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Zupančič, Alenka, Disavowal. *Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024, 133pp., ISBN-13: 978–1–5095–6119–3*

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Župančič review

In recent decades, a significant movement has emerged within continental philosophy that seeks to reassert the Enlightenment project after the harsh critiques it endured throughout the twentieth century.[1] The reasons for this philosophical "resurrection" are not merely immanent to the development of thought, but also deeply connected to radical transformations in our socio-political reality: the rise of fake news, the resurgence of far-right movements globally, the disruptive advancement of AI, and most pressingly, the condition of *polycrisis* — a convergence of ecological, political, economic, and humanitarian crises.

What is striking about this situation is the widespread absence of meaningful response: people continue to live, think, and act as if nothing has happened. The question arises: why?

[1] See, for example, Israel, Jonathan I. A *Revolution of the Mind : Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*. Princeton Univ. Press, 2010. Brassier, Ray. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 and Garcés, Marina. *New Radical Enlightenment*. Translated by Clara Heard, Verso, 2024.

Attempts to pose this question have already surfaced in the history of philosophy. One recalls Peter Sloterdijk's now-classic *Critique of Cynical Reason* (originally published in 1983), where he famously defines modern cynical reason as "enlightened false consciousness" (*aufgeklärtes falsches Bewusstsein*).[2] While Župančič's new book *Disavowal* shares some affinities with Sloterdijk's analysis — both try to answer the same question — her approach differs in significant ways.

As Župančič argues in the opening pages of her book, the Enlightenment project fell into crisis because it was narrowly focused on the promotion of knowledge and the battle against ignorance and belief (which she, notably, differs from religious faith). The assumption that knowledge can dispel falsehoods and guide correct action, Župančič suggests, is itself deeply flawed. Knowledge does not necessarily oppose or dispel false beliefs; in many cases, it can even reinforce them.

This dynamic is central to Župančič's concept of disavowal. Disavowal acknowledges reality on a cognitive level — yet acts as if it were untrue. I *consciously* know that something is the case, but continue to *unconsciously* believe the opposite. Borrowing the formula from Italian psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, Župančič describes this logic as "I know very well, but nevertheless…".[3] Although she largely draws on Mannoni's work, Župančič emphasizes that the mechanisms of disavowal have, since the publication of his article in 1969, radically changed. Disavowal is no longer confined to the psyche of individuals but has become embedded in political and social structures.[4]

One of the main distinctions Župančič makes is between disavowal (Verleugnung) and denial (Verneinung). The difference lies primarily in their relation to knowledge. While denial negates reality, disavowal, by contrast, acknowledges it while acting as if it were not the case.

Župančič notes that although disavowal and denial are different mechanisms, they are not completely opposed. She deconstructs the difference between them, suggesting that disavowal is always lying at the heart of denial.

Take, for example, climate change: we can deny it only because we disavow the underlying trauma of capitalism. One could argue that today, the majority of people recognize that the problem is capitalism. Even those who support right-wing populists are often driven

[2] Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Translated by Michael Eldred, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

[3] Manoni, Octave. *'I Know Well, but All the Same …'*, in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. Molly Anne Rotenberg, Dennis Foster and Slavoj Žižek. Duke University Press, 2003.

[4] Zupančič, Alenka. *Disavowal*. Polity Press, 2024. P. 3–4.

by a hatred of elites, a distrust of (liberal) democracy — where large corporations and capital dominate — and skepticism toward science, especially when it is funded by the private sector, which reinforces their disbelief in the system. Therefore, both "enlightened" subjects, who are fully aware of climate change but continue living their lives as before, and those who actively deny its existence, are engaged in a shared operation of disavowal.

Toward the end of her book, Župančič notes that modes of denial and disavowal are distributed along class lines. Disavowal is more characteristic of the "enlightened" and affluent population, while denial appears more frequently among the economically disadvantaged.

One can trace at this point a clear continuity across Župančič's works. The distinction between denial and disavowal resonates with her earlier writing, where she outlines the difference between active and passive nihilism. As she points out in one of her early works, "active nihilism could be described as a fight against semblance, as an attitude of exposing and unmasking the 'illusions,' 'lies,' and imaginary formations *in the name of the Real.*"[5] This is precisely what is at stake in denial, which is represented in the modern political reality by different sorts of conspiracy movements, and to which she dedicated the last chapter of her book. Moreover, just as denial and disavowal are not simply opposed, passive and active nihilism are also deeply interconnected.[6]

This brings us to Župančič's central and most difficult question in the entire work: How can we resist or overcome disavowal? Once inside its logic, it seems inescapable. First, because disavowal functions as a perversion rather than a neurosis, which means that it is not experienced as a problem.[7] And second, because it replicates itself: even when we know what disavowal is and how it works, we can go on disavowing this knowledge itself—"I know very well that I know very well, but..."[8]

Župančič's answer is intentionally cryptic, multidimensional, and perhaps necessarily unsatisfying. But two underlying lines of thought can be identified, albeit implicitly.

On the one hand, because disavowal is not merely psychological but fundamentally political and social, it requires structural change — namely, the transformation of the conditions (capitalism) that produce trauma and undermine belief in (scientific) knowledge.

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[5] Zupančič, Alenka. *The Shortest Shadow : Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two / Alenka Zupančič.* Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 2003. P. 63.

[6] Ibd. P. 67.

[7] Zupančič, Alenka. *Disavowal.* P. 25.

[8] Ibd. P. 77.

On the other hand, change must also occur at the level of the subject. Here, Župančič recalls Freud's famous formula: "Wo es war, soll ich werden." But she gives this apparently obvious statement an unexpected twist. It does not mean that we must bring our "dark" unconscious beliefs into the light of subjectivity or reason. On the contrary, we must dive into the deep, dark absence or void that is the subject itself. As she puts it:

> The end of analysis implies something like shifting this paralyzing dimension of non-being into a gear, transforming it into a movement, a drive of what is. It allows for the non-being to become what it is and what it always has been — namely, the void at the core of being or substance, and, as such, its subject.[9]

This raises many questions. One can, of course, ask: What does this mean in practical (or even clinical) terms? And how are these two levels — subjective and structural — interconnected? One particularly tempting but unaddressed question in Župančič's book concerns the difference between belief and (religious) faith. What, precisely, is the distinction between them? Is religious faith unrelated to knowledge, while belief is produced and sustained by it? And what role does faith play in cognition and political action?

Perhaps this is the very kind of questioning Župančič invites. Her theory is not a fully consistent system, but one full of tensions, paradoxes, and gaps. Yet these do not signal a failure. On the contrary, they invite us to continue thinking, to push beyond the logic of disavowal — not by "sublating" (aufheben) it, but by dwelling within its contradictions, gaps, and rifts, and from there, seeking new ways to think and act.

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[9] Ibd. P. 67.