

The Hegelian “Night of the World”: Žižek on Subjectivity, Negativity, and Universality

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The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. ... One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful (Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, 1805-6).

This extraordinary passage, written by Hegel in his Jena, pre-*Phenomenology* days, appears in many of Žižek’s published works, usually in connection with the theme of the radical negativity of the (Hegelian-Lacanian) subject (See Žižek 1992: 50-52; 1994: 145; 1996: 78; 1997: 8-10; 1999: 29-30; 2006: 44). One could even say it is one of the Ur-texts for Žižek’s project of rereading Lacanian psychoanalysis through post-Kantian, and in particular Hegelian, idealism. While the importance of Hegel’s *Logic* and Hegelian dialectic has been noted for Žižek’s rereading of Lacan (see J. Butler, Laclau, Žižek, 2000; Kay 2003; Sharpe 2004; R. Butler 2005), the importance of the Hegelian conception of the radical negativity of the subject for Žižek’s project has received far less attention. In what follows I address this lack by exploring the Hegelian figure of the ‘night of the world’ that plays such an important role in Žižek’s theorisation of the (Hegelian) subject. In the first part, I examine how the themes of the “pre-synthetic imagination” and “abstract negativity” are crucial to understanding Žižek’s theorisation of the Hegelian subject (in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999)). In the second part, I consider how this

Hegelian model of the subject is decisive for understanding Žižek's conception of Hegelian "concrete universality," and how the latter concept figures prominently in Žižek's analysis of the relationship between the abstract negativity of the subject and the political question of confronting global capitalism.¹ In conclusion I raise some questions about Žižek's combining of *abstract* and *determinate* negation in his 'romantic' reading of the negativity of the Hegelian subject. I then critically examine the implications Žižek draws from this analysis in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), which presents a sustained argument to reclaim the revolutionary tradition of Leftist politics.

I: The Hegelian Ticklish Subject

Hegel is a ubiquitous presence in Žižek's formidable (and ever growing) *oeuvre*. Indeed, Hegelian dialectics comprises one apex of the triadic structure (or intertwining knots) that continues to define Žižek's prodigious theoretical project, the other two being Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (the apex), and the contemporary criticism of ideology (Žižek 1991: 2). One of Žižek's most significant analyses of Hegel can be found in Part I of *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), entitled "The Night of the World," which presents an Hegelian model of the subject, psychoanalytically reconfigured, emphasising the radical negativity of subjectivity. Žižek's first chapter in *The Ticklish Subject* explores the "deadlock of the transcendental imagination" that prompts Heidegger to recoil from the abyss of subjectivity (after his famous *Kehre* or 'turn'), while the second turns to the "Hegelian Ticklish Subject," developing a powerful rereading of Hegel's concept of "concrete universality" that continues to play a crucial role in Žižek's more recent works, *The Parallax View* (2006) and *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008). This extraordinary analysis of the transcendental imagination, critique of Heidegger, and rereading of Hegelian 'night of the world,' together contribute to Žižek's reassertion of the radicality of the "Cartesian subject"—that thoroughly repudiated theoretical spectre which nonetheless continues to "haunt Western academia" (1999: 1-5). This unorthodox reading of the Hegelian 'night of the world'—the radical negativity that haunts subjectivity—is developed further in an explicitly political direction, which helps explain Žižek's recent critique of the 'Fukuyamaian' consensus, shared both by moral-religious conservatives and libertarian 'postmodernists', that global capitalism remains the 'unsurpassable horizon of our times'.

Žižek's Hegelian criticism of Kantian Imagination

Heidegger's ground-breaking but controversial interpretation of Kant (1997) turned on the question of the possibility of metaphysics, which in turn pointed to the problem of how to think human finitude. For Heidegger, Kant 'shrinks back' from the ontological implications of his path-breaking move (in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) in taking the *productive imagination* as playing the primary role in the constitution of the subject. Indeed, Kant's 'recoiling' from this radical dimension of subjectivity, Heidegger claimed, was a recoiling from our *constitutive finitude* as temporalising-projecting beings. Kant's anxiety over the imagination can also be criticised, however, from a Hegelian-Lacanian point of view, which is what Žižek does in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999). Žižek turns there to Hegel's criticism of Kant's 'formalist' theory of subjectivity, underlining Kant's failure to acknowledge the dimension of *radical negativity* that is constitutive of the experience of subjectivity. It is this radical negativity, Žižek will argue, that Heidegger too ultimately 'shrinks back' from in his later meditative thinking on the history of Being.

Žižek's point of departure is to show that the fundamental ambiguity in Kant's account of imagination lies in its relationship with the discursive understanding. In Kant's considered account of cognition, we begin with the diversity of pure intuition; this diversity is synthesised by the pure imagination, and the resulting pure synthesis is then unified by means of concepts supplied by the understanding. The question thus arises: Is "pure synthesis" the work of the imagination, with understanding intervening only after the imagination has done its work? Or is "pure synthesis" the work of the understanding, such that the imagination is merely a lower level application of the synthetic power of the understanding at a precognitive level? (Žižek 1999: 29) This is precisely the ambiguity that Heidegger emphasises in his critique of Kant's 'recoiling' from the transcendental imagination. For Žižek, the critical point in Heidegger's reading is that "one should determine the synthesis of imagination as the fundamental dimension at the root of the discursive understanding, which should thus be analysed independently of the categories of the Understanding" (1999: 29). Kant recoils from this step, later taken by Heidegger, demoting the imagination to a mediator between the sensuous manifold of intuition and the synthetic activity of the Understanding (Žižek 1999: 29).

Heidegger's proposal to move beyond Kant, I suggest, can be understood as a *romantic* reading emphasising the primacy of imagination over understanding, which can be contrasted with the *idealist* reading insisting on the primacy of understanding over imagination. Kant, along with the mature Hegel, opted for the 'idealist' alternative, while Schelling and the romantics, including Heidegger (and the early Hegel), chose the 'romantic' path to a transcendental

freedom of imagination that grounds, but also circumvents, the discursive understanding. What one discovers along this 'romantic' path—as Schelling, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger were each to find—is that metaphysical thinking, grounded in the transition from understanding to reason, gives way to a post-metaphysical language in which philosophy intersects with poetry, literature, and art. And this is also partially the case, I would suggest, with Žižek's (romantic neo-Hegelian) reading of Kant, even down to Žižek's evocation of the films of David Lynch as disclosing the unconscious, pre-synthetic, 'disintegrative' power of the 'pre-synthetic' imagination (Žižek 1999: 51-59).

Interestingly, Žižek also presents himself here as a romantic reader of Kant. In the spirit of the young Hegel, and in keeping with Schelling's emphasis on the radical self-contraction at the heart of subjectivity, Žižek turns to the radical dimension of *negativity* that Kant eschews in his account of transcendental imagination (1997: 8-12).² Indeed, Kant's version of the imagination ignores the crucial dimension of negativity emphasised by Hegel—"namely, imagination *qua* the 'activity of dissolution', which treats as a separate entity what has effective existence only as a part of some organic Whole" (Žižek 1999: 29). For Hegel, according to Žižek, this negative power of dissolution, of dissolving the whole into distinct independent parts, comprises *both* the power of imagination and of the understanding.

"The Night of the World"

Žižek cites two fascinating passages from Hegel, one obscure, the other well-known, to show Hegel's original insight into the disintegrative power of negativity. The first is from Hegel's 1805-6 *Jenaer Realphilosophie* manuscripts, the enigmatic "night of the world" passage:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful (Hegel 1974: 204; quoted in Verene 1985: 7-8).

Žižek obsessively returns to this extraordinary passage in many of his works.³ Before turning to Žižek's reading of this passage it is worth making a few interpretative remarks. Hegel vividly describes here the pre-subjective experience of the 'impersonal' or 'unconscious' production of representations and images, both violent and destructive, which will form the basis for the emergence of self-conscious subjectivity. This pre-discursive, pre-rational, 'unconscious'

interiority is a part of (alienated) nature in the proto-subject. It expresses the “pure” or impersonal self, whose dark unconscious domain of phantasmagorical partial objects—“a bloody head,” a “ghastly white apparition”—is precisely what marks the ‘violent’, traumatic transition from natural being to social and cultural subject. This netherworld of unconscious fantasy, subjective dissolution—the “night of the world,” of intersubjective meaning—is an irreducible dimension of the finitude of subjectivity. It is the abyss of negativity glimpsed in the uncanny gaze of the Other—in the night of the eye, the abyss of subjectivity, “a night that becomes awful,” as Hegel says.

The proto-psychoanalytic resonances of this passage are striking, anticipating themes such as the Freudian death drive and the Lacanian traumatic encounter with the Real that precipitates the imaginary capture and symbolic ‘quilting’ of the subject. Indeed, Žižek reads this passage, at least in *The Ticklish Subject*, as an exemplary description of the negative, disruptive, decomposing power of imagination, “as the power that disperses continuous reality into a confused multitude of ‘partial objects’, spectral apparitions of what in reality is effective only as a part of a larger organism” (1999: 30). *Contra* Kant, the imagination in its productive or constructive aspect is at the same time also negative or destructive. For the imagination is “the power to dismember what immediate perception puts together”; the uncanny power to imagine a partial, phantasmagorical object abstracted from its proper whole: a head without a body, a ghost without flesh, colours without shape, a body without organs and organs without a body (Žižek 1999: 30). Hegel’s ‘night of the world’—the negative aspect of the synthetic power of subjectivity—is thus “transcendental imagination at its most elementary and violent”: the empty or abstract freedom of imagination as the power of dissolution rather than synthesis; the power of dissolving all objective relations grounded in things in themselves (Žižek 1999: 30). The night of the dissipative imagination is the radical negativity of *arbitrary freedom*; the power, to cite Hegel once again, “to tear up the images and to reconnect them without any constraint” (Žižek 1999: 30).

Žižek returns to this passage many times in different contexts, each time linking the Hegelian ‘night of the world’ with a different philosophical theme. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* the Hegelian ‘night of the world’ is connected with the psychoanalytical and German idealist theses concerning the constituted or ‘posited’ nature of social reality, its constitution through the performative efficacy of ‘symbolic fictions’; the universe of the symbolic order of the Word emerging only against the background of this experience of the abyss of negativity (Žižek 1992/2001: 50). The text of Hegel’s Jena manuscript goes on to make just this point, arguing that this radical inwardness of the pure self “must also enter into existence” through language as “name-giving power” (Hegel 1974; quoted in Verene 1985: 8). In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek compares this Hegelian ‘night of the world’, the experience of the self qua pure ‘abstract

negativity' with Otto Weininger's misogynistic images of the pre-representational feminine, which is really an aversion to the void of subjectivity itself (1994: 145).⁴ Here as in *The Abyss of Freedom*, Žižek underlines Hegel's *break* with the Enlightenment tradition, his metaphoric *reversal* of the image of the transparent subject as the "light of Reason" as opposed to the dark inertness or opacity of matter, nature, or tradition; contra the Enlightenment cliché, Hegel's takes the very kernel of the subject's being, "the gesture which opens up the space for the Light of *Logos*," to be abstract negativity qua the 'night of the world' (1994: 145), the "point of utter madness in which phantasmatic apparitions of 'partial objects' wander around" (1997: 8). Žižek goes on to link the Hegelian 'night of the world' with Schelling's conception of the subject as "pure night of the Self", "infinite lack of Being"; the "violent gesture of contraction" that also forms the basis of Hegel's account of madness as the cutting of all links with external reality, which Hegel then construes as the subject's regression to the level of the "animal soul" still unreflectively immersed in its immediate natural environment (Žižek 1997: 8; 1999: 34-35).

Where Žižek differs from Hegel, however, is in arguing that this withdrawal from the world, the subject's contraction and severing of all links with the *Umwelt*, is rather the founding gesture of 'humanization', indeed the emergence of subjectivity itself (1997: 8). The passage through madness is thus an ontological necessity; there is no subjectivity without this experience of radical negativity, this cutting of links with the *Umwelt*, which is then followed by the construction of a symbolic universe of meaning (1997: 9; 1996: 78). The question, psychoanalytically, is not so much how the fall into madness is possible, but rather how the subject is able to attain "normalcy" by climbing out of madness—for Hegel, this radical withdrawal from the world—in order to reconstitute social reality through symbolic mediation. This Hegelian-Schellingian moment of radical negativity and symbolic reconstruction will remain a consistent feature not only of Žižek's account of subjectivity but also, as we shall see, of his analysis of the historico-political experience of revolutionary violence.

"Tarrying with the Negative"

The other Hegelian text Žižek cites to show the power of negativity is the famous "tarrying with the negative" passage in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977: 19). In the latter, Hegel famously describes the "activity of dissolution" that is the "power and work of the *Understanding* [*Verstand*], the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power" (Hegel 1977: 18). The tremendous power of the negative—which Hegel here attributes to the *understanding* rather than imagination—is the power to detach an accidental, contingent particular belonging within a contextual whole such that it can attain an independent existence

of its own; this is precisely “the energy of thought, of the pure I” (1977: 19) (which we have already encountered in Hegel’s earlier text on the “night of the world”). This life of thought, the activity of dissolution defining the pure I, is at the same time marked by death, finitude, radical loss, which can nonetheless be sublated in thought by the finite subject (which therefore also has the Hegelian ‘logical’ structure of *infinitude*). Indeed, rather than a metaphysical tract on the ‘totalising’ Subject of absolute idealism, Hegel’s famous passage can be read as an account of the *radical finitude* of the Subject; the constitutive negativity that both makes possible and delimits autonomous subjectivity. To quote Hegel:

Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast to what is dead requires the greatest strength. Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject ... (Hegel 1977: 19).

What is striking in this celebrated passage is the way that experiences of finitude—of death, negativity, absence, loss—are all presented as constitutive of the power of the self-conscious Subject as *Geist*. The positive aspect of imagination—for example in the aesthetic experience of beauty, the subjective harmony and free play between imagination and understanding—cannot deal with this radically negative dimension of subjectivity (unless we are talking of the disruptive experience of the *sublime*, as Žižek goes on to discuss (1999: 41-50)). Subjectivity as *Geist* is precisely the embracing of finitude in order to affirm the infinite within the finite (the transforming-transcending power of imagination and understanding defining the finite subject), as well as affirming the finite within the infinite (the self-consciousness of the individual subject recognised within relations of historical and social intersubjectivity). Subjectivity is thus constituted through a *negative self-relation*: a relation to itself that is necessarily a relation to the Other; a *mediated* self-relation in which the self finds itself precisely in and through its relation to the Other. At the same time, this self-relation through the Other is made possible only because of a violent rending of the immediate self-feeling and immersion of this seemingly isolated proto-subject within its natural environment. The subject is not only negative self-relation, a relation to the Other, it is also a *self-relating negativity*: that which wins its truth (its self-identity in otherness) only through the experience of radical negativity or the freedom to negate itself, to

say 'no!' to everything, even itself; or as Hegel puts it, through the experience of finding itself in and through "utter dismemberment".

Once again, for Hegel this negativity is constitutive, ontological rather than ontic, as Heidegger would say. Self-conscious Spirit is this power of self-relating negativity, which is to say free subjectivity, only through "tarrying with the negative". Indeed, this fundamental moment of negativity, we should note, is a decisive feature of every key experience in the phenomenological journey of consciousness and self-consciousness (the most famous example being the life-and-death struggle and experience of mastery and servitude, not to mention the alienated 'freedom' of self-consciousness in stoicism, scepticism, and the unhappy consciousness, or the radical affirmation of freedom in the French revolution and subsequent negative moment of Terror as the 'violence' of abstract universality). This power of radical negativity, this "abyss of freedom," is precisely what for Hegel defines and determines "the Subject".

Unlike some 'non-metaphysical' readers of Hegel, Žižek does not shy away from this element of radical negativity.⁵ Indeed, it is precisely the crux of his critique of the Heideggerian reading of Kantian imagination. Žižek notes the surprising fact that Hegel does not praise speculative Reason but rather the *Understanding* [*Verstand*] as the "mightiest power in the world," the infinite power of 'dismembering,' of taking apart and treating as separate what naturally belongs together (1999: 31). For Žižek, Hegel here identifies the 'negative power' of the Understanding with "the basic negative gesture of — let us risk the term — 'pre-synthetic imagination', its destructive power of undermining every organic unity" (1999: 31). Although the two passages of Hegel seem to speak of opposing phenomena—namely the pre-rational/pre-discursive confusion of the purely subjective Interior, and the abstract discursive activity of the rational understanding—they in fact must be taken together, Žižek argues, as constituting *both* the pre-synthetic *and* discursive power of negativity defining the freedom of subjectivity as such.

Imagination or Understanding?

I remark here that Žižek here passes over the obvious point that Hegel too shifts from giving primacy to the pure imagination (in the 1805-6 Jena manuscripts) to asserting the pure Understanding as the exemplary power of the "activity of dissolution" (in the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*). In response to this point, it is worth noting that Žižek gives this shift a 'Schellingian' interpretation that effectively makes the pre-synthetic imagination and the discursive understanding two 'potences' of the same power of negativity defining the subject: "here 'Understanding' is another name for what we have called 'pre-synthetic understanding'"

(Žižek 1999: 96). Be that as it may, one could nonetheless argue that Hegel confronts here the same difficulty as Kant: how to account for the ambiguous relationship between the pure imagination and discursive understanding? Is the 'pre-synthetic' imagination the source of the radical negativity that makes possible self-conscious subjectivity, or does this reside rather in the mightiest of powers, the discursive understanding or pure I?

On Žižek's 'Schellingian' reading, Hegel's resolution of this ambiguity lies in taking *both* Hegel's references to dissolutive power of imagination and understanding as two interrelated aspects of the process of radical negativity. Heidegger, Žižek notes, was right to point to Kant's retreat from the productive imagination, but this retreat concerned Kant's refusal "to bring to light Imagination in its negative/disruptive aspect, as the force of tearing the continuous fabric of intuitions apart" (1999: 32). Kant overlooks the fact that the primordial form of imagination is not synthetic and unifying but disruptive and disintegrative: "imagination enables us to tear the texture of reality apart, to treat as effectively existing something that is merely a component of a living Whole" (Žižek 1999: 32).

Žižek's response to my question whether the imagination or the understanding is more fundamental for radical negativity is to hand the palm to the dismembering power of 'pre-synthetic' imagination. Žižek thus observes that "because of the subject's irreducible finitude," the disintegrative imagination takes precedence over the understanding. Indeed, "the very endeavour of 'synthesis' is always minimally 'violent' and disruptive" (1999: 33), since every synthetic unity is based upon a primordial act of 'repression' that inevitably leaves some (Schellingian) "indivisible remainder" (or, if one will, Derridean 'supplement'). This primordial 'repression' is the price of entry into the symbolic, intersubjective universe of rational understanding: the violent transition from Hegel's "night of the world" to the intersubjective "spiritual daylight of the present".

Žižek thus arrives at a very distinctive interpretation of the Hegelian 'night of the world' as the 'pre-synthetic' multitude, highly reminiscent of the Lacanian Real. As Žižek remarks, this "pre-synthetic Real, its pure, not-yet-fashioned multitude not yet synthesized by a minimum of transcendental imagination, is, *stricto sensu, impossible*: a level that must be retroactively presupposed, but can never actually be *encountered*." (1999: 33). Contra Judith Butler, who unjustly criticised Žižek for lapsing into a crude pre-Kantian 'transcendental realism' concerning the status of the Lacanian Real (1993: 187-222), Žižek here draws the Hegelian lesson that this retroactively presupposed multitude—pure difference, "difference in itself," or pre-individual singularities, to speak with Deleuze—is the *product* of the transcendental imagination. At the same time, the presupposition of a pre-synthetic multitude is nothing but *pure imagination itself*, "imagination at its most violent, as the activity of disrupting the continuity of the inertia of the pre-symbolic 'natural' Real" (Žižek 1999: 33). This pre-synthetic multitude, the 'night of the

world,' is the "unruliness" of the subject's abyssal freedom, the disruptive power of negativity that is the very definition of the finite Subject. This is the radical moment of finitude that, according to Žižek, the later Heidegger shrinks back from, retreating from this dimension of disruptive negativity and attempting instead to restore the ontological sundering of human *Dasein* from its originary ground in the unconcealment of Being. From this perspective, it is Heidegger, not Hegel, who retreats from the trauma of finitude, which is to say from the radical abyss of freedom.

II: Abstract Negativity and Concrete Universality

Žižek's reflections on the Hegelian subject, however, do not only have psychoanalytic and cultural significance; they also have social and political implications. In *The Ticklish Subject* as well as elsewhere, Žižek's analysis of the Hegelian "night of the world" is explicitly linked with the question of abstract negativity and its relationship with concrete universality. In an argument charged with political resonances, Žižek shows how the radical negativity of subjectivity—the capacity to negate all our finite, particular determinations—enables the dialectical passage from abstract to concrete universality. In practical terms, this means there is a dimension of violence, conflict, or antagonism that cannot be eliminated in historical and socio-political experience. Far from rehearsing the cliché of Hegel's reconciliationist stance towards the state, Žižek claims that the radical negativity of the subject—the 'night of the world'—means that there can be no concrete universality without the historico-political passage through madness, violence, even revolutionary terror (as in Hegel's famous analysis of the post-revolutionary Jacobin Terror, an abstract negativity that ushered in the modern bourgeois state (Hegel 1977: 355-363)). This Hegelian argument concerning abstract negativity and concrete universality provides an essential backdrop, frequently misunderstood, to Žižek's critique of various contemporary forms of 'post-political' ethical resistance to the state (most recently, Simon Critchley's ethically grounded neo-anarchism (see Critchley 2007; Žižek 2006: 332-334; Žižek 2008: 339-350)).

Žižek returns again and again to the Hegelian distinction between abstract and concrete universality. What does it mean? Against the prevailing stereotype of Hegel's subordinating of particularity to universality, Žižek points out that universality in its concrete dimension is realised through *individualisation*; that is, the concrete universal is embodied in the individual. As Žižek observes, Hegel was the first thinker to argue that the "properly modern notion of individualisation" occurs through secondary identification (1999: 90). The individual is initially immersed in its immediate milieu, the particular life-form into which he or she is born (family, local community). It is only once one's primary identifications with one's 'organic' community are

broken that one becomes an “individual,” namely by asserting one’s autonomy through identification with a secondary community that is also universal and ‘artificial’; that is, mediated and sustained through the free activity of independent subjects (profession, nation, independent peer-group versus traditional apprenticeship, organic community, prescribed social role, and so on) (Žižek 1999: 90). The abstract opposition between primary and secondary identifications (where primary identifications are rejected in favour of secondary identifications) is suspended once the primary identifications are reintegrated and experienced as the “modes of appearance” of my secondary identifications (Žižek 1999: 90).

Žižek then further complicates this account of concrete universality, ‘crossbreeding’ it with Hegel’s distinction between neutral “positive” Universality and differentiated “actual” Universality (1999: 90). The former refers to the “impassive/neutral medium of the coexistence of its particular content”; the latter to the actual existence of Universality, “which is *individuality*, the assertion of the subject as unique and irreducible to the particular concrete totality into which he is inserted” (Žižek 1999: 91). The Universal as neutral ‘container’ that is indifferent towards the particulars it subsumes is contrasted with the Universal as “the power of negativity that undermines the fixity of every particular constellation” (Žižek 1999: 91). The latter is the Universality of the individuated subject as power of the negative; the power to oppose and negate all particular determinate content. Indeed the passage from abstract to concrete universality, Žižek argues, proceeds thanks to the power of abstract negativity; phenomenologically speaking, this power of the negative “comes into existence in the guise of the individual’s absolute egotist self-contraction” (Žižek 1999: 91)—via what the *Phenomenology* will later describe, with reference to the discursive understanding, as the subject’s power to “tarry with the negative”.

The striking conclusion Žižek draws from this analysis is that the only way to make the passage from abstract to concrete universality is via “the full assertion” of this power of radical negativity, the negation of all particular content (1999: 92). At one level this would seem to be an instance of the famous Hegelian *Aufhebung*; we must lose immediate reality in the self-contraction of the “night of the world” in order to regain it as social reality, symbolically mediated by the subject; or we must renounce the immediate organic whole, submitting ourselves to the activity of the understanding, in order to regain it at a higher, mediated level as the “totality of Reason” (Žižek 1999: 92). Here the standard objection to the Hegelian *Aufhebung* looms, much rehearsed by poststructuralist readers of Hegel (see Žižek 1991: 31-38); namely that Hegel allows the moment of radical negativity, recognises “the horror of the psychotic self-contraction,” the radical dismemberment in which Spirit finds itself, but only in order to dialectically recuperate this negativity in the name of the “reconstituted organic whole” (Žižek 1999: 92-3).

From Abstract to Concrete Universality

Žižek's radical reading of Hegel challenges this orthodoxy: the passage through negativity, from abstract to concrete universality, is not about avoiding the moment of radical negativity in favour of the rational totality. Rather, it claims that this passage is unavoidable; the passage to the high passes through the low, the direct choice of the higher is precisely the way to miss it (Žižek 1999: 93). Citing another favourite speculative passage from the *Phenomenology*, Žižek refers to the peculiar conjunction of opposites that Hegel observes in the case of the penis, a conjunction which Nature "naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination" (Hegel 1977: 210). It is not a matter of choosing insemination rather than urination (as though these comprise an abstract opposition, as representational consciousness would have it). Rather, we have to pass through the 'wrong choice' (biological excretion, urination) in order to attain the 'right choice' (biological conception, insemination, the reproduction of life): the speculative meaning—the Hegelian infinite judgment that articulates the co-existence of excretion/elimination and conception/reproduction, indeed the shift from biological conception to rational comprehension—emerges only as an after-effect of the first, 'wrong' reading, which is contained within, indeed constitutive of, the speculative meaning (Žižek 1999: 93).⁶

Žižek's point here is to show that the movement from abstract to concrete universality requires this passage through radical negativity, that is to say the 'wrong' choice of the abstract negativity of conflict and violence is the only way to arrive historically at the 'right' choice of a stable, rational, democratic state. At the level of social and political life, the attempt to bypass the negative and directly choose "the 'concrete universality' of a particular ethical life-world" results in the even greater violence of a "regression to premodern organic society"; a denial of the "infinite right of subjectivity" that, for Hegel, is the principle of modernity itself (Žižek 1999: 93). The modern subject-citizen cannot accept being immersed within a particular determinate social role prescribed within an organic social Whole; rather, as in Hegel's famous analysis of the French revolution, it is only by passing through the "horror of revolutionary Terror" that the constraints of the premodern organic 'concrete universality' are destroyed and the "infinite right of subjectivity in its abstract negativity" can thus be asserted (Žižek 1999: 93).

Again, Žižek questions the standard reading of Hegel's famous analysis in the *Phenomenology* of abstract freedom and Terror, according to which the revolutionary project, with its "direct assertion of abstract Universal reason," perishes in "self-destructive fury" because it fails to organise its revolutionary energy into a stable and differentiated social order (1999: 93). Hegel's point, rather, as Žižek argues, is to show how the revolutionary Terror,

despite being an historical deadlock, is nonetheless necessary in order to effect the historical passage towards the modern rational state (1999: 93). The historical situation that opposes “a premodern organic body and the revolutionary Terror which unleashes the destructive force of abstract negativity” always involves an Hegelian *forced choice*: “*one has to choose Terror*” (the ‘wrong’ choice) against pre-modern organic community, in order to create the terrain for the ‘right’ choice; namely to create the conditions “for the new post-revolutionary reconciliation between the demands of social Order and the abstract freedom of the individual” (Žižek 1999: 94).

Žižek thus fully endorses the Hegelian claim that the freedom of subjectivity emerges out a certain experience of radical negativity. This also applies to the contrast between ethical life and *morality*: the immersion of the subject in his/her concrete social life-world versus his/her “abstract individualist/universal moral opposition to this concrete inherited universe” (Žižek 1999: 94). The moral individual, acting on behalf of a larger universality, acts so as to challenge and undermine the inherited determinate ethical mores of his/her community (Socrates versus the Greek *polis*; Christ versus the Jewish people) (Žižek 1999: 94). As Hegel argues, however, the stubborn attachment of the moral subject to his/her convictions, despite the demands of the ethical totality, also dialectically transitions into its opposite, that is, into Evil—yet another instance of the passage through negativity marking the movement from abstract to concrete universality. As Žižek points out, Hegel is well aware that this abstract universality gains existence through violence, the destructive fury towards all particular content, which is again the only way the concrete Universal can be realised through the emergence of the freedom of individual subjectivity (1999: 94).

Once again, Žižek challenges the doxa concerning the young Hegel’s aesthetic vision of harmonious Greek *Sittlichkeit*: Hegel ‘becomes Hegel’ once this vision of a stable organic totality (as developed in the 1802-3 System of *Sittlichkeit*) is abandoned. Such a model, Žižek remarks, is in fact closer to the ‘aestheticisation of politics’ characteristic of political romanticism, with its anti-modernist emphasis on organic community and anti-universalistic traditionalism (1999: 94). Indeed, it is only after Hegel too makes the ‘wrong’ choice (idealised Greek *Sittlichkeit*) that the mature Hegel can make the ‘right’ one: namely, acknowledging that the only path to concrete universality (and the modern state) is via the subject’s choice of abstract negativity (the *skandalon* of Christ’s emergence versus the nostalgic hope for a renewed version of Greek *Sittlichkeit*) (Žižek 1999: 94-5). The mature Hegel’s concept of reconciliation, on Žižek’s reading, is thus deeply ambiguous: it is not only the reconciliation *of* a split (between individual subjectivity and social totality) but reconciliation *with* this split as “the necessary price of individual freedom” (1999: 95). The stereotype of the young radical Hegel who later became the conservative ‘state philosopher’ justifying the existing social order should thus be turned on

its head: it is the revolutionary project of the younger Hegel that prefigured the establishment of a new organic Order that abolishes modern individuality, while the mature Hegel's insistence on the right of subjectivity—including the unavoidable passage through abstract negativity—provides the only way historically to ensure the achievement of concrete universality (Žižek 1999: 95). The lesson to be drawn here is twofold: that liberal democratic modernity cannot disavow its revolutionary, indeed violent, historico-political origins; and that political romanticism can recur even in the guise of an anti-universalist insistence on particularity, difference, and 'community'.

To return to my earlier discussion, this is why Hegel praises the Understanding [*Verstand*] (rather than reason) in the "tarrying with the negative" passage from the *Phenomenology* quoted above. It is the understanding's power to "disrupt any organic link," to treat as separated what originally exists within a concrete context, that guarantees the subject's freedom as Spirit. Indeed, this negative power of the understanding is a more developed version of what the younger, romantic Hegel called the 'night of the world,' the power of the pre-synthetic imagination; "the power that precedes the *synthesis* of imagination whose highest expression is *logos*" (for Heidegger, that which gathers together) (Žižek 1999: 96). The image of Hegel the arch-conservative, arguing for a return to a premodern organic social totality in which each individual has his/her prescribed place, is thus radically false. Rather, for Hegel, the very existence of subjectivity "involves the 'false', 'abstract' choice of Evil, of Crime"—that excessive moment of abstract negativity that throws the whole social order momentarily 'out of joint' (Žižek 1999: 96). The destruction of organic community, the subject's 'irrational' insistence on some 'abstract' feature of the whole that disrupts its harmonious unity, is the very movement by which the subject is historically actualised—or to put it in Hegelese, the manner in which substance also becomes subject. As Žižek argues, the unity that emerges from this passage through negativity is thus no longer a substantial organic unity; rather it is a "substantially different Unity," a Unity grounded in negativity, one in which this movement of negativity assumes a positive existence (1999: 96)—precisely in the modern political state, the formalised 'embodiment' of negativity that nonetheless retains the trace of this violent power to expose the life of its citizens. Hegel thus anticipates the Foucaultian-Agambenian theme of *biopolitics*, the 'negative' power of the state to both expose and administer the biological life of its citizens.

The 'Night of the World' and Revolutionary Violence

Žižek's unorthodox reading of the Hegelian theme of concrete universality—the necessity of a passage through abstract negativity in order to attain the individualisation of the subject as free and universal—is taken up again in *The Parallax View* (2006). It also informs his recent analysis (2008: 337-380) of the “crisis in determinate negation” afflicting liberal democratic politics and contemporary political philosophy (Critchley and Badiou). In *The Parallax View*, Hegel's ‘night of the world’ passage reappears again, this time in connection with the question of revolutionary violence. Žižek cites here Rebecca Comay's fascinating discussion of the link between the Hegelian analysis of the self-destructive fury of the revolutionary Terror, and the “obsessive fantasies of survival entertained by the popular imaginary of the guillotine” (2006: 43). Such spectral decapitation fantasies were vividly manifested, Comay observes, in the “proliferation of blushing heads, talking heads, suffering heads, heads that dreamed, screamed, returned the gaze, the disembodied body parts, detached writing hands, the ghosts and ghouls and zombies that would fill the pages of gothic novels throughout Europe” (Comay 2004: 386). As Žižek asks, with these nightmarish fantasies of spectral decapitation haunting the post-revolutionary world, are we not back again within Hegel's notorious ‘night of the world’? The frenzy of revolutionary upheaval destroys the fabric of ordinary historical and social reality, returning us to the elementary ‘zero-level’ of subjectivity; the “spectral obscene proto-reality of partial objects floating around against the background of the ontological Void” (2006: 44). Revolutionary violence disrupts social reality through the exercise of abstract negativity, temporarily returning the subject to the elemental level of proto-subjectivity, the dismembering violence of the ‘night of the world’.

Here one cannot help but make the comparison between Hegel's brutal observation concerning the guillotine—the post-revolutionary reduction of death to a mechanical cut, “a meaningless chopping off of a cabbage head” (Hegel 1977: 360; Žižek 2006: 43)—and the archaic revival of ‘sacrificial’ beheadings practised by Islamist terrorists. Such beheadings occur through knife-wielding executioner rather than the impersonal operation of the guillotine; and while performed in secret they are video recorded in order to be disseminated via Jihadist propaganda websites for a globally dispersed audience. In the latter case, however, this abstract negativity or political violence is not in the service of “Absolute Freedom,” as was the case, from Hegel's perspective, with the post-French revolutionary Terror.⁷ Rather, Islamist terrorism is more akin to a violent abstract negation of the modern ‘right of individual subjectivity’: a simultaneously ‘pre- and post-modern’, technologically primitive (knives, boxcutters) and sophisticated (internet and communicational media), attempt to negate the

‘morally decadent’ liberal democratic capitalist order that makes this right of subjectivity possible.

The point of Hegel’s analysis, it must be said, is to show that this revolutionary Terror is fundamentally self-undermining; that it cannot reconcile the drive towards (abstractly conceived) Absolute Freedom with the historically achieved norms of freedom and subjectivity that define the institutions of modernity. Žižek’s claim is that such violence is nonetheless historically unavoidable as the way in which the transition from abstract to concrete universality is effected. Here I return to my earlier question concerning the relationship between imagination and understanding: the contrast between the ‘romantic’ reading of Hegel that gives priority to the ‘pre-synthetic’ imagination of the ‘night of the world’ (abstract negation) versus the ‘idealist’ reading that emphasises the “power of the negative” articulated through the discursive understanding (determinate negation). Žižek combines the two forms of negativity (abstract and determinate) in a Schellingian manner, arguing that they are two aspects of the same power of negativity. This move, however, exposes him to the criticism that his account of revolutionary Terror flirts with a political romanticism that valorises the *abstract negativity* of revolutionary struggle over the *determinate negation* that results in the rational social and political institutions of the modern state. For Hegel, the abstract negativity of revolutionary violence must be *aufgehoben* in the rational organisation of the self-reforming social and political institutions of modernity. We only revert to the abstract negativity of revolutionary violence when these norms and institutions have utterly broken down, lost all legitimacy and normative authority, that is, when the (violent) historical transition to a new configuration of Spirit is already well underway. Must we say, however, with Žižek that abstract negation is the only way that concrete universality—the freedom of subjectivity—can be historically realised?

Global Capitalism: ‘End of History’ or ‘History of Violence’?

The question for us today, then, is to ask what happens when this rational totality (Western neoliberal democracy) becomes disturbed by the contradictory dynamics of global capitalism. There are at least two distinct Hegelian responses: one is to point to the role of the self-reforming institutions of modernity, those of capitalist liberal democracy, to effectively pacify, manage, or control these contradictory dynamics without entirely eliminating them. This line of thought—given popular expression in Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992)—tends to the conclusion that liberal democratic capitalist modernity is here to stay; we have effectively reached the ‘end of history’ in which radical revolutionary political transformations are no longer likely or even possible. This ‘Fukuyamaian’ line then cleaves into at least two

opposing positions: the moral or religious conservative position arguing for a return to traditional values to offset the deracinating effects of neoliberalism, a desperate attempt to refound the disturbed *Sittlichkeit* of multicultural liberal democracies; and the libertarian-postmodernist position that displaces political radicalism to the contested sphere of culture, arguing for a cultural politics of difference, utopian multiculturalism, radical affirmation of the Other, and so on, as ways of affirming ethical forms of freedom and plural modes of subjectivity made possible by capitalist liberal democracy. The point, for Žižek, is that both moral-religious conservative and libertarian-postmodernist positions share the ‘Fukuyamaian’ thesis: that capitalist liberal democracy is here to stay, hence needs to be either resisted or reformed. “The dominant ethos today,” as Žižek remarks, “is ‘Fukuyamaian’: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is render it more just, tolerant, and so forth” (2008: 421).

On the other hand, there is the romantic, revolutionary position, which argues for a retrieval of the abstract negativity of the revolutionary tradition in order to perform a destructive negation that would disrupt the capitalist economico-political system. This is the line of thought—Hegelian but also Marxist-Leninist in inspiration—that Žižek argues for in his most recent tome, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008). For Žižek, we must first of all question and theoretically reject the ‘Fukuyamaian’ liberal democratic consensus: capitalist liberal democracy is not necessarily the ‘universal and homogeneous’ form of the state, as Kojève put it, in which the atomised post-historical animals of the species *homo sapiens* will privately enjoy their narcissistic consumer pleasures (Kojève 1969: 157-162). Rather, the contradictory dynamics of contemporary global capitalism—we need only mention global credit, fuel, oil, and Third World food crises, and the stark reality of ecological and environmental limits to growth—suggest that it is possible that Western societies may be entering a period of instability, uncertainty, even decline.

Žižek cites four key antagonisms that are relevant here: the *ecological* crisis (global warming, ‘peak oil’); the challenge to concepts of *private property* posed by new forms of ‘intellectual property’; the socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (biogenetics); and *new forms of apartheid*, particularly the proliferation of slums, separated communities, non-state governed zones of disorder (2008: 421-427). In light of these intersecting antagonisms confronting global capitalism, the historical question of whether it is possible to redeem the failed revolutionary attempts of the past (Benjamin) may not yet be entirely closed.

Žižek’s radical Hegelian-Marxist wager is directed primarily against contemporary liberal democratic but also ‘postmodernist’ politics that depoliticise the economy—‘naturalising’ it as the unquestioned background of society, culture, and politics—and thereby displace political conflict

to the sphere of culture and subjectivity. One could argue that the displacement of political radicalism to the cultural sphere—our contemporary ‘aestheticisation of politics’—is an ideological disavowal of the real source of the antagonisms afflicting modern liberal democracies. It represents a politically debilitating attempt to transpose the abstract negativity of revolutionary struggles to the ‘sublimated’ sphere of culture (as in the familiar ‘culture wars’ that pit social and religious conservatives against secular liberals and libertarian ‘postmodernists’ in symbolic struggles over moral and cultural questions of subjectivity, identity, and values). The problem with this pseudo-Hegelian sublimation of politics into culture, however, is that it leaves untouched what Marx correctly identified as the ‘base’ of these morally driven forms of socio-cultural struggle: the economic dynamics of global capitalism. This is why Žižek’s has recently argued—notably in *In Defense of Lost Causes*—for a refusal of the liberal democratic ‘moral blackmail’ that condemns in advance any form of radical politics as ‘totalitarian’ or ‘terroristic,’ and why he now advocates an active reclaiming of the historical and political revolutionary heritage of the Left. Žižek’s radical Hegelian-Marxist proposal would entail acknowledging the power of negativity defining modern subjectivity, a recognition of the suppressed ‘night of the world’ or abstract negativity that continues to haunt the precarious ‘imaginary community’ of liberal democracy.

The question, however, is whether this can be done without relapsing into the nightmarish violence of the Hegelian ‘night of the world’. Are there more *determinate forms of negation*—of social and political struggle against the normative orders of capitalism—that might disturb the liberal democratic ‘moral consensus’ that has so strikingly paralysed the Left? Does reclaiming the history of revolutionary activism also imply the risk of embracing forms of violence that have marred twentieth-century political history? Or can the revolutionary spirit—the spectre of Marx, if one will—be reanimated without repeating this history of violence? Žižek’s Hegelianism and his Marxist-Leninism pull in different directions precisely on this issue. The Hegelian answer would be that the abstract negativity of revolutionary violence must be *aufgehoben* through the formation of rational social and political institutions capable of reconciling the deracinating effects of capitalism with the principle of individual subjectivity. The Marxist-Leninist response, on the other hand, would argue that such liberal-capitalist institutions themselves be subjected to revolutionary violence—a ‘negation of the negation’—that would create the historical conditions for future (communist) emancipation. We should note, though, that the Hegelian response is *retrospective* and *descriptive*; a conceptual comprehension of the underlying logic of the dynamics of modernity that would reconcile us to the vicissitudes of modern freedom. The Marxist-Leninist response, by contrast, is *prospective* and *prescriptive*; a demand to translate theory into practice, overcoming this alienating opposition by means of revolutionary action. Žižek appears to argue for a synthesis of these distinct, seemingly

incompatible, responses, which raises the following difficulty: how is the Hegelian account of the negativity involved in the transition from abstract to concrete universality to be reconciled with the Marxist-Leninist demand for revolutionary action that would negate all such merely 'ideological' comprehension?

One response would be to suggest that Žižek is simply pointing to the unavoidability of the moment of negativity in any theorisation—and political practice—of the historical realisation of free subjectivity. He reminds us that the Left forgets this Hegelian lesson at its peril. For in that case it either assents to the 'Fukuyamaist' consensus that there is 'nothing to be done' since we've already arrived at the (liberal-capitalist democratic) 'end of history'; or else it naively asserts the need for a renewed romantic-revolutionary response that demands a violent (abstract) negation of the status quo. The Hegelian response, by contrast, would be to argue for the possibility of a retrieval of the revolutionary tradition that has also become historically reflective and socio-politically determinate: not simply an *abstract* 'violent' negation of modern liberal-democratic institutions but rather a *determinate negation* of the normative consensus—the implicit background of economic neo-liberalism—that sustains them; a *productive negation* that would both preserve their emancipatory potentials while also negating their alienating socio-cultural effects. Such a task, of course, is easier said than done. Žižek's bold engagement with the relationship between the negativity of the (Hegelian) subject and the antagonisms defining global capitalism thus throws down the philosophico-political gauntlet. All the more so if one believes that social and political movements today should reclaim that seemingly most 'lost' of causes—the Leftist revolutionary tradition committed to the concrete universality of freedom.

Notes

¹ This Hegelian background is crucial, I suggest, for grasping Žižek's critical response to Simon Critchley's claims for a (Levinasian) ethical anarchism of resistance in response to global capitalism (Critchley 2007; Žižek 2006: 332-334; Žižek 2008: 339-350).

² Žižek returns precisely to Hegel's "night of the world" passage in his analysis of Schelling's *Die Weltalter*, comparing the Hegelian radical negativity and conception of madness as withdrawal from the world with the Schellingian "self-contraction" that "negates every being outside itself" (Žižek 1997: 8).

³ As Žižek remarks, he has referred to these two Hegelian passages "repeatedly in almost all my books" (1999: 67, fn. 33).

⁴ Otto Weininger, like Heidegger, recoils from the abyss of subjectivity: Weininger via recourse to his misogynistic "henids" or phantasmatic "confused feminine representations" (1994: 145),

and Heidegger via his “turn” from the *Daseinsanalytik* of *Being and Time* towards the gentle releasement towards Being (1999: 22-28).

⁵ In this respect, Žižek’s Hegelianism echoes the radical reading of Hegel—inflected by Marx and Heidegger—made famous by Alexandre Kojève in his 1933-39 Lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1969).

⁶ As A. V. Miller observes, Hegel makes a similar speculative point (in his *Philosophy of Nature*) concerning the mouth, which combines kissing and speech on the one hand, with eating, drinking, and spitting on the other (Hegel 1977: 210-211, fn. 1).

⁷ This is why Žižek criticises Simon Critchley’s claim (2007: 5-6) that all forms of revolutionary vanguardism—including Leninism, Maoism, Situationism, and Al-Qaeda-style Islamism—are to be equally rejected as forms of active nihilism. By blurring the difference between the distinct political logics of “radical egalitarian violence” (what Badiou calls the “eternal Idea” of revolutionary justice) and “anti-modernist ‘fundamentalist’ violence” (defining radical Islamism), Critchley lapses into “the purest ideological formalism”, echoing the identification, both by liberals and conservatives, of so-called ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ forms of totalitarianism (Žižek 2008: 348).

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