SUSTAINABLE CITY AS FANTASY

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Abstract

There can be little doubt that our current ecological crisis is being framed through the idea of sustainability. As we plan to deal with anthropogenic climate change, we talk of becoming more sustainable. We are projecting a sustainability vision; a certain future that we desire to achieve. In this paper I offer a Lacanian interpretation of this vision, arguing that we must understand how ideas such as the "sustainable city" operate as fantasy constructs. Here I want to emphasize the particular operation of this fantasy, since it is the very form of this operation that stymies the true politicization of climate change. The paper draws on Žižek's reading of Lacan to illustrate how sustainability (as fantasy) relates to our knowledge of climate change. Two brief illustrations of the operation of sustainability as fantasy are then outlined. The first draws on recent city planning in London, UK, to show how fantasy has gentrified the traumatic elements of climate change. The second illustration draws on a brief conversation with an urban policy-maker to sketch out how transgression is a functioning part of sustainability fantasies. In conclusion the paper turns to the question of politics through a relating of Lacan's psychoanalytical cure with a politicization of economy.

Key Words: cities, fantasy, Lacan, sustainability, Zizek

La ciudad sustentable como fantasia

Resumen

No hay duda de que nuestra crisis ecológica actual está siendo enmarcada en la idea de sustentabilidad. Cuando planeamos cómo manejar el cambio climático antropogénico, hablamos de ser más sustentables en muchas dimensiones. En este sentido proyectamos una visión sustentable, un determinado futuro que buscamos. En este artículo ofrezco una interpretación lacaniana de esta visión, asegurando que debemos entender cómo las ideas como la "ciudad sustentable" operan como construcciones de fantasías. Enfatizo en particular la operación de esta fantasía, porque es precisamente la forma de esta operación la que oculta la verdadera politización del cambio climático. El artículo se basa en la lectura que Zizek hace de Lacan para ilustrar cómo la sustentabilidad (como fantasía) se relaciones con nuestro conocimiento del cambio climático. Para eso propongo dos breves ilustraciones de la operación de sustentabilidad como fantasía. La primera es sobre recientes planes urbanos en Londres, para demostrar cómo la fantasía ha gentrificado los elementos traumáticos del cambio climático. La segunda ilustración se basa en una breve conversación con un político que se dedica al urbanismo que demuestra que la trasgresión es una parte fundamental de las fantasías de sustentabilidad. En conclusión, el artículo arriba a la cuestión política a través de relacionar la cura psicoanalítica de Lacan con una politización de la economía.

Palabras clave: Ciudades, fantasía, Lacan, sustentabilidad, Zizek

Introduction

Talk of sustainability saturates urban policy. This is, of course, quite understandable given the impending threats of global warming. However it is not difficult to identify the numerous paradoxes within this embrace of sustainability. These would include the continued pursuit of economic growth without necessary reductions in carbon emissions, calls for urgent action alongside business-as-usual, carbon

neutral schemes standing alongside coal-fired power stations, extensive suburban expansion with policies advocating reduced auto transit. These paradoxes can be explained as being concerned with the distinction between knowing and doing: we know that climate change requires a much more sustainable city but, at the same time, we continue to do unsustainable things (e.g. more highways, airports, McMansions etc). Given the structural causes of climate change, these paradoxes might also be explained as manifestations of inertia, it being very difficult to rapidly transform various urban development processes. This said one cannot escape the fact that urgently needed reform has not accompanied a knowing of its requirement.

Slow progress towards urban reform stands in stark contrast to the broad support that sustainability enjoys. The breadth of participants in sustainability policy-making is testament to the power of the term to evoke. The operation of sustainability as a master signifier (Davidson, 2010) can therefore be considered as very effective in terms of its ability to coalesce interest and support. However we are left with our glaring failure to transform cities in order to secure a more sustainable future. The paper explains this situation using Lacanian-Marxist theory to understand sustainability as a fantasy construct. Here I will draw directly upon Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of fantasy and Slavoj Žižek's application of Lacanian theory into Marxist philosophy.

The paper makes three main points. First it is argued that the fantasy operation of sustainability – and by extension the sustainable city – serves to mediate the relationship between climate change science and public policy. This mediation, and my second point, is a crucial function of fantasy since it acts, in Žižek's (1997[2008]) terms, to "gentrify the catastrophe". The argument here is that the sustainable city fantasy must be recognized as a construct that functions to mediate our relationship to dystopic urban futures. Here the paper draws briefly on recent planning policies in London, UK, to demonstrate where a sustainability-based urban policy program has removed the antagonism between climate change and economic growth. The final section of the paper explores how transgression is a necessary part of any

playing out of ideology and related fantasies. This is a crucial observation in a context that sees cynicism a structuring feature of politics and policy. In order to illustrate the operation of transgression the paper reflects on a conversation with policy-makers where "official" policy rhetoric contrasted sharply with individual discourse. The paper concludes with a consideration of what a Lacanian theory of fantasy means for sustainability and a politics of economy.

Lacanian Fantasy

In Lacanian psychoanalysis fantasy is understood as constructed in order to veil the subject from the terminal loss brought about by its symbolic castration (Miller, 1991). This castration is a consequence of the subject's spilt from its first nurturer (i.e. the 'mother') and their entry into the language. Entering into language (i.e. becoming a speaking being) involves a pact that renders inaccessible some aspect of 'reality'. The subject is therefore bound to the paternal authority of language in order to access/use it (ibid.). The speaking being emerges as a subject that desires a resolution to this castration. This desire is constituted inter-subjectively. Lacan uses the example of two children playing to illustrate the inter-subjective constitution of desire. S/he observes how one child can watch another child playing with a toy. The child without the toy desires to possess the toy. However, once the child with the toy stops playing with it, the other child's desire disappears. S/he does not desire the toy, but rather want to possess the enjoyment perceived to be held by the other child. In this sense, the child with the toy is understood to have access to the fulfilment denied to the other child through their symbolic castration. This transference, that the "other is supposed to know", provides the basis of Lacan's conception of fantasy.

Each subject constructs fantasies to deal with their castration. They do this through supposing that others really know how to access the objects to fulfil desire. They have more access to the enjoyment (*jouissance*) that your desire promises. These objects Lacan calls "objet petit a". These arbitrary objects function to promise the fulfilment denied by the subject's entry into language (Kirshner, 2005). Fantasy therefore

consoles the subject by positing that a primordial fullness can be restored and the castration imposed by the paternal authority of language be reversed. A key point for Lacan here is that this primordial completeness was never actually there. That, in psychoanalytical terms, the mother-child relationship was never un-split (Žižek, 1989). The injunction against enjoyment (imposed by the symbolic castration) is therefore an impossible one. It bars access to something that never existed. Fantasy therefore serves to protect the subject against the truly terminal nature of their castration.

As a psychotherapist, Lacan's treatment involved a process that would see the patient traverse their fantasy (Lacan, 1998). In his Seminar II, he comments that psychoanalysis exists in an order that you can *mange ton dasein!* (eat your existence!). This involves an internalization of social relations in the sense of the subject taking personal responsibility for their lifeworld. This involves renouncing the idea that others somehow have access to the objects which cause enjoyment (*jouissance*). It is to come to terms with the fact that the subject constructs this very relation in order veil the traumatic nature of castration.

Within critical theory debates, it has been Slavoj Žižek who has pushed Lacan's psychoanalytical theory the furthest into social theory. Žižek argues that "ideology has to rely on some phantasmic background" (2008[1997], xxiii-xxvi), that fantasy plays a constitutive role within ideology. Ideology for Žižek is not simply an illusion that stops us seeing the true reality (i.e. a classical Marxian conceptualization of "false consciousness"): "The fundamental level of ideology, [however], is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (ibid. 33). Ideology is not a supplement that is constructed to stop us comprehending the true nature of things. Instead, drawing on Lacan's understanding of the subject as something split from reality (in Lacanian terms "the Real") by their entry into language, Žižek argues that ideology is the structure by which we understand the otherwise overwhelming nature of reality. Žižek's therefore rejects the idea that we live in a "post-ideological society" (33). We are always an ideological entity.

However we do live in times where many proclaim us to be beyond ideology. The accusation that one is "ideological" serves as a strong condemnation that invokes the notion of being dangerous, un-pragmatic etc. As Žižek often argues referencing Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" declaration, we are often told that today's society is post-ideological, that belief in ideology is a dangerous legacy of the 20th century. For Žižek (1989) this idea that we can distance ourselves from ideology is manifest today in cynicism. A cynic can keep an ironic distance to their structuring ideological fantasies; that although they do not truly believe in them (e.g. family, religion, charity) they continue to act them out. Žižek (1989) therefore claims that ideology does not attempt to mask its illusionary form. We know that our reality is mediated by illusions, but nevertheless carry on as though we do not know they are illusions. Žižek (2008[1997]) uses the following example: "they know that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom" (33). Can we not replace "Freedom" with "Sustainability" and include within the reference to "exploitation" an environmental component?

A Lacanian understanding of the subject therefore insists on understanding the phatasmatic structure of an ideologically mediated reality. Put differently, we must negotiate the fact that our understanding of nature and society is always, to some extent, mediated. This has implications for our critical procedure. Firstly this involves a move away from traditional notions of consciousness-raising and the quest to reveal the truth about reality in a way that is devoid of ideological mediation. Secondly, it involves a critical engagement with ideology in a context where it is presumed absent. This implication has a perverse impact in the sense that phantasmatic constructions appear to carry more importance in a context where their pure appearance renders them real, as Žižek explains:

> in the good old days of traditional *Ideologiekritik*, the paradigmatic critical procedure was to regress from 'abstract' (religious, legal…) notions to the concrete social reality in which these notions were rooted;

today, it seems more and more that the critical procedure is forced to follow the opposite, from pseudo-concrete imagery to abstract (digital, market...) processes which effectively structure our living experience (Žižek, 2008[1997], 1)

What Žižek points to here is that fact that in an ideology that bars the possibility of ideology, a situation emerges whereby imagery (i.e. fantasy constructions) take on the status of really existing. Fantasy constructions do not so much disguise the true nature of things, but actively structure the nature of things. The Lacanian point to be emphasized here is that this reign of ideology is not something that can be ended. To some extent ideology will always be present. The Lacanian psychotherapeutic cure of traversing the fantasy therefore is to live with our ideological status. The subject must realize that the source of their desire is, in fact, a construction of fantasy and its fulfilment can never be achieved. The subject must come to terms with themselves as a lacking (i.e. ideological bound) subject.

Sustainability and Fantasy

The operation of sustainability as a fantasy construct is illustrated by the Lacanian distinction between desire and drive. Lacan, drawing on Freud's theory of death drive, postulates that a drive is something that brings about satisfaction without having any subjective position (Lacan, 1991). A drive is non-subjectivized since it exists before it is realized within the subject's spectrum of meaning. In contrast, desire represents a truth for the subject in that it is interpreted and recognized by the subject. This distinction leads Žižek (1997) to associate knowledge with drive and truth with desire. Knowledge has no necessary assimilation into the subject's lifeworld since it can exist in a dimension prior to its recognition. In contrast a truth is assimilated by the subject. The distinction is illustrated by Žižek (1997) using the example of science and its "blind insistence": "Modern science follows its path (in microbiology, in manipulating genes, in particle physics) heedless of cost - satisfaction is here provided by knowledge

itself, not by any moral or communal goals scientific knowledge is supposed to serve." The central point here is that science operates as a drive, its mission disconnected from subjectivization.

Modern science therefore presents significant truth challenges as its accelerating progress creates constant demands in terms of absorbing its produced knowledges:

> All the "ethical committees" which abound today and attempt to establish rules for the proper conduct of gene-manipulation, of medical experiments, etc. - are they ultimately not desperate attempts to reinscribe this inexorable drive-progress of science which knows of no inherent limitation (in short: this inherent ethic of the scientific attitude) within the confines of human goals, to provide it with a "human face," a limitation? (Žižek, 2008[1997], 37)

This limitation of science is concerned with the imposition of knowledge onto the ideological landscape. Science blindly produces knowledge that confronts our ideological landscape in ways that are not already accounted for:

> Thus, the properly modern ethics of "following the drive" clashes with traditional ethics whereby one is instructed to live one's life according to standards of proper measure and to subordinate all its aspects to some all-encompassing notion of the Good. The problem is, of course, that no balance between these two notions of ethics can ever be achieved. The notion of reinscribing scientific drive into the constraints of the life-world is fantasy at its purest - perhaps the fundamental fascist fantasy. (ibid.)

What Žižek insists upon here is that the clash between what science produces and what we want it to produce cannot be reconciled. To do so promises

what Hannah Arendt (2004[1951]) calls a "scientific philosophy" (468), something that "pretends to know the mysteries of the whole historical process" (ibid. 469). Whereas Arendt warns against the totalitarian tendencies of ideology, Žižek insists on both the inevitability of ideology and its inherently unscientific basis. Science is, in psychoanalytical terms, within the sphere of drives and, as such, produces substance that is de-subjectivized: "positive science can never encompass and account for the very horizon of meaning within which it is operative" (Žižek, 2006, 163). Whilst Žižek certainly goes onto complicate this simple distinction (ibid. 163-6), the point here is that science generates content regardless of subjectification (desire/truth). Its products must confront the field of meaning (i.e. ideology).

The first insistence with respect to climate change and sustainability from the Lacanian perspective must therefore be to recognize their distance. Knowledge of climate change has represented a monumental challenge to our nature/society assumptions. This perhaps explains why knowledge of climate change continues to be a stake in political debate when contesting the evidence base seems so ridiculous. When a presidential candidate can proclaim that "I don't believe man-made global warming is settled in science enough" and remain legitimate, our ideological frame must be considered. It is not that, in this case, Texas Governor Rick Perry appears so ridiculous in the face of the global scientific community's consensus position that he becomes illegitimate. Rather his insertion of doubt utilizes the gap between knowledge and truth. Here, Žižek's (1997) insistence that "science belongs to the Real" indicates the subject's (and society's) difficulty of engaging with the knowledge which science produces. The Real, for Lacan, is the negative space that stands beyond the world of meaning. It is that which is beyond prevailing ideological reasoning: "the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation" (Lacan, 2007[1977], 388).

New knowledge must therefore be incorporated into our ideological frame. It is at this point that fantasy functions: "*fantasy is the very screen that separates desire from drive*: it tells the story which allows the subject to

(mis)perceive the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire" (Žižek, 2008[1997], 43; *emphasis in original*). With reference to climate change scepticism, the fantasy construct becomes doubt over scientific proof or proper scientific conduct. This fantasy, one concerned with the inefficiency of science itself, becomes a construct that enables the true antagonism between a carbon-based, growth-dependent capitalist society and natural environment to be deprived signification. It would, however, be a mistake to associate the fantasy construct with right-wing Republicans. The gap between drive and desire, between knowledge and truth, also exists within the very community responsible for climate change science.

The Inter-governmental Panel of Climate Change's (IPCC) 2007 report made the following distinction: "Determining what constitutes "dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" in relation to Article 2 of the UNFCCC involves value judgements. Science can support informed decisions on this issue, including by providing criteria for judging which vulnerabilities might be labelled 'key'" (IPCC, 2007, 64). This statement is written at the concluding section of the IPCC Synthesis Report, a document intended to "specifically addresses the issues of concern to policymakers in the domain of climate change" (iii). What this statement insists on is the notion that the science presented by the IPCC must be interpreted. The IPCC attempts to maintain the persona of objective presenter of scientific knowledge and, in doing so, divests itself of any moral obligation. It simply delivers knowledge without the responsibility to give it meaning. Climate change science becomes, in Žižek's terms, "indifferent to the modalities of its symbolization" (2008[1997], 38) in that its "functioning is inherently indifferent towards the historically determined horizons of the discourse of Being" (ibid. 52). Here the fantasy is concerned with the constructed of a position beyond/outside the symbolic sphere.

For Habermas, this tension imposed by science means that we must curtail science: "when that kind of science monopolizes the guidance of rational

conduct, all competing claims to provide a scientific orientation for action must be rejected" (Habermas, 1989, 36). Within Žižek's Lacanian framing, such a position is rejected since "[T]he price we pay for this solution is the fetishistic split between science and ethics" (2009, 427). The consequence of such a split reflects the cynical positionality that Žižek and others (Sloterdijk, 1988) find indicative of contemporary ideology. It results in the following position: "I know very well what science claims, but, nonetheless, in order to retain (the appearance of) my autonomy, I choose to ignore it and act as if I don't know it" (Žižek 2009, 436). If we adopt this cynical position, we are prevented from confronting what Žižek terms "the true question: *how do these new conditions compel us to transform and reinvent the very notions of freedom, autonomy, and ethical responsibility?*" (ibid.; *emphasis in original*). Whilst science cannot become ethical in terms of operating on the side of drive (i.e. not desire), it must remain engaged in a dialogue with truth. Or, to put it differently, the fantasy construct is the imagination that science, and in particular the articulating scientists, can simply remain in the realm of the Real.

In both the case of the climate scientist and the climate sceptic, we can therefore see the necessary phantasmic background to their ideological fields. If our knowledge of climate change represents an insertion of the Real, a traumatic intervention into our life-world, we can presume the operation of fantasy. It is in this sense that I want to approach the idea of the "sustainable city". I want to argue that we must understand the "sustainable city" as a fantasy construct that, in its current manifestation, repeatedly fails to ask the right questions. By this, and to put it in Lacanian terms, we are yet to traverse the fantasy in such a way to confront the traumatic nature of environmental crisis.

Gentrifying the catastrophe

The fantasy screen, according to Lacan's Seminar IV, is a principle means by which the subject veils the trauma brought on my their symbolic castration (Nusselder, 2009). However, as Žižek (2008[1997] 6) argues, this notion of screening does not capture the constitutive functioning of fantasy, the "thing to add

is that the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time is creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference" (ibid.) Fantasy operates not as some hallucinogenic phantasmagorical world-view, but rather fantasy itself combines the fanciful and horrific: "The [H]orrible can also function as the screen itself, as the thing whose fascinating effect conceals something 'more horrible than horror itself', the primordial void or antagonism" (Žižek, 2008[1997] 6). Fantasy is not incompatible with problems. Indeed, the problem (i.e. horror) itself is a prime feature in the fantasy screen.

Fantasy can therefore gentrifying the catastrophe (Žižek 2008[1997] 6) but in a ways that need not necessarily obfuscate it. Rather, it teaches us to interpret what it is we want from our traumatic situation. Fantasy teaches us how to desire: "fantasy mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality" (ibid. 7). It is this interceding of fantasy between the traumatic situation (i.e. climate change and environmental crisis) and our desire of what we want from this (i.e. the sustainable city) that I want to explore here. The central point I want to make is that we have thoroughly gentrified the catastrophic situation of climate change within our imagining of the sustainable city. The fantasy of the "sustainable city" does therefore not deny the existential challenges of climate change, rather it functions to deny certain antagonisms and condition others in such a way that the very same challenges appear to demand little transformation of our ideological coordinates.

A caveat from London...

A strange thing has happened within urban policy debates over the past decade. In the early 2000s, climate change was becoming thoroughly incorporated into urban policy documents. Organizations such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, formed in 2005, were established to promote a more sustainable kind of urbanism. The primary idea here was that cities were (a) overwhelmingly responsible for the production of greenhouse gas emissions and,

consequently, (b) urban reform has to be central in any effort to reduce greenhouse gas-related climate change. The C40 group, whose current chairperson is New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, has been organizing and coordinating work to introduce more energy efficient buildings, low emission public transit (e.g. natural gas-powered buses), tree planting, integrated waste management and renewable energy sources. The actions of the C40 group reflect those being undertaken across the globe.

At present this mission contains within it a major antagonism in that reducing environmental impact conflicts with economic growth agendas. The central problem for many cities has become how to resolve environmental crisis from within an economic context that demands growth. From this perspective, the central policy problem is a politico-economic one, not an ecological or technological one. However, this (traumatic) conclusion has not been confronted. Rather, this particular problem has been thoroughly gentrified. This has involved a radically different narrative being imposed on ecological crisis: "Until recently, the predominant reaction to similar ominous news items [polar ice melting] was a call for emergency measures: we are approaching an unthinkable catastrophe, and the time to act is quickly running out. Lately, however, we hear more and more voices enjoining us to be positive about global warming" (Žižek, 2010, 328). There has been a (phantasmic) impulse to re-narrate climate change: from crisis to opportunity. This re-narration is exactly what is happening in urban policy circles. Climatic challenges are being re-inscribed as (economic) opportunities.

London is an illustrative example. In 2011, the Mayor of London Boris Johnson introduced his spatial development strategy, identifying it as "a keystone in realising my vision for London as the best big city in the world" (5). The Plan has two primary objectives:

> London must retain and build upon its world city status as one of three business centres of global reach. It must be somewhere people and businesses want to locate, with places and spaces to meet their needs.

This economic dynamism is vital to ensuring the prosperity of Londoners (and the rest of the United Kingdom) need, to maintaining the world-beating innovation increasingly needed to address global challenges, and to secure the highest quality development and urban environments (5).

What this opening statement establishes is a clear compatibility between economic growth and environmental improvements. The rest of the 2011 *London Plan* pushes confidently forward in moving past the tensions of economy and environment in such a way to make both their futures co-dependent.

The *London Plan's* introductory chapters introduce the problems and challenges facing the city. Whilst flavoured by the Conservative mayor, the problems and challenges outlined are commonly identified across large cities. They include the questions of: What to do about economic development? How to maintain quality of life? How to control migration? What to do with respect to ecological crisis? In response to the latter question the *London Plan* (2011) attempts to unite ecological crisis with economic crisis:

> London has always been at the forefront of enterprise and innovation... The next 20 years are likely to see continued changes to the London economy, with new sectors and enterprises emerging... This period may, for example, see significant growth in the environmental sectors, driven by an increasing shift to a low-carbon economy – with new knowledge and techniques been applied to the challenges facing the planet, across the creative sectors and in new forms of business services meeting the needs of new markets and a changing world (30)

The ecological limits to economic growth, an undesired Malthusian message delivered by the Club of Rome in 1972, are here transformed. Economic limits are removed by transforming ecological crisis

into growth opportunity. The same message can be heard from the Obama administration where a green economy is heralded as the new economic frontier, the solution to our current crisis of over-accumulation.

Whilst the global city may epitomise environmental crisis for some (e.g. excessive wealth and consumption; resource intensive; political power) in London's planning program its global city status (i.e. center for global capital and associated services) is made to equate with sustainability. Not only can the city plan and develop itself in a sustainable manner (e.g. more energy efficient buildings) the latest planning policy also spells out how it can be "[A] city the becomes a world leader in improving the environment locally and globally, taking the lead in tackling climate change, reducing pollution, developing a low carbon economy, consuming fewer resources and using them more effectively" (Mayor of London, 2011, 32). My point here is not that London cannot achieve some combination of these reforms to some extent. Rather I want to the flag the way in which the irreconcilability of ecological crisis and economic growth has been thoroughly removed. Instead we find the potential catastrophe of climate change gentrified, the problem remaining present but now becoming opportunity.

Fantasy's reliance on transgression

This example of London's city planning illustrates the ways in which a fantasy acts to mediate our encounter with the problem of climate change. The message delivered by climate science is thoroughly placed within the sphere of desire, making it largely compatible with our current ideological frame (i.e. capitalist, liberal democracy etc.). But the second point that must be made here is that this fantasy construction always operates at a distance. By this I mean that the fantasy construct of the sustainable city as deliverer of economic prosperity and ecological restoration relies on a distance towards to it: "…fantasy has to remain 'implicit', it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression" (Žižek, 2008[1997], 24). This points towards the distinction between fantasy and ideology, the latter serves as a background texture with the latter providing a

mechanism of support for it. Fantasy serves within our ideological structures, but it cannot be our ideological structure. This distance is crucial since the equating of fantasy with ideology would undermine the ability of ideology to make meaning for the subject: "an ideological-edifice can be undermined by a too-literal identification, which is why its successful functioning requires a minimal distance from its explicit rules" (ibid. 29). The consequence of this is that "an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it" (ibid. 27). Dis-identification with the fantasy is therefore key in ensuring the ideological edifice does not become "undermined by a too-literal identification" (ibid. 29).

With this in mind we therefore have to carefully analyse our interpretation of the type of planning outlined above. It might be easy to dismiss a narration that has brought ecological crisis and economic growth into relation as pure ideological manipulation; to assume that all those formulating and implementing these initiatives are simply duped into believing that capitalism's incompatibility with global ecological well-being can be solved by strengthening capitalism. But, according to Žižek (2008[1997]), this interpretation does not adequately incorporate an understanding of how ideology relies on a transgressive element. As he argues of art: "The artifice of 'true art' is thus to manipulate the censorship of the underlying fantasy in such a way as to reveal the radical falsity of this fantasy" (26). We must not simply be concerned with the "sustainable city's" construction and obvious paradox. We must also have concern with the functioning of those transgressions and acts of censorship that render the fantasy more effective as an ideological device.

A caveat from the elevator...

A short while ago I was conducting an interview with a policy-maker responsible for sustainability policy-making and related initiatives in a large city. The interview went pretty much as expected. My interviewee and his manager (who had accompanied him to ask me about my research and why I was pursuing questions about sustainability) sat in a small confer-

ence room on the seventh floor of the city's offices. I began to ask questions about the status of their policy making and reforms. The interview lasted about 90 minutes. I covered all my main questions: How was policy-making progressing? What challenges had they faced developing policy documents and related reforms? What types of conflicts had been involved in the policy-making process? What kinds of funding issues were sustainability initiatives facing? All went to plan. I had been an academic researcher interested in urban policy and they had represented themselves as city bureaucrats carrying out the wishes of the city's representatives.

At the end of the interview, my interviewee kindly walked me out of the office and into the elevator. A funny thing happened in the elevator. On the short-ride down we began chatting about my stay in the city and what my wider research interests were concerned with. As most geographers probably do, I reeled out my standard response about what I do as a geographer, trying to keep things simple and concise. But then this polite chit-chat was transgressed. This somewhat superficial data sharing exercise went off-script when my interviewee asked me: "You don't happen to know Professor X do you?" I responded "yeh, I know X". My interviewee then commented "so you must know all the Marxist geography then, Harvey, Castells, all that?" They continued, "yeh, all that stuff is great, we need more of that stuff". In what followed my policy-making interviewee spoke at length about the Marxist geography he read in college and how formative it had been to his own thought. Our informative and predictable interview has suddenly taken a turn. We had gone from a detailed and supportive discussion of sustainability policies to an outright embrace of radical Marxist politics.

This elevator conversation appeared as a transgressive moment since we had spent 90 minutes discussing the city's sustainability policies devoid of any critical content. Questions of class interests, structural constraints and cynicism had been off-the-table. I had taken their policy-making process on its merits and my interviewees had been keen to be assured they were not going to be an accessory to some revealing or criticizing commentary. Indeed, a managerial presence had

served to assure this. So why did my interviewee want to bring up Marxian geographers and their damning critique of the type of policy-making my interviewee had been directing?

If we interpret this brief conversation as a transgression of the earlier policy line it equates with Žižek's notion of the distance we have towards fantasy. Žižek uses Robert Altman's television series *MASH* (an anti-Vietnam War, anti-military series) to illustrate this distance. He claims that "[C]ontrary to its misleading appearance, [...] *MASH* is a perfectly conformist film – for all their mockery of authority, practical jokes and sexual escapades, the members of the MASH crew perform their job exemplarily, and thus present absolutely no threat to the smooth running military machine" (2008[1997] 26). Such an example resonates closely with my transgressive elevator conversation. My interview had illustrated the effective and efficient way in which sustainability planning was taking place in the city. In this case, the job of maintaining global city status and economic growth alongside becoming "sustainable" was proceeding without too many hitches. This is not to claim that the city was becoming sustainable (i.e. carbon neutral, socially harmonious, stable and secure economy) but rather it was doing things enabled it to legitimately claim that it was becoming "green" and "sustainable" (e.g. more bike lanes, community gardens, extra public parks). Yet my interviewee had transgressed this message on our short journey out of the building, explaining that the true problems of the city have to be identified in its economic structures.

This transgressive moment signals to a key paradox of ideology and, by extension, the phantasmatic operation of the sustainable city. The transgression indicates how fantasy operates not just in terms of a belief/veil that relies on the ability to operate at a distance from it. Ideology also works in part because it is acted out. Žižek (2001) illustrates this acting out and its constitutive nature within ideology using Blaise Pascal's wager on God. Pascal wager is that it is prudent to believe in God since the risks associated with not believing outweigh the costs. However, Pascal recognizes that this wager is based on reason and argument. A conclusion that leads Pascal to

emphasize that true belief (not calculated reason) comes only from ritual. The actual act of belief is, for Pascal, preceded by ritual. Believe first manifests in rituals (e.g. kneeling at the altar) and then can become foundational as belief for the subject (i.e. the believer truly believes that they believe). But here Žižek is quick to supplement Pascal's understanding by emphasising the cynical basis of belief.

Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk (1988), Žižek argues that today's ideology is shot through with cynicism. This cynicism is manifest in the distance to which people have between themselves and their believes (in policy ideas, religion etc.): "Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.*" (Žižek, 1989, 33). So here Pascal's believer (i.e. after the interpolation via ritual) becomes a cynical believer:

> ...in the "normal;" cynical functioning of ideology, belief is displaced onto another, onto a "subject supposed to believe," so that the true logic is" "Kneel down and you will thereby MAKE SOMEONE ELSE BELIEVE!" One has to take this literally and even risk a kind of inversion of Pascal's formula... That is to say, what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, on the opposite, to GET RID of one's belief, of its over-prox-imity, to acquire a breathing space of a minimal distance towards it? (Žižek, 2006, 308)

The point here then is that the transgression, that act of not really believing, becomes the method by which ideology operates. Fantasy operates to gentrify the catastrophe, but we operate at a distance from such constructs. Ideology works with fantasy, as opposed to fantasy working on ideology. It is our cynical acting out of the fantasy construct (i.e. our not really believing in it) that sustains the ideological frame. We only have to assume that someone believes in the sustainable city, in order that we act out this belief.

In this context we can better understand the transgressive moment. The inherently unsustain-able nature of our cities (i.e. they are integral to an unsustainable set of structural processes) means that any well-informed policy maker can come too close to their belief. A literal engagement with the unsus-tainable nature of most cities (within the current en-vironmental and technological context) would reveal the unbearable proximity to the fantasy construct. It is only the act of creating (cynical) distance that keeps the traumatic antagonism of the Real (knowledge of impending climatic changes and the relationship to unsustainable urbanism) at bay. But, of course, this distance does not change the ideological background. Rather it cements it by externalize the operation of ideology.

Conclusion: fantasy and radical politics

City politics are dominated by economic growth agendas, making the job of policy making and city management very much the concern of doing. However, as climate change warnings have continu-ally pronounced, we face tremendous challenges with respect to making cities sustainable as they continue to expand and consume. A strange situation has consequently emerged whereby cities have continued long-established development trajectories whilst at the same time generating a radical discourse of change (Davidson, 2010). This paradox of business-as-usual and calls of transformation can be understood as being resolved, from a Lacanian perspective, through the gentrifying and cynical operation of fantasy. Consequently, we might explore the social theory im-plications of Lacan's psychotherapeutic cure in terms of changing this environmentally – not to mention economically and socially – destructive process.

For Lacan fantasy must be traversed. By this Lacan means something very specific. He is not talking about removing fantasy from our knowing of the world, as if we could lift the ideological veil and see precisely how things are. Rather Lacan finds that our experience of reality is supported by fantasy. It is only when a fantasy construct fails to explain our reality that we become aware of some other level of psyche. Traversing the fantasy is therefore not a removal of it, but a more direct association with it: "To "traverse the

fantasy" therefore paradoxically means fully identifying oneself with the fantasy - namely with the fantasy which structures the excess resisting our immersion into daily reality" (Žižek, 2009, 329). Our option is therefore not to reject the phantasmatic frame. If we completely reject the fantasy construct "the subject undergoes a 'loss of realty' and starts to perceive reality as an 'unreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation" (Žižek, 2000, 51). Our choice is not whether to be phantastical or not, but rather to recognize that we collectively utilize fantasy and have to conduct social action accordingly in order to effect change.

Whilst critical research has thoroughly criticized the idea of sustainability (and related ideas), it must also consider the prospect of taking it seriously if this imaginary might bring about societal changes to redress/address ecological degradation and climate change. Cynical distance and transgression must be considered devices that, at present, serve to allow the functioning of a politico-economic system that is generating environmental problems. Criticism, whilst taking different forms, can therefore be considered omnipresent. The question therefore becomes concerned with our choice of fantasy (i.e. what it is we desire). This choice can be illuminated by examining the question of what trauma our sustainability frame is serving to gentrify. The trauma is two-fold. On the one-hand, the trauma is the full realization of the dystopic future promised by unmitigated climate change (i.e. drought, starvation, natural disasters). On the other hand, it is the full signification of how this ecological circumstance is generated by politico-economic conditions. The political question therefore becomes how to effectively generate a politics that traverses the current fantasy of sustainability. For this Lacan's psychotherapeutic cure suggests we need to learn to live with our reliance on fantasy in such a way that (a) causes us to identify with it and (b) does not reduce us to blind adherents to it. In this sense, we need to pair gentrifying and traumatic elements.

Žižek (2009) attempts such a pairing in his discussion of a renewed leftist politics and its embrace of "egalitarian terror". What he suggests here is a traversing of fantasy in the sense that a socialist politics must

necessarily involve some impositions (e.g. redistributive reforms that will impose new circumstances on some populations). Put differently, achieving a leftist politics will involve severe disagreements that will result in certain viewpoints not being incorporated. The point here is not to gentrify our fantasy but associate directly with it in a ways that confronts. In doing so, we have to reject the premise of a consensus-based politics that promises some form of utopian co-operative politics. Instead, our fantasy of a better, more egalitarian world has to incorporate ethically-demanding (i.e. un-gentrified) elements.

We might therefore ask what such a pairing might mean for the sustainable city. At present we have a gentrified fantasy that has been constructed to offer a harmonious urban vision (i.e. ecologically sound, economic growth and social cohesion). As I have argued, this gentrifies the traumatic aspect of climate change and relies on a cynical distance in order to maintain the acting out of a social arrangement we understand as unsustainable. To traverse this fantasy is therefore to (re)introduce the question of economy. A more direct association with the sustainability fantasy is to confront traumatic economic questions. This means more than simply questioning "Western lifestyles", as the IPCC does. Rather, it means questioning the very economic system that has constructed the "Western lifestyle" and, furthermore, justifies itself through the development promise to proliferate this consumption-frenzied lifestyle across the globe. Perhaps then the true dystopic horror of sustainability lies right here, in the current need to deny this type of lifestyle and concomitant form of urbanism to ourselves and others?

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