Teil III Erfahrungsdimensionen des Menschen als soziales Wesen

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# Is Hatred a Major Factor Determining the Contemporary Social Imaginary?*

## Introduction

In my paper, I will try to analyze hate as one of the important factors that influence and structure the symbolic sphere. In the first step, I am going to define the notion of "symbolic sphere". Then, I am going to analyze hate from the phenomenological and psychoanalytical points of view. My next step will be a historical digression, concerning the place of hate in the social order. Next, I am going to try to describe, from the perspective developed in this way, some important phenomena of the contemporary societies conditioned by the influence of hatred. Finally, I am going to ask which notions of the social theory are adequate to describe this kind of phenomena.

By symbolic sphere, I understand the order that enables orientation in the complex world of meanings, the one that gives sense to all our human – and also, let me say, inhuman – acts, and the one that provides individual and social consciousness of main coordinates. The idea of the symbolic sphere was already present in the late theory of culture by Ernst Cassirer. This idea is nowadays being developed in two main currents of thought. One originates from the vast field of the poststructural theory, while the other originates from the works of theorists of social thought, such as Charles Taylor, who offer a quasi-synonymic notion of "social imaginary".

As Charles Taylor formulates it, "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society…" (Taylor, 2002, p. 91). In poststructural theory, the symbolic sphere, or symbolic system, encloses all meanings of social consciousness that can be represented in discourse. Nevertheless, the structure of the symbolic sphere as such is not represented. It is rather, to use the language of transcendental philosophy, a "condition of possibility" more than a "phenomenon". This condition of possibility, never directly present in discourse, can be assimilated with "social unconsciousness"; this is why post-structural theory quite easily adopts categories and notions stemming from psychoanalysis.

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## 1. Forms of Hatred

Let's move on to the question of the influence of hate on the society. It has been most frequently apprehended as a sudden eruption of bare violence. Hate has been thought to transform the symbolic sphere through sharp, directly aggressive, and often unexpected actions. Walter Benjamin gave us an example of such a reasoning when he wrote about the role of the death penalty in the institution and maintenance of the system of law – one of the main fundamental elements of the symbolic order (refer Benjamin, 1986). Sovereignty must be violent, and this would be the consequence of this reasoning; it finds its complement in the thinking of Giorgio Agamben about the necessarily savage character of sovereignty as the boundary condition of any system of laws.

Nevertheless, in societies wherein the symbolic legitimization of the political and social order was established as the consequence of the Second World War, a deep change in the attitude toward the bare and direct expression of violence took place. Acts of hate in the public sphere became morally delegitimized and symbolically repressed. As prominent French social thinker Marcel Gauchet shows us, this delegitimization of violence is followed by an unprecedented eclipse of sharp social conflicts. Even if we are witnessing a permanent litany of laments complaining about violence in everyday life – Gauchet writes – the truth is that we are living in Europe in incomparably quiet and peaceful societies (refer Gauchet, 2002). We have to ask then: if the bare violence and the hate determining this violence disappeared by some strange circumstances from the sphere of social praxis, is the hypothesis that they still shape the social imaginary really founded? And if so, how could it be possible?

Thus, to answer these questions, we will have to ask not about the direct impact of aggression but about its hidden influence, the "clandestine" action masked by its nonappearance on the surface of social interactions and discourse. The influence that, however, can be decrypted, as I will maintain, in some important phenomena of the contemporary culture, or even more, in the specific emotional climate of today's societies in the West. We will try to decrypt traces of the hidden, repressed hatred in the growth of indifference and detachment, often indicated as major characteristics of today's social mood.

Another question we need to ask should be about the theoretical instruments, notions, and categories that would enable us to describe such a hidden influence. Thus, our inquiry is also concerned with instruments that social scientists can use if they want to deal with these strata of social consciousness, which have mainly the structuring function and an indirect way of appearing.

## 2. Phenomenological Approach

We will begin our study of hatred in the vastly understood tradition of phenomenology. This theoretical approach can serve to free our thinking about

emotionality from any empirical psychologism. Sartre's theory of the emotion as a general attitude toward the whole of the world seems to be particularly effective for our purpose. Emotion is consciousness that has the world as the intentional correlate.[1] Nevertheless, as the whole world can never become a specific "thing", the consciousness will always find a partial object to represent the "whole". This partial object will be either idealized or diminished and hated. It will then represent the primary attitude of the consciousness facing the world, or – as Sartre will call it – the fundamental orientation of the existential horizon.

In his well-known example concerning the eruption of anger, Sartre shows how consciousness, faced with a choice that seems impossible, annihilates the apprehension of the world, and this act of annihilation appears to it as the phenomenon of anger itself.[2] For Sartre, hatred would be an experience similar to such a blow of fury.[3] His theory aims at violent feelings, abruptly appearing and disappearing. It is understandable, as the points of departure (and arrival) of this thought are only, and strictly, phenomena effectively given in the consciousness. The emotional state, present only as a general disposition for a specific kind of apprehended experience, a condition of conditions, has no place in this way of thinking.

Now, my argument is that hatred is not experienced as something momentary and violent. It is rather something persistent in time, but discrete; we could compare it to frozen anger. Let me analyze the difference between the understanding regarding the notions of anger and hate. If bare anger blows within the symbolic sphere, it constitutes specific phenomena. The attacks of September 11, 2001, could be an evident example of the action of anger on the level of the symbolic sphere – the image of the burning towers of the World Trade Center became a symbolic phenomenon present in our consciousness and strongly connected with multiple issues.

But the action of hatred is quite different. It deforms all the structure of social imaginary and puts a specific light on already-existing phenomena. Thus, it is rather a condition of conditions, only indirectly influencing the constitution of phenomena, adding some features to their complex character and permitting new connections in the horizon of their constitution.

## 3. Hatred as a Background Phenomenon

If we accept this conceptualization, we will have to write again after the thesis of Walter Benjamin about the influence of violence on social life. Violent acts, acts of anger, will constitute apparent "heavy" phenomena in the symbolic sphere. But their importance, their definitive position in the social imaginary, will be

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[1] "La conscience émotionnelle est d'abord conscience *du* monde" (Sartre, 1939, p. 29).
[2] "La colère [...] est une solution brusque d'un conflit" (Sartre, 1939, p. 23).
[3] Sartre, 1939, p. 49.

determined by the whole structure of that sphere. And the structure of the symbolic sphere is conditioned by hidden emotional dispositions, hatred being one of them. As a "condition of conditions", hatred will amplify or diminish the influence of a phenomenon, directly issuing from an outburst of violence.

Hence, to analyze this structure, we shall instead follow the Heideggerian notion of "being attuned".[4] We have to penetrate the domain of lingering, permanently active dispositions, moods that form the foundation of the constitution of the world. Such dispositions will not be apparent; they will have the character of the background, which gives sense to phenomenon. Our inquiry will then continue not along the path set by Sartre's analysis of furious anger but rather along Heidegger's inquiry into the nature of moods, especially boredom.

Why boredom? Because, as Heidegger writes, "Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole."[5] This philosophical observation covers many characteristics of the discontents of the contemporary civilization developed by social theorists. Let me quote two of them: Charles Taylor, when characterizing forms of the *malaise* of modernity, writes about alienation, emptiness, and the disintegration of social ties.[6] This characteristic is synonymic with boredom. Cornelius Castoriadis uses a pervasive term *la monté de l'insignifiance* – "flood [flad] of insignificance" – which is probably the most accurate metaphor of the influence of boredom on the social imaginary. Thus, as the "pervasive indifference" seems to be the main trace that enables us to track down the contemporary mood, we will follow the traces of boredom in our inquiry.

Can we compare the influence of hatred on the symbolic sphere to the above-quoted Heidegger's description of the action of boredom?

Before we try to answer this question, we have to observe that even if hatred doesn't influence the symbolic order in such a direct way as the anger, the ways in which it deforms phenomena of the social imaginary are multiple and differentiated. The differences are mainly dependent upon the level of acceptance of hatred in the discourse. I will try to shed some light on the question by bringing into play a historical example.

## 4. Historical Approach

In the Europe of the second half of the 19th century, the discourse of hate was vastly accepted. Even though there was mainly no direct military confrontation

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[4]  Refer Heidegger, 1962, p. 172.
[5]  Heidegger, 1929.
[6]  Taylor, 2002, p. 9.

on the European ground after the French–Prussian war of 1870, the official language of nationalistic European states and the social imaginary were saturated with characters determined by hate. The views of Prussians in France, of the French in Germany, and of Jews nearly everywhere were deformed by hateful intentions and prepared the ground for the events of the First and the Second World Wars.

But in the Europe of the second half of the 20th century, the situation was different. The European political and intellectual elite, rather scared and reflexive after the killings of the first half of the century, decided to ban any expression of open hatred, especially the ethnic one, from the permitted vocabulary. The legal system accepted the notion of the "incitation to hatred", or "incendiary speech", and treats it as a crime.[7] This crime is severely punished in all European countries, nearly without exception.

I will not maintain that in the democratic discourse, it is not possible to constitute objects of hate. However, they remain rather abstract and distanced, similar to globalization, or terrorism, or Zionism, or hatred itself; we could apply here the perspicacious thought of Peter Sloterdijk, originally concerning hope: objects of hatred are placed thereafter [*Danach*], in the other world [*Jenseits*], or at the end of time [*Endzeit*].

We can suppose two consequences of this state of affairs. Either hatred would disappear or it would change its influence on the symbolic system. The first option is rather optimistic and – as a matter of fact – it was this idea that determined the changes in the legal system after the Second World War: it meant that if we ban hate from the discourse, it will "evaporate" from social life.

Unfortunately, I am rather persuaded that we have to deal with the second consequence. One historical experience is quite thought-provoking here. For nearly 50 years, in the Tito regime in Yugoslavia, the ethnic hatred remained absolutely banned from discourse, at least in public. Nevertheless, with the outbreak of the civil war, hate exploded in an extremely violent and frightening way.

Thus, if it is so that even when banned, hatred persists somewhere in the symbolic field, we have to ask what influence it has then and find the theoretical instrument to describe this influence. In my opinion, the psychoanalytical thought, especially its Lacanian version, gives us some opportunity to understand this type of hidden motivations and intentions, which condition the structure of the social imaginary.

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[7] Duhaime's Law Dictionary. "Hate Crime" definition: The public incitation of hatred against an identifiable group. Retrieved from http://www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/H/HateCrime.aspx [January 12, 2013].

After the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Slavoj Žižek, severely shocked by the cruelty of events that victimized his homeland, wrote bitterly in *The Plague of Phantasies*: "we are as if witnessing the ultimate confirmation of Freud's thesis formulated in the *Civilization and its Discontents*, according to which any act of reinforcement of *Eros* provokes an even stronger, vindictive enhancement of *Thanatos*".[8] Nevertheless, as an instrument of description of contemporary Western societies, this thesis evokes my doubts. It can help us to understand explosions of the violent rage, but not our situation. We are experiencing rather the mood that Cornelius Castoriadis described with the term "flood of insignificance", discussed earlier.

## 5. Psychoanalytical Approach

Therefore, I would rather go to another of Freud's sentences: "If an intense love is opposed by an almost equally powerful hatred and is at the same time inseparably bound up with it, the immediate consequence will be the partial paralysis of the will and an incapacity for coming to a decision upon any of those actions for which love ought to provide motive power."[9] From this perspective, the influence of hatred on contemporary societies could be described in this way: unexpressed in a conscious way and repressed by the legal system in discourse, hatred directs its destructive force inward. Thus, hate paralyzes the capacity of the consciousness to constitute new acts and destroys the core of the power to create new meanings, goals, and perspectives. If we look again to the first sentence of Freud, we can say that "any act of the repression of *Thanatos* provokes an even stronger attenuation of *Eros*". We pay with our creative powers for the repression of the destructive ones.

Erich Fromm was the one who proposed the term "vicious boredom" as the synonym of the situation where repressed aggressiveness damages the capacity of rendering anything worthy of interest.[10] His description of this mood fits our intuitions. Repressed hatred, experienced consciously as "vicious boredom", would be responsible for the lack of dedication and commitment, for the "flood of insignificance". It would be the clandestine condition of the weakness of goals and values, of the decay of any long-term vision, and, last but not the least, of the massive retreatment into the shell, in the circle of the simplest and most direct experiences, the last one connected with the decrepitude of any largely understood, political project, formulated either on the left or on the right wing.

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[8] Žižek, 2001, p. 141.
[9] Freud, 1909, p. 2188.
[10] Erich Fromm, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, NY, Chicago, SF, 1973, p. 242–251.

On the contrary, this invasion of dullness provokes the hectic pursuit of fantastic but, quite often, delusional excitements, applied as a means to "escape from boredom". With her gift for laconic but absolutely accurate sentences, Hannah Arendt expresses a similar intuition, but concerning the beginning of the 20th century: "The process by which bourgeois society developed out of the ruins of its revolutionary traditions and memories added the black ghost of boredom to economic saturation and general indifference to political questions. […] The Enlightenment's genuine tolerance and curiosity for everything human was being replaced by the morbid lust for the exotic, abnormal and different as such".[11] This is an important issue, which I would like to develop now.

The society in which hatred is repressed will develop its potential on the basis of desires. This is the case of the Western societies during the past 60 years. As many social theorists have shown, the rousing and then the satiation of desires determine the most important dynamics of the contemporary model of life. It became so obvious to us, that we don't remember that there can be an absolutely different model based not on desire but on hate and disdain.

Nevertheless, history teaches us that such societies could exist and develop in quite an efficient way. The description of totalitarian systems in modern times gives a clear example of the model, but such societies have probably always existed, from antiquity, through medieval time, till the modern epoch. The development of hatred, the organization of the symbolic sphere around the character of the hated enemy, and then the constitution of social praxis, of all human relations on the foundation of the satisfaction given by abuse and cruelty, can form quite a stable structure for the social imaginary. As a matter of fact, in societies that suffer from strong material deficiency, organization of social imaginary on the basis of hate can be relatively easier than its foundation on the basis of desires.

In contrast to our societies, where hatred is repressed and desires amplified, in societies organized on the basis of hate, the desires will be frustrated. Probably, the best example here will be the Stalinist model of society.

Thus, we can speak on the most general level about two types of social imaginaries: on the one hand, those organized on the basis of desires, and on the other, those determined by hate. If we use psychoanalytical terms to describe these two types of imaginaries, we would speak about those penetrated by *Eros* and others ruled by *Thanatos*.

Here, we face one more quite paradoxical consequence of this state of affairs. The repression of impulses will lead to the constitution of a phantasmatic

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[11] Arendt, 1979, 67–68.

vision of fulfillment and satiation, possible only for the "Other". The denial of the aggressive impulses in one type of society and of the libidinal impulses in the other produces a symmetric vision of the Other, experiencing the repressed "pleasures" in an unlimited way.

The bitterness of Slavoj Žižek, expressed in his *Plague of Fantasies*, written in 1997, was provoked not only by the fact of the horrible violence of Balkan wars but also by this aspect of the "bored mentality" of European societies, the bored mentality expressed often by most prominent intellectuals.[12] To explain it more deeply, he developed the notion of interpassivity, the way in which a social imaginary, in which direct violence and hatred are repressed, finds its way to experience them thanks to the Other. His hypothesis was that in many Western commentaries about the Balkan war, such a phantasmatic vision of "cruel Balkanians" was developed. This vision was the way to experience hatred interpassively.

We can observe some of the similar attitudes concerning the image of the Islamic Terrorist developed in the Western imaginaries. The open aggressiveness expressed in the sphere of global communication by the fundamentalists becomes symptomatic also – or maybe mainly – for Western societies. It is a phantasmatic vision of a purely aggressive subject and an interpassive condition to experience hate through the Other. However, the vision of the immoral and corrupted West, developed in the fundamentalists' imaginaries, plays the same role. Symmetrically, it is a phantasmatic shape of a society, where all the desires are permitted and satiated.

## 6. Conclusion

And now, some sentences to conclude my speech. My analysis shouldn't be understood as an appeal to lift the ban put on the expression of hatred in Western societies. It is clear – and the experiences of the 20th century are absolutely sufficient to prove this – that one can relatively easily organize societies, their imaginaries, symbolic fields and also praxis according to the expression of hatred, disdain,

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[12] "Here the case of Peter Handke is illustrative: for many long years, he lived his authentic life interpassively, delivered of the corruption of Western consumerist capitalism, through the Slovenes (his mother was Slovene): for him, Slovenia was a country in which words related directly to objects (in the shops, milk was called simply "milk", avoiding the pitfall of commercialized brand names, and so on) – in short, a pure phantasmic formation. Now, Slovene independence and willingness to join the European Union have unleashed in him a violent aggressivity: in his recent writings, he dismisses Slovenes as Slaves of Austrian and German capital, selling their legacy to the West... all this, because his interpassive game was disturbed – because the Slovenes no longer behave in a way that would enable him to be authentic through them. No wonder, then, that he has turned to Serbia as the last vestige of authenticity in Europe, comparing Bosnian Serbs laying siege to Sarajevo with Native Americans laying siege to a camp of white colonizers..." (Žižek, 1997, p. 147, ft. 30).

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and aggression. For good reasons, we are rather afraid of it, and nowadays, the majority of people in Europe don't want this.

Nevertheless, I think that it is our duty to think about the consequences of the repression of all the dynamics, all the force connected with aggression, anger, and hatred. I am persuaded that if we will not do so, we may be one day surprised, as the societies of the *fin de siècle* were when – in August 1914 – the First World War started, opening the door for all the horrors of the following 40 years. In order to think about these matters, we should keep looking for adequate theoretical instruments.

### Summary
In my paper, I analyze hate as one of the important factors that influence and structuralize the symbolic sphere. In the first step, I define the notion of "symbolic sphere". Then, I analyze hate from the phenomenological and psychoanalytical points of view. My next step is a historical digression, concerning the place of hate in the social order. Next, I describe some important phenomena of the contemporary societies conditioned by the influence of hatred. Finally, I investigate which notions of the social theory are adequate to describe this kind of phenomena.

Hate has been most frequently apprehended as a sudden eruption of bare violence. It was supposed to transform the symbolic sphere through sharp, directly aggressive, and often unexpected actions. Nevertheless, in societies wherein the symbolic legitimization of the political and social order was established as the consequence of the Second World War, a deep change in the attitude toward the bare and direct expression of violence took place. Acts of hate in the public sphere became morally delegitimized and symbolically repressed. We should ask then: if the bare violence and the hate determining this violence disappeared from the sphere of social praxis, although they still shape the social imaginary, how are they really founded? Thus, to answer these questions, I will have to ask not about the direct impact of hatred, but about its hidden influence.

**Keywords:** Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Marcel Gauchet, hatred, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, social imaginaries, symbolic sphere, Slavoj Žižek

## Ist der Hass ein bestimmender Faktor des gegenwärtigen sozialen Imaginären?

### Zusammenfassung
In meinem Text analysiere ich den Hass als einen wichtigen Faktor, der die symbolische Sphäre beeinflusst und strukturiert. Zuerst definiere ich das Konzept der „symbolischen Sphäre". Danach analysiere ich den Hass aus phänomenologischer und psychoanalytischer Sicht. Als nächster Schritt folgt ein historischer Exkurs, in dem ich die Rolle des Hasses in der sozialen Ordnung thematisiere. Danach beschreibe ich einige wichtige Phänomene der heutigen Gesellschaft, die vom Einfluss des Hasses bedingt sind. Schließlich untersuche ich, welche Konzepte der Sozialtheorien für die Beschreibung dieser Phänomene in Frage kommen.

Hass wurde häufig als ein plötzlicher Ausbruch bloßer Gewalt verstanden. Dabei wurde davon ausgegangen, dass er die symbolische Sphäre durch einschneidende, unmittelbar aggressive und oft unvorhergesehene Handlungen umwandelt. Dennoch gab es in Gesellschaften, in denen die symbolische Legitimation der politischen und sozialen Ordnung als Folge des Zweiten Weltkrieges etabliert wurde, einen grundlegenden Wandel in der Einstellung zu diesem bloßen und direkten Ausdruck der Gewalt. Handlungen im öffentlichen Raum, in denen Hass ausgedrückt wird, wurden moralisch delegitimiert und symbolisch unterdrückt. Wir fragen daher: Wenn die bloße Gewalt und der Hass, der diese Gewalt bedingt, aus der Sphäre der sozialen Praxis verschwunden sind, obwohl sie das soziale Imaginäre weiterhin prägen, wie sind sie dann wirklich begründet? Um diese Frage zu beantworten, thematisiere ich nicht die direkten Auswirkungen des Hasses, sondern seine verborgenen Einflüsse.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Marcel Gauchet, Hass, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, symbolische Sphäre, soziale Imaginarien, Slavoj Žižek.

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