Habermas *avec* Žižek*

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Habermas's Inter-Subjective Approach to the Truth

The starting point of Habermas is that the foundation of a social order rests on an inter-subjective basis, which is explained by the natural *telos* of reaching understanding attributed to language, expressed in human speech, as he says, 'reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech' (Habermas, 2004, 287). Habermas's approach assumes that the basic function of language is to help individuals to coordinate their actions, through the mobilization of shared and accepted meanings. As it is well known this is a pragmatic and inter-subjective function rather than an essentialist–objectivist one. Therefore, the meaning of any linguistic utterance is given by its underlying reason, which can be accepted (therefore shared and known) or not by all individuals interacting in a communicative action. Furthermore, Habermas asserts that each act of speech always involves certain validity claims, which are a sort of commitment that a speaker assumes to rationally justify his/her speech. A validity claim — said Habermas — must be grounded in experience and 'must be able to hold up against all counterarguments and command the assent of all potential participants in a discourse' (Habermas, 2001, 89). They are of three types: truthfulness, truth and rightness.[1] In other words, in each act of speech, the speaker must be in a position to

give reasons (which means that there *must be* reasons) to justify that he is sincere in his communication (truthfulness), and that what he is saying is true and right.

It is worthwhile noting that the validity of the reasons referred is only reached when the hearer accepts them as a satisfactory foundation of the speech, and thus the coordination of actions mobilized by the meaning of the utterance takes place.[2] In other words, although Habermas asserts a rationalist basis for a communicative action, he uses a notion of rationality that is assumed to be an inter-subjective pragmatic construction (Habermas, 2004, Vol. I, 308–309). This notion is very far from the tradition of an enlightened individual reason, which, in fact — as has been suggested by McCarthy — defines a definitive shift from a declining 'paradigm of consciousness to an [emergent] paradigm of language' (McCarthy, 2004, xi). The direct consequence of this inter-subjective matrix is that the truth validity claim, that is, the speaker's commitment to offer reasons to justify the truth of his/her utterance, only becomes (a real) Truth (with capital T) — pragmatically speaking — if it is accepted by the hearer on the basis of the reasons given by the speaker.

Even more suggestive is the distinction posed by Habermas between two types of validities: *Gültigkeit* (which 'conceptually transcends space and time') and *soziale Geltung* ('based merely on settled customs or threat of sanctions'), and the primacy given to the latter (Habermas, 1996, 20–21). Indeed, Habermas is not unaware of the existence of a hypothetical universal-type validity (*Gültigkeit*) that '[might] exceed all contexts', a sort of objective notion of truth, but, as he argues, since 'no one has direct access to uninterpreted conditions of validity' (Habermas, 1996, 14), his explicit option is in favour of a contextualized notion of validity, a 'validity proven for us'. The reason for this more pragmatic option is due to the fact that, for Habermas, this is the only way in which a true validity claim could '(b)ear the burden of social integration for a context-bound everyday practice' (Habermas, 1996, 21).[3]

In this way, Habermas is able to get rid of any essentialist notion of truth from his matrix of communicative actions, replacing it with a *consensus theory of truth*, whose main criterion of validity is given by a sort of 'success rate' of the act of speech in its declared pragmatic aim of reaching an inter-subjective assent of all other potential participants in a given discourse (Habermas, 2001, 89). Although the results of this thesis are very attractive for an era in which any assertion of a vantage point results in a theory that is hard to defend, it opens new problems for the place and status of truth in the constitution of society. Let us consider separately some of these main problems:

The 'Ideal *Vs* the Real World': The Classical Objection

Habermas employs the expression *Verständigung* to refer to the concept of reaching understanding, which 'is considered to be a process of reaching agreement (*Einigung*) among speaking and acting subjects' (Habermas, 2004, Vol. I, 286–287). Furthermore, what Habermas is really referring to when he speaks of reaching understanding is a process aiming 'at an agreement that meets the conditions of rationality motivated assents (*Zustimmung*) to the content of an utterance' (Habermas, 2004, Vol. I, 287). In other words, Habermas is referring to a type of agreement (*Einverständnis*) that rests on common *convictions*, that is, 'the speech act of one person succeeds only if the other accepts the offer contained in it by taking (however implicitly) a "yes" or "no" position on a validity claim that is in principle criticisable' (Habermas, 2004, Vol. I, 287). Therefore, for Habermas, the process of reaching understanding demands that both parties of the communicative action have a necessary shared understanding of the reasons behind that action, which then, and only then, might give rise to a rational agreement (*rationales Einverständnis*).

Take for instance the following situation: A (the speaker) asks B (the hearer) to switch off the light in a room shared by both of them. In order that B will be able to reach an understanding of the utterance coming from A, B has to know the reason behind A's requirement. Imagine that B asks for the reason of the requirement. A then explains that he has an eye problem, which is exacerbated by the light (a validity claim). B is now in a position to understand the reason that justifies A's petition, and both can reach a rational agreement on switching off the light in the room.

For Habermas this would be a case of a communicative action in which the act of speech has an illocutionary effect, that is, it aims to attain a rational motivated consensus. Moreover, it would be inscribed within the field of 'lifeworld', defined by Habermas as the domain of an unregulated social life in which the actions are regulated by consensus, which is assumed 'as a complementary concept to "communicative action"' (Habermas, 2004, Vol. II, 130). However, the most obvious objection to this model comes from the claim that asserts that the 'real world' does not work in this way, — the daily experience of our lives being the best proof of this objection. Indeed, normally we observe that what is predominant in an inter-subjective relationship is not a rational communicative action, but different types of enforced actions in a classical dominant relationship way, in which the stronger imposes its will over the weaker. In which case, the final coordination of actions or agreements reached by people (*rationales Einverständnis*) would not be found through a shared understanding of the reasons (*Verständigung*) behind that agreement. On the contrary, it will come through a mere imposition of will motivated by fear or ignorance. This is a distant point from the ideal

situation of an unfinished project of modernization, as Habermas has postulated, and more closely related to the classic model of a negative conception of ideology.[4]

This is, however, a claim that in a way has already been acknowledged by Habermas. Furthermore, Habermas is able to recognize that the field of 'lifeworld' — the reign of communicative actions — has increasingly been colonized by another field called 'the system' (Habermas, 2004, Vol. II, 196, 305, 311–312). Here, the act of speech, rather than exerting an illocutionary effect has a perlocutionary one, that is, it does not aim to reach a rational understanding and consensus but only to reach agreement on the final action motivated by the speech. In other words, it is a field of instrumental action in which the truly relevant factor is the final agreement rather than the process of reaching understanding. This is because in most cases there is only an instrumental (individual, private) reason behind that agreement and not a shared understanding of it, that is, the speaker has nothing with which to convince the hearer but only a private interest to impose upon him. Therefore, by accepting both spheres — the system and the lifeworld — as two valid but differentiated areas of social life, Habermas manages to keep untouched his thesis of the predominance of the communicative action. In this way, the communicative action becomes a type of communication that aims to reach understanding naturally due to its roots in the *telos* of language.

Let us leave Habermas's account at this point in order to summarize some of the conclusions related to the status of truth in his theory. For the purposes of this paper, the important point to bear in mind is that the Habermasian matrix of communicative *vs* instrumental actions considered above, implicitly assumes that it is only within the former field (communicative action) that the truth might have a place in the constitution of the social order. Indeed, the function of the field of instrumental action in Habermas's thesis seems to be more related to the necessity of highlighting the sphere of communicative actions as a regulatory dimension — the sphere of a true communication — rather than describing exactly how the process of communication (communicative or instrumental) takes place in society. This seems to be a more complex process, as we will analyse later in this paper. Therefore, from the bipolar structure proposed by Habermas: communicative *vs* instrumental action, we can conclude three further premises regarding the problem of the truth:

1. The truth is assumed to be an anti-essentialist notion, placed within a formal, contingent and pragmatic inter-subjective field (the field of communicative actions) expressed, as we have seen, in the speaker's validity claim to offer public reasons to justify that what he is saying to a hearer is the truth. Public reasons are here taken to mean arguments that can be known, understood and accepted by the hearer as valid foundations of a received speech, which aims to reach understanding as well as a rational agreement on a pursued action.

2. In this way defined, the truth becomes sufficient and necessary as an indispensable claim to achieve rational understanding between individuals. In other words, while it might be that agreements can exist without understanding (instrumental actions), it cannot be that rational understanding exists without a truth validity claim.

3. Therefore, there is no room for an objective notion of truth in a field of communicative action, meaning that such a truth is only considered within the formal structure of a validity claim (communicative action).

In the next section, premises (a) and (b) are discussed, taking into account the critique formulated by Žižek, and in the final section, premise (c) is reformulated in light of the conclusions of that critique.

A Žižekian Critique of Habermas's Theory of Truth

From a Žižekian perspective, Habermas's bipolar 'black and white' matrix, communicative *vs* instrumental action, could be criticized, claiming that it assumes an excessive conceptual rigidity that impedes the capture of the grey tonality characteristic of a postulated post-modern society. Indeed, Habermas's notion of falsity is primarily related to the ignorance of agents with respect to the origin of their beliefs or the motives they have to hold such beliefs. For Habermas, beliefs and motives must be broadly interpreted to incorporate empirical and non-empirical beliefs. Therefore, the ignorance of agents cannot be reduced to an empirical mistake but must include a broader criterion of assessment, which for Habermas is founded in a new extensive notion of rationality. This leads Habermas to perceive the ignorance of agents as an unreflective state in which the origins and motives of their beliefs have not been critically contrasted with the basic epistemic principles accepted by a community as valid.[5] Furthermore, those basic epistemic principles, which for Habermas constitute a free speech situation, are now the new criteria of assessment for the ignorance of the agents. A key consequence derived from this idea is that it cannot be possible to conceive of an agent who has been freed from his/her ignorance and who still insists upon holding such false beliefs.

In other words, in Habermas's account it is not possible to assume the cynical logos that Žižek takes from Sloterdijk (1987): 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it' (Žižek, 1989, 29). The reason for this impossibility is explained by the fact that Habermas imagines an immanent notion of basic epistemic principles, which are present as a universal condition in all human communicative interactions.[6] Furthermore, these principles are derived from a free speech situation exclusively ruled by a communicative rationality, without consideration of other criteria of falsity. We will extensively consider this argument in the next sub-section. For now, the important point to bear in mind here is that although the result of Habermas's account is more accurate than that offered by the

corresponding positivist theory of truth, it is still limited and even has a high risk of becoming contradictory.

First, it confuses the notion of truth with the notion of reality. Indeed, a descriptive belief is of course a real belief in the sense that it really exists as a phenomenological category, but it only becomes a true belief if it is able to fulfil all of the criteria of trueness existent in a *rational* community.[7] In the case considered by Habermas, in which a belief could be assumed as descriptively accurate and false at the same time, it seems clear that the main criterion, referring to a reflective acceptability of a belief, that is, a belief originating in a non-coercive environment of communicative action, is not satisfied.[8] Furthermore, this is precisely the reason why Habermas rightly concludes that such a belief would be false, though it could also be a very accurate descriptive belief. However, what Habermas seems not explicitly to analyse is that, if *any* of the criterions of trueness accepted by a political community are not satisfied, then the belief must also and always be necessarily false, even if it is true in the rest of the other sets of criteria. This is because the belief might, at best, be partially true — as, for instance, a belief ruled by a communicative rationality — and a partial truth is always false from a point of view of the whole, *à la* Hegel.

Therefore, the point here is not to censure Habermas by assuming that there would be only one criterion of judgment of the truth or falsity of a belief or a set of beliefs. Rather, it is to criticize him by choosing a (limited) criterion (free speech situation: communicative rationality) that might not be enough to give an accurate account of the reality that is intended to be comprehended. Indeed, it seems that Habermas, in his endeavour to coin a more complex category of falsity is able to surpass positivism, but he still becomes trapped in a 'disabled' notion of truth. Furthermore, there may be no reason not to concur with Habermas in denouncing the fact that we are experiencing a process of internal colonization of 'lifeworld' by system imperatives dominated by the logic of instrumental actions, as he has recurrently stated (Habermas, 2004, vol. II, 196, 305, 311–312). However, what seems to be more relevant here is to stress an additional theoretical caveat, omitted by Habermas and the scholarly discussion in the field — a caveat that seeks to directly contest the dimension of communicative action itself as one that usually expresses no more than a mere *falsification of an inter-subjective rationality*.

The falsification of an inter-subjective rationality is a different phenomenon from the negation of rationality, which manifests itself in a *de facto* accord of an instrumental action field, derived from either a forced or deceptive imposition of an agreement. On the contrary, the falsification of rationality, which gives rise to a disabled notion of truth, implies an active role of the deceived individual in making truth its own deception, although that does not mean that the falsification is an entirely subjective matter. In fact, the main characteristic of

this new type of deception is its objective material basis, as Žižek has highlighted. Let us explore these points in more detail.

Cynism and Fantasy in Žižek's Theory: How Communicative Rationality Does Become a Falsification of Truth?

Žižek's first main theoretical effort focuses on distinguishing the classical version of ideology as a misleading understanding of the so-called reality from the more sophisticated version of the critical theory that perceives one's own reality as ideological, a notion without which it cannot reproduce itself. However thereafter, Žižek concentrates mainly on what is going to be his main thesis in this respect. Indeed, he eventually affirms that although the two versions of ideology are different, they share a common underlying assumption: to place the misleading character of ideology on the side of the *internal subjectivity* of the individual. In other words, while in the classical version the deception of the subject is due to a sort of spectacle which obtrudes access to the true reality, in the critical theory account the subject overlooks reality itself in a way that if he saw (knew) the reality as 'it really is', the reality would 'dissolve itself into nothingness, or, more precisely, it would change into another kind of reality' (Žižek, 1989, 28).

For Žižek, the problem with these two versions of ideology is that both put the accent on the dimension of *knowledge* rather than on the practical (external) side, becoming obsolete and/or naïve in a (post-modern) world in which individuals *know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it*. In fact, individuals in a post-modern world seem to behave no longer as misleading personages who need to be subjected to an enlightening critique in order to know the reality. On the contrary, their acts resemble much more closely a sort of cynical character, who most of the time knows very well the falsehood of his situation or the particular interest hidden behind a misleading universal discourse, but still insists upon acting in accordance with it (Žižek, 1989, 29). If then, the ideological — asserts Žižek — were on the side of *knowing*, as the classical and the critical theory perspective affirm, the notion of ideological misconception would become obsolete and non-existent for a world best described as a place in which individuals follow the prescription of an anti-naïve cynical reason. However, as Žižek points out, if the illusion were not located in the *knowing* but in the *doing* — as he believes actually happens — we would still experience the ideological misconception, even if we were aware — as happens most of the time — that there is an illusion structuring the reality.

It is worthwhile noticing that behind Žižek's original thesis of locating ideological delusion on the side of *doing* rather of *knowing* is his reading of Lacan's objective status of beliefs, that is, a belief, instead of being something internal to the subject, is rather 'radically

exterior, embodied in the practical effective procedure of the people' (Žižek, 1989, 34). This also implies that a subject, by following a custom, ritual, practice, or 'common sense', believes in something without really knowing it. Then, the final act of conversion to, for instance, a religious belief or an ideological matrix, is merely a formal act of recognition of what he/she already believes. In a way, there is already a belief before the belief emerges.[9] Therefore, Žižek concludes, since a belief is always materialized in the effective social activity, it 'supports the fantasy which regulates social activity' (Žižek, 1989, 36).

However, it is a mistake to interpret Žižek's account as an argument that from this external character of a belief it follows that the symbolic machine of ideology is by interpellation immediately and fully internalized into the ideological experience of the truth and meaning of the subjects. On the contrary, Žižek, following Pascal and Lacan, asserts that this internalization process, which represents the belief in a cause, is never fully successful. As Žižek puts it: 'there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it' (Žižek, 1989, 43). However, Žižek emphasizes that this residue '*far from hindering the full submission of the subject to ideological command, is the very condition of it*' (Žižek, 1989, 43, cursives from the original). In other words, it is precisely because there is always a leftover that is not ideologically integrated by symbolic apparatus that ideology acquires its real potentiality.

But how does it happen? Žižek's answer alludes to two ideological mechanisms working together, described below. First, through the action of the Althusserian symbolic apparatus, which by interpellation seeks to link the identification of the subject with the symbolic system (recognition/misrecognition). Second, by the previous operation — in the sense that it operates before the symbolic interpellation apparatus is able to get the identification of the subject — of a fantasy-construction device by which the subject is ideologically trapped. In fact, the fantasy-construction mechanism, far from being conceived as an illusion to escape the insupportable reality, in fact serves to support it; it structures the reality. Let us now go back to our first example related to those two individuals reaching a rational agreement on switching off the light in a shared room, in order to see how Žižek's approach would mean a critique of Habermas's matrix of communicative action. Following Žižek's account, the example described at the beginning of this paper could be explained within a formal structure of a communicative action, but under the logic of a cynical reason and fantasy-construction.

Indeed, suppose now that B knows that A's reason to switch off the light in the room, despite being formally true because A has a widely known eye infection, has also been exaggerated due to A's well-known melodramatic character. B still decides to agree to give validity to the truth claim of A (the eye problem) because he secretly thinks that in this way he is fulfilling the requirements of a high morality standard imposed by his ideal type of

citizen (mandating for a religious or an ideological belief) that he aspires to become one day. In other words, he agrees to give rational validity to A's claim because he has constructed a fantasy to support his agreement. Then, B's agreement on switching off the light is going to be based on a cynical reason (he knows very well that despite the fact that A's petition is true, it is also exaggerated, therefore not totally true, but he — rationally — agrees on that as if it were unquestionably true) as well as on a supporting fantasy-construction mechanism (his dream of becoming an ideal citizen).

Therefore, despite B knowing very well that the rational agreement reached with A is a falsification of the truth, he is not — subjectively speaking — ideologically deluded. However, as he follows in practice the agreement as a rational one — moved by his fantasy — he is in fact affected by a delusion. Moreover, it is worthwhile noting that the cynical distance that allows B to realize the ideological illusion operating in his social relation with A, is one way — 'one of many ways' asserts Žižek — that gives efficiency rather than obsolescence to the structuring power of ideological fantasies (Žižek, 1989, 33). In the context of this essay the important point illustrated in the aforementioned example is that, from a Žižekian approach, it is possible to conceive of a hypothesis of a communicative action in which, although all of the formal requirements to achieve a shared understanding and meanings of a rational agreement are present, there is still opportunity to reach a non-rational, even ideological agreement. In other words, we could have a situation in which a validity claim of truth is present, acting as a public and shared reason accepted by both parties of the communication (free speech situation: communicative rationality) for reaching an understanding and a rational agreement. However, there would still be room to imagine an individual within such a situation whose rational — in the Habermasian sense — agreement rests on a cynical reason and/or fantasy-construction, which in fact might shift the truth validity claim from the Truth — pragmatically speaking — to a falsification of truth.

It is worthwhile noting that a Žižekian critique of Habermas's communicative action, such as that presented here, is not easily inscribed within the realm of the traditional objection that contests the priority of reaching understanding which Habermas attributed to language — the original mode of language — in opposition to its 'parasitic' instrumental use (Habermas, 2004, Vol. I, 288), commonly cited in the literature.[10] Rather, it would be better placed as a critique directly posed against the field of a rationally motivated consensus (*Zustimmung*) itself, which is now observed as the privileged place for a more sophisticated type of delusion. Indeed, the falsification of truth takes place not because B (the hearer) does not know that A's petition is not rationally justified (he is not actually deceived) but because B knows that although A's requirement is formally true and formally acceptable as a justified rational communicative basis of an agreement, it is also not totally true. Therefore, he does not entirely give validity to that claim, though he acts — in his practice — as if he really

believes (pretends to believe) the claim without any doubt, based on an *ad hoc* fantasy-construction device. This is possible because Habermas's idea of truth within a communicative action field (premise a) rests too much on a public and formal discursive exercise of reasons. This is a sort of 'thin rationality', that could perfectly make compatible a shared understanding, and consequentially, a rational agreement on a specific coordination of actions, with a cynical or fantastical reason, giving rise to an ideological delusion in the praxis of individuals. The resulting conclusion of this statement is that a validity claim of truth — within a field of communicative action — is not always sufficient, nor necessary, to get a rational — in the sense of non-ideological — agreement between individuals (premise b). Indeed, a rational agreement, because of the 'thin' rationality demanded by Habermas's matrix, seems to be very often (more often than we actually acknowledge) accompanied by a formal validity claim of truth that is in fact no more than a falsification of truth.

The Possibility and Necessity of a Universal Notion of Truth

Let us finally engage with the problem of an essentialist notion of truth within the field of communicative actions (premise c). It is well known that an essentialist notion of truth has been the main object of denouncement within a post-structuralist ethos, which assumes that we are living in a sort of 'post-metaphysical world': a world devoid of intrinsic meaning (Norval, 2000, 313). Post-structuralism presupposes, as a central premise, the impossibility of accessing a true and definitive knowledge from which it might be possible to discern the misleading or false character of any political statement or discourse (Rorty, 1991, xxxix). If access to a place of definitive truth — commonly accepted as a precondition of a critique of ideology — is no longer possible, then the possibility of a critique of ideology itself might become obsolete. In other words, within a post-structuralist ethos there is no room for an Archimedean vantage point — a *point d'appui* — from which the critique of ideology becomes possible as an intellectual or practical activity.

Does this, however, mean that we have to exclude any possibility of affirming a more universal notion of truth that could avoid the objections posed by a Žižekian approach to a Habermasian matrix of communicative action? In other words, are we condemned to assume that the greatest level to which we can aspire is a truth (or a falsification of truth) reached through a process of a 'thin rationality' — *à la* Habermas —? A cautionary, even realistic, answer could be: yes, indeed. In fact, after a century characterized by the philosophical and political defence of 'thick rationality' and 'big Truths', which often induced the biggest confrontations and atrocities ever known in the history of humankind, this might be the more sensate attitude to assume. But is this the more accurate answer? Moreover, as recent history has started to show there is no guarantee at all that, in an epoch under the reign of a

'non-vantage point mantra' (either assumed by an authentic sense of tolerance or by a sense of fear or guilt), atrocities such as those that happened in Auschwitz can be excluded altogether from the history of mankind. Clearly, this is a point that cannot be resolved here. Instead, bearing in mind our use of Žižek's approach to assess Habermas's matrix of communicative action, it might now be worth reassessing the problem of a universal notion of truth from a perspective that assumes that the real problem with such a notion would be located in the way in which an Archimedean truth has been conceived, rather than in the assertion of the impossibility of any universal notion of truth altogether.[11]

The problem of the existence of an Archimedean vantage point is expressed directly by Žižek when he asks: 'Does not the critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoil of social life, which enable some subject-agents to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility?' (Žižek, 1994, 3). Truly, what Žižek is trying to highlight is that the problem with the notion of ideology is that it would apparently demand an indispensable embracing of a 'God's view' perspective (Žižek, 1994, 25). For Žižek, however, the apparently inevitable conclusion, reached by — among others — post-modernist scholars, that the only non-ideological position is to renounce the very notion of an extra ideological reality, is *ideology per excellence* (Žižek, 1994, 4). He reacts against this new intellectual mode by essaying a twofold solution to that apparent paradox.

He firstly strips out any 'representationalist' character from the notion of ideology. In this sense, for Žižek, far from being related to an illusion or a mistaken representation of its social content, ideology is part of the reality itself (Žižek, 2005, 262). If ideology is part of reality, we do not require any external, transcendental vantage point outside of reality to see a false representation of it, as the classic conception of the critique of ideology demands, because ideology is now within it. We do not need to go outside to see it because we are permanently seeing it. The problem, however, is still in knowing how we can then realize that there is an ideology operating around us if we are also part of such a reality. In other words, how can we recognize that the reality is itself ideological if the ideology is part of the air that we daily breathe?

The Real: The 'Primordial Repressed' as a Hypothetical Universal Notion of Truth

The second part of Žižek's thesis intends to answer these questions. Indeed, Žižek continues his analysis, affirming that although ideology is confused with reality, 'ideology is not all' because it is still possible to conceive an extra-reality (non-ideological) place from which the ideological and non-ideological can be identified within the reality. This extra-reality place is assumed to be neither part of the reality, understood as a symbolic dimension, nor as a mere

illusion floating in the air of the imaginary, but as the kernel 'Real' of society, which, as a condition of being non-ideological, 'must remain empty', free of any 'positively determined reality' (Žižek, 1994, 17).

As it is known, the Real is a notion originally developed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan throughout his career. In the early 1930s, Lacan used the Real to refer to a somewhat philosophical concept of absolute being, which was assumed to be beyond appearance. In the 1950s, the concept lost its philosophical trait and was posed as one of three orders that Lacan identifies in the realm of the subject: the symbolic, the imaginary and the Real (the latter meaning an indivisible materiality that exists prior to symbolization). It was, however, from 1959–1960 onward, that Lacan in his *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, discussing the character of the unconscious in Freud's works, emphasizes the meaning of the Real as the core of the unconscious, which always remains unsymbolizable but is 'the cause of the most fundamental passion' (Lacan, 1992, 97). This he calls *Das Thing*, or the *representative of representation*.[12] Therefore, the Real becomes in the late works of Lacan no longer a materiality but a hole (a void) that is at the core of the constitution of subjectivity. For the matter of this work the important point to highlight here is the ambiguous character of the Real. As Parker (2004) has stressed, the Lacanian Real is 'the structurally necessary limit to representation that is resistant to a simple recoding' (Parker, 2004, 64). In other words, the Real allows the emergence of symbolical subjectivity but also poses the more impenetrable limits to it.

Žižek, following this later sense of Lacan's notion of the Real, defines it in his early works as the '*primordial repressed'* (of Society)*, the irrepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded*' (Žižek, 1994, 21). It comes to represent the original 'antagonism' of society,[13] a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized and that is thus not part of reality but institutes it (Žižek, 1989, 45; 2005, 262). This is a notion that has experienced substantial changes in the subsequent works of Žižek. Particularly, since *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek has moved to a notion of the Real that is associated to the three registers that the Lacanian psychoanalysis identifies in the constitution of subjectivity. Consequently, we would have a 'symbolic Real', an 'imaginary Real' and a 'real Real'. Furthermore, in a more recent book, Žižek asserts a notion of a 'parallax Real' moving away from a Lacanian notion of the Real (Žižek, 2006, 26)[14]. However, the early more standard notion of the Real, as a '*primordial repressed'* developed by Žižek still seems to be more productive to think a critique of a consensual final social order as one presented by Habermas. This is to say, that is a notion of the Real, understood as an *irrepresentable* X or a traumatic void, a more useful resource for the formulation of a critique that points directly to disarm the Habermasian endeavour of postulating a transparent society, hidden within his communicative rationality matrix. Why is this? The reason is simple. It is a notion of Real, as

a traumatic primordial repressed, what would more explicitly allow "opening" the closuring consensus reached by a communicative rationality *à la* Habermas - making it problematic and ultimately impossible.

But how is notion of the Real, as an empty place going to be specified? Žižek's answer resorts to Derrida's notion of 'spectre' (Žižek, 1994, 20; 2005, 262). Indeed, Žižek, again following Lacan, firstly asserts, '[what we experience as] reality it is not the "thing itself", it is always-already symbolized' (Žižek, 1994, 21). This motto, which actually dates back to Kant, becomes problematic when one considers the related premise that assures the failure of a complete symbolization. The symbolic mechanism — as we have seen — through which we experience reality has always — in Žižek 's reading of Lacan — failed to fully cover the concept of the Real. There is always a residue that remains non-symbolized; it is '*this real (the part of "reality" that remains non-symbolized)* [that] *returns in the guise of spectral apparition*' (Žižek, 1994, 21, cursives from the original). Furthermore, it is by distinguishing between 'symbolic fiction' and 'spectre' that Žižek allows for the determining of the content of such an empty place. Symbolic fiction refers to the symbolic construction of the fictional (failed) structure of reality. Spectre, in turn, relates to the spectral apparition that precisely emerges in the gap existing (separating) reality from the Real. Both notions are 'co-dependent in their very incompatibility' because the eternal separation that Žižek affirms as existing between reality and the Real allows for the emergence of the spectral apparitions and also determines the fictional (failed) character of the symbolic reality.

In this way, Žižek resolves the problem of affirming an extra-reality non-ideological kernel 'that consists of the *spectral apparition that fills up the hole of the real*' (Žižek, 1994, 21, cursives from the original), while at the same time assuming the whole (symbolized) reality as ideologically structured (but failed). In this sense, although (and because) ideology is present in the reality — in fact structures the reality — it does not conceal the reality at all. However, that does not imply that ideology is *not* masking anything. Actually it masks the kernel of society, which is at the bottom of any ideological construction. In other words, it masks the Real. Thus, Žižek manages to offer a negative conception of ideology in which the misconception is no longer located in the classical epistemological structure illusion/reality. There is now a tripartite structure operating, composed of the symbolic, the imaginary and the Real. Indeed, the reality (the symbolic sphere), structured by a fantasy (the imaginary field), is offered as an escape from the Real. The Real cannot be symbolized in the reality, but instead appears as a spectre in the fantasy-construction of the subject. Therefore, the ideological (or non-ideological) status of a given political position is determined by the masking (or the unmasking, in the case of the non-ideological) that such a political position tends to produce, of the 'antagonism', the Real, of society.

Although Žižek recognizes that there is no clear distinction between ideology and what we experience as reality, he also affirms that it is worth maintaining the 'tension that keeps the *critique* of ideology alive' (Žižek, 1994, 17, cursives from the original). Moreover, it is this primordial repressed antagonism (the irrepresentable X) — a non-symbolized reality — that constitutes the extra-reality point of reference that makes possible the critique of ideology (Žižek, 1994, 25). Indeed, the new role reserved for a truly 'post-modern' critique of ideology is now: 'to designate the elements within an existing social order which (—....—) point towards the system's antagonistic character, and thus 'estrange' us to the self-evidence of its established identity' (Žižek, 1994, 7). Moreover, for Žižek, the non-ideological perspective is commonly manifested in a 'false in fact' position — a fiction, an illusion —, which, precisely due to its fictional character, is able to point directly to the Real.[15]

In sum, what we have here is an extra-reality place that differs from a traditional notion of an Archimedean point in the following main features:

(1) From a theoretical point of view, while in the classical matrix, the identification of the non-ideological cannot avoid assuming a vantage stage, placed above the reality, giving rise to an idea that is 'contradictorily coherent', because in that matrix nothing can really be outside of reality.[16] In a Žižekian approach there is, conceptually speaking, a place — the Real — which is neither part of the reality (the symbolic sphere) nor the imaginary, which, furthermore, is at the root of (and within) a failed symbolized reality, although it itself can never be totally symbolized (Žižek, 2006, 26). Therefore, this approach does not give rise to an idea that is 'contradictorily coherent', like that denounced by Derrida and thus is a theoretically more consistent perspective.

(2) Consequently, while in the classical matrix, the Archimedean point gives rise to an opposition between reality and illusion — illusion being something that was excluded from reality altogether (floating in the nothingness as a ghost). In the Žižekian approach both the ideological and non-ideological are part of the reality. Moreover, reality is supported by an extra-reality place — the Real — which is at the bottom of its constitution as a symbolized failed reality. The Real, in turn, would ultimately allow the determination of what is ideological and what is non-ideological through the critique of ideology.

In this way, Žižek manages to overcome the problem of the Archimedean vantage point perspective that focuses too much on drawing a line of separation between '"true" reality and illusions (or to ground illusion in reality)', when in fact the key point to highlight is that what we experience as reality only emerges if something is excluded (Žižek, 2005, 262–263). In other words, the 'condition of possibility' of the reality, which is always symbolized, is the exclusion of some lack that both cannot be symbolized (in the reality) and is the 'X' that determines the failure of a complete symbolization of the reality.

But, could the notion of the Real — as defined by Žižek — have any utility in highlighting the shortcomings of Habermas's theory of communicative actions, which are generated as a consequence of its underlying logic of 'a thin rationality'? I suggest that if we — as critics of ideology — avoid giving in to the notion of the Real as having a literal material status, that is, we refuse to put it within an imaginary or symbolic universe (in other words, we seriously envisage it as a Real). Instead, we conceive of it as a *hypothetical universal notion of truth*, [17] the result of which would be to reintroduce the possibility of critique of ideology, conceptually and politically necessary to discern the ideological from the non-ideological — a condition of possibility of a social order based on a dialogical process of communicative action — without being trapped in an Archimedean 'black hole'.

A hypothetical notion would not only give rise to a sort of logic of 'possible explanations' as Nozick, referring to the use of the 'state of nature' stories to explain the emergence of a civil and political society, puts it: 'we learn much by seeing how the state could have arisen even if it did not arise that way' (Nozick, 1974, 9). But it would also introduce the idea of a universal notion of truth, as one that is always ultimately affirmed, at least hypothetically by the critics of ideology. Moreover, this is an affirmation that is offered to the scholarly and public community, as Peter Hallward, introducing the translation of Badiou's *Ethics*, has affirmed - "[as an] innovation *en acte*, singular in its location and occasion, but universal in its 'address' and import" (Hallward, 2001, ix).

Therefore, we can now add a final feature, although this time one that was not directly formulated by Žižek, to those two considered above, that distinguishes an extra-reality place — *à la* Žižek — from a traditional Archimedean vantage point notion, affirming that:

(3) The Real can be assumed to be a hypothetical universal notion of truth that would allow the distinguishing of the non-ideological from the ideological. Furthermore, such a universal notion of truth would not only be possible but also conceptually necessary to ensure that a given social order — *à la* Habermas — could actually take place without turning out to be affected by a falsification of truth.

Finally, I ought to mention that the meaning of 'conceptually necessary' is here inscribed within a dialectical logic, rather than posed within an analytical or positivist tradition in which a necessary truth is held only in analytical judgment by virtue of what the words mean (as in the expression 'bachelors are unmarried'). As Taylor has put it, 'the necessity doesn't repose on the analytical relation, but on something else: that we are here at a conceptual limit, such that we could not form a coherent notion of experience which did not incorporate such [a notion]' (Taylor, 1975, 96). In other words, following Hegel's dialectic tradition, my only starting point is that a social order cannot exist on its own because the forces acting upon it are contradictory. Subsequently, we can only understand such an order if we assume that it rests on a greater, though incommensurable, dimension in which the

notion of an objective truth appears as indispensable, because 'we could not form a coherent notion of experience' in which the ideological and non-ideological could not be distinguished.

Conclusions

Could we then still be in a position to rescue a certain notion of universal truth in a post-metaphysical world? What I have tried to suggest in this paper is that if there is one way to do this, it is by abandoning the paradigm of the classic Archimedean vantage point. Moreover, I have argued that using a notion of the Real or 'primordial repressed', taken from a Žižekian approach, would allow the production of an ideological critique in which the truth becomes possible as a hypothetical universal category.

The universal truth does not appear as a given objective reality which has to be revealed by critics of ideology, as in the correspondence or realist theory in which the truth remains as a function between a statement and the objective (extra-linguistic) dimension that such a statement refers to. Nor it is a mere matter of harmonious coherence between a discourse and a specific context, as the coherence theory of truth asserts (Hallward, 2003, 153). On the contrary, the truth is always ultimately posed axiomatically, at least hypothetically, by the critics of ideology.

In that way, the truth, however, is not only possible but also conceptually necessary as a condition that would make achievable the existence of a communicative action field as a place in which a 'validity claim of truth' can be distinguished from a falsification of truth. In other words, it is only by assuming the existence of a universal truth in relation to which any validity claim of truth produced within a field of communicative action can be assessed, that a risk of being trapped — due to the thin rationality of the Habermasian matrix — in an ideological delusion, as that denounced by Žižek, could be postponed.

Notes

[1]The first formulation of this distinction was made by Habermas in the V Gauss Lecture at Princeton University in 1971 when he distinguished between intelligibility, truth, normative rightness and sincerity (Habermas, 2001, 88). Then it was introduced in the form presented in this text (Habermas, 2004, Vol. 1, 305–306).

[2]As Habermas has put it, in order to be accepted as valid a speech act must be 'in agreement with *our* world of existing states of affairs, or with *the speaker's own* world of subjective experiences' (Habermas, 2004, Vol. I, 308).

[3]For a critical analysis of the distinction between *Gültigkeit* and *Soziale Geltung*, see Callinicos (2006, 26–29).

[4]For a historical review of the negative conception of ideology, see the classic book of Larraín (1979, 28–34).

[5]In relation to the epistemic principles, the Frankfurt school was divided into two sharp positions: on the one hand, Adorno's contextualist view and on the other Habermas' transcendental thesis. While the former affirms that epistemic principles vary historically, the latter argues that every human being has the innate capacity to construct those basic principles (the ideal speech situation) (Geuss, 1981, 63 ff).

[6]For an early development of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action based on the analysis of speech acts, see Habermas (1976, 1–68). For a critique of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, see Thompson (1982, 116–133). For a Habermas' answer to his critics, see Habermas (1982, 219–283).

[7]I am assuming a 'thicker' notion of rationality than Habermas' one. See next subsection on this point.

[8]It was in fact Adorno who more explicitly affirmed that a statement or belief could be both true and false. For a critique of this thesis, see Geuss (1975).

[9]Žižek, who is here following Pascal, argues that this 'belief before belief' is what distinguishes 'Pascalian custom' from the behaviourist thesis that assumes only a direct (non-dialectic) relationship in which the content of a belief is conditioned by factual behaviour (Žižek, 1989, 40).

[10]For instance, Porter (2006) has developed a Deleuzian critique of Habermas' view of the orientation of reaching understanding as the original mode of language use (Porter, 2006, 122–128).

[11]A different angle from which to observe these problems in the works of Žižek and Eagleton, based on a sort of 'Aesthetic Turn', can be found in Sharpe (2006, 95–120).

[12]However, from 1964 the concept of Das Thing was replaced by the notion of *object petit a* that comes to represent the lack of the Big Other, which is ultimately not a specific object but a lack thereof (Homer, 2005, 85–87).

[13]Žižek is here referring to the notion of 'social antagonism' developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985).

[14]See also Porter (2006, 65–71) and Kay (2003).

[15]Žižek refers here to the Lacanian thesis according to which the truth has the structure of a fiction (Žižek, 1994, 7).

[16]An idea becomes contradictorily coherent for Derrida when it is assumed that it structures the structure while itself escaping the process of structuration (Derrida, 1978, 279).

[17]I am following a similar notion to that of 'fictional genealogy' used by Williams (2002, 32).

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