). The author analyses **Žižek's** idea that meaning is transmitted without us having to directly receive or understand it. It is enough if we disseminate it and pass it on; the so-called transindividual network of meanings that is transmitted from person to person despite the absence of its true bearer. The author analyses this idea as a false representation of social relations in the individual that forms the basis of his thinking about the world. Therefore, the individual „*cannot become aware of and distance himself from ideology because it constitutes a part of his awareness process. Ideology no longer consists in a false consciousness, but in an unconscious; that is, a pre-understanding which presents us with pre-ideologized forms of thought*” (p. 21). Values or concepts do not need to be revealed, they just need to be moved. The task of ideology, then, is to analyse the ideational resources of individuals and to assign new meanings to their concepts. In this context, the author uses **Žižek's** argument that we should reverse **Marx's** eleventh thesis of **Feuerbach** and, instead of trying to change the world, we should first try to interpret it to its foundations (p. 23). The author analyses **Žižek's** idea that the ruling ideas are not the ideas of those who rule – the ruling ideas fulfil the ideas of ordinary people about life and the fulfilment of their needs. Thus, the ruling idea embodies the authentic desire of the people, but it also, by manipulating it, puts it in relation to the desires of the powerful. In this way it legitimises the continuation of social domination as well as exploitation.

In the third chapter „*Individual Freedom is the Only Norm*” the author

discusses trust and belief in postmodernism. The chapter analyses Žižek's theoretical apparatus for the functioning of ideology in the age of cynicism. He explains the practical workings of ideology at one time as „*what mattered was not internally believing the theses of the ruling ideology, but performing the external rituals and practices by which that ideology gained material existence*” (p. 27). The author explains this thesis by stating that ideology was once in the hands, feet, and tongue—it was in the actions of people rather than in their minds. Today in the West, according to Žižek, cynicism about power has been reversed: in fact, in public we may pretend to be free, but in private we obey and adhere to what is expected of us. In liberalism, people keep their distance from officially proclaimed principles and norms, but in the private sphere and at work, we must adhere to the proclaimed norms. Liberal ideology allows us to think what we want about it while maintaining the face of independent, free and rational individuals. People are allowed to think and want whatever they want, while at the same time following the social norm. The slogans of liberal democracy perform a similar function to that of socialism. It seems that there has been only a change in the concepts and ideals being proclaimed. Žižek argues that the promotion of distance from official ideology has brought a sense of freedom from manipulation. However, although we do not have to repeat slogans about the freedom of the market and the individual, we will stick to these principles because they set out the guiding principles of the society in which we live. That is why, according to Žižek, we have not stepped out of the shadow of ideology (pp. 28-29).

In the fourth chapter, „*Protecting Against Truth*”, the author discusses the masking of ideology in a supposedly post-ideological age. Subjects in society are under no illusions about the righteous nature of ideology (there are still disadvantages such as poverty, pollution, and others), but knowledge of the truth must be tempered by a certain partial lie, a fetish, in society. The fetish allows the unbearable truth to be hijacked. The symptom embodies the uncomfortable truth repressed by the official ideological narrative; in the psychic world, the fetish serves as a lie that allows the harsh reality to stand (p. 31). The fetish, thus, serves as a denial of knowledge in the style of „*I know very well, but I keep doing it*”. Belief needs not be held directly, it is enough if it is embodied in the objects – fetishes – we surround ourselves with, and this, according to the author, is true of ideology as well (p. 32).

In chapter five, entitled „*Things Believe for Us*”, the author discusses the difference between “*believing in*” and “*believing on*”. “*Believing in*” is the source of our self-esteem; “*believing on*” seems to concern no one. We always attribute

it to others. The author gives the example of faith in the free market's ability to self-regulate, but the problem was that financial institutions relied on the state to intervene, while the state relied on the free market's ability to self-regulate. Each entity, therefore, delegated its belief to someone else, and the aforementioned fetish emerged, which covered up the uncomfortable truth and kept things the same. The author, thus, draws on **Žižek's** idea that in a post-ideological age we do not have to believe because things believe for us (p. 34). This idea of **Žižek's** is applied to the practice of consumerism, where during the period of consumerism the consumer knows that by buying certain products they are destroying the domestic market and exploiting workers in third world countries, but if the price includes a contribution to improve the working conditions of the producers, or to save the environment, they turn an indulgent consumerist activity into an ethical act – the more I buy, the more I help others (pp. 34-35).

In chapter six, „*We Have no Language to Describe Unfreedom*”, the author discusses **Žižek's** analysis of ideology using **Karl Marx's** „*They don't realize it, but they do it*”. Thus, **Žižek** explores ideology in a post-ideological world – ideology is the real activity of people, not what they think. What we lack today, according to **Žižek**, is the language to describe the unfreedom in which we live. Terms like freedom or democracy are general in nature, and unspecified notions risk being misinterpreted. **Žižek** points out that in the name of freedom and democracy it is permissible to attack the freedom and democracy of another country. Interfering in another country's elections in favour of spreading our own idea of freedom is as permissible as defeating the rights of others. Such acts are not minor crimes, but they appear to be so because the ideological language used to talk about them makes it seem as if they are not crimes at all. For **Žižek**, the choice between democracy and fundamentalism, right and wrong, freedom or slavery is a false, ideological choice. The second option is purposefully chosen to justify the generality of the first option, but also to establish the field of meaning in which the choice takes place. The choice is reduced to the single option of democracy, and it is not clear what that term means because of its wide interpretation and understanding. **Žižek** argues that democracy is exclusively associated with the attribute liberal, as if there are no other forms or conceptions of it that extend co-determination to other spheres of life. In this sense, **Žižek** speaks of the fetishization of language through ideology, as words lose the meanings attached to socially extended representational slogans. With ideological explanations, we may not have an explanation from another subject, but we know how others justify a particular phenomenon and so it becomes part

of our explanation as well, we take on what others think, even to the point of what is thought in society. Society is shaped by the ideas and principles that keep it going, which are infiltrated in both institutions and language, acting on subjects without pausing to think about it (pp. 36-42).

In chapter seven, „*Liberal Democracy as the Best of All Possible Worlds*”, the author discusses the goal of ideology. If its goal is an attempt to build a better possible world, the example of **Stalin's** or **Mao's** attempts can be used to show that such efforts only make the future world worse. Also, trying to repair the damage after such efforts can lead to even greater humanitarian disasters. The author cites the example of American efforts to impose American values in the Middle East. The ideological and ambiguous notion of American values and the efforts to implement them have manifested as a different form of barbarism. A similar ideological concept tends to be the nation, which tends to be seen as a higher interest or to justify power objectives (pp. 43-47).

In chapter eight, entitled as „*Spontaneous Followership*”, the author discusses the ideological concepts of liberalism and their self-referential character. Concepts such as democracy, nation, socialism, or God are imagined differently by each subject. These concepts are self-referential – norms and moral principles that refer to them, but they refer only to themselves. In practice, then, everything that is democratic and free will be in a liberal democracy, and a liberal democracy will be no other than free and democratic. This creates room for political manipulation – whatever happens in the ideological universe of liberal capitalism is acceptable. Capitalism can justify the negative effects of capitalism in its own ideological terms. Today's ideology does not force subjects to follow it, but it will provide distance from what it preaches and allow subjects to follow the ideology spontaneously. This creates a sense of independence and the impression that subjects can do whatever they want. This feeling of free choice will create consent to power more easily and encourage subjects to adopt the ideological principles (freedom, democracy, socialism, nation, God...) (pp. 48-53).

In chapter nine, entitled „*The Forced Choice of the Cynic*”, the author discusses the subject's acceptance of the social contract, that is, sacrificing some of his freedom to public authority for the sake of securing interaction between other subjects. The subject is freely coerced to become a subject of the community and thus to submit to its rules. Society is not a system of prohibitions, but also a pact between subjects, creating a world of different desires and needs. These needs take over and become part of us. Thus, according to **Žižek**, we cannot acquire a neutral approach to reality because we are part of it. What is

good and bad is based on the given setting of society and how the given realities are generally regarded in society. The author points out the easy misuse of such an assumption of reality by ideology, as discussed in the previous chapters (pp. 54-57).

In chapter ten, entitled „*The Alternative as Threat*“, the author discusses the notion of totalitarianism as a label for anything that is not compatible with the functioning of liberal democracy. According to **Žižek**, totalitarianism serves as a defence against utopias – efforts to overcome liberal democracy. But this is unrelated, the term totalitarianism has taken the differential place of the antithesis of liberal democracy. According to **Žižek**, pointing to totalitarianism hinders the search for ways out of the new reality and serves to prevent criticism of the current political order, while pointing to the tyranny in totalitarianism. However, according to **Žižek**, by using structuralism, totalitarianism is not the opposite of liberal democracy. **Žižek** argues and takes help from **Hannah Arendt**, concluding that the notion of totalitarian ideology has become the notion of totalitarianism. In an effort to prevent the return of totalitarian thought to determine the “*correct*” course of history and the correct view of it, the concept of totalitarianism has inadvertently become the totalitarianism of the concept. „*Liberal democracy imitates the practices that Arendt attributed to totalitarian regimes: it presents its ideology as the outcome of the history of which it has been the victor, without admitting that there could be any change in the future*” (p. 60). **Arendt** defined totalitarianism on the basis of the common features of Nazism and Stalinism. But the concept of totalitarianism is ambiguous, has been redefined since World War II, and is now used in relation to Islamic fundamentalism (p. 61).

In chapter eleven, entitled „*Exclusive Inclusion*“, the author discusses collective illusion and **Žižek's** principle of pleasure, which states that it is preferable to remain in a delusion, even if one is aware that it is only an illusion (p. 63). Collective illusion is important for the feeling of identification with the group but also to express one's individuality within the group. The author discusses the idea that subjects act as others do, as a result of which one's subjectivity is concealed. However, others are also governed by others, so realistically no one has to believe in what they are doing. The author uses **Jacques Lacan's** theory of the Great Other to explain this idea. The Great Other is seen as a rumour or “*with*” that no one represents. The collective illusion uses the concept of the Big Other, in particular, to cover up the imperfections of democracy, whereby exposure would lead to scandal. Liberal democracy has its negative aspects (privatization of social services, education, health care), social

problems are increasing even though all citizens are equal. Instead of solving problems, it helps the concentration of power and the immutability of the situation, it becomes an obstacle to solving these challenges (p. 64-68).

In chapter twelve, entitled „*The Contradiction in Ideology as a Possibility of Overcoming It*”, the author discusses the idea that others, or the Great Other, always speak for the subject, as described in the previous chapter. There must be something that provides a framework for the subject's thinking. The subject, however, will never perfectly express who it is. All identities are socially contingent and, therefore, will never capture the very core of the subject. This is also why ideology can be criticized, namely for the fact that all identities are imposed on the subject and without ideology and its vocabulary, it is impossible to think of oneself (p. 69-70).

In chapter thirteen, „*Identifying with the Excluded*”, the author discusses the idea of how to include people who „ *dwell in the empty gaps of the state*” (p. 72). According to **Žižek**, in global capitalism, slum dwellers are „*the true symptoms of slogans like development, modernization, and the world market – a necessary product of the internal logic of global capitalism*” (p. 72). The author wonders what does modernization mean if it leads to urban decay, high rates of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, and crime that are so characteristic of slums? According to the author, it is necessary to identify with the excluded and abandon the position of conformity, sacrificing the advantages. To look differently at what ideology deems both good and possible. It is necessary for the subject to be prepared to give up its previous symbolic identity (p. 74).

In chapter fourteen, „*Redefining Meanings*”, the author discusses the idea of overcoming ideology by redefining key terms. According to **Žižek**, it is necessary to create concepts that transcend partial interest and gradually become a symbol of civic union into a unified idea. This could be God, science, but, controversially, also democracy and human rights (p. 76).

In chapter fifteen, entitled „*The Demise of Symbolic Efficacy*”, the author discusses **Žižek's** idea that *the Big Other* today may be on the plane of social relations – the Other People, which causes modern society to see itself as autonomous, self-regulating, and no longer able to rely on an external source of authority (p. 78). That is, *the Big Other* has ceased to exist and there are many "Little" Others left. The author goes on to point out that Nazism and Stalinism also defended their ideology with insights from biology, while contemporary liberalism relies on economics, whose conclusions it places at the level of the laws of nature, which cannot be interfered with for the sake of preserving the natural state of

things. Liberal democracy is the guarantee of the consistency of our approaches to the world in political terms. We do not have to believe in it, nor do we have to respect its representatives, but we will nevertheless remain surrounded by its symbolic meaning and the influence with which it structures, that is to say, arranges and organises our world (p. 81).

In chapter sixteen, entitled „*The Decline of Collective Faith*”, the author discusses the decline of the influence of symbolic power, when the old power loses legitimacy but has not yet been replaced by a new one. After the attack on the World Trade Center and the outbreak of the global financial crisis, the legitimacy of the end-of-history thesis was threatened but not abandoned. Nor was a systematic solution or a lesson sought. On the contrary, political elites were reinforced in their previous belief that there was no alternative. In the aftermath of these two significant events, the political leadership did everything possible to ensure that the course of society would return to the old normal and that liberal democracy could continue to function as the only political system. In these moments of the creation of a vacuum in the hegemony of ideology, other centres of political power were unable to fill the space that was created with the loss of legitimacy of political power (pp. 83-84).

In chapter seventeen, „*The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*”, the author discusses the idea of populism, which aspires to power through reaching out to the electorate with a popular appeal directed against the elites. According to **Žižek**, the rise of populism is indicative of the weakening of the ruling ideology: „...*popular anger is not a sign of the primitivism of ordinary people, but a symbol of the weakness of the very hegemony of liberal democracy, which can no longer generate consent...*” (p. 86). The image of liberal democracy today, according to **Žižek**, is that today's leaders do not respect the law and the separation of powers; instead, they want to take it into their own hands and, surprisingly, they receive democratic authorization to do so from the electorate at the ballot box. Thus, according to the author, power is legitimised through elections, but the representatives use it contrary to the principles of liberal democracy. This is why it is possible to say today that the meaning of democracy has been loosened, because sometimes what we imagine by it has become disconnected from its liberal attributes. Voters continue to vote, but they do not know what to imagine or expect from democracy. This empties the content of the term liberal democracy and makes it possible to fill it with new meaning (pp. 87-88).

In the book, the author has tried to explain and give examples of the theories of the Slovenian philosopher **Slavoj Žižek**. His theories are often complex and the reader must be familiar with concepts such as dialectics, the Big Other, or authors such as **Hegel**, **Lacan**, **Freud** or **Marx**. Combining these authors, **Žižek** analyses today's liberal capitalism, concepts such as democracy, elections and others. This is one of the reasons why **Žižek's** books tend to be difficult for a proper understanding of his ideas. However, **Peter Takáč's** book tries to explain **Žižek's** ideas in the simplest possible way and to apply them to current social phenomena. Despite **Slavoj Žižek's** unquestionable popularity but also some controversy, not much attention is paid to his ideas in Slovakia, which gives this book more importance. **Žižek's** ideas are worthy of attention, and this publication provides a simplified guide to **Žižek**.