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ŽIŽEK'S REDEFINITION OF MODERN SUBJECT

ABSTRACT

Subjektivitas modern yang dibangun atas dasar cogito ergo sum dari Descartes belakangan sedemikian dicela dan dicaci. Subjektivitas macam itu konon terlalu tertutup dan bertendensi untuk mengeksklusi yang lain. Bermacam kubu berupaya menentang subjektivitas modern. Strukturalisme dan post-strukturalisme dengan sengit hendak menyingkapkan subjek dan menggantinya dengan tenunan struktural. Di antara gelombang aliansi yang hendak menyingkapkan subjek tersebut, Žižek justru hendak membuat pembacaan baru dan unik atas subjektivitas modern. Melalui kacamata psikoanalisis ia membedah filsafat dan melihat dimensi-dimensi tertentu dari subjek yang selama ini tersembunyi.

Key Words:

*Subject • Lacanian • Psychoanalysis • Cogito • Displacement • Reinterpretation •
The real-the symbolic-the imaginary • Substitution*

Human as subject was born when Descartes stated his famous “*cogito ergo sum*.” Since then, subject has been considered as “that which thinks and, in thinking, possesses certain essential properties which serve to define it.”¹ Certainty lies on the very capacity of human agent as the thinking being. Thenceforth, philosophers tried hard to refine the Cartesian *cogito*. The centre of gravity of modern philosophy is human consciousness, that is, *cogito*. Modern philosophy is the philosophy of subject. Kant uses the term transcendental subject to signify the structural precondition of all thinking. It is the “I think” which enables human being as rational being to have any representations in the process of thinking.²

The concept of subject is a battlefield for many philosophers. It is as if each wants to knit his own speculative and enlightening thoughts on subjectivity. Structuralism and post-structuralism are attacking human subjectivity. They even desire to chuck it out and replace it with some kinds of structures and/or any structural relations. For both, subject is merely illusion that emerges as a by-product of structures. The questions remain: What is subject? Does it exist? Is it real? If it is still understood as substance, the dualism and exclusion of the other will prevail. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that subject is only the result of structural relation. Take culture as example: although culture is always in a flux, each and every agent in it is determined by the culture to a large extent; oftentimes culture determines how the agent acts as subject.

If the human subjectivity is to be abolished, what is human? Merely object that obeys all the things outside his consciousness? Somehow, subject must exist so that human has something to hold while he is acting in this universe! What we are in need of now is a reinterpretation on subject. When the modern subject has been impotent, it does not mean that the subject should be abolished. Instead of being thrown away, modern subjectivity needs reinterpreting. We need a new way of understanding it as offered by Slavoj Žižek.

Slavoj Žižek: Philosopher and Psychoanalyst

Slavoj Žižek was born on March, 21st 1949 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He was born in a place crossed by the Alps, which is extending from France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, and of course, Slovenia. Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia. The population of the city is just about 330.000.

Žižek was an only son who spent most of his time reading and watching films. He studied philosophy in the University of Ljubljana. Then, he studied psychoanalysis in Paris under Jacques Alain Miller, Jacques Lacan's son in law. Now Žižek is a philosopher and psychoanalyst who writes and gives comment on films, culture, sociology, and any up-to-date events that take place in all around the world. Despite his blue-collar worker outfit, he is an honored professor at Ljubljana University.

Žižek is a "Marxist." He reads and interprets Marxism uncannily. While most Marxists believe that the ruling ideas are the ideas of those who rule, he proposes that the ruling ideas are not merely the ideas of those who rule. For him, hegemonic universality has to incorporate at least two particular contents: the authentic popular contents and its distortion by the relations of domination and exploitation.³

Žižek is within the tradition of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Žižek's thought is a concoction of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Indeed, it is a very very peculiar yet enlightening thought. He is an idiosyncratic thinker. Žižek makes an attempt to reinterpret the Cartesian cogito by bringing to light its obverse, the excessive unacknowledged kernel of the cogito and thus he reasserts the Cartesian subject.⁴

Lacanian psychoanalysis has shed light in many directions.⁵ In France, Lacanian psychoanalysis is clinical and closely linked to psychoanalytical practice. In Anglo-Saxon, the influence of Lacan revolves around literature, cinema and feminism. Lacanian concepts are linked with hermeneutics in Germany. While in Slovenia, Lacanian psychoanalysis has lost its clinical dimension and is used for philosophical and political reflection with the main notion operated is that of the real as that which resists symbolization.

Reinterpretation on Modern Subject through Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Lacan started his psychoanalysis about 1930. His famous "return to Freud" was stated in his weekly seminar at the St. Anne Hospital, Paris. For him, psychoanalysis is a method of interpretation.⁶ He spread out his ideas through seminars since he did not like publication. The seminars were aimed at psychoanalysts but alas many people non-psychoanalysts-attended them. Lacan's lectures attracted many of the Ecole Normale students. Lacan introduces a number of new concepts. The famous one is his triad of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic.

Lacan's triad originates from his great invention of the mirror-phase. This phase is undergone by all men during their early childhood, that is, between 6-18 months of age.⁷ In the mirror-phase, a child recognizes himself integrally through his image in the mirror. He identifies himself with something which is not himself. For Lacan, the mirror-phase is an identification. A transformation takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.⁸ Furthermore, Lacan says that this phase situates the instance of the ego before its social determination.⁹

This moment of identification is the very first alienation in man. Everybody is undeniably alienated from his "genuine" self from the very beginning. The mirror-phase does not end when somebody grows up. Human keeps on identifying himself with the imaginary. In other words, to achieve self-identity, the subject must identify himself with the imaginary other; he must alienate himself-put his identity outside himself, so to speak, into the image of his double.¹⁰ Soon after a child learns a language, the mirror is replaced by the language. Language is of the symbolic. Thus, anything to do with human subjectivity is always mediated or even constructed through language. To put it more bluntly, at this point, again, human is alienated. To be a subject, human must misrecognize the symbolic as his true identity.

The link between human and the symbolic is the imaginary. Hence, we have two elements of psychic structure described by Lacan's triad. As for the real, the third element, it stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech.¹¹ The identification with the symbolic through the mediation of the imaginary always leaves a left-over, namely, the real. The real has nothing to do with objective reality. The real is an entity which must be constructed afterward so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure.¹² Soon after finding out the imaginary and the symbolic operative in us, we realize that there is something that resists the symbolization.

Žižek refines Lacan's concepts of the real by stating that the real serves as support of the symbolic reality.¹³ The reality we face is always a reality constructed by the symbolic. The real supports reality because it intrudes as the symptom without which the symbolic can never exist. Žižek stresses that the real is an entity which although it does not exist (in the sense of 'really existing', talking place in reality) has a series of properties- it exercises a certain structural causality producing effects in the symbolic reality of subjects.¹⁴

Subject is always divided. When one says 'I', he is divided between the 'I' that is uttering the sentence and the 'I' in the sentence. There is a difference between the subject of utterance and the subject of statement. In a nutshell, the subject is decentered helplessly.¹⁵ Žižek reemphasized this by saying, "The basic feature of the Lacanian subject is, of course, its alienation in the signifier: as soon as the subject is caught in the radically external signifying network, he is mortified, dismembered, divided."¹⁶

Subject is barred (\$) because it is represented by the signifier (S1) which belongs to the symbolic. Symbolic representation distorts the subject, that is, the subject cannot find a signifier which would be his own and he is always saying too little or too much.¹⁷ Both the subject and the symbolic qua the big other have a lack. The symbolic wants to capture the subject but the subject always eludes. The subject, nonetheless, desires to find his own signifier but there is no signifier which would really fit him.

The Cartesian cogito as subject is a crack in the universally consistent universe.¹⁸ Cogito is nothing but *punctum* in the universe. *Res cogitans* is a point that distinguishes itself from any other part of the universe through his consciousness. Žižek explains further as follows: "And the subject qua \$, qua pure 'I think' of substanceless self-relating, is precisely such a nothingness without any positive ontological consistency of its own, yet nonetheless introducing a gap into the fullness of being."¹⁹ The Cartesian cogito is not correlative to reality. A hole although it is within reality- is always separated from reality.²⁰ As a hole, the subject is framing reality. It frames reality from the inside.

Through his transcendental turn, Kant is underlining the impossibility of locating the subject in the great chain of being.²¹ Kant's philosophy deals with the possibility of the subject to know. Subjective categories enable the subject to meet reality without being a part of it because the reality experienced by the subject is always reality according to the categories, not reality as such. Only when I am accessible to myself is the cogito possible.²² What is the "be thinking" is still a noumenon vis-à-vis the "I think." Žižek finds a paradox of self consciousness in Kant. Self-consciousness is possible only against the background of its own impossibility and the notion of self-consciousness implies the subject's self-decenterment.²³

Hegel's identification of subject with substance stimulates Žižek to analyze subject in relation to substance. Hegelian subject is the gap separating phenomena from the things, that is, the abyss beyond phenomena conceived in its negative mode.²⁴ Subject limits phenomena in a very negative gesture. This negativity marking the difference between

phenomenon and noumenon is the realm of the subject. The negativity, however, is also mediation between phenomenon and noumenon.

Substance becomes subject through the process of subjectivization. It can never fully capture substance because there is something resisting this process. Subject is the nothingness, the remainder after the substance is emptied. Žižek ultimately concludes that the Hegelian subject is nothing but a name for the externality of the substance to itself.²⁵

The becoming subject of substance involves such a continuous displacement of the centre.²⁶ Applied this to the Universal Substance means that the Universal Substance is undergoing displacement and the subject is the vanishing mediator since it is the hole acting as the medium or operator of the very process of displacement. In language, we can notice this displacement in the very fact that the symbolic qua the big other has hole(s) in it. For Žižek, the Hegelian subject is absolute because it has the ability of 'choosing what is already given' and pretending that the given reality is already his work.²⁷

Subject is the contingent-excessive gesture that constitutes the very universal order of being.²⁸ The universal order of being is constructed by subject. Žižek employs the concepts of *objet petit-a* developed by Jacques Alain Miller and of the subject as that which is framing reality. The hole opened up by subject is what makes reality understandable. That explains his statement:

“The subject is not simply the excessive hubris through which a particular element disturbs the global order of being by positing itself- a particular element- as its centre; the subject is, rather, the paradox of particular element that sustains the very universal frame”²⁹

After explaining Žižek's view on the modern subject, let's turn our attention to the relation between humans as subjects. Žižek describes the relation with a story about three prisoners and five hats.³⁰

On the basis of amnesty, the head of a prison can release one of the three prisoners. He makes a logical puzzle to decide which one deserves to be released. He tells them that there are five hats: three white and two black. They will be distributed and the prisoners should guess the color of his own. The prisoners sit down in a triangle so that each can see the color of the other prisoners' hats but not his own. The one who can guess the color of his own hat correctly must stand up and leave the room.

There are three possible situations in this game. If two black hats and one white hat are distributed, the prisoner with the white hat will soon know that his is white because there are only two black hats and they are on the other prisoners' heads.

If two white hats and one black hat are distributed, the one with the white hat can guess by reasoning as follows, "I can see one black and one white hat. Mine can be either black or white. If it is black, the prisoner with white hat would immediately see two black hats and conclude that his is white. But as no-one leaves the room, mine is certainly white." Here, the winner needs longer time to come to the conclusion. He has to transpose himself to the other to guess correctly the color of his hat.

The most complex situation is when three white hats are distributed. The winner must reason as follows, "Two white hats on their heads. Mine can be either black or white. If it is black, any of them would reason in this way, 'I see a black and a white. If mine is black, the prisoner with the white hat would see two black hats and would stand up and leave immediately. He, however, does not do it. So mine is white. I will stand up and leave.' But since none stands up, mine is white."

The third possibility shows the precipitate identification. Here we see the true genesis of the 'I' and what takes place in it is the shift from \$ to S1.³¹ In the third possibility we find the genesis of the objective socio-symbolic identity.³² Only when the subject makes a precipitate identification, can a more or less "objective" social identity emerge. This anticipation takes place in the imaginary while the symbolic gives great and various possibilities for the subject to construct his own social identity.

Man as subject that relates to other subject is characterized by a substitution. The symbolic as the big other is believed as the barred subject (\$) symbolic representation. This belief causes a constitutive and original displacement. Žižek puts it this way, "There is no immediate, self-present living subjectivity to whom the belief embodied in social things can be attributed, and who is, then, dispossessed of it. There are some beliefs, the most fundamental ones, which are from the very outset decentered, beliefs of the other; the phenomenon of the subject supposed to believe is thus universal and structurally necessary."³³

There are several important points from that statement. First, subjectivity is not immediate and it is fetishistic because it is always-already represented by the other, the symbolic. In other words, human subject in his relation to others is always represented by non-human things and is certain that those are what he really is as human subject. \$ is represented by S1 and

this S1 interacts with other S1 while \$ misrecognizes S1 as his true self.

Second, man as subject is decentered and dependent upon the belief of the other. Anytime one believes something, he surrenders himself to the other. This is what happens when parents act as if they believe in Santa Claus because they are certain that their children do believe it. Children, here, are the guarantors. That is to say, the other the symbolic order-guarantees the belief of the \$. Third, there is other subject qua subject supposed to believe within the believing subject. Subject never really believes as what does believe is the big other.

Even desire does not belong to subject. Desire is the desire of the other.³⁴ The problem with this statement lies in the “of”. At the symbolic level, Žižek sees it as both *genetivus subjectivus* and *genetivus objectivus*.³⁵ Desire, which is mediated by the symbolic, signifies that the one who desires is the symbolic, not the subject. This is the “of” as *genetivus subjectivus*. As *genetivus objectivus*, the “of” tells us that the desire of the other is the object of the subject's desire: what I desire is to be desired-recognized by the other.³⁶

Worth Its Salt

That is Žižek's endeavor to save the Cartesian subject. The key concepts on subjectivity from Descartes, Kant, and Hegel do not have to bring about the fear provoking specter of modernity. After being interpreted in Lacanian perspective, their thoughts reveal the dependence of the very assertion of the subject's autonomy on the sympathetic response of an otherness.³⁷

The new understanding of subject as offered by Žižek should make humans wiser. The very fact that as subject man is dependent to the other warns him against excluding anything that is not the same. The empty cogito is shouting to us, telling that basically as subject we are open toward otherness because that very otherness is inherent in us. Even our desire is the desire of the other.

Žižek does not get rid of human subjectivity as man needs to be recognized as subject. Or else, we do not have anything to hold while trying to make sense of reality. However, if we are too proud of our subjectivity, we are likely to reject and deny what is not the same as us. Žižek has given a new way of understanding what being subject means without confining the subjectivity as something fixed and closed.

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End Notes:

1. Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick, *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 389
2. Cf. *ibid.*
3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London & New York: Verso, 1999), p. 184.
4. *Ibid.* p.2
5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London & New York: Verso, 1989), pp. ix-xi.
6. Peter Dews, *The Logic of Disintegration*, (London & New York: Verso, 1987), p. 51.
7. Cf. *ibid.* p. 54.
8. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I" in Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, (London & New York: Verso, 1994), p. 94.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 104.
11. Alan Sheridan in his notes in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 280.
12. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 162.
13. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), p.32.
14. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 162.
15. Cf. Peter Dews, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
16. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 173.
17. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 175.
18. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 12.
19. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 58.
20. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p.13.
21. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 12
22. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 14.
23. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 15.
24. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 21.
25. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 30
26. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, (London & New York: Verso, 1996), p. 129.
27. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 220.
28. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 160.
29. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 160
30. Cf. *Tarrying With the Negative* pp. 73-75; *The Indivisible Remainder* pp. 132-136. This story is originally from Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and Assertion of Anticipated Certainty" in *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1988.
31. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 135.
32. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 135.

33. Slavoj Žižek, “The Interpassive Subject”, in *The Symptom* no.4, Spring 2003 on www.lacan.com
34. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* quoted from Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 120.
35. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 167.
36. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 167.
37. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, p. 169.