
IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE AND ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

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Setting the frame is a powerful piece of work—who names the world and who frames the issue matters. In area after area, issue after issue, we might productively open space for debate as we question the wisdom of the dominant frame: ...Why does every newspaper have a business section but not a labor section? Why are workers who cross borders in search of jobs considered “illegal immigrants,” while the conditions that give rise to their movement—collapsing prices and massive unemployment caused by the unchecked flow of capital and environmental degradation—are rarely a part of the story? Why is the so-called achievement gap accepted as an empirical reality decontextualized from...“savage inequalities” or absent a sustained critique of the testing industry? –William Ayers¹

At the start of the 2010-2011 school year, the superintendent/principal’s address said that “The product of a Monforton School² education is a student who is intellectually accomplished, curious, critical, confident, self-disciplined, lives ethically, and is driven to learn.” Current uniform, high-stakes accountability educational policy in the United States, in its methods of implementation and assessment, aims for something very different than that: high achievement, as narrowly defined as primarily that which can be registered in test scores and which does not require the characteristics Monforton School works to nurture.

Yet, American educational discourse fails to acknowledge the elision of such aims from its policies. The contents of this omission can be understood as the remainder or leftover that any Lacanian (big, or capital “O”) Other—or conceived and narrativized social consciousness—inheres. The notion of the Other, at least in later Lacan³ and in Žižek,⁴ demonstrates that we falsely

¹ William Ayers, “Barack Obama and the Fight for Public Education,” *Harvard Education Review* 79, no. 2 (2009), 289.

² Lynne Scalia is the superintendent of this district and principal of this school.

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX – Encore. On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972-1973). See also Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XIX - ... Ou pire*. (From unedited French manuscripts, 1971-1972).

attribute a kind of coherence and comprehensiveness to our public discourses, and that what is always left out, or left over, allows for perverse exploitation by those adherents of the system, as is the case in all social constructions, in all ideologies. Thus, it is distinctly differentiated from the more widely known “discourse analysis,” in that here what is left out always returns in a “secret” way, doing harm in any number of ways, “secretly” benefiting certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, while the causes for the harm are sought in the public discourses which we have authorized, or which have been authorized by those who have “set the frame.” Put another way, the participant in any ideological blindness always acquires a gain of pleasure or satisfaction within that very blindness, although the specific types both of blindness and of gain vary and have different destructive consequences, depending on that variation. Whether it be the ravages of colonialism, pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church, environmental degradation in the service of “progress,” assessment methods in No Child Left Behind, or accountability measures in Race to the Top, the concept remains the same: what is left out of the public discourse will return in an imaginary construction that falsely explains and lays blame for the problems in our societal aims, all the while maintaining the “secret” gains of those exploiting the leftover. This is Žižek’s Public Law and its Perverse Superego Supplement.⁵

To name this leftover is always discouraged with great threat by the forces of social reproduction that suppress the very thing that must be spoken. Althusser made this explicitly conceivable with his concepts of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and their attendant Repressive State Apparatus (RSA).⁶ Similarly, Apple⁷ speaks of schools’ hidden curriculum as the inculcation into an uncritical acceptance of the dominant social order. Likewise, Badiou⁸ refers to the State of a Situation as the function of the dominant social order’s reinforcing and maintaining its status, a guaranteeing that anything hidden—in Apple’s sense—is not recognized for what it is.

We are proposing that there are certain psychoanalytic insights, at the intersection of the clinic and of critical social theory, which become crucial at precisely the point of recognizing the hidden curriculum. Furthermore, we

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005). See also Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. (London and New York: Verso, 2009).

⁵ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*.

⁶ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (1971, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

⁷ Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979, New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

propose that it is at this point that a political actor, and an educator or educational theorist interested in radical transformation, must seek to *act* in ways which do not appeal directly to the dominant order, do not insist that it make certain accommodations in the name of Justice or any other noble aim; the site of transformative resistance lies elsewhere. It is at this point, where the Other does not cover the possibilities it would have us believe it does, where the particular dominant order is potentially revealed to be incapable of delivering on the promises it would have us believe that it can, that one must *act*. Badiou and Žižek agree that this is the point at which radical or *True* change can occur; they even agree that to work within the system, to attempt to have it emend some injustice or another, merely and unwittingly strengthens the system by augmenting the illusion that there aren't crucial impossibilities built into it. For Badiou, the Event⁹ is the arrival of a moment where the dominant system's unequivocal incapacity to deliver on its promises reveals itself—if we can pay attention to this rupture and breakdown for what it is, if we can be called or interpellated at that moment as subjects, as political subjects, and proceed to deploy the possibilities of the moment of the event. For Žižek, we suggest, the *act* is the subject's effort to bring about the event, to disturb the system's smooth functioning and reveal its *obscene underbelly*—one of Žižek's evocative terms for it—to influence the system not at its point of "Public Law," but at its perverse superego supplement, that which is left over by the illusion of the system as capable of "covering its bases," of delivering on its promises. Žižek refers to this as *Acheronta movebo*,¹⁰ the motto with which Freud introduced his dreambook, referring to influencing the analysand not by appealing directly to his narrative, but by attempting to bring to his attention that which is not included within it, and which will disturb his comfortable adherence to it: this is actually a succinct way to speak of the unconscious, of what the unconscious is.

Žižek and Badiou have both been criticized as failing to provide any possibility of agency for those wishing to resist the ravages of any dominant and structurally-necessarily oppressive social order, any Repressive State Apparatus, in Althusser's terminology. The complaint would amount to there being this very (what Žižek calls) *social antagonism*, and that any iteration of it can only be (possibly) overthrown at moments of unpredictably arising Events. It is Žižek in particular for whom this is arguably not the case, as suggested by our reading of Žižek's *Acheronta movebo*. Yet how one "moves the underworld"—Freud's reference to the river Acheron, the underworld of the unconscious—cannot have a prescriptive formula, is antithetical to any such formula. Still, there are certain coordinates for it that can be delineated. We

⁹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (1998, London and New York: Continuum, 2005)

¹⁰ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*.

believe the recent work of Adrian Johnston,¹¹ and Geoff Pfeifer's¹² interpretation of Johnston's work, is in accord with what follows but speaks to it in somewhat different language.¹³ The following remarks of certain contemporary clinical work with psychotics, and some of the cultural reflections which have arisen from it, help us to think our own ways toward a theory of the *act*, of how one can both critique ideology and then deploy that critique *Acheronta movebo*, moving heretofore unwitting ideologues into their own desirous spaces of critique, of desire for understanding and transforming in a way which doesn't fall back on the trap of, yet again unwittingly, working in such a way that the dominant repressive system continues along undisturbed.

LESSONS FROM THE CLINIC

In the Lacanian clinic of the psychotic, in Quebec, at the *Groupe interdisciplinaire freudien de recherche et d'intervention clinique et culturelle* (Gifric), where hundreds of psychotics have been psychoanalytically treated for nearly thirty years now, some insights relevant to public policy and the Other have emerged.¹⁴ In order to speak of this, some further familiarity with Lacanian theory is necessary, and presented here.

One must understand the psychotic as without the experiential protection that the neurotic has, that is, without the identification with the Other that presents itself as complete and as capable of eliminating those leftovers that can be perversely turned against us, the Lacanian notion of the aphoristic *sujet supposé savoir*, or subject supposed to know. This is why the neurotic always gives away his opinion: "the other must know, I cannot know it," whether or not he realizes that he is doing so. The neurotic thereby avoids *lack*, the incompleteness of the Other and of himself—of any state of absolutely unrequitable longing, fantasizing that some other knows those crucial things which he does not, and thereby accounts for (what might appear to be) ruptures in the smooth functioning of the social order. The psychotic, who does not live within this illusion, has unmediated (by the non-existent big Other) access to a *savoir*—he knows there is no protective and complete Other—which the neurotic must struggle to ever achieve. Unlike the neurotic, though, he must live with an unmodulated and terrifying insight. Just as neurotics may or may not become symptomatic – in the sense of growing ill owing to a failure of

¹¹ Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

¹² Geoff Pfeifer, "Review of Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*," *Human Studies* 33, no. 3 (2010), 359-364. Also, personal correspondence, 2011.

¹³ Johnston's and Pfeifer's works have only recently come to our attention, but the reader should be aware of them as particularly accessible expositors and theorists of Žižek.

¹⁴ Willy Apollon, *Les journées d'études annuelles du Gifric (Groupe interdisciplinaire freudien de recherche et d'intervention clinique et culturelle)*, 2010.

one's psychostructural coordinates, so too for the psychotic. When the psychotic's psychic structure fails him, he generates a material explanation for the terrifying insight he cannot bear, delusions which explain the disturbance of *lack* and all of its consequents, falling ill in the search for protection. The neurotic pays a different price for his protection, that of a silencing of the ideologico-critical place in himself which would identify the gaps in the Other's discourse, a revelation which would simultaneously liberate him but situate him without the sanction of that Other and as having to bear ideas, opinions, beliefs which place him at odds with the often tenaciously held views of the Other. This neurotic is the most commonplace of all humans. He avoids, rebels against, what Lacan called *lack in being*¹⁵—a constitutive lack, it must be understood, fating us to live with what Žižek has called *pure antagonism* as the individual correlate of his *social antagonism* mentioned earlier.¹⁶

In Québec, one speaks of *la nécessité d'un espace pour l'humain au-delà des enjeux de civilisation*,¹⁷ a psychical and social space in which can be heard the many social discourse ruptures that return in the psychotic's speech and delusions, and of which the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)-supported mental health system, and its practitioners, are terrified and attempt to silence through coercion of various sorts, for example, presuming that brain chemistry trumps subjectivity, and which always misname the psychotic's access to the leftover as some sort of psychopathology in itself. This space *pour l'humain* would be a kind of radical ideologico-critical receptivity and analytic aim, a liberatory space which is not hostage to the Other, not hostage to the idea that the spaces of resistance and transformation are to be within the dominant social order; this *espace pour l'humain* is precisely against that idea and is decidedly *au-delà des enjeux de civilisation*. Without that radical critique, there is no way out for the psychotic caught in his delusions (parenthetically, there is also no way out for the neurotic caught in his *returns of the repressed* without such a radical critique).

AN UNFOLDING THEORY OF THE ACT

In education, the “dominant frame” of which Ayers speaks, of holding schools and teachers accountable for any failures to raise test scores and improve certain (technical or technocratic) competencies, leaves out aims like critical thinking or cultural criticism through its methods of implementation

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in Lacan's *Écrits* (1996, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

¹⁶ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*.

¹⁷ Apollon, *Les journées d'études*, trans., the necessity of a space for the human beyond the stakes of civilization. Incidentally, Apollon was a student of Badiou's before settling in Québec three or so decades ago.

and assessment.¹⁸ We fail to mention that we are leaving these considerations out of our goals. We therein mask the *social antagonism* inherent in public life. We therein silence or close any possible *space for the human*. And of course, and more materially and directly regarding justice, we leave out consideration of any structurally unjust underpinnings of the dominant ideology. Structurally *per definitionem*, we must then fail to mention that we are leaving these considerations out of our ideology-stabilizing goals. *Pace* Anyon,¹⁹ it would not be enough here to give as an example how U.S. educational policy attempts to substitute for economic reform, and to suggest therein that radical policy changes are needed, as Anyon most recently concludes, leaving the functioning of the ISA, and its accompanying RSA, undisturbed.

We have a colleague who is a principal in an Indian school in a western state. His school was the only reservation school to have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—the only reservation school in the state deemed not to have failed. He estimates that approximately one-third of his students are somewhere on the fetal alcohol spectrum. He calls that the elephant in the room because it is not discussed openly. He is concerned about the rote methods and programs of direct instruction that are used, chosen by him and other educational leaders and administered by staff who want to protect students, and themselves, from the consequences of doing poorly on the tests. He is concerned that all these methods deaden the intellectual curiosity of all children, in the same way alcohol and drug use of the mother deadened the future of some of his students when they were fetuses. The leftover, the perverse supplement, is unspoken, unexamined. Not only is this aspect of a hidden curriculum prohibited or risky, but the question of whether the current system requires this aspect of a hidden curriculum for its “smooth functioning,” as Žižek says, has no place in society’s contemporary discourse. It is one thing to ask of the system that it redress disadvantages that its current policies fail to treat, but it is quite another thing to utter the idea that the current politico-ideological order contravenes the possibility of actual acquisition of such noble aims as egalitarianism, or social and economic justice, or dignified lives for all.

While this principal is being celebrated as a model of an effective educational leader, he is aware that he is complicit, along with so many others of us who have gone along with the dominant educational policies, policies which work for the benefit of some, but never for all. What if he notices the

¹⁸ Charles Fazzaro, “Critical Enquiry and Implications for Education, Policy and Practice,” *The Journal of Philosophy and History of Education* 52 (2002), 52-56. By the way, recent suggestions to include “critical thinking” and “creativity” among the skills measured in Race to the Top specifically contravene our proposal, being no more than a particularly bald emergence of the perverse superego supplement, since it attempts—with its appropriation of some of the Left’s language of resistance—to present the illusion that True change can occur within the existing system.

¹⁹ Jean Anyon, *Marx and Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).

system's seducing the citizen into acquiescence and "adjustment" to society? What if he critically inquires whether the educational ISA, not only through its policies but by its very structure, supports a system of exploitation and dominance? What if he seriously critiques whether emendations to the current system, such as Obama's recent wish to include measures of creativity and critical thinking in tests which "hold schools accountable," can remedy its radical failures? What, then, is he, or any of us, to do with such potentially subversive inquiries, if one dares to have them in the first place?

After making AYP, our colleague described the ensuing efforts to recruit him off the reservation, the visits to his school so others can learn from their success, his school becoming the pride of his depressed community. How does one who attempts to act as educational leader, positioned squarely inside the Ideological State Apparatus of schooling, take a position of vigilance against normalizing practices? Or worse, and more to the point we wish to make, how does one look to radical transformation, and aim toward a system which would not require the likes of such Indian reservations in the first place?²⁰

There are dangers to bear, to speak truth.²¹ If a leader begins to talk about practices that fly in the face of the prevailing dominant order, that fly in the face of that order's need to be thought of as capable of delivering on its grand promises, they are likely to be placed in a precarious situation, becoming an outsider, someone who needs to be removed or marginalized. Whereas the neurotic fails to *resist*—in the noblest sense of that term—when he relies for his self-esteem on what the social order says is good; to take a position of resistance toward radical transformation is to open and sustain a place for *l'humain*—to make places for the gaps and ruptures in the dominant order's narrative to find open recognition. It is to attempt to bring to life the moment of a Badiouian Event, such that the crucial and structurally necessitated failures of the prevailing order suddenly come to light for those who have heretofore felt sustained by and, in fact, helped to sustain, that order. This effort is precisely what can be argued as constituting Žižek's notion of the *act*, which he takes from Lacan. We suggest that one may deploy this *act*, which allows one's interlocutor to suddenly and liberatingly come to terms with the lack in the Other, to come to terms with the perverse superego supplement as always residing on the margins of a given social order's narrative for itself, to bear one's own critique of ideology which cuts one off from reliance upon the Other for sustaining oneself. To be a political and educational actor in this way is to

²⁰ Obviously, we are not hereby intimating that an abolition of Indian reservations would benefit Native Americans, such a proposal serving only to promote a further "taking" from the native peoples.

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics*.

bear this critique, first of all,²² and then to act in ways which seek to bring others through the same psychostructural territory such an agent has himself already traversed. This is the Lacanian act, the Žižekian act, the Gifric *act*, this making a space for the human beyond the stakes of civilization, beyond the need of the dominant order to preserve itself as (dupliciously) capable of adjustments which will fill the gaps in the structure of the aims of justice. It is, as they say in Québec, a constraining the other to encounter and articulate the “holes in the real,” the gaps in the dominant order’s narrative, in the Other, which can only lead to that order’s overthrow.

To give this a context, much of Anyon’s work over the past 35 years has been an effort to expose simplistic notions of the causes of urban poverty and low achievement.

Rules and regulations regarding teaching, curriculum and assessment certainly are important, but policies to eliminate poverty-wage work and housing segregation (for example) should be part of the educational policy panoply as well, for these have consequences... at least as profound as curriculum, pedagogy, and testing.²³

We pretend that schools will be able to accomplish a noble aim such as the elimination of poverty through educational policies which blame and punish those schools and teachers whose work doesn’t pass the muster that our discourse sanctions. We fail to acknowledge that no amount of raising test scores can ever eliminate poverty and unfair privilege and privation to an entire socioeconomic class.

However, and again crucially, can educational policy shifts of any variety, within the dominant socioeconomic order, ever be able to bring us to a world of justice for all? Anyon points out, as she links federal policies to the maintaining of poverty, that even when school reform succeeds, it fails; for example, it fails if the only jobs available are those that pay poverty or near-poverty wages, or that even in a very strong economy, almost half the workforce earns what economists call poverty-zone wages.²⁴

²² This is one meaning of Lacan’s closing comment in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” cited above: “Castration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire.” It is precisely this notion of desire to which Lacan refers when he says that one ought never give up on one’s desire, in this sense, desire which is always inextricably linked with ethics.

²³ Jean Anyon, “What ‘Counts’ as Educational Policy? Notes Toward a New Paradigm,” *Harvard Educational Review* 75, no. 1 (2005), 66.

²⁴ Jean Anyon and Greene Kiersten, “No Child Left Behind as an Anti-Poverty Measure,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2007), 157-162.

Anyon names, puts her finger on, the leftover, the perverse supplement—which is denied entry into public discourse—in exposing the effects of economic policies, fueled here by an uncritiqued and thus unchecked capitalism; she exposes those silenced considerations which “continually trump the effects of education policies.”²⁵ The crucial question that both Badiou and Žižek would have us ask is not what better policies might lead to justice within the current order, but can the current order ever lead to justice? Nel Noddings challenges educators to suspect that the accountability movement, which focuses on test scores as the measure of achievement, may in part be an attempt to distract citizens from the problems children face—bad housing, medical and dental attention, living in violence and in fear.²⁶ Yet shouldn't we also ask whether attention to policy emendation as remedy unwittingly serves as distraction from the question of the current dominant politico-economic order's prospective unsustainability, its hypothetically, structurally determined impossibility to deliver?

Teachers who might dare educate thoughtful citizens, but not show high test scores, will be spoken of, through the language and measurement/criteria of educational policy, as doing a substandard job, as growing fat off educational policy which doesn't hold them accountable. Yet, all the while, it is the socioeconomic beneficiaries of a system—not just of a policy—which fails to analyze ISAs and their attendant RSA, who grow fat on the backs of students who are *precisely* not taught to critique the systems and policies which have generated their plights.

We propose, apropos Badiou and Žižek, and through the means of the act as it is being developed at Gifric, that we must attempt to make a place, *au-delà des enjeux de civilisation*, for the human to cognize and utter the leftover, the perverse superego supplement—the way the dominant order must “secretly” exploit its members so that it can continue to function. Amongst other considerations, we must be able to contemplate whether the current dominant social order of global capitalism can ever deliver an emancipatory outcome for humanity, and whether any and all efforts at educational policy reform within this system ultimately and most crucially amount to an unwitting maintenance of the very system which structurally can do no more than oppress in the ways it publically states it wishes to resolve. We must be able to think and interrogate this, and any Idea—to capitalize it and give it its Socratic status—which might emancipate radically, transformatively.

²⁵ Anyon, “What ‘Counts’ as Educational Policy,” 83.

²⁶ Nel Noddings, *When School Reform Goes Wrong* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 4. See also William Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to “No Child Left Behind”* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

To open a space for the leftover to be articulated requires *ethical leaders*, ethical in Badiou's²⁷ sense of the term, not in any ideological framework, but rather in the sense of sustaining their groups' disputations of *social antagonisms* through the capacity of having come to terms with the *pure antagonism* within their own being.²⁸ Such a vision aims for nothing less than a culture of ideologico-criticism,²⁹ a culture—regardless of how large or small such a “culture” might be—which acknowledges lack-in-being and lack in the Other, and which openly devises and continues to devise strategies which aim at uncovering efforts to conceal that lack, a concealing which can only have destructive consequences. To *act* ethically, in the Badiouian-Žižekian sense we are proposing, ethical leaders—as we describe them—will seek and nurture all opportunities presented them as leaders to make Gifrician *spaces for the human*, spaces where we can dialogue and critique and dialogue and critique again, no matter whether or not the Other can be sustained as a result.

²⁷ Badiou, *Ethics*.

²⁸ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*.

²⁹ Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*.
