Ideology and Psychoanalysis

Introduction: psychoanalysis and the problem of the social

Ever since Freud’s time, psychoanalysts and social theorists have used psychoanalytic ideas to look at social and cultural processes, e.g. Freud’s papers on Civilisation and its Discontents, Group Psychology, Moses and Monthesim, and Totem and Taboo; Marcuse’s critique of advanced capitalist society.

Many of these theories have been based on the idea of culture as both a civilising and repressing force – drives are repressed and sublimated in order to allow constructive social interaction, and to avoid the anarchy which is assumed to be the outcome of no repression and sublimation.

Behind these ideas there seems to be a notion of culture and society as being the product of individual and group actions, both conscious and unconscious. Indeed, it is very much a social psychological theory of society. Society is both a product of individual actions, and an ordering of such actions. Society is essentially an imposition on individual and ultimately selfish interests – an imposition which is tolerated (most of the time) as the price for a relatively secure existence.

However, there is another view of society and culture which starts from a very different position – that of culture constructing the individual subject rather than the other way round. There are a number of extreme examples of this, e.g. Althusser’s structural Marxism, Foucault’s analysis of discursive practices; and some rather more complex arguments which problematise both culture and the individual subject.

In many ways these two position mirror a perennial argument within the social sciences, that of attempting to explain social processes in terms of individual ones and vice versa – the individual ‘versus’ society, agency and structure, and so on. Theories of ideology, both psychoanalytically based or otherwise, tend to come from the position that the social constructs the individual subject, although writers such as Laclau and Mouffe argue that the society itself is an ideological construction (see below). One of the problems for psychoanalysis is that it has often been accused of being individualistic and therefore promoting the values of individualism over collectivism, i.e. it is itself ideological. These arguments have tended to come from the political left, although ironically some of the greatest proponents of psychoanalytically inspired social and political theories also come from this position.

However, it is simply incorrect to argue that psychoanalysis is socially naive or cares little for the wider society. Indeed, as has already been mentioned above, many psychoanalytic writers from Freud onwards have been deeply concerned about how their theories could throw light on social problems. What is problematic is how these theories go about constructing the social, and many do seem to start from the individual and ‘extrapolate’ the social. Freud’s paper on Group Psychology is a good example of this. It is hard to see where a notion of ideology would fit into such arguments, beyond the concept of a shared idea or shared values. The more sophisticated theories of ideology, however, from Marxism onwards, give ideology a far more autonomous and material existence. Ideology is produced through socio-
economic practices, and ‘imposes’ itself on the individual subject. In Althusser’s theory of the Ideological State Apparatus, for example, the individual subject is ‘interpellated’ by ideology, and in fact this interpellation is what constructs the subject (Althusser, 1977). In these theories there is hardly a need for the individual subject at all, and although Althusser’s approach has been heavily criticised his legacy lives on in much post-structuralist social theory.

In this paper I will trace the development of psychoanalytically (Lacanian) theories of ideology, and then use the example of Nazism to try and see how the theory can relate to practice. Firstly though, I will outline the Marxist theory of ideology, because it still provides the reference point for all subsequent theories and critiques.

**Marxism**

The theory of ideology is probably best developed within the Marxist tradition: however, within this framework there are a number of different and conflicting approaches. Larraín (1982) argues that Marx’s original conception of ideology, although not systematically formulated, was based around the notion of distortion or misrepresentation of reality. However, this was not to be equated with ideology as being false consciousness or as being simply a set of ideas, as many successive Marxists and non-Marxists have argued:

...it is possible to see that ideology refers to a limited material practice which generates ideas that misrepresent social contradictions in the interest of the ruling class (Larrain, 1982:27)

Such a ‘limited material practice’ refers to social life under capitalism. It is true that for Marx (according to Larrian) that ideology refers to a form of consciousness:

...which gives an inadequate and distorted picture of contradictions, either by ignoring them, or by misrepresenting them (ibid:27)

and that it relates to certain ideas:

..which express practice inadequately (ibid:23)

However, the critical point is that not all ideas are ideological and that it is the distortion or misrepresentation of the contradictions of social life that is the characteristic of ideological ideas. Although it is not altogether clear why Larrian is unhappy with the notion of ‘false consciousness’ it does seem that such an idea implies a ‘true consciousness’ which is not the same as a distorted one. To see things clearly is not the same as having a ‘true’ consciousness.

Larrian goes on to argue that a number of Marx’s successors developed a much more positive notion of ideology, particularly Lenin, Lukács and Gramsci. Here, ideology becomes class consciousness rather than distorted consciousness. For Marx there could not be an ideology of the proletariat because ideology served to mask the contradictions of the proletarian existence and thus served the interests of capital. For these later thinkers, however, it became possible to think of ideological struggle between classes. The problem here was that ideology became equated with ideas and in turn with knowledge and science in general. Thus there could be a bourgeois
science and a proletarian science. This seems a prelude to the later post-structuralist argument that there is no such thing as an objective science or discourse. In fact, even at this stage ideology is becoming equated with discourse.

**Structuralism and post-structuralism**

In the 1970s there were further developments of the Marxist theory of ideology, within a structuralist framework. Two particular examples are those of Althusser, and Coward and Ellis. Both these approaches appear to try and retain a critical attitude to ideology, especially with Althusser, and yet both are moving into similar ground with the post-structuralists, with a focus on the construction of the subject.

Althusser argues that ideology serves to reproduce the relations of production in a capitalist society (Althusser, 1977). It does this through the reproduction of skills and, more importantly, an attitude of mind in the work force - one which ensures the subjection of labour to the demands of capital.

For Althusser, ideology was seen as omnipresent, eternal, outside of history. It has a real, material existence - and yet it is still a distortion of the relationship between human beings and their conditions of existence, which arise from the capitalist relations of production.

Another crucial point for Althusser was that ideology constitutes or defines concrete individuals as subjects. Ideology constitutes its subjects through interpellation, which Althusser also refers to as a 'hailing' of the concrete individual. He gives a number of examples of interpellation, such as a person being hailed in the street. The moment of hailing, of recognition, transforms individuals into subjects.

Furthermore, interpellation of subjects presupposes an interpellator, which Althusser refers to as the Subject. For example, in Christian religion (another of Althusser's examples) God is the Absolute, Other Subject who interpellates human beings as subjects. Althusser goes on to argue that the structure of ideology is specularly, i.e. like a mirror in whose reflection individuals see themselves as subjects (images) of the Subject. It is through this process of interpellation and reflection that human beings come to recognise themselves and others as subjects. However, this subjection of the subject to the Subject is a 'free' submission. Indeed, in bourgeois ideology the subject is the free, rational, self-interested subject of market capitalism.

It is the Althusserian notion of ideology that Coward and Ellis utilize and develop in their materialist analysis of ideology, language and the construction of the human subject (Coward & Ellis, 1977). Although they find Althusser's concepts extremely useful they also find them limiting in the sense that they do not take into account the importance of language in relation to ideological formation. Furthermore, although Althusser does make references to Lacan in his writings, he does not fully explore the role of Lacanian analysis in helping to understand the ideological process.

Coward and Ellis define ideology as

...a practice of representation; a practice to produce a specific articulation, that is, producing certain meanings and necessitating certain subjects as their supports (Coward & Ellis, 1977, p. 67)
The role of ideology is the constitution of human subjects within a certain mode of production. But human beings are not usually aware of the ideological nature of their experience. Rather their experience is perceived as 'natural'. Human beings live through ideology, which reproduces relations of production and class, and the relations between human beings and their world. Ideology positions people in the social structure. More importantly, it reproduces the bourgeois free subject and the notion of a lasting, coherent ego.

Cowan and Ellis draw heavily on Lacanian theory to develop their materialist interpretation of ideology, and especially Lacan's concept of the 'mirror phase'. This is the process whereby, according to Lacan, a child gains an imaginary sense of identity, of being an integrated individual - a 'whole' person (Lacan, 1977).

Ideology operates in a similar way in that it creates an imaginary sense of identity for human beings:

Thus the function of ideology is to fix the individual in place as subject for a certain meaning (Coward & Ellis, 1977, p. 76)

And in doing so ideology closes off the contradictions of the human subject, which in both Althusserian and Lacanian terms is not seen as a fixed, completed, essential individual. Rather the subject is fragmented, full of contradictions, in a constant process of change and transformation. It is only through the intervention of language (Lacan's Symbolic) that the subject becomes 'fixed'.

As a number of writers have pointed out, the concept of ideology is in fact very problematic (see for example (Foucault, 1984); (Laclau, 1990)). These problems revolve particularly around the distinction between ideology and truth, and between the discursive and extra-discursive, or, to put it another way, between the system of meaning or discourse and what the discourse is referring to. With Coward and Ellis in particular, it becomes difficult to differentiate between language, ideology and the 'external' world.

A development of the ideas of both Althusser, and Coward and Ellis is that of Ernesto Laclau. In the mid 1980s he began, with Chantal Mouffe, to develop what they described as a post-Marxist theory of society and politics (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) Their social theory is based on the concept of the social as discourse, although this includes not only language but also institutions, rituals and practices. In fact, for them all discourse has a very material character. Smith argues that:

....Laclau and Mouffe's "discourse" comes close to the theorisations of "ideology" by Althusser or Gramsci. Their divergence from the latter comes from abandoning what they term the "essentialist assumption" about the coherence of ideology.... (Smith, 1997, p. 4).

Laclau further develops the Lacanian aspects of the theory in a number of later writings (Laclau, 1990). His argument centres around the idea that the conception of 'society' is itself ideological, that it represents an attempt to construct an intelligible totality, a attempt to 'sew' together (or to use the Lacanian term, suture) signifiers
with their signifieds. This fixation of meaning is, for Laclau and Mouffe, the definition of ideology. All political systems, be they totalitarian or liberal democracies, attempt to create a stable totality – and all fail, because there is always an excess of meaning around the structure (the ‘infinitude of the social’). Because there can be no ‘ultimate’ fixation, society, as a total system, cannot exist. Rather, the social is an interplay of differences, which is Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of discourse. However, there has to be a partial fixation of meaning otherwise psychosis arises – although it is unclear how Laclau’s use of this terms relates to the clinical use. Ideological and political struggle is an attempt to hegemonize one particular system of meaning, e.g. the great struggles in the twentieth century between Marxism, fascism and liberal democracy.

As well as his critique of society, Laclau also criticises the Marxist notion of false consciousness, which is the essence of the Marxist theory of ideology – ideology mystifies the true social conditions of the subject. False consciousness, for Laclau, is based on the idea of a fixed identity of the subject, and implies both a positive and non-contradictory concept of identity. This is the basis of the Marxist notion of ‘objective class interests’, which had to be sustained through the mediation of the Party, because of the gap between actual consciousness and imputed consciousness. However, and again Laclau is drawing heavily on Lacanian ideas, this fixed identity cannot be sustained, because social agents are decentralised subjects, and thus the notion of false consciousness becomes untenable because there is no true consciousness to start with. Consequently, ideology has to be redefined, though not (as many Foucauldians would have it) done away with. *Ideology is not a misrecognition of a positive essence, i.e. the real social conditions of existence*. Rather, it is the *non-recognition of the impossibility of such an essence*. In other words, ideology is an attempt to create an illusory social (and political) totality, rather than creating an illusion about such a (real) social totality. *(Social) reality is the illusion.* And ultimately it is a defence against the Real. These critical points are the basis of the work of Žižek.

**Ideology as social fantasy: the ideas of Slavoj Žižek**

Slavoj Žižek has become one of the foremost proponents of what might be described as a post-Lacanian theory of ideology. Post-Lacanian in the same way that post-structuralism might be described as a development (rather than a negation of) of structuralism. Much of his work is essentially a reading of Lacan through Hegel, but with his work on ideology he is also heavily influenced by Althusser, and Laclau and Mouffe.

In the first chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Zizek, 1989) Žižek argues that there is a close similarity between Freud’s analysis of dreams and Marx’s analysis of commodities. In both instances the critical focus is *not* on the ‘hidden meaning’ of the dream or the commodity but rather on the form of the dream or commodity itself. The form of the dream (or commodity) is the:

> ....process by means of which the hidden meaning disguised itself in such a form (Zizek, 1989, p. 15)
The latent dream thoughts are not unconscious: they appear in the form of the dream which is the result of the dream work. What is unconscious is the desire which ‘latches on’ to the ‘normal’ thoughts.

However, Žižek argues that it was Marx who laid the foundations for this type of analysis, not Freud. He draws on the work of Sohn-Rethel to explain how the analysis of the commodity form made it possible to analyse the transcendental subject, i.e. the network of the Kantian transcendental categories which are the basis of modern scientific procedures and which allowed thought to arrive at pure abstraction and quantification. The exchange of commodities requires a double abstraction: the changeable nature of the commodity and the particular, qualitative nature of the commodity.

The act of abstraction is at work in the effective process of commodity exchange (the real abstraction) and can be seen as the ‘unconscious’ of the transcendental subject, i.e. what underpins objective, universal scientific knowledge. The abstraction is real in the sense of being a postulate, an ‘as if’, e.g. as if money were really some metaphysical entity. This unconscious is external to the transcendental subject. It is at the level of the sublime, as a body-within-a-body, an indestructible body.

The exchange abstraction does not equal thought, rather it has the form of thought. The commodity exchange only ‘works’ because people are not aware of its logic, and this, argues Žižek, is in the dimension of ideology. However, this is not ideology as false consciousness (as in the traditional Marxist theory of ideology), i.e. an illusory representation of reality. Rather it is a social reality itself, of whose essence its participants are unaware. The ‘false consciousness’ is what supports the social (ideological) being. And, argues Žižek, this is also the dimension of the symptom:

…”a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject (Zizek, 1989, p. 21)

Žižek describes the Marxian symptom as the discrepancy between an ideological Universal, e.g. bourgeois notions of freedom and a specific manifestation of this Universal, e.g. workers selling their labour, which leads to the lose of their freedom. Symptoms are the ‘built in’ negatives of the ideological Universals. In the Universal of equivalent and equitable exchange, the negation is labour, which cannot ‘obey’ the Universal. Labour, as a commodity, as the internal negation of equivalent exchange of commodities, represents Unreason in the midst of Reason. For Marx this Unreason was represented by the proletariat, for Foucault (and for psychoanalysis) it was represented by the mentally ill.

Žižek argues that the ideological illusion lies in the doing not the knowing, which is the inverse of the Marxist position – people do not know it but they are doing it. In other words, people act as if they did not know, even if they think they do know. And this is because they overlook the unconscious illusion which is structuring their social reality, i.e. the ideological fantasy. In this sense, a cynical distancing from ideology, which can be seen as the ‘post-ideological’ position, i.e. people are now aware of ideological mystification, is just another form of delusion.
In feudalism interpersonal relations were mystified, mediated by superstitions and beliefs, whereas in capitalism people are supposedly free of superstition and belief, acting only on rational self interest. However, this commodity relationship becomes an external belief and the mystification now takes place in the commodity relations. The things believe for the people, like the Tibetan prayer wheel, the Chorus in classic tragedy, or the ‘canned laughter’ in modern TV shows.

The social fantasy (ideology) is supported by belief, which is materialised in social activity. This belief comes from doing rather than thinking, as in following the Law because it is the Law. However, Žižek argues that this is not defining belief in terms of behaviourism, i.e. the act of believing produces the belief, but rather that it is a form of belief beyond belief. By acting in a certain way, e.g. by following a custom, a person believes without knowing it. The final ‘conversion’ to the belief, e.g. religious or political, is simply making explicit what is already there. The external act is a material support for the subject’s unconscious.

When we subject ourselves to the machine of a religious ritual, we already believe without knowing it; our belief is already materialised in the external ritual; in other words, we already believe unconsciously... (Zizek, 1989, p. 43).

Althusser’s theory of the ideological state apparatus, according to Žižek, is a modern formulation of Pascal’s ‘machine’ of ritual belief, but fails to explain how such a belief is internalised (or in Althusser’s term, how is interpellelates the subject). Such an interpellation never fully succeeds, because there is always a ‘traumatic’ residue remaining, a senselessness which is the real strength of ideology, the ideological jouissance. There is no complete identification in ideological interpellation: Žižek uses the example of Kafka and the faceless bureaucratic machines. The Kafkaesque subject can never identify with this bureaucracy, which paradoxically is the strength of the system. The subject is desperately trying to identify with something, is desperately seeking the supposed secret within the ideology.

Ideology is a fantasy which serves to support social reality, rather than being an escape from it. Ideology also serves to mask the trauma within such a reality, which is the dimension of the Real, of desire.

Žižek cites Lacan’s argument that it is only in dreams that we come close to the Real of our desire – but this does not mean that life is just a dream – dreams do not equate with fantasies. We cannot break out of ideological fantasy by rational thought, e.g. by being ‘post-ideological’. Instead we need to confront the Real which is the kernel of this fantasy.

Žižek uses the example of anti-Semitism to illustrate that rational thought is incapable of breaking the ideological fantasy. Everyday experience of Jews, e.g. of living next door to them and realising that they are just like non-Jews, is not going to ‘cure’ the anti-Semite of his or her prejudice. This is because anti-Semitism is serving as a fantasy which maintains a sense of meaning for the anti-Semite – it has nothing to do with real Jews. Everyday, contrary experience will simply be used to reinforce such prejudice by showing how cunning and deceptive Jews are because they can portray themselves as normal.
Nazism as ideology

National Socialism (Nazism) has been subjected to an exhaustive analysis over the years, not least because of the resurgence of Fascism and Neo-Nazism in Europe in recent times. Much of the work has understandably focused on what appears to be its defining characteristic, anti-Semitism, and on the role occupied by Adolf Hitler in creating, sustaining and finally destroying the Nazi system.

In one sense there seems little doubt that Nazism was, and still is in its resurgent variations, an ideological system *par excellence*. As a social fantasy, to use Žižek’s term, Nazism effectively reordered the world view of its subjects to such an extent that even after the total collapse of the regime there was for a long time a disavowal of its barbaric and catastrophic nature. This is perhaps one of the peculiar aspects of Nazism – if the function of ideology is to maintain a social fantasy, to create a liveable reality within an impossible situation, then Nazism explicitly contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction – its symptom, its negation, is an inherent part of itself, rather than being an unintended effect. There is compelling evidence which suggests that National Socialism simply synthesised a number of pre-existing anti-democratic, anti-enlightenment and indeed anti-humanistic elements within German culture. Fischer, for example, argues that by the end of the First World War there were five major preconditions for Nazism already in place:

1. a hybrid, half feudal and half industrial society with a long standing militaristic and authoritarian tradition
2. the nationalisation of the masses as an instrument of social control and international aggression
3. the legitimisation and respectability of biological-racial beliefs
4. the trauma of military defeat and economic ruin
5. the convergence of sociopathic personalities and xenophobic movements
   (Fischer, 1995, p. 19)

All of these elements can be seen as a negation of the traditions and values of a universal, albeit bourgeois, social, economic and cultural system. Although there have been attempts by Marxist writers to link Nazism with capitalism, the evidence is problematic. It seems far more likely that capitalism, as part of what remained of the German military-industrial complex, thought it could harness Nazism for its own ends, only to end up being devoured by it.

There seems little doubt either that an important aspect of Nazism was to recreate the violence, and macho camaraderie of the trenches of the First World War. German society became militarised and put onto a permanent war footing, with the enemy being both external and internal, even before the tanks starting rolling. In fact it could be argued that actual military conflict was, paradoxically, the last thing that Nazism needed for its survival, because it then risked a confrontation with a violence which might possibly be even more extreme, and organised, than its own – which is precisely what happened after the initial successes of 1939 to 1941.

It also appears, as alluded to by Fischer, that the psychology (and not to mention psychopathology) of a large section of the German people became mobilised as a political instrument. With reference to anti-Semitism for example, Goldhagen is quite unapologetic in arguing that what he terms ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ was part of
the German people’s mindset (Goldhagen, 1996) Could this be the point where the role of ideology becomes critical? Is the construction of this social fantasy what turns individual pathology into state violence and annihilation? The question then arises as to whether it is a case of individual neuroses (and psychoses) simply being ‘used’ to further a political end, which is how many writers regard the role of the Nazi party, and Hitler in particular. In other words, were the Nazis simply ‘tapping into’ the existing insecurities and desires of the German people? Or is it more the case that Nazism itself can be seen as the political manifestation of such insecurities and desires, and that the ideological component of Nazism is, in fact, not a component of it at all, but rather the means by which it, i.e. Nazism, becomes manifested? In the first case there is an ideological component of Nazism which is used to play on the psychopathology of the German population, in order to mobilise support for the political programme of National Socialism. In the second case, ideology makes National Socialism a political reality, as the expression of the insecurities and desires of the German people.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, both arguments are of great interest, but for very different reasons. The first argument is essentially drawing on a Marxist theory of ideology, in which a false consciousness of the masses is engendered by the ruling class or elite, in this case the Nazi party, in order to hide the truth of the political programme and at the same time to legitimise its existence. The interesting question here is how the ideas, e.g. anti-Semitism, Blut und Boden (blood and soil), Volksgemeinschaft (community of the people), Lebensraum (living space) associated with Nazism became ‘internalised’ or, to use Althusser’s term, interpellated by individual Germans. It has already been argued that most, if not all of these ideas were already present in German culture, in which case the question can still be asked but cannot really be associated with the Nazi party. The interpellation may certainly have taken place, but well before Hitler came on the scene. This argument essentially portrays the mass of the German population as (innocent?) victims of Nazi propaganda, backed by violence. There is a strong argument for this theory, because the Nazis went to great deal of effort to disseminate ideas which were basic to their cause through education, the cinema, sport, art and even architecture (Fischer, 1995, pp. 341-374). From an Althusserian perspective they utilised every arm of the ideological state apparatus to mould the German population into their own image.

There are a number of problems with this approach, however. One is the more fundamental problem with this kind of structural Marxist approach, whereby subjects become the effects of ‘inhuman’ economic forces, and become subjects through ideological interpellation. This is certainly a move away from the more ‘humanist’ Marx whereby men make their own history, albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing. Although Althusser used Lacanian theory to construct his theory of ideology, it was a particular (mis)reading of Lacan (Elliott, 1992).

Another problem goes back to the fact that there was nothing in Nazi ‘ideology’ which wasn’t already present in German culture. The history of Germany in this period is often portrayed as that of a great and cultured people falling under the spell of a corrupt regime – and the question is then asked: how could this have happened? Writers such as Fischer and Goldhagen, however, suggest that it happened quite simply because there was already something very rotten at the core
of this society, and all it took was the trauma of military defeat and socio-economic chaos to bring this to the surface.

Perhaps it can be argued that the Nazi propaganda machine was simply articulating all that was already present in the culture, giving voice to all the underlying resentments, frustrations and desires of the German people. It is true that some of the more extreme examples, e.g. the anti-Semitic films, were received very badly by many of the audiences, but this does not in itself undermine the argument if this revulsion can be regarded as a form of disavowal. It is also true that large number of intellectuals fled the Nazi regime, but many stayed behind and flourished under it, at least for a time, perhaps the most infamous being Martin Heidegger (Fischer, 1995, pp. 364-374).

In what way, though, can the concept of ideology as social fantasy be used to analyse the way in which individual psychopathology, for want of a better phrase, becomes ‘translated’ into political action, and ultimately world war and genocide? Žižek makes a number of references to totalitarianism in his books, and particularly to anti-Semitism. One of the crucial points in his argument about the nature of ideology, which has already been referred to, is the idea that the ideological illusion is on the side of the doing, not the knowing. People know full well....and yet....they act as if they didn’t know. And this is because the doing, the acting, is being sustained by an unconscious fantasy which is holding their (fictional) reality together. To quote Žižek on anti-Semitism:

The proper answer to anti-Semitism is (therefore) not ‘Jews are really not like that but ‘the anti-Semitic idea of Jew has nothing to do with Jews; the ideological figure of a Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system’. (Zizek, 1989, p. 48).

This seems to come very close to a definition of neurosis: a subject ‘knows’ full well that he cannot have sex with his mother........and yet.....in his symptoms betrays his desire for just that. And this is because, to paraphrase Žižek, the neurotic idea of Mother has nothing to do with mothers as real human beings; the neurotic figure of a Mother is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own neurotic system. In this sense, perhaps, individual pathology is ideological fantasy – or vice versa?

Another important aspect of ideology as fantasy is what Žižek describes as its ‘inherent transgression (Zizek, 1997, pp. 18-27). By this he is referring to the ‘gap’ between the symbolic fiction which we call reality, and which includes laws, customs, etc, and the fantasy itself. This is why a cynical distance from the official ideological fails as a way of escaping the ideology – on the contrary, it is the very essence of ideology. Ideology ‘works’ precisely because it points to something beyond itself. Žižek refers directly to Nazism, arguing that the ‘essence’ of its ideology was not the overt demonstration of political and military power, but its ‘inner greatness’, the trans-ideological kernel promising something beyond everyday reality.

Is not a kind of ‘authentic’ vision discernible even in Nazism (the notion of the deep solidarity which keeps the ‘community of people’ together), not to mention Stalinism? The point is thus not that there is no ideology without a trans-ideological ‘authentic’ kernel but rather, that it is only the reference to
such a trans-ideological kernel which makes an ideology ‘workable’. (Zizek, 1997, pp. 21, italics in original).

Is it possible that the mass of the German people knew full well that their country was being governed by a corrupt and murderous regime, and which would eventually drag them into the abyss of a second defeat ...... and yet still supported them because in their everyday existence they tried to live as normal a life as possible? In other words, they tried to live as decent Germans - and the more they tried the more the inconsistency of their behaviour became apparent so the more they tried to stitch up their increasingly contradictory existence, i.e. trying to live a normal life while their cities were being bombed, and Jews were being shipped off to concentration camps. By trying to live as decent Germans they were perhaps trying to maintain that distance from the official ideology – and in doing so sustained the ideological fantasy. Paradoxically, in their very attempt to ‘escape’ from Nazism, in terms of its propaganda and violence, they became ‘victims’ of its underlying fantasy, which was of course, their own fantasy.

Conclusion
In this paper I have tried to give an overview of psychoanalytic theories of ideology, and to see how they can be applied to a particular, and unfortunately still very relevant, example. I realise that I have only scratched the surface in my analysis of Nazism, but hopefully this paves the way for more research. What has become clearer to me in researching and writing this paper is that far from being an attempt to ‘individualise’ the social and the political, or even to try and avoid it altogether, psychoanalysis can provide an invaluable insight into the whole question of the relationship between individual and society. The Lacanian inspired theory of ideology also raises the question of whether an ideology is a form of social neurosis, or conversely, whether a neurosis is a form of personal ideology. Once again, this question provides the starting point for more work.

References


