

The Truth of the Fully-Engaged Subject

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Abstract: This commentary provides a critique of Žižek's 2021 article on the catastrophe of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan with a focus on Žižek's nostalgic moment of the fully engaged subject. The commentary deploys the actual and possible scenarios of the form of subjectivity in association with the cynical subject and the sadistic superego; and suggests the possibility of an alternative ethical subjectivity.

Keywords: fully-engaged subject, cynical subject, sadistic superego, the ethnical subject

Amid the catastrophic pullout of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, Slavoj Žižek issued an op-ed in Russian Times as an explanation of "The real reason why the Taliban has retaken Afghanistan so quickly, which Western liberal media avoids mentioning." (Žižek, 2021) After dismissing several (failed) Western liberal media's attempts at enlightening us on the causes of the debacle, Žižek does what he does the best: offering an incisive analysis of the forms of ideology-subjectivity. According to Žižek, what is truly traumatic for the West "is the Taliban's disregard for survival and the readiness of its fighters to assume 'martyrdom,...' " (Žižek, 2021) Different from the Western subject of knowing, belief as "intellectual insights," the Taliban assumes its belief as "an engaged subjective position." Admittedly, Žižek does not conceal his admiration for the ruthless subjective engagement of the members of the Taliban: their embodiment of their beliefs, or their acting as the material forces of their ideology. Meanwhile, Žižek's analysis features two nostalgic moments: Foucault's fascination with the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the late 1970's, and the "collective emancipatory engagement," the latter of which strongly suggests some form of subjective engagement found primarily in the 20th century of communist experiments.

Different from other critics of Žižek (ex. Bhattacharjee 2021, Zuesse 2021) I find the analysis consistent with Žižek's own frameworks; and notably, it is penetrating and precise. Indeed, it is not what the other does that is traumatic for us, it is why the other does what it does or the other's desire that terrifies us. However, the merciless killings on the streets of Kabul committed by members of the Taliban, which have been shown in various venues of social media, betray the monstrous side of such a fully engaged subject. Meanwhile, the violence in Kabul bears uncanny resemblance to the atrocities committed by the Nazis and the communists in the concentration camps and gulags, and by the Red Guards in the streets of the Beijing or Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. The only difference might lie in the means and manners of killing: the Taliban seems to enjoy the power over other's lives a little too much.

Of course, we are not unfamiliar with such subjective commitment which renders the person the very force of the "truth" he/she embodies, the force of the material truth. In our times of computers, cellphones, social media, machine learning,

and AI, we are even more intimate with the notion: does not the computer simply embody the truth of the operating system, software, etc.? How do we distinguish a robot from a fully engaged truth-subject? As one of the greatest Lacanians of our times, it is unlikely that Žižek does not know the difference. The answer is, of course, *jouissance*! (ex. Zizek 2000). The killing robot kills without passion or pleasure, it simply kills. The human fully-engaged subject kills with at least some degree of frenzy, fear, curiosity, or even sympathy, it kills with *jouissance*. The stereotypical serial killer depicted in movies needs some perverted form of "sympathy" with his victim to enjoy killing. It is this (sometimes minimal, sometimes frenetic) *jouissance* that renders the truth-embodied killer guilty because there is always a (minimal) gap between the subject and the material-truth it embodies, and the subject always has to imagine the unity. That is to say, the fully-engaged subject is never as fully-engaged as it believes.

The real point Žižek tries to make, however, seems to lie somewhere else, a moment of nostalgia that gently tiptoes into an insightful critique of ongoing geopolitical situation; the good old "traditional Marxism" which "provided a perfect European example of what Foucault was looking for in Iran (and of what fascinates us now in Afghanistan), an example which did not involve any religious fundamentalism but just a collective engagement for a better life." (Žižek, 2021) Here we see Žižek's attempt to purge the fully-engaged subject of its fundamentalism, religious or not. It is true that the bourgeois subject obsessed with "self-care" and tasteless pleasures is impotent when confronted with the fully-engaged subjects such as the members of the Taliban or the communists. However, the overly sensitive and fragile contemporary liberal subjectivity is precisely a partial imitation of the communist gesture, a gesture of total rejection of the current conditions, without any true engagement. Žižek's nostalgia is only justifiable with regard to the form of the subjective position, but is misplaced with regard to its substance. The communist substance, the "material" force, if generated, was purely destructive and vengeful; it has never been a moment of collective engagement for the "common good" as Zizek reminisces (Zizek 2021). Arguably, it was only able to create some semblance of normalcy when the cynical subject emerged, as precisely captured by Havel in his *The Power of the Powerless*, which Žižek has pointed to severally in his critique of the post-totalitarian moments in the Communist world

(Žižek, 1989, 2001). Žižek's nostalgic moment in the op-ed discussed here thus functions as fantasy to shield the real trauma of the really existed socialism.

In 2001, China finally became a member of the World Trade Organization after years of negotiation. In the same year a TV show, "The Years of Burning Passion", a story of the People's Liberation Army soldiers and officers set against the background of World War II and the Civil War of China (1946-1949) became a massive hit in the new era of entertainment. Surprisingly, this show found its most resounding resonance with the baby boomer generation, the generation born after the CCP seized power in 1949, instead of the revolutionary generations. This is the generation that later became the main source of the notorious Red Guards, which functioned as a pure destructive force manipulated by the Mao and his loyalists. In 1968, after the most violent episode of the Cultural Revolution came to a rest, some 16 million "educated youth," largely high school students, most of whom Mao's Red Guards, were called upon by the Great Leader to go to the countryside to be re-educated by the "poor peasants." In reality, they had no choice but leaving their families behind, abandoning any hope of going to college, and even working in a factory in the cities. The Leader's mandate was later turned into official policy; and all high school graduates in the ensuing year until 1977 had to go to rural areas and become peasants. The point here is not how much they suffered physically from their toiling and psychologically from their despair in the next decade, or how much this delayed China's industrialization and economic development, or not even to what degree this policy had exhausted the potentials of a whole generation. The point is that most members of that same generation of "educated youth," 40 years later, had become once again the first victims of waves of privatization and layoff. The hit TV show offered a fantasy that allowed them to retrieve some form of meaningfulness of their meaningless youth. What was being retrieved is precisely a pure form of subjectivity, fully-engaged and destructive, not dissimilar to Žižek's subject-as-material-truth; and the burning passion could only emerge retroactively as a loss in the modality of nostalgia. China's own lost generation is only shielded from the trauma of their youth with a nostalgic fantasy of "years of burning passion." With the successful transformation of the revolutionary subject to a nationalistic subject in the ensuing years, the substance of the "passion" was shifted from devotion to the Party to

an unquestionable loyalty to the Nation. This, I bet, Žižek would call ideology par excellence.

The op-ed in question is not the only place where Žižek reminisces the "collective engagement for a better life," (ex. Zizek 2008) in opposition to the contemporary bourgeois spectrum of the self: at one end is the "non-ideological objective expert knowledge," and on the other the "idiosyncratic 'care of the self.'" (Žižek 2021) What is salvaged from the catastrophes of the communist experiments in the 20th century is nothing but a pure form of subjectivity, somehow exemplified in Taliban's contempt for human life, including their own. Is this form of subjectivity not a shield from the real trauma of the really existed socialism? As Žižek suggests (Zizek 2001), the cynical subject works nowhere more effectively than in the post-totalitarian communist regimes. Arguably, without such a cynical attitude toward official ideologies the Soviet Union would not have lasted long after 1956; most of the East European regimes would not have survived the events such as the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring. And of course, the Chinese Communist regime would not have persisted through the reforms.

As Žižek knows well, the cynical subject, which seems to be a distinctive feature of the efficacy of the bourgeois ideology, was actually one of the most salient features of the post-totalitarian communist regimes. After moments of pure negativity which aims only at destroying the old-evil, the emergence of the cynical subject became the very sustaining factor that prolonged the life of many of the regimes. However, in between the moments of truth-subject and the cynical, is another form of subjectivity featuring the sadistic superego as the real, which torments the subject with its incessant and insatiable demands. During the second half of the 1960's until Mao's death in 1976 when six workday week was the norm, Saturday afternoons were reserved for sessions of "political study" and "self-criticism." This two-step ritual included first a public reading of the most recent documents issued by the supreme leader or the Politburo, which seemed to be a tireless machine that regularly churned out inspiring and reprimanding messages; and second a ritual during which attendants took turns to examine and expose one's own weakness and self-centered desires. In the late 1960's the movement

that demanded sessions to "struggle against one's flashes of selfishness" exemplified perfectly how the superego functioned: confessing publicly one's slightest concerns for oneself and exposing them as signs of deeply-rooted flaws that hindered one's loyalty to the regime and the Cause. The few naïve but sincere ones would soon discover that they were nothing but bottomless abyss of selfishness; and the indifferent ones would selectively admit to some minor "incorrect thoughts" and vow to eradicate them; and the vicious opportunists would take advantage of others' confessions to shield themselves and attack the over-confessed when opportunities presented themselves. This ritual could soon devolve into a mob that functioned as an external superego that punished and humiliated the person(s) who mistook the superego for an ethical authority.

Empirically at least, the social dynamics generated by such a sadistic superego proved to be sweepingly powerful as evidenced by the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, it would exhaust social trust quickly and reduce social interactions to much tentative exchanges of trivialities. The fear that any confessed guilt will be used against the confessor soon prevailed. This unforgiving superego writ large at the societal level was often externally embodied by a mob and served as the hinge toward the cynical ego. Absent of a framework that addresses the social and political dynamics in societies where the masses are subjectivized into "the people," namely, the fully-engaged subject itself becomes a machine with burning passion, a monster that no longer thinks, but asserts its being through its passion. This critique is not only aiming at demonstrating the implications of the fully committed subject manifested in such familiar cases as the really existed communist or the Taliban, but also aiming to take a further step in inserting a reflective gap between the committing and what it is committed to. The madness of the fully-engaged subject without doubt is best summarized by Lacan's formula, "if a man who thinks he's a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so." (Lacan 2005:139). Can we also redeploy the above formula to state that a communist who thinks he is a communist is mad? What about a member of the Taliban who thinks he is a Taliban?

The form of subjectivity with a gap imposed by the committing subject from what it is committed to is already homologous to what Žižek calls the cynical

subject, which has been generalized by Žižek as the general formula in which the bourgeois ideologies in our times work with great efficacy: "I know very well, but ..." (Žižek 1989, 2001) However, capitalism is not the only system that takes advantage of its potential through mass consumption and the purely symbolic gestures of virtual signaling. There was evidence that the Nazis started to build concentration camps to slaughter the Jews more efficiently only after they realized that the very act of killing the innocent had psychological effects on the soldiers. Herein lies the difference between the act of killing in Nazi Germany and the communist regimes (the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia etc.): the former designed and implemented industrial-scale killing-machine to make the act of killing feel impersonal; whereas, the latter managed to convince its executioners that he embodied the historical law and the act of killing is nothing but the wheel of history crushing the past, the unworthy, and dredges of the old-evil. The real horror in the communist killing machine is that it convinces, in many cases, its victims that their deaths would bring in a new world. The Nazi killer is one that Žižek might call a cynical killer: I know I am guilty in my act of killing but I kill nonetheless, as I am not truly responsible for my act. This cynical monster is best exemplified by Adolf Eichmann whose defense boils down to "I am just obeying the order," or "I am just a cog in the Machine." The fully-engaged killers who killed with full moral confidence appeared to be a problem in the communist regimes too. For instance, after the rampage of the Red Guards between 1966 and 1968 in China, the official ideology shifted from "smashing the old" to "being a screw for the Party," a cog in the Machine. May we say that the fully-engaged subject is terrifying for the communist too?

What must be asserted here is that the cynical subject is radically different from the subjectivity with a reflective gap, or a reflective gap that is the place of the subject. This gap allows for continual examination of the subjective commitment and what it is committed to. A case that fully deploys such a form of subjectivity is Jesus Christ in Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Jesus Christ*, a subject of incessant doubt, hesitation, rejection, and reflection but at the same time a subject that nonetheless embraces and persists in the Truth. It is precisely the reflective doubt that clears the ground for an ethical subjective position at which the subject does whatever it is committed to and at the same time is fully aware of its own relations with the Cause

and other subjects. Perhaps, we should take advantage of Bruce Fink's (Fink, 1995) operational schema of the three Lacanian registers of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, with which the subject implements certain projects in relation to the registers. The subject fully engaged in a cause is one that endeavors to "symbolize the imaginary" in the sense of bringing the imagined utopia to the staging of the symbolic order. Along its path, any trace of the real is treated as excess to be eradicated. Its truth is the sadistic superego and political mass spectacle. The cynical subject is then one that attempts to "imagine the symbolic" in the sense of relying on an imagined distance with the corrupt and ineluctable Master without disobeying the master's mandate. The truth of the cynical subject is impotent virtue signaling without causing any perturbation in the real. Finally, the ethical subject operates in two ways: to "symbolize the real" in the sense of "interrogating the real" (Žižek, 2006) that results in true scientific knowledge of the social relations, and to "realize the symbolic" in the sense of registering real changes in the symbolic. The truth of the ethical subject is its openness to real emancipation, the symbolic substance of which is yet to be revealed.

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