

Choice and the invasion of Ukraine, by Renata Salecl

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This paper contains my attempt to pastiche the Lacanian philosopher and social theorist Renata Salecl. The pastiche focuses on the effects of coronavirus on liberal societies, the invasion of Ukraine, and offers a definition which I think is of interest to analytic philosophy.

Making pastiches of literary styles seems to have been a trend during the Edwardian period of English literature. But I wonder how hard this is to do, so I am trying to produce a little book imitating various academic styles. This is my attempt at imitating a member of the popular Lacanian school of social theorists, whose writings I enjoy, but it also contains some material which I think is of value for analytic philosophers: a definition of fashion. I attribute it to a fictional Greek philosopher. The pastiche makes me feel somewhat guilty, as if I were stealing something, but probably there are other pastiches of this author, if that helps.

An aisle of a Manchester supermarket sells microwaveable ready-meals from around the world. There is hot lamb curry from Madras, spicy Caribbean chicken, and traditional English favourites, like mushroom pie. A dizzying array of choices awaits the customer. A newspaper advertisement offers cruises around New Zealand or Greek Islands or the Arabian Gulf: there is a world of possibilities for you to choose from. The ideology of Western societies is that more choice is better. This ideology tells us that choice is what defines the West.

When the global pandemic began, some Western societies resisted introducing lockdowns. The UK government's policy was let's just wait and review the situation. Even after most of Europe was in lockdown, it was not. The spread of coronavirus directly challenges the Western ideology of choice. How can a society which defines itself by choice maintain its identity and deal with the virus? The virus continued its rapid spread and the UK government had to introduce a lockdown as well.

The shift from a society all about choice to a society not about choice seemed to happen overnight. People had to wear masks. They were told to only leave their homes for essentials or for exercise once a day. Most shops were shut. Rules in supermarkets did not allow shoppers to buy more than three of a product. Police drove up and down streets in vans, and periodically went into the supermarkets to check that no one was violating the new rules.

Each society has rules and norms. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls these rules and norms the symbolic order. The symbolic order goes with idealized images of what the society is like, what Lacan calls the imaginary. The spread of the virus required a radical change in the symbolic order. There was a rude interruption of something real, that the previous symbolic order was not suited to dealing with and is not part of our way of imagining what this society is about. What happens to a society during such a change?

An article for the BBC website advised people on how to have sex during the pandemic. But given the new rules, how can one have sex? Either someone is in a relationship or the rules are

an obstacle. The article ignores the issue of how to overcome the obstacle. Society was still imagined as basically a liberal place, where people could just hook up; it was merely a question of what small adaptations to make.

Under conditions of extreme change, what we find is that even if the rules change, the imaginary does not change much. The same image of the society is maintained, with scant acknowledgement of the interruption.

The requirement to wear the mask did not apply to everyone. It did not apply to people with medical exemptions. I was able to enter shops without a mask. To avoid discussion, I found it convenient to print out a government document and make a card for myself, following its instructions. But wearing the mask is not a choice. However, there's a presumption that a person with a skin disorder doesn't choose that disorder. Psychoanalysts know that some symptoms are not entirely outside the realm of choice or the realm of enjoyment. Symptoms are stressful, but the subject also enjoys their symptoms. And while a symptom cannot be chosen in the way that we can choose meals from a menu or choose to watch another television channel, there is some ingredient of choice.

The invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin's Russia added another challenge to the Western ideology of choice. In non-Western states, this ideology is often a source of puzzlement. If citizens are all individuals free to make their own choices, what will happen if a country is invaded? How can it ensure that citizens carry out their duties to defend it? Won't each citizen

look at where their comfort and individual self-interest lies? It seems the state must force a commitment on all citizens to defend it or else it will simply be taken over by another state.

The West has responded to the invasion with sanctions. Sanctions treat the Russian state as if it is composed of individuals worried about their comfort. How can they cope with more sanctions? It may be that the West is even trying to produce good liberal subjects. For the rest of the world, the invasion of Ukraine gives rise to questions such as what is to stop Vladimir Putin from invading more of Europe? Could he even invade England and France? And why do Western states have the boundaries they do? For example, why doesn't Germany invade Denmark?

Fashion provides one solution to the problem of how to react to an invasion. We tend to think of fashion as something superficial, but Greek philosopher and filmmaker Yanis Hatzymoysis defines fashion in a way that shows that fashion is deep. Fashion, he says, is when everyone has free choice but they all choose the same thing for a while. They all wear the same brand of shoes, despite several others for sale. This is a structural definition. It is not just about dressing and what we call the fashion industry. It is about a structure of norms and preferences, and applies to other fashions, such as fashions in literature and philosophy. And it can become a fashion to defend against the enemy. We are all free to choose not to but still we all choose to.

Reference

n.a. 2021. Sex and Covid: What are the rules? *BBC News*.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-53736087>