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Truth, Imagination, Act: The Methodology of Žižek's Sociopolitical Writings

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Introduction

Although one of the most read philosophers alive today, Slavoj Žižek holds an uncertain place in the academic world. Not only is Žižek derogatorily called the “rock star” of the philosophical world,ⁱ as if being well known is a sign of selling out or lacking depth, or a “clown,” academic humour being, after all, “to humour as military intelligence is to intelligence” (Bordwell: unpaginated) but the nervous tics, vulgarity and the excessive references to pop culture surrounding his public figure are often the but of ridicule. Furthermore, his work, so characterized by labyrinthine “digressions” and “ad hoc” associations drawn upon an often astounding combination of different philosophers, is frequently seen as a pure waste of time by philosophers and intellectuals alike. What is perhaps the worse, however, is that his textual production itself is often seen as a symptom: his theory is nothing but a response to an individual pathology,ⁱⁱ his writing a cure (cf. La Berge 2007).

The problem with such reactions is that they fail to come to terms with what is really at stake in Žižek's philosophy. Even without having a particular opinion about Žižek, it is not hard to see that they get off on the wrong foot. Seeing something suspect with Žižek's popularity does not constitute any real counterargument as to why one should or should not read him.

Plus, the claim that humour has no place in philosophy, if such a claim is to be taken as serious and not mere rhetoric, is obviously an attempt to maintain the purity of philosophical discourse as one of high culture, when it is not clear that there is a sharp distinction that should be made between high and low culture or even if one should be maintained if it did. And being unable to follow Žižek's argumentation does not mean there is none – indeed, being a self-proclaimed *modern transcendentalist* (Žižek & Daly 2004: 25-27) and an advocator of *rationalism*ⁱⁱⁱ there is no doubt one, though Žižek himself may not clearly outline every step along the way in a manner satisfactory to some proponents of analytical philosophy. Finally, to say that theory production is a mere symptomal manifestation of an individual pathology is to reduce philosophy to psychoanalysis – to carry out a vulgar psychoanalytical interpretation of the kind that Žižek himself, and any psychoanalyst, would abhor.

If the critiques stemming from Žižek's reception in the world of academia at large are more often than not uninteresting, this is not the case for his reception in the field of sociopolitical theory. Although the sentiments clouding the popular perception of Žižek are no better in the latter than in the former, one can identify a specific deficiency here that is surprisingly common to all those who have raised their voice against Žižek and can be nicely made use of as a point of departure into one of the fundamental problems of his philosophical endeavor as a whole. Representatives of the new Third Way find his lack of a positive program and critique of democracy intrinsically suspicious, while others claim that he is just another vulgar Marxist who has learned nothing from the gruesome events of the twentieth century, which clearly “prove” the failure of communism.^{iv} In a similar vein, *Al Jazeera* recently even compared Žižek to Gadhafi by drawing an analogy between their pathological out of touchness with the real state of affairs of the world in which we live (Dabashi 2011: unpaginated). These common reactions, however, completely overlook most crucial defining trait of Žižek's political thinking as a whole, whose goal is not so much to provide a political agenda for a new revolt or to advocate a return to a historical form of really existing communism as it is a rethinking of the very communist hypothesis *in light of* its failure and the difficulty we face in accepting it as a possibility *despite* the impasses we find ourselves confronted with today. If capitalism and its counterpart liberal democracy (see, for instance, Žižek 2000: 222; Žižek 2002b: 273; & Žižek 2008: 337f.) are undoubtedly ridden with antagonisms, then why would any attempt to think an alternative be a priori met with such outright despise by many fronts? Is this due to the intrinsic nature of the idea, or could there be there ideological structures which try to prevent us from doing so? And if so, what are the immediate effects of this for our understanding of politics and the political?

What Žižek's critics often fail to not only critically investigate but even to recognize in his work is one of its underlying problematics: the apparent foreclosure of political imagination and, with it, the very vehicle for genuine change. We can picture the end of the world in a multitude of horrifying manners – biological warfare, nuclear holocaust, an asteroid destroying all life on the planet, a quickly spreading, incurable disease –, but we are astonishingly unable to envision any fundamental change within the fabric of the current socio-political order. If “everyone seems to agree that today's post-political liberal-democratic global capitalist regime is the regime of the non-event (in Nietzsche's terms, of the Last Man)” (Žižek 2000: 209) then there must be a deep-rooted link between the fact that we are unable to think a new beyond of the present state of affairs, a future infinitely different from the one that we now know, and the lack of radical political transformation that seems so typical on Žižek's account of our mode of politics. The Žižekian wager is the following: If the current order has proven itself not only *inadequate* to respond to various deadlocks that we are facing, but also, and more disconcertingly, merely *perpetuates* them, then how could we hope to abolish its internal limitations without such a capacity for imagination? How else could we plan an authentically revolutionary act capable of immanently reconfiguring it? And, more crucially, what prevents the insurmountable, devastating negativity at the core of our objective existence from being the dialectical spring board for a new phase of historical development? Žižek sets out to theorize this impasse in the hope of opening up a space within which the political, in the sense Badiou and Rancière bestow upon it, could become again possible for us, thereby completely bypassing the concerns of many of his critics.

Lenin, psychoanalysis, and the externality of truth

Although the bulk of Žižek's writings often give the impression of an intellectualist form of political essayism or cultural journalism, we should avoid the trap of seeing them merely as a kind of analysis or critique of the events occurring around him. The role that they play in the attempt to carve up the space from within which a genuine political transformation could be possible, and exactly how this role is first established by a theoretical evaluation of how such a carving up has to be accomplished, must be kept in mind, in light of which his writings take on a much more sophisticated form. In the first place, they understand themselves to be an intervention in a very strict and precise manner according to its original etymological sense of *intervenire*: “to come between,” “to interrupt.” Taking as their starting point the foreclosure of

political imagination – of very the possibility of being able to invent radically new forms of life in response to various antagonisms that plague and threaten us either as material or social subjects –, they aim to expose the wide array of structures which obstruct us from cultivating any such capacity of envisioning another future beyond the one automatically laid down in front of us according to the inner logistics of the symbolic order within which we live. In this respect, if Žižek's texts do not present us with a clearly stated position vis-à-vis what we should do, or what could await us if the communist struggle were successful, this is to be expected if we take into account their self-imposed methodological constraints: given that his work largely centers around opening up the possibility for a genuine usage of imagination and its emancipatory potential of social organization and experimentation, it is only by means of a long labour that we could arrive there, if at all. The problem of political imagination is thus not limited to a mere utopia that we desire, *but implies the capacity of envisaging something that could take hold as a structuring principle of action with transformative effects*. Consequently, it is no accident that it is only in his recently published *Living in the End Times*, which was appeared some twenty-three years after his first major theoretical publication *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, that Žižek finally gives a provisional answer to the question of what a communist society would look like – or that here, instead of supplying a program with exact details he is satisfied with mobilizing the power of artistic images (Žižek 2010: 365-383). What is important in the latter is their ability to escape the coordinates of the possible dictated by the regime within which we live – we must remember, art has the very ability to *rewrite* the Symbolic insofar as true art is an event^v –, which means that they can serve as a means to “schematize” sociopolitical reality and thereby supply a positive basis for a source of action. But this work cannot be done on its own: it is only after painstaking disclosing ideological obfuscation of political imagination and identifying possible sites of emancipation that such images (for instance, that of a communist society) could hope to effectuate change.

In the second place, the strict and precise manner of political intervention aimed at by Žižek's writings indicates that the “intellectualization” of politics is not the foreclosure of the political (the standard argument according to which writing on paper is not action: abstractions and words do not suffice, we need sweat and blood) and is even its condition of possibility if we understand “intellectualization” properly. To exemplify this point, we may draw upon one of the great achievements that Žižek sees in Lenin as an implicit reference to the methodology of his own work. Firstly, Žižek cites Lenin from *What Is to Be Done*:

all worship of the spontaneity of the working class-movement, all belittling of the role of the “the conscious element,” of the role of Social Democracy, *means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of the bourgeois ideology upon workers.* [...] the *only* choice is – either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course [...] the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to subordination to bourgeois ideology [...] for the spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism. (Lenin 1999: 40-41; quoted in Žižek 2002b: 183)

What Žižek strikes here is the moment of *externality* needed if the working class is to attain adequate class-consciousness of their intrinsic emancipatory potential and the direct way in which Lenin's theorization thereof is immediately applicable to today's socio-political reality: left to our own devices, instead of coming together to think a new beyond of the antagonisms that plague our everyday lives, we naturally fall upon various institutions or groups which attempt to solve them from within the current symbolic order and are thus incapable of challenging it as such but merely help propagate its inherent problems, just as the spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to trade unionism as an attempts to establish more rights for workers within capitalism instead of attacking it head on. Without this moment of externality, we are incapable of perceiving the necessity of imagining a new order and as a result lack the means of organization and planning to bring it about. Žižek links Lenin's insight to one of the fundamental tenets of Lacanian psychoanalytical practice according to which, rather than being beings who strive to know who we are, we fight against self-knowledge – we prefer to *not* know the truth about ourselves and for things to keep going as they have been, even if our reality is not ideal, and perhaps even painful; as long as the defense mechanisms we have developed to cope continue functioning, we see no need to change anything. In therapy analysands do not want to face the dark truth of their desire: they only decide to undergo analysis once the symptoms that they have developed to cope with the latter stop working and merely ask of the analyst that they help things go back to the way they were before their malfunctioning – the job of the latter being, of course, to *come between* the analysand and their desire and force them to confront that which they do not want to confront, which, though violent, traumatic and potentially dangerous, forces them to undergo a transformation which rewrites their symbolic universe. In this sense, the external element the analyst tries to make the analysand experience does not come from outside the latter, but is a constitutive part of them, paradoxically internal: it signifies nothing other than the analysand's non-coincidence to self and lack of strength or inability to face it, even if there is a “potential” for a cure there (life is that bad as it is, right? why risk making it worse in trying to it better?). The working class is in the exact same position, whereby on Žižek's reading any attempt at revolutionary organization must find a way to call

those for whom the revolution would be most advantageous and who hold the key for its success to their psychoanalytical truth:

This external element does not stand for objective knowledge, that is, its externality is strictly internal, the need for the Party stems from the fact that the working class is never “fully itself.” So the ultimate meaning of Lenin’s insistence on this externality is that “adequate” class-consciousness does not emerge “spontaneously,” that it does not correspond to a “spontaneous tendency” of the working class; on the contrary, what is “spontaneous” is the *misperception* of one’s social position, so that “adequate” class-consciousness has to be fought out through hard work. Here, again, the situation is homologous to the one in psychoanalysis: as Lacan emphasizes again and again, there is no primordial *Wissenstrieb* (drive-to-knowledge): the spontaneous human attitude is that of *je n’en veux rien* savoir – I don’t want to know anything about it; and, far from realizing our innermost tendency, the psychoanalytic treatment has to proceed “against the grain.” (Žižek 2002b: 189)

What should be clear from this is the highly layered methodology of Žižek’s writings. They occupy two positions at once – that of the analyst and that of the Party – whose role overlap in a single task, namely, the rude awakening into one’s place in the social totality and the various means by which this status is obfuscated by the regime within which we live. In this respect, Žižek’s political analyses and ideological critiques are an attempt to “educate” the masses in the German meaning of *Bildung*: what is of importance is not the transmission of knowledge in the sense of handing down information, but the cultivation or formation of a group, recognizing that it is only by means of knowledge that one can change one’s own relationship to self and world and come to see the possibility for change lurking around us (the task of the Party); and, at the same time, it realizes that because this truth that is “being taught” is not a mere recapitulation of an objective state of affairs – empirical descriptions themselves already involve a certain relationship to the reality that is being described, there is for Žižek a “distortion” constitutive of vision as such – access to the truth depends upon an engaged position of the subject which is only opened up by means of an external encounter (the task of the analyst). Consequently, those who criticize Žižek for not supplying us with a positive political program completely miss the point in another crucial manner not mentioned above: in a therapeutic setting, we would say that, remaining at the logic of demand, they are unable to breakthrough to the moment of desire that is necessary for the psychoanalytical cure, the latter being the condition of the possibility for the creation of a positive political program and its having effects in a global scene as soon as one has identified the tasks of the Party and the analyst. After all, the analyst does not have the answers to the questions the analysand poses (they do not occupy the discourse of the master) – their job is only to institute a subjective position from which they can be sought by the

subject (they must put themselves in the enigmatic position of the discourse of the analyst, for otherwise any “cure” risks leading to a relapse). Žižek's position is an attempt to rethink the very role that the Party should play for us today.

The foreclosure of imagination

If we are to be brought to the emancipatory potential of our subjective position by an external encounter with truth, not only must our spontaneous tendencies be abruptly shaken, but the various kinds of ideological structures that deny this potential must be disclosed. This is the first step in establishing the conditions of possibility which would enable us to imagine and effectuate authentic change because it would only be by means of it that we could develop a reliable cartographical cognitive map of the socio-political deadlocks that plague us and the subversive possibility that might silently lurk within them, assuming that it is by recourse to the latter, as that which reveals the inner limitations of the currently existing political order, that radical transformation could occur. With this in mind, Žižek outlines a wide array of manners by way of which even what appears to be a respectable, in itself intrinsically positive discourse, below the surface might hide an obscene, oppressive function that, by suffocating possible sites of political conflict, prevents us to tap into it and by consequence renders our capacity for political imagination and action paralyzed, the two being intimately woven together in any attempt to get out of conflict. Three of these could be said to be fundamental to Žižek's writings insofar as they reoccur again and again in different forms: the inherent shortcomings that can be traced in the discourses of democracy, multiculturalism, and freedom of speech.

For Žižek, democracy as we now know it (liberal democracy combined with capitalism) is – to put it bluntly – a failure. Although on the surface it comprises a regulated parliamentary system of deliberation based on achieving rational consensus between individual parties in power, which gives the impression of fighting as much as possible against ideological dogmatism, one of its fundamental deficiencies is that what is often lost in its “democratic” discourse is the fact that the very political element that was at stake in the original demand by a particular group usually loses any subversive sting it may have by virtue of being integrated into said process of deliberation. This is becoming more evident in the continual conversion of the left liberal strategy to that of the Third Way, whereby the coordinates of the playing field are always in advance determined and every attempt to transform the possible is precluded: “[t]he Third Way dream of the Left was that a pack with the Devil might work out: OK, no revolution,

but at least we will be able to save some of the achievements of the Welfare State, and build a society that is tolerant towards sexual, religious and ethnic minorities” (Žižek 2002b: 304). In order for a demand to have weight in the parliamentary system, a particular demand must be translated so that it is compatible with its rules, this being seen as a condition for democracy – not only is it only through this that a demand can acquire efficacy in the system, but it must be open to its game if one is to arrive at fair and just results. To operate, in other words, the democratic discourse has to mask that there is no possible compromise between the Left and the Right because the rules of the game have already been rigged. Any attempt at compromise not only prevents authentic political change but more disconcertingly risks reinforcing the current political order and all of its problems. Most recently in Canada, a striking example of this occurred. After the government of Charest decided to increase tuition fees by 90% in the coming four years in an effort to privatize universities according to the neo-liberal system, which traditionally Quebec has refused to accept, seeing education as a public affair, and selling this change off as a necessary change, students were outraged – and quickly began organizing massive strikes and protests. In late March, 250,000 students took the street. Not only did the government and even media refuse to recognize the massive calibre of the protest – it is perhaps the protest biggest in the history of Canada (Radovac 2012: unpaginated), and the number of students who were organized together in Montreal *in one day* was about equal to the number of students who protested in over 100 German cities during the famous 2009 *Bildungsstreik*^{vi} – but their response just missed the point. Seeing that increased tuition does pose a problem for students, they first offered a series of government loans to help them out. The students rejecting this “offer” as merely adding insult to injury, the government then proposed another solution: prolonging the increase over seven years instead of five (though in the process accounting for inflation and in the process *increasing* tuition more). The students rejecting this second “offer,” the government began proclaiming that the students themselves are obviously not open to negotiation and simply unwilling to compromise their position, unlike them who continue to make concrete propositions hoping for a democratic solution (ignoring, of course, the fact that many student organizations *were* making concrete propositions). What is missed here, as in all such instances of “democratic” discourse when abused in such a way, is that the particular demand (do not raise tuition!) stands for the universal rights of the people as such (stop privatizing our commons – healthcare, education, natural resources), whereby its integration into the current order would result in the latter's internal overhauling (the disintegration of all neo-liberal measures). The students are in the right to refuse negotiation on this point, because as soon as they do they have lost: by being made to enter into the game of

liberal-democratic negotiation, the demands of the protesters would be robbed of their very subversive core *precisely insofar as they would be allowed to play a role in the ordered and rational process of “democratic” deliberation*. Left liberals “like to evoke racism, ecology, workers' grievances, and so on, to score points over the conservatives – *without endangering the system*” (Žižek 2002b: 300). In this respect, we see exactly what Žižek aims at – by zoning in on the ideological obfuscation at work in apparently “democratic” discourse which attempts to cover up the subversive sting of a given demand by a particular group, he offers a theoretical framework by means of which one could unleash otherwise hidden emancipatory potential; and once this latter is tapped into, and cultivated, then we can begin to envision various ways in which its integration into the sociopolitical sphere would alter, or should alter, the latter. That is to say, it aims to create the conditions under which one could bring forth imagination as a way of inventing new forms of life where the ones we have show themselves not merely as wanting, but oppressive.

For similar reasons, Žižek is also a harsh critic of multiculturalism. Although this has for some earned him the title of an eurocentric racist, one would be wise to not rush to condemn him – for even if his writings do indeed exhibit a rhetorical use of shock and make use of a sharp strategic element of deliberating offending to shake his readers from their unreflected attitudes, beneath the textual surface of their produced effects there are well-reasoned arguments that deserve to be underscored. However, Žižek does not merely aim to show how the discourse of multiculturalism is inherently ambiguous or undecidable insofar as it gives birth to stronger forms of that which it is precisely fighting against; it also aims to bring to the fore the internal limits of the discourse itself by demonstrating its possible ideological value: although it appears, on first view, to struggle for the establishment of new rights of recognition for oppressed and excluded minorities, it often merely covers up primordially political struggles, so that we should be wary when we hear the term “racism” being used:

in Slovenia recently, a big problem arose with a Roma family who were camping close to a small town. When a man was killed in the camp, the townspeople started to protest, demanding that the Roma be moved from the camp (which they had occupied illegally) to another location, organizing vigilante groups, etc. Predictably, Slovenian liberals condemned them as racists, locating racism in this isolated small town, though the liberals, living comfortably in the big cities, had no contact with the Roma other than meeting their representatives in front of the TV cameras. When the TV reporters interviewed the “racists” from the town, it became clear they were a group of people frightened by the constant fighting and shooting in the Roma camp, by the theft of animals from their farms, and by other forms of minor harassment. It is all too easy to

say (as did the liberals) that the Roma way of life is (also) a consequence of centuries of exclusion and mistreatment, that the townspeople should be more receptive to the Roma, and so on and so forth. What nobody was prepared to do vis-à-vis the local “racists” was over concrete solutions for the very real problems the Roma camp evidently posed for them. (Žižek 2010: 45-46)

Žižek's point here is not to argue against multicultural tolerance, but merely to show that in the name of such tolerance *political stakes are often as such covered up by ideological gestures, political problems whose inclusion within the symbolic would demand its radical overhauling*. In the above situation, the central matter is not the “racism” of a small group of Slovenians. Even if we were to admit that they are actually subjectively racist, the reason for which they are is strictly speaking political, that is, objective, so that by merely calling out a subjective outburst of racism as what is at issue instead of the concrete socio-political conditions that lead to it the subversive kernel that latently exists in the situation is lost. By criticizing multiculturalism in this manner, Žižek is merely saying that it must be more radical, for otherwise it could obfuscate possible sites of emancipatory struggle and thereby the possibility of bringing forth and inventing the new (the inclusion of the oppressed and excluded), which is its own goal.

The third discourse whose hidden ideological function Žižek examines in several contexts is that of the freedom of speech. Although our liberal-democratic order prides itself upon the proclamation of the freedom of speech as an inviolable right (don't we only have to think of Noam Chomsky's defense of Holocaust revisionist writer Robert Faurisson to prove this fact?), nevertheless any attempt to envisage a beyond of capitalism and engage in a political project that seeks to confront liberal democracy is considered totalitarian. Beneath our alleged freedom to criticize the powers that be in all public forms of debate available to us – an apparent incarnation of Kant's celebrated right to the public use of reason in “What is Enlightenment?” – is an implicit *Denkverbot*:

Today's liberal democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten *Denkverbot* similar to the infamous *Berufsverbot* (prohibition on employing individuals with radical Left leanings in the state organs) in Germany in the late 1960s – the moment we show a minimal sign of engaging in political projects which aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: “Benevolent as it is, this will inevitably end in a new Gulag!” [...] What we encounter here is the ultimate example of what Anna Dinerstein and Mike Neary have called the project of *disutopia*: “not just the temporary absence of Utopia, but the political celebration of the end of social dreams.” (Žižek 2002b: 167-168)^{vii}

All critiques are allowed, and even encouraged, but only if they *stand within the coordinates of capitalism and its stand-in liberal democracy*, that is to say, only if they can be made use of to

promote and strengthen the existing structural order, something which is highlighted by the the alarming rate of censor coming from so called democratic Western states.^{viii} According to Žižek, it is in this precise sense that we should understand the constant references to historical catastrophes caused by perverse forms of government that were once in power and contemporary ones in the Third World which prevail to this day – they are serve the ideological function of foreclosing any desire that may be building up inside us to want the new from the outset by “demonstrating” how futile it is to think even a future outside of the present known to us, for it is only going to lead to something worse (Žižek 2002b: 168). They “[serve] to cast a shadow over every radical political project – to enforce the *Denkverbot* against a radical political imagination” (Žižek 2001: 67) thereby robbing us of something irreducibly important: a capacity for social creativity. Political imagination, and its emancipatory potential, is cut off before it gets a chance to bloom: “the notion of ‘totalitarianism,’ far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgag*: instead of of enabling us to think, forcing is to acquire new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even prevents us from thinking” (Žižek 2001: 3). It functions “as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical engagement” (Žižek 2001: 4). The fundamental task for us today is therefore to establish the conditions of possibility of truly free thinking uncontaminated such ideological obfuscation, whereby we could begin to examine the socio-political terrain for possible sites of subversive conflict that could, by means of a cultivated collective imagination, come together to enact change. In this respect, Žižek's message is simple: rather than letting ourselves be taken by the discourse we find around us, we should not be afraid to think, to envision, and by that organize ourselves to act.

The foreclosure of the political

For Žižek, the foreclosure of political imagination is merely a part of a greater attempt at the foreclosure of the political as such. Although these forms of foreclosure are structurally different, nevertheless they constitute one singular phenomenon that can only be addressed in its totality in terms of action. In order to draw out the drastic nature of this specific form of foreclosure, Žižek draws upon, and appropriates in his own way by recourse to Lacan, a distinction made by Rancière between “the political” and “police” (see Rancière 1995): whereas the political stands for that which intrinsically threatens the existing order from within by means of an act of political subjectivization that dislodges its self-identity (and is related, in its act of

disturbance, to the act of founding the new, and therefore to social creativity as such) and thereby constitutes the true nature of political conflict (conflict never being able to be subsumed within the coordinates of the status quo, but presenting something irreconcilable in the fold of our existence), police is roughly equivalent to our socio-political substance and its governing rules and laws, which, in order to smoothly function, must deny this moment of the Real represented by the political. Operating at the level of the Imaginary and Symbolic, it expresses the specific role that any given individual has within society by articulating a system of coordinates within which the political as interruptive as such has no place and can have no place, for to grant it a place would signal the perturbation of its positivity: “there is no ontological guarantee or foundation of politics in the a priori Void of Being, in the subject as constitutive Lack/Finitude/Incompleteness; one looks in vain for the philosophico-transcendental 'condition of possibility' of politics. The order of 'police' (the positive order of Being) is in itself full” (Žižek 2000: 169). As a result, when the political occurs from within the reign of police, it necessarily occurs as a devastating event that tries to rewrite the fabric of social being. Following Rancière, Žižek outlines three forms of denial of the political and identifies a fourth that Rancière fails to theorize (Žižek 2000: 190):

- ⌚ *Arche-politics* represents any attempt to define an organically organized society which is intrinsically closed upon itself and therefore complete. By means of an inner structuration, there emerges an homogeneous space wherein there is no room for tension or conflict in a strictly political sense. In this regard, one thinks of the vision of society given by Plato in the *Republic* as an *Urbild*.
- ⌚ *Para-politics* is the tentative to depoliticize the political by officially accepting it and making it an internal part of its own decision-making structure. It does so by including political conflict within a representative system composed of recognized parties and regulated by a strict series of rules. Since parties continually switch the place of executive power, there is a semblance of a heterogeneous, non-hierarchical space by means of which clear and just solutions can be found between agents involved in dispute. Habermas' discourse ethics can be seen as a representative of this form.
- ⌚ *Meta-politics* is the form of politics advocated by the Marxism of utopian socialists. It accepts political strife, but refuses to understand it as an irreducible site that follows its own logic – instead it sees the latter as a shadow-theatre of events that are occurring *auf einem anderen Schauplatz*, namely, that of economics. It proclaims that “the 'true' goal of politics is thus its self-cancellation, the transformation of the 'administration of people' into the 'administration of things' within a fully self-transparent rational order of the

collective Will” (Žižek 2000: 190). Here economics itself is understood as apolitical.

- ⌚ What is for Žižek the most cunning form of the foreclosure of the political, one which Rancière himself does not mention, is what Žižek calls *ultra-politics*, which names a radical attempt to depoliticize the political by a militarization of politics. By means of a purely symbolical intervention – the creation of a new master signifier – there occurs a formal reconfiguration of the social space: although nothing changes at the level of content insofar as concrete social problems (high levels of unemployment, poverty, lack of infrastructure, etc.) still remain intact, by restructuring the social space's universe of meaning so that there is a war between 'Us' and 'Them' the political as such is denied in the name of a greater 'Evil' which threatens all prosperity and thus constitutes us as a 'People.' The most pronounced form of this would be Nazi Germany (see Žižek 2003: 148-162).

Although it would appear that our contemporary political situation is more or less that of para-politics, Žižek disagrees. What is characteristic of each of the above forms of the *denial* of the “systemic” violence intrinsic to political conflict is that they operate by means of its implicit repression – they function, in other words, by an indirect recognition of its existence and its irreducible and dangerous role (for the reign of the police). The situation that we live in today is much worse, for it understands itself as *post-political*: what we encounter is not just a fifth form of foreclosure that stands alongside those of arche-politics, para-politics, meta-politics and ultra-politics, insofar as in post-politics these forms are not supplemented by another, but are rendered obsolete. The difference between them and post-politics is not one of degree, but of kind: rather than merely repressing political conflict by an ideological device (fixed social relations, party representation, historical necessity, 'Us' and 'Them, etc.), it attempts to completely foreclosure it by presenting itself as a new age that is intrinsically post-ideological. Thanks to science and technocratic methodologies we are able to bypass the evils of previous oppressive governments: by means of the objective resources given to us in the form of opinion polls performed by sociologists, concrete analyses done by trained economists, or various statistics detailing the ecological impact of usage of raw resources, expert advice enables us to develop a new form of discourse which frees it from ideological constraints. The end result is a compromise which is nothing other than a general consensus amongst the diverse groups that constitute the social field as such and is therefore the most apt to immediately satisfy their needs in a manner just to all. The self-evident problem with this new kind of politics for Žižek, however, is its “pragmatism,” that is, precisely the reason for which it is considered just: the only way that an idea can be judged good is if it can immediately offer a solution to the present

debates – but naturally any idea which explicitly would demand a stark re-modularization of the sociopolitical would be hereby excluded and deemed bad, even dangerous, insofar as it could not be realized within it. In this sense, the apparently scientifically grounded “post”-ideological system which guarantees the immediate satisfaction of the people tacitly only allows the existing order to have the upper hand. In other words, the founding gesture of contemporary politics, which is supposed to permit genuine change in the right direction, thereby enables certain injustices to be perpetuated. The matter at hand is how can we begin to transform the political so that certain kind of radical changes can be made if our post-political constellation paralyzes the political as eruption as such – how we can begin to rethink the new, the different, imagine a radically different future.

Politics as the art of the impossible

For Žižek, politics should be more than a negotiation within an ideal discursive space regulated by rules within a party system government. It should be more than a general consensus arrived at by balancing diverse positions as mediated by expert opinion as the only way to immediately satisfy the needs of the people. What these options – which perhaps best describe today's fundamental fantasy of liberal democracy – miss is the possibility of an authentically political act understood as an intervention: the latter is not only that which escapes all pragmatism, but more strongly is in direct contradiction with it. It is not something which merely works well or gets the job done by appeasing conflict while keeping the given order intact, but rather something that transforms the very framework with which it occurs and in this precise sense presents a form of systemic violence, for the rewriting of social being is never a mere impersonal, non-biased affair. When seen in this light, Žižek's writings are largely an attempt to make such a conception of a political act thinkable as a viable alternative for us. We do not need to contend ourselves with what we have because it, compared to other governmental forms of politics, not only seems to operate more smoothly but also undoubtedly gives us a greater degree of personal freedom. *We can risk something new.*

But to say that there is a distinction to be drawn between the political and police is not to claim that we have “the full positivity of the police order [which is] perturbed from time to time by the heterogeneous intervention of political subjectivity” (Žižek 2000: 169). What Rancière, ultimately fetishizing the order of police according to Žižek (Žižek 2000: 169), fails to recognize on his account is that an “ontologically” dualist distinction between the political and police is

false: *any* positive political order relies upon an excessive gesture that is arbitrary, which in turn gets disavowed in the process of its positivization in a “smooth” fabric that would be able to produce a structured order according to its own internal principles (in a move that resembles the transition from the master's discourse to the university's discourse, which gives a body of knowledge to the former). In other words, social being as such is structurally always already a direct consequence of a gap within the field of reality and is thus never purely neutral: dependent upon a moment of the subject's non-coincidence with itself in its being in the world (conflict), it is thoroughly penetrated by the political as a destructive eruption (the Real). To argue that political intervention must be systemically violent if it is to be authentic is to, in the same breath, remind us that every political order is itself grounded on such an intervention, whereby its possibility for us today become vindicated and a first space is opened up from within which we can begin to move towards its actualization despite all attempts at its ideological foreclosure:

there is no Power without violence. Power always has to rely on an obscene stain of violence; political space is never 'pure', but always involves some kind of reliance on 'pre-political' violence. Of course, the relationship between political power and pre-political violence is one of mutual implication: not only is violence the necessary supplement of power, (political) power itself is always-already at the root of every apparently 'non-political' relationship of violence. The accepted violence and direct relationship of subordination in the Army, the Church, the family, and other 'non-political' social forms is in itself the 'reification' of a certain ethico-*political* struggle and decision – a critical analysis should discern the hidden *political* process that sustains all these 'non-' or 'pre-political' relationships. In human society, the political is the englobing structuring principle, so that every neutralization of some partial content as 'non-political' is a political gesture *par excellence*. (Žižek 2000: 191)

For a political act to be a proper intervention, however, it cannot merely come between and interrupt the existing order. Such would be no more than a momentary violence, a sudden and perhaps temporary explosion of discontinuity in social reality, which would accomplish lead nowhere in itself. If an act is to be *stricto sensu* political (that is, a *productive* Real), it certainly needs a certain speed or momentum that is capable of perturbing the positivity of the existing order, but also a direction, a structuring principle of unity – it needs, in other words, to be guided by something, to *enact* something, if it is to be more than a mere acting out, for otherwise it does not contain within itself the resources required to bring about lasting change. Political transformation is never purely destructive: it must be able to, in a second moment, gentrify or domesticate its own violence by giving itself the dynamicity of a form. In this sense, political imagination is not merely that which conceives a new order in the world of thought – although

this “utopian” moment of creative vision may be a necessary for an act to get off the ground, it cannot rest there; political imagination is strongly tied to that which disturbs the given order from within because it is precisely that which provides the conditions of possibility of an authentic intervention by supplying an irruptive act with a specific horizon. Being that which converts the violence of an act into a political gesture, it cannot be in and of itself separated from the coordinates of social being and its materiality: arising out of the latter and its immanent antagonism, political imagination occupies an obscure zone that is, while stuck in the present in deadlock, is minimally beyond it insofar as it tries to bring forth a future that is not analytically “contained” within the now but can only be synthetically “achieved” if there is an act of disruption (the violence of the first moment) followed by an act of combination (the politicizing form of the second moment). Or, as Žižek says, “[o]ne can also put it in terms of the well-known definition of politics as the 'art of the possible': authentic politics is, rather, the exact opposite, that is, the art of the impossible – it changes the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation” (Žižek 2000: 200).

To say that politics is the art of the impossible is say that politics in its most raw and englobing form is dependent upon *imagining* the impossible because it is only by means of the latter it can be realized. The properly political act is thus identical imaginative act of social creation that should, at least in certain moments, be given rein. According to Žižek, it is precisely because we have lost this capacity that we can no longer think beyond capitalism and its puppet liberal democracy. In turn, this means that we no longer have the means to cultivate a goal directed momentum which would constitutive an eventful political intervention, so that most of our acts, rather than being subversive in nature, are either reduced to to a mere acting out or just result in small local changes, but changes which will never sediment to a larger more wide scale overhauling of the system, which on Žižek's account is what we really need. In light of this lack, Žižek gives a series of critiques of a wide array movements in contemporary politics which respond to the threats and dangers posed by capitalism ranging from Third Way politics, the construction of collectives outside of capitalist relations, academic critique, to various activist organizations, whose aim is to show how these in many ways perhaps merely amplify the problem. For Žižek, they all share a fundamental deficiency: not only are they completely compatible with the capitalist framework, but they are also only possible from within it. On account of this, Žižek is “tempted to reverse Marx's thesis 11: the first task today is precisely *not* to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things [...], but to the question the hegemonic ideological coordinates” (Žižek 2002b: 170). However, Žižek's claim that we should take a step back should not be understood as a tacit form of conservatism

hidden in his “radical” politics nor as fetishization of theoretical contemplation: at least in terms of his own self-comprehension (whose legitimacy we could question or psychoanalytically criticize,) he puts forth this proposition because he believes that, in the framework of today, when we do act, instead of opening up an authentic space for political action (the art of the impossible), our actions themselves risk being always already absorbed within the existing hegemonic ideological order insofar as sites of authentic conflict are concealed, critique and political engagement are only tolerated if the current regime is not brought into question, or the rules regulating unjustly all deliberation pre-determine certain kinds of responses (and thereby succumb to the possible).

It is only with this in mind that we can comprehend why Žižek is so critical of organizations such as Médecins sans frontières and Green Peace or movements such as feminism and anti-racism: although the work that they have done has been (and still is) undoubtedly quite effective in bringing about some degree of change and has certainly had a positive impact in the world, their efforts, for him, fail because they have exhausted their potential. They must be *reinvented*. Even if, for instance, Green Peace succeeds in establishing an expansive boycott of certain companies, or increase overall awareness of diverse issues, this does not suffice: on Žižek's reading, they succeed merely at actualizing a form of interpassivity like an obsessional neurotic who is constantly active to (unconsciously) avoid coming to terms with some deeper problem – just as someone who talks all the time, never ceasing to tell jokes and going on about nothing, is merely trying to fill up the silence so that it will not bring to the fore the underlying stress of social interaction as such. In this respect, such movements do not constitute a political intervention, although they may give off the air of being one: “aggressive passivity [is] the standard 'interpassive' mode of our participation in socio-ideological life in which we are active all the time in order to make sure that nothing will happen, that nothing will change” (Žižek 2009b: 342). In the same vein, Žižek criticizes radical left academics who, with great zeal, eternally write diatribes against sexism, racism, problems in the Third World, yet who hold prestigious tenured positions – their nonstop textual production is often mere a defence against their own identification with capitalist logic that makes their position and good life in an (American) university certain and fail safe: “[w]ith respect to this radical chick, our first gesture towards Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be one of praise: at least they play the game straight, and are honest in their acceptance of the global capitalist coordinates – unlike pseudo-radical academic Leftists who adopt an attitude of utter disdain towards the Third Way, while their own radicalism ultimately amounts to an empty gesture which obliges no one to do anything definite” (Žižek 2002b: 172). Žižek thus makes a

distinction between veritable political engagement and “weekend revolutionaries” who try to do what they can in their free time to change the world but change nothing, into which most of the academic world, according to him, falls. Although many of his critics claim that it is precisely Žižek who best fits into this latter category, what this strategic framework I am offering permits to suggest that what they fall to realize is the very specific intent underlying Žižek’s writings: because they does not aim at critique merely for the sake of critique, but gives themselves the difficult task of trying to cultivate a capacity for political imagination as the condition of the possibility of politics as the art of the impossible, they (at least in spirit) try the best it can to circumvent this problem. Žižek’s proclamation that we must, instead of acting, withdraw, is not him falling back into the very logic of endless critique to which he is opposed, but an attempt to carve up the space within which what he considers a truly subversive and inherently aggressive act could emerge: “[i]n such a constellation, the first truly critical (‘aggressive,’ violent) step is to withdraw into passivity, to refuse to participate – Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ is the necessary first step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity, for an act that will actually change the coordinates of the constellation” (Žižek 2009b: 342). What is at stake is not withdrawal from the political sphere of action, but more radically *its very creation*, a creation which has as its condition of possibility a subtraction from the existing order and whose zero-level can only be that of refusing to act from within its coordinates. The question then becomes *how* this is possible and *if* Žižek is successful.

If today’s Left is in such a dire situation, it is because it does not, according to Žižek, recognize that there is no communication, no genuine negotiation, possible, within liberal democracy. We cannot continue to play according to its rules because they have always already subdued our demands in the process of making them compatible with its framework. For Žižek, the issue is that the Left – just like the feminist and anti-racism movements in his view – needs new resources, that it no longer has any subversive core, and is quickly becoming a mere ideological supplement to capitalism (just think of how, for instance, the movements of the 60s merely lead to the new form of cultural capitalism, whereby its critiques were merely made an intrinsic part of its notion [see Žižek 2009a: 51-65; & Žižek 2010: 355-357]). As a result, it is only by denying the legitimacy of the post-political game that we can establish the room within which we can regroup and regain strength – a gesture that requires not only that we withdraw into “passivity,” but also patience and hard work. In this respect, if Žižek calls us to look to Lenin in this time of need, it is not with the intention of saying that we should turn to him to find the means by which we can incite a new communist revolution, using his own “solution” to the politico-economic situation of early twentieth-century Russia as a guide for our own

(which would constitute an anachronistic gesture bound to fail); rather it is because the latter was driven by the same catastrophe that we are facing, that is, the failure of the Left:

It is true that today's Left is undergoing the shattering experience of the end of an entire epoch for the progressive movement, an experience which compels it to reinvent the very basic coordinates of its project – however, it was exactly homologous experience that gave birth to Leninism. (Žižek 2002a: 4)

The idea is not to return to Lenin, but to *repeat* him in the Kierkegaardian sense: to retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation. The return to Lenin aims neither at nostalgically *re-enacting* the “good old revolutionary times,” nor at an opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of the old program to “new conditions,” but at *repeating*, in the present worldwide conditions, the Leninist gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism. (Žižek 2002a: 11)

But how did Lenin accomplish such a radical reinvention of the political and why is it of such extreme importance today? In the first place, he argued against those who searched for the objective conditions that must be fulfilled before the communist revolution could occur, fearing that a premature seizure of power would only lead to its downfall (“the beacons of historical Necessity cannot be seen”). Lenin realized that there can be *no* big Other that protects the revolutionary act by paving its way – even if the revolutionary act requires a certain opening, one cannot reduce its coming about to the cold hands of fate. In the second place, in the aftermath of the February Revolution, which had accomplished noteworthy feats (i.e. freedom of organization), it was clear to Lenin that one could not rely upon democratic legitimacy (“only with the People on our side, are we to succeed”) – this kind of pure democratic engagement by the entire population was a mere fantasy that could never be actualized: if the gains of the February Revolution were not to be lost, then another revolution was needed to bring Russian society directly to socialism, by which there is a short-circuit in the orthodox Marxist accounts of the emergence of the new human society. He saw a potential opening and refused to let it become a missed opportunity just because it seemed impossible that this opening would suffice by itself. It is at this precise juncture of the impossible that Lenin's politics are of such extreme importance for us today: to repeat Lenin is not a return Lenin – “to repeat Lenin is to accepted that 'Lenin is dead,' that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously” (Žižek 2002b : 310) – but to recognize that “there was a utopian spark in it worth saving,” something “in Lenin more than Lenin himself” (Žižek 2002b : 310): what Lenin exemplifies is the emancipatory potential in art of *imagining the impossible*, the intrinsically revolutionary capacity of political imagination to effectuate substantial change in the world by rewriting the very coordinates of

what we consider thinkable and feasible in social reality. In this way, what Lenin shows us regardless of the particular direction communism in Russia went in after him is that authentic imagination is not a mere envisioning some kind of utopian future beyond in the distant dregs of historical time, but the efficacy of an “enacted utopia” (Žižek 2002b : 259) as that which, by merely being imagined, can transform the present – through Lenin, we see that by virtue of the sole act of envisaging that which is impossible, we can alter the conditions of the here and now so that it can arise. True, enacted utopia is not a mere phantasmagoric dream, an unrealizable fantasy: it is that which, although literally “nowhere” in the existing order, *should be* “somewhere.” Repeating Lenin means nothing more than a disruptive break from the contemporary political regime and its reigning ideologies (the politics of the possible) to carve up a space within which we can once again imagine a future that does not exist (the art of the impossible, a politics of the Real) and which constitutes itself by “a refined search for 'signs coming from the future,' for indications of this new radical questioning of the system” (Žižek 2010: 363).

Conclusion

I hope to have succeeded in demonstrating that one can identify a clear methodology at work in Žižek's socio-political writings, which many – Žižek critics and admirers alike – often fail to perceive. This failure can lead either to confusion at the level of philosophical hermeneutics in terms of theory and praxis or even worse to gross misunderstandings of the intended effect and intention of Žižek's work. In this respect, the strategy which I have offered as a means of tackling the latter – the triad of truth, imagination and act – not only has a theoretical advantage of allowing one to “systematize” his multifarious remarks and often labyrinthine digressions concerning various historical events and diverse intellectuals, writers, politicians and philosophers by excavating a certain shared conceptual momentum and target from them, but also, and perhaps more importantly, is able to shed a new light upon them. Although I have focused on three interrelated strategical elements that can be seen in Žižek's writings, I do not mean to suggest that there are not others. Sadly, I must leave a more detailed analysis of the nature of political truth, imagination and act for a future time.

If this reading I have developed does indeed proclaim that the majority of Žižek's critics are rather superficial in their attacks insofar as they in very important manner do not comprehend what is at stake in his work, this is not to in turn valorize Žižek or suggest that his

political philosophy is immune from fault. It is easy to criticize *what* a philosopher says; the truly difficult task is to understand *why* and *for what* purpose he has said it. If one can always produce the stance of critique from within one's own already established perspective, the second demands of us by principle to open up our perspective, to risk the possibility of changing our vision to such an extent that our very organ of sight changes (what seems to me to be *the* experience and *the* danger of philosophizing), but this at the same moment brings forth the possibility of evaluating the grounding intuitions of a philosopher for what they are. As a result, instead of asking if Žižek is a eurocentric racist, or so blind by communist ideology that he is unable to see that communism as a hypothesis has failed, perhaps we should instead apply to his own philosophy the very triad of truth, imagination, and act that appears to be central to its notion to see if it, as a self-proclaimed *intervention* in the original etymological sense of “to interrupt” and “to come between,” truly can be what it desires to be. Does Žižek successfully occupy the double position of the Party and the analyst and thereby produce a traumatic experience of truth? Does he demonstrate the necessity of political imagination? Do his sociopolitical writings constitute what is apparently the most violent act possible for us today of subtraction as a means of cultivating social creativity and organization? Or, to push things further: Is all that the militant can do today not act in order to guarantee that their act will not be subsumed by capitalism's auto-movement? Has the radical Left actually exhausted all its potential? If it was indeed self-evident decades ago that the only response to capitalism was an unpredictable “idealist” event, is this still true for us today with the rise of the Left in Latin American and the recent economic meltdowns in America and Europe? Although I must leave these questions unanswered, posing them in such a direct way by way of conclusion at the very least does underline one fundamental fact, namely that the issues raised by Žižek and the very founding intuitions of his writings touch the very core of our contemporary constellation in an undoubtedly acute manner.

Notes

- i *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has called Žižek “the Elvis of cultural theory” and many commentators believe that his thinking is more of a theatrical spectacle than a collected set of propositions, the latest expression of which is collected volume of essays entitled (Clow & Mangold forthcoming).
- ii Although Rex Bulter has a positive take on his theory itself being a symptom, nevertheless such a position risks contaminating all of Žižek's philosophy with the taint of sickness, whereby it would lose its sting and relevance (cf. Bulter 2005: 1-3).
- iii One of the major tasks of Žižek is, fighting “against the distorted picture of Lacan's obscurantism, to [locate] him in the lineage of rationalism. Lacan's theory is perhaps the most radical contemporary vision of the Enlightenment” (Žižek 1989: 7)
- iv “A feature of the hyper-capitalism of recent years is that it abolishes historical memory. The squalor and misery of communism are now as remote to most people as life under feudalism. When Žižek and others like him defend communism – ‘the communist hypothesis,’ as they call it – they can pass over the fact that the hypothesis has been falsified again and again, in dozens of different countries, because their audience knows nothing of the past” (Gray 2009: unpaginated).
- v Perhaps the most easily accessible way to grasp the potential power of artist images is by recourse to literature, which continually challenges our conventional modes of understanding the world and in the process reinvents the very idiom of a language by means of which that understanding originates and, with it, our very way of conceptualizing and relating to reality.
- vi According to official media accounts, there were some 200,000 protestors (“Demos in ganz Deutschland” 2009: unpaginated). However, according to the official *Bildungsstreikbündnis* there were 270,000 (“Demozahlen”: unpaginated). According to the latter, there were only 27,000 in Berlin – meaning that in Montreal there were roughly ten times as many protestors. The difference of population between Quebec (8 million) and Germany (82 million) should also be noted.
- vii This is almost taken verbatim from the earlier *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* However, the second part of the citation concerning Anna Dinerstein and Mike Neary is new (cf. Žižek 2001: 4).
- viii As Dorothy Chou informs us concerning the Google's latest report on censorship: “This is the fifth data set that we've released. Just like every other time, we've been asked to take down political speech. It's alarming not only because free expression is at risk, but because some of these requests come from countries you might not suspect – western democracies not typically associated with censorship.” (Rushe 2012: unpaginated)

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