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Goodbye Lenin? Žižek on Neoliberal Ideology and Post-Marxist Politics

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In the decades following the collapse of Communism, the former East Germany saw the emergence of the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*. Cultural paraphernalia associated with the old DDR (German Democratic Republic)—Communist flags, portraits of Marx, and the famous *Trabant* or *Trabi* (the East German state-produced car)—became highly fashionable. The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* as an expression the tragi-comic trauma of dealing with the collapse of socialism is humorously captured in Ulrich Becker's subtly critical film, *Goodbye Lenin!* (Germany, 2003).¹ According to Slavoj Žižek, however, a phenomenon such as *Ostalgie* is less an expression of nostalgia for the communist past as an attempt to come to terms with its collapse; an exercise in distantiation, de-traumatisation, a farewell to a now-vanished form of life (2008: 64). Can one talk of a similar phenomenon in the realm of theory? Is there a philosophical *Ostalgie*, with Marx, Mao, and dialectical materialism—hardly mentionable a decade ago—now returning to haunt Western academia? Musing in this vein, we might regard the signs of philosophical *Ostalgie* as an attempt to cope with the shock of the collapse of radical Leftist politics, the demise of Marxism as a framework capable of sustaining the theoretical and practical critique of global capitalism.

While tempting, such an analogy would also be misleading, reducing to an impotent nostalgia recent attempts to retrieve a radical political stance. It would also miss the point that we are now entering a period in which the utopian complacency of neoliberal democratic ideology has been severely shaken. Still, the traumatic aspect of the collapse of Marxism as a viable theoretical framework—not to mention as a concrete political project—is not to be underestimated. The question, rather, is whether it can, or indeed should, be rehabilitated or renewed in response to the contemporary crises afflicting global capitalism.

What has replaced the Marxist paradigm?² Here we can identify three distinctive trends: 1) the ‘Kantian’ liberal-democratic turn to human rights, ethics, and, more generally, political liberalism (Rawls, Habermas, Kymlicka, and so on); 2) the ‘postmodernist’ turn towards the cultural politics of identity and the valorisation of difference (Judith Butler, Simon Critchley, ‘cultural materialism’); and 3) the ‘post-political’ turn towards ‘ontological politics,’ rethinking “the political” in deconstructivist or messianic terms, as the possibility of a ‘wholly Other’ community-to-come (Derrida, Agamben, ‘deconstructive’ political theory, and so on).

In addition, there is also 4) a number of important ‘post-Marxist’ attempts—in the sense of having traversed Marxism in order to retrieve what remains viable in Marxist thought—to reclaim the legacy of radical emancipatory politics. Here we might list the critique of hegemony in the name of radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe); the ‘Deleuzian’ self-overcoming of Empire via the immanent becoming of the multitudes (Hardt and Negri); the radical egalitarian axiom of justice applied to situational, anti-statist politics of universality (Badiou); and the antagonist political struggle in the name of egalitarian justice, a radical politics of universality waged by the excluded ‘part with no part’ against the socio-economic management of the *demos* (Rancière).

It is in this dynamic context of attempts to construct a ‘post-Marxist’ politics—a response to what we could call the threefold turn to liberal democracy, cultural politics, and metaphysical messianism—that I shall situate Slavoj Žižek’s ideology critique and political philosophy. Žižek’s most recent reflections, moreover, on the ideologico-political significance of the global financial crisis reveal a firming of his position concerning the prospects of radical Leftist politics: from the neo-Marxist critique of liberal-democratic ideology to a retrieval of the Idea of communism for radical emancipatory politics. With an ironic historical circularity, the time has come, as Žižek might well quip, to farewell the neo-cons and welcome the neo-comms.

1. Goodbye Lenin? Žižek's Critique of Liberal-Democratic Ideology

Žižek's recent tome, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008a), develops a sustained critique of contemporary forms of liberal-democratic ideology. While exemplifying Žižek's distinctively eclectic synthesis of analyses of popular culture, philosophical speculation, and political reflection, the book also represents a significant elaboration of Žižek's own political philosophy, continuing the analyses begun in the (Badiouian) final part of *The Parallax View* ("The Lunar Parallax: Towards a Politics of Subtraction" 2006) and in his shorter books on totalitarianism, the September 11 terrorist attacks, Lenin, and violence (Žižek 2001, 2002, 2004, 2008b). I shall also briefly consider, in conclusion, Žižek's response to the 2008-09 global financial crisis, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009), as marking a new phase in Žižek's political philosophy—the shift from ideology critique to outlining a possible neo-communist politics.

Despite his typically eccentric digressions, the central argument of *In Defense of Lost Causes* can be readily summarised. For Žižek, the prevailing moral-democratic consensus concerning the insurmountable nature of global capitalism, and hence the unquestionability of liberal democracy as its 'political-ideological' supplement, should be subjected to radical critique. Indeed, we should refuse what Žižek elsewhere calls the 'Rumspringa' argument against radical politics (referring to the Amish practice of allowing youth to 'run wild' in American youth culture, then offering them the 'free choice' whether to return to the religious community, which they invariably do) (2006: 331 ff.). In theoretical terms, the 'Rumspringa' argument has a number of variants but all follow the same formula: the lessons of history show that any attempt at radical social revolution and political emancipation (Marxism) inevitably ends in violence and terror (Stalinism, Maoism). Liberal democracy and human rights discourse should therefore be embraced as the only viable way of safely avoiding compromise with political violence. Leftist political philosophers, in this regard, are particularly culpable. We might mention here, for example, Bernard Henri-Levy's critique of the 'totalitarian' complicities of the master thinkers of the 1960s, their condoning of the excesses of state power and political violence (in Stalinism and Maoism). For BHL and a host of contemporary liberal critics, erstwhile radical Leftist philosophers should renounce their renewed fascination with 'totalitarian' politics and the spectre of political violence, and return instead to defending human rights, holding liberal democracies to account through moral critique (Henri-Levy 2008).

Žižek's first move is to reject this 'Rumspringa' argument, which he otherwise

describes as the liberal democratic blackmail that rejects any commitment to radical emancipatory politics as inevitably leading to violence and terror. This move takes on particular urgency given the remarkable public exposure, in recent decades, of the violence at the heart of (neo-conservative) liberal democracy: from the suspension of human rights and civil liberties under the ‘emergency’ conditions of the so-called ‘War on Terror’; the open (and publicly supported) defense of detention ‘camps’ for asylum seekers and so-called ‘illegals’ in many Western democracies; the open advocacy of the (liberal-democratic) right to use torture as a weapon in thwarting terrorist threats (Alan Dershowitz), and so on. This exposure of state-sanctioned violence and suspension of rights suggests that liberal democracies can no longer define themselves by their eschewal of violence, coercion, or manipulation in favour of consensus, conversation, or critique. We all live in Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* now.

Given this exposure of the latent violence underlying liberal democracy, the political Left, Žižek claims, should retrieve and defend its tradition of radical politics. Rejecting the ‘forced choice’ of contemporary political and moral discourse (either liberal democracy or fundamentalist terror), Žižek argues for the revitalising of the suppressed ‘third term’ in this dichotomy: the ‘Lost Cause’ of radical emancipatory politics. Žižek’s defense includes the provocative gesture of ‘resignifying’ the notion of terror, not to advocate political violence as such but rather to refuse the false choice (democracy or terror) that effectively forbids any reflection on radical political action in response to global capitalism. Drawing on the work of Alain Badiou, Žižek concludes that the universal idea of egalitarian justice—which has animated radical revolutionary politics since the French Revolution—should be redeployed in our contemporary political situation, one in which global capitalism faces a number of deep and potentially destructive antagonisms (ecological catastrophe, forms of intellectual property that resist privatisation, unpredictable biotechnological developments, and new forms of social exclusion). As Žižek avers, the impending ecological catastrophe, coupled with global financial, food, and energy crises, opens up the real possibility of renewing radical emancipatory politics.

Granted these conditions of immanent crisis, what are the parameters of our prevailing ideologico-political horizon? Žižek’s response provides a clue to his political philosophy: “the furthest one can go,” Žižek notes, “is enlightened conservative liberalism; obviously there are no viable alternatives to capitalism; at the same time, left to itself, the capitalist dynamic threatens to undermine its own foundations” (2008a: 2). “Intelligent conservative democrats,” Žižek continues, like Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama, realise

that capitalism tends to undermine its own ideological conditions; it can only thrive under “conditions of basic social stability, of intact symbolic trust,” where individuals not only accept responsibility for their fates but have a basic trust in the ‘fairness’ of the system (2008a: 2). Such an ideological background requires a strong educational and cultural apparatus, which is why ‘culture wars,’ scepticism about the Left/Right ideological divide, and the ‘moralisation of politics’ are such pervasive features of liberal democracies. For the latter require a ‘cultural-moral’ supplement in order to ensure that symbolic trust—in institutions, markets, and governments—remains intact, all the better to manage the socially deracinating and subjectively alienating effects of rapid economic liberalisation.

The current solution, according to Žižek, is therefore neither “radical liberalism à la Hayek, nor crude conservatism,” nor old-fashioned welfare-state capitalism, but rather “a blend of economic liberalism with a minimally ‘authoritarian’ spirit of community” (2008a: 2). This can take the familiar form of a neo-conservative brand of neoliberalism, in the style of George Bush Jr.; or a more ‘socially progressive’ tenor via so-called ‘Third Way’ social democracy (exemplified by the Clinton administration and the earlier part of Tony Blair’s government). The latter position, however, has increasingly mutated into the prevailing form of neoliberal economics combined with multi-culturalist liberal democracy, or what Žižek facetiously calls “capitalism with a human face” (which might also apply to Obama’s administration).

Here we reach the limit of contemporary ideologico-political commonsense. Beyond it lies what Žižek calls the realm of “Lost Causes” that require a “leap of faith,” and hence cannot but appear absurd from within the dominant ideologico-political horizon. There are a number of post-Marxist thinkers, however, who have adopted precisely such a position, what Bruno Bosteels (2005) recently dubbed “the speculative Left”. Badiou for one, whose political thought remains faithful to the heritage of the Leftist egalitarian revolutionary tradition, which recently prompted Alain Finkelkraut to denounce it as “the most violent philosophy, symptomatic of the return of radicality and of the collapse of anti-totalitarianism” (Žižek 2008a: 4). As Žižek observes, Finkelkraut’s comment reflects a puzzlement as to the failure of the critique waged by “anti-totalitarians,” the liberal “defenders of human rights, combatants against the ‘old leftist paradigms,” from the French *nouveaux philosophes* to the advocates of a ‘second modernity’” (2008a: 4). From this point of view, Badiou’s thought signals a return of the repressed: the return of radical emancipatory politics at the very moment what it had been declared historically refuted, a dangerous utopian nightmare threatening liberal democratic values, an alarming

valorisation of political violence and terror.

As Žižek observes, however, Badiou's achievement is to have articulated, Platonically speaking, the eternal and indestructible nature of true ideas, above all the idea of universal egalitarian justice: "It is enough for Badiou to *state* these ideas again clearly," as Žižek remarks, "and anti-totalitarian thought appears in all its misery as what it really is": a sophistic "pseudo-theorization of the lowest opportunist survivalist fears and instincts", a reactionary retreat from the misery of global capitalism, a decidedly *reactive* refrain sung by Nietzschean 'last men' (Žižek 2008a: 4).

In response to this ideologico-political blackmail, Žižek embraces the position of the 'speculative Left': "This book is unashamedly committed to the 'Messianic' standpoint of the struggle for universal emancipation" (2008a: 6), he announces, a position that cannot but appear as a "horrorshow" to partisans of the so-called 'postmodern' Left. By the latter, Žižek means a prevalent ideologico-political stance that generally adopts a softer, 'post-political', 'cultural politics' version of previous forms of political radicalism: not the 'totalitarian' political engagement of a philosopher such as Heidegger, or even Foucault's fascination with the Iranian revolution of 1978/79, but anti-globalisation, the promotion of human rights, and the struggle against sexism and racism; not "revolutionary state terror" but "the self-organized decentralized multitude"; not the "dictatorship of the proletariat" but collaborative ventures among multiple agents (civil society initiatives, private investment, state regulation)" (Žižek 2008a: 6). As Žižek's many critics demonstrate, the immediate temptation is to assume that Žižek is therefore simply defending, even irresponsibly valorising, such violent and destructive causes (like Stalinist and Maoist terror) against the prevailing liberal democratic consensus. On this view, Žižek's politics therefore collapse into nothing more than hysterical provocation (in the psychoanalytic sense); an impotent bombardment of the Master (the liberal-democratic capitalist system) with unfulfillable demands that presuppose the efficient functioning of the very economic and social system that makes these demands possible³

Žižek's aim, however, is rather different: "The true aim of the 'defense of lost causes' is not to defend Stalinist terror, and so on, but to render problematic the all-too-easy liberal-democratic alternative" (2008a: 6). The aim, in other words, is to destabilise, even destroy this complacent ideological consensus; to refuse the 'forced choice' between liberal democracy and fundamentalist terror, of whatever political persuasion, and to forcibly shift the parameters of political theorisation. In short, it is to reveal the suppressed third term in this opposition between democracy and fundamentalism: radical

emancipatory politics. This point needs to be underlined, since most critics of Žižek's political thought, rather than engaging with his discourse more substantively, swiftly return to the basic criticism that Žižek endorses terror, violence, and so on, as political means without ends, as a hysterical provocation, as making (like Heidegger and Foucault) the 'wrong choice' by urging radical action rather than democratic deliberation.⁴ In other words, Žižek's provocation is deftly despatched by referring it back to the 'forced choice' we face between liberal democracy and terror, without acknowledging that his real aim is an ideology critique of global capitalism and its ideologico-political supplement, liberal democracy. Let us refuse this 'forced choice', then, and turn instead to Žižek's critique of the deadlocks of liberal democratic politics.

2. "We're All Fukuyamaists Now!" Confronting the Deadlocks of Liberal Democracy

Despite the Marxist political posturing, Žižek's political philosophy remains, in various ways, stubbornly Hegelian. What we face, he observes, is a crisis of "determinate negation": the abandonment of the (Hegelian-Marxist) notion that the immanent antagonisms or contradictions within an existing order generates the seeds of the new, that is, of a more just or egalitarian or universal social and political order (Žižek 2008a: 337 ff.). Beginning with the Frankfurt School of the 1950s and 60s, the abandonment of determinate negation also saw the rise of the "wholly Other": the overcoming of capitalism was no longer sought in the immanent antagonisms of the system but could only come, rather, "from an unmediated Outside" (Žižek 2008a: 337). Global capitalism has since become naturalised as the unquestioned background against which all other forms of social, cultural, and political debate can occur, provided that the economic realm is cordoned off from political critique. Notwithstanding the 'revolutionary' rhetoric of the neo-conservatives and neoliberals alike, the critique of *political* economy, in its fully critical sense, has been all but silenced.

So how has the "contemporary Left" reacted to the "full hegemony of global capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy"? (Žižek 2008a: 337) Žižek lists the following, overlapping developments (2008a: 337-338):

1. Full acceptance of the framework of global capitalism while continuing to fight for emancipation *within* its rules (Third Way social democracy);
2. Acceptance of this framework but as something to be resisted by withdrawing from the reach of the state and operating from its 'interstices' (Simon Critchley's ethical

anarchism);

3. Acceptance of the all-encompassing character of this framework, which coincides with its opposite (the logic of the camp, the permanent 'state of exception'), and thus renders all political struggles futile; all that can be done is to wait for the outburst of something like (Benjamin's) 'divine violence' (late Adorno, Heidegger's 'only a god can save us', Giorgio Agamben);
4. Construing global capitalism as the ontic effect of a deeper ontological principle, whether the world-historical dominance of "instrumental reason" or the destinal sending of Being as modern technics (late Adorno, Heidegger).
5. The 'postmodern' shift from anti-capitalist struggle to "the multiple forms of the political-ideological struggle for hegemony," which is "conceptualised as a contingent process of discursive rearticulation" (of norms, discourses, signifiers) (Ernesto Laclau);
6. The wager that the Marxist gesture of the 'determinate negation' of capitalism can be repeated at the "postmodern" level thanks to the rise of "cognitive work," the contradiction between social production and capitalist relations having reached such a pitch that the immanent power of the "multitudes" might finally make possible the advent of an "absolute democracy" (Hardt and Negri).

All of these responses to the contemporary political situation share a common premise: that global capitalism is now a permanent condition of historical, social, cultural and political existence. Hence whatever political responses one may envisage must operate within the prevailing ideological consensus, which is defined by the disavowal of the economic and hence social antagonisms underlying our social, cultural, and political institutions. How, then, to respond to this situation?

Here Žižek argues that we need to go beyond Francis Fukuyama, with his famous pseudo-Hegelian thesis concerning the "end of history" (1992); the triumphal spread of free market liberal democracy across the globe since 1989 (though recently interrupted by the events of Sept 11, 2001). Indeed today the dominant ethos, as Žižek remarks, *is* "Fukuyamaian": "liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula of the best possible society, all that one can do is to render it more just, tolerant, and so forth" (2008a: 421).

The real question, however, is whether we accept this 'naturalisation' of capitalism, or whether global capitalism harbours antagonisms that might hinder or even prevent its indefinite reproduction (Žižek 2008a: 421). Žižek identifies four such antagonisms (2008a:

421-427):

1) the *ecological* crisis (drastic climate change, 'peak oil,' the geopolitical effects of environmental refugees, collapse of local agriculture, civil strife and unrest);

2) the challenge to concepts of *private property* posed by new forms of intellectual property;

3) the socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (especially in biogenetics);

and 4) *new forms of apartheid, of social exclusion*, particularly the proliferation of slums, separated communities, non-state governed zones of disorder (2008a: 421-427).

In light of these intersecting antagonisms confronting global capitalism, the historical question of whether it is possible to redeem the failed revolutionary attempts of the past (as Benjamin put it) remains open—such is Žižek's political wager.

What are we to make, then, of Žižek's response to this 'Fukuyamaist' consensus? Let me make a few brief remarks on these four antagonisms. The first concerns the difficulty involved in presenting climate change, for example, as linked to the unbridled expansion of global capitalism. Consider, for example, the striking contrast between the extraordinary global effort to deal with the global financial crisis, and the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit to seriously tackle climate change via the imposition of mandatory carbon emission reduction targets ('We have to rethink our priorities concerning energy, carbon trading, etc. because of the global financial crisis we are now all facing'). The political response to what is still perceived as a 'natural disaster,' if not a disaster just afflicting nature, remains coupled to a faith in market mechanisms as providing the 'technical' solution to the problem (Carbon Credit trading or Carbon Tax schemes), and the conviction that climate change must in any event be addressed without adversely harming economic growth or consumption ('I want my government to fix the problem but I don't want my consumerist way of life to change'). This tacit acceptance of global capitalism as compatible with seriously tackling climate change is precisely what a Žižekian politics would challenge. For the antagonism between the continued expansion of global capitalism and the potentially devastating effects of such growth on the planet's climate, not to mention its finite stock of natural resources, marks an immanent limit to the indefinite growth of the prevailing economic system.

The second point concerns the emphasis Žižek places on the rise of forms of intellectual property that challenge conventional notions of private property. For all the excitement surrounding intellectual commons, however, the forces arrayed against it are

formidable (consider Microsoft's attempts to maintain a monopoly over the production and distribution of software communication and information technologies). It is not clear how these new forms of intellectual property, now paradigmatic of the shift to a post-Fordist, 'informational economy', are likely to undermine or shatter the conventional categories of private property. Capitalism, once again, proves remarkably adept at integrating or managing anomalies in the system of global production and consumption, even finding ways of turning them profitably to account (for example, the rise of You-Tube and promotion of 'free', user-based internet services as a way of integrating the active consumer as a market-research resource).

Third point, the socio-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments, particularly in biotechnology and biopolitical manipulation of genetic life: here too the ingenuity of capitalism has proven extraordinary powerful, with the rise of biogenetic venture capitalism, the patenting of gene sequences, and privatisation of the results of scientific research, particularly in the field of genetics and pharmaceutical treatments. Curiously, rather than attack this privatisation of the biological and genetic basis of life, Žižek directs his attention instead to the 'humanist' hesitation over the ethical implications of such biotechnological developments. He also overlooks the rise of 'liberal eugenics': the liberal democratic counterpart to the traditional 'fascist' association with eugenics, now taken as a question of individual choice rather than a projection of state power (see Agar 2004). While criticising Habermas and Fukuyama for claiming that the biogenetic revolution is challenging our traditional conceptions of human nature, autonomy, and moral dignity, Žižek urges instead an obscure "inhuman" embrace of the radical implications of the research into genetics, brain science, and biotechnology. This is done more to challenge 'humanist' critiques of biogenetics, however, than to attack the disturbing 'privatisation of life' under contemporary techno-capitalism.

Final point, the heralding of the slum-dweller as the excluded "part of no-part," the new potential revolutionary subject of the twenty-first century: "what if the new proletarian position is that of the inhabitants of the slums in the new megalopolises?" (Žižek 2008a: 424). Indeed as Žižek notes, the proliferation of vast slums across the globe—from Mexico City and other Latin American capitals, through Africa (Lagos, Chad) to India, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia—represents "perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times" (2008a: 424; see Davis 2006) The extraordinary growth of global slums signals the rise of "a population living outside state control, in conditions half outside the law, in terrible need of the minimal forms of self-organisation" (Žižek 2008a: 424). With

Third World nations forced to join the global market—replacing local agriculture with crops to sell to overseas markets, thus ruining local food production and industry, while wealthy Western nations enjoy the ‘agricultural exception’ of massive subsidies for their farmers—the growth of global slums are a true symptom of the inner logic of global capitalism (Žižek 2008a: 424). While Žižek cautions against the too-easy identification of slum-dwellers as the new proletariat, he nonetheless alludes to the “signs of the new forms of social awareness that will emerge from the slum collectives”; their potential to become a Badiouian ‘evental site’ of the future, one of the “principal horizons of the politics to come” (Žižek 2008a: 426). Recalling the search for the ‘new proletariat’ pursued by Marcuse and Sartre (Third-World peasants, student movements, immigrants, etc.), it remains unclear how the existence of slums, even construed as ‘liberated’ zones of disorder escaping state or economic control (like the Brazilian *favelas*), could become an ‘evental’ site in this sense, given their precarious relations with law, government, and the (illegal) economy (drugs, weapons, gang conflicts, and so on).

Underlying all four antagonisms, moreover, is what Žižek identifies as the “zero-level antagonism,” which colours the entire field of struggle: that between *the included and the excluded* (Žižek 2008a: 428). All four antagonisms must be integrated with this primary one, Žižek argues, if we are to construct a kind of conceptual matrix that would foster radical political emancipation. For otherwise the temptation is to consider each antagonism on its own terms, to assume they are unconnected, and to attempt to resolve each one without reference to the fundamental antagonism between the included and the excluded. Ecology, for example, must not be used to legitimize the oppression of the ‘polluting’ Third World (China, India) by the wealthy West (US, Europe, Australia); the critique of biogenetic practices must resist the conservative (religious-humanist) ideology that typically pervades this critique; the critique of intellectual private property must avoid reducing it to a legalistic, ‘ethical’ issue rather than connecting it to the privatisation of the means of information exchange and communication (Žižek 2008a: 426-427). Unless these three antagonisms are related back to the primary one between the included and the excluded, they are apt to revert to the kind of ‘ethical’ issue that admits only of an ameliorative or ‘technical’ solution.

It is against this background of antagonisms generated within, but unable to be resolved by, capitalist liberal democracies—above all, the key antagonism between the included and the excluded, which defines the ambivalent economic, cultural-technological, and socio-political dynamics of globalization—that Žižek proposes a reinvention of the Idea

of communism. The latter would involve a defense of the need for common ownership and social control over what Hardt and Negri have designated the three “commons” shared by all human beings on the planet. These are 1) the *commons of culture*, including language, socialised forms of ‘cognitive’ capital, and the means of communication and information exchange, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, communication, and so on; 2) the *commons of external nature*, which is threatened by pollution, environmental destruction, climate change, exploitation of natural resources, etc.; and 3) the *commons of internal nature*, our human biogenetic inheritance, now increasingly subject to economically motivated manipulation and commodification.

If global capitalism is permitted to ‘enclose’ these commons as forms of private property or commodity exchange, then the threat posed by the simultaneous privatisation, commodification, and exploitation of all three commons—cultural-communicative, environmental, and biogenetic—could, conceivably, threaten the very existence of humanity. It is precisely this notion of the human ‘commons’—this “substance of productivity which is neither private nor public”—that for Žižek, following Hardt and Negri, justifies the “resuscitation of the notion of communism” (Žižek 2008a: 429). Such commons constitute “the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act which should be resisted,” Žižek adds, “with violence, if necessary” (Žižek 2008a: 428-429).

3. ‘Hegel and Haiti’: Žižek’s Neo-Communist Politics

Having outlined Žižek’s critique of capitalist liberal-democratic ideology, let us consider his proposal to reinvent the idea of communism via the necessary reclaiming of common ownership of environmental, cultural, and biogenetic commons. Žižek’s most recent text, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009) signals a shift towards this more concrete political project, while at the same time insisting that the political philosopher’s work remains that of insistent ideology critique. These two dimensions in Žižek’s political thought—a Marxist commitment to revolutionary praxis, and a (Left) Hegelian commitment to philosophical ideology critique—comprise a fascinating yet ambiguous political theory that, not without reason, leaves many critics troubled and perplexed. My concluding discussion shall thus reflect upon the ambiguous tension between Hegelian and Marxist dimensions of Žižek’s neo-communist political philosophy, and consider whether the key antagonism between the included and the excluded might provide a way of synthesising Žižek’s neo-Hegelian

ideology critique with his neo-communist politics.

There are three related questions that this project raises: 1) how to reconcile the commitment to ideology critique with the commitment to revolutionary politics; 2) how to understand the role of political ‘violence’ in this project; 3) how to understand the forms of neo-communist politics that Žižek proposes in light of these questions. Let us consider each question in turn.

1) The tension between the Hegelian impulse towards ideology critique and the Marxist impulse towards revolutionary politics is manifested in a number of ways. On the one hand, Žižek rejects the prevailing ‘Fukuyamaist’ consensus—shared both by conservatives and liberals—that liberal democracy is the unsurpassable economic-political horizon of our times. On the other, he criticises previous revolutionary groups and movements—Maoist cultural revolution, terrorist groups such as the RAF or Al-Qaeda—for failing to grasp the Hegelian lesson concerning the need for ‘determinate negation,’ that is, for forms of social and political action that do not simply destroy existing institutions but transform them in a universalist, emancipatory direction.

The question here is how to reconcile this commitment to revolutionary neo-Marxism (particularly the peculiarly Leninist strain that Žižek endorses) with the more restrained Hegelian ‘reformism’ suggested by his ideologico-critical stance, his frequent dismissals of calls to action and advocacy of an attitude of persistent philosophical questioning of the presuppositions of prevailing ideological, economic, and political frameworks. To be sure, Žižek rejects attempts, for example by progressive liberals (for example, John Caputo), to argue for radical reforms of liberal democracy within the framework of global capitalism (2009: 77-78). Such a position embraces ‘capitalism with a human face’, a position that presupposes that existing inequalities are aberrations that could in principle be eliminated rather than inherent antagonisms generated by capitalism itself.

In contrast, he advocates a radical political transformation of existing economic relations and political institutions of state power; a “dictatorship of the proletariat” that would radicalise the kinds of state-interventions that have been invoked as emergency measures to stabilise the global economy. At the same time, however, this work of radical political transformation is to be achieved, in good Hegelian fashion, by the patient work of critique, undermining the ideological frameworks that mark the limits of normative socio-cultural and politico-economic institutions and practices. Here one might ask: Is the impetus for radical political transformation to come from the subtle critical undermining of

prevailing forms of *Geist*, or from the immanent revolutionary praxis of a putative “new proletariat”? Is the former supposed to incite the latter? For Žižek, there is no real opposition or antagonism here, since both aspects are essential to any revolutionary transformation: “factual revolution plus spiritual reform, namely, actual struggle for state power plus the virtual struggle for the transformation of customs, of the substance of everyday life—what Hegel called the ‘silent weaving of the Spirit,’ which undermines the invisible foundations of power” (2008a: 374).

The question, however, is how they are to be articulated, synthesised, or integrated. At times, the Hegelian motif appears to gain sway: the patient undermining of ideological edifices eventually creating a space of revolutionary transformation in which prevailing forms of *Geist* suddenly appear as empty, devoid of substance, hence bereft of their essential legitimating function (2008a: 374-375). At other times, it is a more explicitly neo-Marxist analysis that is offered (drawing on both Badiou and Rancière): for example, Žižek’s plea to give “the good old ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’” a chance as the only way of breaking with the ‘post-political’ biopolitics of liberal capitalist societies of control (2008a: 412 ff.), or his rehabilitation of the idea of the *proletariat*, now construed as the coming-to-power of the radically excluded “part of no-part”, itself a universalist expression of the “elementary gesture of politicization, discernible in all great democratic events from the French Revolution ... to the demise of East European socialism” (2008a: 413; 416).

How do these two aspects work together? One way of making the transition from a (Left) Hegelian ideology critique to a Marxist theory of revolutionary praxis might be via the rehabilitation of the concept of *alienation*, which one imagines could be readily mapped on to what Žižek identifies as the fundamental antagonism between the included and the excluded. As Žižek theorised in his earlier books (see 1989 and 1991), social antagonisms generate various forms of social misrecognition that are ameliorated and ideologically ‘managed’ by means of social fantasies. Such ideological fantasies—for example in forms of nationalism, racism, or anti-Semitism—conceal this social misrecognition and rationalise its alienating effects by means of the logic of a ‘theft of enjoyment’. The disaffected working class voter, for example, unsettled by rapid socio-cultural uprooting, the increasing economic precarity, and subtle psychological and social control experienced under democratic neoliberalism, experiences the arrival of asylum seekers and their demands for recognition as an acute ‘theft of enjoyment’—as threatening ‘Others’ enjoying the kind of recognition so lacking in the alienated subject’s own experience; an inverted image of the subject’s own social alienation, disenfranchisement, and stymied aspirations.

Hence the simultaneous expression of fear and satisfaction in the intensely affective focus on 'border protection' in liberal democracies: it expresses a fantasised control and dominance over the movement of 'foreign' bodies, protecting the intact territory and security of the threatened 'national' body (and psyche).⁵

The problem is that this combination of neoliberal economics and neoconservative social fantasy—the neoliberal subject as self-regarding investor in one's own 'human capital', and as fearful-martial manager of affectively charged national 'borders'—has proven extremely potent, even ideologically impenetrable.⁶ We are clearly dealing here with the fundamental antagonism between the included and the excluded—the social fantasy of 'border protection' appealing to the sense of vicarious power offered to an otherwise disenfranchised populace—but it is not clear how this antagonism, which coalesces into neo-conservative nationalism underpinning neoliberal democracy, can be converted from reinforcing the current ideological situation to critically transforming it. More tellingly, the kind of detailed account of alienation present in Žižek's earlier books seems to have evaporated in his more recent work. Despite the continued emphasis on enjoyment [*jouissance*] as a political factor, Žižek's earlier theses on nationalism do not seem to be readily applied to the ideology critique of global capitalism. This is perhaps why, as I discuss further below, Žižek appears to vacillate between recommending the Hegelian path of patient ideology critique and endorsing the more activist Marxist-Leninist strategy of appropriating state power.

2) Žižek's analysis of violence, specifically political violence. Žižek's recent text on the topic (2008b) is notable for its distinction between *subjective* (physical) violence, perpetrated by an identifiable agent, and *objective* violence, which have no immediately obvious agent but is enacted, rather, by institutions or structural conditions (2008b: 8-13). Objective violence, in turn, divides into the symbolic violence of hegemonic forms of language, discourse, normative frameworks, or world-horizons; and the systemic, pervasive 'background' violence of our "smoothly functioning economic and political systems" (2008b: 1).

What, then, of political violence? On the one hand, there is Žižek's 'Marxist-materialist' interpretation of Benjamin's enigmatic reflections upon the idea of 'divine violence': we should take the latter to refer less to elements of Jewish-Marxist messianism or proto-deconstructionism, Žižek argues, than to 'revolutionary terror' and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (2008a: 161-162). On the other hand, there is Žižek's critique of terrorist violence as an 'irrational' outburst or displaced, *impotent passage à l'acte* that avoids or is

unable to comprehend the central antagonism driving its nihilistic fervour. The radical Islamist reaction to global capitalism, for example, arises with the collapse of the secular Left in Muslim countries, displacing the source of injustice and alienation to the moral corruption of the West (so-called 'Islamofascism') (Žižek 2009: 71-74).

Here again we find the contrast between, to put it in Hegelian terms, abstract and determinate negation: the abstract negation of existing social and political structures through terrorist violence versus the determinate negation of these elements of capitalist liberal democracies that attempts to transform them in accordance with the idea of egalitarian justice. But how is one to endorse determinate negation of our existing economic and socio-political structures without reverting to the kind of liberal-democratic reformism that Žižek dismisses as "global capitalism with a human face"? Indeed, one might ask here whether Žižek's more Hegelian strand of political philosophy offers a genuine alternative to communitarianism or simply a radical Left-Hegelian version of it. There are certainly moments that suggest the latter, such as Žižek's references to the importance of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* as providing the shared normative substance required to maintain existing social, cultural, and political forms of life (for example, the German critique of multiculturalism in the name of a prevailing *Leitkultur*) (2008a: 19-22); or his (ironic) plea for a "Leftist Eurocentrism" as a bulwark against post-political forms of liberal democratic multiculturalism, the "ideological supplement" of global capitalism (1998). On the other hand, Žižek's more recent emphasis on the importance of the invention of new cultural, social, and political forms, ones that genuinely shift the parameters of ideological, economic, or political debate, would suggest something capable of confronting the catastrophic effects of unbridled global capitalism: "what alone can prevent such calamity is, then, *pure voluntarism* ... our free decision to act against historical destiny" (2009: 154). On this view, what is needed is precisely a radical alternative to both liberal democracy and social-democratic communitarianism. What might this be?

3) Žižek's idea of neo-communism. Clues to how we might navigate between Hegelian determinate negation and politically irrational forms of abstract negation, and thus gain a clearer sense of Žižekian politics, are evident in Žižek's intriguing discussions of some recent political films. One might have expected, for example, that the ambiguous endorsement of revolutionary violence in *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue /Wachowski Bros, USA/UK/Germany, 2005) might resonate with the Žižekian defense of revolutionary politics or even the resignification of politically motivated 'terror'. Interestingly, however, Žižek criticises the film for not examining and developing further the relationship of

complicity between V (Hugo Weaving), the anarchist-political outlaw bent on a revolutionary repetition of Guy Fawkes' failed Gunpowder plot of 1605; and Sutler (John Hurt), the totalitarian leader who has turned the United Kingdom into a neo-conservative authoritarian police state. According to Žižek, however, the political violence of V is the dialectical counterpart of the authoritarian 'democracy' of Sutler's Norsefire party. Both the anarchist revolutionary and the authoritarian leader practice a kind of "shock doctrine" (see Klein 2007): Sutler unleashing a staged terror campaign (including biological attacks) in order to declare a state of emergency and consolidate Norsefire's own rule; and V subjecting the film's heroine, Evey Hammond (Natalie Portman), to a staged capture, imprisonment, and torture, apparently by government forces, all in the name of radicalising her politically.⁷

Although Žižek claims that there is a parallel between V and Sutler, who terrorises "the English population so that they become free and rebel" (2008a, 193), his claim seems to miss a crucial difference. Sutler's government stages terrorist attacks in order *to instil fear* into the public and thus ensure its own authoritarian rule, whereas V's staging of imprisonment and torture pushes Evey *to liberate herself from fear* and thus radicalise her politically. At the end of the film, after V's death, she freely decides to execute the dying V's plan to trigger a revolutionary transformation by blowing up the Houses of Parliament. Indeed, it is hard not to see Evey Hammond as evoking the kind of political revolutionary action that Žižek frequently valorises, while the historical repetition of Guy Fawkes' failed gunpowder plot would seem to resonate with Žižek's numerous references to Benjamin's conception of revolutionary transformation as an historical approximation of divine violence (2008a: 161-162).

Having criticised *V for Vendetta*'s failure to fully explore the complicity between terrorist violence and state power, Žižek fully endorses, on the other hand, Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (Japan/UK/USA, 2006) as a much more convincing depiction of the deadlocks of contemporary liberal democratic politics, and of the 'messianic' possibility of an revolutionary situation that might transform state power. The film strikingly thematises the nihilistic end of hope, futurity, and utopian emancipation through the metaphor of global sexual infertility. It is the year 2027 and no children have been born anywhere in the world for eighteen years. Former political radical and now depressive government bureaucrat Theo (Clive Owen) is kidnapped and persuaded by his estranged activist wife Julian (Julianne Moore) to assist a pregnant 'fuguee', Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey), to gain safe haven with the 'Human Project' (a group of scientists rumoured to be

working to cure human infertility). As Žižek remarks in his DVD commentary, the film presents a striking evocation of everyday forms of social control, with the sinister normalisation of the 'state of exception', covert suspension of basic rights, ideological cultivation of a climate of fear, and fundamental separation of the included and excluded (notably through brutal refugee detention camps).

In particular, Žižek draws attention to the film's concluding image, that of a solitary rowboat, drifting at sea, the precarious means by which Theo manages, before his heroic death, to deliver the pregnant Kee to safety. The tiny boat, shrouded in fog, is a figure of passage cut off from history, open to possibility, heralding a new beginning. The boat is without roots, drifting within an open horizon, and yet it is the boat that allows the 'miracle' of the child—the possibility of a new way of life—to be rescued and regenerated. Given the numerous Christological references in Cuarón's film, not least Theo's heroic self-sacrifice for the miraculous child, it is hard not to see this image of the boat with its fragile occupants as a 'messianic' figure of neo-romantic anti-capitalism.

What is striking in Žižek's commentary, however, is that there is no mention of the role of state power, or even of collective political action. Indeed, the film casts the latter in an ambivalent light, since "the Fishes"—an underground resistance group defending the rights of refugees—are revealed to have orchestrated the violent ambush attack that kills Theo's wife Julian, and whose real aim is to use Kee's baby as a political instrument. Instead the film's powerful 'messianic' ending suggest less a politically driven transformation than an aestheticist-spiritualist evocation of the 'messianic' hope for a new beginning.

If we take these two films symptomatically as providing clues revealing the basic orientation of Žižek's political philosophy, we find, on the one hand, a rejection of the kind of radical revolutionary movement that is prepared to use political violence in order to seize state power, and on the other, an endorsement of the messianic politics of a non-state based form of collective cultural-spiritual transformation that would occur at a distance from the state.⁸ From this point of view, Žižek appears less a neo-Marxist-Leninist advocate of a reinvented 'dictatorship of the proletariat' than an ethical, 'messianic', neo-romantic revolutionary!

Perhaps the solution to this apparent ambivalence between the Hegelian commitment to ideology critique and Marxist commitment to revolutionary politics can be found in Žižek's most recent reflections on the crises facing global capitalism (2009). The political position Žižek now endorses is that of a neo-communist retrieval of the radical

Left-Hegelian critique of the destructive antagonisms of capitalist liberal democracy, an economic and socio-political form of life that cannot sustain itself indefinitely. The political alternative, as discussed previously, is thus a retrieval of the commons as providing a basis for a neo-communist politics. As Žižek remarks, after the global financial crisis, the liberal-democratic moral blackmail no longer holds the same unquestioned authority: “the time for liberal-democratic moralistic blackmail is over. Our side no longer has to go on apologizing, while the other side had better start soon” (2009: 8).

Indeed, the only genuine political question today, for Žižek, is whether capitalist liberal democracy can sustain itself in the face of the immanent antagonisms that it generates but also cannot fully resolve. The idea of communism that Žižek articulates in response, however, is not a programmatic plan so much as an Hegelian concrete universal: an idea that has to be not just simply realised but reinvented in every new concrete historical situation. Following Badiou, Žižek articulates the “eternal Idea” of communism as involving the four concepts of strict egalitarian justice, disciplinary terror, political voluntarism, and trust in the people (2009: 125). The question is how this “eternal idea” is to be actualised in the specific historical constellation of the present. How a “politics of subtraction” might be pursued that enacts a violent withdrawal from the hegemonic field of global capitalism; a withdrawal that disturbs and disrupts that field, revealing the underlying complicity of the poles that compose it, and which might thereby facilitate the political transformation of state power via new forms of popular participation (2009: 128-131).

Given our situation of imminent crisis and the potentially catastrophic effects of an unchecked global economic system, the idea of communism, Žižek argues, should be reinvented beyond traditional Marxist theory and politics. It might even be described, as Bosteels remarks of Badiou, as a post-Marxist communism (2005). Still, what remains unresolved in Žižek’s most recent political reflections is, yet again, the tension between the Left-Hegelian impetus towards ideology critique, and the neo-Marxist impetus towards revolutionary politics. “Hegel and Haiti”—radical philosophical ideology critique and ‘unthinkable’ revolutionary action (such as the Haitian revolution of 1791, the only successful slave revolt in history)—is one of the formulas Žižek proposes for what a reinvention of the idea of communism might look like: the eventual transformation, by the excluded “part of no-part”, of the very co-ordinates of the prevailing economico-political system under which we all labour today.⁹

This synergetic conjunction between ideology critique and revolutionary repetition,

however, does not resolve the question of how this revolutionary transformation is to occur, nor what role liberal democratic states will play in such a situation, nor how the global economy can be checked or controlled in order to avert future ecological, as well as economic, catastrophes. Žižek's official position, we might say, is to advocate a retrieval of a neo-Leninist form of revolutionary politics that would seek to appropriate state power—via the truth-enacting potentiality of 'the Party'—in order to arrest and control global capitalism's unbridled destructive power. This is to occur on two fronts: via the ideological undermining of the underlying parameters of prevailing neoliberal forms of ideological and political discourse; and via the activist-political reinvention of the idea of communism through the re-appropriation of the environmental, biogenetic, and informational 'commons'. Žižek's unofficial position, on the other hand, is more suggestive of a 'messianic', non-state based form of 'anarchic' political action involving the synergetic convergence of radically egalitarian social movements and novel forms of popular participatory politics.¹⁰

Can these two dimensions—exoteric and esoteric, we might say—be coherently thought or enacted together? How might the underlying antagonism between the included and the excluded be made politically transformative without capitulating either to reformist liberal democratic consensus, or to the abstract negativity of destructive political violence? Can the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' be reinvented as popular participatory democracy without repeating the miserable cycle of historically 'justified' violence against dissenters and paranoiac authoritarianism of one-party dictatorial rule?

Such questions might suggest that Žižek's two-fold politics of neo-Hegelian ideology critique and post-Marxist communism raises more difficulties than it resolves—indeed, that the invocation of a 'parallax view' (2006: 55-56; 382-383) displacing and reframing any apparent incoherence between political and economic perspectives may be more a symptom of theoretical impasse than of political potentiality. Nonetheless, as Žižek vividly reminds us—as do the recent political films I have discussed—it is precisely in such moments of acute historical crisis and theoretico-political impasse that the 'messianic' possibility of an otherwise unthinkable revolutionary transformation comes to life.¹¹

- ¹ See Enns (2007) for an interesting discussion of *Ostalgie* in recent German film, where it functions as a critique of the contemporary German socio-economic-political situation following unification.
- ² See Boucher (2008: 1-74) for a fine critical account of the post-Marxian field of discourses.
- ³ This is the criticism that Žižek makes of Simon Critchley's 'ethical neo-anarchism' (2008: 346-350); but it is also one of the standard criticisms that has been made of Žižek's own politics. Ernesto Laclau's complaint is paradigmatic: "Should we understand that he wants impose the dictatorship of the proletariat? Or does he want socialize the means of production and abolish market mechanisms? And what is political strategy to achieve these rather peculiar aims? What is the alternative model of society that he is postulating? Without at least the beginning of an answer to these questions, his anti-capitalism is mere empty talk" (Laclau 2000: 206). Žižek's most recent book (2009) offers "at least the beginning of an answer to these questions"; but given Laclau's demand for a concrete politics it is not clear that the answer offered is satisfactory. Jodi Dean (2006), on the other hand, defends Žižek's politics as a form of neo-Leninist revolutionary vanguardism with a Lukácsian accent, emphasising the role of "the Party" in overcoming the disaffection of alienated neoliberal subjects—caught between the compulsion to enjoy/consume and the ideological, economic, and political means that stymie such enjoyment—and as offering a collective means to recreate an 'evental' site of truth oriented towards a radical political transformation of global capitalism. To be sure, Žižek's recent work explicitly advocates a neo-Leninist retrieval of the idea of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", whose true political task is to transform the state into a "non-statal" form (2009: 130): "the goal of revolutionary violence is not to take over state power, but to transform it, radically changing its functioning, its relationship to its base, and so on" (2009: 130-131). Combining Leninist with anarchist motifs, Žižek explains that this means a radical transformation of the state in the direction of "new forms of popular participation", which confront the limits of parliamentary and representative democracy in the name of "the direct political self-organization of the people" (2009: 134). As I discuss below, this unstable fusion of Hegelian, Leninist, and messianic motifs may be more an expression of a theoretical impasse than a political solution.
- ⁴ The most extreme version of this critique is by Adam Kirsch, "The Deadly Jester", *The New Republic*, December 8, 2008, to which Žižek responded in print (*The New Republic*, January 7, 2009). See <http://vaseljena.blog.hr/2009/01/1625798358/adam-kirsch-vs-slavoj-zizek.html> [Accessed April 19, 2010].
- ⁵ It is striking that one of Australia's most popular reality-TV shows in recent years is *Border Security: Australia's Front Line* (2004-), which portrays the activities of customs, quarantine, and immigration officials dealing with various 'border protection' cases: a neoconservative social fantasy of the nation-state heroically stemming the flows of unwanted foreign bodies cast adrift by globalisation. So popular was the show that it spawned an American imitation, *Homeland Security USA*—a rare case of Australian television influencing the United States.
- ⁶ Another example of this kind of affectively charged 'moral'-ideological politics is the emergence of the populist Right-wing 'Tea Party' movement in the United States, a populist conservative reaction against the Obama administration's financial bailout of Wall Street and contentious Health Care reforms, which is also vigorously attacking liberals, progressives, political elites, and government in general. See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,688782,00.html> [Accessed April 19, 2010].
- ⁷ It is also worth noting the highly self-reflexive character of *V for Vendetta* (based on Alan Moore's graphic novel allegorising Thatcher's Britain), which clearly signals its own cinematic status as a work of propaganda designed to elicit a similarly traumatic response in the viewer. Consider, for example, the numerous references to the film *The Man in the Iron Mask*, whose plot and romance allegorises that between V and Evey; and the tragic story of the persecuted lesbian film actress—to whose film and death V erects a shrine in his house—that inspires Evey to embrace the militant cause of egalitarian justice.
- ⁸ See Sharpe's (2009) interesting analysis of the convergences between Žižek and Critchley's neo-anarchism, which argues that despite their apparent disagreement they share a common presupposition: the forgetting of the distinction between philosophy and political life.
- ⁹ Žižek draws on Susan Buck-Morss' (2009) fascinating discussion of Haiti in light of the Hegelian notion of universal history, which argues that it is the Haitian revolution (rather than Hegel's nominating of the French revolution) that brings the Idea of freedom to its true historical realisation in modernity.
- ¹⁰ What Žižek evokes here is something like a Left-wing version of the Right-wing populist-conservative American 'Tea Party' movement (but without the hatred or scepticism towards the state).
- ¹¹ My thanks go to the editors for their constructive suggestions and astute comments on an earlier version of this article.

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