Analyzing Chinese Nationalism through the Protect Diaoyutai Movement

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Abstract

Using three psychoanalytic insights in the context of nationalism, this paper sets out to illustrate the unrecognized imaginaries in the political unconscious of contemporary Chinese nationalism by looking at a spectacular Chinese nationalist movement, the Protect Diaoyutai Movement of 1996. Firstly, the paper suggests that a certain cultural imaginary of “nationalism” (or “love of one’s nation”) is perverse. This idea has profound political implications for democracy, because in Lacanian psychoanalysis the pervert is tortured by the inability to separate his subjectivity from the perversely demanding Other. However, democracy is supposed to protect, and allow for the equal and free manifestation of subjectivity in the human community. What, then, can this case teach us about the difficult relation between the two dominant modern political imperatives of nationalism and democracy? Secondly, the paper illustrates the traumatic and “real” implications of the jouissance of nationalism through the example of the inadvertent and traumatic death of a leader of the 1996 Protect Diaoyutai Movement in Hong Kong. Here the question will be: What is the irreducible aspect of the Lacanian real that people failed to symbolize and reckon with in dealing with Chen Yuxiang’s death? Thirdly, the paper takes the concept of disavowal as being central to the operational logic of perversion, and explores the following questions. Can the analysis of this case help us to understand how the perverse cultural imaginary of nationalism operates through denial and disavowal? How can theory articulate and make knowable the plight of nationalism’s hated and persecuted others? How can Jacques-Alain Miller’s concept of extimacy address the relation between the nationalist community and its disavowed others?

Keywords

Chinese nationalism, psychoanalysis, protect Diaoyutai Movement, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Chen Yuxiang