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Žižek, Antagonism and Politics Now: Three Recent Controversies

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Abstract

This article focuses on three recent controversies in which Žižek has been embroiled and for which he has taken positions that rest on the notion of antagonism. His views on Eurocentrism, the European refugee crisis and trans politics have been the subject of notable disapproval, if not denunciation. Critics reproach him for being Eurocentric, racist and transphobic, charges which he has repeatedly countered. The article will examine the differing theoretical and political positions in these debates, underlining what Žižek's critics miss or misunderstand about his notion of antagonism. While I side firmly with Žižek on the substance of these issues, I nonetheless consider the extent to which at least part of the disagreement here centres on the performative rather than the strictly "theoretical": Might his critics be reacting to his overexposure (his writing, speaking, responding so often and so much)? Could such overexposure be interpreted as an attempt at having the last word (ie mastery)? And to what extent does the antagonistic *form* of Žižek's interventions (polemics, generalizations) militate against their theoretical content?

Key Words: Žižek; Antagonism; Eurocentrism; Refugee Crisis; Trans Politics

Introduction

Žižek is most often seen as a philosopher of the politics of enjoyment (ie enjoyment as a “political factor”), but one easily forgets that he is equally a philosopher of antagonism. The two notions — enjoyment and antagonism — are of course closely related in his work, since for him it is enjoyment’s excess that renders life both compelling and off-kilter. But I want to suggest that it is the concept of antagonism, more than that of enjoyment, that explains his controversial positions on recent global political issues, a concept his critics often miss or misunderstand, but also a phenomenon that, as we shall see, gets the better of his own argument.

Following Lacan, Žižek sees antagonism as ontological. There is no escape from it: the traumatic Real is constitutive of the human condition. In fact, according to him, the social emerges from human efforts to struggle against or avoid trauma so that reality is constructed and materialized as a response to antagonism (Žižek 1989: 5–6). Ideologies propagated by the state or market (eg multiculturalism, neoliberalism) aim at covering up this fundamental deadlock (eg social contradictions such as inequality or class struggle) in order to present reality as unified, complete or pristine. The goal of Žižekian ideology critique, then, is to uncover these contradictions in order for us to better face both our social traumas and our unconscious investments in obscuring and perpetuating social antagonisms (Žižek 1989: 125).

In this article, I focus on three recent controversies in which Žižek has been embroiled and for which he has taken positions that rest on the notion of antagonism. His views on Eurocentrism, the European refugee crisis and trans politics have been the subject of notable disapproval, if not denunciation. Critics reproach him for being Eurocentric, racist and transphobic, charges which he has repeatedly countered. I will examine the differing theoretical and political positions in these debates, underlining what Žižek’s critics miss or misunderstand about his notion of antagonism. While I will firmly side with Žižek on the substance of these issues, I will nonetheless consider the extent to which at least part of the disagreement here centres on the performative rather than the strictly “theoretical”: Might his critics be reacting to his overexposure (his writing, speaking, responding so often and so much)? Could such overexposure be interpreted as an attempt at having the last word (ie mastery)? And to what

extent does the antagonistic *form* of Žižek's interventions (polemics, generalizations) militate against their theoretical content?

The Controversy over Eurocentrism

In 2012, academic Santiago Zabala writes a piece for *Al Jazeera* (2012) extolling several contemporary philosophers, and focusing on Žižek in particular as a “thinker of our age.” The piece provokes vehement responses (also in *Al Jazeera*) from Columbia University cultural critic Hamid Dabashi (“Can Non-Europeans Think?,” 2013) and decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo (“Yes, We Can,” 2013), both of whom reproach Zabala of Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism. Zabala does indeed praise Western thinkers such as Žižek, Derrida and Butler as important public intellectuals, while referring to non-Western ones only as “others working in Brazil ... and China” without specifically naming any. Dabashi counters by mentioning a slew of non-Western thinkers — from Chatterjee and Achebe to Bishara and Karatani — who, according to him, also merit the labels “philosopher” and “public intellectual” and offer “alternative ... visions of reality more rooted in the lived experiences of people in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America.”

Mignolo argues along the same lines, taking aim at Žižek. To Žižek's tongue-in-cheek claim in “A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism” (1998: 988) that “When one says Eurocentrism, every self-respecting postmodern leftist intellectual has as violent a reaction as Joseph Goebbels had to culture — to reach for a gun, hurling accusations of proto-fascist Eurocentrist cultural imperialism,” Mignolo responds with: “A self-respecting decolonial intellectual will reach instead to Frantz Fanon” (Mignolo 2013). Mignolo then draws on Fanon to argue that decolonial intellectuals “‘have better things to do’... than being engaged with issues debated by European philosophers.” He maintains that, in the non-European world, Žižek's work is less relevant than that of the likes of Lewis Ricardo Gordon, Nawal El Saadawi or Enrique Dussel, and that Žižek's advocacy of communism is an “abstract universal,” only one of many other possible alternatives/solutions to the problem of global capitalism (Mignolo 2013; see also Nigam 2013).

In 2013, Žižek responds in a public lecture at the London School of Economics (LSE), entitled “Reply to My Critics.” He begins by asking jokingly if Mignolo is “as stupid in real life as he sounds” and then, in relation to Mignolo's exhortation that decolonial intellectuals should ignore European philosophers, he asks “OK fuck you, who are these much more interesting

intellectuals?” (Žižek 2013a at 42:09 and 44:40). In a later written piece, Žižek insists the “fuck you” was “a general exclamation addressed (if at anyone) at my public” (Žižek 2016d; see also Marder and Žižek 2016), but Dabashi counters with an acerbic retort, (mis)quoting Žižek as saying “Fuck you, Walter Mignolo!” (Dabashi 2015: 1). Dabashi’s response forms part of his 2015 volume brought out by Zed, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, with a Preface by Mignolo and an Introduction that he publishes as an online blog on Zed’s website, entitled “Fuck you, Žižek!” Here, Dabashi expands on his 2013 *Al Jazeera* article: he is critical of what he believes are “limited and now exhausted [colonial/European] epistemics,” claiming that the likes of Zabala and Žižek are out of touch with the realities of the global South, have no interest in what non-Europeans have to say, and only end up assimilating the world “into what they already know.” As a result, for Dabashi, it is important for non-Europeans to overcome the “myth of ‘the West’ as the measure of truth” (Dabash 2015: 8, 28, 2).

The problem with Dabashi’s text is that it is replete with mistakes, causing some to characterize it as a “post-colonial comedy of errors” (Marder 2013). Like Mignolo, Dabashi champions Fanon as an exemplar of the postcolonial public intellectual, but in the midst of a critique of Eurocentrism, he wrongly attributes a passage by Fanon on European racism to Žižek, proceeding to do a critique of the passage over several pages (2015: 8ff.) — in effect criticizing Fanon, his exemplar, instead of Žižek. To make matters worse, Dabashi appears not to have actually listened to the audio of Žižek’s LSE talk (during which he mistakenly claims Žižek uttered “Fuck you, Walter Mignolo!”), relying instead on a *second-hand* online account of it (<http://www.critical-theory.com/the-critical-theory-guide-to-that-time-zizek-pissed-everyone-off-again/>). It is from this second-hand account that Dabashi quotes the Fanon passage wrongly attributed to Žižek (Dabashi 2015: 8; see footnote 5). Worse still, the second-hand account itself correctly attributes the quoted passage to Fanon! It is therefore hard not to see Dabashi’s polemic as careless, if not slipshod, at least in the form of it. Needless to say, in a subsequent reflection, Žižek makes hay of this comedy of errors, remarking that “I thought we had reached the lowest point, although in a more recent contribution to *Al-Jazeera*, Dabashi puts me into the same line with Breivik, the Norwegian racist mass murderer” (Žižek 2016d; see also Marder and Žižek 2016).

Putting aside for the moment the name-calling in this debate, let me deal specifically with the accusation that Žižek is Eurocentric: as the title of his 1998 piece, “A Leftist Plea for

Eurocentrism,” makes clear, he is unapologetic about the fact that he *is*. But his is not a run-of-the-mill kind of Eurocentrism that papers over European colonial history and sees the continent as the flag-bearer of liberal democracy and human rights. Instead, Žižek’s is a critical Eurocentrism: he acknowledges his inescapable European background and carries out a critique of many of its legacies (colonialism, liberalism, racism, the holocaust, exploitation, misogyny, etc.). He is even unafraid of characterizing his native Slovenia as a “shitty country” for this reason (Žižek 2016b at 27:40). But nonetheless, he insists on defending and reinvigorating such *Left* European legacies as radical egalitarianism, universal emancipation, justice and the welfare state (Žižek 1998: 1009).

Crucially, Žižek aligns his critical Eurocentrism with his concept of universalism. Once again, this is not the neocolonial form of universalism that parades as neutral/objective while advancing European interests (eg the rights of white men as universal rights), but a universalism that centres on negativity and contradiction — and this is where the important notion of antagonism enters the picture. Here, the universal is the result of shared antagonisms rather than identities: for example, workers, women or LGBT people around the world may respond in unique ways to the traumatic inequalities wrought by global capitalism, but what they have in common is not their particular identities as workers, women or queers — in fact, these are what often divides them across cultures — but precisely their shared trauma. Žižek explains it this way: “[The Universal is about] an antagonistic struggle which does not take place between particular communities, but splits from within each community, so that the ‘trans-cultural’ link between communities is that of a shared struggle” (2010b; see also Žižek 1998: 1006; 2006b: 7ff.; Flemming 2015: 170). The universal is thus not about finding a common positive element but a shared excluded element so that, under our current global capitalist system, solidarity around the world is to be forged on the basis of shared experiences of exploitation and marginalization. It is for this reason that Žižek wishes to appropriate from the European Left tradition those political values (equality, justice, emancipation, etc.) central to the struggle of the excluded and marginalized.

Žižek’s critical Eurocentrism/negative universalism therefore avoids the trap of both a narrow or ghettoized particularism and a neocolonial universalism. It neither pretends to transcend the particular nor imposes a positive universalized norm. Rather, it works in and through the particular and the universal negatively to bring out the antagonistic element(s) in

both. Eisenstein and McGowan (2012: 69) express it thusly: “[t]here are no transcendent principles that every society shares, but there is a constitutive failure that marks every society.”

The problem with Dabashi and Mignolo’s critique is that it fails to meaningfully engage with Žižek’s argument and ends up advocating a narrow particularism. Dabashi appears to be unaware of the idea of a critical Eurocentrism when he accuses Žižek of assimilating the world into “what [he] already knows,” claiming that there is “a direct and unmitigated structural link between an empire, or an imperial frame of reference, and the presumed universality of a thinker thinking in the bosom of that empire” (Dabashi 2013). As outlined above and elaborated further below, Žižek is highly critical of European empire, while nonetheless being able to retrieve from it a Left antagonistic universal dimension (emancipation, justice, equality) that speaks to struggles against empire, marginalization and exploitation in other parts of the world.

Mignolo, like Dabashi, seems to equate non-European particularity with a certain authenticity, as though a distinct or pristine non-European identity can be retrieved in the wake of colonialism and the globalization of capital. As noted above, he appeals to Fanon to justify ignoring European philosophy and relying instead on intellectuals rooted in the global South. Yet as Žižek points out (2013a at 48:30), much of Fanon’s work draws precisely on the likes of Hegel, Sartre, Freud and Lacan. Moreover, Fanon is himself highly critical of a politics of identity and authenticity: he sees the *négritude* movement, for example, as a “blind alley” — a narrow “racism of defense” that is nothing but the “logical antithesis” of White European prejudice against Blacks (1963: 163–4, 214, 212). Žižek concurs, arguing that in “his primitive anti-Eurocentrism” Mignolo “is way too Eurocentric” (2016b at 59:00).

The idea here is not just that anti-Eurocentrism is a knee-jerk reaction to Eurocentrism, but also that “the ‘postcolonial’ critique of Eurocentrism is, in its intellectual background and the tools it mobilizes, a ‘Eurocentric’ endeavor par excellence” (Žižek 2002b: 580). The Western legacy, for Žižek, may well be (and is indeed) imperialist domination and plunder, but it is also “that of the self-critical examination of the violence and exploitation the West itself brought to the Third World ... the West supplied the very standards by which it (and its critics) measures its own criminal past” (2009: 115). To posit authentic “non-European” intellectual space(s), discrete and untainted, as Dabashi and Mignolo tend to do, is therefore to deny both the violence of (post)colonialism and the subversive intellectual tools that enable Dabashi and Mignolo’s Eurocentric critique in the first place.

Rather than mourning loss/fall (from some mythical pre-colonial roots), engaging in *ressentiment* (against European philosophers) or searching for (impossible) non-European authenticity, Žižek suggests facing the antagonism of the fall head-on (2013a): the loss of roots provides the (post)colonial subject with the opportunity to become more emancipated (and hence more universal) than the European subject. By fully immersing oneself in the fall, by mastering the Master's language better (or more creatively) than her/him, one may be able to exploit the liberatory potential of the fall and outsmart Europeans on their own terrain. Such an argument is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak's about colonialism's "enabling violation" and the persistent transformation of "conditions of impossibility into possibility" (Spivak 1987: 198–201; 1996: 19); but Žižek turns instead to Malcolm X, who, according to him, views racism and slavery as traumatic, depriving Black people of their roots but nonetheless opening up a creative space — the "X" in Malcolm X — by inventing a new universal (Islamic) identity (Žižek 2013a at 65:30).

Implicit in Žižek's argument is that, in the wake of European imperial domination, the European symbolic order is the de facto global symbolic order (see Kapoor 2018), so that the postcolonial subject in the global North as much as the South has no choice but to work with it. This is why, like it or not, an anti-Eurocentric viewpoint cannot escape a Eurocentric background. It is also why the non-European's search for roots can never recover a pure or authentic local tradition: the search is always a retroactive one, made possible only in *the* terms of the dominant European Symbolic, so that a search for roots is always a tainted one. There are no doubt innumerable important "non-European" philosophical texts, past and present, but these are inescapably written, read and interpreted in the light of the postcolonial present. No wonder that for Žižek, a (postcolonial) emancipatory project lies in retrieving from both the European Symbolic and (retroactive) "tradition" their respective antagonistic dimension, from which to invent a new universal identity.

But perhaps the more important problem with upholding an authentic particularism for Žižek is that, despite outward protestations against imperial power, it aids and abets that most dominant form of imperial power — global capitalism. Particularism suits imperial economic interests well — you do your own thing, celebrate your language, identity and festivals, as long as you don't interfere with the free mobility of capital. Such postmodern multicultural politics is the politico-cultural arrangement of global capitalism, according to Žižek. Particular identities and minority demands (eg gender, LGBT, ethnic, indigenous rights) are unthreatening to the

smooth functioning of the system and can be (and are) quite readily accommodated (ie assigned a “proper” place) and commodified (eg the corporate niche-marketing of products to women, minorities, environmentalists, etc.) (Žižek 1997; 1998; 2010b). So by opting for particularism, Dabashi and Mignolo are enabling the unfettered globalization of capital.

Dabashi and Mignolo also appear to be giving up entirely on the notion of a universal, seeing it as necessarily complicit with Eurocentrism. Yet once again, what they miss is Žižek’s important point that not all universals are bad, and in fact that a negative, antagonistic version of it is oriented towards emancipation. For Žižek, the globalization of capital cannot be meted out through fragmentation and localized particularisms (which are all too easily blunted, colonized or co-opted, as mentioned above); it can only be challenged through a universalized political project. And such a project would not ignore the local/particular, but retrieve from it an antagonistic dimension (eg the experience of being marginalized under global capitalism) that then forms the basis for a shared/universalized struggle.

It is in this sense that Žižek proposes the idea of communism, viewing it not as an “abstract universal” or a positive or definitive solution to the problem of global capitalism, as Mignolo seems to think (see above), but a determination of the problem (of the antagonism) of capitalist self-reproduction (Žižek 2013a at 56:30; see also Douzinas and Žižek 2010): it is because neoliberal capitalism dispossesses so many around the globe that the possibility of an open and broadly conceived communist project — a commons of nature, biogenetics, intellectual property, etc. — emerges. For Žižek, the project may well not happen at all, or if it goes ahead, it may fail or take on different local forms, but in any case, it would have to be the product not of an externally imposed program, but the politicization by the dispossessed themselves of a commonly perceived and experienced deadlock within capitalism.

Let me note, to conclude this section, that some years ago, Žižek engaged in a not dissimilar debate with William Hart (in 2002-2003) and Gayatri Menon (in 2010), both of them accusing him of being Eurocentric for treating Western Christianity as the height of religious evolution (see Hart 2002; Žižek 2002b; Hart 2003; Menon 2010; Basu Thakur 2013). Indeed, Žižek has written extensively on Christianity (Žižek 2001a; 2001b; 2003; Žižek and Gunjević 2012), but he takes a radical atheistic view of it, arguing that the history of Christianity centres on covering up its radicalism. He once again readily admits to his (critical) Eurocentric view of Christianity, but true to his antagonistic-political hermeneutics, he retrieves from within it not

religious faith or belief but notions of universal justice, egalitarianism and the absence of any guarantee of meaning.

But Hart and Menon are suspicious, asking whether Žižek thinks his universalism “is legitimate for any other religions” (Menon 2010) and if he can “imagine the agonistic universalization of non-European difference?” (Hart 2002: 559). It seems to me that the answer is “yes” in both cases, since Žižek has consistently viewed the rise of global Islam, for example, with much hope, seeing an “emancipatory underground tendency” in it (Žižek 2016e), characterizing Malcolm X’s inflection of it with enthusiasm (as underlined earlier), and stating that “instead of celebrating the greatness of true Islam against its misuse by fundamentalist terrorists, or of bemoaning the fact that, of all great religions, Islam is the one most resistant to modernization, one should rather conceive this resistance as an open chance: it does not necessarily lead to ‘Islamofascism,’ it can also be articulated into a Socialist project. Precisely because Islam harbors the ‘worst’ potentials of the Fascist answer to our present predicament, it can also turn out to be the site for the ‘best’” (Žižek 2004: 48–9).¹

But Žižek also responds to Hart by saying that the onus is on Hart and others, not him, to either demonstrate that he is wrong in retrieving emancipatory features in the Judeo-Christian tradition or whether “we find [emancipatory] features that I attribute to Christianity in Buddhism or Hinduism?” (Žižek 2002b: 579). Once again, like Dabashi and Mignolo, what Hart and Menon miss is the antagonistic dimension of Žižek’s Eurocentrism, which sees universalism emerge not from outside, transcendent principles but the deadlocks/traumas that are constitutive of every particular.²

The Controversy over Refugees

In 2015, at the height of the European refugee crisis, Žižek writes three controversial articles on the issue (2015a; 2015b; 2015c) in the *London Review of Books* (LRB) and *In These Times* (ITT). He begins by emphasizing the heavy responsibility of Western powers in creating the crisis — military interventions and political meddling in Iraq, Libya and Syria, and imperial engagements in such places as the Congo and Central African Republic, all of which has brought about war, “failed states” and untold dispossession and inequality. He is scathing about the racist, anti-immigrant political discourse in Europe, particularly in Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Slovakia, writing that “the principal threat to Europe is not Muslim

immigration but its anti-immigrant, populist leaders [such as Hungary's Orban]" (2015a). He also singles out the wealthy oil states of the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Emirates, etc.) for being so unwelcoming to refugees and turning a blind eye to indentured labour practices against foreign workers, who are essential to these countries' economies.

Žižek supports admitting many more refugees into Europe, but on the other hand, he is critical of those who advocate "open borders," accusing them of a naïve and unrealistic humanitarianism that "would instantly trigger a populist revolt" across Europe (2015a; 2015b). But his most controversial remarks are à propos the refugees themselves. He asserts that European authorities should not hesitate to "impose clear rules and regulations" that assure refugees of their safety, while at the same time requiring them to "accept the destination allocated to them." The latter condition, he says, is a response to reports about refugees in Slovenia and Southern Italy preferring to move to Scandinavian countries rather than stay where they are: they "assert their dreams as their unconditional right, and demand from the European authorities not only proper food and medical care but also transportation to the destination of their choice ... But the hard truth to be faced by the refugees is that 'there is no Norway,' even in Norway" (2015a). He also insists that European authorities should eschew the pretense of "multicultural tolerance" and require refugees to respect the laws and social norms of states (eg individual freedoms, religious tolerance, respect for women's and gay rights, etc.) "without fear that such norms will appear 'Eurocentric' ... Such rules privilege the Western European way of life, but that is the price to be paid for European hospitality" (Žižek 2015a; 2015c).

Finally, given what he sees as haphazard refugee resettlement policies amidst the rising tide of populist anti-immigrant racism across Europe, Žižek advocates for the establishment of resettlement centres near crisis areas (Lebanon, Turkey, Libyan Coast, etc.), with transportation of refugees from there to European destinations. He also suggests relying on the military to help organize these resettlement efforts in a way that "avoids the neocolonial traps of the recent past" (2015a).

Žižek's interventions elicit vociferous rebukes from a number of liberal/Left quarters, with critics accusing him of racism, Eurocentrism and Islamophobia (Kris 2015a; Riemer 2015; Sørensen 2015; Alarian 2016). Riemer (2015) characterizes his position as "reactionary," endorsing "an elitist vision of politics — the enlightened political class versus a racist and ignorant population"; while Alarian (2016) depicts him as an "orientalist ...

“a wolf in sheep’s clothing — masquerading as a leftist while flaunting the most obscene right-wing sentiments.” Kriss’s response is more sustained, with both him and Žižek engaging in a lengthy to-and-fro (Kriss 2015a; 2015b; Žižek 2015c). He sees as xenophobic the idea that “migration threatens some posited European way of life,” reproaching Žižek for being patronizing and prescriptive for requiring refugees to settle in destinations allocated to them and wanting to impose rules and regulations on people already traumatized by dislocation. In the face of rising anti-immigrant political discourse, he argues that Žižek has it wrong: it is not “Europe experiencing a migrant crisis” but “migrants experiencing a European crisis” (2015a). He also criticizes Žižek for wrongly assuming refugees are “backward” or misogynist/racist, pointing out that many Syrian refugees are in fact secular, eager to integrate into European life rather than clinging on to their “particularism.” For him, Žižek too easily presumes that migrants have no agency and are wholly determined by their culture.

Žižek does soften his stance a little in the face of this barrage of criticism, for example striking a more conciliatory note on the question of refugee settlement by admitting that European authorities would need to balance the “desires of refugees (taking into account their wish to move to countries where they already have relatives, etc.) and the capacities of different countries” (Žižek 2015c). But mostly he sticks to his position, which I suggest has to do with being faithful to his hermeneutics of antagonism.³ As Adam Kotsko (2015) puts it, Žižek is always trying to “highlight a fundamental conflict or deadlock.” This is true when he discusses the European side of the refugee crisis, calling out both the European complicity in creating it and the rise of anti-immigrant nationalist-populist discourse across the continent. He thus couldn’t be further from the position of defending “Fortress Europe,” as his critics are wont to insinuate. He even points the finger at the Left for allowing the Right to dominate Europe’s immigration agenda, while not shying away from highlighting anti-immigrant racism within the ranks of the traditional Left: “Yes, unfortunately, a large part of the working class in Europe *is* racist and anti-immigrant, a fact which should in no way be dismissed as the result of the manipulation of an essentially ‘progressive’ working class” (Žižek 2015c).

But as underlined earlier, Žižek also has a go at the refugees, and in this sense he is more an “equal opportunity antagonist” (so-to-speak) than an “elitist” (as Riemer alleges). He excoriates guilt-ridden liberal multiculturalists for not daring to say negative things about immigrants/refugees, seeing it as a reinforcement, not a renunciation, of the White man’s

burden.⁴ For him, not to identify the prejudices (ie gaps, antagonisms) of the Other is itself racism, since it “condescendingly treats [others] as morally inferior beings who should not be held to normal human standards” (Žižek 2015c). Far from denying refugees agency, as his critics suggest, his point is that, like all of us, refugees and immigrants are also ideologically interpellated, so that it is romanticizing them or refraining from criticizing them that denies them agency, disregarding their (as is everyone’s) proclivity to makes mistakes. It also disavows or underestimates the horrors of poverty, dispossession and forced migration, which can often destabilize and brutalize refugees (as it would anyone). In this sense, impoverishment for Žižek is not likely to make for noble people (2015c).

It is for this reason that Žižek does not hesitate to speak out against oppressive sociocultural practices — be they those of refugees, Muslims or indeed Europeans: “Some say I am more right wing, which I am absolutely not. On the refugee crisis, we should drop the patronizing ‘They are warm people.’ No, there are murderers among them in the same way there are among us. The liberal left prohibit writing anything bad about refugees” (Žižek 2016e). And he continues with: “[M]ulticulturalist or anti-colonialist’s defense of different ‘ways of life’ is also false. Such defenses cover up the antagonisms within each of these particular ways of life by justifying acts of brutality, sexism and racism as expressions of a particular way of life that we have no right to measure with foreign, i.e. Western values” (Žižek 2015c). Evident here once again is Žižek’s determination to prod the limits and deadlocks of any particularism, European or not.

Žižek’s concern is that the Left’s tendency to be silent, or make strategic compromises, on questions of culture “results in the anti-immigrant right monopolising” the immigration and refugee agenda (Žižek 2016e). For him, politically correct multiculturalism ends up conceding the terrain of culture to the Right, aiding and abetting anti-refugee populism. Perhaps what worries him most is the complicity of the Left in covering up the Real of our age: as Kotsko underlines (2015), the “entire basis of [Žižek’s] critique of mainstream liberalism ... has been that it enables right-wing reaction as a way of deflecting attention from the fundamental contradictions of capitalism.” In this sense, the refugee crisis serves as an ideological diversion. The real question is not the refugee/immigrant threat, but what this very question tells us about Europe and the global capitalist order. Accepting more refugees or instituting racist immigration policies helps displace the fundamental antagonisms of capitalism, avoiding having to address

them (see Žižek 1993: 210; 2009: 66). The challenge for the Left, according to Žižek, is therefore to envision “radical economic change which would abolish the [very] conditions that create refugees” (2015b). And it is because the Left has given up on the possibility of such change — the prospect of a post-capitalist world — that it ends up compromising on right-wing demands on refugees and immigration: “The real task is to build bridges between ‘our’ and ‘their’ working classes. Without this unity (which includes the critique and self-critique of both sides) class critique proper regresses into a clash of civilizations” (Žižek 2015c).

The Controversy over Trans Politics

In 2016, the US state of North Carolina enacts a law targeting trans people that requires them to use the public restroom (in schools and government offices) corresponding to the sex recorded on their birth certificates. A public outcry ensues across the country, especially after eight other US states end up proclaiming similar laws. Big business — Apple, eBay, GE, Microsoft, IBM, Nike, Intel, American Airlines — is also censorious, denouncing the new regulations as discriminatory, with some threatening to suspend operations in those states ratifying the law.

Soon after, Žižek writes a piece on the issue entitled “The Sexual is Political” in *The Philosophical Salon* (2016a). He follows it up with two replies (2016d; 2016f), responding to a barrage of criticism of his arguments. In the main, he uses the US bathroom controversy to criticize those in the trans community demanding separate washrooms for trans people. While supporting “the struggle of transgender people against their legal separation” (Žižek 2016d), he argues that “transgenderism is ultimately an attempt to avoid (the anxiety of) castration” (2016a).

Žižek’s argument is based on the important Lacanian view that sexual difference (or sexuation) is neither a biological position nor a discursive construct but an ontological category: it is the name of the deadlock (the Real) inherent to the symbolic order (Lacan 1998; Salecl 2000). The feminine and masculine positions are thus different ways of responding to fundamental antagonism and trauma. Lacan denotes by “phallus” (as opposed to the Freudian “penis”) the impossibility of signifying sex, so that the phallic is a symbol not of potency or virility but lack and failure. Indeed, it is for this reason that he can famously claim both that “woman does not exist” (1998: 7, 131) and that “there is no sexual relationship” (1998: 57): his point is to underline the failure of meaning (of the signifier “woman,” or indeed “man”) and

hence the impossibility of any relationship between/among the sexes. Moreover, we should note that, for Lacan, the feminine/masculine positions can be occupied by people of any sex: the relation of the subject to the phallus is “established without regard to the anatomical difference between the sexes” (1977: 282). The Lacanian viewpoint thus averts what are often seen as Freud’s heteronormative and misogynist proclivities on the issue of sexual difference.

In his *Philosophical Salon* article, Žižek begins by acknowledging his own anxieties in entering the men’s toilet, feeling insecure about whether he is “man” enough to do so. He admits that such anxieties are likely more pronounced in trans people, given the prevalence of transphobia/heteronormativity. Nonetheless, for him, all genders may find it difficult to recognize themselves in prescribed social identities: gender anxieties are rooted in the “deadlock of [social] classification.” This is why it is impossible to enumerate all sexual identities: “The multiplicity of gender positions (male, female, gay, lesbian, bigender, transgender ...) circulates around an antagonism that forever eludes it” (Žižek 2016a). Such a conundrum is signaled, for example, by the “+” in LGBTQ+, or the “etc.” or ellipsis in what has become a growing list of additional sexualities: two-spirited, pansexual, asexual, demisexual, intersex, questioning, allies, etc. ... No classification can satisfy since there will always be an exceptional element to add. Yet this growing list, according to Žižek, is precisely an attempt at ducking the anxiety of the lack. It is as if eliminating the straightjacket of binary genders will somehow rid us of antagonistic tensions and yield a “full blossoming multiplicity of sexual positions” (Žižek 2016a).

What concerns Žižek once again is that the multiplication and celebration of sexual identities feeds too straightforwardly into late capitalism’s continuous search for new markets. Far from threatening the System, sexual politics helps reproduce it: big business thrives on sexual fluidity and is only too ready to commodify the emergence of new identities. Žižek is therefore suspicious of big business joining an ostensibly progressive battle against transphobia, declaring how easy it is for Apple’s Tim Cook to forget about the slave-like conditions of workers in Foxconn City in Southern China, while making a “big gesture of solidarity” with trans people in the US (2016a). Thus, for Žižek, the trans movement’s avoidance of the antagonism inherent to sexuation maps too smoothly onto late capitalism’s avoidance of its own inbuilt antagonisms.

Rather than feeling oppressed by an enforced legal choice, a genuinely trans-gressive politics for trans people, according to Žižek, would be to act with “heroic indifference — ‘I am

transgendered, a bit of this and that, a man dressed as a woman, etc., so I can well choose whatever [toilet] I want!” (2016a). Moreover, given that no gender classification can satisfy, he wonders whether a truly third option would be to demand, not a gender neutral or trans toilet, but a “general gender” toilet: this would be a way of inscribing in the social/symbolic order precisely the antagonism of sex by refusing those gender distinctions that are on offer. Here, he is echoing Hegel’s point that difference can never be adequately expressed in terms of positive identities (eg male, female, trans, etc.) because it precedes such qualities (Žižek 2016b; 2016a). A “general gender” or “gender as such” toilet would thus not stand beyond difference but enact sexual difference as such (before its specific determinations); it would embody the universal antagonistic dimension (Real) of sexuation, underlining the impossibility and failure of categorization.

As mentioned above, Žižek’s piece (2016a) elicits fierce criticisms, to which he pens not one but two consecutive replies (“A Reply to my Critics” and “Reply to my Critics, Part Two,” Žižek 2016d; 2016f). Several of the criticisms tend to be based on misrepresentations of his arguments (eg he is arguing that trans people are traumatic for straight people), so I will stick for the moment to the more philosophical reproaches (voiced mainly by Miell; see below). Let me begin though by mentioning a key critique of the Lacanian/Žižekian position on sexuation by Judith Butler and Chris Coffman that provides a background to this debate.

For Butler (1993: 58ff.), Lacan’s contention that the subject enters the Symbolic via sexual differentiation ends up condoning compulsory heterosexuality. That is, sexual difference is made into an unchangeable, phallogocentric “‘law’ *prior* to all ideological formations” (1993: 196). Thus, the Lacanian viewpoint on sexual difference, according to her, privileges binary sexual difference. Chris Coffman (2013) concurs, although she focuses specifically on the work of Žižek, seeing it as reproducing the same Lacanian heterosexist account. For her, Žižek’s insistence that sexual difference is the fundamental antagonism “fallaciously assumes that (hetero)sexual difference is the motivating fantasy for all people across time,” thus creating “problems for theorizing same-sex desire as anything other than a permutation of (hetero)sexual difference.” While, according to Coffman, Žižek acknowledges the multiplicity of genders, repeated references in his work to “‘*the* sexual difference’ (as binary) are symptomatic of the blockage in his own thinking about it.”⁵ In her view, there is no reason to posit the binary as masculine and feminine, since sexual difference can be (and is) lived and expressed in multiple

ways. In this sense, sexuation can be reconstituted in the symbolic order to register “the many possible configurations of desiring subjectivities” (2013).

For his part, Sam Warren Miell, in the more recent of forays against Žižek, starts by reproaching the latter for wrongly assuming that trans people are trying to escape the anxiety of castration. He wonders on the basis of what Žižek makes that claim, especially since it implies “that trans people do not assume the same ontological lack as everyone else” (Miell 2016c). He goes on to chide Žižek for ignoring the recent work of Lacanian trans scholars (notably Ettinger), contending that, thankfully, trans studies have “decisively moved beyond Žižek and his generation. How appropriate that, in the field of psychoanalysis, we have killed the Father” (Miell 2016a). In this regard, he repeats for the most part Coffman’s above-mentioned accusations about Žižek’s heteronormative privileging of binary sexual difference, turning instead to Tim Dean’s re-interpretation of Lacan on sexuation as a way of averting Žižek’s (alleged) mistake. Indeed, as Miell emphasizes, for Dean the Lacanian theory of desire is determined not “by the gender of object-choice, but by the object *a* (*l’objet petit a*), which remains largely independent of gender” and is hence not easily assimilated to the mainstream heterosexual frame (Dean 2000: 216). For Miell as for Dean, then, *objet a* is “radically *unsexed*,” meaning that the unconscious contains no signifier of sexual difference, and certainly no binary signifier (Miell 2016c).

But Žižek counters both sets of (philosophical) critiques. While appreciative of Tim Dean’s work in its attempt to move “from phallus to *objet a*,” he nonetheless disagrees with it. For Žižek, *objet a* as “a-sexual is not prior to the deadlock of sexual relationship but is already mediated by it, an object which fills in the lack/void sustained by this deadlock/impossibility. There is *objet a* because there is no sexual relationship” (2016f). In other words, there is no domain of sexuality *prior* to the deadlock of sexual difference.

Moreover, Žižek refutes Miell’s (and by association, Butler’s and Coffman’s) contention that the Lacanian viewpoint on sexuation is heterosexist. What they miss, according to him, is that there is an inescapable “parallax gap” between the masculine and feminine: “there is no third way” because “the one position excludes the other” (2016f). Indeed, as underlined earlier, for Lacan, all subjects are positioned differently with respect to the phallus, so that “every subject is either ‘all’ or ‘not all’ under the phallic function” (Carlson 2010: 51). The masculine position (“all”) is invested in avoiding the threat of castration, seeing itself as whole and closed (yet

always undermined by a gap or antagonism), while the feminine position (“not all”) is less susceptible to the threat of castration and hence more open to incompleteness and lack. Thus, as Shanna T. Carlson points out, the two positions are not limited by the gender binary as such: for Lacan, there are “two different modes of ex-sistence in the symbolic, two different stances with respect to desire, and (at least) two different types of jouissance. Nothing here indicates ‘gender’ as we might conventionally conceive of it” (2010: 64).

Sexual difference is thus an impossible difference that precedes what it differentiates: the positive identity (man, woman, trans, etc.) is the result of an attempt to resolve the impossible difference. There is no neutral difference, since sexuation is about resolving the deadlock of difference by taking either one side or the other. As Žižek puts it, sexual difference is not “a secondary imposed frame” and is hence incapable of capturing “the wealth of the unconsciously bisexual subject. There is nothing outside this failure, for subject and language are themselves the outcomes of this primordial failure” (2016f). This is why, for Žižek, “[g]ays are male, lesbians female; transsexuals enforce a passage from one to another; cross-dressing combines the two; bigender floats between the two ... Whichever way we turn, the two lurks beneath ... [so that one can never escape the] normative straightjacket of the binary opposition of masculine and feminine” (Žižek 2016a). Socially constructed gender identity, in this sense, happens only after the process of sexuation has taken place and the (never resolved) trauma of having to take a position has played out.

But while I tend to side with Žižek in this debate, I do nevertheless wonder why, for Lacan as for Žižek, the two mutually exclusive positions vis à vis the phallus are labelled “masculine” and “feminine” rather than simply “all” and “not all.” Even though all gendered subjects — female, male, trans, bigender, bisexual, etc., — must sexuate either one way or the other, so that females or trans people can be “masculine” and males or bisexuals “feminine,” the problem is that the heteronormativity of such labelling remains. It is surely this unease that is expressed in the critiques of Butler, Coffman and Miell, even if they may misinterpret Lacan’s/ Žižek’s notion of sexuation. In other words, it is the heteronormative markers of the two mutually exclusive positions under the phallic function that elicit confusion between gender and sex: people tend to equate the binary ontological deadlock (the forced traumatic “choice” of either the “male” or “female” position) with a socially coded compulsory heterosexuality. So the two positions are not limited by the gender binary, as Žižek and Carlson are right to underline,

yet they are nonetheless metaphorically tainted by it, a problem which might be averted if they were labelled differently.

The Performative Dimensions of Žižek's Interventions

Žižek remains a theorist of antagonism to the end, it seems. Antagonism underpins his notion of critical Eurocentrism, enabling him to readily admit to his European partisanship, while retrieving from it a negative universalist dimension that opens up to articulation with other (equally partisan) non-European positions in shared struggle. His hermeneutics of antagonism also comes through in his interventions on refugee and trans politics, permitting him to highlight the fundamental deadlocks on all sides — the European Left (for disavowing the problems of global capitalism, thus enabling the rise of right-wing populism and anti-immigrant racism), refugees (for failing to adequately face up to the limits of their “dreams”) and trans people (for too easily acquiescing to the capitalist liberal democratic myth that sexual anxiety can be eliminated). Yet, while his hermeneutics of antagonism has enabled him to engage with a range of global issues and, in my view, effectively dispute his critics at the level of philosophical argument, I want to suggest that, at the level of performativity (ie the form, style, enactment of his arguments), such a hermeneutics has been counter-productive. This is because it is bound up with an antagonistic address that ends up undoing the work of his arguments. In other words, Žižek hoists on his own petard, becoming victim to his own notion of antagonism.

As implied in the previous sections, antagonism is central not just to the substance of Žižek's arguments, but to their form as well. That is, his arguments, especially (but not exclusively) those he conducts in non-academic fora — his op-ed pieces, public lectures, media appearances — tend to be provocations and polemics. Partly, this has do with a sense of “urgency” (see Žižek 2011): at a time when it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of global capitalism, Žižek appears to feel a pressing need to raise the alarm, almost as if to try and shock people into realizing what and how much is at stake. And partly, as highlighted earlier, the provocations have to do with Žižek's philosophic goal of taking sides (ie admitting to one's partisanship and fighting for one's position), while bringing out the deadlocks of every side, including one's own. This implies having to raise uncomfortable questions, be they about liberal multiculturalism, right- or left-wing racism, or Left political correctness and complicity with global capitalism. It also implies trying to reclaim and redefine “master

signifiers” — immigration, refugees, democracy, culture — so as not to concede them to right-wing populism (Kotsko 2015).

But the consequence of provocations is often that they tend to proceed by extreme and generalization. Žižek’s hermeneutics of antagonism often raises limit cases, since for him these frequently tell the truth of a position, bringing out its gaps and extremities. To wit, he raises the politics of Boko Haram when speaking about trans politics (because both want to get rid of sexual antagonism, according to him) (Žižek 2016b), or he aligns refugee/immigrant homophobia with that of Mugabe, Putin and Boko Haram (ie because of their common portrayal of the West as “sexually depraved”) (Žižek 2015c). Yet, despite his own repeated reminders that he is a committed radical Leftist/Communist, many of his critics point out that his arguments sound close to right-wing ones (Kriss 2015b; Alarian 2016), with some even seeing his pronouncements on refugees/immigrants as indistinguishable from those of David Cameron and Marine Le Pen (Sørensen 2015; Ahmed 2016). His dependence on limit cases is taken not as part of a philosophic critique (in the Kantian/Hegelian sense of that term) but as black-and-white argumentation and caricature, so that disapproval of particularisms (that of non-Europeans, immigrants, refugees or trans people) is equated with narrow Eurocentrism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism and/or transphobia. His detractors end up seeing his criticisms as sleights against minorities, overlooking his political sympathies for the struggle of the likes of refugees and trans people (see Khader 2015) and his more overarching argument that the broader struggle needs to be directed at that which cuts across all such particular struggles: the global capitalist liberal democratic order.

Žižek is also portrayed as making generalizations, with critics seeing him as speaking about the North American trans community as though all its members have bought into multiculturalism and corporate branding, or about European refugees/immigrants as though all tend to be misogynistic, homophobic and religious (Kriss 2015a; 2015b; Riemer 2015; see Miell 2016c). What such critics tend to misunderstand, it seems to me once again, is that his goal is less to generalize than to tease out the antagonisms within each camp of the debate, including and especially the camp he might most identify with politically (non-Europeans, refugees, trans people) so as to point out the ideological impurities and entanglements of *all* camps — the Other’s as much as one’s own.⁶ His rhetorical strategy means, as Kotsko suggests (2015), that he often “overidentif[ies] with the (inadequate) terms of public debate in order to press beyond

them.” Yet the problem is that such a strategy frequently miscarries, with people (including Left analysts) misinterpreting his message and/or failing to grasp his broader philosophical intent. There thus appears to be a certain disconnect between what he says and what is heard, at least by some quarters. In other words, his hermeneutics of antagonism may well be pushing the boundaries of mainstream political imaginaries or academic inquiry, but it doesn’t always translate well in the arena of broader public debate.

Such miscommunication is not helped by Žižek’s (alleged) ad hominem. The most obvious instance is of course his “fuck you!” during that 2013 LSE public lecture, which as mentioned above was uttered light-heartedly in the context of a critique of Mignolo, and while not necessarily addressed to the latter was nonetheless taken by Dabashi (and likely others) as such. But there are also other examples: his characterization during a 2016 LSE lecture of “Conchita Wurst” — the name borne by the drag queen who won the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest — as “some tasteless name” (2016b at 22:30), which despite Žižek’s defense of transgender rights could nonetheless be interpreted as transphobic; and similarly, his declaration that “I am opposed to [transgenderism]” (2016b at 40:30), which as we saw earlier he means philosophically as a critique of the attempt to escape the anxiety of castration but which can be (and has been) taken once again as transphobic [ie “I am opposed to transgenderism” = “I am opposed to trans people”]. Now Žižek is of course an avid raconteur of what he himself admits are “tasteless” jokes and an enduring critic of political correctness, yet what the examples above point to is that, at least to a degree, the lines between jocular criticism and prejudice can often blur, especially in the eyes of those who are not aware of his larger political project. In this sense, provocation and anti-PCness, while intended as tools of ideology critique, may well serve to undermine the latter, diverting attention to its proximate and outward form rather than its broader content.

Then there is the accusation that Žižek’s interventions tend to ignore the relevant academic/activist literatures. In his debate with Mignolo, for example, he doesn’t appear to know who Mignolo is, mistakenly identifying him as a “postcolonial,” as opposed to a “decolonial,” critic (Žižek 2013a at 41:39 to 42:20). Žižek certainly does not cite any of Mignolo’s numerous works (in contrast to Mignolo, who does engage with Žižek’s essay on Eurocentrism), restricting himself to responding to Mignolo’s immediate critique. In this regard, Stam and Shohat point out that Žižek frequently attacks postcolonialism, equating it with political correctness and

ressentiment (against the European Master), yet he makes almost no reference to any named theorist or book (eg Žižek 2002a: 545–6; 2008: 147–8), while often lumping together multiculturalism, depoliticized Cultural Studies and postcolonial criticism (Stam and Shohat 2012: 118–20; see also Gilbert 2007: 66). Many analysts (see Almond 2012; Stam and Shohat 2012: 120–1; Basu Thakur 2013: 70) point out, in fact, that the post/decolonial ethics of alterity of such thinkers as Spivak or Dussel, or the anti-colonial politics of Black radicalism and indigenous activism, is much closer to Žižek than he appears willing to concede.

Similarly, as Miell (2016a) and others have remarked, Žižek’s writing on trans issues is conspicuous by the absence of reference to recent psychoanalytic/Lacanian trans scholarship (eg Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1995; Carlson 2010; Coffman 2013; Gozlan 2014; Cavanagh 2016). The problem here is not so much the lack of academic “rigour” as the lack of political representation: as Che Gossett notes (2016), Žižek writes about “trans subjectivity with such assumed authority while ignoring the voices of trans theorists (academics and activists) entirely.” As pointed out earlier, particularly with respect to his initial foray on trans issues in *The Philosophical Salon* (2016a), Žižek can be (and has been) read as depicting the North American trans community as monolithic, as if all members subscribe to the demand for separate trans toilets and are co-opted/seduced by corporate capitalism. Not only does this misrepresent the community — indeed reference to recent critical trans scholarship would have prevented committing such a mistake — but it also ends up speaking *for* (and *to*) trans people as though they have no agency.

In this regard, it seems to me that Miell is right to ask why Žižek picks on the trans washroom controversy to engage in criticism: “I quite simply do not understand why transgender identity poses a case which must be specifically criticized” (Miell 2016b). It is almost as though Žižek is looking for an example to make a theoretical Lacanian argument about sexualisation, with the washroom controversy acting as the current news story that fits the bill. If so, then one is led to conclude that the trans community is being instrumentalized, all the more so when trans voices and scholarship are also being ignored.

A related criticism applies to the case of refugees: while Žižek may well be an “equal opportunity” antagonist, unwilling to shy away from identifying the deadlocks of any side (as underlined earlier), critics are not wrong to underline that some sides are less powerful than others. European refugees are already strangers in a foreign land and vulnerable to racist, right-wing attack, so criticizing them for harbouring in their midst misogynistic/homophobic

tendencies appears inappropriate, if not heartless, at least in this instance. Here, not only do critics see Žižek making gross generalizations as stressed above (see Kriss 2015a; 2015b; Riemer 2015), but according to them rather than helping counter the Right's domination of the EU refugee/immigration agenda, such generalizations may have the opposite effect — emboldening right-wing populism and further inflaming anti-immigrant racism. If the critics are right, then, Žižek's interventions on refugees, despite being intended as anti-racist, once again risk being counter-productive.

Meanwhile, in this *mêlée*, the voices of the refugees themselves are obscured, with everyone speaking about and *for* them. One wonders, in this regard, whether this problem could have been avoided if Žižek had found a better way of criticizing the Left for its PCness and for allowing the Right to dominate the immigration agenda, while refraining from directly implicating the EU refugees themselves, or at least not in the midst of the crisis, when passions were already inflamed. Aside from Žižek's rhetoric, his (ill-chosen) timing here is also an important part of the picture.

Finally, let me broach the issue of overexposure. As is well known, Žižek's output has been astounding to date, with over seventy single-authored books, more than twenty co-authored/edited books, two films (and several appearances in films), countless media interviews, and innumerable articles in academic journals and the popular/online press.⁷ Hundreds of his academic and public lectures are available on online platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. He has also engaged in numerous debates over the years on both current issues and academic subjects (postcolonialism, Eurocentrism, multiculturalism, liberal tolerance, trans politics, refugees, US elections, Christianity, anti-Semitism, the Israel/Palestine debacle, populism, feminism, Left politics, communism, the EU, UK elections, Brexit, classical and post-Marxism, liberalism, Object Relations Theory, Cognitivism, Foucauldian discourse theory, etc.). It seems plausible to suggest, then, that a contributing factor to the barrage of criticism he has received has to do with a negative reaction to his public exposure and “celebrity.” This problem is compounded by the fact that he does not simply publish a single opinion piece on a current issue but often several, then feeling the need to reply to his critics as well, and in the case of the trans washroom issue, more than once. It is thus not hard to see his writing, speaking and responding so much and so often as not more than an attempt at mastery, at having the last word. If so, then when his critics accuse him of Eurocentrism and elitism, they might be responding not so much

to his philosophic arguments — which they may well have missed or misunderstood — but to what they perceive as his stubbornness, notoriety, and authoritative and antagonistic stance.⁸

Conclusion

I have attempted to highlight the antagonism(s) at the heart of Žižek's recent interventions on Eurocentrism and refugee and trans politics. On the one hand, I have shown how he provides us with a highly original and trenchant hermeneutics/politics of antagonism, for which he is rightly considered one of the foremost philosophers of our time: it is a hermeneutics that brings to the fore the traumas and contradictions that trip up every human pursuit, yet on the basis of which a negative universalism can be constructed that reaches beyond particularistic politics to better confront the pressing problems of our global capitalist order. At the level of theoretical argument, in my view, Žižek's standpoint successfully counters his critics in each of the three controversies discussed.

But on the other hand, I have also dwelled on the performative dimensions of Žižek's interventions, which I have contended trip up the latter's philosophical and political content. That is, the style and enactment of his interventions militate against his theoretical-political message. Partly, this is a problem of miscommunication, which as Žižek is only too aware is endemic to social interaction: indeed, Lacan insists that any attempt at constructing a signified is always doomed, so that communication always misses its mark: "The very foundation of interhuman discourse is misunderstanding," he famously writes (1993: 184). This is evident, as pointed out earlier, in the gaps between what Žižek states/intends and what is apprehended, with several of his arguments — especially his more theoretical ones — misunderstood or taken out of context. It is also evident in his tendency to apply complex philosophic concepts to current news stories (eg "sexuation" in the context of the trans washroom controversy), which does not always succeed. Despite being famed for his explicit engagement with popular culture, there appears to be a distinct "ivory tower" dimension to some of Žižek's op-ed pieces, with some of his subtler theoretical forays translating poorly in the public arena. His meaning/intention thus sometimes gets derailed and displaced, so that even his attempts at further clarification stumble (eg replies to his critics), coming across less as an attempt at debate than mastery and control.

But partly Žižek trips up because of the excess (*jouissance*) of his interventions. This, too, should hardly be surprising, since as underscored at the very start of this paper, Žižek would

be the first to link enjoyment to antagonism: it is the excess of human drive, one's passionate attachment to an "extra," a surplus, that ends up derailing life (see Žižek 2006b: 62). And indeed there is a certain excess, perhaps recklessness, in Žižek's interventions — his polemics, overexposure, ad hominem, jocularity, "generalizations," neglect of academic/activist literatures, etc. — that provoke and enflame. His political objective may well be to push his opponents — on the Left as much as the Right — to face up to their antagonisms, but his excessive rhetoric may do the opposite, causing them to dig in their heels and further entrench their positions.

The result of such miscommunication and excess is that Žižek's philosophical arguments are not necessarily heard, with critics focusing more on their form than their content. It is worth noting that several of Žižek's friends and followers have publicly come to his rescue, defending him against charges of racism, uncritical Eurocentrism, Islamophobia, etc. (Zabala 2012; Khader 2015; Kotsko 2015; Marder and Žižek 2016; Muftah 2016). But even some of them have tired. In the wake of the refugee controversy in particular, Adam Kotsko (2016), a thoughtful and sympathetic analyst and erstwhile defender of Žižek writes:

if most readers construe [what Žižek states] as meaning the opposite of what is intended — then you are doing it wrong ... If your point requires a certain theoretical context in order to make sense, then you should not publish your point without that context ...

[Žižek] needs to stop writing these opinion columns ... before he completely destroys his reputation and legacy.

I would not go so far as Kotsko as to offer Žižek advice; instead my intent here has been more modest: to heed seriously Žižek's argument about having to face and come to terms with the antagonism/excess not just in the Other but in one's own midst, an argument which, as I have indicated, is no more applicable than to Žižek himself.⁹

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Notes

¹ Žižek has also engaged with Buddhism (2010a: 335–6, 2013b: 127–35), seeing parallels between it and some aspects of Lacanian thought (eg the void as not unlike the Real, *nirvana* as mirroring the idea of “traversing the fantasy,” etc.). But in contrast, he has been very critical of *Western* Buddhism (eg 2003: 26), characterizing it as a paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism.

² While I think Menon and Basu Thakur (who is sympathetic to Menon over and against Žižek) make many valuable criticisms of Žižek, I tend not to agree with them. Once again, I think both misinterpret (or ignore) Žižek’s conception of the universal, wrongly attributing to it positive features while missing its negative/antagonistic dimensions (see below re Menon). Basu Thakur mistakenly suggests, for example, that Žižekian universalism is about an “invitation” being offered “to the particular to join the universal,” which would of course result in the subaltern’s subordination to the hegemon (2013: 767, 764; see also Flemming 2015: 170). But as Flemming puts it, “for Žižek, to be universal is not to be a positive element within a symbolic system that asserts itself and is accepted as equal, but an excluded element that enters the frame and thereby negates the frame” (2015: 115). Žižekian politics, after all, is never about being accepted or tolerated by the dominant but engaging agonistically in a struggle to defeat, perhaps even annihilate, the dominant and thereby fashion a new politics.

³ I mean hermeneutics here in the broad, phenomenological sense of not just interpretation of texts, but interpretation that is always already bound up with an engagement in the world. This is especially the case with Žižek’s work, where antagonism is a negative ontological condition and hence integral to life and politics. A “hermeneutics of antagonism” is then at the same time a politics of antagonism.

⁴ Žižek has said that he is not in the least bit interested in hosting a refugee in his home — he wouldn’t even want to do that with family members. But on the other hand, he would be willing to have the state deduct half his salary to support refugees (see Khader 2015). His position is underpinned philosophically by a view, not of the goodness of the refugee-qua-neighbour, but the “monstrosity of the neighbour” (Žižek 2016c). In stark contrast to a liberal multicultural position of tolerance and celebration of alterity, he sees the Other as inaccessible, unknowable, incommensurable. My neighbour is a traumatic intrusion and makes me anxious (which has to do with anxiety about the stranger in myself). S/he is not “exotic” or “interesting,” someone I want to eagerly engage with, but rather someone I must maintain at a certain distance, suspending the desire to “understand” or empathize because this invariable translates into trying to incorporate or control her/him (Žižek 2005). The postcapitalist society for Žižek, then, is one in which there is social diversity but people politely ignore each other. They live alongside one another, despite

the existential gap between them and in a way that recognizes and faces such a gap. In this sense, true communication with the Other has nothing to do with reciprocal identification. Meaningful social encounters happen in unexpected or rare moments of solidarity and shared battle.

⁵ Coffman argues that Žižek's stance on the binary of sexual difference has changed to some extent, with Žižek more intransigent on the issue in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999: 272: the sexual relationship is an antagonism "between two sexes"), while being more open in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000: 110: sexual difference is the "name of a deadlock ... an open question of something that resists every attempt at symbolization") and *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993: 83: "sexual difference is to be viewed not as the 'polar opposition of two cosmic forces' ... [but as] a certain crack which prevents us from consistently imagining the universe as a Whole"). While I get Coffman's point, I disagree with it: I do not see a necessary shift in Žižek's thinking here but in fact a certain consistency. As I explain below, Coffman appears to be confusing sex with gender: in the Lacanian scheme, sexuation involves two mutually exclusive positions (confusingly labelled "masculine" and "feminine" instead of "all" and "not all"), which do not map straightforwardly with binary gendered heterosexism.

⁶ Having said that, I do think that his earlier quoted statement, "Such rules privilege the Western European way of life, but that is the price to be paid for European hospitality" (Žižek 2015a) is needlessly provocative, with the term "hospitality" likely ill-chosen: the word reads as though Europe is being beneficent and generous, militating against Žižek's argument (in the same piece) that Europe has itself, to a great degree, created its refugee problem.

⁷ In recent years, Žižek has repeatedly lamented being "more and more excluded" from publishing (eg Žižek 2016b) in such outlets as the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Guardian* and *London Review of Books*, publications he used to contribute to quite frequently at one time. While there is no doubt that such exclusion is the result of his radical (and likely what are seen as un-PC) views (in addition to accusations of self-plagiarism), it is hard to see this as impeding him from being heard, given his voluminous publications, his "celebrity" status, and the number of alternative venues he has been able to publish in instead (*Independent*, *In These Times*, *Jacobin*, *Philosophical Salon*, *Al Jazeera*, *Lacanian Ink*, etc.).

⁸ Žižek readily acknowledges that he talks "too much," and that his friends call him "Fidel" (2016e). Given his excessive talking and writing, one is tempted to see his own frequently deployed notion of the "obsessive neurotic" (2006a: 26) — the one who speaks ceaselessly in order to avoid facing the moment of silence/trauma — as a self-description.

⁹ Many thanks to Sheila Cavanagh, Gautam Basu Thakur and Kent Murnaghan for their invaluable comments and support.