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## *Žižek's phenomenology of the subject: transcendental or materialist?*

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### **Introduction: phenomenology and Europe**

Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology face severe problems if not dead-ends while trying to formulate a politically active philosophical position. It can be assumed, at least for the sake of the argument, that Žižek's return to Hegel is, in part, an attempt to avoid these problems that are connected to the philosophy of the subject and action, or even, work. Consequently, it may be relevant to see how Žižek's phenomenology of the subject compares to that of Husserl and Heidegger, especially with regard to progressive or revolutionary action, a place where, necessarily, the notions of subjectivity, of being human, and of work, of engaging materially and socially in the world, come together. The emphasis here will be on Žižek's thoughts as they are presented, not on their historical roots or accuracy, for instance, in view of his interpretation of Hegel (not, even, on what that interpretation exactly is).

The historical momentum included in a Hegelian phenomenology of the subject is explicit. Furthermore, if we, like Žižek, read Hegel as philosopher of the negativity of subjectivity, there is ample reason to suspect that Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology has not been radical enough in its allegedly purely formal (phenomenological) description of subjectivity. Crudely put, the claim could be that while both Husserl and Heidegger stay too close to a particular positive subjectivity (transcendental reason, German *Dasein*) they miss the truly universal dimension attainable through a dialectic of subjectivity. In Žižek's reading of Hegelian dialectic such universality is, however, necessary for radical political engagement. In this sense, whatever the

crucial differences between Hegelian, Husserlian and (early-)Heideggerian theories, they are, so to speak, competing on the same field in trying to “out-universalize” each other in describing what a subject is.

Correspondingly, it is good to remember that despite the image sometimes presented, both Husserl and Heidegger were deeply concerned about their times and tried to bring the whole weight of their philosophy to bear on historical developments. Husserl's fervent anti-naturalism was already motivated by his concern over the detrimental effect natural science had on people's everyday life, especially to the self-understanding of the Western mind or subject, and he did some of his best work in trying to find ways out of the so-called crisis of European sciences and European man. Heidegger shared Husserl's concern over the devastating effect that a naturalist self-understanding had on European life, and took part in a revolutionary movement in the thirties, trying to forge from national socialism a political movement that would shape modern man away from naturalist and technological tendencies; here, in a notorious way, Heidegger's and Husserl's paths parted. Still in the 60's Heidegger emphasised in *Der Spiegel*-interview (1976) that the crucial question for him was “how and what kind of political system can be given for our technological age.” To be sure, there are forms and schools of phenomenology that live in the Ivory Tower, but as a fundamental description of human being-in-the-world, phenomenological philosophy in the manner of Husserl and Heidegger (or Merleau-Ponty and Patocka) is explicitly and consciously engaged in thinking about action; it is also a philosophy of the transformative potential of human work or human subjectivity.

Husserl's phenomenology was intended not only as a fresh start for philosophy, but also as a forceful counterbalance for naturalism. The idea was to provide a method through which philosophy can make progress in the same way as natural sciences do. Husserl points out repeatedly and most pointedly in *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (1981: first published in 1911), that a consistent naturalism refutes itself. No ought or should exists in nature – other than the empty notion of survival – and nothing exists outside of nature. In this way, Husserl points out, consistent naturalism is a denial of reason, of the ideal and normative aspects of reason. The root of the problem is that naturalism presupposes that there are facts of nature. If nature consists of neutral facts, then all values are illusory, or, at best, relative. Husserl objects to the relativism-or-nihilism of naturalism quite simply by pointing out that we do experience values, we do experience meanings and significance, we do work with and inside systems that contain notions like justified or unjustified, right or wrong. In this vein, Husserl addresses (1981: 21, 99-100) to naive naturalism the question: how can experiences be mutually legitimated or corrected by means of each other? Naive naturalism cannot answer the question, either because it is empty, non-experiential from the outset, or, in an inexplicable and unjustifiable way, gives precedence to our experience of the physical. He suggests that this incapability is to be alleviated by an analysis of the essence of the totality of pure – not empirical – consciousness. This analysis is supposed to clarify the ground of

all objectivities (and subjectivities), it is supposed to study reality as experienced, not as presupposed nature. The answer according to Husserl, is, simply put, to start from the *a priori* essences that somehow, in a non-explicable manner, appear in reason, in its eidetic perception, which is a capacity “all humans have”.

This is also the root for Husserl's positive program, the main ingredient in his cure for the crisis of European man. In the famous Vienna lecture held in 1935, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man (Die Philosophie in der Krisis der europäischen Menschheit)*, Husserl tries to describe the true beauty and greatness of European sciences by referring to the “spiritual *telos* of European man”; this *telos* is “the free fashioning of its being and its historical life out of rational ideas and infinite tasks.” (1965: 270) By undertaking the infinite tasks or, actually, the infinite task of philosophy-science, as Husserl calls it, European man has found a unique and leading position in the world. In the contours of the European *telos* it is easy to see features of Husserl's own transcendental phenomenology, especially the infinite and rational task of elucidating the *a priori* structure of the human *Lebenswelt*. This is, infamously, the place where Husserlian transcendental phenomenology reveals its particular content: the transcendental subject Husserl is talking about is universal only in the sense that it is European. The spiritual *telos* of Europe cannot be limited geographically, as Husserl himself emphasises, “Eskimos and Gypsies” are not included, while the Europeans and their offspring in America are. In the infinity and rationality of the European spirituality, Husserl writes, “[...] lies something unique, which all other human groups, too, feel with regard to us, something that apart from all considerations of expediency, becomes a motivation for them – despite their determination to retain their spiritual autonomy – constantly to Europeanize themselves, whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, will never, for example, Indianize ourselves.” (1965: 273-274) The supposedly universal rational tasks, the supposedly pure *a priori* consciousness, is, after all, in Husserl's own words something unique. It seems, then, that already the Husserlian transcendental phenomenology that is often described as a relatively rigid and structural enterprise, contains a dialectical moment: indeed, is there not something of a Žižekian-Hegelian short-cut in Husserl's notion of the European *telos*, projecting uniqueness into universality itself? Thus, for Husserl as for Hegel (and, consequently, Marx and Žižek), it is meaningful to discuss *becoming* a transcendental subject, or assuming such subjectivity; this is the “constant motivation to Europeanize oneself”. Husserlian transcendental subjectivity is the rational point from which the infinite European tasks can be launched. It is not only structural, so that it can be revealed by a phenomenological reduction, but also the fixed point forming a community, namely Europe.

While Heidegger would agree with Husserl that Europe is in crisis and must be saved, and that Europe is a spiritual entity with roots in the Greek beginning, he would strongly dispute the nature and place of subjectivity in the spiritual *telos* and tasks of thinking. In *The Ticklish Subject* (2000: 21), Žižek characterises Heidegger's work by referring to the distinction between Heidegger

I, the author of *Being and Time* working still within the perspective of Husserlian transcendental subjectivism, and Heidegger II, author of the late semi-pagan and pseudo-obscurantist essays. In between them is the Heidegger of political activism. For Žižek, this explicitly political phase in Heidegger's thinking is a step in the right direction, a step that accepts the abyss of human freedom (i.e., negativity of the subject) by acting without any ontological guarantees. However, Heidegger makes two mistakes, according to Žižek. First, the engagement with Nazism is based on false premises. Heidegger's own account of subjectivity and community in *Being and Time* and later is, according to Žižek (2000: 20), blind to the inherently antagonistic nature of all communal ways of life. This makes it easier for Heidegger to fall into the lure of Nazism, which, supposedly, envisions a holistic social body. In a crucial way, Žižek does not think that the fundamental mistake of Nazism was a perverted "metaphysics of subjectivity", therefore his analysis of Heidegger's Nazism is different from, say, Derrida's (1989). For Žižek, Nazism was trying to avoid the full potential of modern subjectivity, and this is why Heidegger, though taking a step in the right direction by becoming openly political, still made a mistake in supporting and trying to give form to Nazism. According to Žižek, Heidegger should have stayed with the residual subjectivity that still haunts *Being and Time* rather than wander off into the fatalistic forest paths of his later thinking. For Žižek, Heidegger's Nazism is a lapse from transcendental subjectivity; a lapse that only grows deeper in the following years, when Heidegger reworks his idea of German *Dasein* as the middle of Europe with a unique Greek origin.

### **The subject and politics**

One of the obvious features of the leap away from the metaphysics of subjectivity is the fact that Heidegger does not consider communicative subjectivity as the founding level of human being. Prior to communicative subjectivity, humans are in the world as engaged agents, as care, as something that could be paraphrased as work. In a rare moment of openness Heidegger praises Marx's analysis of human activity in *Brief über den Humanismus* (1949): against the idealist background in Husserlian phenomenology, there is a clear materialist trend in Heidegger's thought. Heidegger envisions a transformation of European spirituality, one in which both the naturalist and the rationalist misunderstandings are avoided by starting anew on a level that precedes the subject. In this he agrees with certain elements of Nazi ideology and, after a brief period of hesitation, takes part in the revolution. Consistent with his philosophical scorn for the idea of subjectivity and personal ethical responsibility, he does not denounce or regret his involvement after the war. Quite the opposite; he keeps on talking about the necessary meeting between planetary technology and modern man on the political level. For Heidegger, this is not opportunism but rather the consistent denial of precisely the infinite and rational tasks that Husserl – or, for that

matter, Hegel – sets for European man. Indeed, the “other thinking” envisioned by Heidegger II, while having deep roots in the European tradition, also seeks inspiration from the Far East, and finds through *Gelassenheit* a route to Middle East, and the gnostic traditions. While Heidegger tries to save the Europe that manifests itself in the Greek-German linguistic axis, he also introduces in his thought something that to someone like Husserl is quite non-European.<sup>1</sup>

The levelling down of human non-subjective experience is one of Heidegger's reasons for suspecting transcendental subjectivity. Indeed, Heidegger, like Patocka and Merleau-Ponty, draws the roots of his thinking into aconceptual and asubjective experience, in which the distinction between the subject and the object does not yet exist. This is a type of experience that transcendental phenomenology would not recognise as human and it may be appropriate to call the attempts by Heidegger and his followers in this direction as post-phenomenological. One crucial follow-up from this post-phenomenological move towards asubjectivity is that it allows for the philosophical investigation of the birth of the subject-object distinction in the philosophical sense, not the naturalist one. It also means that it is possible to envision subjectivities other than the European one. For example, the other thinking that Heidegger talks about is open to other ethnic and local interpretations than his own Greek-German one, even though Heidegger would reserve the metaphysical problems of technology for the (Greco-)Germans. But precisely because his thinking is not only epochal or historical, but also local in the sense of being inalienably connected to (non-physical) locations – discussed through the themes of *Verwurzelung*, *Boden*, *Heimat*, *Gegnet*, and so on, in various phases of his work – that possess linguistic and cultural unity, it also opens itself to non-European thought. This theme, in turn, is sharply removed from Hegelian phenomenology, where the theory concerns the *development* of subjectivity and self-consciousness; to put it bluntly, the polytheism and pluralism of Heidegger II gain their “Eastern” flavour from an active devolution of subjectivity. As Žižek points out, “what Heidegger actually encountered in his pursuit of *Being and Time* was the abyss of radical subjectivity announced in Kantian transcendental imagination, and he recoiled from this abyss into his thought of the historicity of Being” (2000: 23). We should, however, not lose sight of the fact that it is the historicity of Being that makes it possible for Heidegger to escape the infinite tasks and *telos* of Europe, and to think of the freedom of (human) being. It might be possible even to claim that Heidegger's later thinking is a secularised version of Schelling's ideas on the freedom-giving split between/in God and nature. This makes it possible for Heidegger to evade the universalist core of Husserlian phenomenology, while still providing an account of human activity and of the act, which Schelling already in his *Freiheit*-essay conceived as something that comes before and happens outside subjective consciousness.

Žižek's objection to Heideggerian phenomenology, to Heidegger II and to the middle Heidegger of the Nazi year(s), is not Heidegger's totalitarianism. Quite the contrary, Žižek has invested considerable amounts of energy in revitalising thought around the concept. For instance,

in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism* (2001a, see also Žižek 2002b), Žižek's starting point is that the notion of totalitarianism is used as a stopgap in order to prevent us from thinking on what is wrong in the current global situation; if you challenge the liberal order, you are a totalitarian. What is wrong, according to Žižek, is the universal and total reign of liberal democracy that disguises itself in the toleration and proliferation of particularisms of multicultural, ethnic, and sexual roots. Against this, Žižek urges us to summon the strength of taking beliefs seriously enough, up to the "totalitarian-fundamentalist" point of insisting on socio-political antagonism against the multiculturalist identities. While Heidegger II, and, maybe even more ferociously the political Heidegger, situated the fundamental antagonism on the level of culture, forms of life and language, for Žižek the belief to be taken seriously is that the socio-political order of the world is overdetermined by a capitalist mode of production. The indefinite article "a" is important; we are in the middle of a shift in capitalism itself, more precisely, the shift from "monoculturalist" old capitalism to the "multiculturalist" new one, but we do not yet quite know what this shift is.

In this sense, the difference between Heidegger II and Žižek is not in their attitudes towards totalitarianism; both see it as a possible, maybe even a necessary political moment. The difference is in their view of the fundamental antagonism. As noted above, Žižek thinks that Heidegger missed the dimension of communal antagonism altogether. This is only half true: Heidegger's notion of community does contain a fundamental antagonism, but it is not mainly identified on the level of socio-economic classes, what one might call a horizontal viewpoint, but on the level of language and culture-bound forms of life, what one might call a vertical viewpoint. Especially in the 30's, but also before and after, Heidegger emphasises the notion of Heraclitean *polemos* and Nietzschean *Kampf* as necessary elements of a *Volk's* quest for its essence. The true antagonism, for Heidegger is inside the *Dasein* of a *Volk*, in its shattering questioning on its own being. Consequently, in the political world the opposition, for Heidegger, is geophilosophical in the old sense: German Europeanness against Eastern Bolshevism and Western Americanization. However, Heidegger is aware of the fact that these different "vertical" communities are inherently antagonistic: he repeatedly talks about the *deinon*, violence, included in creative, life-forming language, and the ensuing struggle that is the life of the community. However, Heidegger does not raise this antagonism into the level of the Symbolic order; rather it resides in the aconceptual and asubjective levels of language and experience. It is precisely this lack of antagonism on the symbolic level that makes it possible to characterise Heidegger's later thinking as semi-pagan, as nostalgic yearning for a community.

In many places, for instance in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism* (2001a), Žižek describes history in very much the same terms that Husserl uses in the Vienna Lecture. It is relatively surprising that coming from a place that has struggled for its position in "official" Europe and that has a multiply complicated experience of colonialism, Žižek's story of world history reads (e.g., 2001b, 2004) like a tale from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is the pre-Greek and Greek pagan period,

the Greek and Christian beginning, and then the oscillating march of European philosophy-science. Žižek constantly ridicules the premodern, pagan (thinking of mostly Greek, but also Buddhist) wisdom that sees nature as a holistic Great Chain of Being; this is also a reason for ridiculing the New Age ideology of current postmodern science, especially that of quantum mechanics. According to Žižek, Hegel's great achievement was to show that what makes nature as the ontological whole possible is that it is *not* a whole; it is intrinsically 'broken', non holistically consistent. While Kant still posited a noumenal sphere of totality, Hegel saw that the impossibility of total knowledge is a feature of the ontological as such, not a feature of our knowledge; the world (and ourselves) can exist only if it is broken, if it is impossible for us to be completely immersed in it. Žižek combines Hegel and Lacan by stating that the conditions of the possibility of knowledge are also the conditions of its impossibility: ontology or the Real is inherently not a whole, not a homogeneous series. Forgetting this, as in pagan wisdom of the holistic Chain of Being, or as in a positivist view of nature as a collection of objects, is an escape to an impossible Other Place, an escape into a fetish. In a similar way, language as the symbolic sphere is a system of interconnected meanings that derive their meaning from the other ones – there is no supporting fundamental meaning, but rather the interconnected web is broken by the empty signifier that has nothing else to do but to cover the void, the absent centre, the non-support. Correspondingly, the subject is the empty "I of the storm" around which the Humean impressions and ideas circulate; the subject is just the cover of the fact that there is no substantial, foundational subject.

Compared with the richness of Heidegger's account, Husserl's and Žižek's descriptions of European history are simplified, if not naive. However, Žižek's description of the subject as the empty cover for the lack of the subject clearly evades the strongest criticisms that can be directed to the Husserlian transcendental subject. This Lacanian 'minimalist' subject, so to speak, is not tightly connected to the *a priori* structures of supposedly universal European reason, it is not a part of the structure of European *Lebenswelt*, and thus might evade some of the accusations of colonialism directed at Husserlian phenomenology. The minimalist subject is something to be struggled for, unlike the Husserlian subject that is necessary. The idea is that the minimalist account of the subject is able to correct both the Husserlian mistake of colonialism masquerading as universalism, and the Heideggerian mistake of positing a non-antagonist and therefore non-political ideal community. However, if it is the case that Heidegger is in agreement about the fundamental antagonism, but situates it on a different level of experience, we might want to investigate if, indeed, Žižek's account of the subject can, at the same time, be universalist-materialist and evade Euro-centrism.

## Revolution *ex nihilo* and an-nihilo

Žižek (2001a,b) insists that his account of the subject is materialist in the sense that there is no Big Other, no Chain of Being, no Party Line, no Father that would preside over or support the edifice of meaning, knowledge, and so on. The task of psychoanalysis is to bring us to this insight. In this way we are brought, again, to the ontologically unguaranteed abyss of freedom. This sense of the term "materialism" is relatively non-standard. It is materialism in a highly technical sense, in the sense of not presupposing a pre-existing harmonious world of being, that of the Big Other; it does not, for instance, like Heidegger's view of the birth of the subject, mention the role of activity, equipment, grasping the world with one's hands in the formation of the subject. Instead, Žižek (2001a: 177-8) presupposes the basic level of "something, a meaningful order, appearing from nothing, the preceding chaos"; "what emerges *ex nihilo* are immaterial pure semblances (Stoic *phantasmata*), which conceal nothing, which are nothing but the masks of the Void." This materialistic account of the subject-object division arising from an ontological break, from a breach in the totality, quite consistently concerns also the notion of the act: "And an act is, in this very sense, an intervention *ex nihilo*" (2001a: 178). Žižek's materialist criticism of ideologies of ontological totality, such as naive Darwinism, New Age-thinking and phenomenologies of the whole are well on target, but his solution to the problem of creation sounds dubiously like a *deus ex machina*: creation *ex nihilo* is materialism (2001a: 177). How, after this solution that Žižek himself calls paradoxical, are we to unite the philosophical or semi-transcendental knowledge about the subject-object division with scientific knowledge? How are we to unify the Lacanian-Žižekian account of the act with empirical politics?

One form of this problem is that Žižek sees science as Science, as one thing, with a definite identity. This has not been the case for a long time; consider, for instance, the competing theories in physics that have existed for almost a hundred years now. He accepts the Heideggerian credo that "science does not think" without paying further attention to the heteronomies of really existing science. While Žižek sees the apparently opposite ways of dealing with today's problems, such as Culture Studies and Cognitivistic Third Culture, as forms of the same battle that has to be overcome by giving up the idea of nature as a positive body (contra Cognitivistic Third Culture) and by paying attention to the basic antagonism that grounds society (contra Culture Studies), he does not see a way out of the transcendental-hermeneutic vs. scientific-positive dilemma. This, of course, is no big surprise, since that dilemma is strictly correlative to the idea of a subject (and object) as a structural feature of experience (created *ex nihilo*); something that Žižek most emphatically insists upon. For instance, Žižek consistently talks about psychoanalysis as a mediation between subjects; persons are to him communicating vessels; even when he talks about excess and the like in connection to the act, the basic presupposition is always the minimally subjectified person communicating through a medium. This is, indeed, necessary, for Žižek's



phenomenological account of the subject connects the subject with the Symbolic order. While postmodern deconstructionism sees the human as a set of power-produced features, Žižek wants to reintroduce the notion that an ethical act has to happen on a symbolic level which is based on the existence of the "empty" subject (or the empty signifier).

The problems with the notion of the act are the similar to the ones with the materialist creation *ex nihilo*. For Žižek, an act is something in which freedom and necessity co-incide, in which the short-circuit of the universal and particular is accomplished. Pointedly, Žižek (2001a,b) asks how does one know that an act is not just caprice but really an act, but does not answer the question. Instead he attempts to show that an act is possible, since it does not happen inside the given symbolic co-ordinates of reality, but rearranges those coordinates, changes reality. But we are still left with the question of how does one know that one is changing the co-ordinates, and not simply a victim of the whim of *phantasmata*, a victim of the whirlwind of abstracted, negated features, dismembered pure abstractions. Of course, Žižek can answer that an act is always a risk, something that can not be calculated, something undecidable (Derrida), which, again is true as such. However, do we not have here a mystification, an obscurantism (maybe not, after all, that far away from Heidegger's evasions)? Why would it not be enough to have an 'ordinary' act, something that is done without full knowledge, with unforeseeable consequences, with some degree of freedom and some degree of determinacy?

Žižek illuminates the true, ethical act with a structural notion: in a true act there is a gap between the actual content of an act and the ethical space of possibilities that it opens up. What is this gap? For Žižek, something like the October revolution or even Stalinism has emancipatory potential because of this gap (2002a: 193): the gap opens up a dimension of possibility that is separate from the actual content of the act. This is certainly true, in a sense. An act can go terribly wrong, but still in it we might be able to recognise a possibility of acting that we may realize better and in this sense "repeat" the original act, as in "repeating Lenin". But what is the use of structuralising this possibility of doing something a little better as a "gap"? Does not the gap explode also into the other dimension? Let us, for instance, take the statement that Nazism has emancipatory potential because of the gap between its "inner greatness and truth" (Heidegger) and its actual content – does not this claim (one that Žižek vigorously denies, 2002a: 193), become structurally possible because of the mystification, reification, hypostatis of the "gap", which strictly corresponds to the hypostatis of the subject, however minimal? Žižek would no doubt retort that this is in principle possible, but in fact there is no such potential, because the October revolution in Russia was a real revolution, while the German nationalist revolution of '33 was *not*.

This, perhaps, is the crux of the matter. What are authentic revolutions, authentic acts, and how do we know? What if, for a period of time, the Nazi revolution, for it was a popular revolution, also diminished class inequality? What if it attempted to confront the disease of cosmopolitan multiculturalist democracy and "mondialisation"? What if, for a time, it was more effective in

pursuing these aims than communist Russia? While Žižek's analysis of Nazism is more nuanced than the customary ones, there are disconcerting signs that he might be playing with the "difference of small marginals" in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism* (2001a): were not the communist and national socialist revolutions rivals, indeed, hegemonic rivals? Žižek wants to make a distinction between Hitlerist and Stalinist terror by pointing out that, unlike the pseudo-scientifically systematised Nazi genocide, Stalinist terror was, at least in some stages, untargeted, an attack on the whole social body. But is this true, is it a description that is materialist enough? Did Stalinist terror *tout court* not have the dimension of ethnic cleansing? Did it not mean the genocide and dislocation of not one but *several* finno-ugric people, for instance? These are, of course, empirical questions that can not be settled here; in any case it is possible that the answers are positive. For instance, Otto Pohl (2000, 271) explicitly addresses the view according to which "Whereas Stalin's terror was arbitrary, Hitler's was targeted at a particular group." His conclusion is unequivocal: "Information released from the former Soviet archives in the last 10 years supports the argument that the Stalin regimen did indeed commit genocide against the 'Repressed Peoples'. The Soviet government sought to destroy these groups as distinct ethnic identities." (ibid.). To his credit, Žižek does not give himself the easy exit of saying that the Nazi revolution was predestined to turn into the Holocaust (he does ponder on the possibility that the Holocaust was a "blind effect, without purpose", 2000: 65); this would amount to saying that Stalinism was the predestined effect of the October revolution.<sup>2</sup>

We are back with the question of how do we know an authentic act. Of course, the answer could be that we do not and can not, but what, then is the point of theoretically separating ethical, authentic acts from ordinary ones? If this can be done only in retrospect, are we not, in fact, engaging in writing a history of the victorious? Žižek's answer in, for instance (2002a: 259), is that an authentic act is an enacted utopia: in and through the act we live as if the utopia was already here. A revolution is its own ontological proof (2002a: 260). But did not the Germans of 1933, including amongst others Heidegger, experience this elation, the exhilarating and rejuvenating experience of a popular uprising, of utopia in action? Is this enacted utopia not part of the non-naive explanation for the initial political, economical and military success of Nazism? Georges Bataille (1947a,b, see Surya 2002: 360-362) has set a criterion according to which post-Holocaust (and post-Hiroshima) philosophical anthropology is serious only if it does not paint a picture of humans that are incapable of the Holocaust. In a similar manner, it seems that a serious picture of the Nazi revolution has to be able to account for its utopian dimension, too. In any case, does not the criterion of "enacted utopia" create the same problem of interpretation than the one created by the notion of an authentic act? Is there a non-ideological content to these notions? And is this problem not strictly correlative with the notion of the empty subject?

## The subject, *ethnos* and revolution

In *The Abyss of Freedom* (1997), the magnificent essay preceding a translation of Schelling's *Ages of the World*, Žižek explains that “we are in ideology the moment we 'naturalize' the link between Master Signifier and a set of positive features that define it as the result of a struggle. In this precise sense, the subject is a nonideological concept; [...] we 'subjectivize' ourselves when we recognize ourselves in a determinate content of the Master Signifier, [...] whereas the subject is the void correlative to the empty signifier.” (1997: 49) I will follow Žižek's advice, given repeatedly, that precisely when something poses as non-ideological, self-evident and clear, in this case the notion of the subject, it is most suspect of actually being invested with ideological interests. Of course, if we define ideology as identification with a Master Signifier with positive content, then the empty subject and the empty signifier are, as structures, technically speaking non-ideological. But precisely as such non-empirical and non-naturalizable concepts they are, *strictu sensu*, transcendental. If the story of philosophy from Hegel, Marx, Husserl to Heidegger and onwards has taught us anything, it must be the realisation that philosophical abstractions, concepts and structures work as embedded practises, as flesh and blood in the world, or not at all. So we need to ask what is the work that the minimal, structural concept of the empty subject is doing and what is the work that the notion of the authentic act is doing.

Before answering the question, let us add a hermeneutic guideline. The well-known and controversial native American leader – who insists on calling himself American Indian – Russell Means (1980: unpaginated) has in one of his speeches given an alternative criterion for evaluating the revolutionary potential of an ideology: “You cannot judge the real nature of a European revolutionary doctrine on the basis of the changes it proposes to make within the European power structure and society. You can only judge it by the effects it will have on non-European peoples.” The quote is made more pertinent by the fact that Means is, among other things, the voice of Powhatan, the father of the heroine, in Disney's *Pocahontas*.

Žižek has been admirably clear in not trying to hide the fact that he works for certain European values and goals; not the ethnocentrically colonialist values of a Europe as the uniquely initiated middle, but rather the universally materialistically interpreted values of emancipation and enlightenment. We will not, therefore, err greatly if we suspect that in the structural phenomenology of the act as presented by Žižek, we find a residue of a Europocentrism. Crudely put, the minimal subject is needed as a Maxwellian demon separating revolutionary acts from ordinary ones. This it can do, because Europeanization provides the ideological content of the minimal subject as a formal concept. Thus, Žižek's theory faces a dilemma. Either the notion of the minimal subject is truly pure and non-ideological, in which case it is also transcendental (and necessary) or then it does have a residual positive content (which has to be struggled for and can be recognised only retroactively). Because both options typically and teleologically fall back to a European ideals, they

may seem similar but are distinct with regard to the determinism and historical dimension involved. The first option is deterministic (everyone already is a subject, or then something inhuman) but not necessarily historical, the second is not necessarily deterministic (subjectivity has to be attained) but is historical with regard to the development of the subject. Consequently, the least we can say of Žižek's theory of the subject is that, for the moment, it suggests that everybody become European in the sense of the empty subject.

If this idea is present in Žižek, what does it mean in terms of the account that can be given on human activity, especially revolutionary one? We have already discussed how the transcendental subject-object division makes it impossible to unite natural science and *Geisteswissenschaften*; both of these dualisms are, indeed, mentioned by Žižek as examples of unredeemable "parallax" pairs (2006).<sup>3</sup> Only in an ontological schema that tries to explain the birth of the subject-object division, can the unification be attempted. The creation *ex nihilo* of the subject-object distinction makes the unification impossible. When it comes to the description of human activity, the miraculous appearance of the distinction makes it possible to underestimate the aconceptual and asubjective roots of action and to overstate and mystify the revolutionary potential of "authentic, ethical" acts.

The case of Hitlerist terror versus Stalinist terror is one case in point. Let us assume that the October revolution was an authentic act. What was its effect on non-European peoples, positive or negative? What was its effect on the edges of Europe, on the aspirations of becoming European or staying non-European? How are we to evaluate this without in advance deciding what kind of subjectivization or Europeanization of those peoples is for the(ir) good? Furthermore, is it really not the case that what Europeanization means, after all, is the obliteration of non-European cultures, especially of non-Indo-European ones? In this sense and, for example, from the non-Indo-European Finnish perspective transcendental phenomenology in all its forms is colonialism: non-European experience, such as the disappearing Finnish one, might produce nice anecdotes or poetry that can be used as examples in illustrating European theory (see Žižek 2006: 139), but ultimately the task for the Finns is to grow up, to Europeanize themselves, own up to their subjectivity and join the project of the ethics of the Real.

But is there a choice, subjective or asubjective? Žižek points out that ethnic and local identities are not a real alternative to the globalization of capital, because, in effect, globalization uses and produces the localities as one of its products. The true opposition to globalization is not localism, but universalism. However, how much would it help to break the capitalist chains only to discover that one has, finally, become a Parisian? When the Amazon Indians these days are attacking illegal miners on their land, it is obvious that the two groups created and exploited by global capitalism are run against each other in a logic that also in itself serves the capital. But is not there also an issue of real ethnic battle involved? When Russell Means gives his voice to Powhatan, his ethnic identity is certainly being manipulated by multiculturalist capitalism. But does

this mean that Means claim (1980: unpaginated) "The US will never have an effective foreign policy until it deals justly with the American Indians" is not true? Could not an act or a revolution in this situation be both an ethnic and a materialist-revolutionary one? Yes, it could, if it was an ordinary act, if it would not have to have the subjectual universal-European structure. The destruction of non-European or pseudo-European identities or subjectivities by European revolutions can not be waved back by saying that such identities are never pure, never whole, but bundles of antagonistic tendencies in themselves. They are such bundles, but becoming a subject, becoming a Lacanian still means becoming an European bundle and thus losing and destroying something else. Furthermore, what if the real radicality and revolutionary potential of Lenin's call for the October revolution was precisely its ordinariness and mundaness: the place was not right, the time was not right, there was no theoretical duty, no short-circuit, rather just the dogged and, to the true Europeans, somewhat embarrassing improvisation by Lenin?

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism* (2001a: 234-235) Žižek tells the story of an Austrian pacifist who in a TV debate between a Serb and an Albanian urged them to put their animosity aside, to negotiate, not to use violence despite of their grave hatred of each other. According to Žižek, at this point the Serb and the Albanian glanced at each other, as by saying "Does this moron not understand that we are only manipulating the ethnic stories in order to do battle on power and money?" Žižek's conclusion is that the pacifist was secretly racist, assuming the truth of the ethnic identities and the stories told about them. This is a great simile, because it allows us to explore other vistas, too. Let us imagine a Finn or a Pole attending a heated discussion between Hitler and Stalin just before the signing of the Ribbentrop treaty. Hitler and Stalin are arguing over the relative merits of their revolutions, Hitler emphasising the unity of spirit in Germany, its radical transformation, Stalin putting stress on the internationalism of the socialist revolution. The Finn or the Pole intervenes, tries to cool down the animosity, which makes Stalin and Hitler change glances: does not this moron know that we are just manipulating these revolutionary stories? Indeed, still staying on the question of revolutionary identities, is it not possible to use the stories of both global capital and Lacano-Marxism in a manipulative way? Is there not a not-so-hidden Europocentrism in taking these two seriously? Could there not be a discussion in which a liberal democrat and a Lacano-Marxist would discuss on the merits of their views with regard to economic equality in the world? The observer could be a New Ageist, saying "put the economical side away, concentrate on your souls"; both parties would then glance at each other: "does not this moron know that we are only manipulating these stories?" From a non-into-European perspective, is there not a sinister side to the utopia of "collectives of material production" (Žižek's positive goal in 2001a)? Is it sure that these are not ensnared in the trap of "survival" and other essentially Europocentric (scientific, political, philosophical) notions?

Second, and more seriously, is it certain that a collective of subjects can, in an effective way, challenge the onslaught of technology and liberal democracy? Is not the production of a collective

of subjects possible only under certain relatively advanced conditions of technology and democracy? Furthermore, is it not possible that some of the Nazis (part of the *Dasein*-wing, for instance, including 'Heideggerians' and 'Jüngerians') realized this and that one version of Nazism was responding to the challenge of the impotence of democracy and subjects in dealing with the onslaught of technology? Is there really an example of a collective of materially productive subjects that is not at the same time an example of the technological destruction of the planet? And most curiously, does not something of this connection between technology and subjectivity glimmer in Žižek's notion of the act? He writes (2001a: 247) "The paradox to accept is that in democracy, individuals *do* tend to remain stuck on the level of 'servicing goods' – often, one *does* need a Leader in order to 'do the impossible'. The authentic Leader is literally the One who enables me actually to *choose myself* – my subordination to him is the highest act of freedom." Are these not almost exactly the awords of Heidegger in the 30's? There is no paradox here: democracy, subject and the technological servicing of goods come from the same factory – made in Europe. It is not that "in a democracy individuals *tend* to remain on the level of the 'servicing of goods'"; subjects are the *means* of the servicing of the goods, and individuals *are* the goods themselves. Technology, democracy and the subject can not be separated without at the same time taking apart our view of what it is to be human. This sympathy between Žižek and the political Heidegger is not a coincidence (there is the materialism of denying the existence of the Big Other to start with): both Žižek and Heidegger are convinced of the special nature of the European project beyond capitalist atomisation. Philosophically, both present us with an impasse: in order to really think about the problems of today, it is necessary to be or to become a European. In a sense Žižek gives more hope than Heidegger: for Heidegger becoming a European, taking up the task of thinking about technology, is impossible unless one is born into a Greek-German language; for Žižek it is enough to embrace the universal dimension of one's being, of realizing the truths of European psychoanalysis and philosophy. But, in fact, that would already be stepping into the trap that is technology-democracy-subjectivity. In contrast, there is reason to believe that in order to efficiently evade the structural violence created by multiculturalist capitalism, it is crucial to resist the urge to become Europeanized, the urge to start acting as a subject in pursuit of symbolic tasks, which in effect, means 'servicing the goods'.

In addition, we can ask why it would not be enough to oppose liberalist democracy on the basis that it destroys lives; why are the notions of the gap, the subject, the authentic act, needed? If the answer is that theory is needed in uniting the dispersed criticisms of globalisation, then that unification has to be done in a better way, in a way that is not trapped when it comes to overcoming techno-science and its role in the Western domination. One can agree with Žižek about the radical non-totality of nature and the necessity of taking our beliefs seriously, even about the materialism of "no Big Other" without succumbing to the Parisianism of minimalist subjects and authentic acts. Indeed, one can even agree about the necessity of creating "communities of

struggle across the entire social edifice” (2002a: 177), and the essential connection between partisan viewpoints and truth without calling for a subject that collapses back to European uniqueness. In fact, what is needed is only the removal of the capitalisation of the act and the *ex nihilo* subject, and we can do without the edifice of Europocentric mystification. How do we know when an act is 'authentic' in the sense of creating new "Good"? We do not: all acts are inauthentic, mundane, without a short-circuit between the Universal and the Singular, some of them are better, have more beneficial and more far-reaching consequences than other ones, some might even be revolutionary. Would this not be a materialist phenomenology of the act? Acts are finite, impure and ineliminably connected to their experiential and antagonistic roots; the same goes for the subject, if and when it is created.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 It can, with good reason, be argued that Heidegger's thinking is ethnocentric (see, e.g., Derrida 1989); this is, as noted above, one of the reasons that Žižek finds Heidegger II not universalistic enough. However, Heidegger II is at the same time aware of the possibility of non-European subjectivities (or asubjectivities); in Vadén (2005) it is argued that this is because of (not despite of) the ethnocentrism.
- 2 A similar pattern of comparison emerges when Žižek writes in *The Parallax View* (2006: 289): "in today's Germany there are many CD's on the market featuring old GDR revolutionary and Party songs – but we look in vain for a CD featuring Nazi Party songs." One doubts the truth of the claim, especially given that just months after the book was published, the BBC reported that ca. 750 people had taken part in a peaceful demonstration in support of the release of neo-Nazi singer Michael Regener from Tegel prison (BBC World News 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2006).
- 3 If "materialist" is Žižek's technical term for "ex nihilo", then "parallax" is the technical term for "dualist".
- 4 I would like to thank the reviewers of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* for helpful criticism on an earlier version of this article.