

Perverse conservatism: A Lacanian interpretation of Russia's turn to traditional values

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Abstract

This article analyzes Russia's "conservative turn", which occurred in 2012 when Vladimir Putin was elected President for a third time. An overview of this turn – incorporating anti-Westernism, an emphasis on tradition, the protection of symbols of purity, and the persecution of symbols of impurity – opens the article. The author then explains the concept of "perverse conservatism" and elaborates its basic pattern with reference to such Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts as subjectification, perversion, disavowal, and what he calls the "defensive fetish". Finally, this pattern and its subpatterns of fetishism and sadism are applied to an explanation of certain aspects of Russia's domestic policy. The author concludes that the discourse on traditional values, at least in some respects, is subordinated to the pattern of perversion.

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The passage of power from Dmitry Medvedev to Vladimir Putin, who became President of the Russian Federation for a third non-consecutive term on 7 May 2012, was not merely a political formality. It coincided with a radical shift from a political agenda of 'democratization', 'modernization', and "the resetting of Russian–American relations" under Medvedev to one of political reaction and confrontation with the West. One of the key elements of Putin's new agenda became the ideology of traditional moral values (Pomerantsev, 2012). Although this discourse had already been important before 2012, especially in foreign policy (Curanovic', 2012), for the first time in the history of post-Soviet Russia moral conservatism has moved to the very epicenter of domestic politics, becoming nearly hegemonic.

This article offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the ideology of traditional values and Russia's attempts to implement it. By 'psychoanalytic interpretation' I mean an interpretation with reference to the ideas of Jacques Lacan and his followers/interpreters – notably Octave Mannoni, Slavoj Žižek, Robert Pfaller, and Bruce Fink – whose work constitutes the theoretical toolkit by means of which I seek to understand the object of this study. This article aims to explore whether it is possible to evaluate "perverse conservatism" as a specific social and cultural phenomenon; the theoretical goal is to investigate a possible connection between "perversion" (in the sense of a psychoanalytic 'clinical structure') and "moral conservatism". A further aim is to apply these theoretical investigations to the Russian case. I will argue that the phenomenon of perverse conservatism opens a door to understanding the logic behind the activities and statements of key Russian "moral entrepreneurs" (on this concept, see Becker, 1963, pp. 147–164). Finally, I will demonstrate that the discourse of traditional values, at least in certain respects, is subordinated to the pattern of perversion.

This turn to moral conservatism is not at all unique. In fact, it is a local example of a much broader trend: the rise of moral conservatism as not only an increasingly significant aspect of nation-states' agendas (Grzymala-Busse, 2015), but also a global transnational phenomenon (Bob, 2012). The Russian case is of particular interest for the following reasons: (1) in Russia, these ideas appear to have turned hegemonic; (2) the moral conservatism of Russian Orthodox actors can rely on the support of the state in a way that other conservative actors in the West cannot. Russia aspires to become the leader of a new "international moralism"¹ (a term coined by Alexander Morozov) defending "traditional values" not only within the country, but also worldwide in a new global culture war. Thus, an analysis of the Russian case will contribute to a general understanding of this global phenomenon, in which Russia is one of the most noteworthy players.

Russia's Turn to Traditional Values

In December 2012, 9 months after his third election as President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin presented his annual address to the Federal Assembly. This was an important speech, because it was the impetus for a policy aimed at “strengthening the solid, spiritual-moral foundations of [Russian] society”. Putin explained the need for urgent steps in this direction due to what he deemed a disturbing lack of “spiritual bonds” (such as ‘mercy’ or ‘compassion’). By employing the terminology of “spiritual bonds”, Putin had in mind the re-establishment of a system of traditional moral values for Russian society, which in his view had been falling apart. The solution, he proposed, was not only to defend morality by means of law (something that “must be done”), but also to begin a series of policy initiatives in the areas of culture, education, and youth policy, with the help of “institutions that are bearers of traditional values”. The outcome of these policy initiatives, according to Putin, should be the creation of ‘an environment for the formation of a moral, harmonious person’ (Putin, 2012).

Putin’s address triggered – or at least coincided with – a moralistic “avalanche”, which led to numerous legislative initiatives (some of them enacted into law), media campaigns, and civil society activism, etc. The main benefactor of this new policy was the Russian Orthodox Church, which for many years had been promoting the ideology of traditional values and which perceives itself as the privileged bearer of tradition (Agadjanian and Rousselet, 2005). It is little wonder, therefore, that the key public figures in this ‘moralistic turn’ were in one sense or another connected to Russian Orthodoxy (including Patriarch Kirill and his team). They finally got what they had been lacking all these years – access to the state apparatus and its resources (especially its resources for ideological dissemination).

The quest for this “spiritual-moral revival” – which began in 2012 and continues today – had many manifestations, but I am especially interested in the following ideological elements:

An Increasing Moral Anti-Westernism

The structure of the new Russian anti-Westernism is twofold. First, “the West” becomes the collective symbol of all possible sins and threats. According to Russia’s anti-Western ideologues, such movements as “immoral” liberalism, LGBTQ rights, and blasphemous contemporary art all derive from the West. “Western civilization”, as it is repeatedly portrayed by the President and the Patriarch, has lost its moral and religious (Christian) foundations; it legalizes sin and transforms itself into an apocalyptic image of “the kingdom of Sodom and Gomorrah” (Putin, 2013; Kirill, 2015). Second, this immoral West is portrayed as trying to seduce Russia, its direct antipode. This “Russia” becomes the collective symbol of all that is righteous and virtuous. According to the proponents of this notion, “Russian civilization”, in contrast with ‘Western civilization’, still adheres to its religious foundations (tradition) and is the one remaining “stronghold of Christian morality” in the world. Within this so-called Russian civilization, there are practically no antagonists, as all basic elements of this idealized Russia – “the people”, the state, and of course the Church – fit together harmoniously. Moreover, this Russia has a mission not only to save itself from subversive influences, but also to help the West to overcome its current moral-spiritual dysfunction (Kirill, 2015).

The Promotion of Everything Connected with Tradition, Traditional Moral Values, and a Traditional Way of Life

According to such a view, what stands between the “immoral” West and “moral” Russia is “tradition”. This tradition determines Russia’s ‘spiritualcultural originality’ and safeguards its “stronghold of Christian morality” against pernicious influence. Tradition is presented as the embodiment of moral purity; as such, it is clearly connected to Orthodoxy. But what is actually meant by “tradition”? In practice, one finds it difficult to unpack its positive content.

At best, it can be interpreted as an ethos of the negation of all things connected to the corrupted West: family (as opposed to the destruction of family); differentiated and unequal gender roles (over against gender equality); sexual (self-)restraint (over against sexual freedom); the repression of individual interests and expression (as opposed to the freedom of the individual); an emphasis on responsibilities (over against an emphasis on rights); collective social control and solidarity (as opposed to *anomie* and individualism); and finally the rhetoric of prioritizing the “spiritual” (over against the presumed prioritization of the “material”).

This “tradition”, and its corresponding “traditional way of life”, is highly paradoxical. It both exists and does not exist. On the one hand, Patriarch Kirill is constantly talking about “Russkii mir” (the “Russian world”) (Bremer, 2015).

For him, the “Russian world” is the embodiment of traditional moral values and its corresponding way of life. It is a unique civilization, which began with the Christianization of Kyivan Rus and continues to this day. On the one hand, it

unites all people living on the territory of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus who lead an Orthodox way of life, respect traditional moral values, and are ready to defend their civilization's uniqueness (Kirill, 2014). On the other hand, the very agenda of spiritual-moral revival, which is promoted so fervently by Orthodox moral entrepreneurs and supported vociferously by Putin, is a clear sign that this traditional way of life is either non-existent or barely functioning (hence, the reason it has to be defended or even re-created). This contradictory (i.e., simultaneously existing and non-existent) nature of tradition is crucial for this article's developing argument.

Concern for Symbolic Figures of Purity

The public support for tradition and moral purity is closely associated with ultimate concerns for those who are perceived as symbols or bearers of said purity – for example, “children”/“minors”, “believers”, “the simple Russian people” etc. In the view of traditionalist actors, the turn toward traditional values is carried out for the sake of “millions of simple Russians” who constitute “the majority of Orthodox believers”. They are the silent keepers of traditional values and the adherents of a traditional way of life. Every proposed reform is presented and justified with reference to these entities. “Millions” and “majorities” are opposed to the alien “minorities”, who in turn represent impurity and a threat to tradition.

If we look at these “millions of simple Russians” more closely, however, we can discern among them certain key figures. These are symbolic figures representing moral purity, including the figure of a “child”/“minor”, a “believer”, or “the family” as a collective figure. The concern over these symbolic figures has resulted in the introduction of special laws aimed precisely at defending their purity, especially the laws against offending the religious feelings of believers (enacted 1 July 2013) and against propaganda promoting non-traditional family values and non-traditional sexual relations among children and the under-age (enacted 30 June 2013). The underlying logic of these laws is the same: certain figures in society are so “innocent” and “sensitive” that authority figures must isolate them from any potentially disturbing ideas or experiences.

Persecution of Symbolic Figures of Moral Decay

This concern for figures of moral purity goes hand in hand with the persecution of those who are perceived as symbolic threats to this purity. These amoral figures constitute the “loud minorities” who either symbolize moral decay (e.g., homosexuals and “perverts”) or are perceived as being responsible for such decay (e.g., liberals, “foreign agents”, “bearers of alien cultural codes”).

One can trace several forms of this persecution. Let us take the legal sphere – and specifically the above-mentioned anti-propaganda law – as an example. This law aimed not only at defending purity, but also restricting impurity – especially the public activism of “homosexuals” and other embodiments of nontraditional values and relations (Wilkinson, 2014, pp. 365–368). Another noteworthy law was enacted against “foreign agents” on 21 November 2012. Rather than focusing on the political implications of this law (as an instrument to oppress opposition), I am interested in the figure of the “foreign agent”, an expression that has quickly become part of everyday speech in Russia and is understood as an individual who is an agent of foreign (especially, “Western”) influence whose activities must therefore be restricted, since these so-called “agents” intend to destroy Russian traditions by way of subversion of Russia's social and political affairs.

Efforts to fight perceived impurity have not been exhausted with the implementation of the aforementioned laws. Legislation has recently been proposed that would make “coming-out” illegal if it were enacted (Petrov, 2015). The law against “foreign agents” was followed by a law against “unwanted organizations” (enacted 3 June 2015), which makes the lives of so-called foreign agents even more complicated. The struggle with impurity, it seems, is endlessly cyclical, for the existing restrictions are never enough.

The stages of this “moralistic turn” are as follows:

- (1) a perceived threat of moral chaos (originating from “the West” and “Western influence”);
- (2) anxiety that the existing system is incapable of restraining this chaos (“tradition” is not functioning the way it should; “spiritual bonds” are lacking);
- (3) the perceived need to take urgent measures in order to avert the inevitable collapse of “Russia” and her identity (i.e., her “spiritual-cultural originality”) through

- (a) the promotion of traditional moral values;
 - (b) the defense of purity (of “believers”, or of “children”); and
 - (c) attacks on perceived impurity (of “homosexuals”, “corrupted liberals”, “agents of foreign influence” etc.);
- (4) the expected outcome of
- (a) creating a functioning system (including a “traditional way of life” and “solid spiritual-moral foundations in society”); and
 - (b) neutralizing the perceived threat.

Methodological Reflections

This assessment of Russia’s moralistic turn employs psychoanalytic tools for the analysis of social processes. Although some would question such an approach – claiming that the merger of psychoanalysis and sociology is based on a false analogy between society and the individual – an interdisciplinary methodology incorporating both psychoanalysis and sociology leads to significant scholarly insights (Chancer and Andrews, 2014). Moreover, for the Lacanian tradition, this dichotomy of social vs. individual does not exist at all, since psychoanalysis “deals with the ‘interface’ between the two, with the ways in which the individual and the social are irreducibly related” (Kotsko, 2008, p. 28).

Here I follow Smelser (1987), who claims that “the theory of the mechanisms of defense” is a viable approach for a synthesis of the two disciplines (p. 267) and argues that “the ego, in dealing with external threats and deprivations, uses precisely the same repertoire of defense modes as it does in dealing with instinctual representations and conflicts” (p. 278). One’s repertoire of defenses is limited and, in cases of external threat, mechanisms must be mobilized that are identical to those of one’s inner life. Moral conservatism is based on the perception of an anxiety-causing threat and the defense mechanism triggered in order to shield one from this threat. This defense mechanism is known as **disavowal**, which, as I wish to show, is the source of moralistic endeavors (at least in their perverse manifestations) in the Russian Federation.

Smelser (1987) further argues that modern society is extremely complex, consisting of many groups which follow their particular causes. These groups are differentiated “with respect to what in society they define as threatening and as sources of anxiety, how they define these threats and what kinds of affects they mobilize in relation to these threats, and what kinds of purposive action (if any) they envision as a means to contend with them” (p. 283). Moreover, “many groups ... are built around the anxiety based on the perception of a grave threat (e.g., alcohol, drugs, crime, environmental abuse) and devote their energies to attempting to persuade others to accept their perception, the anxiety they feel about it, and the need to act” (p. 283). In citing Smelser, I am not claiming that all Russian people are perverse conservatives or that the entire Russian Orthodox Church is intrinsically of this nature. Rather, I am examining a single group – Orthodox conservatives and their broader supporters/sympathizers – built around the anxiety of a West-induced moral decay and a desire to defend traditional values in order to stop this decay. This group is unique in that it has managed – at least, since 2012 – to impose its anxiety as **the** anxiety of the whole Russian state, thereby making its agenda hegemonic.

Perversion: Between Jouissance and Law

Since a detailed analysis of the psychoanalytic understanding of perversion has already been given extensively elsewhere (Fink, 1997, pp. 165–204; Swales, 2012), I will limit my discussion to perversion as germane to the analysis of moral conservatism. In psychoanalysis, perversion “is not a derogatory term, used to stigmatize people for engaging in sexual behaviors different from the ‘norm’. Rather, it designates a highly specific clinical structure, with features that sharply distinguish it from neurosis and psychosis” (Fink, 1997, pp. 166–167). Each structure – psychosis, perversion, neurosis – indicates a particular place of the subject on the scale of subjectification (i.e., the coming-into-being of the subject). Subjectification is a long and complicated process (Lacan, 1973, pp. 185–195, 2006, pp. 712–719). One does not arrive in this world as a ready-made subject; one must **become** a subject. Initially, the human being is nothing more than an inseparable part of a mother–child dyad. The mother is the source of **jouissance** or enjoyment. But this **jouissance** is ambivalent – it is not only pleasure, but extreme pleasure, pleasure beyond limit, to the point of pain (Braunstein, 2003, p. 103). “The smothering mother” and her love for the child, despite all the enjoyment or **jouissance** her love brings to the child, is like “a huge crocodile in whose jaws [the child is] ensnared” (Lacan, cited in Fink, 1996, p. 56). In order to become a subject, the human being must detach him or herself from this suffocating and anxiety-causing enjoyment. The key element in this detachment is the establishment of the Law (the big Other), which becomes the barrier between the subject and enjoyment. The Law on the one hand prevents **jouissance** from

completely absorbing the subject, and on the other provides some crumbs of this *jouissance* through the mechanism of human desire with all its vicissitudes.

The Law appears in two stages: its first manifestation – alienation – is the prohibition of unlimited pleasurable contact with the mother. With this intervention, the preliminary structure of order, based upon a foundational differentiation between “yes” and “no”, establishes itself. The dyadic condition is irreparably broken. The human being is no longer inseparable from her mOther. Her structural position in this stage is “the object with which mOther obtains satisfaction” (Fink, 1997, p. 179). However, this first stage is not enough; it must be followed by the second stage of separation, which provides the final detachment from mOther’s enjoyment through the full establishment of the Law. The structural position of the subject changes – she is no longer the object of the Other’s enjoyment. Instead, she becomes a desiring subject in a fully established symbolical order.

Perversion is an aspect of human subjectivity resulting from a failure in the process of subjectification – when the passage from the first stage to the second does not happen. First, the pervert’s “particular structural position in relation to the Other” (Swales, 2012, p. 12) is that of “the instrument of the Other’s *jouissance*” (Lacan, 2006, p. 697). The perverse subject acts as an object that should cause something in the Other. He never perceives himself as a subject, but only as an object that acts for the Other’s sake. Second, this structure is highly unstable, since the subject is stuck between ambivalent anxiety-inducing *jouissance* and feeble and non-functional Law. The perverse subject wants the Other (Law and Order) to appear and to place limits on the threatening *jouissance*, which “continues to be a source of anxiety” (Swales, 2012, p. 41), completing the establishment of the Law. Third, these two peculiar features of perversion determine this strategy of establishment. In trying to become the instrument of the Law’s enjoyment, the perverse subject “locates enjoyment in the very agency of the law which prohibits the access to enjoyment” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 47). Law becomes the source of enjoyment, and the perverse subject becomes the instrument of the enjoyment of this Law. In perversion, the subject “gains satisfaction from the very obscenity of the gesture of installing the rule of Law” (p. 47).

Hence, the connection between perversion and moral conservatism is apparent. The perverse subject is obsessed with Law; he “verily and truly props up a law” (Lacan, 2004, p. 176). The obsessional fixation on Law makes perversion a “profoundly conservative” phenomenon when it is transposed into the political sphere (Foster and Rothenberg, 2003, p. 13). This refutes the widespread perception of the pervert as the one who breaks the law and all possible moral norms in search of extreme and forbidden pleasures. In reality, “what appears from the outside to be satisfaction with no holds barred is in fact defense, the implementing of a law insofar as it restrains, suspends, or stops the subject on the road to *jouissance*” (Lacan, cited in Fink, 2014, p. 128). But Law and Order, which are propped up in perversion, are doomed to fail as they are also perverse or fake.

The key defense mechanism by which the pervert attempts to alleviate his highly ambivalent position is that of *disavowal*. The understanding of disavowal gives us a key to the very core of perversion and, later, of perverse conservatism. In order to explain disavowal, however, we must explore another key concept: the *fetish*. In a famous essay, Freud (1927/2001) explained the phenomenon of fetishism thus: when a boy faces the fact that his mother does not possess a penis, he perceives in this discovery a threat, since it could mean “that his own possession of a penis was in danger” (e.g., just as his father castrated his mother, so his father could castrate him) (p. 153). This traumatic discovery can trigger disavowal (*Verleugnung*), a defense mechanism by which the subject can simultaneously support two contradictory perspectives: a perception of a threat, on the one hand, and an illusion or belief that clearly contradicts this perception on the other. In Freud’s example, the boy manages to see clearly that the mother lacks a penis, while maintaining the illusion that she still has one in spite of everything. This illusion, embodied in a particular object, becomes the boy’s fetish and a “token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (p. 154).

A fetishistic split manifests itself in a specific verbal construction: “I know very well..., but still...”. In this construction, the “I know very well” corresponds to the perception of a traumatic reality, while the “but still” corresponds to the fetish-illusion that is intended to defend against the perceived threat. This logic of disavowal gives us the possibility of connecting the individual psychodynamic to broader cultural and social trajectories. Mannoni (2003) argues that fetishistic disavowal is a common cultural phenomenon witnessed in a wide variety of spheres (i.e., is not limited to sexual perversions). Belief in the presence of the maternal phallus “is the first belief that one disavows and the paradigm for all other acts of disavowal” (p. 76). One could schematically present disavowal as a cyclical, repeating mechanism consisting of several subsequent stages which I call “the basic pattern of perversion”:

a threat (seductive and irresistible) ?
an anxiety that Law and Order are non-functional ?
disavowal ?
a “defensive fetish” (i.e., a fetish the subject employs to defend oneself
against anxiety-causing reality and perceived danger) ?
the establishment of perverse or fake Law and Order ?
neutralization of the threat.

Perversion in the Context of Russia and Russian Orthodoxy

At least two factors promote perverse conservatism: One is typical for any modern society; the other is specific to Russian Orthodoxy. First, there is a basic structural affinity between perversion and the advent of modernity. Modernity, with its emphasis on individual autonomy (i.e. self-determination, self-reflexivity, giving oneself one’s own laws) and rational mastery (Wagner, 2008) undermines any urge to take Law and Order (the big Other) for granted. Modern subjects experience the social edifice, laws, and traditions as having no intrinsic foundation. The basic experience of modernity is that the big Other is something you cannot rely on completely. This situation is anxiety-inducing as it puts “the subject in a double-bind. On the one hand, without the law, *jouissance* threatens to overwhelm the subject. On the other hand, the breakdown of the law also threatens to deprive the subject of the little bits of *jouissance* the subject derives from transgressing the law” (Kotsko, 2008, pp. 85–86). This double-bind leads to constant perverse attempts to reestablish the big Other: “[social] perversion is a double strategy to counteract this nonexistence [of law]: an (ultimately deeply conservative, nostalgic) attempt to install the law artificially, in the desperate hope that we will then take this selfposited limitation ‘seriously,’ and, in a complementary way, a no less desperate attempt to codify the very transgression of the Law” (Žižek, 2003, p. 53). But this strategy can give only a fake order – it is not possible to establish or invent traditions and then to make oneself forget this very act of invention. These traditions and traditional values exist as long as someone is ready to play the game, to pretend they are serious. The fake nature of these traditions, their lack of foundation, explains the cyclical nature of perverse conservatism – simulated Order must be reinvented, reestablished with each rotation of the pattern of perversion.

Second, this general modern propensity towards perversion is reinforced by the specific situation of Russian Orthodoxy. Hegel rightly claimed that any political change that contradicts the religious spirit is doomed to fail and , ‘to sink back into [its] old condition” (Hegel, 2001, p. 473). Unless these two spheres – political order and religion – are reconciled, there will be an inner conflict. This is the basic problem of Russian Orthodox conservatism; despite the profound political, social, economic, cultural, and legal changes which have taken place over the last 100 years, religious consciousness is still – despite the efforts of some actors (see Stoeckl, 2014) – pre-modern. Conservative Orthodox consciousness and modern society are in a situation of fundamental contradiction. Much of Russian society has remained profoundly secular in the wake of semi-successful attempts by Soviet authorities to violently extirpate traditional religious forms in the twentieth century since the 1917 Revolution. Yet, conservatives still proceed from an assumption of Orthodox culture, an Orthodox majority, and an Orthodox consensus around traditional values. One can expect two possible solutions to this contradiction, a retreat to the prerevolutionary situation being categorically impossible: either reformation and “*aggiornamento*”; or marginalization (wherein the Church becomes a sect or a denomination). But the defense mechanism of disavowal provides us with a third option: the neutralization of anxiety-inducing reality by what I call “defensive fetishes” (see below).

So who are the perverts and in what sense? Are Orthodox conservatives who support a turn to “traditional values” perverts in a clinical sense? Absolutely not. But, with respect to structural identity, the situation of a moral conservative stuck between the threatening, seductive debauchery of (post-/late-) modern society and a lack of “spiritual bonds” is similar to that of a pervert oscillating between seductive *jouissance* and feeble Law. Moral conservatism thus exhibits the structure of perversion, a structure that assumes the same defense mechanism of disavowal. Do I mean by this that any conservatism is perverse? Not at all. Perverse conservatism is a conservatism that exhibits the structure of perversion. If the structure is different (e.g., if it is not based on anxiety that the law is non-functional), then conservatism is not perverse.

Fetishism and Sadism: Sub-patterns of Perverse Conservatism

The first two elements of the basic pattern of perversion (i.e., the perceived threat and non-functional Law and Order) are clear in the Russian case. As the source of an anxiety-inducing experience, and the embodiment of sinful freedoms

and forbidden pleasures, the West functions similarly to mOther's *jouissance*. On the one hand, these freedoms and pleasures are threatening, since they are incompatible with a certain vision of "traditional Russia". On the other hand, they are attractive and seductive to the point of irresistibility (the famous dialectics of law and sin in St. Paul (Rom. 7:1–25) that Lacan so admired (Lacan, 1992)). Were this not so, it is unclear why this threat would be so menacing. For this reason, the fight with the West is so fierce (and in the end, futile), inasmuch as moralists are fighting against something perceived as both irresistibly seductive (like mOther's *jouissance*) and utterly dangerous (like Lacan's "crocodile jaws"). Hence, the West should actually be treated not as an external, but an **internal** factor. In other words, we are observing the projection of interior problems to an external site. The internal Russian conflict (about gay rights, the crisis of the traditional family, or the lack of respect towards traditional religion) is presented as an external conflict between a moral "us" and an immoral "them". However, this is all an attempt to turn internal antagonism into external enmity. The "West" symbolizes contemporary society with its wide range of new challenges, problems, and antagonisms (for a list of such challenges in the context of Russian Orthodoxy, see Agadjanian and Rousselet, 2005, pp. 29–30). This reality – as opposed to the simulated reality of "the traditional way of life" – seems threatening to traditionalists, because it is incompatible with their understanding of tradition. In the moralist's eyes, the West could potentially deprive Orthodox Russia of its most precious possessions – its sovereignty, its "spiritual-cultural originality", and, as the propaganda often claims, its nuclear rockets (i.e., its "penis"). The West, as both an unavoidable and unacceptable reality, triggers defense mechanisms – the traumatic perception of a new reality and the simultaneous refusal to acknowledge it through disavowal and defensive fetishes. We discover the second element of the basic pattern – non-functional Law and Order – within this self-contradictory "tradition"/"traditional way of life". As mentioned above, this "traditional way of life" is paradoxical, for it both exists (when dealing with the opposition between "moral, traditional Russia" and "the immoral West, which has lost any [moral] foundations") and does not exist (otherwise, it would be useless to talk about "moral decay" and the desired revival of "spiritual bonds"). The expression "spiritual bonds" – literally, spiritual "clamps" (*skrepy* is a term borrowed from the lexicon of building construction) – has clear connotations with non-functionality; those who use this phrase assume that a certain structure or mechanism is either falling apart or not functioning properly. Thus, the proponents of this view believe that Russia must be secured with clamps. The space between the threat ("the West") and the fragile identity ("Orthodox Russia") must be occupied by Law and Order ("tradition"), which ought to neutralize this threat. Yet, it seems that the place of "tradition" is left unoccupied, which results in an anxiety-causing experience.

With respect to disavowal and defensive fetishes, certain variations exist, indicating that perverse conservatism is not a unified phenomenon. Several subpatterns can be distinguished within, including fetishism, sadism, masochism, exhibitionism etc., to the first two of which I limit my analysis.

Fetishistic Conservatism: Traditional Values, Children, and Other Defensive Fetishes

Fetishism is the most basic and, probably, most harmless version of perverse conservatism. To a certain extent, it can even be claimed that it is inevitable for the survival of both the individual and society. We mentioned above that the key formula of fetishism is "I know very well..., but still...". This formula assumes that the human ego does not remain intact, but is provoked to undergo a "splitting", in which the subject is split into a centered part (i.e., the conscious perception of a threat) and a decentered part. The decentered part can then be projected onto certain naïve and credulous others who have become the carriers of fetishistic beliefs or illusions (or who could perform the function of fetishes themselves). Žižek (2008b) calls these others "subjects supposed to believe" (p. 136ff); they are "virtual observers" (Pfaller, 2014, p. 9) for the sake of whom society should maintain "the order of pure semblance" (Žižek, 2008b, p. 135). Of course, the subject remains unconscious of this split – neither aware of the disavowed nature of the illusion nor, for that matter, the fact that he or she is the author of this illusion. Moreover, neither is the subject aware of the imaginary or virtual status of the others who are carriers of this illusion.

Here we face not only the most basic pattern of perverse conservatism but also an important mechanism of society's preservation: "It is the logic of 'subject supposed to believe' which is effectively 'conservative' in its reliance upon the structure of belief which must not be put in question by the subject" (Žižek, 2008b, p. 139). This fetishistic conservatism, by virtue of a split in the subject, allows the subject to come to terms with reality, while at the same time preserving an important belief about reality by ascribing it to others in whose name this belief is supported.

Contemporary society, with its progressive challenges, triggers disavowal, which spurs the production of defensive fetishes, thereby allowing the subject neither to lose contact with reality nor to challenge certain long-cherished illusions. In the current Russian context, the most common defensive fetishes include:

- *Quantitative fetishes*, such as “the majority of Russians”, “millions of Orthodox or Muslim believers”, or simply “Russians” or “believers” (when connoting a large group of people). The idea here is to screen oneself off from a threatening reality through the introduction of numbers so huge as to be overwhelming. It is difficult to object when facing “millions” of people. (What can one do, if “millions of Russians” are said to be offended, for example?)
- *Naive and credulous observers*, such as “children” (or the ‘under-age’), “believers”, and “the simple people” (in the sense of unsophisticated, hardworking men and women). The assumption is that naïve, fragile, pure figures exist, in whose presence (or ostensible presence) we should behave decently and maintain a semblance of purity, even if we see no reason to do so. If the fetish of “the simple people” remains a rhetorical one, the fetishes ‘believers’ and “children” have already entered into Russian law (see above). However, these laws are utterly ambiguous in that one can never know whether one has violated them; in order to comply with them, one must behave as if some credulous child or no less credulous believer is watching one closely at all times. The fetish “children” plays a key role in thwarting LGBTQ activities (all public activities of this kind in Russia are *de facto* banned). For example, when a hypothetical LGBTQ civil protest is discussed, the key – and usually sole – argument against it is the following: “children and the underage could easily witness these activities” (Russkaia narodnaia liniia, 2011).
- *Abstract fetishes*, such as “traditional values”, “traditional morality”, and “tradition”. No one can definitively explain what these traditional values are (e.g., in relation to traditional sexual relations, what precisely are nontraditional sexual relations?). No one knows where to look historically for the “golden age” of said values, but, as a defense against the threatening challenges of contemporary society, these vague invocations work rather well.
- *Fetish-identities*, such as “I am a patriot”, “I am a Russian”, “I am a believer” and so on. These are among the most subtle, but no less significant, types of fetishes. In order to express oneself, one must reduplicate oneself within the symbolic order, finding the words (or signifiers) that would best represent oneself. Žižek (2008b) calls such acts “symbolic redoublings” (p. 143). These redoublings are equated with people’s identities (such as “man” or ‘woman’, “believer” or “atheist”, “priest”, “Russian”). Some believe that the real human being and his or her identities are one and the same, so that one cannot differentiate between them. Yet, there are extreme cases in which the individual must step back from his or her identity. In such a moment, one detects a distance between the real human being and his or her ‘symbolic redoublings’.

Fetishes are used as a shield against a perceived threat. First, one faces a reality that it is difficult to know how to manage (e.g., gay rights, non-traditional relations, new forms of contemporary art, etc.). Then comes disavowal, which manifests itself in a twofold construction with multiple variations:

I am a) not a homophobe; (b) not a sanctimonious person; (c) very respectful to my homosexual friends; (d) a big fan of contemporary art myself; (e) a liberal myself...

...but still a) what if children were involved?; (b) millions of Orthodox believers would be offended; (c) this contradicts our traditional morality.

Disavowal produces a defensive fetish (such as “children”, “millions of believers”, “traditional morality”), which in turn becomes the carrier of a cherished illusion. This fetish neutralizes the threat and recreates an order that was shaken by its encounter with reality. One knows very well that the LGBTQ agenda, non-traditional relations, contemporary art, and other phenomena exist. One can even be sympathetic toward them and say personal words in their defense, but only to the extent that they are not a perceived threat to any number of defensive fetishes. In extreme cases, one can even enjoy these realities; or can know them “all too well” (the revelations of Protodeacon Andrey Kuraev (2013–2016) concerning the homosexual lifestyle of Russian Orthodox bishops are a good example). However, this “all too well” is always supplemented by the “but still”. One enjoys all these threatening factors and “knows them very well”, but still believes that Russia (the “majority”, ‘millions of believers’) is not ready for them or that “children” (or “believers”, or ‘the simple people’) would be shocked, offended or humiliated by them.

Sadistic Conservatism: Restricting Jouissance

The sub-pattern of sadism is similar to that of fetishism. The goal remains the same: to utilize a defensive fetish in order to neutralize a perceived threat. An additional element, however, makes sadism particularly pernicious. Contrary to the fetishist, the sadist requires a partner (a victim) for his or her perverse manipulations.

Lacan (2006) analyzed the phenomenon of sadism in his essay “Kant avec Sade”. Excessive *jouissance*, for which there is no lasting limit (since Law is nonfunctional), leads to fears of being obliterated by this *jouissance*. This triggers

the search for an enjoyment-restraining Law. Yet, since the pervert/sadist cannot act as the subject, he is merely an object, an instrument acting for the Other's sake. The sadist performs the role of the voice that proclaims the Law; he is not the author of the Law, but its transmitter. This voice is directed toward the partner whom the sadist wants to transform. This partner then becomes a victim of sadistic performances (pp. 645–670).

What kind of defensive fetish is the sadist searching for? The sadist is searching for the anxiety of the victim (Lacan, 2004, p. 123). The sadist stages a performance through which she wants to provoke anxiety in her partner – the anxiety of losing freedom, life, well-being, or calmness. The victim's anxiety proves that there is a limit to *jouissance*, that Law exists (i.e., the threat is neutralized). The sadist “tries to erect the law insofar as it restrains, suspends, or stops the subject on the road to *jouissance*” (Lacan, 2004, p. 176). When applied to the Russian case, this logic reflects the following pattern:

“The West” as “the kingdom of Sodom and Gomorra” -> a non-functional “tradition” and anxiety concerning Russia's moral decay -> proponents claiming, “I am the voice of tradition, and these people are embodiments of immorality” -> the anxiety of victims as a result of restrictions placed upon them -> fake “tradition” (or “Russia as the stronghold of Christian values”) -> the neutralization of the threat.

Various figures can occupy the place of the victim of sadistic treatment. For example, “immoral homosexuals” and “venal liberals” are typical figures whose “excessive *jouissance*” must be limited in the Russian case. They are “an external element, a foreign body introducing corruption into the sound social fabric” (Žižek, 2008a, p. 142). Of special interest here is the way a particular group with a particular issue becomes a symbol placed at the very center of a nearly apocalyptic struggle.

The “issue” of homosexuals in Russia, for example, no longer implies compromise toward particular solutions to particular problems (Wilkinson, 2014; Zorgdrager, 2013). Rather, it has turned into a sort of “cosmic war” between immoral Western liberalism and “the last stronghold of Christian values”, between moral decay and moral purity, between “the kingdom of Sodom” and Orthodox Russia, etc. In this perceived war, every concession is perceived as a loss to the devil. Violence against homosexuals, be it rhetorical or physical, is portrayed not as violence against concrete innocent people (homosexuality is, after all, legal according to Russian law), but as acceptable participation in a “cosmic war”. For example, denying gays the rather ordinary right to organize a civil rights demonstration (involving no more than several dozen people) has remained one of the key issues on the national agenda in Russia for many years.

According to this logic, restricting homosexuals' access to gay marriage, or even to participation in civil rights demonstrations, is seen as convincing evidence that “tradition” still exists. In the minds of Russian sadists, the “West” is literally in the process of degradation, since it legalizes gay marriage, and Russia is “the stronghold of Christianity”, because homosexuals do not get what they want (their transgressive *jouissance* is restricted). Consider Patriarch Kirill's (2003) logic concerning the process of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Western countries:

...in a number of countries, the choice of sin is being approved and justified by law... This is a very dangerous, *apocalyptic symptom*, and we must ensure that this sin never be sanctioned by state law on the territory of Holy Rus' [i.e., Holy Orthodox Russia], because this is a sign that people have stepped onto the *path of self-destruction*.

Here one can make two observations concerning Kirill's statement. First, he quickly transforms a particular case into a “cosmic war”: same-sex marriage is a sin as such, and from this sin there is a direct link to the threat of apocalypse and self-destruction (and one can give numerous examples of such “cosmic war” transformations). Second, his statement depicts a reestablishment of order through the victim's discomfort: Holy Rus' (i.e., Holy Orthodox Russia) exists because – and probably to the extent that – the state does not support sin (i.e., because and to the extent that homosexuals do not get what they want). Common sense logic dictates the following sequence: Holy Orthodox Russia exists; therefore, homosexuals are not allowed to get what they want. Yet, the perverse logic actually at play here is the opposite: homosexuals are not allowed to get what they want, which is the reason Holy Orthodox Russia exists.

The case concerning homosexuals is but one example; the same logic could be revealed in attacks upon liberals, contemporary artists, and followers of so-called “non-traditional” religions. These sadistic performances in Russia remind strange quasi-alchemical rituals through which some substance – ,‘tradition’, “traditional way of life”, “Holy Rus'”, “the last stronghold of Christianity” – would magically appear. But this substance is doomed to melt into thin air as soon as the complaints of the victims are no longer heard. “Russia”, to rephrase Žižek (2008a, p. 143), is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of its “enemies”; it is prevented from such attainments by its own

antagonistic nature and immanent blockage, while it “projects” this internal negativity onto the figure of “the enemy”, be it the homosexual or any other “alien elements”. That is why the search for victims is never-ending, and the rituals of restricting victims’ *jouissance* are repeated again and again. One measure against homosexuals is followed by another. One anti-liberal TV campaign is followed by another. One attack on “agents of foreign influence” is followed by another. It is useless to search for any substantial evolution in this activity, since it consists of a cyclical rotation of a psychopathological mechanism.

Conclusion

To a certain degree, disavowal and defensive fetishes are inevitable for individuals and for society in general. Without them, the smooth running of certain traditions would simply stop. All the same, one should never forget that perversion – be it individual or social – is still a psychopathological mechanism. It results from a double failure in the process of subjectification and the search for identity and implies a refusal to challenge one’s illusions; an artificial agreement with reality (“I know very well...”) that actually hides cherished beliefs that an individual is unprepared to face, and the subject’s decentered parts that she or he is unprepared to subjectify (“but still...”). Instead of preserving Russian identity, which is the aim of all promoters of “tradition”, this disavowal is nothing more than an escape from it. Authentic subjectification (both individual and national), by contrast, occurs by overcoming the fetishistic split and facing reality. Hence, the latter inevitably signifies a parting with (or serious reconsideration of) one’s cherished illusions hidden within defensive fetishes.

One important lesson of psychoanalysis is that our true identity is what awaits us. As such, it must be worked towards and not merely defended in a paranoid war with unceasing threats. Social perversion becomes particularly pernicious when the mechanism of conservation turns into a mechanism of destruction that becomes more and more cruel and violent with every cyclical repetition. In this sense, it is little wonder that what began in Russia in 2012 as a fight for morality and a traditional way of life resulted not in the creation of a peaceful society, but in the increase of hostility (war in Ukraine for the sake of “the Russian world” as just one obvious example), paranoid suspicion (the intensive search for enemies and traitors), and hysterical anti-Western and antiliberal sentiments. Perverse conservatism can lead only to a perverse (i.e., fake) order that requires constant verification precisely due to its inauthenticity. Patterns of perversion can neither be realized nor exhausted, for they are endless in their cyclical rotation. They can only be traversed, and left behind.

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Note

1 This term, an allusion to the Communist International, refers to the international consolidation of moral conservatives all over the world. These conservatives unite in order to promote an agenda of traditional values in both national and international contexts.

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Author’s Note: All Russian to English translations are mine

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