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## On Acts, Pure and Impure<sup>1</sup>

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### What is (not) to be done?

In the e-mail they sent me to invite my contribution to this special issue of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe have singled out Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes* (Žižek 2008a) as a major theoretico-political intervention that has the potential to redraw the ideological frontiers of our age, by 'asking all the right questions'. Among them they included the following: 'What is to be done, in the face of the structural violence of global capitalism, concealed beneath its legitimating ideologies?' Although commodification has not managed to engulf the totality of social and economic relations in our societies – and to disavow this fact, elevating capitalism into some kind of metaphysical arch-enemy, potentially enhances the legitimating ideologies cited above, reproducing what Gibson-Graham describe as 'capitalocentrism' (Gibson-Graham 2006) – there is no doubt that capitalism has amply shown that *it can* revolutionize the way we relate to (the lack of) *jouissance*, maintaining and expanding its hegemonic grip as far as both consumption patterns and workplace culture is concerned, co-opting resistance and neutralizing the egalitarian potential of democracy, channeling its radical promise into post-democratic directions (Rancière 1999, Crouch 2003).

So, *what is to be done?* Indeed it is not only Boucher and Sharpe that have used the old Leninist formula.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly – given Žižek's continuous references to Lenin – 'What is to be done?' provides the title for the third part of *In Defense on Lost Causes*. More generally, this question dominates his recent work and his answer usually develops around his notion of the 'radical act'.<sup>3</sup> It is this notion of the act that will constitute the focus of my argumentation in this text, something that will also give me the opportunity to continue my dialogue with Slavoj Žižek on these matters and to clarify some of the issues he raises in Chapter 6 of *In Defense of Lost Causes* in relation to my work (Žižek 2008a: 304-333).

Žižek customarily distinguishes between an imaginary form of resistance, a 'false transgression' that ultimately serves to maintain and reproduce the law, and 'the effective symbolic re-articulation *via* the intervention of the real of an *act*' (Žižek 1998a: 5).<sup>4</sup> However, the way he elaborates this orientation, as well as the choice of his examples – with Antigone being the protagonist – introduces a series of tensions and ambiguities. I have dealt with some of these ambiguities elsewhere in much detail.<sup>5</sup> But let me revisit and develop further a couple of points with reference to the present discussion and Žižek's argumentation in *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Overall, what I find problematic with Žižek's politics of the act is that it is over-stressing the unlimited (real) positivity of human action beyond any *reflexive* registering of (symbolic) lack and finitude. Any initial registering of negativity – and it is, obviously, initially registered – is eventually *disavowed* in his argument through the perfection with which the act is invested, an investment that miraculously transubstantiates negative to positive.

What is thus stressed is the supposed *purity* of a political praxis, which transcends altogether the discursive (spatial) limits of the symbolic and, operating as a cataclysmic real creation, opens itself onto the miraculous void of eternity. Obviously, this can be quite appealing today, when the post-political consensus attempts to de-politicise the democratic process in the West and to impose models of domestic and international governance (the signifier of de-politicisation *par excellence*), which discourage active participation and passionate identification, marginalize democratic antagonism and foreclose the possibility of formulating any real, post-capitalist alternatives. Against the fake promise of 'decaf resistance' the supposedly *pure* radicalism of the 'real act' sounds as the only way to save the lost bite of radical politics and the declining ethical integrity of radical academia. But is it really the proper way to do this a revival of the old fantasy of a total and miraculous social refoundation through a single apocalyptic cut?<sup>6</sup> I am afraid that what we have here

is a reoccupation of a very old-fashioned theme – combining a gnostic-style rejection of our world *in toto*, as the kingdom of an evil creator (capitalism) and its false detractors (decaf resistance), and the millenarian need for an apocalyptic act of *pure* desire fully transcending it.<sup>7</sup>

Besides all his stressing of the logic of the drive (Žižek 2008a: 328),<sup>8</sup> this *purity of desire* is essential for Žižek's notion of the act and that's why Antigone, the incarnation of Lacan's temporary flirting with the disastrous idea of *pure desire* (Guyomard 1992), is presented here as the perfect example. Seen in an idealised light, beyond the confines of an evil and unredeemed reality, she incarnates the purity of the only perfect act: suicide. It is not a coincidence that Lacan had singled out suicide as the only act that cannot misfire. Certainly Antigone's act is not 'decaf', but does it qualify as an act, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term? And what are the socio-political implications of its supposed purity?

Obviously, in order to answer the first question we would have to take into account the way Lacan conceptualizes the psychoanalytic act; after all, he does devote a whole year of his seminar to this topic (1967-8). And it is clearly not sufficient to take for granted the authority of Slavoj Žižek as our new *subject supposed to know* about Lacan, something that has become common practice, what Stephen Frosh has described in a public debate with Žižek as 'the zizekfication of Lacan'. Now, I respect enormously Žižek's work, but this is no reason to treat him as the living reincarnation of Jacques Lacan; besides, I don't think he would like that himself anyway. I can fully understand that not everyone has the required desire or time to devote to deciphering Lacan's teaching, but in this case it makes more sense to acknowledge the originality of Žižek's notion of the 'radical act' instead of accepting at face-value some sort of mystical continuity between Žižek's rendering and the Lacanian corpus *per se*. In other words, one needs from the beginning to ask the question: 'Are other readings of Lacan possible that would productively problematize the models of change promoted in the form of both the Žižekian act and the Badiouian event?' (Johnston 2007: 16). Johnston's answer to this rhetorical question is 'yes' and it is difficult to disagree with that – although, as we shall see, Žižek's position is rather the opposite, especially when such a problematization is articulated by someone like myself, in which case all disagreement is interpreted as hostile rejection, only to be treated with a paradoxical and deeply ambivalent *violent and active contempt*.

What happens then if we go back to Lacan's seminar on the act? Furthermore, can we point to other readings of Lacan's act problematizing Žižek's take?<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt, of course, that the act acquires its radical, non-decaf value precisely because it

presupposes an encounter with the real. Yet this encounter only becomes conscious through the failure of the symbolic; and, in addition, it has to be expressed, articulated, registered, within the symbolic. Acts are properly situated 'right in the boundary' between symbolic and real (Pluth 2007: 1). In order to retain its ethical dimension, an act cannot be divorced from a re-inscription in the symbolic – this is the crucial point made by Lacan (Neill 2003: 339): 'An act does not just involve doing something: it involves doing something with signifiers' (Pluth 2004: 22). It is in this sense that any socio-politically relevant fidelity to the act/event has to be an *infidel fidelity*, a symbolic recognition of the lack in the Other and of the irreducibility of the distance between the real and the symbolic it reveals.

A proper act, in other words, involves the production of a signifier of the lack in the Other *and* an attempt to *institutionalize* this empty signification, to pass, in other words, *from time to space* – in fact, to re-conceive space and spatiality in a way very different from what existed before the act. Even if 'the act as real is an event which occurs *ex nihilo*, without any fantasmatic support' (Žižek 1998a: 14), *assuming* this act nevertheless entails traversing the fantasy and *coming to terms with lack*; the subject is divided by the signifying act (Lacan in Pluth 2007). Ethically assuming the act can only become possible within such a symbolic matrix. Besides, this symbolic assumption – entailing a radical reconfiguration of socio-symbolic reality in a way institutionalizing a recognition of the lack in the Other and facilitating further *re-acts* (seminar of 20 March 1968) – is what accounts for the political effectiveness of the act. Yet, this symbolic dimension of the act is downplayed by Žižek, who 'has tended not to highlight the fact that acts are signifiers at all' and often portrays the act as 'a refusal of the symbolic', distinguishing 'acts proper' from 'symbolic acts' (Pluth 2007: 12).

What is the implication of Lacan's locating the act at the intersection of real and symbolic? The constitutive *imperfection* and *impurity* of the act. The perfect act Žižek idealizes – an act in the real, i.e. Antigone's suicidal gesture – may be an act that, on a first (real) level, succeeds without misfiring, but this is precisely what excludes it from what, according to Lacan, would be a proper *psychoanalytic act*, *un fait de signifiant* – and I would add, a proper *political act*. Suicide:

is not, from the subjective perspective, reinscribed in the symbolic. There is in suicide no continuation, no possibility of recuperation by or to the symbolic . . . [This] is not to advocate suicide, it is, rather, to recognise the impossibility of other acts not misfiring . . . Suicide is the only act available to the subject which

cannot result in a persistence of lack. Postsuicide, there is no subject to lack. And just as there is no subject, neither is there an Other for the subject, there is, that is, no symbolic order in which the act could be (re)inscribed (Neill 2003: 349–53).

Although initially Žižek seems to accept the formal, symbolic conditioning of the act, Antigone's suicide lures him to disavow it in favour of the unconditional perfection and purity of her act. But this is precisely what makes her unsuitable as a model of progressive ethico-political action. Seen as a cut in the real, her suicide is a one-off without wider socio-political relevance (and with disastrous implications for everybody near her – Haemon, Eurydice, and other characters in the play). What is 'gained' in terms of the purity of the act at the subjective level – now reduced to the solipsistic pursuit of death – is lost in terms of its socio-political efficacy precisely because Žižek 'simply refuses to allow the signifiers in the act to enter into a relationship to any other signifiers' (Pluth 2007: 21). For Žižek, 'this is crucial to the act's ability to be an absolute, pure "no!"'. But as Pluth correctly puts it, no new situation can arise without such relationships, without allowing a new articulation of signifiers: 'They may lose something of their negative purity by doing so, but ... it is difficult to see how acts could produce a different way of being ... without construction as well as destruction' (Pluth 2007: 22).

So why is Žižek insisting so much on Antigone? And why are so many of his followers willing to stick with his position? No doubt Žižek's argument is triggered by a very real and ever-present danger, the danger of the re-absorption of an act, of its co-optation: 'the Other is capable of absorbing any and every signifying creation. In other words, it is always possible for a signifying practice, no matter how act-like, to become a truism' (Pluth 2004: 31). It is this possibility that Žižek finds threatening and the resulting unease forces him to conceptualize the 'real act' in such spectacular, idealized, and ultimately unreal and anti-political terms:

In those places where he remains enthralled by the spectacular side of the Lacanian act, Žižek is in danger of paralyzing himself into inaction by raising the bar so high for what would constitute an authentically revolutionary intervention that no foreseeable possible courses of action in the reality of the contemporary socio-political world stand a chance of measuring up to the demanded magnitude of a "real act" (Johnston 2007: 28).

Antigone's death is precious to him because it provides him with an opportunity to *disavow* this danger of co-optation. The 'madness of decision' is our only true guide in this terrain

and, 'excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of symbolic regulations', managing to *be* 'the Thing directly', Antigone incarnates this orientation (Žižek 2005: 320).

To be sure, when death does not intervene, all acts – even the most radical – are bound to encounter their own limit; their inevitable symbolization is their condition both of possibility –without which they cannot claim any socio-political effectiveness beyond the *solipsistic* perfection of a suicidal act – and of impossibility – often taking the form of *banalization*. This is precisely the fear behind the purist stance adopted by Žižek and many of his followers: the 'decaf' co-optation of acts of resistance; and the only solution seems to be the idealisation of another category of real acts of pure resistance, which are impossible to co-opt and neutralize. It is such a *pure desire* for radical transgression, which underlies many Žižek-inspired projects.

Such a strategy is not only undesirably anti-political, but also ultimately impossible, based on an illusion. Even the purest of real acts is ultimately attached to certain symbolic conditions of possibility. This is the lesson from Lacan's teaching following his flirting with pure desire in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. If we go back to this Lacan, we soon realise that *pure desire* is itself nothing but a *false transgression*. Echoing Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, Lacan eventually acknowledges the constitutive dialectics between law and desire (Lacan 2006: 103). In his seminar on *Anxiety*, delivered only two years after the *Ethics* seminar, desire not only loses its value as a pure force of transgression, but is also revealed as the ultimate support of power structures. Even in perversion, where desire 'appears by presenting itself as what lays down the law, namely as a subversion of the law, it is in fact well and truly the support of a law' (seminar of 27 February 1963). In fact, Lacan will go so far as to argue that *desire is the law* (seminar of 27 February 1963). Even Antigone's act, the purest possible, her deadly desire, is ultimately linked to a certain law, the laws of the Gods: 'These laws, I was not about to break them, not out of fear of some man's [Creon's] wounded pride, and face the retribution of the gods' (Sophocles, 1984: 82, lines 509–11). In that sense, Antigone remains ultimately obedient to the law of the Father (Grigg 2001: 119), which disqualifies her – once more, but now for a different reason – as a suitable example of a facilitator of radical social and political change:

Antigone's act is not an act of absolute freedom in the required sense. . . . It is arguable that Sygne de Coufontaine's act is, but not Antigone's. And the reason why Antigone's is not is that she is acting, and sacrificing herself, blindly, in the name of the law – even if it is the fractured law of Oedipus (Grigg 2001: 117).

Hence, even if one were to accept, on one level, the purity of a given act, on another level, both the conditioning – even a minimal one – as well as any wider socio-political implications of even the purest of acts, will have, by necessity, to be impure. Such an impurity is thus inscribed in the kernel of every act, subverting all fantasies of (real) purity. It is now fully revealed how weak Žižek's initial position was – to idealize the purity of the act in the Real as incarnated in the perfect act of Antigone's suicide. Not only is such an idealization of the 'real act' untenable as an abstract guiding principle, but his prime example is also revealed as deeply ambiguous. Even in her case, the passage through the symbolic, the symbolic support, is very much present. And, crucially, there is nothing radical about it. This was indirectly accepted even by Žižek himself, when he articulated the following view:

Is not, in certain extreme circumstances, such 'apolitical' defiance on behalf of 'decency' or 'old customs' the very model of heroic political resistance? Second, Antigone's gesture is not simply pure desire for death. If it were, she could have killed herself directly and spared the people around her all the fuss. Hers was not a pure symbolic striving for death, but an unconditional insistence on a particular symbolic ritual (Žižek 2003: 133).

Is it only my impression or is it indeed the case that, in order to defend the position that there is something other than death about Antigone, Žižek accepts that, at any rate, it is nothing progressive? On Žižek's own confession, that something ranges from the 'apolitical' to the conservative!

In *In Defense of Lost Causes*, this standpoint acquires a new twist:

Far from just throwing herself into the arms of death, Sophocles' Antigone insists up to her death on performing a precise symbolic gesture: the proper burial of her brother ... Antigone does not stand for some extra-symbolic real, but for the pure signifier – her 'purity' is that of a signifier (Žižek 2008a: 305).

What does the surprised reader learn here? OK, the supposed purity of Antigone's suicide as act in the real was not sufficient to demonstrate her function as a model for ethico-political action. OK, one can locate in the background of this act a whole symbolic support related to the Oedipal Law. Nevertheless, instead of acknowledging the ultimate impurity of Antigone's desire, purity remains. If it cannot be a real purity, let it be a symbolic purity! No big deal! Žižek is determined to prioritize 'purity' and 'persistence' – another name for *purity* – at all cost. It does not matter whether this is purity in the real or the symbolic,

whether it is persistence of a solipsistic and a-social type or socially-conditioned and, in fact, conservative. Persistence and purity acquire a positive value above and beyond anything else; a value that, in some of Žižek's expositions, is linked with an obscure, solipsistic attempt to transcend the dialectics of the law and to inhabit the inhuman sphere of drive, whatever that may mean in political terms. In this universe, 'anything goes' as long as it is pure and persistent: '*pure voluntarism*' is the key-word here, as one reads in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (Žižek 2009: 154).

It is here one has to draw the line between what is to be done and what is not to be done. It is here that we have to choose: are we for *purity* or *impurity*? Are we in favor of a politics of the perfect (real or symbolic) voluntarist act, a catalytic one-off that will miraculously re-found our reality, what Johnston describes as a 'spectacular act'? Or is purity just another fantasy of false transgression trapping us into a vicious dialectic of resentment and violent acting-outs? In my view, what the Lacanian Left needs is to move in the direction of articulating an alternative conception of the act, one which may link Lacan's insights (operating at both the real and symbolic levels) with a radical democratic project, able to promote the idea of a continuous *re-enacting of the act* as well as to imagine and construct a (conceptual, affective and material) space where such *re-enacting* becomes possible here and now. Such an act would not be spectacular: 'Lacan's descriptions of the analytic act (issuing from the position of the discourse of the analyst) points to the possibility of a modest-but-nonetheless revolutionary vanishing act as an auto-erasing moment that generates true change precisely through quietly receding into the background' (Johnston 2007: 28). This is the act that takes place within the analytic setting – when, indeed, it does take place: an act that presupposes a certain *reflexivity*, an awareness of its own limits, of the fact that it will never lead to the full realization of subjectivity (neither of the analyst nor of the analysand) (seminar of 20 March 1968).

To avoid any misunderstandings, reflexivity here does not refer to Giddens, Beck etc. It is more someone like Blaise Pascal I have in mind. Especially his negotiation of the relation between Man's *greatness* and *wretchedness*. For Pascal these two are intimately connected. Man's greatness is astonishing exactly on account of his being aware of his wretchedness: 'In a word, man knows that he is wretched. He is therefore wretched, because he is so; but he is really great because he knows it'. This is the paradoxical reflexivity I have in mind. It is through a registering of the limit – of impossibility – that symbolic beings can encounter truth in the real. Hence Lacan's seminal phrase: 'I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way to say it all. Saying it all is



literally [materially] impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real' (Lacan 1987: 7). And this is not solely a retroactive, after the fact, operation. At least not within the discourse of the analyst. Furthermore, this is a reflexivity oriented towards action. At the beginning of every new analysis, the analyst authorizes and risks an operation, knowing well that it will end with his or her own rejection as excrement (seminar of 21 February 1968). Only thus can the analyst's (symbolic) assumption of castration and division be re-enacted in the subjective structure of the analysand(s).

What we have here then is a reflexivity of the *not-All*, an ethics of the *not-All*, which rejects the Žižekian voluntarism of the madness of decision: 'the act is not to be relegated to the "*madness* of a decision" since there are formal criteria distinguishing it from the madness of terror. Even if you begin with Marx but decide to make something like the dictatorship of the proletariat, for which all bourgeois tradition is the enemy, you form an exclusory All and – not accidentally, but by structural necessity – end up with Stalinist terror' (Kordela 2007: 67).<sup>10</sup> What differentiates a true from a false event-act in this perspective is that the true includes the void, a symbolic registering of the limit, 'so that it does not ever allow the All or the One to form itself as a closed, and hence exclusionary, set'; every true event has to be 'not-All' (Kordela 2007: 51); it has to open itself into *event-ness*. Only such an act can be an ethical act according to Lacanian ethics, an ethics situated beyond the sovereign good: 'The sole good that the ethical act can acknowledge is its own mandate to name the void of the situation' (Kordela 2007: 67). However, one should always keep in mind that the political promise of such an ethical orientation depends on its association with types of enjoyment that will allow subjective engagement and transformation and will enhance its hegemonic appeal, managing to combine *modesty* with *energy*.

It is here that a distinction between *ideological* and *ethical* modes of enjoyment through which subjects engage with the social world, becomes crucial:

there is a mode of enjoyment associated with closure and a mode of enjoyment associated with openness. While the former has a "logic", more specifically a fantasmatic logic, which grips through transgression and guilt, the latter escapes attempts at capture – indeed, it appears to entail the *dissolution* of such a logic. Instead, it is characterized by an alternative ethos, which signals a commitment to recognizing and exploring the possibilities of the new in contingent encounters. If the former can be linked to an *ideological* mode of being, then we could say that the fidelity to contingency [to the continuous *re-enacting of the act*, to *event-ness*] can be linked to an *ethical* mode of being (Glynos 2008: 291).

It is clear that Žižek's 'pure voluntarism', his 'speculative Leftism', to use Badiou's expression, no matter how radical or revolutionary, would remain fantasmatic and thus ideological, to the extent that 'public contestation of norms and mobilization of struggles through various political logics can be just as ideological as those forces which exploit fantasmatic elements to maintain the status quo' (Glynos 2008: 292).

If by asking 'what is to be done?' we demand from theory to resolve all impurity and guarantee the purity of the act, to transform uncertainty to certainty, then, to say the least, we are working with the wrong theoretical tradition. There is a very precise limit here. Even if the overall orientation of a Lacanian reformulation of political theory is thoroughly critical and enabling – critical of any established doxa and enabling the formulation of alternative visions and interventions – it cannot guarantee the emergence of the new. Contu is right to point out that there is a cost to acts proper, a price to be paid: the loss of a part of this reality, ultimately a part of ourselves (Contu 2008: 374).<sup>11</sup> There is no full big Other to guarantee our consistency and the effectiveness of our acts. This does not mean, however, that we can become ourselves guarantors of our acts. It is impossible to assume 'full responsibility for the act itself' (Contu 2008: 376) unless we also assume responsibility for its necessary imperfection.<sup>12</sup>

For us academics – and for analysts – this active *ethical* assumption of the limit includes the *sacrifice* and presupposes the *mourning* of our role as guarantors of pure desire and real transgression. In 1968 Lacan points out that 'the theoretician is not the one who finds the way. He explains it. Obviously, the explanation is useful to find the rest of the path' (seminar of 19 June 1968). It is the same strategy that informed Slavoj Žižek's reaction to the recent events in the French suburbs, in which one reads: 'So what can a philosopher do here? One should bear in mind that the philosopher's task is not to propose solutions, but to reformulate the problem itself, to shift the ideological framework within which we hitherto perceived the problem' (Žižek 2005). Such a shift can often enable an alternative course of action, which, however, no philosopher-king (or psychoanalyst-king) can ever prescribe, predict or guarantee.

Given this last disclaimer by Žižek, which he is practically repeating everywhere, I am really puzzled by the fact that when it comes to discussing some of the arguments put forward in my last book, *The Lacanian Left*, what he asks from me is exactly concrete solutions and empirical examples. But let's take one step at a time, in order to determine what is really at stake in the rather complex argument he puts forward in Chapter 6 of *In*

### ***Demanding examples***

A large part of Žižek's commentary is exhausted in arguments that anybody familiar with academic debate will find rather hard to understand. For we are all surely aware, for example, of the rather common occurrence of opposing interpretations of the same text or argument. And yet Žižek expresses his astonishment that Peter Hallward and myself articulate opposed readings of his work as far as the balance between positivity and negativity is concerned:<sup>13</sup> 'Is this not strange: two critical readings of the same work which attribute to me exactly opposite positions?' (Žižek 2008a: 317). Well, no more strange than the fact that Žižek and Philip Derbyshire attribute to me exactly opposite positions vis-à-vis Freudo-Marxism: while Žižek concludes that *The Lacanian Left* 'remains within Freudo-Marxism' (Žižek 2008a: 331), Derbyshire laments my distance from Reich and Marcuse (Derbyshire 2008: 41). Which is to say not strange at all! Unless, of course, one believes that arguments allow for only one reading, presumably the one their author authorizes. Is this Žižek's position? And does it apply to all arguments or only to his own? It would be useful to know.

Another instance of rather tedious bickering – at least this is how it initially sounds – is when Žižek takes issue with my use of the word 'seems', as in 'Žižek seems to be saying that ...'. What is the problem here? Well, it is worth quoting Žižek in full: '“Seems” is a crucial word here, and, as we shall see, in Stavrakakis' book too: it registers his own doubt about the accuracy of his own reading' (Žižek 2008: 306). The use of such tropes has to be measured against each one's expressly stated argumentative standards; and may I just remind the reader here that already in the introduction of *The Lacanian Left*, what I put forward is an ethos of theorization registering doubt and encouraging the active encircling of the limits of knowledge (Stavrakakis 2007: 5-14). This is, after all, a crucial difference between an ethics and a politics of purity and one of impurity! But the use of 'seems', in opposition to *ad hominem* claims, is also about respect. Doesn't Žižek's rejection of this way of conducting dialogue risk fostering a drift towards sectarianism? Would conducting an argument through polemical denunciations imply a commitment to pluralism, or its fierce rejection? Last, but not least, does the Lacanian Left stand to lose or to gain from a full discussion of the substantive positions that propose alternatives to our current predicament, a discussion conducted in agonistic spirit?

Of course, the funny thing here is when one finds Žižek himself – the rock of self-certainty and self-confidence! – using a similar trope in order to qualify some of his most extreme arguments, contradicting thus his own expressly stated standard. Notice for example how, in *Violence*, provocative statements like ‘a dose of alienation is indispensable for peaceful coexistence’, ‘alienation is not a problem but a solution’ (Žižek 2008b: 51), ‘hatred is the only proof that I really love you’ (Žižek 2008b: 173), and ‘doing nothing is the most violent thing to do’ (Žižek 2008b: 183), all acquire a very different meaning through the use of the word ‘sometimes’ which precedes them, introducing thus an element of doubt as to when and how exactly the statements apply. Thus it is only ‘sometimes [that] alienation is not a problem but a solution’, only ‘[s]ometimes, hatred is the only proof that I really love you’ and ‘[s]ometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do’. And thank God for that! This ‘sometimes’ is the only thing saving Žižek from sliding into total absurdity.

I could go on and on dealing with similar points raised by Žižek one by one, but is it really worth it? Apart from momentarily boosting my narcissism by scoring some points in what is increasingly becoming an idiosyncratic tit-for-tat, very little can come out of it in terms of clarifying the wider dilemmas at stake. We need, I think, to concentrate on more serious issues. What is, after all, Žižek's central argument if one cleanses it from all the *ad hominem* packaging? In particular, how does he defend his notion of the act? Well, it *seems* to me – yes, I dare risk the use of this word, once more – that he does defend himself in a way indicating at least a partial agreement with my argument. How else can one interpret his numerous attempts to argue that it is not fair to criticize him for neglecting the day after of the act ‘as if’ he had not written ‘many pages developing’ exactly that; for disavowing the need to institutionalize lack and negativity ‘as if’ the whole point of his reading of Hegel was not exactly that; of ignoring the registering of emptiness as a formal precondition for an act ‘as if’ he had not written ‘pages and pages on opening up empty space’, and so on and so forth (Žižek 2008a: 307). I am more than happy to accept Žižek's qualifications, but I never doubted that he does accept all these points, at least on one level. My argument was precisely that of *disavowal*: that the acceptance of the aforementioned points is coupled with a ‘voluntarism’ that ultimately disavows the formal preconditions and limitations of any act in favour of its fetishized purity. Can Žižek provide any persuading arguments that the mechanism linking the contradictory positions he simultaneously upholds is not that of disavowal?

At any rate, though, he does provide a rather clear exposition of what is at stake in

my criticism of the act: 'Stavrakakis' solution is neither the phallic enjoyment of power nor the utopia of the incestuous full enjoyment, but non-phallic (non-all) partial enjoyment' (Žižek 2008a: 326) as a basis for the development of an *enjoyable democratic ethics of the political* (Žižek 2008a: 325). Now, does he agree or disagree with such a solution? Admittedly, it could go both ways. Initially he does defend himself from being seen as representative of the utopian side and he does focus on the 'how'.<sup>14</sup> From then onwards, however, the initial partial agreement is often transformed to skepticism – to put it mildly – regarding the political effects of the argument and the way it is formulated. And yet, all ends up in a *demand* for empirical examples, as if the presentation of sufficient examples would win him over: 'when Stavrakakis tries to provide some concrete examples of this new politics of partial enjoyment, things become really "bizarre" ' (Žižek 2008a: 330). As a result, 'Stavrakakis' attempt to relate Lacanian concepts like feminine *jouissance*, the signifier of the lack in the Other, and so on, to concrete sociopolitical examples is thus thoroughly unconvincing', 'Stavrakakis' political vision is vacuous' (Žižek 2008a: 331); I am thus prevented from articulating a viable political project.

Interestingly enough, this is also a demand articulated by many other critics of *The Lacanian Left*, irrespective of their overall view of the book and whether this is positive or negative. On the negative side I could cite, first of all, Jodi Dean: 'To be sure, Stavrakakis is fully aware that any Lacanian politics must include the notion of enjoyment (and he employs this notion critically and well in his chapters on consumerism and nationalism). Yet his gestures toward a democratic enjoyment of emptiness and the lack are unpersuasive' (Dean 2009: 6). Derbyshire articulates a similar criticism in *Radical Philosophy*:

What might this [the enjoyment of the not-All] be? For so crucial a component of the Lacanian Left project, this is cursorily dealt with, and emerges only at the theoretical level... But how does this work for democracy, and more crucially for a politics: what might be those examples of such a *jouissance* at large in the world? Sadly, Stavrakakis, normally garrulous, is now taciturn. There is a reference to Sahlins and Clastres, and the possibility of things being (socially) otherwise, and a brief discussion of cooperative economic possibilities from a scattered list of writers – Unger, Santos, and so on – but the allegedly profound difference of this form of enjoyment remains unexemplified, and its possible generalization unexamined (Derbyshire 2008: 43).

Not to mention Robinson's critique in *Contemporary Political Theory*: 'By his own admission, Stavrakakis does not provide blueprints (which is unsurprising), nor does he

provide prescriptions, political direction or policy proposals (pp. 13-14, 30). This leaves the work of dubious relevance to people *doing* politics whether as activists, politicians or administrators' (Robinson 2008: 355).

The situation is similar when one takes into account more positive reviews. Notice for example Paulina Tambakaki's point: 'Therein lies the greatest strength of the book, in the argument that while reflections on negativity, alienation and lack further our understanding of democratic politics, so do reflections of affect and *jouissance*. Its limitation is that while Stavrakakis explores an alternative approach to the study of politics, the reader does not get a clear sense of what the author's own conception of politics involves' (Tambakaki, 2008: 380). Let me end with Ed Pluth: 'He thinks alienation and lack are inevitable parts of human life, and wants us to be able somehow to affirm or at least live with them. It remains difficult to see how translating this perspective into the political sphere can be politically satisfying. The alternatives however – consisting of denials of lack or a naïvely utopian politics – are certainly worse' (Pluth 2009: 71).

It is clear that this demand for empirical examples emerges as the most crucial criterion on which the validity of my argument is evaluated, as a largely missing *supplement* that would instantly persuade and convince. This raises a series of important issues concerning the status of examples in theory and analysis in general, the role of examples in the type of discourse in which *The Lacanian Left* belongs, as well as the possibility of expanding the list of examples already offered in my work. Let me deal with all these one by one.

### ***The impurity of examples ...***

To start with, it is true that although a variety of examples is offered in *The Lacanian Left*, I do refrain from fully elaborating the empirical implications of the ethico-political orientation put forward. And this is not only due to limitations of space. It is partly intentional. It is done in an explicit attempt to frustrate any demand for closure, to deconstruct the idea of any simplistic 'application' of theoretical principles, to keep alive the imagination of the reader and to stimulate new articulations between the formal level and the challenges each and every one of us is facing in her/his own particular context. No matter how many examples are presented, theoretical and analytical discourse can neither predict and command nor accomplish the act – any act, that is, beyond its own (limited) elaboration. Nothing would be more alien to psychoanalytic discourse, which locates itself beyond any naïve

didacticism (academic or political) and remains suspicious of the Discourses of the Master and the University. As Lacan makes abundantly clear, already from his first seminar: 'Do analysts have to push subjects on the road to absolute knowledge?' The answer is: 'Certainly not . . . Nor can we engineer their meeting with the real . . . It is not our function to guide them by the hand through life' (Lacan 1988: 265). In that sense, the supposed perfection of an argument – through a miraculous use of examples or any other means – needs to be dropped already from the beginning.

This is why *The Lacanian Left* was never envisaged as a political manifesto. This is made clear already from the first pages of the book: 'This is an exercise in political theory and critical analysis and not a political manifesto' (Stavrakakis 2007: 13). It limits itself to offering a commentary on the character of the act, reflexively articulating some of its formal conditions of possibility/impossibility: an act is always impure, imperfect, located at the intersection between real and symbolic, but, instead of repressing or camouflaging it, it thematises this imperfection, registering it within its own fabric. And yet, acts proper are not purely negative gestures traversing a dominant fantasy; they also make the emergence of a new articulation possible. But, instead of incarnating an apocalyptic, total re-foundation of positivity, this articulation is characterized by a distinct relation with lack: instead of covering it over, it purports to register and institutionalize lack/negativity. In this context, I am trying to sketch the conditions under which this strategy might be able to increasingly claim a hegemonic role. The first concerns our ability to move beyond the lure of closure, purity and identity, inscribe lack and event-ness, un-stick desire and enjoyment. Here, from a Freudian and Lacanian point of view, it is a (thoroughly productive) process of *mourning* which is called for and an ability to mourn that has to be cultivated – a lesson particularly important for the Left. The second question is one related to the affective value of a radical democratic identification with lack. The crucial question here is: what (ethical) administration of enjoyment would permit the formulation and differential cathexis of this alternative articulation? Here, Lacan's sketching of another, feminine *jouissance* of the not-All may be of some help.

Now, this process of mourning has to start with an acceptance of our constitutive inability to articulate a perfect argument, resolving all doubts and annulling the ontological gap between academic discourse and political praxis. Only such an inscription of our own limits will allow us to *enjoy the other enjoyment* emerging from the contingent articulation *to come* between our limited orientation and the equally limited orientations of others. Why then is Žižek – as well as many of my other critics – insisting so much in their demand for

empirical examples that would somehow square the circle and supposedly restore the lacking fullness of the proposed ethico-political orientation?

What makes things even more complex is that, at least as far as Žižek is concerned, this strict, if not draconian, requirement applies only to others and never to himself. When, for example, he puts forward his new communist vision, he doesn't bother much with presenting such examples. Instead, 'communism' is presented as an empty signifier, a call for experimentation: 'More than a solution to the problems we are facing today, communism is itself the name of a problem: a name for the difficult task of breaking out of the confines of the market and state framework, a task for which no quick formula is at hand' (Žižek 2009: 129). And I don't mean that as a criticism. I may disagree with the choice of 'communism' as nodal point, but I do agree entirely with Žižek when he defines his project not as 'a series of abstract-universal features that may be applied everywhere', but as something 'that has to be re-invented in each new historical situation' (Žižek 2009: 6). But does this apply only to communism? Why is the radical democratic ethics of the political associated with an enjoyment of the not-All judged with reference to completely different standards? On what basis can that be justified?

Having said that, it is also true that, at least in some cases, an imaginative use of examples can resolve misunderstandings and enable a better grasping of arguments that are complex and may sound, at least initially, as paradoxical or counter-intuitive. In that sense, the task I will set myself in the following paragraphs will be the following: what examples can be offered in support of an ethical orientation highlighting the reflexive institutionalisation of lack and the ethical mode of *jouissance* that can be associated with it? In fact, two separate issues are at stake here: 1. Can such an acceptance of lack be really appealing, do we see it materializing around us? 2. Can it involve or encourage encounters with such a, by definition, elusive (feminine) *jouissance* of not-All?

Now, I could start by referring to and by developing further examples present in my other books and articles, but it would be rather boring to start recycling the same old arguments. I must only note that, surprisingly, some of them are included in the limited and sketchy list of concrete examples and proposals associated with Žižek's 'communism'. When, for example, Karatani suggests a return to the ancient Greek democratic institution of lot, this is quoted rather approvingly by Žižek, being invested with a 'heroic' gloss (Žižek 2009: 152).<sup>15</sup> I couldn't agree more.<sup>16</sup> It is also the case that, today, political experiments of participatory democracy through random selection are proliferating around us, even in established Western democracies – one such case in point was the *British Columbia*



*Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform* (2004): in order to propose a new electoral system for this province of Canada, 160 citizens were chosen through a process of random selection to debate different proposals for a new electoral system, with the result being the object of a popular referendum.<sup>17</sup> In this case, what was adopted from ancient Greek democracy was not only lot but also the establishment of a reward structure for participants in the form of a honorarium. But why the hell would one want today to associate that with 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or 'communism'?

The same applies to Žižek's dictum 'We are the ones we have been waiting for', which he himself associates with Gandhi's 'Be yourself the change you want to see in the world' (Žižek 2009: 154), a position very close to the self-critical ethos advanced in my work. Yet, once more, what does that have to do with 'communism'?<sup>18</sup> In other words, if Žižek objects to my examples but partially agrees with their formal envelope, here we have the opposite case. I would agree with many of his examples, which have been or could be used to strengthen my position, but cannot really see the point of a return to communism! Unless Žižek remains a closet radical democrat, who uses 'communism' as a Trojan horse to co-opt the radical potential of the democratic revolution, attempting to maintain at the same time, at the rhetorical level, his revolutionary aura (also see, in this respect, Žižek 2008a: 417).

I could also refer to the work of others who offer more detailed analyses of some of the examples briefly mentioned in *The Lacanian Left*. For, in some cases, other Lacanian political theorists have dealt with the same examples reaching conclusions overlapping with mine. For instance, Jason Glynos has drawn from the empirical work of Byrne and Healy conclusions virtually identical with mine (Stavrakakis 2007: 275). Glynos's take is that their research provides evidence of a new ethos of collective commitment to address antagonism, contingency and uncertainty head on, traversing dominant fantasies and resentments: 'Byrne and Healy's empirical research on cooperative forms of organization suggests that perhaps a different sort of relation to fantasy – and thus mode of enjoyment or subjectivity – is possible, which one can qualify, following Lacan, as ethical' (Glynos 2008: 15). All that, however, can be easily found in Glynos's work, as well as in the study by Byrne and Healy itself (Byrne and Healy 2006), and in the work of others. In fact, today, a lot more information is available to help evaluate cooperative experience in Argentina and elsewhere (Sitrin 2006, The Lavaca Collective 2007).

Needless to say, I will not be referring to examples from the psychoanalytic clinic either, precisely because what most sceptics dispute is the wider social and political

relevance of this orientation.<sup>19</sup> What I will be stressing thus is examples from the wider socio-cultural field, exploring the political implications of contemporary art, consumption and religious orientations. However, loyal to the ethics of theorizing explained above, I will not be offering examples directly emanating from the field of politics – I will refrain, that is to say, from engaging with politics as a distinct sub-system of differentiated institutions and processes. Wishing to insist and even enhance the creative challenge this discourse poses to the reader – especially to readers ‘*doing* politics whether as activists, politicians or administrator’ – I will remain at the periphery of politics. Which does not mean, of course, that these examples will not be targeting, as always, *the political*, generating – often by means of a negative presentation – a variety of concrete political implications.

### ***... and the examples of impurity***

Before setting out to elaborate on a number of new examples, it is important to dispel a certain misunderstanding. What is at stake here is clearly not whether it is possible or impossible to inscribe lack and negativity, nor whether this act of inscription is desirable or undesirable. This is something all ideologies and all discourses do in a variety of ways. Žižek may be correct when he argues that ‘[t]here is nothing inherently “subversive” or “progressive” in the notion of a “signifier of lack” ’ (Žižek 2008a: 318). The question is how this inscription is used, what types of ideological (fantasmatic) or ethical (post-fantasmatic) orientations it serves and facilitates. And the possibilities are truly infinite.

Anybody doubting the ‘desirability’ of inscribing lack and negativity in general will be surprised by the multitude of examples pointing to the possibility and wider appeal not only of symbolic castration, but of real castration as well, in a search for utopian purity and salvation. To give just one such example, Laura Engelstein relays the story of the *Skoptsy* (meaning ‘the castrated ones’ or ‘self-castrators’), a Russian sect which was active for almost 150 years (roughly up until the Second World War) and whose adherents ‘went so far in their search for purity and eternal life as to adopt the practice of ritual self-castration. Following the call of a charismatic vagrant who claimed to embody the reincarnated Jesus Christ, the believers subjected themselves to pain and mutilation in the expectation of redemption’ (Engelstein 1999: xi). Inspired by a particular interpretation of the Gospels, they believed that to secure salvation in this world one was obliged to enact ‘the physical impossibility of carnal connection’ (Engelstein 1999: 2). In this case the radical act of real castration was envisaged as an act of rebirth – this is the dominant meaning ‘castration

acquired for those who remade themselves through the act' (Engelstein 1999: 14). 'Castration translated the symbolic language of Scripture into palpable bodily signs' (Engelstein 1999: 33) and thus the metaphorical was deemed concrete! For the Skoptsy, castration was understood as a form of corrective surgery returning 'males and females to the prelapsarian asexuality disrupted when Eve and Adam entered the cruel flux of time, with its cycles of conception, birth, and death' (Engelstein 1999: 93). And this was not a case of individual folly – castration was not a solitary act: 'it both defined and cemented the community' (Engelstein 1999: 36), which numbered tens or even hundreds of thousands of members and aimed at regulating fear and social dislocation (Engelstein 1999: 21-23).

It is entirely possible to present numerous examples of this sort, proving the possibility and appeal even the most radical inscriptions of lack can exert. But is this the sort of example needed? I think not. In fact, such an example may be closer to some of Žižek's formulations concerning the radical act, but is clearly very far from the examples I am going to present, where, as we shall see, the inscription of lack refrains from fetishizing its own occurrence in the real and traverses fantasies of purity, certainty and utopian salvation.<sup>20</sup> Let us move a bit further, then. Let us move from religion to art. Contemporary art does, in fact, offer numerous examples in which a symbolic inscription of lack is associated with artistic forms of enjoyment with broader appeal, examples of a satisfying reflexive act of sublimation. And this sublimation is never a solitary achievement to the extent that, as we shall see, it always involves the creation of a certain type of public space.

At any rate, we already know from psychoanalytic commentary that 'true creation has its source in the void of knowledge' and that 'the artist endeavors to keep empty' this hole (André 2006: 151-2), to bring it into public view. To highlight this, Serge André speaks about the 'mental anorexia' of writers: 'The writer is basically a case of mental anorexia. He suffers and derives enjoyment from a form of anorexia (because he cultivates it as something precious) that crystallizes around speech rather than food. He does not want to speak; he refuses to be satisfied with speech; he does not want to feed upon the ordinary, standardized words that speech invites him to share, not to mention the stuffing that common discourse seeks to impose on him. ... the writer begins by refusing speech and the social link it institutes' (André 2006: 165). By referring to nothing but to the void rupturing the language of representation and meaning, the writer acquires the power 'to renew language and the relation to language' (André 2006: 160, 158). True creation is premised on such a self-critical registering of the lack in the Other, a move that produces a

paradoxical enjoyment of the not-All and affects the status of the social institution of language. This is also the case with visual and public art, to which I shall now turn.<sup>21</sup>

From Anish Kapoor's games with emptiness to Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, the impressive creation of a 'negative space' inside the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, from Hans Haacke to the NSK and their NSK state project, from Hirschhorn's to Luchezar Boyadziev's deconstructions of the monument, the message is more than clear. Today, artistic practices can indeed highlight the central parameters of our present political predicament. There is an increasing need to problematize the emerging post-democratic order, to highlight the malaise it produces and its various (local and global) side-effects and to reinvigorate democratic citizenship; to re-politicise an increasingly post-political, post-democratic public sphere. Yet such a re-politicisation needs to be alert to the dangers of speculative leftist utopianism and voluntarism, and also conscious of our personal implication in the reproduction of power structures and aware of the inability of conscious knowledge to effect a shift in this relation. What is called for, in other words, is a restrained re-politicisation able to function at both the cognitive and affective levels in order to make us assume responsibility for our multiple (conscious and unconscious) accommodation to power structures. Contemporary art has emerged as one of the most forceful agents of such a re-politicisation. William Kentridge's work (his drawings, his films, his texts) provides a clear illustration of this.

Not only are Kentridge's origins (South Africa), family background (his father was a prominent anti-apartheid lawyer), and education (he studied politics before turning to fine art), indicative of a political orientation. The fabric of his work, as well as the way he himself (and others) perceives it is deeply political. It responds to the post-democratic malaise we currently experience: Kentridge's work intervenes 'in a country – or indeed a world – where many people feel disenfranchised and disconnected from the political process' and attempts to raise issues without providing fixed answers (Macgregor 2004: 13). By bringing together the outrageous, the extreme, and the mundane, Kentridge manages 'to connect the specificity of daily life (with which every viewer can identify) to the broader moral and ethical issues of citizenship' (Christov-Bakargiev 2004: 33).

Furthermore, it is political not in the fetishistic, absolutist way of utopian, speculative leftism, but in a sophisticated way alert to the ambiguities of relations of power and to power, conscious of the promise and limits of democracy. 'I am interested in a political art', Kentridge writes, 'that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings – an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check, and

nihilism at bay' (Kentridge 1992). Speaking about the political implications of his work, he defends his position as 'a polemic for a kind of uncertainty', which he wants to differentiate from relativism: 'To say that one needs art, or politics, that incorporate ambiguity and contradiction is not to say that one then stops recognizing and condemning things as evil. However, it might stop one being so utterly convinced of the certainty of one's own solutions. There needs to be an understanding of fallibility and how the very act of certainty or authoritativeness can bring disasters' (Kentridge 1999: 34).

But Kentridge is also alert to the lack of any automatic escape from the post-democratic malaise. Even more troubling than the malaise we are experiencing is the easiness with which we accommodate ourselves to it: 'Its central characteristic is disjunction. The fact that daily living is made up of a non-stop flow of incomplete, contradictory elements, impulses and sensations. But the arresting thing for me is not this disjunction itself, but the ease with which we accommodate to it. It takes a massive personal shock for us to be more than momentarily moved' (Kentridge 2004a: 68-9). This raises the issue of personal implication, of what he calls 'indirect responsibility'. Indeed Kentridge is particularly interested in the way the political world 'affects us personally' (Kentridge 1999: 14). He has, in fact, positioned his own work accordingly: 'in the years following apartheid, Kentridge's drawings and films began to express the weight of having been one of the privileged few, exploring the notion and implications of indirect responsibility' (Christov-Bakargiev 2004: 34). We are always already guilty: we need to assume responsibility for the 'implications of what one knew, half knew, and did not know of the abuses of the apartheid years' (Kentridge, cited in Fernie 2007).

Although Kentridge and his family were opposed to and resisted apartheid, the assumption of this responsibility acquires in his work the most radical representation. This is how Jes Fernie describes that assumption:

In *Mine*, the third film that Kentridge made, Soho Eckstein is a mine owner enjoying the fruits of his labour. He sits propped up in bed wearing a suit with his breakfast placed before him. He presses the plunger of his cafetiere through his tray down into a noisy, claustrophobic, hellish mine in which misery, physical confinement, and the violent sound of drilling are horribly apparent. The contrast between the spaces above and below ground evokes Eckstein's exploitation of the land and the labourers he employs beneath it. He is ignorant of the suffering he is causing, thus avoiding the incapacitating emotion of guilt. The contradictions and ambiguities in the film emerge when we realise that we can't dismiss Eckstein (or any of Kentridge's characters, Ubu included) as a straightforward representative of evil distant from ourselves, but someone or

something inside us all. The physical resemblance of Eckstein to Kentridge himself is striking, and indeed Kentridge has talked about the fact that Eckstein is loosely based on his grandfather, Morris Kentridge, a lawyer and parliamentarian for the Labour Party in South Africa during the first half of the 20th century...The physical stature of the repulsive protagonist in the film *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997) is also based on Kentridge - more specifically on photographs of himself naked taken in his studio (Ferne, 2007).

The need for such a strategy follows from Kentridge's realisation that knowledge is not enough to shift our personal implication in unjust hegemonic orders. His admiration for Italo Svevo's Zeno partly emanates from his realisation of the gap between knowledge – even self-knowledge – and action. As Kentridge observes, 'Zeno, the hero of Svevo's novel, has remarkable self-knowledge. But it is knowledge that is without effect. This absolute inability of self-knowledge to force Zeno to act, or at other times to stop him from acting, feels familiar' (Kentridge 2004b). The first step in any subjective – or collective – change is to assume responsibility for our – direct and indirect, conscious and unconscious, cognitive and affective – implication in our symptom: to put it in Lacan's terms we need to *identify with our symptom*, to thematize our own (traumatic) attachment to what secures our servitude. And as Kentridge's status in the contemporary art world shows, such an active and re-politicizing registration of impurity can produce an ethical form of aesthetico-political satisfaction with wider appeal. Indeed, 'certain artworks seem to bring us to the borders of traumatic encounter in ways that are disturbing and provoking, even painfully so, but also at the same time aesthetically enjoyable' (Ray 2009: 135). To the extent that they 'create a sense of discomfort and inner conflict that leads to a reconsideration of previously held views' and encourage the experience of questioning ourselves and society, such artworks have a true democratic potential (Hersch 1998: 8).

Michael Landy's methodical destruction of all his belongings – as a way to actively test his own implication in ownership and consumerism – in his celebrated work *Break Down*, also points to the alternative satisfaction entailed in the sacrifice of phallic enjoyment, which can acquire a wider appeal. This is how *The Guardian* reported the event, and it is worth quoting in some length:

Oxford Street, the most famous shopping street in Britain, is playing host to one of the more genuinely disturbing art events of recent years. Michael Landy's *Break Down* is a piece of alternative retail therapy housed in what was once a C&A department store near Marble Arch. Dominating the stripped-down retail space is a long, winding automatic conveyor belt which reminds one, in a consumer year-zero sort of way, of the famous conveyor belt of prizes in The

Generation Game, carrying as it does an endlessly circling succession of trays of Michael Landy's stuff, in different stages of breakdown (Cumming 2001).

Landy's work could be emblematic here: not only does it risk a temporary – but nevertheless courageous – suspension of the coordinates of our (consumerist) reality, not only does it embrace the lack in the Other; it also thematises the personal cost, the process of mourning, involved in such a critical act, a cost necessary in order to reflexively highlight our own implication in hegemonic orders. This is what we read in a discussion between Landy and Julian Stallabras: 'JS: Some people will read this work as an attack on consumerism, though. ML: People will read it like that, and—well—it is an attack. But it's an inverted attack because it's an assault on me. It's trying to ask: what is it that makes consumerism the strongest ideology of our time?' (Stallabras 2000: 6-7). And yet, this act, this embrace of lack, situated at the intersection of the real with the symbolic, produces its own enjoyment and earns the appreciation of his audience both at the cognitive and at the affective level:

At the show's private view last week, he still didn't know how he was going to feel as the conveyor belt sprang his intricately planned project into action. The next day he told me he thought it was the happiest day of his life. He'd seen people moved to tears. He'd also seen them nicking stuff from the trays, but that's consumerism, part of what he expected.

... Instead of showing out, Landy's *Break Down* journeys within, consuming what is his and discarding the accoutrements of modern life to find out exactly what happens when nothing's left (Cumming 2001).

And now, on to something more controversial. Anthony Gormley is another artist in whose work his own body is continuously involved as a model, although in a way very different – and, arguably, less challenging or inspiring – from that of Kentridge. And yet, his recent *One and Other* public art project demonstrates that inscriptions of the lack in the Other can acquire degrees of visibility and popular appeal able to re-politicize the centre of the post-democratic capitals of the West, bringing to mind Claude Lefort's argument, according to which the defining characteristic of modern democracy is that in a democratic regime the locus of power remains an empty space, only to be temporarily occupied. What did Gormley do? He used the opportunity offered by the Mayor of London to a series of artists to exhibit their work on the empty 4th plinth in London's Trafalgar Square to initiate a true democratic experiment. Instead of placing one of his sculptures on the plinth, a space usually hosting statues of royalty and generals, he invited applications from people

who wanted to temporarily occupy this space at the heart of London for one hour each. The response to this call was unprecedented. As we read in the official website of the project: 'No fewer than 2,400 people from as far afield as the Shetland Islands and Penzance occupied the plinth for sixty minutes each, picked at random from nearly 35,000 who applied. 1,208 men and 1,192 women aged between 16 and 84 took part... During the 100 day project, the website received over 7 million hits. The project became the subject of photos and blogs, tweets and newspaper articles. It provoked plaudits and vitriol – in short, it became part of the cultural fabric of the UK'.

Gormley sacrificed the exhibition of his own artwork in favor of an encounter with whatever random selection (lot) would bring to the limelight, in what could be construed as a radical pluralist bid to democratize the public sphere. Interestingly enough, not only did this project involve an aesthetico-political institutionalization of lack stimulating the desire for participation, not only did it risk an unpredictable encounter with the 'divided city', to use Nicole Loraux's expression;<sup>22</sup> it also created new forms of subjectivity, new forms of fidelity to the event of participation. People who participated, now call themselves 'the plinthers' to mark this fidelity to Gormley's innovative and satisfying democratic experiment. This is where the kernel of every true act is located; not (so much) in the action of the one individual who initiates something, but in the collective response to her/his challenge by those excluded and demanding to be heard,<sup>23</sup> in the creation of a particular type of commonality of the not-All. But Gormley's work is also important for one more crucial reason: for reactivating the democratic institution of lot inside an (artistic) terrain dominated by the (aristocratic?) quest for unique individual talent, within a socio-cultural terrain regulated by the technocratic Discourse of the University and a political terrain following a post-democratic direction. Simply put, given that 'the drawing of lots has ... been the object of formidable work of forgetting' (Rancière 2006: 42), to embrace this constitutive *scandal of democracy* provides crucial help in the effort to reinvigorate this valuable tradition of equality and to bring back on the agenda sortition and civic lotteries (Dowlen 2008). In that sense, Gormley's work does seem to belong to a type of political art that, no matter in what limited fashion, brings 'political ideas and ideals into the realm of the senses and into the moral and emotional lives of individuals', the type of art that can support democracy by 'educating citizens' (Hersch 1998: 3), encouraging questioning and agonistic participation, an awareness of lack and contingency.

However, it is not only contemporary art that engages with forms of enjoyment registering a certain lack without sacrificing its broad socio-cultural appeal. Attitudes



towards consumption are also a very topical case in point. Here, it would be possible to use critical attitudes towards consumption, which emerged following the global crisis in hard-hit economies (in Iceland and elsewhere), as incarnating a stance very close to Marshall Sahlins' 'Zen road to affluence' implicit in stone age economics and briefly discussed in *The Lacanian Left*.<sup>24</sup> However, it is doubtful whether such initiatives of de-consumption and de-growth would be able to persuade critics like Žižek who, strangely enough, are more than ready to dismiss all that as utopian fantasies! (Žižek 2008a: 330).<sup>25</sup> Instead, let us move then into the heart of an *existing utopia*, that of contemporary consumerism. Let us encounter the 'Zen road to branding'. Here the example of MUJI is striking. One of today's most successful retail brands, manufacturing and selling more than 6,000 different items and operating shops in 16 countries, is a non-brand. Its products are never visibly branded and, most important, *Muji*, its name, signifies exactly that, the absence of a brand name; it is a name marking an absence. As we read in the shop catalogue: '*Mujirushi Ryohin*, as Muji was originally known, means *no brand quality goods*'. Nevertheless, precisely by occupying such an extimate place inside the world of branding, MUJI has been a huge success.

And this is a success from which transformative politics has to learn a lot. Here, anti-capitalist readers should overcome their shock and acknowledge, together with Badiou, the '*ontological* virtue' of capital: 'it exposes the pure multiple as the foundation of presentation; it denounces every effect of One as a simple, precarious configuration, it dismisses the symbolic representations in which the bond found a semblance of being' (Badiou 1999: 56-7). This is the paradox and the challenge Badiou puts forth: 'philosophy has not known until quite recently how to think in *level terms with Capital* since it has left the field open to its most intimate point, to vain nostalgia for the sacred, to obsession with Presence ... It has not cared to recognize in a straightforward way the absoluteness of the multiple and the non-being of the bond' (Badiou 1999: 58). Muji may be a concrete manifestation of this challenge. It is up to us to draw the implications for progressive politics and to channel this apparently existing potential in radical democratic instead of post-democratic directions.

Indeed, imperfect acts will always be, sooner or later, open to some degree of co-optation by established institutions and even by the market. Kentridge has not managed to change our implicit complicity to power structures. Landy's work has not resulted in a massive weakening of consumerism.<sup>26</sup> Gormley, a 'celebrity artist' most people would associate with a New Labour vision of public art, has not reversed post-political trends.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, through their aforementioned works and stances, they have undoubtedly increased their visibility and perhaps their 'market value'. By embracing, however, the partial *jouissance* of the not-All in terrains where this was considered unimaginable, by partly restructuring a (limited) public space along these lines, their projects address an important challenge to all of us, even beyond what they might or might not be consciously envisaging and irrespective of whether they can support this challenge themselves.<sup>28</sup> Why then disqualify them from being fitting examples?

As for Muji, it does remain a successful capitalist enterprise due to its creative and enjoyable embrace of the logic of lack. But, why not see that co-optation as a measure of success? Why not see it as a sign of the ability of all these acts to present the sacrifice of phallic enjoyment and the identification with the lack in the Other in a way that the *status quo* cannot ignore:

Commodification is the simplest process through which capitalism can acknowledge the validity of a critique and make it its own, by incorporating it into its own specific mechanisms: hearing the demand expressed by the critique, entrepreneurs seek to create products and services which will satisfy it, and which they will be able to sell (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 442).

Co-optation is, at any rate, unavoidable. We are all aware that art has and can certainly function as *ideological support* for the status quo by capturing and rendering harmless energies and pressures for change (Ray 2009b: 80). Marcuse, among others, warns us that an artistic search for sensibility can become an end in itself 'and thereby be co-opted into the reigning ethic of consumption' (Hersch 1998: 170). Almost from its inception, psychoanalysis was also put in the service of the *engineering of consent*, with Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays being one of the pioneers of the public relations industry in the US. And even Žižek's Gandhian dictum – 'Be yourself the change you want to see in the world' – was recently given a 'revolutionary individualist' twist in a new *Nike* campaign: 'Be the revolution of you'! When such co-optation/domestication of a radical act occurs, then transformative orientations need to re-direct their objectives, with the frontiers of antagonism displaced to a new position. This is what is at stake in any struggle, which can only be an impure, 'ongoing, multiple, and unpredictable' dialectic between power and resistance (Fleming and Spicer 2008: 305).<sup>29</sup> Unless, of course, one envisages it as a dramatic one-off *à la* Žižek. But then we are closer to religion than to politics and psychoanalysis. In the Lacanian ethical orientation we can only hope that the

institutionalization of lack will make the unavoidable dialectic between co-optation and innovation a dynamic one, introducing new rhythms in the (continuous) redistribution of the sensible and permitting the formulation of innovative post-capitalist alternatives. But here, very often, capital is still ahead of us.

### ***To conclude ...***

Does the reader feel rewarded by the presentation of all these new examples? Do they prove the plausibility and validity of my position? I really doubt it. The reader seeking final solutions will still be frustrated. If, however, the frustration is increasingly being experienced not as wholly debilitating, but – at least partly – as a productive challenge for cultural, economic and political innovation, then something may be changing. In any case, the preceding argumentation was not meant to present a perfect example, precisely because there is none available! If there is no perfect act there is also no perfect example of the act. Examples are utilized not in order to prove that a better future is guaranteed, but to show that the dis-investment of hegemonic ideologies and practices is still possible and that practically shifting the frontiers of what is permissible/sayable/enjoyable/imaginable for all of us remains, under certain conditions, a real option.<sup>30</sup>

Examples, in other words, can only serve as indications and sources of inspiration and not as algorithmic evidence of alternative orientations. Insofar as we judge things from within the realm of the symbolic, of instituted reality, then this limitation is radical. The role of examples can only be to support imagination – to encourage the decision to imagine something radically different; neither to enslave imagination with the presentation of a final solution nor to guarantee the compliance of the real to whatever the imaginary dictates. In that sense, all examples are more or less failed examples. But it is through their partial failure that a partial success can be envisaged. Their failure is a productive failure and registering this failure, this constitutive lack, can initiate the process of productive mourning necessary for the rigorous pursuit of the new.<sup>31</sup>

Along these lines, my choice of examples should be interpreted as a deliberate choice of particular failures and not of others. Indeed, the choice of a certain sort of examples and of the failures associated with them may reveal a lot about the direction a theory is taking, ethically and politically. We need to assume, in other words, responsibility for our failures, and, in my view, the failures with which we should identify are clearly not those of Antigone, Robespierre, Mao or Stalin. As for the attainment of certainty and purity,

as for the phallic quest for the final solution, for a utopian telos, this needs to be sacrificed in the continuous movement that constitutes politics. As Giorgio Agamben has put it:

movement is an unfinished, unaccomplished act, without telos, which means that movement keeps an essential relation with a privation, an absence of telos. The movement is always constitutively the relation with its lack, its absence of an end, or telos ... Movement is the impossibility, indefiniteness and imperfection of every politics. It always leaves a residue. ... It is the threshold of indeterminacy between an excess and a lack that marks the limit of every politics in its constitutive imperfection (Agamben 2008).<sup>32</sup>

- 1 Many thanks are due to Geoff Boucher, Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Jason Glynos for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper and to Alan Finlayson for some really helpful bibliographical as well as substantive suggestions.
- 2 Alessia Contu, for example, has also utilized this rhetorical topos in a recent Žižek-inspired paper entitled 'Decaf Resistance' – its concluding section is characteristically entitled 'Concluding Remarks ... So "What is to be Done?"' (Contu 2008: 376).
- 3 Predictably, Contu also draws on Žižek's politics of the 'radical act' to sketch a way out of our current predicament.
- 4 Likewise, against decaf acts of pseudo-resistance, Contu calls for Real acts, acts of the impossible (Contu 2008: 370). Contu is right to point to the ethical status of the act in Lacanian theory. Instead, however, of elaborating on Lacan's original conceptualization of the act – in his seminar *L'acte psychanalytique* and elsewhere – she relies entirely on Žižek's theorizing of the act, inclusive of his favourite example, Antigone. Thus, her argument is bound to reproduce some of the same ambiguities one finds in Žižek's work on the radical act.
- 5 See, for example, Stavrakakis 2007, ch. 3.
- 6 Of an 'act of resistance, qua act of terrifying and unadulterated freedom'? (Contu 2008: 376).
- 7 I owe this connection to the history of gnosticism to discussions with Thanos Lipowatz.
- 8 Which, indeed, constitutes an important theoretico-political knot here, as highlighted by Zupancic and others (Stavrakakis 2007: 118).
- 9 In opposition to the relevant discussion in *The Lacanian Left*, and since this is ultimately a matter of interpretation and problematization, I will be devoting more space in this text to a discussion of the secondary literature on Lacan's act, paying particular attention to commentators more open towards Žižek's sensibilities.
- 10 With all his ambiguities, and in opposition to Žižek, Badiou seems to be taking this into account in his conceptualization of the event: without the exercise of restraint, the (absolutised) power of Truth can easily degenerate into a disastrous Evil (see, in this respect, Stavrakakis 2007: 154).
- 11 I will be returning to this idea towards the end of this text.
- 12 This is a course similar to the one explored by Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, where she duly registers this 'something unyielding that sets itself up residence in us, that constitutes what we do not know and renders us fallible' – this is why morality has to be situated on the side of restraint, 'of "not joining in", and even, in an explicit critique of Heideggerian *Entschlossenheit*, as refraining from self-assertiveness' (Butler 2005: 60-1). It is here that she cites Adorno: 'There has to be an element of unswerving persistence (*Unbeirrbarkeit*), of holding fast to what we think we have learnt from experience, and on the other hand, we need an element not just of self-criticism, but of criticism of that unyielding, inexorable something (*an jenem Starren und Unerbittlichen*), that sets itself up in us. In other words, what is needed above all is that consciousness of our own fallibility' (Adorno in Butler 2005: 60). Against any type of voluntarist disavowal à la Žižek, Butler charts a different way forward: 'If we are to act ethically, for either Adorno or Foucault, it will mean that we avow that error is constitutive of who we are. This does not mean that we are only error, or all that we say is errant and wrong. But it does mean that what conditions our doing is precisely that for which we cannot give full account, a constitutive limit, and that this condition is, paradoxically, the basis of our accountability' (Butler 2005: 66).
- 13 My reading stresses Žižek's ultimate disavowal of negativity, while Hallward's criticism concerns Žižek's 'alleged morbid fascination with negativity ... which misses the positivity of the Event' (Žižek 2008a: 316-7).
- 14 In which case, his prior violent rejection of my approach might just be his own unique way of registering criticism and initiating debate. Otherwise, after all, why would anybody devote so many pages to something so utterly worthless?
- 15 In *The Parallax View*, Žižek had adopted a more (openly) critical position vis-à-vis Karatani's endorsement of lottery as a way of sustaining the idea of the centre and putting it in question at the same time, retaining a place for power without fetishizing power into a substance. His first objection was predictable: 'does all this not exactly fit Lefort's theorization of democracy'? (Žižek 2006a: 57). Obviously, this is not so objectionable for all of us. Nevertheless, there is also a second, substantive objection: 'But is this, in fact, enough to undermine the "fetishism of Power"? When an accidental individual is temporarily allowed to occupy the place of Power, the charisma of Power is bestowed on him, following the well-known logic of fetishist disavowal: "I know very well that this is an ordinary person just like me, but nonetheless ... (while he is in power, he becomes an instrument of a transcendent force; Power speaks and acts through him)! ... would not the true task be precisely to get rid of the very mystique of the place of Power?' (Žižek 2006a: 58).

But, who exactly is captivated by the mystique of power here? Who is trapped within a fetishistic logic of disavowal? Only the one who, ignoring Max Weber and the whole theory of power, sees charisma as its only possible source of legitimacy and fails to register the paradoxical scandal of democratic power: 'The scandal of democracy, and of the drawing of lots which is its essence, is to reveal that the title [to govern] can be nothing but the absence of title, that the government of societies cannot

but rest in the last resort on its own contingency' (Rancière 2006: 47).

- 16 In fact, similar references to sortition can be found in the last chapter of *Lacan and the Political* as well as in *The Lacanian Left* (Stavrakakis 1999: 162, Stavrakakis 2007: 270).
- 17 Further information on this experiment and other similar initiatives of participatory and deliberative democracy can be found in *participedia*: [http://www.participedia.net/wiki/British\\_Columbia\\_Citizens\\_%27\\_Assembly\\_on\\_Electoral\\_Reform](http://www.participedia.net/wiki/British_Columbia_Citizens_%27_Assembly_on_Electoral_Reform) (accessed 15 March 2010). The British Columbia experiment was repeated two years later in Ontario (2006).
- 18 Admittedly, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels describe the proletariat as already incarnating the collapse of bourgeois society: 'In the condition of the proletariat, those of old society at large are already virtually swamped. The proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family relations; modern industry labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests' (Marx and Engels 1998: 48). However, this is described as merely the result of impersonal historical progress. As the first World War demonstrated, without an active ethical embrace and reorientation of change, without dealing with the personal costs it entails, 'national character' and 'bourgeois prejudices' easily got a second lease of life as fantasmatic objects of identification for the proletariat. And the Leninist solution, relying on the party vanguard, only made things worse.
- 19 Although it has to be noted that the ethics of the Lacanian clinical orientation is inexorably linked with such an act of reflexive inscription of lack able to shift a subject's relation to its own enjoyment: 'The impossible ... can only be hypothesized, given that it is strictly unaccounted for within the symbolic. Nevertheless, to the credit of psychoanalytic discourse, such a point can and must be inscribed in a structure. The ethic of the psychoanalytic clinic is to be located in this very act of positioning this impossibility at the heart of its practice. ... All that psychoanalysis and its epistemological allies demand is that this impossibility be formalized, that is, that one seek to establish a discourse that coheres while still containing a non-signifying element' (Skomra 2006: 7).
- 20 Violent acts of real castration are no less dangerous when what is at stake is the testicles of those in power. In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Žižek flirts with this idea in his discussion of an old Russian joke about the balls of a Mongol rapist. His first conclusion, consistent with a violent Jacobinist imaginary, is that 'in our societies, critical Leftists have hitherto only succeeded in soiling those in power, whereas the real point is to castrate them ...' Fortunately, this time, he goes on to argue: 'But how can we do this? We should learn here from the failures of twentieth century Leftist politics. The task is not to conduct the castration in a direct climactic confrontation, but to undermine those in power with patient ideologico-critical work, so that although they are still in power, one all of a sudden notices that the powers-that-be are afflicted with unnaturally high-pitched voices' (Žižek 2009: 7).
- 21 Leaving aside cinematic art, Žižek's favorite playground, as well as a major inspiration for some of his most innovative work. See, for example, his references to emptiness and the lack in the Other in the fascinating analysis of the MacGuffin and the other Hitchcockian objects elaborated in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Žižek 1989: 182-3). Which is not to say, of course, that Žižek has nothing to say on the visual arts. See, in this respect, his discussion of Malevich's *Black Square* as the artwork re-establishing the structure of sublimation in the modernist setting, by directly staging 'the void itself' (Žižek 2000: 38).
- 22 This division was also reflected in press reactions to the event. On the one hand, supporters praised 'The fact that the corner of one of our most famous landmarks has been given over to a group of ordinary citizens, to do with what they will' (Skinner 2009), in a way re-claiming the commons. On the other, dismissive critics were quick to conclude that 'Antony Gormley's "plinth people" don't stand up for democracy, they just stand there – and they look stupid' (Jones 2009).
- 23 Likewise, 'the only true act in Antigone is precisely not in Antigone, it is in response of Antigone' (Neill 2003: 364), in the creation of a particular type of aesthetico-political institution of democratic self-limitation: the theatre in the Ancient Greek cities (Stavrakakis 2007: 128).
- 24 See, in this respect, Stavrakakis 2007: 280.
- 25 In my view, and although it still contains certain utopian connotations, an argument for de-growth, such as the one put forward by Serge Latouche, presents a series of challenging features certainly relevant for the elaboration of a post-fantasmatic economic and political orientation embracing lack. See, in this respect, Latouche 2006, where Sahlin's work is also (briefly) discussed.
- 26 Landy is, in fact, conscious of the fact that his act can even be construed as the ultimate consumer choice: 'JS: This project reminds me of some of the writing about potlatch and economies in which gifts play an important part. The disposal of goods, sometimes very valuable goods, can be central to a society: in Chichén-Itzá, the great Mayan city, there is a vast, very steep-sided pit, with deep water, into which valuables, and sometimes children, were thrown as sacrifices (archaeologists have fished the treasures out). That disposal can also be a form of conspicuous consumption: does that have a resonance for you? ML: Yeah, this is a kind of luxury in one respect. I don't want the work to be seen as

purely negative. In a sense, it's the ultimate consumer choice' (Stallabras 2000: 4).

- 27 Associated with SkyArts and relying heavily on media coverage, Gormley's project was all along in danger of being accused of complicity with the post-political mediated reality it partially put in question.
- 28 Even Salcedo, when referring to her aforementioned work *Shibboleth*, seems to ignore its ecumenical appeal and severely limits the scope of possible interpretations by linking it with the legacy of colonialism and racism (Salcedo 2007: 65). And as for Anish Kapoor, briefly mentioned above, he has just decided to alienate many of his admirers by associating himself with a commercial spectacle such as the Olympic Games.
- 29 This is especially true as far as art is concerned. As Gene Ray has put it, 'all productions of spirit in class society are entanglements of truth *and* untruth, freedom *and* unfreedom, promise of happiness and marker of barbarism. Critique confronts the social untruth embedded in cultural artefacts in order to set free the potential truth that is also latent in them' (Ray 2009a: 138).
- 30 It is along such lines that Jacques Rancière describes the political relevance of artistic practices: 'Aesthetic experience has a political effect' to the extent that, by defining a community of sense, a *sensus communis*, it involves 'a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities for collective enunciation' (Rancière 2008: 11).
- 31 It is here, in this process of mourning, that another crucial link between art and socio-political critique is revealed: 'Followed rigorously, mourning converges with radical social critique' (Ray 2009a: 149), certain artworks can indeed entail a radical politicization of mourning (Ray 2009a: 136) which can modestly affect practices of everyday life, 'spurring mourning back into movement' (Ray 2005: 6).
- 32 In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels similarly point out that 'Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* that is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement that abolishes the present state of things' (Marx and Engels 1987: 56). It is a pity that, in the Marxist tradition, this movement was largely seen as obeying a predetermined course leading to an apocalyptic showdown with a guaranteed outcome, rendering the category of 'communism', once more, deeply problematic.

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