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Examining the Mechanism of Disavowal and its Two Forms: Cynical Disavowal and Fetishistic Disavowal

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Examining the Mechanism of Disavowal and its Two Forms: Cynical Disavowal and Fetishistic Disavowal

Abstract

This essay posits the existence of two forms of disavowal: cynical and fetishistic. It explores how cynical disavowal involves maintaining a manipulative distance by obscuring the gap between belief and action, allowing the cynic to disavow their investment in an unattainable object and their knowledge of the Other's lack. In contrast, fetishistic disavowal acknowledges both the objective reality of things and their subjective appearance to the fetishist. Unlike cynicism, fetishism does not rely on obscuring the gap between belief and action; instead, it recognizes and embraces both aspects. In doing so, the essay highlights significant differences between the manipulative distance of the cynic and the self-awareness of the fetishist. It acknowledges the role of cynicism in maintaining the limits and prohibitions within ideology and authority, through examples of banality, while also emphasizing the unique qualities of fetishistic disavowal.

When we engage in an action, fantasy, or belief that we know to be untrue, we engage in what Freud (1927) referred to as disavowal (*Verleugnung*). Through disavowal, some form of "comprise" is achieved: upon becoming aware of the mother's absent penis, the child disavows such an absence in order to maintain their belief in the phallus. In effect, through disavowal, there is a division in the child's belief in the

phallus: the child has "retained that belief, but he has also given it up" (Freud, 1927, p. 155).

Under Lacan (2020), this process is revised to incorporate the child's disavowal of the m(O)ther's lack, which functions as a key mechanism in examples of perversion. In so doing, Lacan separates disavowal from examples of repression (as seen in neurosis) and foreclosure (as seen in psychosis), by noting that when confronted with the ambiguity of the (m)Other's desire, and the lack of any answer to this desire, the child offers itself as the object of the (m)Other's desire—a nonetheless ambivalent position that requires the pervert to ascertain an unlimited *jouissance*, while also seeking the very limit, in the form of the Law (the Name-of-the-Father), that would separate them from the (m)Other's desire and the proximity of an unbearable *jouissance* (Swales, 2012).

Accordingly, it is in our day-to-day lives that we live with and perform examples of disavowal as a fundamental component of our social and psychical existence. Here, "images of fullness and completeness … fill in the gaps of the social order" to such an extent that, in the case of authority, "rather than seeing the gap in a figure of authority, [… we] take this authority as absolute" (McGowan, 2020, p. 231). Where lack remains the cause of desire (Lacan, 2004), there is, for both the subject and the Other, no object that could satisfy desire, and, thus, no satiation of the subject's lack. Instead, throughout our lives we disavow the constitutive lack that avers our symbolic castration.

Across numerous publications, Slavoj Žižek has extensively applied the concept of disavowal to help explain its central role in the functioning of ideology (Žižek, 2008a). Ideology operates by necessitating a rejection of certain unsettling or inconvenient truths. It functions through a mechanism wherein individuals may

recognize the existence of problems or contradictions within their belief system, yet concurrently choose to disavow these issues in order to preserve the integrity of their ideological framework. For Žižek, disavowal provides an understanding of how the subject continues to maintain and perpetuate certain belief systems and social structures, as well as the contradictions therein.

Indeed, it is for this reason that Žižek (2023a) argues that, "Today, ideology functions less and less like a symptom and more and more like a fetish" (p. 32). Whereas once it was conceived that better knowledge of the symptom would enlighten the subject, allowing them to cast off its ideological shackles to perceive the world as it really is, today, such a critique of the symptom is, in its Žižekian formulation, transferred for the fetish (Žižek, 2007, 2008a). It is in the form of fetishist disavowal—I know very well, but nonetheless… (I continue doing it)—that one maintains one's ideological position. Ideology works by relying on the subject's very knowledge of this ideology. It is the fetish that constitutes, "the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth" (Žižek, 2007, p. 253).

By incorporating the concept of the fetish into his ideological critique, Žižek (2008a) leverages it as a tool to criticize and scrutinize the widespread presence of cynicism within the framework of contemporary ideological operations. The contention that the cynical subject knows very well that certain beliefs, values, or assertions are false—or, better still, belong to a certain hegemonic position, and, thus, are not shared by all—is, nonetheless, accepted by the cynic (Žižek, 2008a). For example, while we all know the problems and antagonisms brought about by capitalism, cynically, we nonetheless continue to act as if this were not the case. Echoing both Freudian and Lacanian interpretations of perversion, Žižek's fetishistic disavowal accentuates the divided structure that perversion presents. We are, much

like the pervert, fully aware of lack—both for the subject and the Other—yet we, nonetheless, disavow it. We function, that is, through the fetish (some object, belief, or value) that manages castration by disavowing this very lack.

Based upon this brief introduction, what the following essay will seek to achieve is an elaboration of how examples of disavowal function, today. Primarily, it will make the claim that there are in fact two forms of disavowal: a cynical disavowal and a fetishistic disavowal. Though these two forms are widely conflated in Žižek's work—indeed, for Žižek examples of fetishistic disavowal are prescribed via a specifically cynical mode—the purpose of the following essay is to pay closer attention to Mannoni's (2003), "I know well, *but all the same*..." (Hagin, 2008; Kuldova, 2019; Zupančič, 2022a).[1] That is, by focusing on the effects of the "but all the same" in examples of fetishism it is argued that a significant variation to the cynic's position can be made: namely, that "the fetishist's attachment to his fetish and its function" (Mańko, 2016, p. 37) can elaborate upon important "differences among the effects of disavowal, whether they are acknowledged or ignored" (Mannoni, 2003, p. 76). Before elaborating upon these differences, let us begin with a discussion of cynicism and the disavowal it relies upon.

Cynical Disavowal: The Disavowal of Knowledge

An important consequence of the cynical position is that it is frequently made from some perceived position of enlightenment. For the cynic, they do not fall foul of the misrecognitions that permeate society, instead their autonomy is guaranteed by their knowledge—in short, the cynic *knows*. Underpinning this knowledge is the key characteristic that defines the cynic's position: a *cynical distance* grounded in the

cynic's "knowing better" (Author, 2021). Such "knowing better" inherently functions as the mode through which the cynic disavows their knowledge: they achieve distance to their knowledge by disavowing it (encapsulated in, "I *know* very well, but nevertheless…"). They can be fully aware that the commodity is nothing more than a simple object, endowed with certain ideological significances, yet they disavow this knowledge so as to continue to enjoy the commodity itself.

The cynicism that always "includes a distance towards itself", so that a "critical distance towards the social order is the very medium through which this order reproduces itself" (Žižek, 2023a, p. 145), is ideologically upheld via a "cynicism [that] entices us with the lure of 'knowing better' of 'seeing through' the illusion to the underlying reality" (Friedlander, 2022, p. 116).[2] It is for this reason that Flisfeder (2021) contends that cynicism "is inherently perverse since it operates by acknowledging failure, but nevertheless disavows this fact in order to go on enjoying" (p. 186). We can add here that what is enjoyed is the sense of continually aiming for a concretizing of desire (Ragland, 1995).

Examples of cynicism can help to orientate the subject in a variety of ways, not least in examples of symbolic authority, whereupon, in full recognition of the fact "that symbolic titles are just semblances, illusion" we nonetheless "act AS IF they are true in order not to disturb not only the social order but also [… our] own ability to desire" (Žižek, 2022, p. 213). This poses a number of important insights into the limitations of traditional ideological critique—a critique that always relies upon the assertion that better knowledge will counteract false consciousness—as well as the extent to which our enjoyment is itself imbricated in examples of cynical disavowal. For McGowan (2022a), "More knowledge can augment the amount of enjoyment that subjects obtain from their disavowal of what they know" (p. 69); insofar that it is the

very sacrifice of this knowledge that produces one's enjoyment. Here, "The 'better knowledge' contained in the first clause of the logic of disavowal ['I know very well...'] enhances the capacity for the pleasure implied in the second clause ['but even so...']" (Friedlander, 2018). This is perhaps best expressed when we acknowledge that we remain fully aware of the harmful effects of smoking, over-exercising, excessive drinking and eating, yet we, nonetheless, continue to partake in these activities to varying degrees (Author, forthcoming).

However, there is, in these examples, a clear case of one's enjoyment being grounded in the *distance* that one's "knowing better" provides. In contrast to McGowan (2022a), for whom one's enjoyment resides within the sacrifice of one's knowledge, which is subsequently disavowed, Krzych (2022), in his analysis of conservative memes, details how "conservative audiences may take perverse pleasure in forms of political antagonism at a distance"; what he refers to as a "politics without participation" (p. 5). In effect, it is the distance afforded to one's knowing better that is enjoyed.

We can, at this point, elaborate upon an important contention regarding the object of disavowal in examples of cynicism. Indeed, as previously noted, what is disavowed in cynicism is knowledge of the (m)Other's lack. This permits a perverse distancing on behalf of the subject—a cynical pleasure encapsulated by the fact that one knows one is acting against one's better knowledge. What this requires, however, is a cynical distance: a distance forged between one's knowledge and one's ability to act despite one's knowledge, indeed, to disavow this very knowledge. In such cases, the cynic's knowledge is held above the social order; they are, it seems, 'above' the order of appearances that everyone else falls for, but which they nonetheless follow. The crux of this cynical position is that it rests upon a decidedly non-alienated

conception of the subject—or, at least, a subject that is able to forgo or overlook their alienation in the cynicism they profess. One is always free to act under the logic of a cynical distance where one's disavowed knowledge provides them the capacity to obtain a cynical-manipulative distance towards it. Yet, what this reveals is a subject who is completely dependent on the cynicism they aver. Indebted to their better knowledge, the cynic nonetheless disavows this knowledge in order to sustain their enjoyment.

Thus, it is in accordance with the disavowal of knowledge that the cynic's position becomes clear. The cynic's mistake is to perceive enjoyment in the disavowal of knowledge as a form of transgression in and of itself. In other words, through the illusion of transgression, perpetuated via a cynical indifference or non-conformity, the cynic nonetheless relies upon an authority in order for it then to be transgressed. Here, the "secret objective of perversion", in the case of cynicism, "is not to transgress the law, but to bring back its authority" (Feldner and Vighi, 2018, p. 110).[3]

Achieving (Dis)Belief: A Cynical-Manipulative Distance

This failure to transgress is demonstrated by the fact that the cynic relies upon the disavowal of their knowledge. While, for the cynic, their better knowledge may prescribe them the position not to believe, they ultimately require, and no less rely upon, an Other who *does* believe. It is in this way that the cynic's distance is, for them, reassuringly maintained: they can continue to belief via the Other's belief. More importantly, the cynic's better knowledge plays no role in undermining the enjoyment that pertains to belief. Instead, "better knowledge forms a necessary prerequisite of

each and every belief; we believe precisely what we know better" (Pfaller, 2014, p. 105).

As noted, such awareness belies the fact that the cynic's belief is one that always distances them from the naïve Other, who does believe.[4] While a cynic will act upon a particular belief—they may, for example, continue to keep the horseshoe above the door, knowing full well that such superstitions are nonsense—their belief is always disavowed through the "knowing better" that they seek to maintain: "They believe instead at one step's remove, with the comfort of cynical distance from their belief" (Hook, 2018, p. 97).

The mechanism of such a disavowed belief points to the importance of the Other for the cynic. That is, "the innocent gaze of the big Other", for whom all appearances are ultimately maintained (Žižek, 2008b, p. 277), is upheld by the cynic through a "cynical-manipulative distance" (Žižek, 2003, p. 125). This distance, and the manipulation it requires, is distinguished by the fact that while "I do not believe, … I transpose my belief into a naïve [O]ther' (Žižek, 2003, p. 125). For example, though "I know there is no God, I nonetheless pretend to believe for the sake of my children who really believe and would be disappointed" (Žižek, 2003, p. 125).

The effects of such a manipulative distance is that it provides a certain "interpassive inoculation" for the cynic; a withdrawal or distancing from the politics of a particular situation. Krzych (2022) highlights:

> Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in the U.S., politicians and influencers on the Right have demonstrated a peculiar form of withdrawal, a refusal to participate fully in the pandemic, as if the ongoing global crisis was a matter of choice rather than a brute fact. … [T]he minimal acknowledgment of

> calamity, but with a clever act of displacement, in which the real crisis is attributable to those fools who naively believe the pandemic to be a serious threat. (p. 10).

This "minimal gesture of social participation" effectively functions for the cynic by allowing them to see through the public ideology (Krzych, 2022, p. 9), thus distancing them from those too easily duped into believing its importance (Johnston, 2004; McGowan, 2004; Pfaller, 2005; Žižek, 2002).

Furthermore, the significance of this manipulative distance is that it allows the cynic to continue desiring. That is, for the cynic, their fetishistic disavowal emanates from a manipulation of the object of desire itself. Manipulatively, the cynic "keep[s] alive the dream of successfully attaining the lost object while fetishistically denying one's investment in this idea" (McGowan, 2011, p. 29 see also Flisfeder, 2021, p. 157). Manipulation occurs when:

> In order to feel free to pursue the lost object of desire we require the enactment of some limit preventing its access. In the form of disavowal, we miss the point that we are always, still, actualizing the form of the Other whom we transgress (Flisfeder, 2023, p. 180)

It is, however, at this point that an important distinction can be made between the manipulative distance that is achieved in examples of cynical disavowal and the relation to disavowal that is obtained by the fetishist. While it is in our material practices that we cynically disavow our investment in the desire for the unobtainable lost object, a process that requires the actualization of the limit that prevents the

cynic's capacity to obtain this very object (Flisfeder, 2021, 2023), such an analysis relies primarily upon disavowing the gap that exists *between* what the cynic believes and what they do. It is through disavowing and therefore obscuring this gap in the form of one's better knowledge that the cynic maintains their distance, while all the while ensuring their very investment to the object of desire. The key distinction to be drawn here, and what will be returned to below, is that "in the structure of fetishistic disavowal, the self-proclaimed fetishists are not only aware of how things are, but also how they really appear to them" (Kuldova, 2019, p. 774)—in other words, for the fetishist there is no *manipulation* of their "better knowledge"; they know what they do.

Trump's Cynicism

This is not to negate the effects of cynicism as a form of disavowal, or to critique the very ways in which examples of cynicism rely upon an actualization of the limits and prohibitions that maintains one's perverse relation to ideology and its forms of authority. Rather, it is to propose an important distinction within the cynic's manipulative distance and the fetishist's awareness. In fact, as Žižek (2016) highlights, the "fetish can function in two opposite ways: either its role remains unconscious … or you think that the fetish is that which really matters" (p. 176). Importantly, these opposing functions can be coupled with what Žižek (2020a) refers to as "distinguish[ing] two levels of distance" (p. 299). He notes:

> First, there is the widespread stance of distance, which only confirms our inner belonging—say, true patriots are not stupid fanatic zealots, they love to make

> fun of their country, etc. Then, there is the more radical cynical distance, such as, for example, the one that prevailed in the Soviet Union in Brezhnev's time of 'stagnation'—after the fall of Khrushchev, the nomenklatura no longer took its own ideology seriously; Khrushchev was the last Soviet leader who really believed in Communism (Žižek, 2020a, p. 299).

In examples of cynical disavowal, it is when no one takes the ideology seriously that a "manipulative distance" is at play. Such manipulation is apparent in the "eclipse of reason", which, today, "correspon[d] to new forms of power and domination that no longer really disguise their own agendas and do not even attempt to lie honestly anymore" (Ruda in Hamza and Ruda, 2020).

The capacity to lie without honesty, is clearly reflected in our current political predicaments, most notable, perhaps, in Žižek's (2021) account of "the cynical distance practiced by Donald Trump toward extreme Right violent groups" (p. 77). Indeed:

> Trump, … when … asked about radical rightist groups which propagate violence or conspiracy theories, seeks to formally distance himself from their problematic aspects while praising their general patriotic attitude. This distance is of course empty, a purely rhetorical device. Trump's tacit expectation is that the groups will act upon the implicit calls to violence his speeches are full of (Žižek, 2021, p. 78).

What is key to Trump's "empty distance" is that it functions by sustaining the very appearance of power (Žižek, 2020b). Through his offensive obscenities, Trump's

cynicism practices an obscene perversity that openly displays his vulgarity in the face of any reply. Such an openness in vulgarity ultimately allows Trump to declare a certain honesty regarding his intentions. Again:

> Trump … admits he is constantly breaking the rules (not just) of politeness, resorting to vulgar insinuations and throwing unverified or even blatantly false accusations at his enemies, but he presents this as a proof that he really means it, in contrast with liberal formal politeness (Žižek, 2020b, pp. 174-175).

In each example, Trump manipulates the distance between what he knows and what he does by overtly disavowing the gap between formal decency and obscenity. All of this functions by following a cynical disavowal, which, through his manipulation of "the rules", effectively distances him from the formal niceties and biases of the liberal political sphere. For this reason, "what makes Trump's obscenity perverse is that not only does he lie brazenly, without any restraint, he also directly tells the truth when one would expect him to be embarrassed by it" (Žižek, 2020b, p. 150).[5]

The crux of the matter is that Trump essentially chooses the illusion: the liberal political space which in no way prevented his ascension (similar forms of cynical manipulation can also be traced in the case of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Javier Milei in Argentina). In effect, Trump's manipulation of the political system reveals an empty, cynical acceptance of the current malaise, within which he remains safe in the knowledge that his actions are nothing more than a performance of the very illusions that uphold the liberal political order.

The Banality of Cynicism

The ramifications of Trump's cynicism remain perverse for those who both critique his assertions, but also for those who follow him. In the case of critiquing Trump, one is encouraged to maintain an almost cold distance towards his political ramifications: a sort of, "I told you so" attitude evinced by those happy to cynically deride Trump and politicians like him. At the same time, for Trump's supporters, Trump's political performances allow them "to see what is behind the fiction" (Salecl, 1998, p. 151): in this sense, a political system run largely on a set of biases that function to work against "them".

In either case, what Trump confirms is the cynic's knowledge. Given that "Today's consumerist is a cynical pervert who *knows*", it is in accordance with such knowing that "desire is neutralized" (Žižek, 2023b, p. 283, italics added). While the actualization of prohibition may allow the cynic to maintain their desire, it is, in contrast, through examples of cynicism that an eradication of desire is achieved (or, at least, that the knowledge to know one's desire is disavowed [Author, 2023b]). Unlike the hysteric, the perverse cynic is left with a nullified desire;[6] a nonetheless obedient position where the Other's lack, including its inherent mystery, is routinely disavowed, and confirmed by the cynic's position as the knowing non-duped (seeing through the fiction/illusion, but disavowing the significance of the fiction, nevertheless).

Along these lines, we can begin to extend our characterizations of cynicism as perpetuating a certain lack of imagination and fascination. That today it seems "people have lost a perspective for progress" is emphasised by the fact that for the cynic there is no "fetish [that] embodies fascination" (Pfaller, 2016). Ruda (2016) reflects upon the effects of this process, noting how:

> Cynicism … is a product of the alleged complete transparency of the functioning of capitalist dynamics (everyone knows that there are self-seeking interests behind everything, etc.), because what one assumes to see if one sees through this dynamics is that there is nothing left to imagine, no alternative to what is, no form of radical change. … The cynic is therefore led to assert the precise opposite of what he wanted to assert, namely that he sees through everything but ultimately he sees nothing, nothing to see, everywhere. He comprehends everything, but this in the last instance amounts to comprehending that one cannot comprehend what one sees through (pp. 191-192).

In such "full" comprehension, we see no fetishistic split in the case of cynicism, at least not in the extent to which this split can reveal a certain ambiguity or ambivalence towards the fetishized object (Mannoni, 2003; Pfaller, 2016). Instead, what the cynic's double refusal purports—and this double refusal is, following the above discussion, enacted in the refusal to be deceived and then in the refusal to acknowledge one's deception—is the very banality it relies upon.

Such banality is always used to justify, for example, cases of racism or patriarchy; most notable when a manipulative distance is achieved by saying the unsayable (Author, 2021). As Trump, and many others like him reveal, the unsayable is now banally sayable; it is accepted and normalized. It is this very manipulation of what is accepted and not accepted in public discourse that allows the cynic to avoid the gap between what they know and what they do: they are always simply "stating the obvious", "telling it how it is", or "saying what no one else will say". The banality

of this manipulation is that it is a defence against lack; a refusal to think (Arendt, 2006).[7]

In what follows, let us turn our discussion towards distinguishing what remains significant about the fetishist's disavowal.

Fetishistic Disavowal: Locating the Fetish

In her examination of the racially charged imagery employed by a U.S. high school, Neroni (2022) offers an insightful narrative on how the term "Rebel", and its associated Confederate symbols, were transformed into objects of fixation—in other words, fetish objects. Indeed, it was "the enormous attachment people have to Confederate signifiers" that underscored their significance as fetishized objects (Neroni, 2022, p. 54). Accordingly, while protests against the racial signifiers and its connotations with the U.S. Confederacy formed part of a series of protests that engulfed both the school and its accompanying locale, ultimately, Neroni outlines how the school's racist imagery was employed to construct an artificial sense of completeness upon behalf of those supporting it. In fact, in comparison to desire, which "acknowledges lack and attempts to engage it", in the case of the fetish, and, specifically, in examples of fetishistic disavowal, Neroni's analysis reveals how "lack [… is] something that can be permanently erased" (2022, p. 54). Though in desire the "object becomes inconsequential" (Neroni, 2022, p. 54), in examples of fetishism, the object is everything, if only for the reason that it is *this* very ordinary object that negates one's lack; it is the object that is prescribed a certain libidinal investment for the fetishist. Importantly, this does not necessarily have to be a literal object, but can also encompass a "way of life", such as, the sacred American way of life (Žižek,

2006), which has always, to a greater or lesser degree, served as a lynchpin of U.S. diplomacy.

Crucially, the significance of the fetish can be demonstrated in debates on gun rights in the U.S. Here, McGowan (2022b) highlights how the ardent supporter of gun rights unconsciously relies upon a process of disavowal, whereby "the freedom or the security associated with the gun" constitutes the "fetish object". Ultimately:

> Rather than recognizing that they are enjoying the slaughter, people take refuge in the belief that the gun provides positive, rather than deadly, results. In the end, they have to disavow that they enjoy the brutal death of the most helpless, in order to invest themselves in the fetish of their freedom. (McGowan, 2022b)

Based on this fetishization of freedom, it becomes possible to draw a line of demarcation between the ardent gun rights proponent and the cynic. Namely, in the case of fetishism, the fetishist openly accepts and acknowledges their belief in the gun (including the various illusions that this object holds for them), rather than disavowing their knowledge and the illusions that are attributed to it. Take, for example, Akin Olla, "a Black, leftwing gun owner", who argued that:

> We must ensure that any new gun control laws do not disproportionately limit minority communities' ability to own arms for reasons of legitimate self-defense, which may be impossible given that most laws in a country as steeped in racism as ours will inevitably be exploited to oppress the already oppressed. (Olla, 2022)

Conceived as a “legitimate self-defense”, Olla’s gun ownership displays a certain fetishization of the apparent “freedom” to defend oneself, despite knowing that the implementation of gun laws will work to further forms of oppression. Though they can certainly disavow the tragedy of gun violence, in the end, such disavowal serves only to proclaim, as well as confirm, what remains essential about maintaining one’s “freedom”, and, perversely, the (human) price of upholding such freedom. Whereas one could subscribe to a cynical pro-gun position—cynically acknowledging the fact that the values of freedom that it helps sustain are nothing more than simple abstractions that ultimately hide one’s enjoyment for the gun itself (and, perhaps, the murder associated with it)—to fall foul of this position would only accentuate the *cynical manipulation* it requires.

One further example can help emphasize the subtle differences between the cynic and fetishist’s disavowal. This relates to Žižek’s example of the unfortunate husband who tragically lost his wife to cancer. In response to the tragedy, the husband’s solace during the ordeal was found in a peculiar source—a hamster, which happened to be the late wife’s cherished pet. What became clear, however, was that despite being “able to talk in a cold way about his wife’s painful dying” (Žižek cited in Pfaller, 2005, p. 117), the husband was, albeit with an apparent detachment, perfectly capable of discussing his wife’s passing while holding the hamster. Serving as the husband’s fetish, the hamster was seemingly used by the husband as a tangible disavowal of his wife’s passing. It was only when the hamster passed away six-months later that the emotional impact proved overwhelming. The husband experienced a profound breakdown, leading to hospitalization due to severe suicidal depression. In light of the example, Žižek (2016) notes:

> So, when we are bombarded by claims that in our post-ideological, cynical era nobody believes in the proclaimed ideal, when we encounter a person who claims he is cured of any beliefs, accepting social reality the way it really is, one should always counter such claims with the question: OK, but where is your hamster? Where is the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality 'the way it is'? (pp. 175-176)

Again, much like the fetishization of freedom that is proclaimed by the gun-supporter, does the husband's fetish—the hamster—prove comparable to the post-ideological cynic, accepting reality "the way it is"? In short, can the husband be labelled a cynic? This is not to ignore the fact that the cynic clearly uses the fetish object to achieve their cynical distance, but what is ignored is the subtle difference in these examples which ultimately belies their conflation: one that is forged between the cold acceptance presented by the husband—an acceptance whose knowledge was never disavowed, but, instead, blatantly "accepted" through the function of the fetish-hamster—and the level of *pretence* that characterises the cynic's manipulations—an acceptance of reality, based upon *their* better knowledge.

Rather, across these examples, what we observe is a clear distinction between the manipulation afforded by cases of cynical disavowal, which often rely upon the banality of patently disavowing what one knows, and the disavowal afforded to the fetish object, which, while following a similar process of knowing and not-knowing, functions to willingly recognize one's fetish. It is in the case of the latter, that, as Žižek (2003) notes, "we encounter fetishism proper": that is, "a fetishist needs no 'but

nonetheless', he simply knows how things really stand, and the disavowal of this knowledge is directly materialized in the fetish" (p. 125).

Consequently, unlike the cynic, there is no manipulation of reality in order to sustain one's knowing better. Instead, the husband remains fully aware of his wife's death, and it is here that the fetish-hamster functions as a disavowal of lack (the loss of his wife). There is, therefore, a unique relation to lack that is prefigured in examples of fetishistic disavowal. While we can assert that, in cases of cynicism, it is one's knowledge that is disavowed, thus obscuring and obfuscating one's lack (the gap), in fetishism, what is disavowed is lack itself—it is the fetish object that characterises the disavowal of lack in examples of fetishistic disavowal.

Lack and the Fetish Object

To expound upon the fetishist's relation to lack, we can consider the difference between the cynic and fetishist's relation to the object. In accordance with the banality that characterises cynicism, there is "no object that has more value than any other", insofar as "the impossible object" is nothing more than "just another everyday object" (McGowan, 2013, p. 114). However, for the fetishist, the fetish object emerges at the point at which the split in the subject is averred. In other words, the fetish arises not because there is no lack, but because there is a lack that is both acknowledged *and* disavowed (Mannoni, 2003).

Paradoxically, therefore, "the fetish is the pervert's way of *making* a hole, of making visible the fact of a lack" (Rothernberg and Foster, 2003, p. 6); or the fetish acts by making positive some negativity: lack itself.[8] For Žižek (2008c), "Therein lies Lacan's fundamental paradox", adding that:

> within the symbolic order (the order of differential relations based on a radical lack), the positivity of an object occurs not when the lack is filled but, on the contrary, when *two lacks overlap*. The fetish functions simultaneously as the representative of the Other's inaccessible depth *and* as its exact opposite, as the stand-in for that which the Other itself lacks ('mother's phallus'). At its most fundamental, the fetish is a screen concealing the liminal experience of the Other's impotence (p. 132)

Accordingly, what is unique to fetishist disavowal is the elevation of the fetish object as adjacent to lack. This does not deny the prosthetic purposes of the fetish, but, rather, asserts that the "act of disavowal is, paradoxically, made possible only by way of an originary act of avowal, of acknowledgment" (Sbriglia, 2017, p. 126 see also Balasopoulos, 1997).[9]

Consequently, the fact that the fetish provides no "imitative function" (indeed, no banality), instead "function[ing] … to clothe the unrepresentable in a representation" (McNulty, 2014, p. 167, italics removed), allows us once again to distinguish it from the manipulations afforded to the cynic. For instance, when we lie to a friend or colleague to preserve a certain level of politeness—a form of social efficiency sustained by the lie itself, thus maintaining our relationship with the other—cynicism works by manipulating the efficiency of this lie in such a way that it openly acknowledges the truth. Cynicism, in effect, exposes the truth and questions the need for the lie, implying that since the truth is already known, the act of lying is unnecessary.

In contrast, it is in examples of fetishism that "the fetish becomes both what hides the 'truth' and what points to it" (Balasopoulos, 1997, p. 44fn.15). Indeed, what encompasses the fetishist's relation to the truth is that the "'but all the same' *is* his fetish" (Mannoni, 2003, p. 70, italics added). Encapsulated in the fetish object, the "but all the same" prescribes an ambivalent object that fascinates as much as it confuses. It is not a persecutory object, as in the case of psychosis (Author, 2023a), but a strange, alluring object that bears witness to the paradoxes in behaviour.

Take, for example, the case of the recovering alcoholic, for whom the act of drinking can still be enjoyed, but for whom alcohol—that very object which the non-alcoholic cannot have—becomes *the* fetish object (Thomas, 2018). In this example:

> [The alcoholic's] passion is to see others enjoying, to see their *jouissance*; to watch the spectacle of his guests becoming drunk. His perverse 'ethics' sees that he experiences some sort of loss—giving up drinking—only to fill his guest's glasses with his *own* loss. (Thomas, 2018, p. 170)

Though the alcoholic's disavowal—his very lack—is asserted, it is all the same a lack that is positively acquired through lack itself: a paradoxical "filling up" of the glass that fetishistically disavows one's lack through the act of *not*-drinking. It is in such cases that "A fetish object involves enjoyment because it stands in the place of lack, or rather it defends our consciousness from the horror of lack" (Neroni, 2022, p. 55).

Such defence renders the importance of the fetish a key part of the subject's existence. In contrast to the mundane banality that examples of cynical disavowal prescribe, the fetishist is able to acquire a position on reality. That is, "fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly 'realists,' able to accept

the way things effectively are" (Žižek, 2006, p. 14). While the cynic's acknowledgement functions in the form of a manipulative disavowal that distances them from their very knowledge, the fetishist will know "how things appear and how they really appear to them, and they acknowledge that acting in accordance with how things really appear is a source of their pleasure, along with the magical techniques they develop in respect to their fetishes" (Kuldova, 2019, p. 774). In so doing, "what the fetishist acknowledges is not that objects are magical, but the way things *really appear* to him (unlike the cynics)" (Kuldova, 2019, p. 774). In this way, the fetishist knows that their fetishized object is nothing more than an ordinary, everyday, mundane object, but, unlike the cynic, who knows quite well of such ordinariness (yet, nonetheless, does nothing to act on such knowledge), the fetishist openly accepts how this knowledge appears to them and continues, all the same.

In her analysis of outlaw motorcycle clubs, and the iconic "patches" (club logos) that they wear, Kuldova (2019) specifically evidences this important distinction noting that in contrast to examples of cynicism, "the bikers [would] openly acknowledge how the patches *really* appear to them" (p. 777). Ultimately:

> They know perfectly well that the patch is both a piece of fabric and a sacred object that needs to be protected, venerated, fought for and that has the power to transform their behavior (how things really appear). *As a result, they openly admit to the fact that the patch really appears to them as a sacred object with magical properties and that they ritually treat it as such.* (Kuldova, 2019, p. 777)

On this basis, we can conceive that while the cynic remains in the position of the non-duped—seeing through the symbolic fiction, but nonetheless disavowing their knowledge that the fiction is simply an illusion—it is the fetishist that disavows the lack in the fiction *and* accepts it all the same. While the fetishist admits to the appearance, and how it appears to them, for the cynic, they remain caught in the logic of appearances itself: a position that, while nonetheless acknowledging the appearance, allows them to cynically distance themselves from its Real effects.

Concluding Thoughts: Knowledge as Fetish

There is one final distinction that can help to distinguish between the examples of cynical and fetishistic disavowal—one that speaks to the "twist" in disavowal that Zupančič (2016) identifies. Here, Zupančič (2016) highlights how, today, "knowledge itself starts to function as fetish" (p. 422, italics removed). In other words, "the precipitated knowledge (the awareness of how things really stand) makes it possible for us to ignore what we know, and even to actively support what we know to be wrong" (Zupančič, 2016, p. 422). Zupančič's contention speaks to the political predicaments that are evidenced in examples such as Trump: while we know "the Emperor is naked" and while the Emperor may make every effort to proclaim his nakedness, ultimately, such revelations bear no effect.

Following the above discussion, Zupančič's knowledge as fetish—a knowledge that is disavowed, thus allowing us to continue, nonetheless—seems to accurately account for the cynical manipulation that this essay has highlighted. Indeed, is it not the cynic who remains well aware of the problems with the current state of affairs but behaves as if unaware, thus navigating daily life with the

knowledge that the social structure, despite its flaws, is immutable (McGowan, 2004)? The key here is that, despite functioning as the fetish object, such knowledge, is, in the end, cynically disavowed. In fact, while it is the cynic who disavows their knowledge through a naïve Other, "What we get in today's cynical functioning of ideology is interpassive nonknowledge, *the other DOESN'T know for me*—I comfortably dwell in my knowledge, ignoring this knowledge through an Other" (Žižek, 2023c, 133). Consequently, while the fetishistic disavowal that Zupančič (2022a) acknowledges relies primarily on the assumption that "I see it, I acknowledge it, and this is enough, now I can now forget about it", it is in accordance with one's capacity to "forget" through an Other that a distance towards one's knowledge is achieved.

Moreover, it is in this regard that we can begin to see how examples of both cynicism and conspiratorial paranoia remain "codependent" (Žižek, 2000).[10] In considering well-known conspiracists, like "the flat earthers",[11] Zupančič (2022a) highlights how it becomes clear that "It is not simply that flat earthers refuse science and scientific proofs, rather they refuse to be deceived, to be taken in by the 'manipulation' of science". Accordingly, for all conspiracists, it is maintaining their position as the ones who *know* the conspiracy which proves essential (Author et al., 2023). Here, the conspiracist's enjoyment is found in the narrative that underpins the conspiracy and not necessarily whether or not it can be proven true. If the conspiracy was proven to be true, this would only cement the conspiracy—in other words, that there is, in fact, a conspiracy confirming the conspiracy itself (Author et al., 2023; Zupančič, 2022b). The effect of this is that it is the conspiracist who remains in full knowledge of "what lies 'behind' mere appearances" (Zupančič, 2022a).

Consequently, while "Even the craziest and weirdest conspiracy narratives are primarily anchored in this will not to be deceived" (Zupančič, 2022a), examples of conspiracy still require a naïve Other who remains unaware of the conspiracy at play. Indeed, it is here that the conspiracies co-dependence with the process of cynical disavowal can be traced. That is, while "the belief that the earth is flat is not really a quarrel about *the shape* of the earth, but an attempt to point out the massive *deception* that has been systematically going on for hundreds of years" (Zupančič, 2022a), it remains a belief which, as Žižek (2023c) adds, finds its traction (and its deception) in an Other who does *not* believe; or, rather, who does *not* know the implications of the conspiracy and the deceptions that sustain it.[12] It is the knowledge obtained by the cynical-conspiracist that remains dependent upon an act of disavowal as well as the Other's lack of knowledge.[13] If anything, such cynicism may function to stave off the paranoia that one's knowledge can induce; a knowledge, which, for Lacan, must always be disavowed (Lacan, 1953).

However, what seems to be overlooked in the knowledge as fetish-object is not that it allows us to disavow what we know, but that it is in the contradictions inherent to knowledge that we are able to disavow such knowledge yet continue knowing, all the same. It is this contradiction that draws attention to the fact that while we may have knowledge, we lack the very knowledge in which to use *this* knowledge. The problem here is not that we disavow our knowledge through some naïve Other, who doesn't know, but that it is knowledge itself that both stalls and prevents us from acting (in the face of climate change, for example, how much more knowledge is required?). It is not that we lack knowledge, but, rather, as Zupančič (2022a, 2022b) contends, our knowledge becomes *the* very barrier to achieving change.[14] It is in this sense that the fetishization of knowledge relies upon a certain

acquiring of knowledge that has come to effectively characterize our impending catastrophes.

In outlining the effects of this knowledge, as well as the significance of the knowledge-fetish, we can draw from Pfaller's (2016) account of the German philosopher, Klaus Heinrich, who, according to Pfaller, offers a unique take on the fetish and the fascinating-predicaments it establishes: "fascination is where mankind keeps itself stuck concerning its most vital interests" (Heinrich cited in Pfaller, 2016). Where, in Pfaller's (2016) case, being "powered by ambivalent tendencies, you stay stuck at this certain point of fascination, you hate and love but you don't get into any negotiation of these two binary pools, you are stuck on this one thing which unites both, which certifies both drives", it can be understood that our predicaments in knowledge, and the ambivalent-fascination of the knowledge as fetish, resides precisely at the moment of fetishistic disavowal. That is, once conceived as the fetish-object, our knowledge bears all the imagination and fascination that is endowed by the fetish but no application through which to assert this knowledge towards some corresponding change or application. Unlike examples of cynical disavowal, there is no banal acceptance of such knowledge, but, instead, a fundamental stasis in what to do with this very knowledge. We are, it would seem, fascinated by this knowledge, *but all the same* removed from the ability to change the predicaments that created it. Ultimately, what remains disavowed is the constitutive lack that continues to generate the very predicaments that come to trouble both the subject and the Other.

In conclusion, while the banality afforded to examples of cynical disavowal present no opportunity for change, beyond the manipulations it requires, it is only in opposing, or, rather, questioning, the fetish that a (new) relation to lack is obtained via a disruption of the disavowal it conceals. From a broader social-psychological

perspective, these forms of disavowal hold critical implications. As evident in the example of Trump, the banality of certain racist or patriarchal justifications, or even the far more common, “I told you so” attitude, cynical disavowal reflects an increasingly entrenched position in contemporary society, one that permits a detachment from collective responsibility by concealing lack and its contradictions. Societies and democracies, by persisting in this form of disavowal, risk hollowing out the transformative potential of a collective engagement that is predicated on the acknowledgment of our shared limitations.

Importantly, acknowledging lack does not require a path of simple ignorance: it is not the case that we ignore or reject the knowledge we have, but, rather, when faced with the manipulative distance that our cynicism encourages, or when left with the very disavowal of lack that our fetishistic disavowal presents, the challenge is to abandon such paths for an identity with lack. It requires confronting the limitations of knowledge and recognizing the need for action beyond simply ‘knowing’. This shift can lead to more effective solutions to societal issues, especially those rooted in denial and inaction (such as climate change, for example), where a better recognition of the contradictions that underpin examples of disavowal for the subject can be forged. Such a perspective can enhance democratic resilience by encouraging individuals and institutions to engage with, as well as inform, more honest, adaptive responses to contemporary social challenges.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest

Notes

[1] In fact, in his preface to Mannoni's essay, Žižek (2003) distinguishes three modes to the disavowal that characterizes Mannoni's, "I know very well, but all the same…". These distinctions are rarely returned to, and, as the following essay will reveal, it is with regard to the second and third distinctions—what Žižek (2003) distinguishes between a cynical-manipulative distance and fetishism proper—that this essay will explore.

[2] As Ragland (1995) notes, "lure objects never deliver the satisfaction implicit in them, but only titillate" (p. 197).

[3] Hides (2005) highlights how this sense of transgression serves as part of the authority's "openness": "Essays denouncing the (corporatist) ideology of the Internet are freely available on the Web, each having the 'effect' of supporting the very law it aims to transgress 'proving' the system's openness" (p. 336).

[4] Indeed, Hook (2018) highlights how such "'believing' is effectively delegated to a series of institutional operations, symbolic actions or, crucially, to the trans-subjective network of the beliefs of others" (p. 97).

[5] According to Žižek (2020b), "This is Trump at his purest: the question of factual truth doesn't even enter the picture. We are thus gradually entering what can be called a post-truth discursive space, a space that oscillates between premodern superstition (conspiracy theories) and postmodern cynical skepticism" (p. 152).

[6] Thompson (2018) proposes something similar when referring to how "The pervert … creates an object to fill the gap of loss, thus preventing any access to a well-shaped desire" (p. 169).

[7] Moreover, though "it is through the banality of the everyday, not in the promised satisfaction of the future, that one discovers the sublime" (McGowan, 2016, p. 243), it is this very banality of the everyday that cynicism disavows.

[8] Similarly, Hook (2012) details how "the fetish allows us to affirm that something is *not* the case" (p. 231). He highlights "for example the love that white South Africa has for Mandela. Not only a focus of libidinal investment and an icon that mitigates against anxieties of political transformation, Mandela, as loved object provides the proof of a 'not'; in this respect proof of the fact that we are not racist" (Hook, 2012, p. 231).

[9] Referring to Freud, Balasopoulos (1997) notes how "it is within the fetish itself that both the disavowal and the acceptance of castration coexist" (p. 44fn.15).

[10] Elsewhere, Rambatan and Johanssen (2021) note that "Paranoia and perversion dance in harmony" (p. 112).

[11] The term "flat Earthers" refers to individuals who subscribe to the belief that the Earth is flat rather than spherical.

[12] A subtle difference between the conspiracist and the cynic can be noted here. Indeed, while both the cynic and paranoid conspiracist rely upon a naïve Other, for the paranoid conspiracist this naïve Other is always secretly managed by a far more omnipotent "Other of the Other" (Author, 2023a; Author et al., 2023). Though the paranoid conspiracist may disavow their non-knowledge through a naïve Other who does not know, it is this Other of the Other that they nonetheless rely upon in order to maintain their paranoia.

[13] This presents a formal inverse to the cynic's "subject supposed to believe" (a subject for whom, despite the cynic's knowledge, nonetheless provides the capacity for the cynic to believe), proposing instead a "subject supposed not to believe".

[14] This is echoed by Adrian Johnston, who notes, "We know things are broken. We know what needs fixing. We even sometimes have ideas about how to fix them. But, nevertheless, we keep doing nothing either to mend damage already done or to prevent further easily foreseeable damage" (Johnston, 2021, p. 140).

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