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Fantasy and Identity in Critical Political Theory¹

In an article entitled ‘Philosophy’s Gaudy Dress: Rhetoric and Fantasy in the Lockean Social Contract’, Linda Zerilli draws our attention to a section in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that John Locke added in its fourth edition of 1700, four years before his death. The section is entitled ‘Of the Association of Ideas’. She claims this section introduces a kind of torsion into his *Essay* because it goes against the grain of his otherwise consistent and loud valorisation of reason and correspondingly loud castigation of rhetoric as a ‘gaudy dress’ or, more straightforwardly, as ‘the Abuse of Words’.

In that section he appears to reveal a more ambivalent attitude toward rhetoric and an at least implicit recognition of the powerful grip that certain chance associations can exert over us. Consider the following extract:

It is of a young gentleman, who having learnt to dance, and that to great perfection, there happened to stand an old trunk in the room where he learnt. The *idea* of this remarkable piece of household stuff, had so mixed itself with the turns and steps of all his dances that, though in that chamber he could dance excellently well, yet it was only whilst that trunk was there; nor could he perform well in any other place, unless that, or some such other trunk had its due position in the room.

John Locke (1993: 222–223), Book 2, Chapter 33, Paragraph 16

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In light of this, Zerilli imagines Locke asking himself: well, ‘if a trunk can take on such significance for a Gentleman, what is to keep another equally unremarkable object from assuming the same strange status in the subject’s fantasy life? The answer is: nothing – [and] therein lies the disruptive power of association for an education in reason’ (Zerilli 2005: 152). In drawing out the implica-

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tions of this insight for an analysis of the Lockean social contract Zerilli draws on the Italian philosopher Ernesto Grassi, arguing that rhetoric and fantasy are a potent ‘source of inventive political and philosophical thinking’ and ‘the very “ground” of rational thought’ (Zerilli 2006: 479).

In a similar way it has been suggested that ‘there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasy into the frame’. So claims Jacqueline Rose in her book *States of Fantasy* because, for her, it is fantasy that provides the sticky psychic glue that binds together the elements of social and political reality (Rose 1996: 4). Far from confining fantasy to the private life of the individual, fantasy is here understood to play a crucial role in forging a people’s collective and political will.²

And yet the category of fantasy rarely features in the debates of political theorists and philosophers. Rose suggests that ‘[o]ne of the reasons the idea of fantasy has a hard time getting into the political argument is... because it is seen as threatening political composure’ (Rose 1996: 7). By this I take her to be making the point that talking about fantasy in a formal context defined by the dominant, disciplinary norms of political science threatens to reproduce the erstwhile experience of bringing up the topic of sex with one’s parents. Reacting in this way, however, risks overlooking a crucial point about political life. For political authority and people’s obedience are rooted in the hopes and fears that our fantasies help dramatize. In this vein Rose points to Max Weber’s insight that, beyond tradition, charisma, and legality, the obedience of the people rests on ‘fear of the vengeance of magical powers or of the power-holder, [and] hope for reward in this world or in the world beyond’ (Weber 1991: 79, as cited in Rose 1996: 8).

² It is clear that the appeals to the term ‘fantasy’ are not so infrequent in the context of social and political studies, as well as political journalism and the media at large. ‘As the job market plunges, the fantasy politics prevail’ – so reads one of Polly Toynbee’s headlines. Or elsewhere, she summarizes a prevalent, though often unstated, collective desire in terms of a plea: ‘Please can we have our bubble back’. This is the way Polly Toynbee (2009) expresses the unstated wish animating the collective complicity of ‘just about everyone’ to return to business as usual in the wake of the credit crunch. That the full extent of the fall-out has yet to become clear has not prevented governments, investors, entrepreneurs, especially homeowners and consumer-citizens in general, wanting a quick return to the alleged ‘good old days’. ‘Please can we have our bubble back’ summarizes the all too palpable fear that the chance for meaningful, structural change might already be lost.

A recent analysis of the American social and political landscape takes this insight to heart. In her book *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* Susan Faludi charts how, in the wake of 9/11, there was a sustained effort by the media, entertainment, and advertising industries to graft a very specific fantasy onto America's psychic wound, based on the Cold War narrative, particularly of the 1950s. The Cold War narrative was successfully installed not simply on account of the sheer force of intent, backed by huge resources, but also because it tapped into memories and fantasmatic evocations of the baby-boom childhood of 'nuclear family "togetherness", redomesticated femininity, [and] Cold Warrior manhood' (Faludi 2007: 4).

Folded into this narrative, of course, were all the Hollywood classics of this period, especially the John Wayne films, to which the Turner Broadcasting Corporation devoted all of its Christmas 2001 programming. A massive array of media, entertainment, and advertising outlets spun a seductive web of 'rescue and protect' fantasies about revenge and American invincibility; about male virility, feminine frailty and childhood vulnerability. By the end of 2005 the airwaves were packed with 'cowboy-code-of-honour types who never throw the first punch but are relentless and invincible once riled' (Faludi 2007: 8). In these images and a whole array of accompanying statements Faludi discerns an underlying 'Lone Ranger'/'Dirty Harry' fantasy of the John Wayne or Clint Eastwood types, reinforced by media portrayals of George W. Bush's cowboy dress and swagger. This 'rescue and protect' fantasy was disseminated with gusto to the American public (and beyond) – a public which appeared ready and willing to embrace it.

Why does Faludi take an interest in these fantasies? She does so because they carry consequences (Faludi 2007: 380). Their wide dissemination and consumption make sense of many things according to her, including the comparative absence in the US media of public democratic contestation of US foreign policy; draconian curtailment of civil liberties; and regression in matters of women's security and political voice, both at home and abroad. (Faludi is, of course, keen to point out that these consequences result not only or even primarily because of fantasy.) Fantasies facilitate, or contribute to, these consequences according to Faludi because they shape the way we 'see' reality, including its problems and solutions, and therefore they structure the way we *act* in the world. Faludi takes

special note of the widespread and widely tolerated denigration of women that, she feels, is a direct result of women departing from the scripts of constructed rescue fantasies (Faludi 2007: 23-57).³ A key part of this construction process involved placing women in the position of someone in *need* of rescue and protection. In this regard, she trains her critical gaze on the widespread and widely disseminated stories in which women and children appear as victims. As Faludi puts it:

In the post-9/11 reenactment of the fifties Western, women figured largely as vulnerable maidens. Never mind that the fatalities that day were three-to-one male-to female and that most of the female office workers at the World Trade Center (like their male counterparts) rescued *themselves* by walking down the stairs on their own two feet...

(Faludi 2007: 6-7)

According to Faludi this myth was so powerful that it was immune to what she calls 'the antibiotics of common sense or statistical hard evidence' (Faludi 2007: 186).⁴

Taken together these claims appear to suggest that Faludi thinks we need to get 'closer' to reality and that fantasies are to be defined and evaluated on the basis of their ability or inability to reflect that reality faithfully. So the political and ideological significance of fantasy is understood here as a function of a 'correspondence theory of truth', a view which is widely held by others, including journalists, as well as many academics who appreciate the symbolic significance of political argument. Fantasy, then, tends to be construed as a kind of false-consciousness. More than that, we might add that fantasy tends to be construed as a kind of bad, or morally regressive, false-consciousness.

³ Rescue fantasies are opposed by Faludi to female liberation for example (Faludi 2007: 54).

⁴ For Faludi this is a product not just of the power and political economy of the media in the US, but also because these stories tap into a specific cultural history that succeeds in interpellating a good portion of the public (Aitkenhead, D. '9/11 Ripped the Bandage off US Culture', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2008). The fact that several narratives (eg., the Pearl Harbour narrative) were attempted shortly after 9/11, but failed to interpellate, suggests that 'successful myths' need some form of background historical and experiential validation, including fantasmatic resonance.

Insightful and informative as Faludi's work is, the way she relates fantasy to 'reality' and to questions of critique tends to underestimate the complexity of their relation and thus the strategic and tactical challenges facing those who might wish to contest and transform that reality. In order to make sense of this claim, I explore the appeal and content of the category of fantasy, situating my remarks in relation to a critical political theory, by which I mean a theory grounded in a political ontology that offers a basis for problem-driven empirical research but also a rationale for both normative and ideological critique. Apart from Susan Faludi's work, I draw on the political analytical work of William Connolly, Jacqueline Rose, and Judith Butler, among others, using them as case illustrations with which to consider the explanatory and critical implications of the concept of fantasy for questions of identity, political identity in particular.

Why Fantasy?

Despite the above-noted tendency to construe fantasy in predominantly epistemological terms, as illusion or myth, there remain good reasons to affirm fantasy as a productive analytical and critical category. The attraction of the concept of fantasy can be understood in part by reflecting on the emergence and development of poststructuralist political theory and analysis. Central, in this regard, are what have been labelled the linguistic and affective 'turns'. The linguistic turn (Rorty 1967) signalled an appreciation of the symbolic dimension of political practices (Edelman 1964), especially the importance of discourse and identity in thinking about political mobilization. Nationalist, feminist, environmental, and gay and lesbian movements elevated in importance the stories people tell each other in shaping their identity. More importantly, it highlighted the *constructed* character of identity and discourse, calling for subjects to affirm this constructed and contingent character (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Connolly 1995).

These developments were welcomed by many because they marked a move beyond standard analyses that emphasized the 'givenness' of class, gender, and other interests. They pluralized perspectives on political mobilization and engagement beyond those grounded in interest-based rationalities. Nevertheless, there were many who felt that emphasizing the contingent and constructed character of discourse and identity underestimated the inertia and force of social norms and practices. According to this view, the roles of emotions and passions had been neglected – or at least had not been given their proper due. The

so-called ‘affective turn’ thus indicates a need or demand to acknowledge affects as central to political theory and analysis (cf. Massumi 1996; Ahmed 2004; Stavrakakis, 2007).

The influence of Lacan’s work on these two ‘turns’ (the linguistic turn and the affective turn) is fairly clear. One can think, for instance, of the turn to Lacan’s ‘*point de capiton*’ by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). One can also appeal to the importance attributed to the category of *enjoyment* (*jouissance*) by many scholars in the study of political phenomena, especially in relation to the ‘grip’ of ideology (Glynos 2001; see also Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004 and Žižek 1989).

The category of fantasy, together with associated concepts like identification, split subjectivity, the unconscious, and so on, can be invoked as a key category because it captures the combined centrality of the symbolic *and* affective dimensions of social and political life. This is something that has been emphasized by Laclau himself in relation to the category of discourse (see, for example, Laclau in Glynos & Stavrakakis 2010; see also Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008). To date, however, there have been few systematic attempts to ascertain in a general way the political and ideological significance of fantasy. Moreover, most analyses that invoke the term ‘fantasy’ rarely elaborate the ontological, conceptual, and methodological parameters in detail or unproblematically, and so I believe we still need to determine the specificity and worth of the category of fantasy for critical political theory and analysis in a more systematic and nuanced manner.

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Of course the definition of fantasy is contested. But for purposes of offering an initial sketch, we could say, following Freud, that it denotes a framing device that subjects use to ‘protect’ themselves from the anxiety associated with the idea that there is no ultimate guarantee or law underlying and guiding our social existence. This guarantee has been given many names, certainly when one takes the long historical view: God, Reason, the Senses, the Laws of History, and so on. But this guarantee can in principle take any form whatsoever, including a seemingly innocuous ‘piece of Household stuff’, such as a trunk.

With this as background we can say that fantasy also furnishes the subject with a schema that mediates between publicly affirmed ideals on the one hand, and the darker side of those aspirations and aims on the other hand – a side that subjects would rather not consciously or officially affirm. The operation of fantasy is especially evident when responses to events appear disproportionately charged or invested with emotion, sometimes qualified as ‘irrational’ emotion. This is particularly clear when an ‘Other’ (immigrant Other, racial Other, religious Other, sexed Other, and so on) is cast as an urgent threat to someone’s (or a nation’s) ‘way of life’. But the *logic* of fantasy is such that features of its narrative tend to *resist* public official disclosure because they are in some way socially prohibited or unsettling. This is the *transgressive* dimension of fantasy. For example, while it may be possible for the tabloid press to blame immigrants or single mothers for many of the problems with the welfare system, it is not so often that one finds individuals making such pronouncements in a public, official capacity.

Consequently, individual and collective fantasies often appear to make it difficult to contest and debate the norms of a social practice in an open or democratic fashion. The documented phenomenon of ‘dog-whistling’ can serve to briefly illustrate this idea. Dog-whistle politics typically concerns the transmission of implicit messages to a select group of voters – messages that contravene a widely and officially affirmed social norm. In the UK context, Michael Howard’s ‘Are you thinking what we’re thinking’ electoral campaign of 2005 is a classic example. Take the claim that ‘it’s not racist to impose limits on immigration’. Just like Freud’s account of dream censorship, such statements appear incontestable, yet the emotional charge in the expressions suggests there is something more at stake: it taps into fantasies about how (e.g. immigrant) ‘others’ are responsible for the theft of, or threat to, our ‘way of life’. A Freudian-inspired conception of fantasy adds to our understanding of these phenomena because it supplements accounts that rely exclusively or heavily on ‘false consciousness’ or ‘moral corruption’ to explain them. Of course, questions of ‘truth’ and ‘morality’ do have an important role to play in coming to terms with social and political phenomena. But the appeal to fantasy and desire suggests that intimations of anxiety in the face of uncertainty and contingency are powerful drivers of such responses, and that these must be taken seriously because they help shape the significance we attach to the ‘truth’ and ‘morality’ of such phenomena.

Yet because fantasmatic desires are often transmitted *implicitly*, it becomes difficult to engage publicly and productively in related normative and political debates. It follows that it also makes it difficult for scholars to assess the place and role of fantasy in critical political analysis more generally. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that understandings of fantasy tend to vary considerably, as do understandings of the ideals in terms of which the role of fantasy can be critically assessed. What resources, then, are available to us for purposes of fleshing out with greater precision the logic of fantasy?

From a Lacanian point of view, one can start with the claim that ‘realizing one’s fantasy is impossible’. Realizing one’s fantasy is impossible in the sense that the subject (as a subject of *desire*) survives only insofar as its desire remains *unsatisfied*. Rather than *satisfying* desire, fantasy *structures* desire. It does so, usually, through a narrative that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome, or that foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves too threatening or insurmountable. But the obstacle, which often comes in the form of a prohibition or a threatening Other, transforms impossibility into a ‘mere difficulty’, thereby creating the impression that its realization is at least potentially possible. The many obstacles identified as reasons for procrastinating, for example, create the impression that it is possible to achieve ‘fullness’ while also maintaining one’s self as a desiring subject. But the role of fantasy is actually to *structure* desire through a dialectic of fullness and lack, maintaining one’s sense of *being* as a subject of desire. So the status psychoanalysis gives to fantasy is not so much epistemological as it is ontological and (as we will see shortly) ethical. In other words, the appeal to fantasy in critical analysis should be understood primarily *as a means to access the structure of desire and enjoyment*, rather than as a means of dismissing a belief or worldview as untrue or irrational because it does not conform to a particular understanding of reality.

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What gives a narrative a specifically *psychoanalytic* inflection, then, is the fantasmatic *logic* structuring the subject’s desire. It furnishes the subject with an ideal and an impediment to the realization of an ideal, investing the narrative with a beatific or horrific hue. The logic of fantasy also produces an enjoyment (Lacan’s *jouissance*, also linked to Freud’s libido), often associated with the transgression of an ideal. Crucially, however, fantasy purports to offer a foundational guarantee of sorts, in the sense that it offers the subject a degree of

protection from the anxiety associated with a direct confrontation with the radical contingency of social relations. Fantasy, therefore, is not merely a narrative with its potentially infinite variations at the level of content, although it is of course this too. It also has a certain 'logic' in which the subject's very being is implicated: the disruption or dissolution of the logic leads to what Lacan calls *aphanisis*, a kind of vanishing of the subject as a subject of desire.

Nevertheless, Lacanians are fond of using the expression 'crossing the fantasy' as an ethical imperative, and this may give one the idea that what we must do is *overcome* or go *beyond* fantasy. In one sense, of course, this is true, but in what sense exactly? This is an important point because it is crucial that fantasy is not demonized or, to put it in milder terms, that we do not attribute to fantasy an exclusively negative valence, as those do who treat it epistemologically as a synonym for illusion or myth. This is because fantasy has an *ontological* status *vis-à-vis* the subject: it is a necessary condition for political mobilization and change as much as it is functional to social passivity and maintaining the *status quo*. From an ontological point of view, in other words, fantasies are ineliminable and essential to action, whether these are characterized as normatively progressive or regressive. As Jacques-Alain Miller put it in a 1983 lecture,

if Lacan talks about the 'crossing of the fantasy', it is not in order to talk about the 'lifting or disappearance of the fantasy'. In the case of the fantasy, the question is rather [...] to see what is behind, which is difficult, because there is nothing behind. Nonetheless, this is a nothing that can take various guises, and the crossing of the fantasy amounts to taking a walk on the side of those nothings.

(Miller 2010)

By appealing to the idea of a *logic*, then, I seek to emphasize how a Lacanian perspective (but certainly not *only* a Lacanian perspective) insists on investing fantasy with ontological and ethical significance. What many Lacanians call 'crossing the fantasy' coincides with what I call the dissolution – or, to be more precise, a *loosening* – of this logic. It means not abandoning fantasy or going beyond fantasy, but rather acquiring a different relation to the fantasmatic object, one in which the subject is less 'in thrall' to it. This is one way to understand the Lacanian idea of an 'ethics of the real'.

Fantasy, Identity, Critique

So far I have focused on fantasy, but what about identity? How might we conceptualize the relationship between fantasy and identity, and political identity in particular? In a first sweep we could say that the more we are *invested* in fantasies – the more we are locked into its *logic* – the more likely we are to read aspects of our experience in terms of that fantasmatic narrative. By appealing to a *logic* of fantasy, then, I aim to capture something about the way a subject is (strongly) attached to, or (over)invested in, a fantasmatic narrative.

Consider again the ‘rescue and protect’ fantasies described by Susan Faludi. There we saw how a powerful attachment to rescue fantasies translated very quickly into the ‘dogma’ of scripting firemen as heroes. Indeed the 9/11 commission itself was accused of *dishonouring* the ‘heroes’ when it tried to examine the pathways that led to the death of so many firefighters. The media, as well as New York mayors Bloomberg and Giuliani, clung to ‘the image of the New York firefighter as cavarlyman charging willingly, knowingly, to certain death’ (Faludi 2007: 381). And even when different stories were told about systemic, infrastructural, equipmental, and support failures before *and* after 9/11, these were quickly sidelined by the dominant narrative of rescue and heroism (Faludi 2007: 381–3). This was as true of people’s responses to firefighters’ experiences as it was of people’s responses to the 9/11 event more generally.

For instance, many – individual firemen included – had stepped forward to categorically reject the honour of manly heroism. Instead they sought to offer a more complex picture of the events that unfolded in the run-up to, and aftermath of, 9/11. But these stories did not receive much media attention at all. Faludi identifies a series of initiatives which reveal a whole range of ‘alternative’ responses by ordinary citizens made visible through private recordings of people’s dreams and stories in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and she charts how this nuance and creative energy was marginalized by the dominant fantasmatic narrative (Faludi 2007: 13–14, 377–380).

The implication is that the more invested one is in fantasy, the more one understands and experiences life in accordance with this template; and conversely, the less likely we are to experience the creative potential involved in offering alternative readings and interpretations of events for purposes of political mo-

bilisation or other forms of action. Certainly, the subject tends to use fantasy as a way to protect itself from ambiguities, uncertainties, and other features which evoke intimations of anxiety. But it is precisely those ambiguities that open up possibilities for critical distance and alternative becomings, including alternative political and economic pathways. So the problem lies not with fantasy *as such* so much with the way it *engages* the subject. In an important sense it is irrelevant that the fantasmatic script diverges from a 'consensus reality'. The problem, rather, lies more with the subject's strong attachment to, or libidinal overinvestment in, fantasy; and that this *mode* of attachment, in turn, has political and normative implications.

As a counterpoint to my reading of these events, consider Faludi's earlier reference to fantasy and myth as something which concealed the 'true' facts of the matter. The fantasy of heroic men rescuing women and children from the inferno involved erasing the fact that most victims of the 9/11 attacks were *men* and that most women saved *themselves*. But consider now the possibility that as a matter of 'hard facts' more women *were* victims in the 9/11 attacks. The point here would be that this 'fact' would actually not necessarily change the way it gets caught in the *logic* of fantasy, by which I mean the way the subject is libidinally *invested* in its narrative. The Lacanian insight here suggests that understanding this aspect of fantasy is essential when trying to tease out more fully its political and ideological role.

What is at stake, then, is not so much the content of fantasy (and its convergence with, or divergence from, a consensus reality) but the mode of our attachment to this content. In a similar vein we can refer to Lacan's often quoted insight that even if a patient's wife really is sleeping around with other men, his jealousy can still be treated as excessive or pathological. So the 'trouble' with fantasy emerges in two steps. First, when a subject becomes hooked into its logic, in the sense that the subject has become strongly attached or *gripped* by it (this is the ideological aspect). Second, when this logic serves to bolster certain ideals that are not only *contestable* but also questionable (this is the normative aspect). This view of fantasy clearly forces into contact (and forces us to think the relation between) the ideological and normative aspects of critique. But this view provokes a further series of questions, namely, whether there are modes of subjectivity beyond those embodied in the logic of fantasy and desire, what their conditions of possibility might be, and with what implications for think-

ing about social and political identity and practice (cf. Glynos 2008; Glynos and Howarth 2007). These are questions that have yet to receive sufficient detailed empirical and critical attention in the literature. There are, however, several studies that move decisively in this direction. Consider, for example, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*.

Fantasy and Identity, American Style

In an incisive critical analysis of contemporary political life in the United States, Bill Connolly is alert to the potency of fantasy in shaping the American social and political scene. In this respect there are many points of convergence between his and Faludi's analyses. However, in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* Connolly is explicit in trying *not* to remain at the level of fantasmatic content. If not in name, then at least in sense, the aspects and role of fantasy I have outlined thus far find themselves neatly expressed in this study.

Connolly offers a powerful and fairly comprehensive diagnosis and critique of what he calls America's 'evangelical-capitalist resonance machine'. Emerging in the 1970s in the wake of the demise of Keynesian economics, the evangelical-capitalist machine produced a political programme whose demands provoked resonances across creedal and class differences – demands for lower taxes for the rich, demands for lower welfare expenditure, demands for pre-emptive wars, demands to affirm as necessary the collateral damage wrought by the Abu Ghraibs and Guantanos of this world, demands for punitive immigration measures, demands for less state interference on matters of consumer choice, such as the choice to purchase an SUV, and so on. These are demands that, according to Connolly, sideline more egalitarian, pluralist, and ecological demands, and for this reason it is crucial to understand the process by which these processes of chaining take place.

Central to Connolly's diagnosis is the distinction he draws between ethos and belief – a distinction that is similar to the fantasmatic mode/content distinction discussed earlier. It is a distinction which is expressed in different ways, the spirituality/creed pair being one. In this view, the evangelical-capitalist machine resonates because the spiritualities coursing through the evangelical and capitalist wings of the 'machine' reverberate with one another – more specifically, they spring from a common and deep sense of entitlement and revenge. Of

course, these spiritualities are not normally expressed in a public-official capacity. As noted earlier, this resistance to public-official disclosure is often a characteristic feature of the logic of fantasy. As Connolly puts it ‘our behaviour may express intensities we officially deny’ (Connolly 2008: 8; see also 4). In fact, this transgressive dimension often functions as a potent driver of collective identification and mobilisation precisely *because* it remains silent (Connolly 2008: 54). In this view, fantasy’s power derives from the enjoyment embodied in such shared transgression. Dog-whistle politics, we recall, is sustained in part by means of stoking precisely this enjoyment through the deft use of silences. Silences facilitate the practice of plausible deniability, which is a tried and tested way of targeting and binding particular constituencies. It rarely fails to provoke the expected reaction of flummoxed impotence on the part of their liberal critics, transmitting paroxysms of joy to those ‘in the know’ and, in doing so, further consolidating the collective identification such enjoyment underpins.

This is not to say there are no exceptions to the ‘silence rule’. But such exceptions can be said to *underline* the tactical and strategic significance of the public-official silences. Connolly refers to an incident in 2005, in which a group of parents and community citizens in Dover, Pennsylvania, succeeded in their political and legal campaign against a local school board’s decision to introduce ‘Intelligent Design’ into the classroom. In response to this action, the American evangelical leader Pat Robertson addressed the community in the following way:

I’d like to say to the good citizens of Dover: if there is disaster in your area don’t turn to God, you just rejected him from your city. And don’t wonder why he hasn’t helped you when problems begin, if they begin. I’m not saying that they will, but if they do, just remember, you just voted God out of your city. And if that’s the case, don’t ask for his help because he might not be there.

(Robertson 2005, as cited in Connolly 2008: 52)

Connolly’s central thesis suggests that this evangelically-expressed ethos of entitlement, resentment and revenge *resonates* with the ethos underpinning much cowboy capitalism. Anyone can make real his American dream of hitting the jackpot, so long as one brings a little invention and athletic energy to one or another of the widely available ‘how-to-get-rich’ manuals... and maybe a bit of luck which, in any case, will be well deserved. This is a potent headline fantasy which is commonly shared, and high levels of investment in this fantasy may

go some way to explaining both why a substantial (near-majority) proportion of twenty-year olds believe they'll be earning salaries in their fifties which will put them in the top 5 per cent of the population (Connolly 2008: 33-4) and why guilt and *ressentiment* are not unexpected supports of associated regressive and reactionary political demands when fantasmatic ideals fail to materialize.

What are the implications of such fantasmatic analysis for social and political identity? Clearly, these fantasmatic narratives fuel and reinforce a sense of resentment and entitlement. It makes it possible for those lower down on the wealth and income scale to identify with those on much higher rungs, consolidating their collective political position against those who preach egalitarianism and the virtues of care for the other and for the environment. It also makes it possible for an alliance across class and creed to consolidate itself by identifying a common enemy in those who threaten these visions of plenty and glory. Though this is not explicitly or systematically thematised by Connolly, what appears crucial in understanding the sense of resentment and entitlement and the way this resonates outwardly throughout the evangelical-capitalist machine is the strength by which subjects are attached to, or invested in, underlying fantasies.

Many might say, of course, that this powerful attachment to fantasy betrays a predictable and dangerous narrow-mindedness. But the creative potential of this mode of attachment should not be underestimated, since the ethos associated with fantasmatic overinvestment can be, and is, regularly deployed innovatively. As new circumstances arise and new grievances emerge, these must be articulated as demands that are compatible with the more familiar ethos of resentment and entitlement. This is a creative act. But – and I think this is by no means incompatible with what Connolly says – I would add that this is a 'closed creativity'. It is 'closed' precisely in the sense that a *logic* can be discerned, a logic linked to a mode of overinvested fantasmatic attachment and thus to the tendency to fit all that one encounters into a mould that preserves this mode of attachment – in this case a mode cashed out as a function of *ressentiment*. And here it is worth emphasizing how *a logic rooted in resentment and revenge can be as effective in inflecting progressive demands as it is in inflecting regressive demands*.

Moving beyond the *logic* of fantasy, then, entails the adoption of a distinct ethos, not so much a distinct set of beliefs. Such an ethos promises greater po-

litical potential because the frame through which the world is experienced is no longer understood as grounded in an external guarantee. A key role of fantasy is to protect us from ambiguity by providing us with a script with which to shuffle vulnerability and uncertainty to the margins. Once detached from fantasmatic guarantees, we can begin to discern a more expansive, 'open' creative potential in the uncertainties and ambiguities that become visible – including potential for political mobilisation. As Connolly puts it, '[t]o accept a messy conception of the world is to emphasise simultaneously its capacity for surprise, its tragic potential, and possible lines of creative action to take' (Connolly 2008: 10).

The political significance of sustaining a distinction between the content and mode of fantasy is that the adoption of a different mode may facilitate the construction of linkages across a wide range of doctrinal elements into an alternative counter-hegemonic formation: 'it opens a window to the formation of a new political assemblage' (Connolly 2008: 61; see also 9, 16). So what is interesting from the point of view of political and ideological critique is not only the specific *content* of fantasies – this is certainly important from a normative point of view. What is crucial as well, especially from the point of view of those concerned with the possibilities of social transformation and of those espousing the value of a deep pluralism, is the *mode* of the subject's attachment to that content. This is how I would read Connolly's remark that '[i]t is important, for both political and ethical reasons, to distinguish those who fill a doctrine with extreme entitlement and revenge from those who do not do so' (Connolly 2008: 52).

Fantasy and Political Identity, Zionist Style

The relationship between fantasy and identity can be further explored with reference to a study by Jacqueline Rose, who tackles a theme similar to the one pre-occupying Connolly, and who invokes the mode/content distinction in a similar, albeit more implicit, way. Rose's intervention centres on a question often provoked by Israelis and Jews who criticize Israeli state policy – a question, however, that was also very clearly and visibly on the lips of many US citizens and commentators in the wake of the US government's decision to go to war in Afghanistan and Irak. Iterating the formulation of the question by Daniel Ben-Simon and Gideon Levy she asks: *Is the true friend of a nation state the loving critic or the unthinking patriot? Is the true friend of a nation one who identifies with it automatically or one who wants it to be just?* (Rose 2005: 134)

This, however, produces a further question: ‘What would happen to a political or religious identity, even the most binding, if it could see itself as contingent, as something that might have taken another path? Can you be devoted to an identity – or would you be differently devoted to an identity – if you knew it was also unsure?’ (Rose 2005: 96) Rose acknowledges the difficulty of going beyond rigid forms of identification governed by the logic of fantasy, thereby foregrounding a crucial challenge: ‘How do you begin to address... the problem of a political identity whose strength in the world, indeed its ability to survive as an identity, relies on its not being able, or willing, to question itself?’ (Rose 2005: 152) One pathway open to us – the pathway Rose explores – is the genealogical pathway. She suggests that this sort of self-questioning can be found at the root of Israeli national identity. Rose implies that this sort of self-questioning can be brought more firmly into consciousness through a historical inquiry whose aim is to reveal the irreducible pluralism lying at the origins of the Israeli national idea and ideal (Rose 2005: 107).

In *The Question of Zion*, with which she explicitly calls to mind Edward Said’s 1979 *The Question of Palestine*, Jacqueline Rose offers us an exemplary account of how fantasy and political identity intersect. Based on a series of lectures delivered at Princeton University in 2003, she attempts to answer two questions arising out of her attempt to grapple with the curious turn of events in which ‘one of the most persecuted peoples of the world... [came] to embody some of the worst cruelties of the modern nation-state’ (Rose 2005: 115-6). First, how did the Zionist self-image of Israel first arise and what were its dominant and less dominant strands (the historical question); and second, what is it ‘about Zionism that commands such passionate and seemingly intractable allegiance’ (the psychoanalytic question) (Rose 2005: xiii).

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Israeli views about Israel, argues Rose, are underpinned by a narrative which is hardly ever talked about: Zionism (Rose 2005: xii). But this ‘not talked-about Zionism’ is actually a particular version of Zionism that was by no means the only one that was originally on offer. The interpretation that has come to define Zionism today is Theodor Herzl’s interpretation – an interpretation very much rooted in an earlier *messianic* outlook. This is an important historical point, according to Rose, because messianism tends to flourish in dark times, and messianic legend tends to ‘drench’ itself ‘in “uninhibited fantasies” about the catastrophic aspects of redemption’, wherein a prominent place is reserved for settling scores

and thus satisfying a desire for historic revenge (Rose 2005: 17, 19). Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* won the hearts of the European Jewish masses because it appeared in 1940 in the thick of war, in the context of ongoing hardship and despair, and because he was very good at exploiting anti-Semitism as a way to convince state leaders (whether of Central Europe or of Turkey) of the need, viability, and validity of a separate Jewish state.

In this way Herzl retained the ethos of a past messianism rooted in redemption and revenge, but transposed it from a religious to a political register: 'Secular Zionism's revolution was to move salvation from the heaven to the plains: "[it] does not expect the return to Palestine to be brought about by a miracle, but desires to prepare the way by its own efforts"' (Rose 2005: 33). Nevertheless, Rose finds traces of messianic redemption in the writing of major visionaries, advocates, and historians of Zionism, such as Herzl, Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, and Scholem (Rose 2005: 28–43). Use of terms such as 'Kingdom of Israel' and 'Congregation of Israel' cannot but conjure all the religious associations it explicitly disavows: 'We are talking of the "slow but steady" penetration of the civic culture by a vision that many of Israel's citizens do not explicitly embrace [...] Messianism, as unconscious inspiration, is in the air and soil of Israel' (Rose 2005: 54). A very particular expression of entitlement and revenge was thus set up, within which to articulate grievances emanating from European anti-semitism and the pogroms of Eastern Europe. These grievances were put to an international audience and persuasively articulated as a need and demand for the inauguration of a new state.

But Rose shows that there was an alternative sensibility in play at the moment of Zionism's inception, also pointing out that its one nation-state form was not a necessary one. Her historical and documentary analysis reveals that Herzl's vision was not the only way Zionism's unconscious dimension could be, nor was, articulated (Rose 2005: 68). Herzl pressed this unconscious dimension in the service of a very specific set of political objectives culminating in the establishment of a separate nation state in Palestine. There was a powerfully articulated alternative however. The dissenters' way was to make visible both the dangers and positive potential of this unconscious Messianic aspect, advocating the need to be attentive to this dimension of Zionism. It has been suggested that Jews and Israelis often do not know that there was this history of dissent (Ellis 2002: 35, 138). Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, Hans Kohn, and Ahad Ha'am

each believed that Zionism could have taken a different path to the one it did take, and to this day their views continue to provide a ‘resonant, melancholic, counternarrative to [Zionism’s messianic version of the] birth of a nation-state’ (Rose 2005: 70).

Martin Buber, for example, envisioned not partition but partnership – a partnership between two nations, a Jewish nation and an Arab nation, with equal political rights and ‘united in the enterprise of developing their common homeland and in the federal management of shared matters’ (as cited in Rose 2005: 75). The presentation of a two-nation state as an alternative to Herzl’s one-nation state, however, was underpinned by a worry about the ‘absolutizing’ ethos critics discerned at the root of Herzl’s proposal. Hans Kohn, in particular, was explicit in suggesting that an ‘absolute’ form of nationalism ‘allows you the illusion of mastering the unmasterable: the enigma of life, destructive gesticulations, the dark beast... It allows you, like the ego, to believe you could be sufficient unto yourself’ (Rose 2005: 80). In light of Buber, Kohn, and Arendt’s writings, then, it is clear that Rose feels that ‘Zionism... had the opportunity to forge a model of nationhood, neither belligerently nor pre-emptively, but ambivalent, uncertain, obscure, something closer to this disquieting and transformative space. But did not take it’ (Rose 2005: 86).

The consequences of being firmly and resolutely attached to a political identity through a logic of fantasmatic overinvestment is that political options appear stark and dichotomic: ‘So often in discussion of Zionism we seem to be faced with a false alternative: acknowledge... suffering *or* castigate the injustice of the Israeli state (the charge that any critique of Israel is anti-Semitic merely rides on the back of this false choice)’ (Rose 2005: 115). Alternative and more creative political pathways are blocked off in this way. And so a messianic ‘militarization of suffering’ comes to bolster an ethos of revenge and entitlement in a zero-sum game, supporting and supported by the belief, for example, that ‘Israeli submission would invite further aggression’. ‘When we seem weak’ says a former adviser to the Likud government, ‘we are attacked’ (Rose 2005: 131).⁵ Certainly, a genealogy of Zionism shows how the militarization of suffering and

⁵ “According to this logic, every achievement of the Palestinians in negotiations is perceived as a crushing internal defeat (Yasser Arafat’s return to Gaza after the Oslo Accord became a national humiliation)” (Rose 2005: 131).

the nation-state became victorious within it. But it also shows that it was not necessary.

Mourning as a Pathway Through Fantasy?

Returning to our earlier discussion of the US reaction to 9/11, we recall similar sorts of consequences flowing from fantasmatic overinvestments. Of course, an important part of Susan Faludi's analysis pointed to an epistemological, and thus fairly conventional, non-psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy as myth or illusion (see also Faludi 2007: 385, 387, 388). However, in discussing possible ways forward she introduces an interesting and important shift in perspective, disarticulating 'truth' from reality and rearticulating it to an ethical stance, suggesting we look at the 'truth' of our weakness and vulnerability in the eye and have the character to address that directly (Faludi 2007: 377).

A turn to a 'truth in weakness' is clearly promising because it appears to go beyond somewhat staid 'false-consciousness' conceptualizations of fantasy. This idea, however, is not developed in detail. Nevertheless, this is a lead we should perhaps follow rather cautiously since, as we saw in the analysis presented to us by Jacqueline Rose, nothing progressive or ethical necessarily follows from simply acknowledging and affirming weakness and vulnerability. Much depends on *how* this is done. In fact a shift from 'mastery' to 'weakness' can easily serve to *preserve* a subjective mode of fantasmatic overinvestment. Rose points out, for example, that Israel, one of the most powerful and bellicose nations in the world, "still chooses to present itself as eternally on the defensive, as though weakness were a weapon, and vulnerability its greatest strength" (Rose 2005: xiii).

That nothing progressive or ethical automatically follows a shift to the position of victim and vulnerability is something other scholars are keen to point out too. Consider Wendy Brown's discussion of 'wounded attachments' (Brown 1995: 52-76). Brown also speaks to the dangers of fantasmatic overinvestment from the point of view of the position of vulnerability and injury. Her worry is that making past and present injury the basis of political demands often ends up *reinforcing* one's psychic attachment to this injury as well as reinscribing the (fantasmatic) conditions which make such injury possible. The claim here is that the enjoyment (*jouissance*) procured in 'reliving a certain punishing recognition reassures us not only of our own place (identity) but also of the presence of the order out

of which that identity was forged and to which we remain perversely beholden' (Brown 2001: 56). It is easy to underestimate the debilitating effects of *ressentiment* and guilt associated with the thought that others are responsible for the theft of our enjoyment. If so, we can hypothesize that the enjoyment associated with our investment in fantasies of victimization and rescue may constrain the possibility of transformation just as much as fantasies of control and mastery. The possibility of transformation may thus be facilitated through the adoption of a different *mode* of enjoyment and relation to fantasy, something that 'might take shape as a certain ironic ethos or as a spirit of radical, critical patriotism – or it might take some other form, as yet unthought' (Brown 2001: 59).

Perhaps, then, Faludi's turn to vulnerability as an alternative point of political identification taps into an important intuition that may actually lead us down a path that avoids the pitfalls identified by Rose and Brown – a path that both Rose and Brown could affirm. Judith Butler's work on mourning is helpful in this respect (cf. Eng and Kazanjian 2003), offering one way of thinking through the Lacanian idea of 'crossing the fantasy'. The appeal to mourning is attractive for Butler because it points to the notion of loss, and the pain linked to loss, as a potential catalyst for subjective transformation and political engagement:

Perhaps [...] one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. One can try to choose it, but it may be that this experience of transformation deconstitutes choice at some level.

(Butler 2004: 21).

Mourning achieves this because it demonstrates that loss is, at a fundamental level, *relational* in character:

[T]he attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps

what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related.

(Butler 2004: 22)

Mourning thus creates a kind of ‘mindfulness of vulnerability’ that can become the basis of political claims, an ethos clearly opposed to claims animated by *ressentiment*, and opening up a pathway to alternative forms of political identification, including national identifications. As Butler puts it, ‘[w]e have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building’ (Butler 2004: 34). Mourning can produce a different way of imagining community or thinking about national identity. Since all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody, Butler suggests we can think of constructing a (tenuous) ‘we’ in relation to loss (Butler 2004: 20).

The conditions which make life *grievable*, are thus central to a form of politics that is non-belligerent or beyond *ressentiment*. When soldiers’ coffins (of *both* sides) are shuffled to the margins of public official and popular media discourse, when there is no place for public and performative recognition of our common vulnerability or of ourselves as always in a process of ‘becoming’ rather than as an always-already ‘us’, then those conditions are lacking. What we get is a ‘denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) [that] can fuel the instruments of war’ (Butler 2004: 29). A repudiation of mourning is manifest, for example, in Bush’s declaration ten days after Sept 11 that ‘we have finished grieving and that *now* it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief’ (*ibid.*)

Conclusion

Fantasy is a useful device with which to explore and probe the political and ideological dimension of a practice or narrative. This is because it foregrounds the combined significance of the symbolic and affective dimensions of life. Moreover, a psychoanalytic perspective can facilitate a move away from an epistemological or moralizing understanding of fantasy, placing the emphasis instead on its ontological and ethical status. In this view, it is not simply the *content* of fantasy that is important, but also the *mode* of our attachment to it, our libidinal investment in it. With detachment from (rather than abandonment of) fantasy

comes the possibility of affirming an ethos of *becoming* and embracing a greater potential for *resignification*, which is a key precondition for a form of political mobilization marked by deep pluralism.

The trouble with fantasmatic over-investment appears in an especially stark form in George Lucas's *Star Wars* epic. At a key moment in *Star Wars Episode 3: The Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin – who is later baptized 'Darth Vader' by Darth Sidius, Lord of the Sith – reveals to Master Yoda how, in his sleep, he has seen a future in which a loved one suffers pain and death. In response to this revelation Yoda cautions him as follows:

Careful you must be when sensing the future, Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the dark side.

But Anakin insists that he will not let his horrific vision come true. So Master Yoda is forced to be more explicit about what is at stake. He says:

Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them, do not. Miss them, do not. *Attachment* leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed, that is.

[You must] train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose.

Is the model of the Jedi expressed here by Master Yoda a model for the subject we can, or even ought to, emulate? Indeed, what *kind* of subject is Yoda calling forth? Some might say that what is at stake is precisely the possibility of an ethics beyond desire and the mode of fantasmatic attachment that this presupposes. There is enough ambiguity in Master Yoda's formulation, however, for us to remain fairly confident that others will disagree.

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Either way, what I hope to have shown by engaging with a number of case illustrations is the value of drawing a distinction between fantasmatic mode and fantasmatic content on the one hand, and, on the other hand, between a mode of enjoyment associated with closure (an 'ideological' mode of being) and a mode of enjoyment associated with openness (an 'ethical' mode of being). While the former has a *logic*, more specifically a fantasmatic logic of overinvestment that grips through transgression, guilt, and *ressentiment*, the latter escapes attempts at capture – indeed, it appears to entail the *dissolution* or *loos-*

ening of such a logic, ushering forth a different sort of ethos that signals a commitment to recognizing and exploring the possibilities of the new in contingent encounters.

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