

ISSN 1751-8229
Volume Four, Number Two

An Inversion of Radical Democracy: The Republic of Virtue in Žižek's Revolutionary Politics

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In his most controversial recent work, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (hereafter *IDLC*), Žižek seeks to translate his critiques of the structural violence of global capitalism (Žižek, 2008b) into a programme for revolutionary action. In the series of works leading up to *IDLC*, Žižek has described himself as a “dialectical materialist,” albeit with a metaphysical apparatus based in Lacanian psychoanalysis that is said to supersede historical materialism. Against contemporary post-Marxian radicalism (with its exclusive focus on politics) and radical post-modernism (with its exclusive focus on culture), Žižek advocates that the radical Left should refuse to accept that capitalism “is the only game in town” (Žižek, 2000a: 95). This is combined with the injunction to “repeat Lenin” and generate the radical Act of another October 1917, although this is sometimes expressed in the bizarre vocabulary of calls for a “diabolically evil” proletarian chiasm undertaken by “acephalous” saints (Žižek, 1997a: 79-82; Žižek, 1997b: 228-230). In *IDLC*, Žižek explains that these “headless,” or driven, militants of a Jacobin-style party, modelled on quasi-suicidal samurai, would be prepared

to implement a “politics of universal Truth” that would break utterly with existing moral norms (Žižek, 2008a: 170, 159, 163). In a terminology borrowed from Marxism, Žižek proposes that the application of his reconceptualized notion of “class struggle,” framed by a psychoanalytic interpretation of surplus value as “surplus enjoyment” and based in an elementary antagonism between the excluded and the included, leads to a rehabilitation of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In line with these declarations, for some time now, Žižek has called for the Left to “reassert the actuality of Marx’s critique of political economy” in a move that is designed to demonstrate that alternatives to free-market capitalism can be imagined (Žižek, 2006a). In response to those, such as Ernesto Laclau, who have mocked his “r-r-revolutionary” ambitions and derided his intentions to destroy world capitalism and overthrow parliamentary democracy (Laclau, 2000b: 206; Laclau, 2000c: 289), *IDLC* is an effort to redeem Žižek’s promise to develop a political programme consonant with these ambitions. But the truth is that Žižek has not really gone beyond the idea that economy and politics cannot be described within a single theoretical apparatus:

Is not the ultimate Marxian parallax ... the one between economy and politics—between the ‘critique of political economy,’ with its logic of commodities, and the political struggle, with its logic of antagonism? ... The ‘pure politics’ of Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Étienne Balibar, more Jacobin than Marxist, shares with its great opponent, Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies and their focus on struggles for recognition, the degradation of the sphere of economy. ... Within this horizon, there is simply no place for the Marxian ‘critique of political economy’: the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx’s *Capital* is not just that of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental *apriori*, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations. (Žižek, 2006b: 55-56).

Against this conceptual background, the fact that in 400 pages *IDLC* develops an anti-capitalist programme for revolutionary government without any sustained analysis of the laws of motion of capitalism whatsoever is both unsurprising (Žižek is after all saying that political strategy excludes economic theory) and astonishing (Žižek’s critique of radical Jacobinism seems as if it were premised on the assumption of a Marxian position). Although astute commentators have expressed major reservations about Žižek’s politics, on the lines of Ian Parker’s observation that “the motif of ‘repetition’ [in ‘repeating Lenin’] signals something other than Marxism” (Parker, 2004: 83), too few have questioned whether a dialectical materialism shorn of the disciplined categories of the historical materialist critique of political economy can yield a viable emancipatory strategy. In this

article, I intend to read Žižek's Jacobinism—the “reinvention of emancipatory terror” (Žižek, 2008a: 174) as a political strategy that is at once provocative and desperate—as the symptom of an impasse. I will show that neglect of political economy means that Žižek merely confronts the Jacobin dilemma once again; and, if the Jacobin Terror can correctly be diagnosed as an ideological displacement of economic failure (Žižek, 2008a: 173), then Žižek's own embrace of the discourse of terror can be interpreted as the rhetorical displacement of a conceptual failure with cognate roots.

Programme of *IDLC*

A lot of *IDLC* is a provocation designed to expose the liberal politics hidden within the apparently radical positions of his critics, for, as Žižek says, “the true aim of the ‘defense of lost causes’ is not to defend Stalinist terror, and so on, as such, but to render problematic the all-too-easy liberal-democratic alternative” (Žižek, 2008a: 6). But if the work were only intended to hold the place of the excluded third alternative—radical politics—by problematising the false dichotomy of “liberalism or fundamentalism,” then it would be just an indeterminate (or abstract) negation. Thus, although part of the intention of *IDLC* is doubtlessly to “resignify” terror as a valorized term, against the “liberal blackmail” of “either liberal democracy or fundamentalist terror” (Žižek, 2008a: 2-7), this cannot exhaust the work's significance. For Žižek, the problem with the Left today is exactly that of abstract assertions of utopian hopes for radical change in the context of a defeatist analysis of the victory of capitalism, a contradiction that he diagnoses as a “crisis of determinate negation” (Žižek, 2008a: 337). He proposes to leap beyond what he regards as the self-defeating, anti-state utopianism of the speculative Left, through articulating a definite programme for social transformation by a revolutionary government (Žižek, 2008a: 337-380, 480). It is reasonable, therefore, to speak of the *programme* outlined in *IDLC* and to evaluate the proposed measures, including the “retrieval of emancipatory terror,” as a serious contribution to political theory.

Now, the programme of *IDLC* politically seeks to represent the “singular universal” or “part of no part” in the world system, the groups who are radically excluded from parliamentary liberalism and affected by the structural violence of global capitalism (Žižek, 2008a: 414, 428). Žižek argues that the international situation is characterized by a moral and political consensus on the “impossibility” of alternatives to capitalism, combined with

the paradoxical recognition that the dynamics of the world economy undermine “the conditions of basic social stability, of intact symbolic trust” (Žižek, 2008a: 2). The consequence is a turn to cultural politics on both Right and Left: on the Right, spanning neo-conservatives through to Third Way social democrats, this takes the form of “culture wars” and “a blend of economic liberalism with a minimally ‘authoritarian’ spirit of community”; on the radical-democratic post-Marxian Left, this takes the form of identity-political struggles for cultural recognition that try to assert a minimum of liberty within the culture war climate (Žižek, 2008a: 2). For Žižek, the “socialist strategy” of Radical Democracy is no alternative at all, for it stands indicted not only for its assumption that capitalism is permanent, but also for its failure to subvert the reigning universal of neo-liberal ideology, democracy itself (Žižek, 2008a: 183-184). Beyond what Žižek calls de-MORE-cracy (the “extension and deepening of the Democratic Revolution of Modernity,” the demand for *égaliberté* (“equaliberty”), that is the basis for post-Marxian politics) lies a radical break with established social norms and recognizable political morality so drastic that it must be conceptualized as a “leap of faith” without any guarantees whatsoever, “including the inevitable risk of a catastrophic disaster” (Žižek, 2008a: 7). Only those who are, formally speaking, representatives of the “substanceless subjectivity” of a proletarian subject-position, because they lack a social identity, and materially excluded from the world system through structural marginalization, are going to be ready for such a step into the void, Žižek argues. With some qualifications, Žižek considers that the “new proletarian position is that of the inhabitants of the slums in the new megalopolises” (Žižek 2008a: 424), provided that this structural location is conceptualized through the lens of the “zero antagonism” between the included and the excluded (Žižek, 2008a: 428).

In a diagnosis reminiscent of the early Frankfurt School’s assessment of consumer society, Žižek has often excoriated contemporary capitalism as a form of perversion, one that might be summarised as the full deployment of commodity fetishism (Žižek, 1989: 18-21, 26; Žižek, 1999: 354-355). Certainly, this includes all of the system-protecting illusions and psychological bondage to consumer capitalism that the label implies. But ultimately the major problem in the current political conjuncture is not the way that mass culture shields global capitalism from potentially revolutionary enthusiasms, and nor is it that the oppressed of the world have all become Fukuyama-style enthusiasts for liberal democracy as the highest form of political regime. The real problem is that with human rights abuses in full swing in the *War on Terror* (Žižek, 2002), with humanitarian military interventions

exposed as crude imperialist carve-ups of the developing world (Žižek, 2004), with (now) the global financial crisis continuing to expand in growing circles of misery on top of existing deprivations (Žižek, 2009), and so forth—in short, with the humane mask of capitalism well and truly ripped off—the Left has got nothing to say to the “wretched of the earth”.

For Žižek, there are two fundamental reasons why the Left has not been able to take advantage of the shift in the political conjuncture from the “triumph of capitalism” to widespread disenchantment with economic liberalism and neo-communitarian politics. The first is that major sections of the Left have accepted the anti-radical arguments originally presented by the *Nouveaux Philosophes*, that every intervention that goes beyond a militant defense of human rights necessarily leads to a totalitarian catastrophe (Žižek, 2008a: 4). For the radical democratic Left, for instance, it is necessary to “renounce the discourse of the universal” and reject the “Jacobin temptation” of totalitarian democracy by abandoning the notion of the proletarian class struggle and political revolution as the reconstitution of society through state power (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 2). From this perspective, there is always a trade-off between equality and liberty, so that the egalitarianism of the communist tradition and the libertarianism of neo-liberalism both stand condemned as totalitarian erasures of democratic space (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 176). The task here, as Žižek sees it, is to disarm this “prohibition on radical thinking” by provocatively embracing the denigrated term in the contemporary ideological “forced choices” of “democracy or totalitarianism,” “liberalism or fundamentalism,” “humanism or terror”—with “terror [and its cognates], not humanism as the positive term[s]” (Žižek, 2008a: 165). I think that in doing this, however, all Žižek has done is to accept in advance the conceptual framework of the adversary—as Žižek himself never tires of repeating, from the Hegelian perspective, once we reply to the antagonist on their terms, the debate is effectively over already (Žižek, 2008a: 189).

The second is that for today’s radical Left, there no longer appear to be immanent contradictions in the capitalist system that drive in the direction of a transcendence of that historical mode of production. Beyond Žižek’s paradoxical affirmation of the utopian impulse behind the political disasters of Stalinism and Maoism, his claim that “there was in each of [the lost causes] a redemptive moment which gets lost in the liberal-democratic rejection” (Žižek, 2008a: 7), then, lies an address to the possibility of social transformation today. Žižek argues that the “crisis of determinate negation” is a crisis of historical

imagination on the Left linked to the abandonment of the dialectical method, so that instead of the internal contradictions of the capitalist system leading to crisis potentials with an emancipatory dynamic, the Left after the 1960s began to think of alternatives as originating outside the “total system”. For Žižek, the solution is to identify four immanent possibilities for historical rupture and link these to a programme capable of translating the utopian and messianic demands of the radical Left into a contemporary idiom. These four antagonisms are: ecology; new forms of intellectual property; techno-scientific developments; and, new forms of social exclusion (Žižek, 2008a: 421-427). It is clear, however, in light of Žižek’s claim that the “elementary matrix of social antagonism” is that of exclusion/inclusion, that the final antagonism is the trump, because it alone yields an empirically plausible political agent (Žižek, 2008a: 428).

Revolutionary Government and “Emancipatory Terror”

In response to these problems and antagonisms, Žižek proposes a revolutionary government (perhaps modelled on Hugo Chavez [Žižek, 2008a: 379]) to implement this programme, which he positions as lying in the lineage of Robespierre and Mao. Citing Alain Badiou, Žižek declares that the “eternal Idea of egalitarian communism” involves strict egalitarian justice, revolutionary-emancipatory terror, political voluntarism, and a doctrine of popular sovereignty:

In his *Logiques des mondes*, Alain Badiou elaborates the eternal Idea of the politics of revolutionary justice at work from ... the Jacobins to Lenin and Mao. It consists of four moments: *voluntarism* (the belief that one can move mountains, ignoring ‘objective’ laws and obstacles); *terror* (a ruthless will to crush the enemy of the people); *egalitarian justice* (its immediate brutal imposition, with no understanding for the ‘complex circumstances’ which allegedly compel us to proceed gradually); and, last but not least, *trust in the people*—suffice it to recall two examples here, Robespierre ... and Mao. (Žižek, 2008a: 157).

Although there are things to be said about all of these, it is clearly the “reinvention of emancipatory terror” that is the most problematic. Žižek knows that political repression and state terror under Stalin and Mao took the following forms: arbitrary arrest including torture; the suspension of legality including show trials and a police state; forced collectivization and the militarization of labour discipline; the suppression of popular democracy and the prohibition of dissent; at the limit, extermination camps, forced deportations and deliberate

starvation. That's why he calls these regimes "historical catastrophes". Surely the revolutionary terror is not the "redemptive moment which gets lost in the liberal-democratic rejection"? There are three things that Žižek says which make it appear that his response would be, "no, of course not," and these are: allegation, failure and anxiety.

Allegation: in several places in the book, Žižek gives the impression that "terror" should be used in mocking quotations as the accusation falsely hurled against the Left by its enemies. The state is regarded as a repressive apparatus that includes the army, the judiciary and the police, and so if the operation of a revolutionary government seeking to implement radically egalitarian social measures through the administration of justice is "terror," then Žižek is ready to defend it. "Terror," here, would really mean: the normal routine of the implementation of legislation through the state's monopoly on violence; it involves no suspension of universal moral principles or violations of the rule of law; instead, "terror" is a *false allegation* levelled by the Right against popular anti-imperialist governments. Discussing terror as the excess of egalitarianism over the democratic procedure (as the democratization of everyday life and economic arrangements, together with the rejection of formal equality for substantive equality), Žižek suggests that "terror" is an emotive complement to "totalitarianism," the liberal accusation when the private sphere is abrogated (Žižek, 2008a: 416-417). Yet this *simply cannot* be the full meaning of "emancipatory terror," because the measures that Žižek admires most in Stalin and Mao, the "redemptive moments" (forced collectivization (Žižek, 1999: 194; Žižek, 2006b: 285), Cultural Revolution (Žižek, 2008a: 207), very precisely require the elimination of democracy, suspension of the law and abuses of conventional ethics. Terror is not just a false allegation, although we must not assume that the terror in question is identical with Stalinist counter-revolution before looking more closely.

Failure: Žižek sometimes proposes that the revolutionary terrors of Robespierre, Lenin, Stalin and Mao were all indices of *failure* to be critiqued rather than emulated. Where the extra-legal coercion and moral abuses of Robespierre's regime sprang from the revolution's refusal to negate private property, the political crimes and anti-proletarian character of Stalin and Mao arise from the absence or incompleteness of the process of cultural revolution. Stalin's Show Trials, Žižek proposes, evidence the massive resurgence of bourgeois humanism in the cultural field (Žižek, 2008a: 214); and this is the source of the counter-revolution. Mao's Cultural Revolution, meanwhile, replaces bourgeois humanism with the desired revolutionary anti-humanism, but because Mao fails to assume

the sovereign decision in the void of the absence of historical guarantees, it leaves intact the big Other (Žižek, 2008: 168). The consequence is a perverse implementation of cultural revolution: theoretically, “a total reversal (perversion even) of Marx’s model, [where] the class struggle is reformulated as the struggle between First World ‘bourgeois nations’ and Third World ‘proletarian nations’” (Žižek, 2008a: 179); practically, the idealization of Mao as the Lord of Misrule, who elevates transgression into a new norm, leading to a return to capitalism (because “capitalism is the ultimate Lord of Misrule”) (Žižek, 2008a: 198).

Žižek’s diagnosis of the failure of previous revolutions makes it seem that he might argue that a total transformation would avoid revolutionary terror. And this is the sense in which many commentators interpret him. But this is illegitimate: it is a transposition of the interpreters’ assumptions (the horizon of expectations of Left-wing common-sense, according to which emancipation and terror are opposites) onto Žižek’s statements. What Žižek says is the opposite of this:

As Saint-Just put it succinctly: ‘That which produces the general good is always terrible’. These words should not be interpreted as a warning against the temptation to violently impose the general good on a society, but on the contrary, as a bitter truth to be fully endorsed (160).

After all, if a real revolutionary government would not need terror (because terror is a symptom of a failure of political will), then why rehabilitate terror? Žižek maintains that for structural reasons revolutionary government needs political terror to succeed. What it needs, he proposes, is the “divine violence” of extra-legal egalitarianism, as opposed to the routinisation of political violence in all hitherto existing forms of revolutionary state terror. Jacobin violence, he claims, is not state founding violence, but divine violence (which is outside the law, “violence exerted as brutal revenge/justice”), which indicates the dimension of the inhuman death drive: “divine violence = inhuman terror = dictatorship of the proletariat” (Žižek, 2008a: 162). This is done, “not in the perverse sense of ‘we are doing it as mere instruments of the people’s Will,’ but as the heroic assumption of the solitude of a sovereign decision. ... If it is extra-moral, it is not ‘immoral,’ it does not give the agent the license to just kill with some kind of angelic innocence” (Žižek, 2008a: 162). As Žižek says of torture: “following the unavoidable brutal urgency of the moment, I should simply *do it* ... [and] retain the proper sense of the horror of what I did” (Žižek, 2008a: 50).

Anxiety: Žižek proposes that there is a terror involved in losing the “existence of the

big Other” that is best described psychoanalytically as anxiety (Žižek, 2008a: 212, 374, 434). But when Žižek counter-poses the anxiety generated by a revolutionary government that operates without normative restraints to the imperialist “politics of fear” of the War on Terror, or the populist manipulation of mass mobilizations (Žižek, 2008a: 52, 304), we must understand that anxiety is not just a subjective state. There are very definite institutional correlates—political violence, to be precise—to the “non-existence of the big Other” that Žižek suggests an authentic revolutionary government and cultural revolution would entail:

“this is what Robespierre is targeting in his famous accusation to the moderates that what they want really is a ‘revolution without revolution’: they want a revolution deprived of the excess in which democracy and terror coincide, a revolution respecting social rules, subordinated to pre-existing norms, a revolution in which violence is deprived of the ‘divine’ dimension and thus reduced to a strategic intervention serving precise and limited goals” (Žižek, 2008a: 163).

“Totalitarian Democracy”

In other words, Žižek is absolutely clear that “emancipatory terror,” by which he means more than just a reactionary allegation, an index of revolutionary failure or a condition of subjective uncertainty, is necessary to revolutionary government. Why? The key is a conflation of the notion that “the entire field of state power is that of dictatorship,” so that, formally speaking, “democracy is also a form of dictatorship,” with the idea that every state form must be instituted by that extra-legal, “divine” violence whose content is said to be revolutionary terror (Žižek, 2008a: 412, 413). From the perspective of form, “even the most ‘free’ elections cannot put in question the legal procedures that legitimize and organize them, [where] the state apparatuses guarantee (by force, if necessary) the electoral process” (Žižek, 2008a: 412). Following Lenin, this argument invokes a lexical equivalence between the state’s monopoly on violence and the terms “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” and “dictatorship of the proletariat”. The question then arises: how is the passage from one type of democracy (bourgeois) to another sort (proletarian) achieved, if not through extra-legal and unconstitutional force, so that, in line with Walter Benjamin’s Schmitt-derived argument, “democracy ... has to rely continuously on [the] constitutive violence” of its own moment of social inauguration (Žižek, 2008a: 413). This moment of social inauguration is the revolutionary government, which must, logically, exercise extra-legal force to hold in

place its own democratic and legal procedures. Žižek says that this “‘terroristic’ aspect of democracy can only appear as a ‘totalitarian’ distortion” from within the Kantian-Lefortian lens of postmarxian politics (Žižek, 2008a: 418), but in actuality the Left should affirm the “moment of truth in ‘totalitarianism’” (Žižek, 2008a: 378).

The argument that is being revived here—strangely, under the sign of its affirmation—originated as a reactionary critique of emancipatory projects, and it is that the Left stands for “totalitarian democracy” because it purports to represent a new universality through representative government (Talmon, 1952). Its “Leftwing” post-structuralist form is the proposition of Claude Lefort that democracy involves the temporary and provisional occupation of the formally universal “empty place of power” by particular groups in society (Lefort, 1988: 16-18). According to the widely accepted post-Marxist argument of Laclau and Mouffe, these particular groups seek to hegemonize the content of the formal universal through the relative and incomplete universalization of the “empty signifiers” that cement their social alliances (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 152-159). For them, the “totalitarian temptation” of the “Jacobin Imaginary” is the notion of a social group that incarnates universality and thus by right permanently occupies the empty place of power as a direct representation of popular sovereignty (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 2, 176; Laclau, 1995: 22-26). The consequence of accepting this sort of “renunciation of the universal” is the dogmatic assertion of the primacy of the particular (Laclau, 2000a: 55), which is systematically linked to the refusal of post-Marxism to contemplate socialist transformation of the capitalist economy on grounds that the egalitarian logic of equivalence must not homogenize political space (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 176). As Žižek clearly perceives, this means that the French Revolution, said to inaugurate the Democratic Revolution of Modernity and generate the valorized “empty place of power,” represents from this perspective an extra-moral violence that is the never-should-be-repeated foundation of democracy, and which presupposes the very Jacobin radicalism that post-Marxism subsequently denounces.

If we accept these terms of debate, then the following question arises: how does a party that directly represents the egalitarian power of universality because it stands for the “part of no part” that “lacks the particular features that would legitimate their place in the social body” (Žižek, 2008a: 413) manage to avoid permanently occupying the locus of power as an incarnation of popular sovereignty—in other words, how is Jacobin dictatorship to be avoided? For the post-Marxists, as Žižek shows very persuasively

throughout *IDLC*, the answer is that radical democrats must either renounce the discourse of the universal in the theory of government (Laclau, Mouffe, Stavrakakis), or renounce the discourse of government in the theory of the universal (Badiou, Balibar, Rancière). Žižek cuts through the Gordian Knot by accepting the Jacobin paradox: revolutionary democracy equals totalitarian terror; but then he spends 400 pages softening and qualifying that position because it is “a radical position which is difficult to sustain, but, perhaps our only hope” (Žižek, 2008a: 165).

Should this “perhaps” be read as an index of deep uncertainty? I certainly hope so. For there most definitely is an alternative, although it is one that Žižek has, so far, rejected. The first thing to note is the Hobbesian provenance of the argument for “foundational violence,” which is transmitted from Schmitt (who relies entirely on Hobbes for his “political theology”) through Benjamin to today’s Left (Bredenkamp *et al*, 1999: 247-266). By regarding violence as prior to the social contract, and by considering the state in terms of protection from the war of each against all, Hobbes must necessarily think of the institution of sovereignty in terms of force and fraud. In contrast, the social contract tradition thinks the institution of the state in terms of the ratification of a normative agreement, one that the sovereign people defends from the enemies of equality and liberty with force if necessary. Hegel corrects the atomized individualism of the social contract argument from the state of nature by pointing out the historical dialectics of this normative agreement, without in the slightest disagreeing with the proposition that the state expresses a form of freedom (rather than the imposition of force) (Riley, 1982). Marx, developing the Hegelian argument more radically, locates the limitations of the negative freedom of the bourgeois social contract in the historical evolution of the commodity form and proposes that the final realization of positive freedom would include the dissolution of the state apparatus. In other words, the emancipatory tradition rejects the notion that the rule of the universal must be imposed by extra-moral violence, although that tradition is deeply suspicious that the state itself might represent a potentially lethal threat to substantive freedom.

The radical tradition that runs from Rousseau to Marx—and which stands opposed to that which runs from Robespierre to Mao—affirms that popular sovereignty does not entail “totalitarian democracy,” only on condition that the universal element rules directly through participatory democracy (Levine, 1993: esp. 161-162, 181-185). Note that this does not exclude representative government, provided that this is strictly subordinated to participatory organs, so that Rousseau, for instance, proposes that the participatory

legislature should delegate to a representative executive (Rousseau, 1997). In his response, Žižek rejects the alternative of participatory democracy—“the [workers’ council] model of ‘democratic socialism’ was just a spectral double of ‘bureaucratic’ ‘really-existing socialism’” (Žižek, 2008a: 376)—and locates the problem in the figure of the Sovereign Master (Žižek, 2008a: 162) who resembles the Totalitarian Leader in every respect except for the “non-existence of the Other” (Žižek, 2008a: 378). This is a difference supposed to make all the difference, and indeed it does: it erases the intersubjectively-valid normative agreement that prevents the emergence of a new universality from being a mere violent imposition, because by the “non-existence of the Other” Žižek means not the openness of intersubjectivity but the absence of moral norms.

The combination of these two positions—scepticism towards the normative foundations of political community and rejection of participatory democracy—is indeed a Jacobin position, but it is really only an inversion of radical democracy because its ultimate premise is the opposition between the basic particularity of social groups and the universality of an extra-social group. What is missing is the dialectical interpenetration of particular and universal *in all social groups* that characterizes the Hegelian and Marxist understanding of historical evolution. Žižek protests that his usage is similar to that of Marx, for whom “the term ‘dictatorship’ designates the hegemonic role in the political space and the term ‘proletariat’ those ‘out of joint’ in the social space, the ‘part of no part’ lacking their proper place within it” (Žižek, 2008a: 414). But that is not right: Marx did not accept this modification of the Kantian (and Lefortian) opposition between universal and particular that places them side by side in abstract opposition, for it is not true that the proletariat lacks a place in the capitalist system, or that it opposes the particular groups of bourgeois society as an extra-social pure universality. The proletariat is a universal class because of the particular character of the commodity that it produces under conditions of generalized commodity production, its labour power, which positions it at the centre of capitalism, both structurally and normatively.

From Rousseau to Robespierre

Where Žižek’s inversion of radical democracy is heading is clarified in the chapter on “Revolutionary Terror” in *IDLC*, with its endorsement of Robespierre’s paradoxical combination, or “coincidence of opposites,” of “virtue and terror” as the leading principle of

revolutionary democracy. According to Robespierre, the “mainspring [of popular government] in time of revolution is virtue and terror combined,” for “... terror is nothing other than swift, severe and inflexible justice: it is therefore an emanation of virtue” (Žižek, 2008a: 159 Robespierre cited). By virtue, Robespierre meant what Rousseau meant, that is “nothing other than love of one’s country and its laws,” that is, love of that combination of equality and liberty that constitutes the social contract (Rousseau, 1994: 20-21). For the republican social contract tradition, the political community of autonomous and virtuous individuals is formed by setting aside the private interests and particular wills found amongst egoistic individuals in the state of nature, and enacting laws with reference to the general interest of the public citizen, who, subordinating self-interest to the interests of all, legislates from the general will. These individuals are virtuous by definition, and their republican virtue consists in their unforced agreement with the will of the whole community, so that the virtuous citizen is at once the foundation of the political community and its ultimate end, the thing that the republic of virtue forms (Rousseau, 1994: 59, 116-117). The difficulty for Robespierre is that in the republican social contract tradition of Rousseau, virtue and terror are opposites; and there are two profound reasons for this: “virtue” consists in that political autonomy whereby popular sovereignty is directly exercised through democratic participation; and, the alleged necessity for “terror” directly admits the absence of virtue in the citizenry, because it states that without the terrorist imposition of the general will via a party claiming to legislate for the common good, it is particular wills that legislate in the new democracy.

Although Robespierre and the Jacobins often tried to legitimate their actions with reference to Rousseau’s doctrine of social contract (Rude, 1975: 38-44), the key difference (as we have seen) is that for Rousseau, popular sovereignty cannot be represented, only enacted directly (Rousseau, 1994: 63-65, 126-128). Of course, Rousseau accepts that executive power might be delegated by a popular assembly to temporary representatives, but he insists that the legislative and juridical power must remain modelled on the participatory democracy of ancient Athens. When Robespierre and the Jacobins sought to get around this, their argument was not from the realism of representative government in a complex society, but from the provisions for a temporary dictatorship found amongst Rousseau’s caveats for emergency conditions (Rude, 1975: 38-40). As Rousseau made clear, temporary and provisional dictatorial powers at the level of the executive amount to a *suspension* of democratic government (rather than its revolutionary enactment), one that

poses a potentially mortal threat to popular sovereignty, for which reason the dictatorship must neither legislate nor arbitrate (Rousseau, 1994: 153-155). For the Jacobins, of course, Robespierre was the figure of the legislator foreseen by Rousseau, entirely forgetting that Rousseau stipulates the popular ratification of the laws by the democratic citizenry, rather than the collapse of the legislator and the dictator into the figure of the judge presiding over a Committee of Public Safety (Rousseau, 1994: 76-78). “Prompt, severe, inflexible justice” under these conditions means the abrogation of republican democracy and its replacement by a party that arrogates to itself the title of embodiment of the general will, which is why Robespierre is profoundly correct to maintain that the Jacobin “theory of revolutionary government is as new as the revolution which has brought it about—it should not be sought in the books of political writers” (Levine, 1977: 544 Robespierre cited). From Rousseau’s perspective, Robespierre simply cannot claim that terror is the emanation of virtue, for they are opposites: virtue belongs to the democratic republic, terror to tyrannical despotism.

It might be objected, however, that although *inspired* by Rousseau, Robespierre’s government must not be understood as an implementation of *The Social Contract*, and perhaps this is why Žižek nowhere mentions the republican tradition. Furthermore, we have seen that Žižek rejects participatory democracy for representative government, so that Rousseau’s institutional notions are not a direct reply to the figure of Robespierre in *IDLC*. But there is a second and more profound reason why terror and virtue must be thought of as opposites, and their combination as a *contradiction* that reveals a fundamental impasse. As we have seen, the necessity for a reign of terror—for the Jacobins, arising not from the external causes such as natural catastrophe or foreign invasion anticipated by Rousseau, but from internal causes of economic dislocation and political opposition—indicates, with absolute clarity, the persistence of private interests. The aim of the terror is to sweep away these private interests, which include civil associations such as the workers collectives banned under the Le Chapelier Law of 14 June 1791 (Lewis, 1993: 67-68). The terror is therefore an effort to square the circle of the paradox that the republic supposes a virtuous citizenry as its foundation and posits the formation of these autonomous and egalitarian individuals as its result, yet is *presupposes* the irreducible originality of the particular interests of the state of nature—for which, read “the market economy”. For Rousseau, a series of cultural and political measures—a charismatic leader, maintenance of a civil religion, the creation of a public administration,

redistributive measures aimed at substantive equality—were intended to supplement the basic work performed by the state, so as to provide the mechanism for combining private wills into the general interest (Rousseau, 1994: 158-167). The private wills of the state of nature carry on, of course, in the market economy, but this is safely circumscribed within the political framework of the social contract. For Robespierre, the terror takes the place of these cultural and political measures, but—and this is the crucial point—these are still regarded as introducing the individuals generated in the state of nature into the virtuous republic.

In other words, the problem is that for Robespierre, capitalism does not exist, at least not as the generative matrix of a peculiar combination of universality and particularity that distorts the social contract and resists political willpower, as a material process that, while not entirely separate from the social, has regional dynamics that require independent analysis. For Robespierre as for Rousseau, capitalism is not really a problem: its distributive problems and implications for politics can be solved through political voluntarism plus redistributive measures. What this means is that the distinction between private will and the general interest is thereby *institutionalized*, not eradicated. For social class is not just a partial association to be politically suppressed and whose cultural traces in egocentric calculation can be “liquidated” by revolutionary re-education and the repression of dissent.

By maintaining capitalism, Robespierre and the Jacobins make the need for “revolutionary terror” *permanent*, thus giving the lie to any claims about a temporary and provisional dictatorship. This is the *meaning* of the bourgeois revolution from a Marxist perspective, and the underlying reason why Marx can celebrate the French Revolution against the semi-feudal absolutist regimes, while at the same time denouncing the bourgeoisie for its dictatorship of private interests. It is a basic postulate of socialist politics that there is a fundamental difference between the bourgeois political revolution and the proletarian socialist revolution, for the bourgeois revolution sets free the market and therefore needs to institutionalize repression, whereas the socialist revolution liberates the masses and therefore aims at the supersession of classes and the abolition of the state apparatus. The “dictatorship of the proletariat”—itself a term selected on grounds of a political compromise designed to secure the practical unity of the international movement rather than for its theoretical accuracy (Draper, 1987: 1-20)—does *not* mean a “red” version of the Jacobin government. It means, if anything, an enactment of Rousseau’s

participatory democracy under conditions where the critique of political economy exposes the limitations of the *Second Discourse on Inequality* and therefore of the economic foundations of the social contract; that is, a workers' council republic *opposed* to the terror of the military dictatorship proposed by the counter-revolution (see *The Civil War in France*).

The Revolution Betrayed

Now Žižek knows all of this. In fact, he says it himself: Žižek argues that the economy is the point at which we encounter “the limitation of Jacobin politics” (Žižek, 2008a: 173). According to Marx, “capitalist inequalities (‘exploitation’) are not ‘unprincipled violations of the principle of equality,’” Žižek says, “but are absolutely inherent to the logic of equality, are the paradoxical result of its consistent realization” (Žižek, 2008a: 173). In this light, the Jacobin Terror appears as an index of failure rather than a success to be emulated:

The problem here is not terror as such—our problem is precisely to reinvent emancipatory terror. The problem lies elsewhere: egalitarian political extremism or ‘excessive radicalism should always be read as a phenomenon of ideologico-political *displacement*, of an index of its opposite, of a refusal effectively to ‘go to the end’. What was the Jacobin recourse to radical ‘terror’ if not a kind of hysterical acting out bearing witness to their inability to disturb the very fundamentals of economic order (private property, etc?). ... What if political terror signals precisely that the sphere of material production is denied its autonomy and subordinated to political logic? Is it not that all political ‘terror,’ from the Jacobins to the Maoist Cultural Revolution, presupposes the foreclosure of production proper, its reduction to the terrain of the political struggle? (Žižek, 2008a: 175).

Although all of this *looks* like the standard Marxist response to the bourgeois revolution and to the Stalinist counter-revolution, in fact, what is being proposed by Žižek under the sign of “egalitarian communism” is the direct opposite of the classical Marxist position.

In politics, the conclusion that Žižek draws is not that the Marxist critique of political economy reveals that revolutionary government can be conceptualised as participatory democracy not as dictatorial tyranny, but the opposite of this. For Žižek, revolutionary history shows that revolutionary democracy, as the institutionalisation of egalitarian communism, needs to be conceptualised as its opposite, as a dictatorship. This dictatorship, even if not permanent, has no clear “use-by” date: “the harsh consequence to

be accepted here is that this excess of egalitarian democracy over and above the democratic procedure can only ‘institutionalise’ itself in the guise of its opposite, as revolutionary-democratic *terror*” (Žižek, 2008a: 175).

In economics, the roots of this position lie in a rejection of the conception of socialism as the abolition of the extraction of surplus value. Žižek thinks that the failure of socialism was exactly grounded in its rejection of the profit system as a form of exploitation, which led to efforts to expand productivity (in order to overcome scarcity) without the mechanism of competition through the elimination of private property. At the same time, as an anti-capitalist, Žižek is opposed to the profit-driven dynamism of the commodity economy and he thus rejects the state capitalist solution of, for instance, contemporary China. Neither capitalism nor socialism—what, then? Paradoxically enough, Žižek’s only solution *must* be to declare that “capitalism does not exist”.

That will be a contentious claim, so let me prove its plausibility. For Žižek, as he says again and again, socialism misunderstood the dynamism of the profit economy:

Marx’s fundamental mistake was to conclude from [capitalism’s debilitating inherent contradictions] that a new, higher social order (communism) was possible, an order that would maintain not only but even raise to a higher degree and fully release the potential of the upward spiral of productivity without it being threatened by socially destructive economic crises. In short, what Marx overlooked is that ... if we abolish the obstacle [the fetter on the productive forces of now obsolete social relations], the inherent contradiction of capitalism, we do not get the fully unleashed drive finally freed from its shackles, but rather we lose precisely this very productivity that seemed to be stimulated by capitalism, for it simply dissipates ... which underlay the failure of socialist attempts to overcome capitalism (Žižek, 2008a: 190; Žižek, 2006b: 266).

But that doesn’t mean that Žižek is proposing a highly regulated form of state capitalism where a revolutionary government would treat substantive equality as a question of radical redistributive mechanisms. He accepts that the result of the Cultural Revolution was the institutionalization of a form of state capitalism and that Chinese Marxism is today an official doctrine that aims against those forms of pro-worker “leftism” which seek a return to the emancipatory doctrine of Marx. He mocks the diagnosis of the ruling bureaucracy:

What to do, then, when capitalism *de facto* proves itself as the most effective motor of social relations? The answer is the Chinese solution: to honestly admit that, in this phase of world history, we should fully embrace capitalism. Where Marxism enters is in the claim that only the leading role of the Communist Party can sustain such modernization and simultaneously maintain a ‘harmonious society,’ that is, prevent the social disintegration that characterizes Western

liberal capitalism (Žižek, 2008a: 204).

Despite the sarcasm, Žižek rejects the “libertarian Western Marxist” rejection of this dogma because “we are not dealing with a simple betrayal of Marxism, but, literally, with its symptom... there effectively was in ‘original’ Marxism itself a dimension which potentially led to the enslavement of the workers to ‘progress’” (Žižek, 2008a: 204). The problem with Marxism should now be clear: for Marxism, in Žižek’s view, the big Other—in the form of History—exists; Chinese doctrine merely transposes Capitalism onto the locus of the big Other, without breaking with the underlying enslavement of the proletariat; and, that is why Chinese doctrine is the truth of classical Marxism. Where does that leave Žižek?

Žižek’s basic claim about the current conjuncture is that capitalism is now the big Other for the global system (Žižek, 2008a: 11-51). This position connects with Žižek’s fundamental argument that there is an homology between commodity fetishism and fetishistic perversion, grounded in the structural equivalence of surplus value and surplus enjoyment (Žižek, 1989: 16-18). Furthermore, Žižek often reminds his readers that the moment of the psychoanalytic cure arrives when the subject acknowledges the “non-existence of the Other”. Throughout *IDL*, Žižek proposes that the revolutionary Act involves a break with today’s perverse elevation of transgression to a norm that is ultimately based in the supposition of the existence of the Other, and that the revolutionary government would therefore institutionalize the non-existence of the big Other. As a result of the revolution, capitalism, in short, “does not exist”.

Embracing the Jacobin Paradox

I do not mean this as ridicule. There is a very serious explanatory position, one that, in fact, I hold to be true, which affirms in all earnestness that capitalism “does not exist”—as a homogeneous, autonomous subsystem governed exclusively by endogenous laws of motion. That position is the political economy of Regulation Theory, developed by Michel Aglietta and extended by figures such as Robert Boyer, Alain Lipietz, David Harvey and Bob Jessop. Based on the theoretical postulates of the labour theory of value, this position elaborates a contemporary Marxist economics that grounds its analysis in the ways that state interventions into labour markets shape “modes of regulation” of the capitalist

economy (Aglietta, 1979). The existence of modes of regulation does not preclude quantitative modelling and qualitative explanations in terms of the laws of motion of capitalism, for these modes set boundary conditions and modify the operation of laws; Regulation Theory does not affirm that capitalism is just an amorphous mess or that anything goes. By developing mathematical models of the dynamics of the profit system—as inflected and modified by the mode of regulation—that have a sound empirical basis, high levels of explanatory power and strong predictive abilities, Regulation Theory is capable of going the full fifteen rounds with neo-classical economics in terms of accuracy and comprehensiveness (Boyer, 2000; Jessop, 2001). In short, it is an empirically reliable guide to action in the context of a break with the idea of the economy as consistent—but, unfortunately for Žižek, as a type of Marxism, Regulation Theory must no doubt be considered just another form of the “enslavement of the workers to progress”.

The other position that affirms that “capitalism does not exist,” the one that Žižek knows, is the purely descriptive apparatus of Laclau and Mouffe. For them, capitalism does not exist for reasons similar to Žižek: according to Laclau and Mouffe, Marxism is an “evolutionary paradigm,” centred upon the concept of “historical necessity,” unfolding through the “endogenous laws” operating in the “economic base” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 7-46). They reject economic reductionism—with its essentialist supposition of historical necessity—for a political doctrine of hegemonic articulations based in historical contingencies. But unlike Žižek, they oppose the political strategy of a hegemonic articulation designed to abolish capitalism. Yet his matrix of four antagonisms in world capitalism aims at something quite different from Marx’s analysis of the internal contradictions of the profit system. Žižek’s combination of an endorsement of “class struggle” with the rejection of the proletariat as the universal agent in that political strategy —“the underlying problem is how we are to think the singular universal of the emancipatory subject as not purely formal, that is, as objectively materially determined, but without the working class as its substantial base” (420)—means is that Žižek is looking for a non-proletarian anti-capitalism, where the solution to globalisation is not the classical Marxist one.

What Žižek overlooks is that if capitalism does not exist (as a unified system), then this undoes the alleged “parallax view” that prevents the articulation of politics and economics in a single theory. Žižek’s objection to the “Marxian parallax” is framed in terms that make it evident that it is based on Balibar’s influential claim that there is an opposition

between political antagonism and economic contradiction present in classical Marxism, *because of its assumption of completely endogenous economic laws* (Balibar, 1994). The moment that we reject this, we must articulate a plausible political economy such as Regulation Theory, or armed with a merely descriptive notion of the relation between capitalism and the state, oscillate helplessly between leaving capitalism in place (radical Democracy) and an anti-capitalism with no clear conception of what it opposes. And Žižek is right: the position of Badiou, Balibar and Ranciere *is* “more Jacobin than Marxist”. These figures shield themselves from the possible implication that this means a reactivation of Jacobin Terror by refusing the temptation of state power; Žižek, by contrast, affirms that the revolutionary “passion of the Real” is the “courage” to assert the (morally objectionable) consequences of a premise (Žižek, 2008a: 158).

Let us not deceive ourselves, then. Žižek’s invocation of Lenin and Mao does not imply a necessary theoretical development from Marxist premises, in light of empirical sociology and historical experience, to contemporary socialist conclusions. Instead, the genealogy within which Žižek positions himself (Lenin, Stalin, Mao) is marked by that retroactive conversion of historical contingency into evolutionary necessity (Žižek, 2008a: 175) that Žižek elsewhere diagnoses as ideology supported by fantasy (Žižek, 1989: 126). Within the framework of what we might call “repeating Mao,” the “perversion of Marxism” of antagonisms external to the internal dynamics of capitalism (Third World versus First World, excluded versus included), a non-proletarian social agent (the peasantry, the lumpenproletariat), an idealist understanding of capitalism as susceptible to the intensity of political willpower, as opposed to regulation/transition guided by science (the Great Leap Forward, the political voluntarism of egalitarian communism), and the rejection of political democracy for egalitarian leveling without democratic participation (the Cultural Revolution, neo-Jacobin efforts to emulate Robespierre), all these might perhaps seem logical. From the perspective of contemporary Marxism, they look like the theoretical formula for a historical catastrophe.

The core of this is the link between a dictatorship founded on political voluntarism, an idealist conception of political economy and the pseudo-solution of Mao-style cultural revolution. Robespierre, as we have already seen, provides the model for a radical non-proletarian political voluntarism that, armed with a utopian conception of the market economy, seeks to resolve the enigma of its own unintentional slide from revolutionary democracy towards anti-proletarian dictatorship with reference to cultural forms. The

Jacobin dictatorship employs state terror to force the leap from particular interests to the general will—what a shame, Žižek adds that this was done through cultural humanism rather than practical anti-humanism. If only Robespierre had have adopted something like the “biocosmic” vision of War Communism, Žižek implies (Žižek, 2008a: 212), or some anticipation of Lacanian ethics, the Jacobin dictatorship might have become the republic of virtue. At the same time, Žižek does not really believe this, because, as we have seen, the problem is that the market economy generates contradictions that are insoluble from within Jacobin politics.

Where does that leave Žižek? Suspended somewhere between Robespierre and Mao, trapped in a conceptual framework that is “more Jacobin than Marxist,” denouncing the post-Marxists for their cultural turn away from political economy, yet, paradoxically, spending four hundred pages calling for cultural revolution rather than discussing the actuality of Marxian economics. And what *is* a cultural revolution? In Žižek’s opposition between the “pure transcendental subject unaffected by [a nuclear] catastrophe” and the merely empirical human species annihilated in the flames, in “the truth of the assertion of the independence of the subject with regard to the empirical individuals *qua* living beings” (Žižek, 2008a: 169) , we have an exact repetition of the opposition between the particular and the general will that revolutionary terror, via cultural revolution, is to bridge. The egalitarian republic of virtue will break entirely with the dead weight of human history—with “bourgeois” civility, humanitarian ethics, principles of human rights, liberal democracy, and, especially, habits of all varieties and kind (Žižek, 2008a: 171)—in short, with modern ethical life (Žižek, 2008a: 19-22). This is the substance of individual freedom, in other words, the stuff that forms particular interests; authentic revolutionaries are “figures without habits” operating according to universal principles without consideration of the “complex circumstances” and the “particular conditions” (Žižek, 2008a: 171). Of course, for Hegel and Marx—and at one time, for Žižek too—ethical life represented an accumulation of contradictions rather than “one reactionary mass,” so that the real cultural revolution happened *before* the political transformation, through the “silent weaving of spirit”. But not any more—Robespierre and Mao have changed all that.

In Žižek’s analysis of the fate of the Russian and Chinese revolutions, we have a precise illustration of the problem with this position. For the materialist, the problem is that a revolutionary government which, because of its rejection of democratic participation, needs to bloat the repressive state apparatus to implement revolutionary terror, inevitably

becomes a growing drain on the social surplus product. This apparatus has a material interest in protecting its own conditions of existence as a social parasite, so that revolutionary terror in the name of the republic of virtue quickly turns into state terror in the interests of the bureaucratic caste. This is the essence of Trotsky's analysis in *The Revolution Betrayed* (Trotsky, 1972: 105-112). Žižek's response? Well, Trotsky is important, but only as a place-holder for a third term in the false opposition between social democracy and Stalinist totalitarianism (Žižek, 2008a: 232), because, actually, "his attitude made it impossible for his orientation to win" (Žižek, 2008a: 233), even though Žižek thinks that the revolution was betrayed by the Stalinist regime (Žižek, 2008a: 251). What was wrong with Trotsky's "attitude" is nowhere stated directly, but it can be inferred with probability: Žižek believes that the Stalinist counter-revolution "was a humanist terror: its adherence to a 'humanist' core was not what constrained its horror, it was what sustained it, it was its inherent condition of possibility" (Žižek, 2008a: 214-215). Massively and overwhelmingly, this is Žižek's diagnosis of Stalinism (and Maoism, in a related but different way). Thus Trotsky's call for a reactivation of workers' democracy against the Stalin regime is not the solution: what was needed, for Žižek, was a different ethics, not a radical politics. Trotsky's diagnosis depends on an analysis of the material interests of the bureaucratic caste charged with implementing revolutionary terror. Žižek's diagnosis depends on an analysis of the cultural values and intellectual positions of the ruling stratum. Are we so completely blinded by post-structuralism that we cannot see that Žižek's position is idealism?

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