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From Marx to the Act

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Introduction - From Marx to the Act

A group is impulsive, changeable and irritable. It is led almost exclusively by the unconscious. The impulses which a group obeys may according to circumstances be generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they are always so imperious that no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation, can make itself felt [...]. Nothing about it is premeditated. Though it may desire things passionately, yet this is never so for long, for it is incapable of perseverance. It cannot tolerate any delay between its desire and the fulfillment of what it desires. It has a sense of omnipotence; the notion of impossibility disappears for the individual in a group (Freud, 1967, 9)

While there is much talk of how Žižek aims to ‘bugger’ Hegel with Lacan (mostly by Žižek himself), one cannot overlook the history into which Žižek’s project fits – the ‘marriage’ of Marx and Freud, of critical political economy and psychoanalytic theory. From Fenichel to Reich, to Horkheimer and Adorno (and gang) to Althusser, Žižek is one of a long line. What differentiates him from others in this queue, even from contemporaries like the ‘post-Marxist’ Ernesto Laclau (who has denied the possibility of such a marriage¹), is the introduction of ‘enjoyment’.² Otherwise known as *jouissance*, enjoyment is part of the Lacanian psychoanalytic topology, and what Žižek has

attempted to do is merge it and other Lacanian theoretical figures with the forms of Marxist critique. Indeed, Žižek performs less a marriage of the two than a copulation that births a new terrain where the two become one. It ends up looking something like the following: antagonism is taken as central to any social arrangement. This antagonism is seen as analogous to 'lack', or a void, which in turn finds positive existence in a symptom – for instance war, or the creation of an internal enemy such as that invented by the Nazi's in the thirties. While displaced and condensed into the symptom, the social antagonism or lack at the centre of society is further obscured by fantasy, an ideological scenario that paints the social edifice as a complete (non-lacking) whole, an unconscious symbolic fiction that structures our reality by obfuscating our effective relation to the Real (Žižek, 1989: 33). Enjoyment, as embodied in the symptom, is the adhesive that keeps the whole edifice together, making it very hard to break it all apart.

The problem is, of course, to understand just how to break it all apart, to move beyond existing ideologies to political, social and economic change. Today, the social edifice in question is western liberal-democracy and capitalism.³ Žižek's complaint is that true political action, defined as action taken outside the co-ordinates of established and accepted norms, can no longer be found. He locates the problem at the level of hysteria, where many activist groups are now content to call for those in power to provide what they want, rather than challenge the legitimacy of that power and its ability to actually fulfill a demand. In opposition to this, Žižek offers the revolutionary Act, which breaks through existing social and political arrangements and asserts the subject's ability to act for itself. Violent hysterical outbreaks that follow the frustration of the needs that belie demand are, for Žižek, the ground for ideological breaks, the ground for shattering the ideological fantasy that belies a social system. Their politicization also stands as a break with teleological notions of history: only in the subject's choosing a side can radical change be brought. It will not come of objective conditions alone.

To fully understand this, it is necessary to inspect Žižek's development of the category of ideology by returning to his first book in English, to the development of his theory of ideology and 'going through the fantasy', and to find in them the seeds for his development of the idea of 'the Act'. While the *Sublime Object of Ideology* generally sets the stage for Žižek's conceptualization of ideology, it does not, however, give a theory of social revolution. To find such a description and garner a fuller picture of Žižek's version of it, it is necessary to look at work that appears later in his career, after his "Leninist turn" near the beginning of the new millennium. In so doing it becomes evident that for

Žižek real social change (and not merely the maintenance of capitalist arrangements) is dependant on an uprising, and not negotiation and concession, nor acceptance of the status quo.

The Sublime Object of Ideology

Lenin is dead, and Žižek needs a theory of revolution. This is because his project largely revolves around the category of ideology. Developed through a psychoanalytic lens, he aligns ideology with the Lacanian notion of fantasy – the dream-like illusions⁴ or scenarios that are the shape of our lived reality and provide a protective cover from the void at that reality's centre (Žižek, 1989: 126). Just as in a clinical setting, where revealing the imaginary nature of one's thinking and the cause of one's symptoms does not result in their undoing, a factual description of the falsity of the content of ideologies does little to eliminate them. This is because the problem lies not in the content, but in the *form* of ideology (Žižek, 1989: 84). Žižek develops the question of form in the first chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* with a meeting of Freud and Marx. It is not a coincidence that the birth of psychoanalysis is marked with the publishing of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that after much deliberation Marx decided to begin the first volume of his magnum opus with the commodity, and that Žižek's entry into the English world begins with both. Žižek asserts that Freud's description of the form of the dream and Marx's description of the form of the commodity are the true secrets of their respective realms and brings them together to rejuvenate ideology as a viable category of critique. Where psyche meets social, Žižek finds critical-theoretical fecundity and the basis of his political project – a project that necessitates a theory of revolution.

Žižek approaches the coming together of Marx and psychoanalysis by taking on Lacan's equation of surplus-value (Marx) and surplus-enjoyment (Lacan's invention). The key to understanding this lies in how Marx formulates the form in which capitalists extract surplus-value from their workers with reference to the difference between abstract labour and labour-power (the capacity to labour). The captains of industry legitimate exploitation by explaining that the purchase of labour is an act of fair exchange, where the worker is given the full value of their labour in the form of a wage. That is, labour is taken as a commodity like any other, one that is purchased outright from an individual who freely sells it. Marx tells us that this misconception leads to a crux

for the classical political economist who, in searching for the root of the value of labour, follows this logic to its end only to find a tautology: if the value of a commodity is the amount of social labour objectified in it, then labour as a commodity is its own measure – 12 hours of labour is equivalent to 12 hours of labour (Marx, 1976: 676). If equivalents were exchanged between the capitalist and the worker, if the capitalist was to actually give the product of 12 hours labour to the worker, there would not be a problem. There is a surplus that arises, however, and it must be explained. There must be something else that gives labour its value on the market, or another source of surplus-value.

Marx rejects the claim that surplus-value comes anywhere but from the ‘fair exchange’ of wages for labour, explaining that the political economists before him had already come upon the correct answer, they have followed their own logic to its rightful conclusion, and yet done so unknowingly: where the value of a commodity comes from the cost of its production, the value of labour must also come from the cost of its production. This value is not the cost of the production of labour itself, however, but of the *worker as a worker*. This is known by the political economists, argues Marx, but “unconsciously” displaced. The cost of the production of the worker becomes the cost of labour itself (Marx, 1976: 678). That is, the political economists at whom Marx takes aim claim the cost of production is the natural cost of labour itself, not recognizing that labour creates more than the conditions of its subsistence.

What is truly valued in the transaction between the capitalist and the worker is the worker’s *potential* to labour, his labour-*power*. It is assigned a monetary value based on the amount of labour it takes to reproduce it, as determined by the conditions of production: the accepted intensity of labour in a sector. The harder one works, the more one wears oneself out, the more expensive it is (the more value is needed) to replenish the worn body: “...the daily value of labour-power is calculated upon a certain length of the worker’s life, and ... this [value] corresponds, in turn, to a certain length of the working day” (Marx, 1976: 679). Surplus-value is garnered by the capitalist because the value-product (the labour embodied in the commodity produced) is worth more than labour-power. This is because the value of the commodity does not depend on the value of labour-power, but the length of time labour-power is made to labour. The value of producing labour-power is not the value it takes to produce only itself – that is, its subsistence is not simply that of working long enough to ensure it can live – but the value of the capacity to labour for longer than it takes to reproduce itself. Workers are paid to maintain their bodies such that they can reproduce those bodies (and those of

their families) and create surplus-value for the capitalist. The labour provided exceeds the value needed to produce it.

According to Marx, labour itself is *not*, however, a commodity for which the capitalist exchanges money. A commodity must exist before it is sold; it must exist independently of the person who sells it. A worker does not first produce labour and hand it to a capitalist on the market and walk away. Instead, workers advance their labour to the capitalist, who pays for it after a specified amount of labour has been given. Labour does not have an existence apart from a worker unless it is embodied as dead labour in a commodity. Living labour *is* the worker.⁵ Labour has no value, but is given the *appearance* of value when taken as a commodity. That is, *effectively* labour *is* a commodity – this appearance is socially concrete. Labour takes on this ‘specific form of appearance’ for the worker as well as the political economist because the logic of capitalism demands that it be so.

The *function* of labour-power – a specific labour – is for Marx that which gives value to all other commodities. As such, it cannot itself be taken as a commodity without they who think in such a way succumbing to an unsolvable tautology. Understanding labour as something other than a commodity, however, is “outside the frame of reference of everyday consciousness” for classical political economists and workers alike (Marx, 1976: 681). Part of the problem is that capitalist ways of thinking are “reproduced directly and spontaneously, as current and usual modes of thought” (Marx, 1976: 682). The commodity form is the lynchpin of everyday capitalist ideology because it hides the fact that labour is something invaluable.⁶ Marx writes that:

in the expression ‘value of labour’, the concept of value is not only completely extinguished, but inverted, so that it becomes its contrary. It is an expression as imaginary of the value of the earth.⁷ These imaginary expressions arise, nevertheless, from the relations of production themselves. They are categories for the forms of appearance of essential relations (Marx, 1976: 677).

That is, labour would have no value were it not for the ‘unconscious substitution’ of the value of labour-power for that of labour via the commodity form. This provides a “secure base of operations to the vulgar economists” who “worship appearances,” enabling them to justify the capitalist’s claim that the worker receives equitable payment for their labour (Marx, 1976: 679). This justification takes the form of the commodity, aided by the wage-form, which mystifies the real relation of production that belies it: this hidden background is “the essential relation manifested in [the wage-form], namely, the value and price of

labour-power” (Marx, 1976: 682). This is to say that labour-power does not exist in itself under capitalism, but is made concrete by the system of capital. Where labour-power becomes a cost of production workers are beholden to capital for their subsistence, while capitalists are wholly dependant on this relation to appropriate surplus-value and remain capitalists. Without the commodity form to maintain this relation, there could be no capital. Where capitalism consists of the contradiction between use- and exchange-value, between a particular labour and abstract labour which leads to surplus-value, it is the commodity form that makes it all possible. Marx likens it to an ellipse: “the ellipse is a form of motion within which this contradiction is both realized and resolved” (Marx, 1976: 198). While Marx disabuses those who ‘worship appearances’, it is not because the appearances are not real, but because it is form that holds the truth of the situation. As Banaji (1979) shows, for both Hegel and Marx appearance is only ‘pure illusion’ when divorced from form, when the abstract is separated from the concrete. Otherwise, appearance is one of the necessary movements of essence, the way in which the abstract manifests itself. “*Appearance is itself essential to essence*” (Hegel in Banaji, 1979: 20).

This is the social relation/form that constantly accompanies capital, and which drives the forces of production to change: When surplus-value, loosely understood as profit, begins to drop, means of production that can increase the output of commodities must be found. Surplus-value, thus understood, is the impetus for constant change. Marx knows this, cries Žižek, but acts as if he does not, adhering to a teleological⁸ notion of revolution (Žižek, 1989: 53). Žižek argues that this is because surplus-value is identical to Lacan’s surplus-enjoyment – a constitutive excess. The remainder of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* works towards elucidating the paradoxes of this enjoyment, with which (according to Žižek) Marx failed to cope when thinking the dynamics of social change.

It is this surplus that is the support of ideology, and the sole purpose of ideology is to service this *jouissance* (Žižek, 1989: 124; 84). What this means is that it is not the ends (content) presented in ideology that are important, but the means or actions employed to reach those ends (form).⁹ The defeat of ideology, then, consists in ‘revelation’, in ‘perceiving’ that ideology is not rational, but exists only for the sake of surplus-value/enjoyment (Žižek, 1989: 84). Towards this defeat, Žižek lists three steps for the critique of ideology, the third being a supplement of the second:

1. A discursive critique of ideology. This entails what Žižek calls a post-structuralist or deconstructive approach to ideology, wherein one must identify the 'form' Freud found in the dream as it appears in the social realm: the displacements and condensations that make up the content of ideological discourse. In addition, a discursive critique hunts out 'floating signifiers' (e.g. 'democracy') and the 'quilting points' that ensure their meaning/signification (Žižek, 1989: 125). (Under 'Liberalism', for example, democracy means representational democracy; under socialism, it means something else.)
2. To ground this discursive deconstruction, one must also articulate the way in which *jouissance* is structured by a particular ideology. Where fantasy hides a gap in the social edifice, one must in the end be able to experience the void that lies behind fantasy (Žižek, 1989: 125-6).
3. In addition to revealing the void, one must pinpoint the positive incarnation of that void. That is, one must pinpoint the 'symptom,' pinpoint the "eruption of enjoyment in the social field" (Žižek, 1989: 125-6). To find this symptom, one must detect that which marks the point of society's impossibility, find the point at which it is prevented from becoming complete (Žižek, 1989: 127).

The first is a relatively familiar procedure, but the second less so. Understanding the title of Žižek's first book is the key. Locating the 'social symptom' (the product of a systemic failure) of a social formation is to find the 'sublime object of ideology'.¹⁰ Following Laclau and Mouffe in their claim that 'society doesn't exist', Žižek asserts that the social symptom is that which hides the fact that society is never closed and complete, but maintained and yet prevented from wholeness by social antagonism. In this way they are able to say that society has at its centre a fundamental lack: this antagonism is always left out of discourse. The object that fills this lack takes on sublime characteristics, no matter how vulgar that object is. Žižek's classic example is the 'Jew' of the Shoah: Where the Nazi's claimed that Germany was a natural, organic community, the 'Jew' was essentialized, taken as that which prevented Germany from reaching its full potential. In contrast to this ideological formation, Žižek sees in the figure of the 'Jew' the embodiment of the social antagonism that lay beneath Germany's economic woes: class struggle, or the battle of capital with workers.

Again, what these procedures aim at is a critique of ideology. Overcoming it is a different matter, and as we saw above it involves the 'revelation' or 'perception' of the irrational nature of the ideological fantasy/scenario. This is accomplished by 'going through (or in later works, 'traversing') the fantasy', of *experiencing* that fantasy is a screen masking a void. Fantasy is not to be interpreted. It instead serves as a guidepost pointing towards the symptom that serves as its support (that is, the first step of ideological critique is purposefully first, as it should lead to the second). Where going through the fantasy is the first step of cutting through ideology, identifying with the symptom is the second. The excesses attributed to the symptom must be taken as "the truth about ourselves", the product of our social system: "To 'identify with a symptom' means to recognize in the 'excesses', in the disruptions of the 'normal' functioning of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning" (Žižek, 1989: 128). Identifying with the symptom means seeing in the exception that which sustains social reality. In the case of Nazi Germany, such an identification would have taken the shape of 'we are all Jews.' Žižek means this literally. 'Going through the fantasy' is not to make an analogy along the lines of 'we too are oppressed like the Jews', but to identify with the excluded element as oneself, to step through the ideology that separates the social symptom from the social body (Žižek, 1999: 229-232).

While Marx appears to use the language of psychoanalysis *avant la lettre* (the 'unconscious displacements' of the political economists before him), it is not these terms that provide the link between psychoanalysis and Marx: it is instead the symptom that serves as this point. As noted above in the first step in Žižek's critique of ideology, the symptom is the product of condensations and displacements, each of which make up the form of the dream as first presented by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It is Lacan's development of the notion of symptom, however, that Žižek relies upon, and which provides the link to Marx *via* surplus-value/surplus-enjoyment: the symptom is the embodiment of enjoyment, an object that has taken the place of the Thing and become sublime. In its sublimity it fascinates the subject, distracting from its nature. It is not that this fascination distracts from the symptoms meaning, however, but that the meaning attributed to the symptom "obscures the terrifying impact of its presence" (Žižek, 1989: 71). That is, the symptom has no meaning; it is nothing but the presence of enjoyment and social antagonism. It is the sole support of being, and to eliminate it would be 'psychic-suicide' (Žižek, 1989: 75). This is because *jouissance* is the leftover of symbolic castration – without symbolic castration there is no subject, no pleasure-pain, only

schizophrenic terror and a self with no relation to the world. A symbolic network always leaves something behind that cannot ever be symbolized. This is the Real, *jouissance*, surplus-enjoyment. Thus, surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment exist by virtue of structural or *formal* excess – the commodity form makes surplus-value possible; surplus-enjoyment/*jouissance* is the form around which the psychic economy is built. This, then, is the structural homology that links Marxism and psychoanalysis, and the subject to capital.

The End of Analysis

To traverse the fantasy and to identify with the symptom is to pass through ideology, and this means passing into *revolution*. The question remains, however, as to how one accomplishes this passage, to make this encounter with the Real. Immediately after describing this process in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek gives us a chapter on revolution. Although, not quite. What we get is the shortest chapter of the book, which begins with a discussion of revolution via Benjamin's twelve theses on history but ends with a description of democracy and the role of the Master. It is here, however, that Žižek writes of a "revolutionary act," one that brings about revolution, an act that redeems all the failed revolutionary moments of history, rewriting the past in its wake (Žižek, 1989: 138). This serves as a break with an "evolutionist dialectics" (Žižek, 1989: 53), the teleological approach to the overcoming of capitalism. Revolution is instead a "creationist act", an "erasure of the reigning Text [of history], creation *ex nihilo* of a new Text by means of which the stifled past 'will have been'" (Žižek, 1989: 143-4). This act, however, is not fully theorized in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Žižek still needs a theory of revolution. To understand it we must look elsewhere.

Before getting there, however, it is worthwhile to look at what Žižek does provide at the end of his first book – a gesture towards subjective destitution and the end of analysis. This he does with reference to Hegel's description of the 'beautiful soul' – a form of subjectivity that sees itself as separate from the evils of the world, safe to stand back and criticize in place of muddying its hands with any sort of activity that might bring change. What Žižek extracts from this figure is the notion that it is not passive, not simply outside its social constellation, but actively involved in that situations' maintenance. That is, it unknowingly chooses its position and in so doing maintains the social-symbolic network that makes that position possible. To make his point clearer, he

describes a hypothetical housewife who complains that her family exploits her position in it. In failing to do anything about it she is an accomplice to her own exploitation. In Žižek's formulation, relinquishing her position would be to give up the consistency of her identity. Where 'over-worked housewife' stands as her ego/imaginary identification, as her image of herself, this image is maintained because she views herself in this position from the vantage of the family structure, from the mandate that it confers upon her. Unbeknownst to her, she has chosen family life by dint of acceding to it. This choice is, of course, not on a conscious level, but on a formal, unconscious one (Žižek, 1989: 215-7). In continuing in one's actions, one betrays what one implicitly holds to be true. This in turn makes one formally responsible for the social network at hand.

According to Žižek the first step towards the end of analysis is to experience that one is in fact active in one's own social arrangement, to experience the guilt of one's subjecthood. To understand this we need to briefly turn to the penultimate chapter of the book. There Žižek tells us that "there is no subject without guilt, the subject exist[s] only in so far as he is ashamed of the object in himself, in its interior" (Žižek, 1989: 180). Where in the final sections of the last chapter of the book start from *subjectivity*, from the point of a subject who is flush with their own experiences and imaginary and symbolic identifications, here he begins from a point before identification.¹¹ This is the moment of first finding oneself in a social position, and thereby subject to a symbolic mandate and the question posed by the Other – the *Che Vuoi?*, or 'what do you want?' For example, the hypothetical mother finds herself unexpectedly pregnant and thereby given the role of mother. The 'question' (*Che Vuoi?*) is in fact the mandate itself, given as if the subject receiving it already knew the answer as to why it was given (Žižek, 1989: 113). That is, the mandate is given as if the subject asked for it. The feeling of guilt that is attendant with this mandate comes from the subject's inability to answer, which arises because, of course, they do not know why they are in that position but desire it nonetheless. Thus shame and guilt are aligned in the quote above: the accusation touches at the point of one's intimate secrets, one's unconscious desires, for which one is responsible, and being exposed in this desire elicits shame.¹² Avoiding this question and the guilt that is strapped to it is done through identification: one takes on one's mandate, and in so doing sees oneself as likeable. In so doing one also avoids confronting one's desire. Taking the first step towards the end of analysis is done in accepting this desire and guilt, the process of which Žižek calls 'formal conversion': where before the world appeared as though it was given in advance, it is now taken as the result of one's own work (Žižek,

1989: 218). In the case of Žižek's housewife, she would have to see herself as responsible for the way her children and husband treat her. In "Lenin's Choice" Žižek provides a concrete example: Andrea Yates. In 2001 the Texan woman drowned her five young children. Though not actually responsible for the conditions that lead to her unhappy position – the lack of childcare support available to her; between the ages of two and five many children do act like monsters – she accepted their behaviour as her own work (Žižek, 2002: 223-5). The way she dealt with the situation, however, was not an Act, but an 'acting out' (to be discussed below). What is important here is that her assertion of guilt is, for Žižek, an example of 'formal conversion'.

For Žižek's theory of revolution, 'formal conversion' is not accomplished on a strictly personal level, however. It is instead inherently social, and not in the sense that it rests on an intersubjective relationship between two people: "... subjects are subjects only in so far as they presuppose the social substance, opposed to them in the form of the state, is already in itself a subject (Monarch) to whom they are subjected" (Žižek, 1989: 229). Formal conversion is only possible after the social becomes universal in the form of a single individual. This is, of course, Hegel's sovereign, who stands as the concretization of the sovereignty of a rational universalized state, an organic whole wherein each part – each class, each organ of government – contributes to the health of the others. The mention of an organic whole should, of course, raise some eyebrows as Žižek asserts more than once that 'society doesn't exist' – i.e. that there is no closed, organic social whole. And this is precisely where Žižek wants to go – to achieve the 'formal conversion' wherein one takes oneself as responsible for the world as it exists is to presuppose the existence of the Other. Herein lies the possibility for social change – the 'end of analysis' looms. Once one has taken responsibility for the symbolic network in which one finds oneself, one can then give up their imaginary and symbolic identifications and achieve subjective destitution – the realization that there is no big Other.

This is an extreme gloss on Žižek's complicated description of the Hegelian progressions that make up his development of the subject, but it puts us in a position from which we can more fully discuss *how* to achieve subjective destitution. It is necessary to remember that this is not something that Žižek thinks happens to atomized subjects, but on a social/collective level. That is, subjective destitution at the level of the social is the place of revolution in Žižek's thought.

Demand and Acting out

Žižek's main problem with what he sees as contemporary left politics is that the question of class struggle and the overthrow of capital has been eliminated.¹³ What he sees us as left with are 'cultural politics' that aim a set of demands at existing political powers with the expectation that they will do what is necessary to accommodate those needs. It is his contention that this is not politics at all, because for Žižek a political act is one that does not rely on the authority of another, but establishes new terms of debate and authorizes its own actions (Žižek, 1999: 199). His position, not surprisingly, springs from the work of Lacan and his formulation of demand: "Demand already constitutes the Other as having the 'privilege' of satisfying needs, that is, the power to deprive them of what alone can satisfy them" (Lacan, 2006: 580). For Lacan, a demand is really for something other than is actually asked for – love. Every demand is as a consequence impossible to fulfill, as the Other does not have it to give. And so for Žižek any particular political demand, any particular voicing of injustice, is actually a demand for complete social change – which those in power cannot give because they do not have it within them to do so. Providing that which was demanded, then, is to frustrate the motivation that the demand belies. This is why for Žižek "politics is the art of the impossible" (Žižek, 1999: 199).

We can see the play of demand in a speech by Wilfred Laurier on the difference between liberalism and conservatism:

The supreme art of government consists in guiding and directing, while controlling, these aspirations of human nature. The English are the supreme masters of this art. Look at the work of the great Liberal party of England! How many reforms has it brought about, how many abuses it has done away with, without shock, disturbance, or violence! It has understood the aspirations of the oppressed and the new needs created by new situations, and under the law, without any instrument except the law, it has brought about a series of reforms that have made the English people the freest, the most prosperous, and the happiest in Europe.

See how different are the continental governments. Most of them have never been able to understand the aspirations of their peoples. They met the stirring of their poor with brutal repression, and rather than allowing the wretches a few breaths of air and freedom, they pushed them back into an ever more tightly confined existence (Laurier, 1984: 140-1).

The first volume of Marx's *Capital* was published a mere decade before the delivery of this speech, and relied on documents prepared and published by the English government. In it he enumerates the horrors of English capitalism, from child labour and the destruction of working people's health, to bread purposefully riddled with unsavory inedibles (read: rocks) for the sake of profit. Within this context it is hard to imagine the "happiness" of the great majority of English – the workers. Here Laurier – who's face now adorns the Canadian five dollar bill – points less to the improvement of life than to *reforms* that left capitalism untouched. That is, in place of systemic change, English workers were given (and I think we should take this literally) "a few breaths of air and freedom" within capital rather than freedom from capital's yoke.

Laurier also points in a direction that we can use to begin discussing the movement towards 'going through the fantasy' and revolution: 'But a day came when the impediments were shattered, when these peoples, no longer paralysed by their restraints, stampeded, and then the most frightful crimes were committed in the holy name of liberty. Should we be astonished at this?' (Laurier, 1984: 141).¹⁴ David McNally describes violence in the context of a mass protest by that mass (and not necessarily by small groups within it) with reference to protests in Argentina in December 2001. He writes that the destruction of banks, McDonald's restaurants and other symbols of capitalism "were widely understood and supported as legitimate expressions of popular anger" and goes on to quote Martin Luther King: "A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard" (McNally, 2002: 246). Žižek's take is very similar, calling this sort of occurrence a '*passage à l'acte*'. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, *passage à l'acte* means 'acting out' – a hysterical act. This is why Žižek labels such occurrences 'irrational' – they appear to come from nowhere. There is, however, a logic that underlies them: "...the only way for a universality to come into existence, to 'posit' itself 'as such', is in the guise of its very opposite, of what cannot but appear as an excessive 'irrational' whim. These violent *passages à l'acte* bear witness to some underlying *antagonism* that can no longer be formulated-symbolized in properly political terms" (Žižek, 1999: 204). This act is, for Žižek, not properly political, however. It is instead the *first* step towards a "new political subjectivization" (Žižek, 1999: 204).

This first step occurs in the face of an ideological double bind, wherein the violent act is the only way to break from it. This double bind is inherent to ideology, and it functions like a Kantian antinomy. One of Žižek's often cited examples is multi-culturalist tolerance, wherein the injunction to tolerate is coupled with the implication that one must

also be intolerant. That is, one can tolerate the other insofar as they fit into the liberal-democratic framework (Žižek, 2002: 224-7).¹⁵ Once one moves past the cuisines and languages, the truly Other – for instance, clitoridectomies; stoning – is rejected. In the case of Andrea Yates, there existed an antinomy that looked something like 'be happy/be unhappy'. Where Žižek sees multiculturalist discourse as one that forces one to be tolerant in their intolerance, Yates was to be happy in her unhappiness, to *enjoy* her situation.

Marx describes a similar antinomy within capitalism that arises because of the commodity form as it applies to labour. Where the capitalist seeks the most for their money (as much labour as possible for the wage paid) the worker seeks to set the limits upon how much is contained in its sale (the number of hours given to the capitalist in a day). Where capitalism and the commodity form are the logic that belies all exchange, each party is in the right: "The capitalist maintains his right as a purchaser...and the worker maintains his right as a seller.... There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides" (Marx, 1976, 344).¹⁶ Similarly, Žižek's description of ideological antinomies is a deadlock that can only be overcome by first violently 'acting out'. This *passage à l'acte* accomplishes the emergence of the "pure subject", the elimination of all the content of one's identity (Žižek, 2002: 252).¹⁷ For Marx this would mean the end of capitalism. In the case of tolerance, this would mean a break with the liberal-democratic (i.e. capitalist) way of being, and the elimination of the terms of the debate.

The pure, or empty, Cartesian subject revealed in acting out is the core of subjectivity. The content that obfuscates this is the product of subjectivization – *imaginary* (ego) identification – and interpellation – *symbolic* identification and the acceptance of the mandate imposed by one's position in the symbolic network (Žižek, 2001: 168; 1989: 120). The latter is the predicate of the former. Where an imaginary or ego identification is the image one has of oneself as likeable, one cannot take on such an image without first having a place from within the intersubjective symbolic network from which to see it (Žižek, 1989: 110). It is Žižek's assertion that such identification is always the effect of a disavowed, violent act (Žižek, 1999: 238).¹⁸ That is, it is always the product of some forgotten trauma, of the acceptance of symbolic castration.¹⁹ It is the spontaneous (discussed below) occurrence of the *passage à l'acte*, of acting out, that sweeps away these two forms of identification – but only when it is focused. It is the point at which one refuses the mandate that has had set upon them. Andrea Yates

unfortunate case stands as an example of an un-politicized acting out. Once focused, an episode of 'acting out' becomes the Act, a move that breaks with the status quo.

In *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek describes the politicization of the *passage à l'acte* as the move from a hysterical, particular demand to a universal revolutionary demand (Žižek, 1999: 204). He further develops the mechanics of this move in "Lenin's Choice" – one moves from living within the given fantasy frame to a self authorizing, universal *political act by beating the master out of oneself*. In so doing, one realizes that the master has no power, that the social-symbolic network of the master must be renounced, and accomplishes that renunciation (Žižek, 2002: 225-6; 252-3; 263).²⁰ This is the political Act. What one is left with is a final form of identification – one discussed above: *excremental* identification. This is synonymous with identifying with the symptom, and the sweeping away of imaginary and symbolic identification with traversing the fantasy. This is not a nihilistic end, not a complete, senseless destruction for the sake of destruction. It is instead the place from which a new subjectivization and a new political world can and must be made. For Žižek, however, this can only be accomplished through the Party.

The Broken Car and the Party

Capital *is* the production of surplus-value (Marx, 1976: 948). Likewise, the subject is their symptom. Marx evokes elliptical movement as a way to convey how the commodity-form is the root of this. Similarly, Žižek puts it in terms of elementary particle physics and the movement of particles:

The mass of each element in our reality is composed of its mass at rest plus the surplus provided by the acceleration of its movement; an electron's mass at rest, however, is zero; its mass consists only of the surplus generated by the acceleration of its movement, as if we are dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself (Žižek, 2002: 284).

In a footnote to this example, Žižek adds that this phenomenon is similar to a well known gag seen in Hollywood movies, where a car breaks down in the middle of nowhere and is completely taken apart by a local mechanic in order to repair it. The gag lies in that there is always some part left over, an excess for which a place and an explanation cannot be found (much like surplus-value as seen by the bourgeois economists of

Marx's regard). He ends the footnote at this point with ellipses, but perhaps we can finish it. Marx writes that if the capitalist came "to see that if such a thing as the value of labour really existed, and he really paid this value, no capital would exist..." (Marx, 1976: 682). To complete Žižek's gag, we would have to see the mechanic throw the excess part under the hood and watch the entire car fall to pieces.

Revolution is, of course, not so simple: surplus-enjoyment keeps everyone tied to the system that maintains it because it is not easy to give up. A spontaneous outburst, a *passage à l'acte*, is the first step towards change. The politicization of such an act is a question of organization. One of the basic categories of Marxist critique is the working class – a category whose relevance has been called into question. Žižek's approach to this problem is grounded in the separation between it and another term – the proletariat:

One should, perhaps, rehabilitate Marx's (implicit) distinction between the working class (an "objective" social category, a topic of sociological study) and the proletariat (a certain *subjective* position – the class 'for-itself', the embodiment of social negativity, to use an old and rather unfortunate expression). Instead of searching for the disappearing working class, we should, rather, ask: who occupies, who is able to subjectivize its position as proletarian today? (Žižek, 2002: 336).

Žižek insists on this distinction in several places (Žižek, 1999: 226-7; 2004: 666; 2006a: 564; 2006b: 188). Laclau argues that Marx made no such delineation (Laclau, 2006: 660), and Žižek responds that he is formalizing an implicit division, just as Lacan did for Freud's ego-ideal and ideal-ego (Žižek, 2006b: 188). However, such a position may not be so new as it first appears: Neil Harding argues that a similar distinction was made by Russian Marxists of the late nineteenth century (including Lenin). For them, the proletariat as a class did not exist until it realized itself in the political: "Plekhanov [a highly influential Russian Marxist] argued that only in the proportion that the proletariat recognized that it must emerge as a political force – as a political party – did it properly become a class" (Harding, 1977: 52). Harding quotes Marx writing in a similar vein of logic about other classes: "Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class" (Marx in Harding, 1977: 53).²¹ Similarly, the 'proletariat' is for Žižek the formalization of the excluded elements of society, one that has not yet happened. For him 'proletariat' is not an empirical category, but a subjective one – one in which the group in question realizes

itself to be such through its alienation in an other. In political terms, this other is the Leninist Party.

This again brings us to Žižek's insistence that one cannot maintain the position of the 'beautiful soul', of the objective observer who stands outside the situation at hand. He approaches this problem, along with that of truth and the Party, via (amongst others) three Marxist figures: Lenin, Lukács and Trotsky. As we saw above, before the end of analysis could be achieved the subject had to leave the headspace of the beautiful soul that accepted its situation as given to one wherein responsibility is taken for all that is. This can only happen after alienation in an other. Hegel's monarch stood as the example. While giving it slightly less focus in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek also likens this move to that of the Christ, in whom the abstract God is made concrete. Where it was the monarch who had to be rejected before, in his discussion of the role of the Party in "Lenin's Choice" it is God as the big Other who must be assumed not to exist. Where Lacan²² first replaces Nietzsche's version of atheism as "God is dead" with "God is unconscious", Žižek opts for the later formulation that "the world doesn't exist": "The existence of the world implies its founding exception, which is God" (Žižek, 2002: 182-3). 'The world doesn't exist' is the expanded version of 'society doesn't exist', that there is no big Other who confers consistency or wholeness upon our being, that our world is not a closed totality, that the fantasy of completeness that is our lived reality can be traversed and a new reality created. When Žižek presents the image of Christ on the cross and ventriloquizes his last words as they appear in the books of Mathew and Mark (and not Luke or John, incidentally, where this phrase does not appear) he sees the end of the big Other. Jesus' 'God, why have you forsaken me' stands as the moment when the guarantor of our subjective consistency undermines their own position. This figure, as a mediator that enables subjectivity (symbolic and imaginary identifications) as well as its dissolution, relates directly to knowledge, truth, the Party and the psychoanalyst.

In bringing together Marxism and psychoanalysis it is not Žižek's intention to supplement Marxism with a theory of the subject, but to show how the two can combine on another level. This level is that of *form* – it was the commodity form and the form of the dream that enabled him to bring the two together. In addition to this pair of forms he sees in the Party "the form of knowledge" (Žižek, 2002: 188). He contrasts this form of knowledge from four other discourses/forms of knowledge (servant; master; science; bureaucracy). Unlike these forms of knowledge, which largely remain within the bounds of the status quo and power, the knowledge of the Party stands as an external,

supposed knowledge. What makes this knowledge 'supposed' is not that the Party and the analyst do not know anything, but that they do not know the "secret of the analysand's desire" (Žižek, 2002: 185). Instead, what the Party does know is the irreconcilability of the 'analysand's' position in the political and social conditions attendant to capitalism – i.e. Marx's 'conflict of rights' – and that the 'analysand' needs to be shaken from their tendency to slip into a position that prevents them from confronting the root of their problem. To further explain this 'external' position Žižek refers to Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* In it we see Lenin describe Russian labour strikes and riots in the 1860s and seventies in much the same way that Žižek writes about un-politicized *passages a l'acte*: in them, the workers "began, I shall not say to understand, but to sense the necessity for collective resistance, and definitely abandoned their slavish submission to their superiors. But all this was more in the nature of outbursts of desperation and vengeance than of *struggle*" (Lenin, 1987: 74). Lenin contrasts this to the more organized, politicized events of the 1890s. Here it is possible to see where, perhaps, Žižek finds inspiration for the idea that one must first beat the master out of oneself in a violent act, and that such an act stands as a mere outburst until focused politically. The particular manner of this focusing is, of course, where Žižek sees the necessity of the Party, as well as its externality.

Alan Shandro (1995) argues that in *What Is to Be Done?* the 'without' in the notion of 'consciousness from without' does not imply a simple dichotomy between workers and socialist theoreticians. According to Shandro's reading of Lenin, workers' spontaneous uprisings (e.g. strikes and riots) tend to fall in line with inherently bourgeois trade unions that seek to find compromise rather than complete social and economic overhaul. Combating this tendency is the work not only of socialist intellectuals, but of workers who are also aware of this tendency and of the irreconcilability of their social interests with those of their employers. To come from the 'outside' means, then, not from outside the class struggle but from outside bourgeois ideologies and the non-consciousness of spontaneity (a.k.a. 'economism'). Shandro (who is, incidentally, a worker-come-intellectual) holds that this is what Lenin means when he writes that "there is a difference between spontaneity and spontaneity" (Lenin, 1987: 73). The 'acting out' of the worker in the mid-19th century, the first of Lenin's 'spontaneities', fell squarely within the logic of trade unionism: preference for negotiation with governments who could draft laws to secure legislation that would regulate working conditions was taken over challenging the legitimacy of capitalist stakeholders. The second spontaneity is that

of workers informed and guided by socialist agitation and organization. For Shandro, Lenin's argument is not that people are dominated by their economic position and blindly determined by it, but that domination comes in the form of the bourgeois ideological subjugation of workers' political actions. It is the Party's aim, as consequence, to instill a socialist rather than bourgeois understanding of what course political action should take: "...the thesis of consciousness from without does not imply a working class bridled to a superior will or one that resists its own emancipation" (Shandro, 1995: 277). It instead implies that there is a certain limit to what workers, immersed in a long history of bourgeois ideology, can do without socialist theory.

This is what Žižek means when apropos of *What is To Be Done?* he writes that "...Lenin speaks of consciousness which should be introduced by intellectuals who are outside the economic struggle, not outside the class struggle!" (Žižek, 2002: 183). The 'economic struggle' is the struggle within the limits of capitalism to improve working conditions and the relationship between worker and capitalist.²³ This 'outside' is not, then, a neutral place of observation, but from within class struggle and on the side of socialism. Žižek rejects the notion of a neutral position because it is that of the apolitical beautiful soul we have encountered several times already – a position that is not neutral at all, but embedded in the status quo through its willful ignorance of its own political nature. Instead, the Party as a form of knowledge is strictly and openly partisan, the representative of the antagonism that structures the entire social edifice. The 'Party-form' "stands...for the traumatic kernel of the Real, for the antagonism which 'colours' the entire field in question. In this precise sense, class struggle is the Form of the Social: every social phenomena is overdetermined by it, so that it is not possible to remain neutral towards it" (Žižek, 2002: 190). Occupying this position provides the proletariat with a means of becoming a subject via the Other in order to ultimately dissolve itself: That is, to achieve subjective destitution and the possibility of building something new. Again, Žižek holds that the Party is not able to accomplish this because it knows what the people 'really want', but because "not one of these three subjects (believer, proletarian, analyst) is a self-centred agent of self-mediation – all three are decentred agents struggling with a foreign kernel" (Žižek, 2002: 188). That is, they are all embedded in the social, economic and historical moment in which they find themselves, and none of these moments is complete. For Christ there is no God, for Lenin society is divided by class struggle, and for the analyst there is no big Other. In this way the Party

also stands for truth – the (Real) dialectical-materialist assertion that class exploitation exists.

It is the elaboration of this idea (that of partisan truth) that Žižek attributes to Lukács, ‘the philosopher of Leninism’. It is Žižek’s contention that Lukács explodes historicism by taking it to its logical extreme: it only appears that truth is relative to its historical period if one assumes a neutral position from which to judge all truth. Without such a position, truth is necessarily produced by the engagement of a subject in the passing of history (Žižek, 2000: 174). One of the major theses that Žižek advances in the last two chapters of *Sublime Object* is that Hegel showed that appearance is essence, that there is no thing-in-itself that exists beyond a thing’s appearance. He attributes the same argument to the Lukács’ of *History and Class Consciousness*, stressing that Lukács shows that by including the one who observes the passing of history as an embedded element of it, truth is the effect of political engagement: they who observe and act are a part of that which they observe and act in, whether they acknowledge it or not. The beautiful soul is just as political as the Marxist militant, the difference being that the later acknowledges as much and actively intervenes, rather than letting things take their course. In rendering Lukács this way Žižek aligns the Hungarian theorist’s formulation of consciousness with his own take on ideology. As described above, ideology is the fantasy that is our lived reality that that sustains our relation to the Real – the antagonism at the centre of our world. As such fantasy is not ‘mere’ but possesses, like Marx’s notion of value, a social objectivity – it’s appearance is not a mask, but an actually existing effectivity. The value hidden in the body of a commodity, invisible and intangible no matter how much it is poked or prodded, becomes objective in the body of the commodity for which it is exchanged (i.e. money): the commodity realizes its value when it is alienated in the body of another. Ideology is concrete so long as it is lived, sustained through the existence of the body of the Other who guarantees that there is no divisive antagonism at the core of society, that society is an organic whole (Hegel’s sovereign).

Where the body of the socialist Other is the Party, and the Party exposes the antagonism that is the Real, and its authority comes not from the content it possesses but its form, it is dependant on its membership for the positive content of its knowledge. Like Hegel’s sovereign, Žižek’s version of the Party does not possess its own knowledge, but relies on consultation from the people. For Hegel’s monarch this means the Executive – who stands as the universal class and acts not out of personal interest

but of the interest of the lower spheres of society – consults the sovereign before doing whatever particular acts it needs to accomplish. In times of peace, the sovereign merely adds their signature, while in times of strife or conflict they cut through indecision with their own pronouncements. Likewise, the Party relies on the particular struggles of the working class to eliminate the antagonism that structures the whole of society. In both cases there is no outside of the social body: everything is integrated and mutually dependant. Consequently, the Party is effective only so long as everyone agrees to “fight with us, fight for us, fight for your truth against the party line” from within and not from without the Party (Žižek, 2002: 188). For Žižek this does not mean, however, that the Party should do whatever ‘the people’ want, no more than it did for Hegel. For both truth and not opinion is the basis of politics.

Likening the idea of sovereign and God is not Žižek’s alone, but Hegel’s in *The Philosophy of Right*: “The very concept of [constitutional] Monarchy is that it is not deduced from something else but entirely *self-originating*. The idea [*Vorstellung*] that the right of the monarch is based on divine authority is therefore the closest approximation of this concept...” (Hegel, 1991: 318). Hegel’s sovereign resembles Christ in that they are the abstract universal made individual, skipping the moment of particularity. Where Christ avoids being the offspring of any particular man, the sovereign avoids being a member of any particular class. Being chosen based on a hereditary line that exists apart from any determinations of work, the sovereign avoids links to the particular interests of any class and can thereby make decisions in the interest of the social body. Hegel contrasts this with other types of monarchs – feudal, for instance – who have particular economic interests and found their decisions in those interests. This also goes for the heads of aristocracies and democracies. It is in this presence of personal interest that Hegel sees the root of the need to appeal to fate and the Gods (oracles or other religious figures) for unalloyed pronouncements, and the inadequacy of these forms of political organization (Hegel, 1991: 319-20). Without the *detached* (constitutional) sovereign’s will to ensure that all the elements of society – either individuals or groups of individuals, as in Hegel’s ‘estates’ (classes) and ‘corporations’ (guilds) – function as a whole, ‘society doesn’t exist’: “*Without* its monarch and that *articulation* of the whole which is necessarily and immediately associated with monarchy, *the* people is a formless mass” (Hegel, 1991: 319). It is only when a society is an internally organized/differentiated as a whole – rather than composed of competing parts – with the sovereign as its head that it is ‘healthy’, or contributing to the universalization of all

its members. Opposed to figures in democracies and aristocracies that can rise on a tide of prestige or are chosen as circumstances require, the sovereign is 'self-originating'. This is to say that they cannot be voted into power. The sovereign, as existing outside any class, as having desires and drives that are not determined by the type of work in which they have chosen to develop themselves (as have the individuals in the corporations), is beyond the winds of opinion. As such, they stand for truth: where each moment of Hegel's discussion of the concept of right comes together as one, the monarch express the Idea (truth) of right – the concept of freedom made concrete (Hegel, 1991: 317).

The similarities between the Party and Hegel's Idea of sovereignty can be seen in Žižek's discussion of opinion in his papers on Lukács and Trotsky. He asserts that "Revolutionary politics is not a matter of 'opinions', but of the truth on behalf of which one often *is* compelled to disregard the 'opinion of the majority' and to impose the revolutionary will against it" (Žižek, 2000: 176). The imposition of this will, as discussed above, does not come from without, but from the revolutionary Party who stands as the truth of class struggle and steers the subjectivity of the 'masses' away from bourgeois interests and towards their own. Just as Hegel sees caprice in opinion, in times of revolt Žižek (referring to comments by Trotsky in *Terrorism and Communism*) sees a rapid changing opinion that effaces any possibility of even gauging what opinion is actually held: "...in reaction to large-scale traumatic events the majority can swing in a matter of days from one to another extreme, oscillations are so strong and fast that the democratic 'reflection' losses its effectivity..." (Žižek, 2007: xvii). The 'imposition of will' is the focusing of actions so that they do not slip into one favouring the ruling class, what above was called the politicization of *passage á l'acte*. What can now be added is the similarity of this to the work of Hegel's sovereign, who in times of strife "cuts short the weighing of arguments and counter-arguments (between which vacillations in either direction are always possible) and *resolves* them by its 'I will', thereby initiating all activity and actuality" (Hegel, 1991: 317).²⁴ Remembering that the sovereign does not administer but defers to the Executive, compare the above to Trotsky's remarks on the Party:

In the hands of the Party is concentrated the general control. It does not immediately administer, since its apparatus is not adapted for this purpose. But it has the final word in all fundamental questions. Further, our practice has led to the result that, in all moot questions, generally – conflicts between departments and personal conflicts within departments – the last word belongs to the central

committee of the party. This affords extreme economy of time and energy. And in the most difficult and complicated circumstances gives a guarantee for the necessary unity of action (Trotsky, 2007: 102).

In addition, Hegel's assertion that all parts of society must be united in the sovereign (including the Executive and Legislative bodies), lest they tear the social edifice apart by acting independently, can be seen in Trotsky's comments about the Socialist-Revolutionaries and their desire to align with the provisional government during the 1917 revolution:

...the left SR episode quite clearly shows that the regime of compromises, agreements, mutual concessions – for that is the meaning of the regime of coalition – cannot last long in an epoch when situations alter with extreme rapidity, and in which supreme unity in point of view is necessary in order to render possible unity of action (Trotsky, 2007: 104).

That is, the Party must be a unified one that shuns coalitions with outside organizations lest the revolution be lost.

All of this might point to the conclusion that the Party is simply a replacement for the State and synonymous with it. The major distinction between the two, however, is that the sovereign stands as the embodiment of the *whole*, while the Party stands as the embodiment of *the excluded*, of the Real. These stand as two exclusive forms of universality, and social struggle is essentially between these two forms – the status quo and those excluded from it (Žižek, 2006a: 564). This is tied directly to subjectivity. The state is not a machine without will, but the culmination of the subject coming into its universality. In the introduction to *The Philosophy of Right* Hegel describes the establishment of universality as the abstraction from all that is particular, so that all that remains are universals without content. This is the indeterminate 'I' of thought, a potential that waits to be actualized. It is the ground from which choice can be made, and is negative freedom in the sense of freedom from the determination of all inclinations. The differentiation or particularization of this universal is described as the positing of particular desires, drives, or other content, which makes the 'I' determinate once again. This is to say that after one realizes oneself as universal, one must then go on to choose that upon which one wishes to focus one's energies, and which energies will be focused. The unity of these two moments appears as a third.

The second moment reveals the first to have in fact been determinate – it was in relation to determinacy, from the determinations to which it was subject, that it abstracted itself. Having posited a particular will as its second moment, however, the I revealed that it could act in a way that was not determined by anything but itself. In so doing, the will provides itself a ground from which to see itself as universal once more. The will itself becomes the object of the will, taking the place of determinate desires, and thus becomes truly indeterminate while still possessing content (Hegel, 1991: 37-42). This is the self-determination of the I, and is what makes the sovereign a figure of truth. Where society becomes more and more universal the more it determines its own drives and desires in work, the sovereign is beyond the particularity of the drives and desires of any class and stands as the concrete-universal will in which they find their unity. By contrast, the proletariat finds its truth beyond positivity, beyond the content of their subjectivities (imaginary and symbolic identifications) and in the symptom, as discussed above.

Where the sovereign takes the place the big Other (God), the Party is the assertion that the Other doesn't exist. This further affects the notion of truth operational in both: where the sovereign sits as the embodiment of truth in the discourse of the master who appropriates the knowledge of their pupils and is loved by them, the Party sits in the discourse of the analyst who enables the analysand to experience the truth themselves and break from their master. In this way we can also see the difference between the 'self-origination' of the sovereign and the Party: the party is not the affirmation of the universality of the existing social edifice, the culmination of the concept in the idea, but the instigator of the move that goes beyond the Law *without* the permission of the big Other and creates a space where the social can be thought anew.

Thinking the Act

As discussed above, part of Žižek's project in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* was to show that by bringing together Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis it was possible to efface teleology from a Marxist approach to the struggle against capitalism. The problem arises, he claims, when one accepts that there are objective conditions that exist beyond any subjective intervention, a claim that he attempts to disprove with his reading of Lukács. Once one accepts that it is only by partisan participation that political change is

possible, once one accepts that subjectivity is a social objectivity, the possibility of an Act arises. With this theoretical development also comes the defeat of the idea that revolutionary politics necessarily ends in totalitarian state rule: to accept such a progression is to accept a teleological notion of history, that objective social conditions will have a necessary outcome, that capitalism will necessarily create a class that will inevitably seize the means of production and in so doing destroy capitalism. It is in Lenin that Žižek sees the potential for fully realizing the un-thinking of this teleology and the re-thinking of revolutionary space where new social thought can begin: in Lenin he sees a figure who asserted the non-existence of the big Other and went where there were no guarantees of success. This is why Žižek holds it must be asserted that Lenin is dead – he is not a big Other who will guarantee a new revolution, not a God who guarantees the progress of history from point A to B, but a figure that can be used to help think the renewal of politics.

In moving beyond a teleological approach to history, change comes at the hands of ‘spontaneity and spontaneity’ – a contingent outbreak of unrest and its hegemonization by a political movement that will help the next spontaneous outburst pave the way for a new social order. In this way any outburst by any group – workers, immigrants, blacks, gays, whoever – can become the one that stands for the unacceptability of the antagonism that belies society. For Žižek, becoming ‘proletarian’ is not to be transformed into a verifiable demographic group, is not the economic outcome of increased exploitation by capital, but an identification with the excluded universal. In this way revolution is ‘the end of analysis’ – in identifying with the social symptom (the embodiment of antagonism/negativity) rather than the social order (the monarch as the figure of the positive social unity) one realizes that truth must come as the product of one’s own work in tandem with that of an other (‘the work of analysis’, shared by analysand and analyst). Conceived of at the social level, this means that everyone must become the ‘proletariat’. Formulating revolution in this way, he attempts to show that while one group must be the one to begin, it is necessary that all become part of the movement. The ‘proletariat’ is thus not just the workers, but everyone as politicized in opposition to capital. This is also to say that it is only on the basis of local conditions that universal change can occur.

With this in mind, charges that Žižek’s theory lacks a political program demand, perhaps, too much. His project is not to say what particularities must be accomplished, but an attempt to describe how a new space might be opened, one within which the

political can be thought anew. And ‘thought’ is here accorded that status that it is given by Badiou in *Metapolitics*: thought and practice are not *separated* in the political, but *are* the political. This is also Žižek’s position: thought is practical in that every action is belied by a framework of thought without which action would be impossible – this is what he draws from Lukács (Žižek, 2000: 172). He approvingly quotes Adorno to explain his stance:

To the question “what should we do?” I can most often truly answer with “I don’t know”. I can only try to analyse rigorously what there is. Here people reproach me: When you practice criticism, you are also obliged to say how one should make it better. To my mind, this is incontrovertibly a bourgeois prejudice. Many times in history it so happened that the very works which pursued purely theoretical goals transformed consciousness, and thereby also social reality (Adorno in Žižek, 2002: 170).

Where his entire project is predicated on the coming together of psychoanalysis and Marxism there is, however, a potentially fatal flaw in his system. Žižek brings the two together by way of the commodity form (surplus-value) and the ‘object-cause of desire’ (surplus-enjoyment). If, as has been widely argued, Marx’s labour theory of value does not hold (Laclau, for instance, holds this position and levels this critique against Žižek²⁵), one wonders what remains of Žižek’s system. This is what could perhaps be called Žižek’s wager. Vidal, the Marxist professor in Eric Rohmer’s *My Night at Maud’s*, explains: perhaps history is meaningless; perhaps it is not. Even if the probability that history is not stands at 10 per cent, I must still choose to believe in that possibility, otherwise my life is meaningless. I may, in the end, be correct in choosing the former, but gain nothing. The potential gains from the former are infinite. This is why Žižek stands against Laclau’s populist politics in “Against the populist temptation” – the pay-off of taking this tack is not high enough, the potential to slip into a “long-term protofascist tendency” too great (Žižek, 2006a: 556-7). Žižek’s wager is that Marx is right, that the commodity form and surplus-value are the core of the capitalist machine. Accepting Žižek’s thought is then necessarily also such a wager.

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Endnotes:

¹ Laclau declares that psychoanalysis cannot 'supplement' Marxism with a theory of the subject because the latter negates "the validity and the pertinence of any theory of subjectivity" (Laclau, 1987: 330). What Laclau suggests is a new frame of reference within which the two can be articulated together. His frame is that of post-Marxism. The project of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is, of course, to establish just such a terrain, but not under the rubric of a 'post'. Žižek refuses to abandon the notion of class struggle and remains undecided on the question of the labour theory of value (see note iii).

² Žižek claims that it is *jouissance* that Althusser and theories of ideology derived from his work on interpellation overlook (Žižek, 1989: 124). For a brief description of where Žižek fits in the recent history of psychoanalysis and Marxism, see Rustin (1995).

³ As Mathew Sharpe (2004) points out, Žižek does not have a coherent, economically described notion of capitalism built into his theory. This is a major sticking point, to which even Žižek admits:

The way I try to squeeze out of this problem is to redefine the concept of the proletariat in a way similar to Badiou and Rancière: those who stand for a universal singularity, those who belong to a situation without having a specific "place" in the situation, included but without any part in the social edifice. As such, this excluded non-part stands for the universal. The concept of the proletariat becomes a shifting category. But how can this be linked to the problems of political economy? This is a huge problem. I don't have a real solution. Are we supposed to abandon the labor theory of value, or redeem it? People as different as Badiou and Fredric Jameson claim we already know how capitalism works, and that the real issue is the invention of new political forms. I don't think we really know how capitalism functions today. The entire Marxist conceptual structure is based on the notion of exploitation. How does this concept function today? I don't have an answer. All the terms used to describe the contemporary moment—"post-industrial society," "information society," "risk society" and so on—are completely journalistic categories (Žižek, 2007a: unpaginated).

⁴ "...in our everyday, wakening reality we are *nothing but a consciousness of [our] dream*" (Žižek, 1989: 47).

⁵ In this way we can surmise part of the reason Marx likens wage labour to slavery – where labour is not a commodity, one can only give it to the capitalist at the cost of their own life, their subsistence.

⁶ "Labour is the substance, and the immanent measure of value, but it has no value itself" (Marx, 1976: 677).

⁷ One might presume, then, that the gifts of nature also falsely appear to the capitalists as commodities, that nature too is valueless but can easily be usurped by the commodity-form, which confers upon it the appearance and socially objective effectivity of an exchange value.

⁸ For a brief discussion of why a linear narrative appears as a narrative, see (Žižek 1991: 69-71). A 'quilting point' retroactively confers linearity on a sequence, hiding the contingency that belies it. By 'quilting point' or 'suture' Žižek means the process wherein the master signifier neutralizes the incessant undecidability of meaning caused by the supplement which undermines as well as creates structure, i.e. the *objet a* (Žižek, 2005: 196).

⁹ "...what is really at stake in ideology is its form" (Žižek, 1989: 84).

¹⁰ For a fuller description of this identity, see (Žižek, 1989: 71-84).

¹¹ Strictly speaking, there is no 'point before' in these constructions. They stand as logical moments that exist as part of an already existing whole. That is why there is so much talk of 'retroaction' in Žižek's description of the subject – the latter, final moments presuppose the former. As corroboration that this is so for Žižek, take this quote regarding Hegel's master/slave dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: "It is senseless trying to determine when this event could have taken place; the point is just that it must be presupposed, that it constitutes a fantasy-scenario implied by the very fact the people work – it is the intersubjective condition of the so-called 'instrumental relation to the world of objects' (Žižek, 1989: 162-3).

A similar quote can be found in "Lenin's Choice": "Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – contrary to Richard Rorty's reading – does not suggest a grand narrative of the birth and deployment of subjectivity, but the *form* of subjectivity" (Žižek, 2002: 191). On this same page he makes the same point regarding Marx's description of the commodity form. It is of course possible to apply these moments to existing or past events – otherwise theory would be useless. The point is that the validity of the theory does not derive from observation.

¹² Agamben also aligns guilt, shame and desire, with reference to Heidegger and Freud. For Agamben, shame is:

...defined as being consigned to a passivity that cannot be assumed. Shame, indeed, then appears the most proper emotive tonality of subjectivity. For there is certainly nothing shameful in a human being who suffers on account of sexual violence, but if he takes pleasure in his suffering violence, if he is moved by his passivity – if, that is, auto-affection is produced – only then can one speak of shame (Agamben, 1999: 110)

Further on he writes:

...It is now possible to clarify the sense in which shame is truly something like the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness. Insofar as it consists solely in the event of enunciation, consciousness constitutively has the form of being consigned to something that cannot be assumed. To be conscious means: to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed (Hence both guilt as the structure of conscience in Heidegger, and the necessity of the unconscious in Freud) (Agamben, 1999: 128).

¹³ Take, for example, Žižek's comments to Christopher Hanlon: Identity politics...

"...involves a transformation of 'politics' into 'cultural politics,' where certain questions are no longer asked. Now, I'm not saying that we should return to some Marxist-fundamentalist essentialism, or whatever. I'm just saying that... my God, let's at least just take note of this, that certain questions – like those concerning the nature of relationships of production, whether political democracy is really the ultimate horizon, and so on – these questions are simply no longer asked" (Hanlon, 2001: 9).

¹⁴ The gist of this example is not that liberalism is more effective at changing to meet social needs than is conservatism. Rather, it is that concession does nothing to change systemic problems and can lead to violent *passages à l'acte*.

¹⁵ Badiou makes this same point about multi-cultural intolerance (Badiou, 2002: 24).

¹⁶ The logic of Marx's 'conflict of rights' can be seen in Trotsky's remarks on the dictatorship of the Party: "The dictatorship is necessary because it is the case, not of partial changes, but of the very existence of the bourgeoisie. No agreement is possible on this ground. Only force can be the deciding factor" (Trotsky, 2007: 23).

¹⁷ While identification implies identity in the sense of equality, "identification" takes on this meaning only in regards to imaginary/ego identification. Strictly speaking, in symbolic identification "we identify with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable" (Žižek, 1989: 109). That is, one must *occupy* a role, not imitate it (Žižek, 1989: 110).

¹⁸ "There is no Order of Being as a positive ontologically consistent Whole: the false semblance of such an Order relies on the self-obliteration of the Act" (Žižek, 1999: 238).

¹⁹ Choosing to refuse a place in the social-symbolic network is to foreclose on the symbolic and enter into psychosis. Deleuze and Guattari also saw the refusal of the existing social world as the reason for the existence of schizophrenia, but in *Anti-Oedipus* they explicitly reject Lacan's conception of foreclosure (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). See page 90 specifically, and 84-104 more generally. While they saw schizophrenia as the key to revolution, Žižek sees it in the Cartesian subject and the Freudian unconscious.

²⁰ The immediate problem this presents is how one initiates this self-beating. Žižek is being literal here – he uses Edward Norton in *Fight Club* as an example, and goes on to make reference to a strategy "occasionally used in political demonstrations," a scene in which protestors begin beating each as a way of reversing the tables of an immanent police beating (Žižek, 2002: 253). A hint as to why subjective destitution must be accomplished in such a physical way is given in *The Ticklish Subject*: Žižek theorizes that in our post-modern moment the inefficacy of the symbolic order (the Other) changes the status of 'the cut' – people no longer sacrifice their empirical identities for a cause, instead asserting their independence from established order by impinging on their body with piercings, tattoos and the like. This he attributes to the need to inscribe symbolic castration on the surface of the body to achieve symbolic empowerment. This leads to the ideological deadlock (antinomy) of postmodern individuality, where one must be oneself, but in so doing becomes cut off from everything and slips into *idios* – separation from the world (Žižek, 1999: 369-377). The way out of this ideological deadlock is the subjective destitution described above.

²¹ Elsewhere, Marx writes the following:

Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation? Answer: In the formulation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no historical, but only human, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat (Marx, 2007, unpaginated).

This sounds much like Žižek's 'Act,' but in Marx's text it appears that he holds that it is industrialization that will create the proletariat. It is Žižek's position that the division between proletariat as a class and as a subjective stance is an implicit one that needs to be formalized.

²² Some of Lacan's formulations of atheism can be seen in the following:

"For the myth of the *God is dead* – which, personally, I feel much less sure about, as a myth of course, than most contemporary intellectuals, which is in no sense a declaration of theism, nor of faith in the resurrection – perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against castration" (Lacan, 1981: 27).

"For the true formula of atheism is not *God is dead* – even by basing the origin of the function of the father on his murder, Freud protects the father – the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*" (Lacan, 1981: 59).

"... And from this results the following, which remains strange, that some-one – a part of this world – is at the outset assumed to be able to take cognizance of it. This one finds itself therein in a state that we can call existence, for how could it be the basis of the 'taking cognizance' if it did not exist? Therein has always laid the impasse, the vacillation resulting from the cosmology that consists in the belief in a world. On the contrary, isn't there something in the analytic discourse that can introduce us to the following: that every subsistence or persistence of the world as such must be abandoned?" (Lacan, 1999: 43).

²³ Just as Shandro argues that Lenin did not maintain a strict line between economic and political struggle, nor between reform and revolution, Žižek does not say that resistance is wrongheaded *per se*, but that it is so when it comes from the assumption that capitalism can never be eradicated and that reform is the *only* possibility. See his contribution to the *London Review of Books*, where he accuses Critchley of holding just such a position (Žižek, 2007c: unpaginated).

²⁴ This argument can also be seen in this quote from the section previous to the one quoted:

... in a situation of crises – whether in internal or external affairs – it is around the simple concept of sovereignty that the organism and all the particular spheres of which it formally consisted rally, and it is to this sovereignty that the salvation of the state is entrusted, while previously legitimate functions are sacrificed... (Hegel, 1991: 316).

²⁵ "Žižek totally ignores this literature and continues asserting Marx's version of the labour theory of value as an unchallengeable dogma" (Laclau, 2006: 659).