

# TAUTOLOGY AS THE HIGHEST FORM OF IDEOLOGY: REFLECTIONS ON STALINIST DISCOURSE (1930-1953)

**Petre Petrov**

(University of Texas, Austin)

## I. “Wooden” Tautology

Tautology and ideology share a suffix, but not much else. If we go by basic definitions only, it is more fitting to regard them as opposites, the former referring to aberrant expression of thought, the latter designating thought’s systematic elaboration. Of course, actually existing ideologies are not simply systems of meaning. They are discursive productions, too, and as such are exposed to all the vagaries of language. Still, if someone were to commit a tautology while making an ideological pronouncement, we would regard this as a contingent *lapsus*, and would be in no way inclined to think that tautology is a constitutive feature of the worldview that is being expounded. For us to suspect a more integral connection between the two, a *lapsus* of this kind would need to occur with some regularity. Such appears to have been the case in the Soviet Union, and more specifically in the sphere of its official ideological discourse.

By now there exists a sizeable body of scholarship that treats tautology as one of the identifying features of Soviet ideology or, rather, of its language. I am referring, in particular, to the work of social linguists that, from the early 1980s, established the paradigm of the so-called *langue de bois* (“wooden language”, *dubovyi/dereviannyi iazyk*).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: Alain Besançon, *Présent soviétique et passé russe* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1980); M. Głowiński, *Nowamowa po polsku* (Warsaw: PEN, 1991); Louis Martinez, “Le langue de bois soviétique”, *Commentaire*

Within this paradigm, itself a late offspring of the “totalitarian” approach to Soviet politics and society,<sup>2</sup> the language of official ideology was habitually characterized as impersonal, repetitive, devoid of informational value, and very often tautological. Its instrumentality allegedly consisted in numbing the mind, suppressing individuality and independent thinking, so as to better enforce robotic submission to authoritarian power.<sup>3</sup> Tautology, an extreme case of repetition, was one of the main devices through which the numbing effect was achieved. A section in François Thom’s *Newspeak: The Language of Soviet Communism* bears the revealing title, “How *Lingue de bois* Paralyzes Reason”.<sup>4</sup> Another section of the book is devoted to tautology,<sup>5</sup> which, Thom maintains, “can create a hypnotic state in which human beings lose all sense of reality”.<sup>6</sup>

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16 (1981): 506-515; Françoise Thom, *Newspeak: The Language of Soviet Communism*, trans. Ken Connelly (London: Claridge Press, 1989); Daniel Weiss, “Was ist neu am Newspeak? Reflexionen zur Sprache der Politik in der Sowjetunion”, *Slavistische Linguistik 1985. Referate des 11. Konstanzer Slavistischen Arbeitstreffens*, ed. by Renate Rathmayr (München: Sagner, 1986), 343-391. For discussion of the term *langue de bois*, see: Patrick Sériot, *Analyse du discours politique soviétique* (Paris: IMSECO, 1985), 21-29.

<sup>2</sup> For a wide-ranging historical account of this approach, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Among the seminal texts that made totalitarianism the dominant framework for the study of the Soviet Union are: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); *Totalitarianism*, ed. by Carl J. Friedrich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954); Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952). The fall of the Soviet Union stimulated a revival of the totalitarian approach during the 1990s, as evidenced by such historical studies as François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). For a groundbreaking engagement with the Cold-War ideologization of Soviet studies, see Stephen F. Cohen, “Scholarly Missions: Sovietology as a Vocation”, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917*, ed. by Stephen F. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-37.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the influential characterization of Nazi language in Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich. LTI-Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 21. Together with George Orwell’s *1984*, Klemperer’s book was the main inspiration for the study of “totalitarian” languages.

<sup>4</sup> Thom, *Newspeak*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Thom, *Newspeak*, 85-87.

<sup>6</sup> Thom, *Newspeak*, 85. Similarly, Mikhail Vaiskopf claims that Stalin’s use of tautologies was “meant to guarantee a certain hypnotic effect [...]”. See: Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Pisatel’ Stalin* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001), 35. All translations from non-English sources are mine (PP).

If critics thus found tautology to be at the very heart of ideology, it was only because they saw the latter as not being genuinely *ideo*-logical. It was not the ideas of Marxism-Leninism that mattered, but the deployment of discourse and its effects on the public.<sup>7</sup> Emptied of all meaning, Soviet ideology had become purely speech,<sup>8</sup> a medium through which totalitarian power directly molded (that is to say, falsified) reality and the subjects inhabiting it.<sup>9</sup> With this “latin monstrueux d’une Eglise monstrueuse”,<sup>10</sup> ritual triumphed over substance, incantation took the place of argumentation.<sup>11</sup> Totalitarian discourse, so the argument went, addressed itself not so much to mind as to feeling and instinct.<sup>12</sup> For the aim was not to convince, but rather to incite and mobilize.<sup>13</sup> Tautology, which might have been a defect in the proper exposition of ideas, was an effective tool where subliminal impact was sought, that is, where reason needed to be bypassed or sedated. It ensured that “thought is imprisoned in a cyclical movement which leads nowhere”.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars who adopted the *langue du bois* perspective delighted in stringing quotations from official Soviet texts in order to show the redundancy, illogicality, circularity, or sheer non-sense of the state-socialist “newspeak”. A notable, book-length example of this exercise is Mikhail Vaiskopf’s study of Stalin’s language.<sup>15</sup> In the long first chapter, which documents in great textual detail Stalin’s linguistic inadequacies and logical deviations, considerable space is devoted to his penchant for tautology and repetition.<sup>16</sup> The chapter concludes by asserting that Stalin’s rhetoric channeled a lethal logic of power, which precisely in its intellectual primitiveness was able to captivate the primitive mind

<sup>7</sup> Thus Marietta Chudakova contrasts the semantic vacuity of Soviet language with its “executive” prowess (*deistvennost*). See: Marietta Chudakova, *Novye raboty: 2003-2006* (Moscow: Vremia, 2007), 237-238.

<sup>8</sup> “[A]fter all, it is not a matter of knowing the world but of speaking about it properly, of constantly tailoring or adapting it to the requirements of doctrine”, Głowiński, *Nowamowa*, 39-40.

<sup>9</sup> “The element of magic plays a great role in newspeak. Words are not so much signs of reality, do not so much describe it, as create it. What is authoritatively spoken becomes real”, Głowiński, *Nowamowa*, 8. In a similar vein, Louis Martinez proposes that the objective of *langue du bois* is not to describe the real but to “decree [...] the surreal”, “Le langue de bois”, 508.

<sup>10</sup> Martinez, “Le langue de bois”, 514.

<sup>11</sup> Thus Martinez finds that “the conceptual content of words [in *langue de bois*] is more or less completely effaced behind their poetic function”, “Le langue de bois”, 509; while historian Richard Pipes observes that the function of Soviet ideology was similar to that of ritualistic mass spectacles, *Russia*, 271.

<sup>12</sup> Klemperer, *Language*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Martinez, “Le langue de bois”, 514.

<sup>14</sup> Thom, *Newspeak*, 102.

<sup>15</sup> Vaiskopf, *Pisatel*.

<sup>16</sup> Vaiskopf, *Pisatel*, 35-44.

of the Soviet mass man.<sup>17</sup> All of this is fully in accord with the totalitarian approach (a virtually unquestioned truth for the post-Soviet intelligentsia), which framed ideology as the opposite of sober rationality, an agent of manipulation, a bewitcher of uprooted multitudes, most effective where modernization and enlightenment had been slow to take hold.<sup>18</sup>

Whether tautology is seen as a strategic device of manipulation or, simply, as evidencing the “semantic primitivism” of Soviet political discourse,<sup>19</sup> it stands as a feature external to the content of ideology. This is hardly surprising, for, in the common understanding, tautology is a discursive motion that fails to add anything new to the content that has already been brought forth. My intention in the present chapter is to test this truism and, in doing so, to move beyond the *langue de bois* paradigm. My argument will be that tautology has a meaning in Soviet ideological discourse, and should not be regarded merely as an enactment of nonsense or a premeditated assault on the Soviet citizen’s rational self. I will contend that tautology has ideological content of its own, which is to say that the tautological form of statements is itself part of the ideological ‘message’ and should be interrogated as such. Obviously, I am not out to prove that every instance of tautology one could find in the Soviet press hides some deeper significance. All I wish to demonstrate is that there is intelligible reason why the articulation of Soviet ideology sometimes proceeds by means of tautology.

If we think of tautology as something formal, characterizing the expression of thought, rather than thought as such, then the only way in which it could belong to the content of ideology is if form and content intersected somehow, somewhere. More specifically, the ideological content would have to be such that it would condition its own tautological enunciation. In such case, the form would not be external to the meaning but would be part of its unfolding. This, in most general terms, is the case that I will be arguing here. To support it, I will use official texts from the Stalinist period, most of which come from the highest places in the system of discursive production. But before I take up the discussion of specific textual material, I would like to establish the theoretical framework within which this material will be evaluated.

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<sup>17</sup> Vaiskopf, *Pisatel'*, 123. Apparently this deleterious effect was not confined to the early decades of Soviet power: “The seeds of idiotism diligently sown by [Stalin] in the minds of the Soviet people, yielded an opulent crop, and the fantastic abundance of fools at today’s communist assemblies wonderfully confirms the active power of his teaching”, Vaiskopf, *Pisatel'*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> For the seminal account of the masses’ role in the rise of totalitarianism, see Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 305-364.

<sup>19</sup> N. A. Kupina, *Totalitarnyi iazyk: Slovar' i rechevye reaktskii* (Ekaterinburg: Ural'skii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1995), 10.

## II. The “Quilting Point” of Ideology

This section offers a brief exposition of one influential approach ideology, most relevant for the present discussion in that tautology has a major part in it. I have in mind theoretical work inspired, more generally, by semiotics and, more specifically, by Jacques Lacan’s linguistically-driven meta-psychology. To remember, Lacan’s psychoanalysis treats the human subject as an entity constituted through language; the unconscious is viewed as a web of signification that comes together around a privileged point, called the master signifier, which has the function of totalizing, or stitching together, the various meanings that make up the web (for that reason, Lacan also refers to it as *point de caption*, “quilting” or “anchoring” point).<sup>20</sup> Extending this model to the political field, Slavoj Žižek thinks of social discourse as a web of potentially dispersive, or certainly partial, meanings that become “fixed” by the intervention of a certain master-signifier, an ideological quilting point.<sup>21</sup> In agreement with Lacan, while also drawing on the work of political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Claude Lefort, Žižek insist that at the quilting point of ideological discourse we find not some extraordinarily meaningful word, richer than all the other words that make up the discursive fabric. Quite on the contrary: the master signifier is characterized by vacuity; it is the mark of an empty place.<sup>22</sup> It is a signifier without a signified or, more simply put, it has no (discursive) meaning; its only meaning is its equivalence with itself. And here is where tautology comes in. This quilting point – the master signifier – is also a point of tautology.<sup>23</sup> Žižek gives as examples locutions such as “Law is law”; the implication being that we owe obedience to the law not because it is rational or just, but because it is the law.<sup>24</sup> To understand why the master signifier operates under the sign of tautology we have to appreciate what

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<sup>20</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Norton, 1977), 303 and Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955-1956. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: Norton, 1993), 268-269. On the structural-ideological function of master signifiers, see Ernesto Laclau, “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?”, *Emancipations*, ed. by Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1996), 36-45; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001), 113; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 95-96, 105, 114-15; Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* (London: Verso, 2007), 119. Of course, Lacan’s theory builds on Freud’s legacy, with its rich inventory of meta-psychological concepts, such as the Oedipus complex, the threat of castration, transference, and so on. While this background is indispensable for a full appreciation of Lacan’s contributions, to discuss it here would mean to drift too far away from this chapter’s principal concerns.

<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 112-15.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 108-10; Laclau, “Empty Signifiers”, 108-110.

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 537.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 33-37, 87-88; Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 370.

might be called the ‘curse of discursivity’. As anyone who has answered endless children’s questions knows, every thing can be defined by another thing, and that other thing by still another, without end, without an absolute ground ever being reached. In the face of this predicament, the master-signifier provides the *illusion* of absolute ground. Its special status is due to its seeming exclusion from the merry-go-round in which every thing means something else (what, in the tradition of French post-structuralist thought after Lacan, has been called the *glissement*, “sliding”, of meaning).<sup>25</sup>

I mentioned that the master signifier is bereft of sense, and this simply highlights the fact that it has been set aside as an item that does not participate in equivalences with other, ordinary signifiers. They cannot define it; it can only define itself by itself, which is to say, through tautology. In Žižek’s example, the authority of the law is not grounded in some notion of justice or right; this would be tantamount to referring one signifier to another; rather, the authority of the law comes from the fact that it doesn’t have to justify itself before the subject;<sup>26</sup> it is always right, because it is the very framework in which the question of right or wrong is decided. Differently put, it is the law that defines what constitutes justice; therefore, it cannot itself be grounded in some prior notion of justice. And Žižek goes on to suggest that the same logic can be extended to such ideological keywords as “communism”, “class struggle”, “ecology”, “liberalism”, and so forth.<sup>27</sup> They cannot be defined by means of other terms because their structural role in ideological discourse is none other than to set the framework in which all other terms first acquire a stable meaning. And to say that these privileged signifiers are prone to tautology is the same as to say that, when push comes to shove, they refuse to be treated as discursive items and present themselves instead as the Real itself (in opposition to “mere words”). When we say, tautologically, “Family is family”, what we are gesturing toward is a vital and indestructible essence of the familial bond that no words can properly convey (you cannot know it discursively; you only know it when you are part of it).

This is very close to the phenomenon Roland Barthes calls “naturalization” and which he identifies as the main function of ideological myth. Ideology works by “turning culture into nature”, Barthes maintains.<sup>28</sup> And it does this by making it appear as if cultural constructs, or institutions, or customs, are not historical *artefacts* but quasi-natural facts. It makes historically contingent phenomena appear as timeless, universal essences that

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<sup>25</sup> “[T]he ‘anchoring point’ (*point de caption*) [...] stops the otherwise endless movement (*glissement*) of the signification”, Lacan, *Écrits*, 303.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 87-88.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 112-113.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974), 206. See also Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), 58-61.

are self-evidently *there*. Which is the same as saying that ideological meanings pretend not to be meanings at all, but pre-discursive realities. Barthes's own examples of tautology are pronouncements such as "Racine is Racine" and "Business is business",<sup>29</sup> which are obviously of a kind with a statement such as "Family is family". In all of these, tautology serves to stop the unfolding of discourse by suggesting that the item in question warrants no explication.

To illustrate both what I called the 'curse of discursivity' and the temptation to evade it via a tautological short circuit, let us imagine the following exchange. Someone begins by stating that family is the thing we should value most. We respond by asking why this should be so. Our interlocutor buttresses his initial declaration by arguing that our family members are the persons closest to us. To this we reply by asking why our parents or siblings should be considered the people closest to us. Here the ideologue of family values is tempted to retort bluntly, "Because they *are!*" but instead opts for a more reasoned approach and explains to us that these are our blood relations, we share the same genes, physical traits, temperament, and so on. After this, we might inquire, with a most innocent air, why we should place the highest value in our lives on factors such as genetic kinship or physical resemblances. Visibly discombobulated by now, our interlocutor tells us that DNA is, of course, not the only thing that unites us with the persons in our family; there is also the time we have spent together, the character traits and habits that have been passed from one generation to the next, the experiences we have shared, and the memories that we now have in common. Having heard him out, we might put an end to the conversation by pointing out the glaring flaw in his chain of reasoning. At the beginning, the question to be answered was why we should value family relations above all else. For this question to have real significance, that is to say, for it to be a truly open question, it must be assumed that we do not have any prior grounds to prefer our family members to other persons or beings, and that any such grounds would have to be supplied in the process of argumentation. Our ideologist violated this condition when he referred us to all the things that we *already* have in common with our kin. Instead of telling us why we *should* be tied to our family, he told us that we *are* tied to them anyway. Instead of telling us why we should place value on family, he assured us that the value has been there all along, crystallized in shared traits, experiences, and memories. But if such were indeed the case, then the question did not need to be posed in the first place (clearly, a person who would seriously confront such a question would be someone for whom familial bonds are non-existent or highly problematic; their value is what would need to be established).

One lesson to learn from this little skit is that ideology works by de-problematizing reality; it presents as givens the very things whose substance or import needs to be adju-

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<sup>29</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 96-98.

licated. Another aspect we might reflect upon is how the chain of explanations in this hypothetical scenario runs, at every turn, on the very edge of tautology. This is because the signifiers that are supposed to explicate the significance of family – “proximity”, “unity”, “kinship”, “bond”, “togetherness”, “commonality”, “sharing”, “being part of” – are already implied in the notion of family. In lieu of explaining why family should matter, our interlocutor offers near-synonyms that masquerade as facts. When he announces that family matters because it rests on kinship of blood, what he is implicitly saying is, “Family is family”, or “Kinship is kinship”. The way this is verbalized may not be tautological from a strictly linguistic point of view, but the meaning conveyed is clearly circular. The crucial point to take from this line of argument is that when someone actually comes out and says things like, “Family is family”, this only explicates a (tauto-)logic that is implicit in ideological discourse as such.

As another example, let us ask, “Why is democracy a good thing?” It is reasonable to expect an answer along the lines of, “Because everyone should be able to decide the affairs of the society to which s/he belongs”. Even at this initial step of argumentation, it is obvious that tautology lurks just beneath the surface of what is being said. For “democracy” here is being referred to something that is no more than its analytical digestion (people’s participation in the affairs of society). If we wished to continue the conversation, the next question would come as a matter of course: “But why is it a good thing for every person to have a say in how the state is governed?” Let us imagine that the answer we get is, “Because all people are equal”. We could notice, again, that the notion of equality is already implied in that of democracy, which makes this into yet another analytical move. If all the speaker wished to express is that the citizens of a country *should* be equal, then the game would go back to the beginning, and the question would become, “Why is equality a good thing?” However, if what he meant was that people are “created equal”, then we would have a clear case of the aforementioned sleight of hand: a concept masquerading as an existent. “Equality” is a concept, just like “democracy”, which makes it liable to the potentially interminable *glissement* mentioned earlier. But in the present situation, it has been presented as a quasi-natural fact: if “people are created equal”, then equality has being wherever there are human beings; it is itself something existing.

We are now in the position to fix more precisely the source of tautology from the perspective Žižek has elaborated. Tautology happens because the same item appears in two different guises – concept and fact, or potentiality and reality – which are then (surreptitiously) brought into equivalence. A thing’s ‘what’ is equated with its ‘is’. This violates Kant’s famous interdiction to not treat existence as a predicate.<sup>30</sup> Being does not add anything to the concept of a thing; but in ideology this operation proves to be

<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 566-567.

very useful. Through it, the failure to arrive at an ultimate explanation, to reach some absolute ground that would support the whole structure of ideological notions, is turned into a triumph. The tautological gesture amounts to a refusal of symbolic substitution. One cannot lose a game if one refuses to play. And this is essentially what happens when one equates an ideological master-signifier with itself: the item in question is thereby taken out of the losing game of cascading definitions and explanations. This produces the effect of a mystical surplus in the thing, as if there were something more in it than words can convey. The ideological fantasy, as Žižek understands it, is the belief in this indefinable ‘more’. The specific nature of the surplus and the affective investments it attracts vary from one ideology to the next; but its symbolic-structural basis is the same: treating being as if it were an actual quality of the thing, its ultimate, truly defining quality. In lieu of justifying the importance of family through logical argumentation, one could simply state, “Family is family”. As I suggested earlier, this implies that all it would take for us to be convinced is to *experience* family (instead of thinking and talking about it); which further implies that the essence of family exists “out there”, and we could have access to it.

### III. Possibility and Reality

Now that we have identified a logic that brings together *ideology* and *tautology*, we could proceed to ask whether the same logic is operative in official Soviet discourse. Does this discourse conform to the same dynamic of “quilting”? Does it resort to reiteration from the same structural necessity to arrest the sliding of signification? Does it end up positing essences that are supposed to be prior to ratiocination? My answer to these questions will be largely in the negative, as I will argue that the examples from official Stalinist texts exhibit an intriguingly different logic from the one discussed thus far. Having Žižek’s model in the background will allow me to outline what makes the Soviet case special, and to do so in terms that have acquired broad intellectual currency by now.

The textual snippets I offer below have the form of analytical judgments; something is predicated on the subject that is already encompassed by the semantics of the latter and, therefore, should ‘go without saying’. Therefore, these pronouncements all boil down to the tautological formula ‘X is X’. The challenge is to discern the meaning behind this redundancy of meaning or, as I put it earlier, to decipher the ‘message’ of Stalinist tautology. Assuming that these are not cases of logical confusion, illiteracy, or carelessness, the question becomes: why something that ‘goes without saying’ needs to be said?

My first exhibit is a 1930 pronouncement by Stalin himself:

(1) *Существо уклона к местному национализму состоит в стремлении обособиться и замкнуться в рамках своей национальной скорлупы [...].*<sup>31</sup>

(1) *The essence of the deviation toward local nationalism consists in the striving to stand apart and enclose oneself within the limits of one's national shell [...].*

Before taking power, Stalin was regarded as the specialist on the nationality question within the Bolshevik Central Committee. But it certainly does not take deep expertise to reach the conclusion just quoted. Tautology here is right on the lexical surface: “national” is called upon to explain “nationalism”.

The second example is from an article by the leading Party philosopher, Pavel Iudin:

(2) *Социалистическое соревнование и ударничество являются социалистическими формами труда.*<sup>32</sup>

(2) *Socialist competition and shock work are socialist forms of labor.*

Here the redundancy is even more glaring, since the same adjectival form is simply repeated. One is tempted to attribute the *faux pas* to simple negligence; but here is Iudin again, just a few pages later:

(3) *Ленин учит, что пролетарская культура является культурой классовой.*<sup>33</sup>

(3) *Lenin teaches that proletarian culture is a class culture.*

Admittedly, verbal repetition is avoided here, but the cognitive gain is negligible. It is not clear which work by Lenin is meant, but it is hardly necessary to tap sources of political wisdom for what Iudin wishes to convey. Since the proletariat is a class, it seems logically inevitable that its culture would be a class culture.

An article in the main Party journal, *Bol'shevik*, explains in the following tautological terms the then-ongoing process of collectivization:

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<sup>31</sup> Iosif V. Stalin, “Politicheskii otchet tsentral'nogo komiteta XVI s"ezdu VKP(b) 27 iulia 1930”, *Sochineniia*, Vol. 12 (Moscow: GIPL, 1949), 317.

<sup>32</sup> Pavel Iudin, “K voprosu o proletarskoi, sotsialisticheskoi kul'ture”, *Bol'shevik*, 13 (1932): 68.

<sup>33</sup> Iudin, “K voprosu”, 70.

(4) *Коллективизация мелкого крестьянского хозяйства переводит это хозяйство на принципиально иную основу – с частной на коллективную собственность на средства производства.*<sup>34</sup>

(4) *The collectivization of the small peasant economy changes principally this economy's basis: from private to collective ownership of the means of production.*

As in the first two examples, the lexical replication makes the tautological gesture manifest. The noun, “collectivization”, is a verbal derivative. It means nothing other than “to make collective”. The sentence thus ends up saying that making collective is, or consists in, making collective.

The following statement comes from another authoritative source, an academic volume on the history of Soviet economy:

(5) *Передовые люди нашей страны задают тон во всех областях жизни советского народа.*<sup>35</sup>

(5) *The leading people of our country set the tone in all spheres of the Soviet people's life.*

In this instance, there is no verbal redundancy, but the duplication of meaning is still plain as day. The expression “to set the tone” does no more than present in the form of action what is already expressed by the adjective “leading” (*peredovye*). We are given to understand that the country's leading people are those representatives of the Soviet people who... lead.

A more elaborate version of this proposition is the following excerpt from a 1930 editorial in *Bol'shevik*:

(6) *Коммунист на производстве, на заводе, шахте, промысле, строительстве – боец передового участка фронта социалистического наступления, – и он должен являться подлинным вожаком масс, действующим в первую очередь показом и примером подлинно-социалистического отношения к труду.*<sup>36</sup>

(6) *The communist in production, in the factory, mine, industry, construction, is a fighter of the vanguard of the socialist offensive, and he ought to be a true leader of the masses, acting, in the first place, through the demonstration and example of a truly socialist attitude toward labor.*

<sup>34</sup> I. Anchishkin *et al.*, “O fundamente sotsialisticheskoi ekonomiki”, *Bol'shevik*, 3 (1932), 25.

<sup>35</sup> *Razvitie sovetskoj ekonomiki*, eds. by A. A. Arutianian and Boris L. Markus (Moscow: GSEI, 1940), 424.

<sup>36</sup> “Na poroge tret'ego goda piatiletki”, *Bol'shevik*, 15-16 (1930): 13.

Again, by ideological default, “communist” is synonymous with “a member of the vanguard”, that is, the most advanced part of the working class. Therefore, it is *prima facie* redundant to demand that he should be the leader of the masses or to state that he is at the head of the “socialist offensive”.

Such pronouncements are quite common in the ideological-discursive corpus of Stalinism. Many more can be adduced at will. But the ones I have given so far should suffice to furnish us with an initial ‘feel’ for the semantics that interests me. I say ‘feel’, because I realize that this semantics is in no way immediately legible. It is clear that in all the statements quoted we are dealing with tautological meaning. But it is far from clear what is the meaning of that meaning, that is to say, the reason why the ideological message assumes the redundant form that it does. Pretty much each of the above examples, if taken in isolation, as pure utterance, with no further context, is bound to remain enigmatic. After all, we are asking about the sense of nonsense, and it is probably naïve to expect that it would simply float up from the latter.

The last of our examples (6), as the most elaborate of them all, gives us somewhat ampler foothold for interpretation. Apart from being an exercise in circular meaning, it exhibits what Katerina Clark once termed “modal schizophrenia”.<sup>37</sup> Part of the sentence is in the declarative mode, while the other part is in the imperative. It begins by telling us what the communist is, before proceeding to stipulate what he should be. This only twists further a logic that has been twisted into a knot by tautology. If someone is already acting as a “fighter of the vanguard” (in factories, mines, and so on), what could be the point of insisting that “he ought to be a true leader of the masses”? We may well have an instance of confusion here, but it is a symptomatic confusion, which may give us a clue as to tautology’s underlying cause. As I have shown elsewhere, Stalinist discourse is prone to collapsing empirical and principled generalizations, making it impossible for the reader to determine whether an actual or potential-theoretical state of affairs is meant.<sup>38</sup> Differently put, it is often impossible to say whether a general rule is being stated or an existing situation is being described. This is the case in the example before us: the beginning of the sentence gives the impression that the generalization is over actual communists working in actual factories, mines, and construction sites. But the switch to the imperative mode suggests that the author might have intended to state what a communist is *supposed to be*, that is, to give a normative definition. The semantic confusion results, apparently, from the author’s inability to sustain one of the two modes: either ‘is’ or ‘supposed to be’.

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<sup>37</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomfield, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 39-42.

<sup>38</sup> Petre Petrov, “The Soviet Gnostic (On the Peculiarity of Generic Phenomena in Stalinist Officialese)”, *SEEJ*, 4 (2013): 604-626.

I would like to suggest that behind the tautological formula ‘X is X’ in Stalinist discourse lies the assertion ‘X is the X it is supposed to be’, or, in a somewhat extended form: ‘X in reality is the same as X in theory’. As Party speeches infallibly pointed out, positive developments in reality were a direct consequence of official policy, itself guided by Marxist-Leninist wisdom.<sup>39</sup> Thus, industrialization is a realization of the policy of industrialization; the struggle against fractions is an implementation of the Party line against fractionalism; and so forth. It goes without saying that the rule of the Party depends for its legitimation on showing that the Word whose custodian it is, Marxism-Leninism, is effective. This entails showing that slogans and directives, which, of course, respond to ‘objective tendencies’, become true historical factors, actively shaping reality, giving rise to facts. As one illustration, consider this passage from the canonical *Short Course of the History of CPSU*:

(7) *Следуя директивам XV съезда партии, партия перешла в решительное наступление против кулачества. В своем наступлении партия осуществляла лозунг: опираясь прочно на бедноту и укрепляя союз с середняком, повести решительную борьбу против кулачества.*<sup>40</sup>

(7) *Following the directives of the Fifteenth Party Congress, the Party went into a decisive offensive against the kulak class. In its offensive, the Party was realizing the slogan: to wage a decisive battle against the kulak class by firmly leaning on the poor peasants and strengthening its union with the middle peasants.*

If we had to reduce this passage to its semantic gist, we would end up with the proposition that the Party fought against the kulak class by following the Party directives to fight against the kulak class. Reality is no more than the realization of a slogan (*partii osushchestviala slogan*).

Here is another passage from the *Short Course*, in which Stalin’s stance on “building socialism in one country” is explained:

(8) *Да, отвечала партия, социалистическое хозяйство можно и нужно построить в нашей стране, ибо у нас есть все необходимое для того, чтобы построить социалистическое хозяйство, построить полное социалистическое общество.*<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> “These successes were a direct consequence of the politics of reconstruction, implemented most insistently by the party and government”, *Kratkii kurs*, 320.

<sup>40</sup> *Istoriia Vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov)*. *Kratkii kurs* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1938), 279.

<sup>41</sup> *Kratkii kurs*, 260.

(8) *Yes, answered the Party, the socialist economy could and should be built in our country, for we have all that is necessary in order to build the socialist economy, to build a full socialist society.*

The tautology of this passage is blatant: it is possible to build socialism because we have everything that makes this possible. The statement, most likely penned by Stalin himself, allows us to trace the tautological effect to its ideological source. On one hand, there are the ‘objective conditions’ that make the building of socialism possible. The Party, having taken these into account, charts a course toward the “building of socialism in one country”. The actual work of building socialism is the realization of the slogan, which is nothing other than the bringing-to-consciousness of the existing ‘objective conditions’. The tautology results from having one and the same thing, ‘socialism’, in two modes, which are distinguished only to be identified. Socialism is first a real possibility, before becoming an actual project. The word of Stalin (the theory of “socialism in one country”) mediates between the two: the actual work of building socialism is undertaken because the Leader has become cognizant of the ‘objective conditions’ and made them the basis of policy. In this way, socialism as an objective possibility gives rise to socialism as a reality.

Other privileged items of Stalinist ideological discourse are similarly inscribed on two levels, as both empirical reality and the essential tendency that the said reality obeys. For instance, one could distinguish between collectivization as a postulate-slogan and collectivization as an actual process of bringing individual peasant farmsteads into kolkhoz collectives. If one then wishes to say that the postulate-slogan has become a true historical factor and is actively shaping reality, one would be saying, essentially, that collectivization collectivizes the countryside. And this is just what is stated in (4). In a similar fashion, one could distinguish between the Party as a notional-theoretical entity (“the vanguard of the working class”; P1) and the Party as an actual body of men currently governing the Soviet Union (P2). Then it would not be wholly redundant to assert that the Party in its current actions (P2) adheres to what the Party, according to haloed Leninist principles, is supposed to be (P1). This is exactly the logic that informs the following passage:

(9) *Неуклонно осуществляя решения XIX съезда партии, укрепляя единство и боеспособность своих рядов, всемерно развивая внутрипартийную демократию, самокритику и в особенности критику снизу, партия последовательно руководствуется выработанными Лениным нормами партийной жизни и принципами партийного руководства.<sup>42</sup>*

<sup>42</sup> “Velikii prodolzhatel’ dela Lenina”, *Ogonek*, 51 (1954): 2.

(9) *Unwaveringly realizing the decisions of the XIX Party Congress, strengthening the unity and fighting readiness of its ranks, developing in an all-sided manner the inner-party democracy, self-criticism, and, especially, criticism from below, the Party consistently guides itself by the norms of party life and the principle of party leadership worked out by Lenin.*

As we can see, the Party, in its current life, does nothing other than adhere to the “norms of Party life”, to principles of what the Party is supposed to be. In short, the Party (P2) is being the Party (P1). It is the very same logic that we find in (5) (the leading people are being leading people) and (6) (communists are being communists). Iudin’s two pronouncements admit of analogous interpretation: in (2), socialist competition and shock work, as real practices, are asserted to be materializing the essence of socialism; while in (3), the actuality of proletarian culture is seen as adhering to the universal principle that social class determines culture.

#### IV. Tauto-logics

How is this different from the general account of ideology proposed by Žižek? The difference is, certainly, not immediately obvious. After all, we are dealing in both cases with the formula ‘X is X’. Still, my claim is that the meaning of this equivalence, the meaning of tautology, is not the same. In this section I will try to explicate what makes the Soviet-Stalinist ‘X is X’ a special case of ideological tauto-logic.

Let us remind ourselves of what is intended when one says, ‘Family is family’. Or – to take the master signifier of anti-Semitic ideology – ‘A Jew is a Jew’, or ‘A Jew will always be a Jew’.<sup>43</sup> As I pointed out earlier, this is meant to suggest that the entity in question is equal to itself, that is its own definition. And, by the same token, the tautology ends up disavowing the fact that the Jew, or the family, is a construct, something contingent, conditioned, historical. The formula, ‘A Jew is a Jew’, claims a *pre-discursive* knowledge of the world. You can paraphrase it as: ‘Say whatever you will, but a Jew is a Jew’. It is something prior to reflection; you can try to explain it as much as you want, but *it is what it is*; a Jew is a Jew! Something very different is intended by the analytical distillate of (6), ‘A communist is a communist’. Here we are dealing with what I would call *post-discursive embodiment*. The communist is first an ideological concept, a word, a mere item of discourse, and *then* this discursive figment is found embodied in reality: “Look, there he is, in factories, mine shafts, construction sites!” The ideological point being made is that the communist in reality acts exactly in accordance with the concept of a

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 106-107.

communist; he is just what he is doctrinally supposed to be. This would not apply to the family or the Jew. It would not make sense to say that the family is what it is supposed to be. And the reason for this is that in bourgeois ideology the family is not posited first as *a concept*, before we need to ascertain whether its actual existence is the same as what the concept presupposes. Quite on the contrary: in the ideological operation that Žižek has in mind, the family, or the Jew, is taken as a quasi-natural fact, a pre-conceptual kernel of the real to which no words could do justice. (To remember, the tautological equivalence of the master signifier with itself was tantamount to its exclusion from the unprofitable game of defining one thing by means of another, and so on.)

By the very same token, the logic behind the Soviet examples is different from what Barthes means by “naturalization”. To “naturalize” a concept is to pretend that it is not a concept in the first place, but rather a self-evident fact of life, an item of common sense. Barthes’s famous exhibit is the cover of the journal *Paris Match*, with a photograph of a black boy saluting the French flag. According to Barthes, the image gives body to the concept of “French imperialism”; but in so doing, it effaces precisely its notional, ‘fabricated’, character. The concept is “made absent by this literal sense (*The French Empire? It’s just a fact: look at this good Negro who salutes like one of our own boys*)”.<sup>44</sup>

But in the Stalinist locutions we have before us a different script is being played out: the concept is naturalized *as concept*. Something is asserted to have reality not because it *precedes* the processing of reality through mind and language. Rather, it is real in the sense that, having passed through that processing, it has gone out into the world and become an object of experience. The tendency to evade the dimension of discourse, which Barthes and Žižek identify with the ideological as such, is not in evidence here. This ideological speech does not try to mask the fact that it is speech. On the contrary, it highlights the discursive commerce in concepts, principles, and slogans. But having done this, it insists on showing that these are not mere concepts, principles, and slogans, but, as Stalinist writers were fond of putting it, “have become life” (*stalis’ zbizniu, voplotilis’ v zhizn*). Since, as we saw in (8), the Party Word mediates between possibility and reality, it does not efface itself as a representation (the way the photograph of the adolescent French patriot does). In order for this legitimacy-conferring mediation to remain in view, an ideologeme must draw attention to itself as an ideologeme. This is the reason why so often in Soviet discourse statements that apparently describe factual happenings have the form of principled (nomic) generalizations.<sup>45</sup> Is (6) describing an actual process currently under way or explaining what collectivization is in principle? It is difficult to decide because the two options that confront us are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123.

<sup>45</sup> For further discussion, see Petrov, “Soviet Gnostic”.

The ambiguity between fact and law is not a random effect. It proceeds from the need to demonstrate, even on the level of linguistic form, that the ideologeme can ‘become life’.

In Žižek’s general account of ideology, the tautological gesture produces the illusion of a non-discursive surplus, as if behind the word “Jew” and all the definitions one may supply for it, there was a thing-like essence, “Jewishness” (analogously, behind the notion of empire, Barthes identifies the phantasmic essence “imperiality”).<sup>46</sup> Tautology in official Soviet discourse points to a different kind of surplus. It is an excess in the signifier as such, as if the word possessed a quasi-magical power by virtue of being an ideological word. Clearly, we are dealing with an ideology that does not conceal but foregrounds its ideological nature, what one might call its “ideologicity”. This is the name which we might give to the surplus quality implied by the Stalinist version of ‘X is X’. The ideologicity of a thing is not some pre-discursive facticity. Rather, it is that which makes each empirical particular behave in a law-like manner, that is, fully in accord with its doctrinal notion. While ideology according to Barthes evacuates history, ideology according to Stalin makes historical happening indistinguishable from the discursive unfolding of a concept; empirical cause-effect relations are hard to tell apart from purely (ideo-)logical deductions. If there is a compulsion to repeat in Stalinist discourse, it is because one and the same thing has to be posited twice: once as a principle, in its possibility, or ideality, and the second time as the empirical manifestation of that same principle, its *hic-et-nunc* reality. The ‘message’ of Stalinist tautology is that things are what they are supposed to be, what is implied in their ideological concept. Kulaks necessarily rise against Soviet power, because the notion of kulak is that of a class enemy; while shock workers – also necessarily – care about socialist property, because shock work follows from the idea of unexploited labor, which itself follows from the notion of socialism.<sup>47</sup> In other words, all that is happening in the world, all that can ever happen, is the realm of the ideal duplicating itself in the real, as the real.

<sup>46</sup> “[At] first, ‘Jew’ appears as a signifier connoting a cluster of supposedly ‘effective’ properties (intriguing spirit, greedy for gain, and so on), but this is not yet anti-Semitism proper. To achieve that, we must invert the relation and say: they are like that (greedy, intriguing...) because they are Jews. This inversion seems at first sight purely tautological – we could retort: of course it is so, because ‘Jewish’ means precisely greedy, intriguing, dirty... But this appearance of tautology is false: ‘Jew’ in ‘because they are Jews’ does not connote a series of effective properties, it refers again to that unattainable X, to what is ‘in Jew more than Jew’ and what Nazism tried so desperately to seize, measure, change into a positive property enabling us to identify Jews in an objective-scientific way. The ‘rigid designator’ aims, then, at that impossible-real kernel, at what is ‘in an object more than the object’, at this surplus produced by the signifying operation”, Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> “The kolkhoz farmer, having become a shock-worker, cannot be indifferent to the shortcomings in his brigade, in the kolkhoz. Shock work, by its very essence, eliminates this indifference inherited from the fragmented private-farm ownership. It demands of the shock-worker energetic struggle with the shortcomings in the kolkhoz”, N. Rubinshtein, “Udarnichestvo v kolkhozakh”, *Bol’shevik* 15-16 [1933]: 63.