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Lacan in Bosnia

Book review

Salecl, R (1994) **The spoils of freedom: Ppsychoanalysis and feminism after the fall of socialism.** London: Routledge. ISBN 0-415--07358-8 pbk. 167 pages.

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The spoils of freedom is the fourth title in the series *Opening Out: Feminism for Today*, which, according to series editor Teresa Brennan, will "apply the living insights of feminist critical theory in current social and political contexts" (pvi).

Salecl's contribution is an attempt to develop an account of ideology drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, especially a Lacanian notion of *jouissance* (enjoyment), her essential claim being that "there is no politics without fantasy" (p37). This analysis grows out of her attempt to account for various social changes in Eastern Europe, especially former Yugoslavia, and is in turn deployed in an effort to understand those changes. The main areas Salecl considers are, besides ideology, the rise of conservative moral majorities in post-socialist countries, the nature of war, distributive justice and human rights, the notion of normalisation, power, violence and its legitimation, and several issues relating to feminism.

Salecl's book is divided into two parts. The first concentrates on the fall of socialism, and the second with the lessons Salecl draws from this for our understanding of ideology. Her opening contention is that with the fall of socialism the meanings of notions such as democracy, human rights, capitalism have changed in the course of working out how they can be applied in countries with different histories, especially the common fact of a history of Stalinism.

The early part of the book evinces a timely scepticism, even hostility, towards political correctness and aspects of the multiculturalism debate, where Salecl shows how a common failing of both is that of making the problem of racism invisible. Here she draws on Balibar's notion of contemporary "meta-racism" (based on culture) and explains how this kind of thinking has consequences essentially indistinguishable from nineteenth century style racism based on race. The defining characteristic of meta-racism is that it "perceives cultures as fixed entities and desperately tries to maintain these 'cultural distances'." This racism does not postulate the intrinsic superiority of

one group or people but protests the "harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions." (p12) This attitude she convincingly links to the most common excuse for Western inaction concerning the Bosnian conflict: that it is an internal cultural-ethnic squabble.

This kind of useful and illuminating work is, though, presented alongside bold and often irresponsible claims such as that "the Bosnian war is a direct result of the failure of the West to grasp the political dynamic of the disintegration of Yugoslavia" (p13). An especially disappointing feature of this particular accusation is that Salecl does not even try to dress it up in the psychoanalytic terms in which she frames much of the rest of her work. Perhaps the most grievous failing of this part of the book, though, is Salecl's attempt to account for the fact of war in psychoanalytic terms, where she takes the Bosnian conflict as somehow paradigmatic of war in general (doing ignoring differences between various types of war and the many ways of fighting them), and then offering a series of often two dimensional re-readings of aspects of conflict. Thus, for example, the taking of territory is read in terms of the desire to interfere with the enemy's fantasies regarding that territory. However important the fantasy element may be, it is simply inadequate to say without argument that contesting fantasy is generally the "primary aim" of military action (p15).

Salecl's discussion (in chapter 3) of normalisation in a socialist regime could have been one of the book's strong points. In a sense this part of the work promises to be a fulfillment of Foucault's (1979:308) closing remarks in **Discipline and punish,** where he wrote that "At this point I end a book that must serve as a historical background to various studies of the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern society."

Sadly Salecl's analysis fails to take into account important aspects Foucault's analysis, such the relationship between power to knowledge. Her distinction between "socialist normalization" and "Foucauldian normalization" does not save her, since it is drawn in the context of a too superficial reading of Foucault. Salecl seems to conceive power as something which the state wields directly, like a tool. This is especially clear in her discussion of management in the socialist state, which she describes as being effected on the macro level by the Party, rather than at the micro level of the general populace. This seems to be a reversion to a more simplistic vision of power, directly opposed to Foucault's conception of power as a complex set of relationships of domination in which everyone is caught. In **Power / Knowledge** Foucault pointedly eschews discussing power at "the conscious level of intention", yet Salecl often presents her psychologised notion of power as Foucauldian. Worse still, her conception of power fails to make any reference to the notion of practice, an essential aspect of Foucault's work on power, in which power plays itself out in a series of practices, which mark the body through training and discipline.

By far the most pressing problem with Salecl's reading of Foucault, though, is her understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge. For Foucault, power and knowledge exist in a symbiotic relationship, where power both produces forms of discourse or "regimes" of knowledge, and is in turn bolstered and extended by these discourses. Salecl as good as ignores any discussion of role of knowledge in the production of (post)socialist power, and consequently is unable to say anything useful or genuinely Foucauldian about either power or knowledge.

Part II contains some genuinely interesting material, although marred by lapses of scholarship. Salecl's discussion of theories of justice in chapter 5, for example, is often superficial and makes no reference to crucial areas of the literature, perhaps most glaringly the contest between Habermas and Lyotard. Her argument that liberal theories of justice fail *because* of their exclusion of fantasy is too underdeveloped to amount to a serious contribution.

For all that Salecl does know what some of the big questions are, and in Chapter 8 she turns to the question of how human rights are to be conceived in the postmodern world, with all its scepticism over claims to universal validity. This is an urgent question, especially for an author protesting loyalty to feminism which barely makes sense without a notion of how it is that women might be systematically deprived of some good or another simply in virtue of being women. Salecl's analysis is, however, ultimately disappointing.

After an opening attack on a rather two dimensional version of liberal feminist legal theory Salecl turns to a 'detour through the contemporary philosophical debates on human rights'. This laconic detour is reminiscent of the treatment of justice earlier in the book, and reduces the options to a universalistic neo-Kantianism, and a genealogical Foucauldianism. Salecl considers pragmatism *a la* Rorty as a third way which resolves the impasse between Kantianism and Foucauldianism by offering an account of how local and particular forms of solidarity enable consensus to be reached without universal validity. Salecl's main objection to Rorty's view is that it seems unduly optimistic about the kind of tolerance which might be achieved, which she traces to Rorty's failure to account for the ways in which the notion of human rights is apparently "determined by the logic of desire" (p123). Here too, though, Salecl fails to develop her case in enough detail. More than that her claim that the discourse of universal rights is a "fantasy scenario" sits uneasily with her earlier insistence that liberal theory has no place for fantasy.

It would be one thing to take a series of insights from psychoanalysis and use them to show us something hitherto invisible about the state of ideology in post-socialist countries. This Salecl does from time to time, in an often suggestive and illuminating manner. It would be another thing entirely to imagine that the very terms of ideological thinking can somehow be shown to be underwritten by notions available only to psychoanalysis, and that the results of this analysis can in turn bear sociologically interesting fruit. Besides being intrinsically implausible, such an undertaking would require the working out of a detailed and sophisticated theory of how a society is a suitable object of psychoanalytic understanding, and how relations between this "psycho-polis" and its members are mediated. Some of the time Salecl seems to believe that she has pulled off this second task, but the fact of the matter is that she has not.

Indeed it is possible that the most serious philosophical criticism which can be leveled at Salecl is that on the whole she grossly underdevelops the interesting and suggestive idea of deploying insights from psychoanalysis to treat problems in ideology. She offers no theory of how these insights might be applied, instead using vague and unexplained locutions where society "tries" this, "perceives" or "grasps" that. Anthropomorphising social structures does nothing to close the theoretical gap her work creates, nor to explain how a psychoanalytic account of ideology could work in the face of the bald fact

that we create society through our practices, but are also made into the kind of people we are by the nature of the society we find ourselves in.

In the end Salecl tries to do too much, writing a book which if it met its own goals would have been a contribution to the literatures on psychoanalysis, political philosophy, human rights theory, strategic studies, peace studies and feminism. That she fails to pull this off is shown as much as anything by the vague and unconnected nature of her conclusion. This general lack of integration and the absence of a connecting overall argument leaves **The spoils of freedom** being at best a disappointing contribution to her major area, feminism.

REFERENCE.

Foucault, M (1979) **Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.** Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (1975-French).