



Tyrannical Control and the Big Other in Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*

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Abstract

Harrison Bergeron's ideological society has been analyzed from various perspectives, predominantly focusing on its political atmosphere. However, researchers often overlook the role of the government as the Big Other in shaping this society. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's theory of the big Other, this study aims to analyze the political context of Kurt Vonnegut's dystopian short story, illustrating how authorities shape the lives and personalities of ideological subjects. In this story, everybody is made equal by the big Other, and the laws represented by Handicapper General have handicapped characters such as George and Harrison, due to their above-average intelligence and other attributes deemed dangerous. Therefore, in the first step, this paper explores the role of the big Other, arguing that the Handicapper has taken control of the subjects' minds and actions. Then, it establishes that laws for characters such as George and Hazel are not alienating but disalienating, in line with Žižek's idea regarding the law's role. In the final section of the paper, the focus turns to Harrison's Act against the big Other. Through Žižek's conceptual framework of the Act, the last section scrutinizes Harrison's rebellion as the only means for the subject to break free from the Symbolic order. By Act, he exposes the flaws and contradictions in the oppressive social system. Through the process of conducting this analysis, we can gain valuable insights into understanding the complex relationship between power and ideology in dystopian societies. This research highlights the need to critically examine the mechanisms wielded by governing bodies to assert dominance over ordinary people.

Keywords: Big Other, Dystopian Society, Equality, Law, Žižek, Act

Introduction

Ideology is paramount to understanding what happens around us. Therefore, ideology disseminated at all levels of society aligns with government control, the foundation of a utopian society. One of the most critical issues in contemporary philosophical debates is the close correlation between the notion of the big Other and those in authority. It is one of the significant concepts that Žižek, as the leading critic of this study, discusses in his books and interviews, which are dominated by a discussion of the

concept with political issues. Zizek's theorization of the big Other is viewed as the way ideological subjects experience and structure desire since it is the big Other who makes decisions about our desire (Zizek, 1994, p. 126).

Zizek was a Lacanian philosopher at heart and incorporated Lacan's ideas into his theory (Butler, 2015, p. 205). Lacan and Zizek both believe that there is no big Other who stands out from the crowd. In other words, the big Other does not exist (Zizek, 1989, p. 77). Put differently, our desires have no structuring principle.

Vonnegut depicts a utopian society in which the government enforces strict equality among all citizens by handicapping those with exceptional abilities or qualities. "THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way" (Vonnegut, 2009, p.11). However, this equality came at a substantial cost to society. "All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General" (ibid). Therefore, to be comparable to other people in society, anyone who is better than others, in terms of intelligence, strength, and beauty, must wear handicaps. On the other hand, the government's agent, the Handicapper General, constantly monitors people to prevent any mistakes. As a result, they are not able to think critically because the government controls their actions and minds.

What is of the utmost importance here is that George and Hazel, the couple who have been handicapped to be average in every way, do not question the strict rules. Likewise, George represents the government in their absence, as when he says, "What will happen to society if people start cheating on laws?" in reply to Hazel's request regarding taking the handicaps out for a while" (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 12). Before this, he also warns Hazel about the consequences of breaking the law. "Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I take out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain" (ibid). Despite his current situation, George believes that he is doing his duty as a citizen.

Having perused Zizek's *Sublime Object of Ideology*, which covers prominent features of the big Other, one could be surprised at how thoroughly it is discussed. A wide range of theories have been developed regarding the notion of the Other or the big Other, beginning with those of Jacques Lacan, a French philosopher. Zizek continued to pursue and expand Lacan's ideas to discern how the Other is different from the big Other (Butler, 2015, p. 206). In his 1955 seminar, in *The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan shed light upon the difference between the "small other" and the "big Other," making the concept even more difficult to understand.

Literature Review

Political issues have always been significant in studying Kurt Vonnegut's works. Political atmosphere in Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* has, since its publication in

1961, been interpreted according to social issues such as equality and freedom (Joodaki & Mahdiyani, 2013; Latiff & Feisal, 2020).

Moreover, the work has a large body of literature. Studies such as *Equality versus Freedom in "Harrison Bergeron"* by Kurt Vonnegut: A Study of Dystopian Setting, written by Mahdiyani and Joodaki in 2013, and *The Poverty of Equality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Harrison Bergeron*, composed by Abdul Latiff and Suraiya Feisal have perused the political atmosphere contending how concepts such as freedom and equality are used by those in power to control society.

The study associated with the current research paper is Joodaki and Madiyani's *Equality versus Freedom in "Harrison Bergeron"* by Kurt Vonnegut: A Study of Dystopian Setting which considers the ideological subjects in the idealistic society of the story as "a clump of soulless, robot-like creatures" since master-signifiers such as equality are used by those in power to both deprive people of their rights and create a monological setting (Joodaki & Mahdiyani, 2013, p. 73).

Methodology

While the dystopian society of the short story, *Harrison Bergeron*, has been under thorough investigation in different ways, as in the above-cited studies, it appears far too little attention has been paid to the role of those in power, analyzing them through the lens of the big Other; therefore, the current study attempts to scrutinize the story in light of Zizek's theory of the big Other. In other words, the researchers, by utilizing Zizek's view of the big Other, aim to examine the role of the government as the big Other of society. To achieve equality, the big Other not only enforces strict laws but also controls the minds and actions of its subjects. Three objectives are served by this paper: first, it attempts to analyze *Harrison Bergeron's* ideological society, which controls every single action of the subjects. The second section will touch upon the notion of law. It will shed light on both how it forces everybody to be equal and how it can lead to the disalienation of subjects. Toward the end of the paper, the concept of "Act" is used to demonstrate how an ideological subject acts against the big Other.

Government Control and Fake Utopian Society

According to Zizek (1989), subjects living in a utopian society assume that the big Other can provide them with a certain answer since the big Other is conceived to be, "consistent, complete because its very formation is an appeal to the Other that contains its meaning" (p. 89). It is evident from George and Hazel's conversations that they are both immersed in the Handicapper General's rules. It seems Hazel is dreaming of being a totalitarian leader after hearing the loud noise. "If I was Diana Moon Clampers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday—just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion" (Vonnegut,

2009, p. 11).

For Žižek, the big Other of each ideological society is not a self-sustaining entity, which means it exists as long as the ideological subject exists (Žižek 1989, p. 163). This is what occurs with *Harrison Bergeron*. The big Other, the H.G. in this case, exists because of ideological subjects such as George and Hazel. Their actions are in accordance with the big Other's commands. As an example, in the part when Hazel asks George to rest, George says, "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me" (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 12).

The case in point is the fact that not only the Handicapper General controls the minds and actions of the ideological subjects in society, thus robbing them of their freedom but also through the fantasy of equality makes them believe what they tolerate will enhance their future. This is particularly true for Žižek's fantasy construction in that he defines it as "the very screen that separates desire from drive": "In other words, fantasy provides a rationale for the inherent deadlock of desire" (Žižek, 1997, p. 43). Inherently lacking, the Handicapper General provides ideological subjects with equality. This makes the subjects enjoy the lack of anxiety since they are already convinced there are no fundamental structural problems. Since the big Other for George and Hazel is seen as a flawless entity, their beliefs are also shaped by it. The point is that they will not oppose constitutional amendments or speak out against them. In the scene in which Hazel asks George to remove the handicaps for a while, George avers that "Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain" (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 12).

On the other hand, the big Other is believed to possess a totality that can provide a definite answer. Put differently, the big Other is perceived as meaningful by ideological subjects in a society where everyone is equal. This is also what Žižek discusses about the consistency of the big Other in ideological subjects' eyes. Moreover, as Farrell (2009) posits, George "has trained himself not to think much at all" which shows how the figure of the big Other is of high value for both George and Hazel to the extent that George is ready to tolerate the heavy handicaps all day and accepts it as a part of himself (p.184). In this way, the big Other, who is supposed to contain meaning, conveys his sublime position in society. Conversely, George and Hazel substantiate the existence of a totalized big Other since their words and actions are consistent with that of the Handicapper General.

Another facet of Žižek's theory of the big Other is the interaction between the big Other and the ideological subject; that is, the subject needs the big Other as an entity to survive, which certainly comes in handy in vivifying George and Hazel's inclination towards being bound by those in authority. George, for instance, feels liberated by burdening himself with handicaps and obeying HG's commands. Accordingly, both George and Hazel as the main characters of the story do not consider being bound by the big Other a disadvantage. In fact, through the interplay of George and Hazel as ideological subjects

and Handicapper General as the big Other of the story, H.G provides them with authentic freedom, although it is unfreedom in the guise of freedom.

And yet it is critical to note that the only possible way for the big Other to sustain itself and be kept alive in the minds of ideological subjects is "fantasy construction" (Zizek, 1989, p. 128). It is the fantasy that allows the subject to create the possibility of reality (Zizek, 1989, p. 45). Fantasy plays a vital role since the big Other is only sustained by fantasy. In the story, we can imply that through the fantasy of equality, people are lured into believing that being handicapped is the best way to achieve equality and the big Other is doing the right thing.

Consequently, George and Hazel's proclivity to bear hardships in their dystopian society originates from fantasy construction. This serves both as a means of disengaging from the unknown world of questions and as a defense mechanism for those in authority to survive. They do not often question the big Other as much, although there are instances in the narrative where they do, such as when George considers the notion that because the ballerinas are so appealing, they should not be disabled while performing on stage. But a loud noise distracts him, and he quickly forgets what he was thinking.

Law and Disalienation

Law plays a crucial role in the quotidian existence of ideological subjects. At the onset of the story, through the notion of law, Vonnegut addresses one of the main themes of the story. Due to the strict enforcement of laws, they lose their sense of individuality and are also limited in their daily interactions. "All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution" (Vonnegut, 2009, p.11). These laws are so strict that individuality is suppressed. Furthermore, people are hesitant to express their true feelings or speak out against the government. The media is also controlled by the government to prevent anyone from being exposed to anything that might make them feel superior or inferior.

Law "functions in so far as its subjects are deceived, in so far as they experience law's authority as "authentic and eternal" and overlook "the truth about the usurpation" (Zizek, 1991, p. 204). This is what the Handicapper General does to make people abide by laws. George and Hazel are both deceived into doing what is imposed on them. To deceive people, the government uses different means, such as the media. As a result of fantasy construction, ideological subjects also believe they must accept the current situation for equality to be achieved. Furthermore, Zizek believes the key thing for the big Other is hiding the truth behind the law. This means the ideology behind the rules they impose must be kept hidden from ideological subjects (Zizek, 1991, pp. 45–83).

This is precisely what H.G. does through the fantasy of equality or master signifiers such as communism. It is through fantasy construction that they conceal the inconsistency

of the big Other. In addition, they act as though the laws are ideal for people such as George. Therefore, it can be implied that political regimes can be sustained when they provide ideological subjects with a sense that they are free and believe that what and whom they obey are authentic (Zizek, 1991, 204). As far as George and Hazel are concerned, they have no doubts about the authenticity of the Handicapper General's rules. However, if they want to question them, they will be interrupted by radio-transmitted noises aimed at eradicating critical thinking in society.

On the other hand, Zizek unlike many other critics believes that the law is not always to blame for alienation in society. He touches upon the fact that submission to the law of the big Other is not only liberating but also prevents the subject from total alienation (Zizek, 1991, p. 265). He also notes that "Law is here conceived as an agency of —disalienation and —liberation: it opens our access to desire by enabling us to disengage ourselves from the rule of the Other's whim" (p.265).

George and Hazel are no exceptions. The more they embrace society's governing rules and take communism as a primary signifier, the more comfortable they will become with their condition. In addition, they will feel less alienated. Moreover, when Hazel asks George to remove handicaps, he immediately refers to the "Dark Ages" (Vonnegut, 2009, p.12), when there were no such strict rules and prohibitions. He refers to the time when there was no master signifier such as communism or equality to stop the free-floating signifiers; thus, according to George, everything was chaotic at that time, with "everybody competing against everybody else" (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 12). Thus, Law's intervention is not alienating but disalienating for both George and Hazel. Moreover, when there is no prohibition, there would be no primary signifier to stop the flux of signifiers, which leads to total alienation of the subject since there is no spot in which the flux of signifiers could be stopped (Zizek, 1989, p. 96).

In light of the above propositions, laws do not always cause alienation in an ideological society. Conversely, they can help subjects escape the Other's whims. The absence of any symbolically binding mandate is most oppressive for the individual since the individual is left to the whims of the maternal superego, who orders them to Enjoy!

Acting against the Law

Despite catastrophic consequences, acting against the law is paramount for ideological subjects, who cannot bear political oppression in an ideological society. The scene in which Harrison appears in the center of the studio, taking out all of his handicaps, plays a significant role at the end of the story.

Zizek says laws always contain crime. In other words, "At the beginning' of the law, there is a certain 'outlaw', a certain Real of violence, which coincides with the act itself of the establishment of the reign of law (Zizek, 1991, p. 204). This is what happens

in *Harrison Bergeron*. The strict laws cause Harrison to break free from his restraints. "I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" (Vonnegut, 2009, p.13). Put differently, since the laws are too harsh, Harrison renounces all laws and removes his handicaps. "Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall" (p.13).

Additionally, Act is the only way for the ideological subject to break free from the Public Symbolic Law (Zizek, 2000, p. 8). In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2011) written by Butler, Laclau, and Zizek, they define "Act" as when the ideological subject "accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be 'impossible', yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its possibility" (p. 121). Thus, breaking with the existing symbolic order can only be accomplished through Act.

In the story, Harrison, only 14 years old, is prepared to sacrifice himself to change the world for the better. He wants to enlighten others about the fact that people should not easily accept what has been imposed on them. The protagonist of the story feels oppressed more than the others since "Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wears a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 12). When a dance show is televised, both the ballerinas and the musicians perform with their weights. Then, Harrison appears in the scene and takes off on his own. One of the ballerina's handicaps aids Harrison in Acting against Diana Moon Glampers. This is the beginning point for Harrison to break free from the fetters of the authorities. "Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him, expecting to die" (Vonnegut, 2009, p.13). In fact, by removing his handicaps, he prepares the ground for acting against the law.

His entrance into the studio is accompanied by artists kneeling in front of him, which, according to Zizek, is called "act before act". Through this, the subject "structures his perception of the world in advance in a way that opens the space for his intervention" (Zizek, 1989, p. 247). Prior to his main act, he commits a political act by announcing himself as Emperor. Rex Butler (2015) also maintains that an Act "is made without strategic calculations or consideration of outcomes" which is what goes on in this story (p.1). Without considering the disastrous consequences of his Act against the government, Harrison renounces all enforced laws. This is the reason why the government is afraid of him. "If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not—I repeat, do not—try to reason with him" (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 12). The announcer also says that he "should be regarded as extremely dangerous" (ibid). Act "opens a moment when absolute freedom coincides with an unconditional necessity, a moment when the subject is suspended between its being and meaning" (Butler 1). "And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!" (Vonnegut 13). Then they are suspended in the air, dancing with each other while "Not

only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well" (ibid). For a long time, "they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other" (ibid).

These Acts all carry a sense of "striking at oneself", of giving up what one values the most to act without the protection of the Other (Butler, 2015, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, Harrison accomplishes what was considered impossible for other ideological subjects, including his parents. His courageous behavior in the presence of the Handicapper General also demonstrates his desire to free himself from the Symbolic. By sacrificing himself in front of the audience watching him on television, he reveals an inconsistency or a crack in the totalitarian world of the story. In addition, he announces his "non-integration into the legal space of citizenship" (Žizek, 2009, p. 420).

Consequently, he loses symbolic support, and the Handicapper General kills him. She "came into the studio with a doublebarreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor" (Vonnegut, 2009, p. 13). Although he gets killed, Harrison proves to others that there is another world they can construct. The big Other is not the fully-fledged figure they considered it to be. In other words, Harrison is the one who clears the path for other people in society to create another new world for themselves.

Conclusion

The current study, by delving into Vonnegut's egalitarian dystopia in light of Žizek's theory of the big Other, analyzes the role of the Handicapper General as the big Other of the story, the role of law, and the way an ideological subject acts against the government. Vonnegut in "*Harrison Bergeron*" satirizes and criticizes society, which uses the fantasy of equality to take control of people's minds and actions, thus robbing them of their basic rights. By doing so, he sheds light upon the fact that equality is just a concept through which the government imposes its ideology. To serve this purpose, through various means such as technology, government agents lure people into believing that they must abide by the laws if they want to be equal to each other. Through satirizing the dominant ideology, Vonnegut also shows how strict laws can be the main reason for rebelling against the government.

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