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Can We (Still) Be Žižekians and Rancièreans?

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I couldn't help noticing how all the best Marxist analyses are always analyses of a failure ... Like, why did the Paris Commune go wrong? Trotskyites. Why did the October Revolution go wrong? And so on ... OK, we screwed it up, but we can give the best theory why it had to happen. – Slavoj Žižek

Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, ... by placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than ... the contradiction of two worlds in a single world.
– Jacques Rancièrè

Introduction

When the recession struck the United States and the global economy in 2008 and 2009, according to Slavoj Žižek, we “place[d] the blame for the meltdown not on the global capitalist system as such, but on secondary and contingent deviations (over-strict regulations, the corruption of big financial institutions, and so on)” (Žižek 2009: 19). The predominant response attempted to shift culpability from the financial system itself to a series of particular, malignant deviations from the expected “normal” running of the market.

For Slavoj Žižek, the answer to the global recession that the United States finds itself now barely climbing out of is precisely no to “regulate more, tax more, spend less,” but instead question the very assumptions of our prized system of ownership. A central question posed by the media was why, given the increasing computational power of the financial industry, the regulatory power of the federal government, etc., did nobody “see it coming”? As Marxist geographer David Harvey pointed out so clearly, the failure of economists and politicians to “see the crisis coming” was not due to a lack of statistical explanations: it was a protracted ideological blindness. A report by the British Academy of Economists agreed: it was “principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people.” Yet this response runs parallel to explanations following the dot-com crash in the early 2000s and the plethora of financial turmoil that accompanied movement towards the 21st century. Why, then, does it seem that again and again the collective imagination of so many bright individuals fails to “see it coming”? Perhaps there is something to the totality of the system that necessitates these crises and impels us, as academics, to begin to explore new possibilities for alternative arrangements of human society. What remains critical in this effort for Žižek is sustaining hope in the viability of the “communist hypothesis,” a term which French philosopher Alain Badiou coined in a 2008 article:

Without the perspective of communism, without the Idea, nothing in the historical and political future is of such a kind as to interest the philosopher.... What we are ascribed as a philosophical task, we could say even a duty, is to help a new modality of existence of the hypothesis to come into being. New in terms of the type of experimentation to which this hypothesis could give rise.
(Badiou 2008: 115)

For Žižek, our struggle is not only to reinvigorate the theoretical implications of the “communist hypothesis,” but also to begin to tease out new modes of politics that could properly be called “communist.” As the recent publication of *The Idea of Communism* and a slew of new conferences on the topic have made clear, communism is, once again, “in.”

Jacques Rancière, a French philosopher whose work has seen a recent increase in popularity due to a series of new translations, has a slightly different but similarly aligned perspective on the communist hypothesis and what it means for radical politics today. For Rancière, the most important aspect of the communist hypothesis is that it is, in Badiou's words, “a pure idea of equality” (Badiou 2009: 100). For both Rancière and Badiou, equality is not a future ideal or end goal to work towards, but an axiom that requires people to orient themselves politically and ethically to a presupposition of equality in the here and

now, letting it constantly filter into all aspects of action and speech. This has extremely important implications for how working from the communist hypothesis can and should build alternative socio-economic arrangements. For Rancière, "equality has nothing to do with an equal distribution of concrete wealth or status," but with "an equality of intelligences," or in Badiou's terms "a universal power to be struck by a truth" (Barbour 2010: 254). For Rancière, equality has a performative, almost tautological character – it "exists to the extent that some subject acts and speaks on the assumption that equality exists" (Barbour 2010: 254-255). Building alternative socio-economic arrangements, then, begins in the here and now. Acting out of the communist hypothesis means changing one's perspective, the frame by which one acts and subsequently views the world. Equality becomes the axiomatic starting point and guiding hand behind all of our actions.

In this paper, we explore the differences between a Žižekian "party-state" politics that seeks to create emancipatory change *through* altering the State-form and a Rancièrean "axiomatic" politics that attempts to reorient our approach to collective action itself. These two positions have each been debated thoroughly, but the dialectic between them has not been explored in any great depth. We hope to excavate a productive tension from which to establish and theorize a new emancipatory, communist politics of equality. We begin with a brief analysis of the political thought on both sides before diving into the larger question of what a Žižekian/Rancièrean politics might look like, and then grappling with the import of these intellectual developments in the context of substantial social change happening around the world.

Communism Today

Amid the recent spate of revolutionary fervor in the Middle East and Africa, partisans on the Right and Left of the debate on democracy have argued that the social change created by a series of popular revolts against dictatorial power is proof that their pseudo-teleological theorizations of societal organization are correct. William Kristol, a prominent conservative pundit, extolled the protest movement in Egypt as an exemplary victory of Western democracy over totalitarianism: "The United States must support the Egyptian awakening, and has a paramount moral and strategic interest in real democracy in Egypt..." (Kristol 2011). An editorial in the *The Daily Caller* referred to the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia as strong evidence supporting Francis Fukuyama's proclamation that we have entered the "end of history" – meaning that democratic capitalism has finally and

conclusively *won* out over alternative forms of social organization. There is little doubt that these popular uprisings are movements away from totalitarianism – yet are they endorsements of the type of Western democratic values that Fukuyama endorsed? And even if they do represent further proof that democracy has “won” on a global scale, is this really evidence of a natural movement of human society towards democratic-capitalist “freedom” or have we been, in a sense, conned into believing that the society we find ourselves in is *the best of all possible worlds*? In a recent article, Alain Badiou argues much the opposite:

Isn't it laughable to see certain intellectuals on duty ... offering themselves to the magnificent Tunisian and Egyptian peoples in order to teach these savage populations the basics of “democracy”? What a distressing persistence of colonial arrogance! Given the miserable political situation that we are experiencing, isn't it obvious that it is us who have everything to learn from the current popular uprisings? Shouldn't we, in all urgency, closely study what has made possible the overthrow through collective action of governments that are oligarchic, corrupt and —possibly, above all—humiliatingly the vassals of Western states? (Badiou 2011)

For Žižek, the answer is clearly in line with Badiou's: far from being examples of the hegemony of democratic capitalism, recent protests throughout the Middle East and Africa only increase the importance of reinvigorating new communist currents of thought. The democracy so lauded by pundits like Kristol is not truly “democratic” because it relies upon unequal forms of representation that allow for continued, if less visible, capitalist exploitation: governance in America is controlled by the rich, political elites who can afford large mass media campaigns.¹ The poor are, very literally, precluded from accessing the democratic system that is supposed to serve them. It is for this reason that Žižek emphasizes the communist hypothesis as critical to any truly emancipatory politics. But this communism needs to be distinguished from its historical manifestations: the *idea* of Communism, the possibility of a classless society, the belief “that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour,” must be maintained (Badiou 2009: 99). The reality of democracy, and even its theorization, relies upon a foundational exclusion that arbitrarily separates certain populations from the rest of society. These groups, like the slum dwellers in South America and Africa who exist, very literally, outside any form of law or economic accounting, are what Jacques Rancière calls the “part-of-no-part.” The part-of-no-part have no direct position inside the private, social hierarchies and are thus excluded even from participation

in the political world. Democracy, in all its varied historical manifestations, seems to possess no method to *include* these people: for Žižek, the system necessitates this form of exclusion. According to Erik Swyngedouw, the recent increase in violence and social unrest like the burning of “banlieues” in France, student-led riots in Greece, large-scale diaspora movements, and even urban rebellions around the world which have been largely “tolerated” by liberal capitalism represent irresolvable strains inside the system:

Universally condemned by the political elites, these are desperate signs of the levels of discontent, screams for recognition, and express profound dissatisfaction with the existing configuration, while testifying to the political impotence of such gestures and signalling the need for a more political, that is politicized, organization of these anarchic expressions for the desire for a new commons. (Swyngedouw 2009: 315)

It is these populations, which begin to stand in for universality itself, that necessitate the reinvigoration of communism and the process of creating new “commons.” And for Žižek, our task is to begin to link the *idea* of communism to specific historical moments.²

Rancière’s (Anti)Politics

Though Žižek frequently makes use of Rancière’s conception of the “part-of-no-part”³ as a crucial focal point for politics, he differs with Rancière on the question of the “how” of politics. Rancière divides politics and policing into two different activities. He sees “policing” not in its literal “cops-and-robbers” position, but instead as the social creation and organization of hierarchies by identifying groups and choosing specific places they belong. He sees politics as profoundly aesthetic, and thus this “ordering” of the police becomes one aspect of the “partition of the sensible” – the “visible proofs” of the various “inclusions, exclusions, hierarchies, topologies, potential dynamics, etc.,” inside a system (Toscano 2006). Against this method of policing, Rancière understands “politics” as the acts that undo these hierarchical orders: it is an active disidentification with these regimes. In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek argues that “we should ... ultimately also abandon the distinction, proposed by Rancière, between politics proper (the rise to universality of the singular “part-of-no-part”) and police (the administration of social affairs)” (Žižek 2010: 199-200). For Žižek, “politics proper truly counts only insofar as it affects policing itself, radically transforming its mode” (200). Rancièrian politics refuse engagement with the power of the police. Thus the idea of a direct intervention to “affect policing itself,” which

Žižek sees as integral to any properly political project, becomes impossible. Rancière's notion of politics put into practice becomes a politics of *subtraction*, mirroring Žižek's criticism of Badiou's reliance on fidelity to a Truth Event as the only properly political act. Both of these models for praxis see a corrupted State-form from inside of which no "political" change is possible. Progress within that system merely reaffirms the problems of the status quo. A politics of emancipation that presupposes an inability or unwillingness to directly influence the affairs of the State is thus, for Žižek, doomed to failure from the very beginning. This was the problem with communist politics of the past: they attempted to "replace statal forms of organization with direct non-representative forms of self-organization," instead of directly altering the "functioning" of the State-form (Žižek 2010a: 219). Indeed, a failure to grapple with this aspect of the State-form ignores the existence of contemporary capitalism: far from a sedimentary, unchanging nature, capitalism relies on constant self-revolutions to preserve its social hegemony. A politics that centers solely on the universality of the "part-of-no-part" and attempts to subvert the order of capitalism from outside ignores the fact that the system has commodified "revolution" into a product that can be bought and sold. The case of rich, bourgeois teenagers wearing Che t-shirts as a way to "rebel" against their parents seems a clear example – a symbol of egalitarian revolution has been repurposed and *cleansed* of its truly radical nature. Yet it is not just in revolution's commodification as *product*, but its integration into the very being of contemporary capitalism. Was this not demonstrated with the recession? Far from undermining the power of the market, the great crisis of the last few years allowed greater consolidation of holdings by large corporations and banks and even greater power by the corporate-dominated governments of the world. It is the constant revolutionizing, constant self-overcoming of its limits that provides much of the power of the ruling capitalist elites (Žižek 2009: 128).

Even more importantly, the forces *against* capitalism are repurposed and re-presented as forces *for* capitalism. Starbucks is an instructive example: a bottle of water or cup of coffee often comes with special arrangements that provide a small donation to some charity with each purchase. Each cup you buy from the particular Starbucks you frequent, then, directly helps those "less fortunate" than yourself. It's hard to argue with this logic for two reasons. First, it increases the "utility" of the purchase – you get not just a cup of coffee but also the feeling of being a good Samaritan.⁴ Second, it serves to whitewash the role Starbucks plays in unfair circulations of capital, labor abuses, and the fact that your cup of coffee is already substantially overpriced: you were going to purchase

it anyways, why not feel a little better about the process? It is precisely the ideological underpinnings here that color this quotidian exchange in a very different light. There is, further, something very powerful in *linking* common symbols: your cup of coffee comes branded not only with a Starbucks logo, but also, implicitly, with the face of the starving “Third World” child that we all know so well from endlessly repeated television advertisements and various international charity campaigns. How can you argue with a company when it has Third World children on its side?

This “face job” of capitalism is also clear in the increasingly popular reality shows that focus on wealthy million/billionaires who take time out of their otherwise perfect lives to go work with truly poor individuals. In *Undercover Boss*, CEOs dress up in a disguise and go to work with workers in the lowest tiers of their respective companies. After spending some “gritty” time at the bottom, witnessing first-hand the unfortunate circumstances that their own corporate decisions have created for lower-echelon workers, each boss reveals his/her true identity and writes a check to remedy some wrongs, changes a rule or two, and goes back to how he or she acted before. This time, however, they will *remember* that the people they hire are *real* just like they are! The workers are, of course, floored that their CEOs are coming to work with them and this is taken as evidence of the magical power of capitalism: CEOs are not the evil monsters they are made out to be by leftists. Instead, they are people just like us and they *understand our pain*. But this is exactly the wrong way to view *Undercover Boss*: it is a “surprise” precisely because we *don't* expect CEOs to do these sorts of things. A large number of CEOs around the world are implementing ethically atrocious policies without humanely considering the individual links in their supply chain: think of the factory workers making less than a dollar per day creating shoes that cost over one-hundred or the refusal of major energy companies and operators of toxic waste dumps to take responsibility for medical problems created by their operations. Do we see the heads of toxic waste disposal companies visiting the sewage burials and spending a “day in the life”? No, and this is precisely the lesson that needs to be taken: the workers in *Undercover Boss* should reverse the camera and ask why the CEO is not working alongside them *every day*. If *Undercover Boss* is evidence that even the individuals who profit most from capitalism can change their practices, we should take this to its extreme: every company should change until the proposal of *Undercover Boss* as a television show would seem needlessly repetitive. “*Undercover Boss? We are all our own bosses!*” But instead, at the end of the day, all *Undercover Boss* gives the audience is a slightly altered body with a brand new face. Or perhaps more insidiously, the iron fist

receives a shiny white glove.

Was this not also, in a sense, the lesson of Jonathan Franzen's recent bestseller, *Freedom*? Joey Berglund, a "typical" modern American kid, grows up and finds work with a defense contractor, selling low-grade machine parts that have been collected from decaying vehicles around the world to the United States war effort in Iraq. In the end, of course, he has his "aha!" moment, realizing that his hidden liberal conscience cannot stomach what he is doing, and he becomes a sustainable coffee grower. This whole progression replays, in a particular fashion, the fantasy many have relating to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: Maybe eventually the people in charge will realize how horrible all of this is and just call it quits – maybe they can focus on poverty instead. Joey completes his metamorphosis from the evil capitalist bent on cheating *even our brave soldiers* to the kind, sustainable businessman, as if the only possible fate in American life is to choose precisely what level of exploitation to take on your shoulders. We have, in a very parallel sense, Starbucks come full circle: not only not-negative, but also the most positive business aspiration one could realistically aspire towards. After all, they're just selling coffee, not cheating American soldiers. This is why, then, it is critical to refuse a politics that doesn't directly *halt* the movement of capitalism. Capitalism integrates its strongest critics into its regular functioning: the truly radical gesture then would be to create small fissures that can expand into universal struggles, to refuse to engage in a continuation of the status quo. Instead of subtraction, Žižek proposes the very opposite: to "re-appropriate the 'old Hegelian' topic of a strong State grounded in a shared ethical substance" (Žižek 2010a: 199).

Equality of Minds or Markets

Žižek's second area of contention focuses on the Rancièrian insistence upon equality as a prior axiom for any properly political struggle. For Rancière, politics must center on a presupposition of equality of each individual's intelligence. Any politics that refuses this, and thus begins from a point of inequality, is doomed to reestablish the hierarchies that it seeks to eliminate. Žižek disagrees not with the necessity of bringing equality to the forefront, but instead with the uniqueness and viability of the position: the logic of equality is already circumscribed and integrated within the broader logic of capitalism. Capitalism, far from supposing unequal relations of exchange, includes a presupposition of equality in its most basic functioning:

Marx's fundamental insight concerns the "bourgeois" limitation of the logic of equality. Just as capitalism already asserts the primacy of presentation of the State of representation, it also already asserts the principle of equality: its inequalities ("exploitations") are not the "unprincipled violations of the principle of equality," but are absolutely inherent to the logic of equality: they are the paradoxical result of its logical realization. (Žižek 2006: 325)

Žižek, here, has in mind more than pure relations of exchange between individuals, but the very nature of exploitation in capitalism. It does not involve *direct* inequality, but instead a presupposed "equality" between the worker and capitalist. The worker receives "the full value of the commodity he is selling (his labor-power)" (Žižek 2006: 325). When viewed from this angle, the axiom of equality becomes little more than a stand-in for imposition of *de jure* equality that ends up creating more and more *de facto* inequality. Is this not the case with the creation of equal wages where certain groups, such as women, racial or sexual minorities, are elevated above others (their domineering white co-workers)? The mantra of free market capitalism *embraces* the notion of a foundational equality: each individual has an equal opportunity and ability to compete her way to the top of the capitalist world system. Equality is coopted by Capital to create more inequality, in an endless cycle.

What are we to make of this? Surely it is the case that exploitation in capitalist relations of production is due, in some part, to socially imposed inequalities. Is Žižek's critique of the axiom of inequality not shortsighted in this view? For Rancière, the answer is yes. The conventional Marxist viewpoint falls prey to the *a priori* nature of market relations and ignores the role a presupposition of inequality plays in market relations. Marxism ignores that "the wrong of exploitation is not that it extracts surplus value from the worker, but that it refuses to recognize the equality of the worker" (May 2008: 82). Equality as an *a priori* consideration becomes vital and needs to be theorized first in any truly emancipatory project because relations of inequality *determine* the forms of repression that a Marxist analysis seeks to remedy. In this understanding, flows of Capital are determined by relations of inequality to create unequal flows of capital, in an endless cycle.

We have, here, two seemingly irreconcilable chains. In one, equality endlessly oscillates around the movement of capitalist exploitation, while in the other, capitalist exploitation endlessly oscillates around the movement of inequality. Thus arises a critical question: does the presupposition of equality need to precede a politics that breaks from capitalism, or does a politics that breaks from capitalism need to precede true relations of

equality? It is instructive to examine Marx's notion of the base/superstructure relationship here. In classical Marxism, social relations are divided into two co-constituent parts: a base that contains the productive relations and a superstructure that contains the state-form, culture, institutions, etc. The base both supports and is influenced by the superstructure. In Žižek's psychoanalytic Marxism, the base/superstructure relationship works differently:

Marx's point here is not primarily to reduce the second dimension to the first (to demonstrate how the supranatural mad dance of commodities arises out of the antagonisms of "real life"); his point is, rather, that we cannot properly grasp the first (the social reality of material production and social interaction) without the second: it is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of Capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes.
(Žižek 2006: 383)

It is the logic of Capital that allows the observer to *understand* (acting as a decoder lens of sorts) the "base" in conventional Marxist understanding. Ernesto Laclau criticizes Žižek's "crude" form of the base/superstructure model as eliminating the possibility of emancipatory movements and ignoring the role the hegemonic constructions play in the system itself (Laclau 2000: 292). However, with Žižek's model of the relations between "material reality" and Capital, it is clear why the axiom of equality could become little more than bourgeois political posturing: it functions only at the level of concrete, social interaction, ignoring the role that the "self-propelling metaphysical dance of Capital" plays in always-already structuring the relations between worker and capitalist. There is no way to think *beyond* inequality while we still wear the "glasses" of Capital.

Yet for Rancière this criticism rests on a grossly oversimplified notion of equality. Any analysis of equality should entail recognition of its role in founding any social order:

If the ignorant are to understand that they have to obey the orders of the learned, [the elites'] power must rest on a supplementary title, the power of those who have no other property that predisposes them more to governing than to being governed... The power of the best cannot ultimately be legitimated except via the power of equals... Equality is not a fiction. All superiors experience this as the most commonplace of realities. There is no master who does not sit back and risk letting his slave run away, no man who is not capable of killing another, no force that is imposed without having to justify itself, and hence without having to recognize the irreducibility of equality needed for inequality to function. From the moment obedience has to refer to a principle of legitimacy... commanding must presuppose the equality of the one who commands and the one who is commanded... There is no service that is carried out, no knowledge that is imparted, no authority that is established without the master having, however little, to speak 'equal to equal' with the one he commands or instructs. Inegalitarian society can only function thanks to

a multitude of egalitarian relations. It is this intrication of equality in inequality that the democratic scandal makes manifest in order to make it the basis of public power.
(Rancière 2006: 46-48)

Not only is Rancière claiming that equality is an always-present point of resistance, but more strongly that the powerful cannot create relationships of oppression without referring to this baseline relationship of equality. A command given from a superior to an inferior, though it does institute a relationship of inequality, must presume that the lesser is both equally capable of understanding this order and equally capable of knowing she must carry it out. Thus, for Rancière, the mere existence of this equality underlying inequality ensures the contingency of any relationship of oppression. Taking equality as an axiom should be treated as compellingly as Aristotle's law of non-contradiction – it is an "un-hypothetical principle" (Phillips 2010: 148). This makes equality "the absolute condition of any communication and all social order" (Rancière 1999: 34). This provides a reason to be optimistic about the communist hypothesis – while any police order can superimpose itself as a division of the people and fall afoul of the axiom of equality, this division is ultimately only a contingent and historical imposition, which can always be overthrown by the universal principle of equality which necessarily takes logical precedence (Phillips, 2010: 148-149).

In some sense, this is an ontological claim, but it is important to note that Rancière does not argue that equality is the essential identity of any group of people, but rather that "there is ... a twist that ties together the contingency of equality and ... inequality. The power of the demos ... enacts an excess inherent in any process of nomination: the arbitrariness of the relationship binding names and bodies together (Rancière 2003: 12). Rancière provides a powerful description of the pervasiveness of equality, no matter how fleeting it may seem or how strongly it may be denied after the fact. It is important to acknowledge that the existence of social relations imply equality. Using this concept of an underlying, universal equality provides Rancière's politics with an incredibly powerful normative force. Statements such as "we are all of this world" or "we all exist together" can be drawn from this axiom, revealing its basic affinity with Badiou's affirmation of the idea of "one world" (Badiou, 2009: 60).⁵ When we shift to viewing equality as a specifically performative gesture, the extreme importance that it has for the communist hypothesis becomes clear. Rather than equality being a bourgeois construct designed to make the intricate relations of capitalism look more benign, the capitalist move is to *cover up* this

founding equality, for it denies the inequalities upon which market hierarchies are built. Equality and inequality exist simultaneously, and capitalism's basic function is to assume equality in only the barest terms before quickly reverting to an affirmation of a multitude of relations of inequality.

To view equality as co-existent with inequality is not a reason to ignore the gross inequalities that capitalism produces. Instead, it provides a recognition that theorizing an emancipation from capital must begin from an understanding of the way that equality underlies capitalism, however narrow that relationship actually is, and proceed to expand that equality by presupposing that it applies to all relations, rather than just a small set of relations which allows the bourgeoisie to deny capitalism's founding equality. Politically, this would mean starting from the fundamental presupposition of the equality of individuals to collectively participate in the creation of their own lives, and applying that presupposition to the relations between workers and bosses, financial elites and slum dwellers. It would mean expanding equality beyond the narrow purview of the market, which only acts to confirm inequality, to the equality of collective decision-making over who controls the means of production, and what is produced. Beginning theorizing from the question of equality is important because of the implications it has for political decision-making. It is dangerous to stray too far down the Althusserian path of assuming that people are unable to act out of their own equality until the "ideological blinders" of capital are lifted from their eyes. This presupposition of inequality stems from an inherent distrust in popular movements against capitalism, and can only result in the continued oppression and denial of agency of the excluded.

Non-Statal, Non-Policing Politics

There is, however, a great deal of common ground between Žižek and Rancière's understandings of politics. For Rancière, the division between politics and the police is neither absolute nor one that prevents engagement with the logic of the police. Instead, Rancière's conception of politics is *more* closely aligned to Žižek's than he himself realizes. For Rancière, "the spaces of politics are enmeshed with the space of the police. If politics puts the police ordering of space to an egalitarian test, then politics is possible not despite the police, but because of it" (Dikeç 2005: 181). Along the lines of Žižek's claim that we should make the state work in a "non-statal mode," Rancière understands politics as an intervention that makes the police work in a non-policing mode. "Politics acts on the

police... It acts in the places and with the words that are common to both, even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words” (Rancière, 1999, 33). While this process is what changes the police for the better, it is not a reason to abandon political intervention in favor of modifying the police, but instead a reason to affirm political intervention as such:

There is a worse and a better police - the better one... being... the one that all the breaking and entering perpetrated by egalitarian logic has most often jolted out of its "natural" logic. The police can produce all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be infinitely preferable to another. This does not change the nature of the police... Whether the police is sweet and kind does not make it any less the opposite of politics. (Rancière 1999: 30-31)

Though politics is the opposite of the police, this does not mean that it is separate. Instead, politics and the police are constantly brought together in an almost dialectical fashion, as politics unmakes hierarchies and police solidifies current ones or creates new divisions. The important distinction to maintain, and the reason why Rancière’s politics/police distinction adds something to an understanding of a Žižekian politics, rather than refuting it, is that while “politics proper acts on the police space, from the police space, and through the police space, [it] ... acts not in the police space, but *inbetween* spaces that are not determined by the police, that have no place in the police space” (Dikeç, 2005: 181-182). There is a clear correlation to be drawn between the Žižekian notion of a truly revolutionary Act emerging *ex nihilo* and this notion of politics arising from the “inbetween” space – perhaps Pynchon’s “between zero and one” provides an apt metaphor. The emphasis on spaces outside the police sphere is why “the-part-of-no-part” is so crucial to Rancière’s politics – politics is universal in character precisely because it comes from the place that has no place within the police order. And, *contra* Žižek, it influences the police order *because* it serves as a contestation of current inegalitarian administrations of social affairs. Was this not the case of the recent revolutionary fervor in the Middle East and Africa? It was not other established political parties that rose up to change rules and laws for the better – in Egypt, the other parties were covert and incapable of having a direct political impact until they piggy-backed on a revolution which they were not the cause of; the same goes for Libya and the other nations in turmoil – but instead those individuals who had precisely *no role* to play in politics made themselves known with calls for equality that directly contested the policing power of the state. It seems particularly instructive to view the *success* of these political movements in contrast to the Green movement in Iran

that formed itself around a particular political party and leader: in the end this situation failed in achieving its political goals.

Preserving this space as the point of universality is crucial because it prevents an emancipatory movement from allowing policing to become the *telos* of political intervention. Instead, it ensures recognition of the temporary and antagonistic interaction between politics and the police. From this perspective, politics takes place “through the construction of a common space where the two logics meet” (Dikeç 2005: 184). Rancière highlights the necessity of creating a space from which politics *can* intervene, in opposition to the prevailing mode of governing. According to Swyngedouw, the form of politics becoming popularized is precisely *not* politics – where particular disagreements begin to act as “metaphoric condensations” of the larger movements against those “in power” – but instead a post-political administration that places a few in charge of policing social affairs and leaves the rest no part in any political decision-making (Swyngedouw 2006: 10; Swyngedouw 2009: 307-208). The recent protest movements are again instructive here: these movements centered on the creation of space that would *allow* an egalitarian statal politics to function.

Instead of viewing the distinction between Rancière’s and Žižek’s understandings of politics as irreconcilable, perhaps the distinction is one without a difference, as Dikeç highlights:

It is important, therefore, to construct a common polemical space, for only the meeting of these two logics makes possible the redefinition of the whole; only in this way might it be possible to disrupt the ‘right’ order of the police rather than merely to bring about alterations within the already existing order with its established forms of identification and partitioning. (Dikeç 2005: 184)

It is but a small step from this crucial distinction between working within and modifying the police order to Žižek’s own claim that:

It is here that we encounter the gap that separates a political act proper from the ‘administration of social matters’ which remains within the framework of existing sociopolitical relations: the political act (intervention) proper is not simply something that works well within the framework of the existing relations, but something that changes the very framework that determines how things work. (Žižek 1999: 198-199)

Thus, it is clear that a politics cannot *refuse engagement* with the police: Žižek and Rancière are in agreement there. But to begin to integrate the Rancièrian division

between politics and the police inside of a Žižekian politics provides a clearer explanation for how we can move from the framework of existing sociopolitical relations to changing how that very framework limits the possibilities of action.

Dreamworlds and Distribution

Historically, the problem of the failure of communist politics lay specifically in the incapacity to move from the *dream* of self-organization to a concrete reality that provides an equal access to the basics of existence for all. A, and perhaps even *the*, major problem in the Communist imaginary is the question of *distribution*. It is very specifically in the questions of *distribution* that the enactment of many utopian visions of society-to-come has run up against repeated impasses. Yannis Stavrakakis thoroughly detailed the danger of utopian visions gone astray:

What is dominant here is a fear to encounter negativity without recourse to the certainty of attaining another order, a utopian society, a harmonious future eliminating negativity once and for all. In fact, whenever a conscious attempt was made to realize utopia, to institute human reality according to a plan promising to resolve social contradiction and dissimulate political antagonism, the results were catastrophic. (Stavrakakis 2005: 188)

Every instance of “realization” is met with further disaster: the Nazi utopia culminated in the Holocaust, the Soviet utopia resulted in the unending drive to eliminate the amorphous “enemies of socialism,” and we could perhaps add to that list the United States government’s attempt to permanently “stabilize” its borders that has caused the death of thousands of migrants, depicted as “pests” scampering through America’s back door. In the specific instance of Soviet communism, the material implications of the failure of the dream of mass sovereignty are clear: the Soviet system collapsed into repression, violence, and, at its height, the Stalinist show trials – carnivalesque in their tragedy. The impacts was not merely localized, but precisely *globalized* – in a way that seems ironic given the import of “globalization” in contemporary economic discourse – the failures of “the dream of mass sovereignty has led to world wars of nationalism” (Buck-Morss 2002: xi). Is this lesson not also made clearly in the wonderfully haunting film, *Dogtooth* (2009)? In it, a husband and wife seek to prolong the utopia of a family uncorrupted by age and drama by enslaving their children inside the confines of their gated compound from childhood to adulthood. The efforts are successful: the children follow orders obediently,

compete against each other mercilessly, even have pleasant dinner table conversation. It is not until the problem of the *distribution* of the goods of the household creates strains between the children that the totality of the charade begins to fall apart: the son receives an airplane that his elder sister greatly desires and a fight ensues over who should have it. Slowly but surely, competition and the inability to find a “fair” equilibrium of distribution cause a steady deterioration in the lives of all the residents. It is violence, then, which becomes the only possibility for escape and return to normality: the father beats the security guard, his son and even his own daughter with an absolutely emotionless vehemence. Violence-as-last-resort becomes the *only* resort. The role of the father, a lived, metaphorical embodiment of the part of the government, shifts from protecting the family, just as easily a stand-in for the body populace, from the dangers that lurk outside of the “gated community” to a violent, and precisely implacable quest to remove the dangers that are *always already* present *inside* the community itself (Houtum 2007).

The lesson of *Dogtooth* becomes structurally homologous to the lesson of historical communism. Without an even *distribution* of the social good, or, perhaps escaping the linguistic and material confines of *distribution* entirely, the violent disintegration of social harmony seems the inevitable result of any “emancipatory” politic. This possibility was, of course, and very importantly, not only a problem with historical Communism and the Nazi regime, but also rears its ugly head today in democratic society’s attempts at a security state: the predominant menace to the liberal democratic polis (in our contemporary times, clearly the racialized terrorist threat) becomes no longer external, but properly *internalized*. This shift was clear in United States counter-terror policy following 9/11: the adventurist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan made evident that an external quest to eliminate terrorism would serve only to overstretch capacity and would never eliminate every possible instantiation of terrorism. Thus, the focal point became to ensure that domestic actors didn’t become *real* terrorists. And given the difficulty in pinpointing the threat – what it looks like, where it might appear – we have all become *potential* terrorists. The task of the State is not to stop the already existing terrorist forces from acting, but to stop the *not-yet-present* terrorist inside all of us from surfacing (Vaughan-Williams 2009: 120).

Until the question of distribution is thought more thoroughly, a truly *communist* society will stay perpetually out of our reach, instead merely collapsing back into the brutal, historical failures that liberals use as cannon fodder for their defenses of representative democracy. For Rancière, the distributive aspect of historical Communism was part and parcel of the problem: instead of affirming the equal access to intelligence, it affirmed a

universal impotence. The social agents in charge of *distribution* could never distribute equally, and were thus, as the historical tale goes, corrupted by power. Todd May clarifies this sharp Rancièrian critique of distributive notions of politics: there is a serious risk in centering any emancipatory politics around questions like "What degree of health care is everyone entitled to?" or "What should the legally enforced minimum wage be?" (May 2008: 46). Concentrating a political project on questions of the proper amount of distribution carries the very real possibility of relapsing into identity politics, making emancipatory change merely a question of what the people should receive instead of how individuals can organize for collective action. It also forecloses the properly universal dimension of politics – the agency of the part-of-no-part is replaced by the agency of those tasked with distribution which today, more often than not, are the wealthy and the powerful. Has this not been demonstrated more clearly than ever in the recent debates in the United States over President Obama's health care plan? As single-payer dropped out of contention before even being truly debated and the public option faded away soon after, it became increasingly, depressingly clear that any form of distributive politics would always slant, in one way or another, towards the interests of the distributors. In a world where wealthy politicians and insurance lobbyists are the ones in control of the distributive decision-making – and the extent of the power of the health care lobby is truly shocking – what real hope is there for fundamental socio-political change? While a fairer and more open health care system is, of course, more desirable than less, there is clearly a problem with constraining the limits of political thought to this trajectory.

Rancièr's understanding of the police provides an effective schema for analyzing why thinking beyond distribution is so critical. No matter how equal the distributions of the police order become, distribution will always "presuppose at least one inequality: between those who distribute and those who receive the distribution" (May, 2008: 47). And this one inequality, even if the rest of society were "legislated" equal, is significant: not only does confining politics to distribution disempower the vast majority of those whose vital interests are at stake by excluding them from the political decision-making process, but it actively covers up that exclusion with the illusion of a whole and complete police order whose distributions and allotment of roles are perfectly aligned to society's needs. Here again the closeness of Rancièr's thought with the Lacanian character of Žižek's politics becomes apparent. Is this belief in a perfect order of distribution not just a reinvestment in the symbolic order? Here we find the flipside of market distribution, the possibility of a "global mechanism which, applied to the whole of society, will automatically bring out the balanced

state of progress and happiness... and... bring about the optimal state of society" (Žižek 2000: 324). Lacan's symbolic order is analogous to Rancière's police order, and just as the truly political act for Žižek involves suspending belief in the big Other, presupposing equality means suspending the police order as the dominant frame for making decisions, rather than merely adjusting it. Yet distribution still remains an important political question, one that we cannot, and should not, simply wish away. If we take Rancière's notion of equality as an axiom enacted through its very assumption and of politics as an intervention into the police order, we can begin to think *beyond* distribution while still *thinking* distribution. These insights ensure that politics proper is always emancipatory in character, and that distribution, rather than irrelevant, is the *effect* of an emancipatory politics. Our goal is then still profoundly Žižekian: to change state functioning to work in a non-statal mode. What Rancière does is begin to elaborate what that means. State distribution is not the end goal of politics, but a by-product of the political intervention of the part-of-no-part – along the axiom of equality and against the hierarchies of given existent systems of distribution and the police order. Social administration neither becomes the form of politics, nor is political decision-making ever placed outside of the reach of the excluded.

Maybe, then, we can shift the question away from "What is the blueprint for distribution in a post-capitalist world?" towards "How can we begin to create the foundations for a world that resolves the problem of distribution?" It is the insistence on a direct, concrete plan of action that historically blackmailed so many efforts for radical change. After all, equality is not something that can be planned for and neither is a world without capitalism. Maybe "the most important task is ... the effort to cure an intellectual constipation resulting from capitalist ideology and thereby truly to open up the space for imagining authentic alternatives to the prevailing state of the situation" (Johnston 2007: 23). "But without a plan, the struggle is useless," forces on both the right and left will retort: "If you cannot imagine a world after capitalism, you will lead to the gulags." But perhaps the absolutely crucial response should be that we are not planning for anything: as Massimo De Angelis argues, our strategies aim not to *overthrow* capitalism but to *defeat* it:

In other words, just as capital's drive for accumulation must identify a common as limit for its expansion and thus outline strategies of new enclosures,⁶⁷ so the building of alternatives to capital must identify a strategic space in which current enclosures are limiting the development of new commons. ... In other words, life *despite* capitalism and not life *after* capitalism. How can we politically invert capital's strategies and identify enclosures as limits for non-market social interactions and as a strategic space for new commons? (De Angelis 2004: 20)

This effort centers on the creation of new commons: the gradual reclamation of enclosed, private space for collective interests. This is an effort that requires the involvement of individuals at all levels of the political and social spectrum: that absolute equality of participation is the only way to ensure that this politics does not devolve back to a politics of pure distribution. But just as importantly, a communist politics cannot give up on changing the State-form. Using equality as an axiom and refusing to kowtow to the powers of global capitalism, a new communist politics of equality can begin the reclamation of enclosures as commons as part of a gradual process of moving-towards equality. After all, equality is not something that can be achieved at once, or some goal at a distance from our current politics, but instead the constant focal point of any political endeavor. The same could be said about capitalism. And it is with equality in mind that we can begin to solve the problems of distribution in historical communism. By presupposing the equal ability of all to govern and *live*, a communist politics of equality is perhaps the best and only hope for a sustainable and, most importantly, successful politics for the future.

To return to the example that began this paper, maybe the greatest illustration of this form of politics is already at work across the Middle East and Africa. The radicals and protestors of Egypt and Tunisia do not want to be told *how* to govern: that has been the history of their politics up until now and was also the *raison d'être* for ousting their political leaders.⁶ We can begin to see these movements not simply as demonstrations of the power of Western democracy against the totalitarian impulse, but the resurrection, or perhaps even creation, of new, communist politics of equality. These sporadic and loosely connected movements that reacted in a reverse-domino theory of incredible proportions are not seeking a set of specific reforms: they all want to fundamentally change participation inside the state and they will refuse any compromise that does not bring equality back to the people. So when we ask, "How can we *advise* these movements?" it is time to turn that question around: "How can these movements teach us about organizing our own politics of emancipation?" The communist hypothesis is a simple one: that a truly classless society is possible. What the mass movements of 2011 have taught us is that change which long seemed impossible is *precisely* possible: this wild and unexpected upheaval creates space for its own possibility, retroactively legitimating itself. Is this the communism that we hoped for? While the form of the movements throughout the Middle East may come as a surprise, their intentions cannot but be applauded and supported. To do otherwise would be to fall prey to a presupposition of inequality: that somehow "we"

know better than “they” how to properly organize a new world. Perhaps, then, this is the best answer to those who claim Žižek’s contradictions nullify the importance of his philosophy: after all, doesn’t he advocate that we “do nothing” and “change the functioning of the state” inside even the same texts? Yes, precisely because there is no *universal* solution to politics. And in the same way, it is dangerous to think of the choice between Rancière and Žižek as an either/or proposition. We should ensure that our analysis always remains specific to the situation at hand and does not adopt a totalizing or ahistorical theory of politics. In some instances, it may be better to refrain from engaging the state – there are very clearly situations when altering police power will only play into the hands of the police. And yet, in others, we must ensure that we do not cede a political battle within the state when it functions as a crucial site of struggle – when its operation and form are themselves in question and open to change. The combination of Žižek and Rancière may not be compatible in every instance, but that does not prevent us from using both thinkers to highlight different aspects of the same situations, allowing their insights to build upon and clash with one another. And thus, we should not *adopt* the strategies of the Middle Eastern and African protest movements. Instead, the best way that we can respond to this incredible social change is to begin seriously theorizing how we can bring some of this revolutionary spirit home. Equality exists whenever we say and act as if it does.

Disappointment and Ways Forward

This essay explored a new synthesis between the work of Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek that sought to unite the Rancièrian analysis of polic(e)ing with the Žižekian notion of withdrawal from and engagement with the State. Our contention was that far from opposed political methods, they represent different sides of a similar coin that strategically plays at interventions into modes of policing and refusals to operate within the logic of the police. The article stressed the necessity of approaching Communism through the axiom of equality and it engaged with the critical question of “distribution” in any revolutionary praxis. We ended with a call for a deeper investigation into the question of distributive “equality,” which has historically foiled many radical programs. The lessons of this article are not a blueprint for action, but a profound theoretical paradigm with which to re-engage the question of the political. Returning to the question posed by our title, we might respond that today we can and should be Žižekians and Rancièrians with a greater necessity than ever before. In line with the “Arab Spring” theme of this essay, we might see the ambiguity

of results in Western interventions and mediation throughout the Middle East and North Africa as suggestions that the United States and the nations of the European Union have often, and with sometimes dangerous results, rushed to action before gaining a proper understanding of and care for the systems, events, and individuals on the ground. In the space of the former optimism about the “Arab Spring,” we find a new pessimism haunting the liberal imaginary: the chance that Egypt’s military establishes a negative alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood; a world where Libya’s “democratic” movements rush toward vengeance-fueled mass killings and the very Islamic government America sought to avoid; or, finally, that in Tunisia, the bright spot and beginning of the uprisings themselves, democratic elections may trigger further revolts. All these potentialities point to a need to temper the predominant Liberal view that the “End of History” is happening here.

There are calls on all sides for intellectuals to provide specific answers to a simple question: “What should we do?” Through our synthesis of Žižek and Rancière, we would say that the problem is not only that our approaches to the Middle East and North Africa have been giving the wrong *answers*. Instead, it’s true more often than not that in the lead up to actual policy implementation, we are asking the wrong *questions*. This is the role of the intellectual today, and one that both Žižek and Rancière embrace: to reformulate the very tenets of the questions that are producing wrong lines of action. Žižek and Rancière do not provide a “universal” notion of politics. Instead, and to take Hegel as seriously as Žižek would want us to, we might say that it is precisely the specific example, here of protests in the Middle East, that tells us more than any “universal” politics could. Yet, against the rush to action, it is absolutely crucial to emphasize that there are no examples *outside* the “universal” theories. What these new insights into the combination of Žižek and Rancière’s political thought can provide is a critically important lens through which we can evaluate new movements for the future. Further, they can help us to begin new experiments of social organization. We can, and we must, think thoroughly organization, distribution, and equality as they relate to communism. If not, we run the risk of playing the role of wife and children in the finale of *Dogtooth*: on all fours, barking as loudly as we can at listeners who are not there, while what we are really looking for stays locked away forever right in front of us. Returning to Žižek is once again instructive: perhaps we are the ones we have been waiting for.

1 Notes

Karl Rove recently announced plans to defeat Obama in the 2012 elections. His main goal: to raise an absolutely obscene amount of political funding (over 100 million dollars). To put this amount in perspective, \$100,000 is roughly 1/3rd of the GDP of Sao Tome and Principe and this money could be going to one incredibly worthy cause that has lost much of its original attention: Haiti.

- 2 Badiou makes a very similar point in his recent discussion of Communism: the utmost task of intellectuals is the “the sharing of the Idea” in small discussions that allow new life and momentum to grow behind and inside the idea of Communism (Badiou 2010: 12).
- 3 Žižek makes repeated references to the part-of-no-part in *Living in the End Times*, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, and *First as Tragedy Then as Farce*.
- 4 Is this not a strange manifestation of Marx’s equation of capitalism $M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M'$? Your money buys not just a commodity, but also an excess of immaterial wealth.
- 5 While Badiou claims that the existence of “one world” is not an objective condition but is instead a performative statement, for an interesting counter-point drawing on Heideggerian subjectivity, see (Odysseos, 2007: 90-91), which provides a succinct outline of the Heideggerian understanding of Dasein as always already imbedded in the world, with its Being constituted foremost by relations with others. While this passage is at odds with Žižek’s understanding of subjectivity, in the context of Rancière it could be used to provide another powerful account of how, by virtue of always being engaged in relations with others, we are always already acting out relationships of equality.
- 6 A recent *New York Times* article drew attention to a highly specialized cadre of lobbyists working for clients like Libya and Egypt who had actually stopped the US government for calling on Egypt to curtail its human rights abuses before the regime change occurred.

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