

The Question of Žižekian Politics: Pragmatism or Revolution?

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Abstract:

The critical aspect of Slavoj Žižek's philosophical system is clearly established. It has allowed us to see the ideological backdrop of late capitalism and its political situation. As we move from critique of ideology to theory proper, the desert of Žižekian politics lies in describing the political implications of a politics of subjectivity. Here, I tackle the question of how should we deal with the post-event rupture, when the morning after demands us to present a viable alternative to the previous system. Engaging with Žižek's latest works, I find a deadlock: responding to the myriad of anti-Trump movements and actions, Žižek warned us of the dangers of false activity and invites us to further study the conditions that allowed the rise of clownish populists in the first place; concerning the European debate about the refugee crisis, he argues for the strengthening of European borders as well as provide an effective bureaucracy to deal with the influx of refugees, avoiding the liberal leftist naïveté of open borders. Such positions do not sit well with the liberal leftist politics that invite us to combat fascism at all costs and demand a compassionate policy towards the refugees. Here, the question of Žižekian politics becomes clear: is it a form of pragmatism (of instituting small reforms to radically change our political life) or a revolutionary theory that depends on the collective subject that introduces the rupture to the status quo? I do not argue that it is one or the other; rather, the two sides provoke a dialectical examination of our political situation, where grand revolutionary projects are constantly haunted by the stigma of failure. Hence, Žižekian politics, as a politics of subjectivity, is a politics of the organization of the collective from the margins that will break the status quo; but, as a politics of militancy, collectivity is complemented by the vigorous study of our present situation to be able to properly confront the political crises of our time.

Keywords:

Žižek; politics; populism; pragmatism; revolution; ideology

Slavoj Žižek's criticism of today's left reflects Ernst Bloch's observations of the left at the rise of Nazism. Like the German left of Bloch's time, mired in the academicism of their romantic and mercantilist critique of capital (Bloch 1991: 98), today's leftist movements are mired in their own sense of moralism, political correctness or, in the case of the Marxist-Leninist left, the insistence of using old slogans to combat new situations. For both Bloch and Žižek, moralism, nostalgia, and insurrectionism made the left incapable of addressing the rise of fascism and illiberal democracies. With the bankruptcy of both the social democratic and Marxist-Leninist left, Žižek opens the task of theorizing the coordinates of our political life under late capitalism, a stage where capitalist ideology is adept at appropriating criticism against it. The question that this essay takes on is the issue whether the stakes of a Žižekian politics is an invitation to pragmatism, working on ways to practically deal with political life, or a provocation to revolution, inviting us to form collectives of resistance that will lead the revolution and topple all the powers that be. While one can cite many passages from Žižek's texts advocating one or the other, one cannot reduce Žižekian politics to solely being pragmatic or revolutionary.

The procedure of this essay is two-fold. First, I argue that there is a lot to learn from Vladimir Lenin and Deng Xiaoping's socialist practice apropos their pragmatic steps to achieve a socialist goal. From these two historical figures we can understand Žižek's statement that the true test of the revolution is in what it can present as a concrete alternative. While Lenin and Deng confronted the similar challenge of resuscitating the economy, both took two opposing steps to realizing their goals. Lenin and Deng's administrations are marked by their efforts to contain the logic of capitalism; while Lenin emphasized the intensification of class struggle in the implementation of the New Economic Policy, Deng, on the other hand, sought to contain capitalism by extinguishing its internal contradiction with the notion of harmony enforced by the state. Given these two different approaches to socialist practice, I proceed to Žižek's conception of politics. Learning from the practice of Lenin and Deng, we arrive at two types of politics: one centered on the constant awareness of the contradictions of political practice and the reification of politics to

any metaphysical principle. To maintain the former position, a materialist pragmatism has to begin from an attitude of militancy: a discipline of being constantly aware of the inconsistencies of political life. This attitude of militancy can be perceived from Žižek's writings concerning religion and his fascination with Pauline theology.

A Lesson in Pragmatism: Two Renormalizations in Lenin and Deng

The very notion of being pragmatic is an unfavorable political term in Žižek's theoretical corpus. It entails the acceptance of an empiricist and realist political perspective that accepts the perennial position of liberal democracy and capitalism over all alternatives. To be a pragmatist is tantamount to Fukuyamaism. But should all pragmatisms be necessarily realist, post-ideological, and post-political (like its Anglo-American definitions)? In this section, I discuss the socialist pragmatisms of Vladimir Lenin and Deng Xiaoping. Their pragmatism was born out of the attempt to resuscitate the economy after years of failing to achieve a socialist economy through collective production. Both leaders had to grasp the need to make use of a market economy to boost the productive forces of their countries and provide a comparatively prosperous economy.

The lessons in Lenin and Deng offer two distinct approaches to grasping the factuality of a material condition and the ways to respond to them. The problem with Lenin's New Economic Policy was that in the short period of its implementation, it is difficult to pinpoint the crucial points where it failed or succeeded. One can only admire, like Žižek does, the audacity to take the initiative in admitting the mistake of jumping to communism and the need to take things slowly, willing to learn along the way. In the case of Deng however, the extensive years of his political life, the ups and downs of his political career, purged and reconciled more than once, allow us to see the extent of by which his insight and foresight have developed from the years after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) to the reformation of the Chinese economy. One can always blame Deng for being a revisionist and a "capitalist roader", but his statesmanship is admirable for its capacity to be flexible with the changing ideological tides of Maoist China. I would argue that the fundamental lesson from Lenin and Deng apropos the stakes of a Žižekian politics lies in their perception of struggle. Between Lenin and Deng are two ways to deal with the problems inherent to capitalism, its pure logic of production, exchange, and capital circulation, and its appropriation to the socialist economy. In Lenin, there is

always an invitation to learn with the added caveat to be always aware about the intensification of class struggle. With Deng, any problem caused by either the mechanisms of the state or the inherent contradictions in capitalism can be associated with anarchy and disorder, a fact that must be remedied and watched by the party to maintain harmony and stability. Militancy and harmony are two opposing approaches that can lead either to resolving struggles or repressing them.

Lenin in 1921: the Audacity to Retreat

Lenin proclaimed the “strategic retreat” during the Second Congress of Political Education Departments to introduce his argument for the necessary adoption of the “New Economic Policy” (NEP), an economic policy that advocated for the limited return of capitalism to improve the productive forces of the Soviet state as well as a concession to the peasantry, ending forced grain requisition in the countryside. In Žižek’s introduction to Lenin’s texts from the 1920s, he highlights two moments in Lenin’s strategic retreat. One is Lenin’s rejection of the model proposed in *State and Revolution* which ended his hopes for a communist world revolution and the formation, upon the seizure of state power by the vanguard party, of the initial stages of Marx’s notion of communism. Second, with the rejection of the stage-ist and utopian vision of *State and Revolution*, Lenin’s second retreat is economic. What he called “state capitalism” (the freedom to form private enterprises and engage in the free market, while the state holds key sectors of finance, infrastructure, and industry) was an instrument for a specific goal: the resuscitation of the economy and the integration of the peasantry to the Soviet state (Žižek 2017a: 30-31). As an economic retreat, the NEP was a deviance from the supposed economy of the Soviet state, one that is expected to be collectivist and different from the capitalist monetary economy. The NEP not only initiated a return of a monetary market economy, but also the return of private enterprises.

Both moments in the strategic retreat were goaded by the events that followed the October Revolution, where instead of peace, the Soviets have to fight a brutal civil war; instead of bread, the peasants have to deal with grain requisitioning and rationing. Since socialism meant a complete revolution from a bourgeois and backward society to a proletarian and modern one, the return of free trade within the Soviet state is dogmatically unthinkable. To describe the internal struggle in the Bolshevik party during the implementation of the NEP would require a book-length

study of the Soviet economy in the 1920s. An important point in this moment in the history of the Soviet state is how it was difficult for veteran members of the party to accept the economic provisions of the NEP (Chubarov 2001: 91). The NEP was, for Stephen Kotkin, the “Peasant Brest-Litovsk”, a policy that Lenin forced on the Soviet state to achieve his goals at whatever cost (Kotkin 2015: 389).

The NEP was a divisive policy (cutting the Bolsheviks into the right and left tendencies, supporting either full collectivization and world revolution or the slow and cautious policies of the NEP) and broke the Marxist stage theory of the history of productive forces. Without a linear conception of history, the legitimacy of the Bolsheviks would eventually be questioned. But Lenin is aware of the perceived problems of the return of the capitalists and any private enterprise. In his instruction to the Political Education Departments, he spoke of the intensification of class struggle and encouraged the people to learn from the capitalists the expertise of running the economy. The enemy is no longer imperialist monopoly capitalism, but “anarchic capitalism” and “anarchic commodity exchange”, a buzzword for unregulated capitalism in the centers of capitalism in the West (Lenin 1973: 67). Lenin’s pragmatic acumen lies in the way he juggles between concession to the market and militancy. While he instructs the workers to participate in the market economy, letting the capitalist squeeze out profits, he asserts, at the same time, the continuation of a fiercer struggle than the civil war (Lenin 1973, 68, 71-72). The martial tone of Lenin’s speech marks the guarded optimism that accompanies his concessions to the changing tides of the struggle.

The rejection of the initial Bolshevik socialist vision was crucial to pursue the original Bolshevik goal. Lenin was aware that he is making a tactical deviation and that a new capitalist class would emerge; still, the emphases on struggle allowed the party to consolidate its authority and manage the economy far better than the policies of “war communism” (from 1924 to 1928, the Russian economy was back to its pre-war economic level and grain production restored to its previous levels of productive yield) (Chubarov 2001: 90). Since the NEP had a short span as an official policy (by 1928, with Stalin in power, the foundations of the NEP were slowly being dismantled), one must avoid engaging in useless counterfactual speculations (“what if Lenin was alive beyond 1925 and saw the NEP through...”) to evaluate the effectiveness of Lenin’s strategic retreat. While Lenin was audacious enough to admit his mistakes and take a step back, Žižek highlights that Lenin’s cautious

moves also set the stage for Stalinism. Stalin, although he supported the NEP, was not amicable to the theoretical deviation that underlies Lenin's strategic retreat; with Stalin, we have a return to the historical materialist linear theory of history. The reaction to Lenin's theoretical detour was to renormalize his actions as part of a linear course of historical development that led to the modernization of the Soviet Union. The NEP was then reduced as a stage in the development of socialism within Russia (Žižek 2017a: 26).

Lenin's pragmatism, although short-lived, was able to trek a different path in the economic and political development of socialism than the one advocated by Marx himself (the need to pass through a prosperous bourgeois capitalist economy hoping that its internal crises would lead to a massive popular uprising against capital). By stepping back, he not only defended the achievements of the revolution, but turned the impossibility (the backwardness of the Russian economy and society) into the very category of possibility in pursuing the Bolshevik goal (Žižek 2017a, 26). Lenin's practice provides us with a framework in evaluating our next lesson.

Deng: The Administration of Harmony

To condemn Deng as a "capitalist roader" (a term used by Mao himself during the GPCR) or as a revisionist is a convenient argument made by those who are unaware of the changing tides of Maoism within the Communist Party of China (CPC) especially during the years after the GPCR up to the death of Mao. An important point of departure for any analysis of Deng's administration and reform policies must begin with the politico-ideological debates of 1975, a time when Mao posed the question of the legacy of the GPCR. With the drafting of a new constitution during the Fourth National People's Congress, Mao inserted the worker's freedom to strike: a policy that aimed to allow the workers a direct control over the politics of the state, strengthening the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in practice (Russo 2013: 241-242). He was wary of the return of capitalism in any form (whether economically or culturally) as well as any form of theoretical deviation. His solution was to politicize the factory and economic work (politicizing the productive forces in general) as a counterweight to the bourgeois (Taylorist) reification in the factory; Mao's policy allowed workers to be engaged politically in the management of the factory, forming theoretical collectives for the study of the important theories of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought (but not to the extreme so as to avoid the events in

Shanghai in 1966-1967). Deng responded to this invitation to theorization with indifference. In 1975, he was working to fix the chaotic political and bureaucratic system caused by the internal power struggles and denunciations within the party, breaking the factions that emerged during the GPCR. For Deng, the GPCR was responsible for the state of disorder in the party and the state; a disorder whose cause must be “thoroughly negated, while creating a new socialist vision for China” (Russo 2013: 257). By being indifferent to Mao’s invitation to revisit and determine the legacy and achievements of the GPCR, Deng worked to reverse the democratization of the factory and assert state control over the workers. Political cadres, the sites of Maoist instruction, were “put in order” and placed under strict state control and supervision. One of the hallmarks of the GPCR, the direct involvement of the masses in the political and economic life of the nation, was abolished in the name of order and the struggle to end factionalism; the great Maoist experiment was over (Russo 2013: 261).

Deng’s indifference to the ideological oscillations within the CPC and obsession with order would eventually put him in conflict with Mao. When Mao posed the question of the meaning of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the extent by which the GPCR strengthened the proletariat, his abstract, almost metaphysical, question implied the call for a new theorization to analyze new situations, but Deng approached the question creatively by posing the issue as a problem that can only be solved by enforcing order against anarchy (Russo 2013: 242). So while Mao spoke of assessing theoretical matters and maintaining theoretical purity, Deng spoke of *zhengdun* (to correct a disorder), *jilǔ* (discipline), and severe punishments to combat *luan* (disorder) and factionalism.¹ Deng’s targets were specific: cadres, party-state bureaucrats, and leaders of working groups (*danwei*); discipline puts in line the members of the ruling nomenklatura, imposing strict discipline to members of the party. Modernization demands discipline especially from the party. The point of contention between Mao and Deng is in the extent of what must be put in order. Deng’s supporters theorized this by synthesizing the perceived aims of Mao Zedong thought with Deng’s pragmatism and brand of statesmanship which focused on three fundamental concepts: stability, unity, progress (Russo 2013: 266).

The final stroke against Mao would occur at the succession of Hua Guofeng. Hua’s supporters were persistent Maoists who insisted on upholding whatever policies Mao made and follow whatever decisions and instructions Mao gave; the

condemnation of the “two whatevers”, as it was known, allowed Deng to finally negate the legacy of the Maoist period, while maintaining the legitimacy of Mao as the founder of the nation. Constantly mentioning the achievements and failures of Mao’s leadership (70 per cent achievement and 30 per cent mistakes) allowed Deng to highlight what he thinks are the sole aims of Mao: party building and modernization (Deng 1995: 55, 58).

Deng is the quintessential party bureaucrat: one who is adept at repackaging official slogans to achieve a different course of action. His creative approach to Mao Zedong thought reaches its most ironic in 1979:

We should emancipate our minds and restore the good social conduct that prevailed for a long time. We shall try to fully arouse the initiative of the people in order to accomplish the four modernizations, but we have a precondition, that is, we need to create a political situation characterized by social stability and unity (Deng 1995: 237).

Deng’s solution is fundamentally a Kantian one: you can explore everything you want, exercise creativity in solving problems, and so on, but obey the party and follow its orders.²

Although Mao instructed cadres to obey their superiors, an important aspect of Maoist political practice is the role of the masses in criticizing members of the party, if it deviates from its own policy and faithfulness to Marxism-Leninism (what in Maoist practice is called the right to “criticism and self-criticism”).³ The ideological effects of Deng’s emphasis on order eventually led him to argue that class struggle has been finally resolved. “The bourgeoisie no longer exist in China. There are still former capitalists, but their class status has changed (Deng 1995: 239).” Harmony trumps chaos even on the level of class struggle; there is only class unity with the common goal of modernizing the nation.

One of the favorite slogans of the post-Deng CPC is the imperative to constantly reexamine Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought to the changing conditions of Chinese society and economy. It is easy to dismiss this imperative as an empty gesture that retains the slogans of communism as a state ritual, while engaging in the liberalization of the economy and letting capitalism run wild.⁴ The ideological debates of 1975 and the changing faces of Maoism after Mao are two important moments in understanding Deng’s economic reforms. Whatever economic

effects the reforms had achieved, the Marxist rhetoric of today's Chinese communists is not an empty gesture, but emerged from the belief that they can get the best out of capitalism to achieve socialist goals as long as they can repress the contradictions inherent to capitalism, by implementing a policy of constantly putting capitalism into order.

Two Opposing Pragmatisms: Opportunities and Missed Opportunities

We can thus pose the question: why is Lenin's retreat treated as audacious and revolutionary, while Deng's reforms and interpretation of Mao Zedong though considered reactionary? Lenin in 1921 and Deng in 1975 onwards faced analogically similar situations: both confronted the challenge of reconstructing an economy and realizing the failure of an initial experiment with collective production. Both are aware that the true work of the revolution lies at "the morning after" great revolutionary mobilizations; a situation that requires a great discipline to reconstruct a new social order, different from the old (Žižek 2003: 135; Žižek 2012: 188). In the case of Lenin, his retreat to the NEP was constantly followed by the caveat to confront the struggles that lay ahead. Deng, on the other hand, saw the inherent contradictions of the market as something that can be put in order. As revolutionary subjects, Lenin and Deng are two opposing figures. Lenin is the paradigm of the revolutionary subject. Lenin's tactical deviations and strategic retreats show his awareness that the path to socialism is not paved by the organic progress of history or the internal logic of a developed capitalism. In Lenin, there is no ontological principle to guide the progress of history; it is the proletariat and the party that creates history by working through the struggles that lay ahead.

While Deng faced similar challenges as Lenin in 1921, by 1975, Deng's approach to the administration of the state is already oriented to his perception of order and harmony. From the Maoist emphases on democratic collectivism and centralism, Deng reverses Maoist collectivism to intensify the role of a virtuous party that works for the benefit of the people (Žižek 2017b: 89-90). He relies extensively on a very Chinese philosophical concept of order and saw disorder as an external obstacle that intrudes in the social stability of the nation. His conception of order is an onto-theological reaction to Mao's "chaos under heaven". Deng can be described, in a limited way, as a cynical realist; his pragmatic approach to statesmanship follows from a fetishistic disavowal of Mao's revolutionary legacy. As long as Mao

exists merely as the founder of the nation whose achievements outweigh his mistakes, whatever deviation from the socialist goal can be easily justified as a holistic understanding of Mao Zedong thought. Deng's cynicism lies in his most popular proverb: "it does not matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as, it catches mice, it is a good cat." While this proverb embodies the pragmatism that Deng is famous for, it clearly shows his cynical distance with the legacy of Maoism. This cynical distance reaches its peak in the utopian aspiration of the CPC to construct a harmonious and moderately prosperous society (*Xiaokang* society). The goal of this harmonious society is unfettered production without obstacles, one that fully utilized the creative capacities of everyone, united under the control of the party.

What I shall later call as a materialist notion of pragmatism takes off from what we can learn from Lenin's audacity and the missed opportunities under Deng. Both are products of revolutionary events, but what makes Lenin different from Deng is the role of class struggle in the reconstruction of the economy and the state. Deng's socialism with Chinese characteristics depends on a philosophical and ontological conception of order. By emphasizing the need for harmony, Deng and his successors want to throw the dirty water of capitalist contradictions, while keeping the healthy baby of capitalist prosperity. Leninist pragmatism, on the other hand, is made with the attitude of guarded optimism. To build a new society required multiple steps backwards working diligently to solve problems; but while retreating is oftentimes needed, it is always followed by a guarded militancy, aware of an intense fight, needed to reconstruct society.

The Revolutionary Militant Subject

In our examination of Lenin and Deng's pragmatisms, two apparent details emerge. First, the challenge faced by both individuals is the reconstruction of the economy; beyond the slogans, there is a call for a concrete economic and social program to put the economy back in shape. This challenge opens up after great revolutionary mobilizations; when the fires of revolution die down, the new ruling party inherits the problems created by the old regime. Both Lenin and Deng faced the need to defend the achievements of the revolution by arriving at policies that aim to resolve the problems inherited from the previous regime and their own failures to build a collective mode of production. Second, with the legitimacy of the revolution at stake, Lenin and Deng diverge on the crucial point of utilizing the political

mechanisms of the state to achieve their economic ends. For Lenin, the retreat to state capitalism is a political move inasmuch as it is an economic one; thus, the struggles of the political include the economic. With the Deng, society, the economy, and the party are independent units that operate harmoniously. They are pre-given entities that require administration by a legitimate authority.

As we move from the historical discussion, the lessons from Lenin and Deng allow us to theorize the subject involved in the struggle, a subject that persists even after great revolutionary mobilizations have died down. The militant subject is the central topic of this section and binds together with a materialist conception of pragmatism. Our inquiry would proceed with Žižek's political ontology; to see how he saw reality is the key to determining the place of the militant subject in political struggle. Once that has been properly described, we can describe the consequences of a materialist pragmatism to a politics envisioned under a Žižekian theory.

The Inconsistency of the Political

In the *Science of Logic*, G.W.F. Hegel begins the chapter on the doctrine of being by defining what are essentially two similar terms: being, as pure being, and nothingness. Pure being in its immediacy is indeterminate immediacy, containing no substantial content whatsoever. Thus, nothingness, in its simplicity, is the complete absence of a determination, an emptiness that can be thought of (Hegel 2010: 59). When Hegel made the claim that being and nothing are the same, it implies that the immediate reality of objects meant the indeterminateness of immediate reality (Hegel 2010: 60). The thing-itself is not an inaccessible object of pure positivity, but, in its pure indeterminate simplicity, is an empty shell, an inherent negativity. Hegel presented a claim to counter Kant's dualism; the noumena does not contain any substantial reality outside of human consciousness, but what it does have inherent to its own is the lack of determinateness. In the Žižekian appropriation of Hegelian ontology, the inseparability of being and nothing implies that the ground of reality is the indeterminateness of reality. Žižek's references to quantum physics developed Hegelian ontology to its full materialist consequences. Since reality at quantum-level is constantly unstable, the perspective of the observer is equal to the explanandum. Reality at the quantum level always exhibits the model imposed upon it. Formalization is a crucial starting point that one has to necessarily begin by posing an assumed model from which one can build a general framework of reality.

Quantum physics fundamentally begins with the incompleteness of reality (Žižek 2013: 925).

Žižek's ontological system posits an acosmic reality, grounded on the absence of an apodictic ground that exists by itself and devoid of any internal consistency (Johnston 2009: 135). Hence, there are two absences in his ontological system: the subject as lack (or what Lacan described with the matheme \$) that implies the absence of an interior truth and the lack in reality, implying the absence of an ontological foundation or internal consistency that makes a "world" or "nature", as a homeostatic system possible. On this latter point, it means that a Žižekian ontology has no place for the two conceptions of history that assumes either the linear progression of history, reaching its end as the actualization of a concept (as in Marx's theory of history) or as a cyclical system that would eventually return to its source (the new age conception of nature). Rejecting the linear and the cyclical conception of historical progress, the acosmic conception of history makes history open for a subjectivity that creates it.

Applied to politics, Žižek accepts the claim of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that society as a homogenous conglomeration of individuals, practices, and relationships do not exist (Žižek 2002: 182). There is no homogenous field that sustains the multiplicity of social practices; the political, therefore, does not arise as an irruption into the homogenous social edifice. Johnston:

Žižek's Marx-influenced political deployment of his ontological version of the Lacanian thesis regarding the big Other's non-existence leads him to portray the underlying being of the social body (i.e. the symbolic Other) as a jumble of conflicts and tensions. As heterogenous and inconsistent split and fissured in its very (non-)essence, the not-whole ensembles of social strata always contain within their midst a plethora of political (or at a minimum proto-political) potentials (Johnston 2009: 139)

The ontology of tension is Žižek's name for class struggle: without the homogenous field of social relations, struggles between social agents are not pre-determined by their reified roles in the mode of production. Rather, class struggle, in a Žižekian sense, is marked by the split non-essence of the social, a realm prior to the antagonistic and non-antagonistic relationship, creating a tension that makes one or the other possible. The Maoist aspect of Žižek's notion of class struggle occurs in a conception of society without a determined system of human relations or a

conglomeration of practices that form the whole. The political, therefore, does not begin from the inherent logic of present social formations (or as Marx puts it: from the inherent crises of capitalism). Rather, it comes from the lack in the social itself, in what composes the not-all of the symbolic system. Žižek, therefore, has no metalanguage for what makes reality a consistent whole. The analytic moment does not provide us a model for what the object of analysis is, but indicates to the analysand his place in the lack. One should not expect a Žižekian notion of the political sphere; there is no political sphere as such; the political is a field where antagonistic or non-antagonistic relations oscillate inconsistently.

Since Žižek saw reality as inconsistent and without any external guarantees of meaning, its political repercussions imply the lack of any notion of historical progress. His critique of Marx expresses his rejection of such a conception of history, while his admiration of Lenin's subjective audacity is his exemplar for a subject that acts without a big Other as an external guarantee to legitimize any action. The important distinction between a simple pragmatic reformism and revolution is the former's reliance in the external other of politics, in whatever name(s) it might take (normative politics, liberal democracy, and so on), that makes the reform necessary and legitimate. A revolution is, first and foremost, defined as an act made without the intent of being interpreted by an external observer. An urban insurrection, a simple political reform, or a strike by the industrial and intellectual precariat can, depending on the circumstances in its placement in the political struggle, be either a simple "acting out", for the gaze of an external observer, or a legitimate "act" that can transform society.

Destitution, the Act, Militancy: A Materialist Theory of Pragmatism

In the penultimate scene from Hideaki Anno's *The End of Evangelion* (an alternative ending to the TV series), Rei Ayanami (a clone who contains the spirit of Lilith, the primordial female in the Lurianic Kabbalah), who was fused with Adam (based on *Adam Kadmon* of the Kabbalah), gives Shinji Ikari, the main protagonist, a choice: accept "human instrumentality" and fuse all of humanity into a single consciousness and end all suffering, or persist in living a mortal life filled with more suffering than happiness and satisfaction. After a long series of soliloquies and disputations, Shinji realizes that living in a world of suffering is better than a state of being without it, since it is in suffering that everything is possible. Shinji's "no" is an

act that affirms the destituteness of human life as the condition that opens up all possibilities. His reaction to instrumentality is the Christian response to the Buddhist problematic: suffering is not an obstacle to be eliminated, but the very possibility of liberation. Shinji finds himself, at the end, on the shores of a post-apocalyptic world, facing the open possibilities of the future. The film's open ending implies that the world is in his hands; it needs to be reconstructed and he cannot depend on any external figures to legitimize his acts.

The obvious Pauline response to *Evangelion's* ending can be found in the letter to the Ephesians. Paul exhorts the church of Ephesus to wear the armor of God, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit (Eph 6: 10-17). The use of martial metaphors is not coincidental, but part of the Pauline concept of truth. This truth is not sought as knowledge (as the Greeks do), but worn by its subjects as a weapon in the spiritual warfare that lay ahead. The theological use of the martial rhetoric describes the life of the subject after he has been touched by the truth. Badiou describes this apropos the figure of the soldier in poetry: poets have used the figure of the soldier as the metaphor for the capacity of human beings to go beyond what is possible in the service of the idea (Badiou 2012: 30). But he only saw one side of the martial language of poetry and, eventually, Paul's rhetoric i.e. the subject that was occupied with the impossible task of defending the idea. As Žižek emphasized, the true battle starts after great revolutionary acts, when the work of reconstruction begins. In the Pauline theological rhetoric, he preached that the battle against sin intensifies after one's confession and acceptance of Christ's resurrection.

The End of Evangelion describes the two moments in Žižek's theory of political transformation. The first moment is the realization of one's subjective destitution. In the TV series, Shinji is constantly haunted by the gaze of his father, Gendo Ikari, who constantly forces him to pilot the Evangelion and fight humanity's enemies. Later on, he would eventually start to enjoy fulfilling his father's wishes. By the film's beginning, Shinji deals with his destitution; since all of humanity's enemies had been defeated, he already lost his sense of purpose to his father's gaze. Once he realized that his father's gaze does not exist, he responds to that realization by acting without the intention of satisfying the (paternal) gaze. When he rejects human instrumentality (something that his father would have wanted so he could be united with his deceased wife), the rejection was his "act" of freedom from the (paternal)

gaze. Shinji's Bartleby response is his act, the second moment in the Žižekian notion of political transformation. His act is not meant to be interpreted by an external gaze; it is a self-sufficient act without the provocation of being deciphered by the Other. Shinji's rejection of instrumentality is a gesture that transforms the symbolic, reconstructing the subject as well as the symbolic register of his world (Johnston 2009: 146-147). The film, however, lacks the third moment; the moment where the work of reconstruction is carried out by the handiwork of militancy, a guarded optimism that is open to strategic retreats and progress.

Militancy is a crucial component of a materialist notion of pragmatism. But how do we find this in Žižek's works and how should we differentiate this notion of pragmatism with the Anglo-American political reformism? In *The Courage of Hopelessness*, one finds Žižek at his most pessimistic. Writing that the search for an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, true courage is the capacity to realize the hopelessness of our situation that the light at the end of tunnel is an incoming train (Žižek 2017b: xi-xii). Is Žižek's pessimism a form of cynical distance or a fair warning to the voices of the left that called for an immediate uprising after the electoral victories of illiberal populists? I read this passage as aimed at figures on the left that called for immediate action and rushed alternatives to the current tides of capitalism and populism. Žižek's warning has one fundamental message: alternatives drawn from popular outrage are insufficient and would likely fail. Outrage clouds judgment and the capacity to make sharp distinctions between problems and opportunities. The invitation to pragmatism follows from the deadlock of our theoretical blindness, caused by our dependence on outrage as a factor uniting collectives together. The basic message of Charles Sanders Peirce is still relevant: one must still be able to distinguish obscure ideas from clear ones and constantly examine the clarity of our ideas through thorough examination and not just an explication of our theoretical deadlocks. Peirce's pragmatism might appear to the reader as the very embodiment of American pragmatism and its centrist political reformism. However, we can read Peirce's pragmatic maxim to arrive at its latent materialist consequence. He, like any of the other American pragmatists, falls under the notion that reality can exist by itself and that any ideas we form come only from the sensations of those objects. Eventually, all of our knowledge of the object is founded on the experience of the object. The pragmatic maxim, supposes that the knowledge we can obtain from objects is limited by our encounter with them; hence,

it is essential to work together to form any knowledge of the integral whole (Peirce 2001: 6). The maxim emphasizes the need for variegated practices of knowledge accumulation to converge and form a collective whole. The materialist consequence of this maxim implies the absence of a reality that is complete and inherently consistent. The incompleteness of our knowledge is parallel to the incompleteness of reality.

Pragmatism is not merely an attitude, but a method of clarifying ideas through the test of dialectical examination. Concepts and ideas formed through outrage and resentment contain an obscure element, hiding beneath its naïve optimism: the vague notion that anything evil must be eliminated by the sheer force of collective will and collective justice. While collectivism might sound a correct stance in any political struggle, it is difficult to create a tactical line, when the collective will is blinded by outrage. Militancy is the name for a discipline that keeps a level headed approach to political life; it does not reject outrage, but sees it as something that must be worked through and conceptualized into a concrete collective advocacy. As an attitude to political life, it expresses a guarded optimism that allows the militant to constantly address the changing tides of politics with a clear head and the awareness that any political problem can be solved by the thorough study of its internal inconsistencies; it does not begin with the assumption that the political is always already present, but as an indeterminate realm, where everything is possible. Such an attitude is necessary in the reconstruction of society after great revolutionary acts, a time when the demand for a clear program is necessarily needed. This is the attitude that Žižek thought is sorely needed by the left. Apropos the failure of Syriza to stop the austerity measures imposed upon them by financial institutions, he writes:

If one wants to produce something truly new in politics, it is not enough to have a government directly relying on a strong popular presence: the unique enthusiasm of such a situation gets soon diluted into inertia or even despair if a political organization does not propose a concrete plan of what to do... So do I display distrust in the people? Yes, there is nothing non-communist about it. "People" are an inconsistent multiplicity capable of breathtaking acts of solidarity that surprise cynical intellectuals, but they can also get lost in the lowest fascist passions (Žižek 2017b: 86-87)

For Žižek, the problem with the left is that it relies highly on the sheer power of collective forces, organized around a common outrage. When the left does attain

power, it can only provide ideas for a robust welfare system to dampen the effects of global capitalism. So when Žižek implores the left to take the strategic retreat, it is an invitation to rethink the parameters of our politics. Mere collectivism is insufficient.

To conclude, a materialist conception of pragmatism is not a simple reformism. Either political reformism or vanguard party politics can provide the possibility of an authentic political transformation as long as it emerged from an attempt to work through the inconsistencies of the political. Should an event emerge from the spontaneous act of political subjects; militancy sustains the event through the discipline of constantly and consistently reframing the social. As a methodic discipline that examines the theoretical boundaries and limitations of political life, militancy guards communist optimism with the sharpness of critique.

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Notes

¹ A quick note on Deng's use of terminology, the terms he uses (*luan*, *jilù*, *zhengdun*) are commonly used in Chinese classics. A clear example of this is *luan* (亂): a term commonly used in Classical Chinese to denote "disorder" of any kind which also necessitates the need to "put into order". While Mao's effort in the GPCR was to instigate a clear break from Chinese history and its traditional practices, we see in Deng's rhetoric the attempt at a synthesis that would come to be known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

² Lenin makes a similar statement: “And our whole task, the task of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks), which is the class-conscious spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation, is to appreciate this change, to understand that it is necessary, to stand at the head of the exhausted people who are wearily seeking a way out and lead them along the true path, along the path of labour discipline, along the path of co-ordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings *about* the conditions of work with the task of unquestioningly obeying the will of the Soviet leader, of the dictator, *during* the work ... We must learn to combine the ‘public meeting’ democracy of the working people – turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood – with *iron* discipline while at work, with *unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader, while at work (Lenin 1974: 270).”

³ Consider this quote from Mao in 1966: “you say that it is right to rebel against reactionaries; I enthusiastically support you (Mao 1966).” The difference in the language between Mao and Deng is worth noting; to rebel means to correct what was wrong and express one’s loyalty to the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. With Deng, the right to rebel disappears and is replaced by initiative as the creative capacity of individuals (talents, capacities, skills of the majority), appropriated by the state to form a harmonious whole.

⁴ This observation makes a strong point. Contemporary footages of the CPC show members of the party unable to sing the Internationale during party congresses (compare that to how communist activists sing the Internationale). Moreover, recent news footage from Xinhua News shows Xi-Jinping leading a discussion of the *Communist Manifesto* to completely apathetic members of the Central Committee of the CPC, while Xi masterfully inserts an apologia for the liberalization of the economy, in between discussions of Marx’s work.