

Žižek and Heidegger - IJŽS Vol 1.4

Where's the Point? Slavoj Žižek and the Broken Sword

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I. Use Both Hands

What is one to make of Slavoj Žižek? On the one hand, in a recent essay for the *London Review of Books*, "Resistance Is Surrender," he writes,

The lesson here [in Hugo Chavez's grabbing state power in Venezuela] is that the truly subversive thing is not to insist on 'infinite' demands we know those in power cannot fulfill. Since they know that we know it, such an 'infinitely demanding' attitude presents no problem for those in power: 'So wonderful that, with your critical demands, you remind us what kind of world we would all like to live in. Unfortunately, we live in the real world, where we have to make do with what is possible.' The thing to do is, on the contrary, to bombard those in power with strategically well-selected, precise, finite demands, which can't be met with the same excuse.¹

Here Žižek opposes a postmodern Left that calls for a politics of resistance, a Left that refuses any opportunity of wielding state power because it deems all such power inherently corrupt and corrupting, a Left that cultivates new forms of community and power outside of the state and at the margins of society. Žižek charges that such resistance is surrender because it effectively cedes the field to global capitalism and to those who presently wield state power. Indeed, it even legitimizes them, because they can refer to such resistance and say, in effect: See, we remain true to our principles of tolerating, even promoting, democratic opposition. Against such

impotent, utopian resistance, Žižek champions a Left unafraid to seize whatever existing forms of power come its way or to “bombard” those existing powers-that-be with relentless and decidedly pragmatic demands.

On the other hand, in this essay that we have before us here, “Why Heidegger Made the Right Step in 1933,” Žižek writes that Heidegger’s Nazi engagement was “the best thing he did” (10), which hardly seems the declaration of a man of the Left (even if combined with his praise for the “gesture” of Foucault’s enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution). And then there are passages like this, where he asks (channeling the spirit of Lacan), how we might resolve “the democratic paradox” when, “in trying to get rid of the imperfections of democracy, of its non-democratic ingredients, we inadvertently lose democracy itself” (8). His answer to cutting through the paradox is: “The risky but necessary gesture of rendering problematic the very notion of ‘democracy,’ of moving elsewhere — of taking the risk of elaborating a positive *livable* project ‘beyond democracy’” (9). Žižek finds the Western, bourgeois world so lamentable that he is willing to valorize the attempt to *live*, not just theorize, beyond it (7). This brings us to the brink of Žižek’s deployment of the notion of revolt as “Event” (following Badiou’s and others’ use of this term) as an epochal rupture that precedes and goes deeper than any mere revolution in political power. While it is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish when Žižek is merely explicating from when he is approving an author’s ideas, he does seem to affirm that this kind of transfiguring revolt *redeems*

...not only the enthusiasm evoked by the Stalinist Russia in many Western intellectuals and artists in the 1930s and 1940s, but even the enthusiasm evoked in those who were otherwise bitter critics of Stalinism by the Maoist Cultural Revolution: what matters is not the brutal violence and terror in China, but the enthusiasm generated by this spectacle in the Western observers... (And, why not, one could redeem the fascination by some Western observers by the Nazi Germany in the first four years of Hitler’s rule when unemployment fell rapidly, etc.!) (10)

To be clear: Žižek does *not* seem to be celebrating the horrors that ensued from these revolutionary beginnings, but rather the pure potential of revolt as such. He wants to *deconstruct* the distinction between the *enthusiasm* of direct *participant in* and distant *observer of* such rupturing events (10), because he wants to recover and preserve the fecundity of this enthusiasm for the radical transformation of life, and not just in theory.

Now, Žižek’s essay is an *essai* in the original French sense of that term: a test, an attempt, and more: a *tentation*, a temptation and a provocation. The shocking title is itself, of course, a twist of the tiger’s tail, and a wink to the reader: Žižek inserts his first footnote (40 fn 1) after the

word “Step.” Fully disclosed, the title should read: “Why Heidegger Made the Right Step (Albeit in the Wrong Direction) in 1933.” For Žižek, what was “right” was the sheer act itself, the motion that is not yet movement; only understood in this way (and I will return to this point), in the radical disjunction between the will to move and the orientation and fulfillment of the movement itself, can it make sense to “step,” even if stepping sends you off on the wrong way.

But it seems we have two Žižeks on our hands: one, a tactical pragmatist, the other, a revolutionary so revolutionary that he is willing to affirm radical experiments simply because they take seriously “the risk of elaborating a positive *livable* project,” a project that transcends the fatuous complacency of bourgeois democracy and global capitalism. Only note that the risk must come before the project, the moment of genuine rupture and refusal before any plan and reconstitution; more on this later. This is not the place to reconcile the two Žižeks, and I must confess that I am not qualified to do it. Nevertheless, part of what unites the two is that he professes the faith of a man of the Left, and the appeal to Heidegger derives from that identification. Since I am called upon to respond to Žižek’s essay, and not to the man, here the name “Žižek” must stand for the decisive questions that confront in his *essai*, the questions that must rightly test, tempt and provoke us. Decisive among these is the question of the *right* “Direction” for “The Left”; for surely what defines both of these is now more obscure and questionable than ever. We have our hands full.

II. Virtuous Beginnings, Vicious Endings

Žižek gets some important things right in his essay. Chief among these is a willingness to take seriously what is at issue for thought in Heidegger’s political episode of 1933-34. Bad faith about Heidegger’s politics can manifest in two ways. The first is the attempt by Heidegger’s devoted defenders to exculpate him as a political naïf who stumbled into his engagement and who extricated himself as soon as he discovered his error. The other is the attempt to prove that Heidegger’s thinking is fascist through-and-through (or worse, simply to point at his politics) and thereby to insist that this thought has no merit as philosophy. As I have argued in *Heidegger’s Polemos*, such readings prevent us from confronting what remains at issue for us in our politics.²

This seems to be the point of Žižek’s use of G. K. Chesterton’s story, “The Sign of the Broken Sword.”³ In that tale, the detective-priest Father Brown has spent many years unraveling a terrible mystery. As Father Brown tells it, General Sir Arthur St. Clare had served as one of

the best officers of the British Empire; in death, he had become revered as both a war hero and a Christian martyr. General St. Clare had been a prudent, conscientious and quietly brilliant commander. In his last campaign, St. Clare fought against the Brazilian patriot Olivier, a man esteemed for his extraordinary chivalry. On the fateful day, the otherwise careful St. Clare led his troops in an unaccountably foolish assault against vastly superior forces. Most of his men died, and the rest were captured, including St. Clare himself. True to honor's form, Olivier released his prisoners. All the more unaccountable, then, was the fact that St. Clare was hanged on the field of battle: "He was found swinging there after the Brazilians had retired, with his broken sword hung round his neck." So there were two mysteries: why had "one of the wisest men in the world acted like an idiot," and why had a supremely chivalrous man "acted like a fiend"?

Father Brown asks his lone companion Flambeau a series of seemingly irrelevant questions: 'Where does a wise man hide a pebble?' 'On the beach,' answers Flambeau. 'Where does a wise man hide a leaf?' 'In the forest.' 'But what does he do if there is no beach? Or no forest?' 'Well, he must make a beach. Or grow a forest.' 'A fearful sin.' The double mystery is solved if one knows that St. Clare has murdered a fellow officer and needs to cover up the crime. "And if a man had to hide a dead body, he would make a field of dead bodies to hide it in." St. Clare leads his men on a suicidal assault to produce that field of corpses. But his surviving soldiers discover the crime nevertheless, and they hang St. Clare with the murder weapon hung around his neck.

For Žižek, philosophers of various political stripes try to hide their corpses in similar ways. Some try to blame the catastrophes of the 20th century (the corpse) on the entire tradition of Western thought (the field of corpses), with its relentlessly totalizing metaphysics and its obsession with instrumental reason (2). The Left does the same with Western civilization in general as one that cultivates an inevitable "class-genocidal system" (2). Heidegger himself, along with other former Nazis, sought to bury the corpse of his own Nazi pasts in "in the mountain of corpses called Western metaphysics" (3). Nor does Žižek spare the liberals: they are far too quick to bury any potentially transformative political philosophy along with the pile of corpses that are the failed attempts to put theory into practice (3, 16).

Fair enough. There is a lot of bad faith among intellectuals, no doubt. But I have to admit — given the prominence that Žižek lends to this Chesterton tale, given the noble lie that Father Brown seals at the end (after all, he does not reveal the mystery to the public, only to Flambeau), and given the genre itself (mystery) — a quasi-Straussian thought crossed my mind. Might Žižek also be hiding a corpse, or at least a terrible secret? Is there an esoteric meaning to

be found in his exoteric deployment of this mystery, a mystery that is only half-solved, because the solution internal to its own narrative (St. Clare exposed as a depraved murderer) remains unresolved in the broader context of its adoption into Žižek's larger narrative? The parallel seems to be that Heidegger, who was described in the 1920s as the hidden king of philosophy, has been "exposed" by Farías as the depraved Führer-worshiper of the 1930s. But as Žižek rightly indicates, such moralizing hardly resolves the matter.

So let's go further into the details of the Chesterton story. The first thing to notice is the layering of narrative. While walking back from a graveyard on a wretchedly gloomy night, Father Brown unravels the mystery of General Sir Arthur St. Clare to one man, and one man only: Flambeau, his (now) faithful companion. And who is this Father Brown? He is a man who epitomizes the Tyndale translation of Matthew 10:16: "Lo I send you forth, as sheep among wolves. Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and innocent as doves." "Wise" here is *phronimoi*, that is, in the old Aristotelian sense, persons of practical wisdom, prudent. And "innocent" is *akeraioi*: unmixed, pure, uncontaminated, guileless. Hence the title to the collection in which the "Broken Sword" story appeared: *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911). Father Brown's "innocence" is not naïveté, ignorance and gullibility; it is the harmlessness of the Latin root of that word. For despite his slight stature and innocuous, bumbling appearance, Father Brown is a *phronimos*, a man who is as wise as a serpent about the dark recesses of the human spirit. So wise, indeed, that Flambeau, once a master-criminal and Father Brown's arch-rival, as Moriarty was to Holmes, has now become Father Brown's acolyte (of sorts). In fact, Father Brown has been leading him all over England to visit memorials to St. Clare, an enterprise Flambeau cannot understand: "I only know that you have dragged me a precious long dance to all the shrines of this fellow, whoever he is." The worn-out Flambeau somewhat petulantly asks, "What are you hunting for in all these crypts and effigies?"

"I am only looking for one word," said Father Brown. "A word that isn't there."

What is that "one word"? He never says. But we can hazard a guess. Why, after all, does he drag Flambeau along on this hunt? Why does he tell the tale to him alone? Father Brown is a priest, after all. Flambeau was and may still be a criminal. The journey is a pilgrimage of sorts, even if Flambeau does not quite realize it. We may see all the more clearly what is at stake if we bear in mind that Chesterton based the character of Father Brown on his actual friend, Father O'Connor, whom he met in 1906. Like Father Brown, Father O'Connor was a slight, unprepossessing man. Like Flambeau, Chesterton was a large and jovially unruly man. Flambeau follows Father Brown all over England; Chesterton followed Father O'Connor in spirit until 1922, when Father O'Connor received him officially into the Catholic Church. What so

struck Chesterton about Father O'Connor, almost at once, was this gentle, unassuming man's genuine acquaintance with the depths of human evil. Like Flambeau in the story, Chesterton was shocked by an insight into human evil far deeper than he had suspected possible. Chesterton was also shocked that this humble little man could have such an understanding of depravity while still maintaining a simple, faithful innocence. That shock became respect, then friendship, and finally conversion. Chesterton came to understand that even in the face of human nature's utter depravity, redemption is possible, if one had the courage for it. The word, perhaps, is repentance.

For redemption follows from repentance, at least for a good Catholic like Father Brown. Christ, of course, is Chesterton's redeemer, as well as Father Brown's and Father O'Connor's. Žižek, too, seeks redemption (he uses the word "redeem" frequently), not for himself, ostensibly, but for all those thinkers and political actors who err greatly in laying themselves open or striving to break the world open to an Event that will come, like a thief in the night, to transform and redeem everything.

But back to the story. Father Brown drags Flambeau around to these monuments and graves because he is seeking to evoke in his friend a fundamental mood, a *Stimmung*: the horror of understanding and the understanding of horror. For he hopes this mood will open him to the Event of redemption that can reconcile a terrible wisdom and a wise innocence. He is wise enough to know that such Events cannot be forced. Flambeau himself, as the tale becomes darker and the forest path more terrifying, "could almost fancy he was Dante" and the priest "a Virgil leading him through a land of eternal sins." Alas, poor Flambeau misses this opportunity for self-understanding and instead seeks redemption only in a comforting glass of brandy at the end. (Which still leaves hope for the reader, of course, which must be Chesterton's point.)

So what is so horrifying in the story, then? Chesterton sets the mood with a description of a graveyard set in the midst of "ashen wastes of forest" where "the black hollows between the trunks of tree looked like bottomless, black caverns of that Scandinavian hell" — the impossibly cold and forlorn hell, that is. This atmosphere of hopeless, deathly gloom increases in the course of the story. This lightless nothingness corresponds to the moral and spiritual nihilism of the subject (but not yet, at least, of the object) of Father Brown's unholy pilgrimage and the tale he tells Flambeau: General Sir Arthur St. Clare. Žižek claims that "Chesterton is wise enough to depict the cause of the General's moral downfall as inherent to Christianity" (2), because St. Clare was, as Father Brown describes him, an old-school evangelical Protestant, "a man who read his Bible." But I think this moves too fast. Yes, St. Clare read his Bible, but Father Brown is

quick to point out that St. Clare read with a particularly narrow and self-serving hermeneutic. Reading only the Old Testament and not the New, “he found in the Old Testament anything that he wanted -- lust, tyranny, treason.” The man read to confirm *himself*, not to challenge, open or transform himself; in short, he did not *read* at all. St. Clare indulged in prostitutes and orgies, torture and sadism, bribery and corruption. In the end, he betrayed his own army to the enemy for the money to pay his debts and to cover his blackmailed steps. The root, in sadistic sexual passion, of St. Clare’s treason to both faith and comrades is crucial, and I shall return to the theme.

Žižek suggests two possible motivations in Father Brown’s obsessive but ultimately private search. One is that Father Brown plays the petty Hegelian “valet” to the general’s “great man”: he can see only the great man’s squalid particularity, but he is blind to the historic greatness that moves *in* and *through* the man (2). The other is that Father Brown might be “a cynic who knows that the unpleasant truth has to be covered up on behalf of the public Good” (2) — that is, he plays the role, *not* of the valet, but of Hegel, with an admixture of Platonic noble lie.

One can see how the former might apply to the Heidegger case and all the many other pebbles on the beach of the tormented 20th century that Žižek cites: Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Che Guevara; one could add many to the list of names: men (and note that they almost all seem to be men) who had their gross personal faults, who engaged in or gave intellectual cover to *hupsipolis-apolis* crimes, but who nevertheless were in some essential way *in step* with the current of the most vital questions in history. The moral valet, the *moralizer*, resorts to the “*j’accuse!*” — so ready-to-hand in conventional morality — in order to silence the call of whatever is most essential for thought in a historic happening or questioning. Or so the story goes.

But as a characterization of Father Brown, the valet comparison does not really fit: after all, St. Clare was, in the end, a simple fraud, despite being something of a genius. He had no world-historical importance in himself. In a moment of chivalrous generosity, Father Brown characterizes St. Clare’s piety like this: “Oh, I dare say he was honest, as you call it.” Then he immediately qualifies this, saying, “But what is the good of a man being honest in his worship of dishonesty?” Of St. Clare’s fornication, deceit and cruelty, Father Brown again allows him some theological good faith (as it were): “certainly he would have said with steady eyes that he did it to the glory of the Lord.” But again the qualification: “My own theology is sufficiently expressed by asking which Lord?” As a reader both of the Bible and of the world, St. Clare was a hermeneutic bigot, a self-idolater who made his own desires his “Lord” and found what he needed to justify them in the “text.” As Father Brown asks, “When will people understand that it

is useless for a man to read his Bible unless he also reads everybody else's Bible?" Indeed, whoever lives by a conscientious hermeneutic would add that it is useless to interpret one's own world without confronting everyone else's — as I would argue, following Heidegger, that all *logos* is a *polemos* with both self and other.⁴ And in fact, St. Clare's falseness, his bad faith to both himself and all others, is exposed when his fellow officer and fellow Evangelical, the Puritan Major Murry, realizes his betrayal and confronts him. Murray offers St. Clare an honorable escape: immediate resignation. Instead, St. Clare stabs Murray in the back with his officer's sabre, breaking off the point between the man's shoulders. The only "greatness" remaining to St. Clare is his ingenious strategy of leading hundreds to their deaths to cover this one corpse.

As to the latter possibility, that Father Brown is a rank whitewasher, the first thing to ask is whether it is always and only *cynical* to *know* (Žižek's word, not mine) when "the unpleasant truth has to be covered up on behalf of the public Good"? After all, something very much *like* "the public Good" seems very important to Žižek himself (a point to which I will return), and if he is willing to suffer (or let others suffer) none too little terror and blood for its sake, why not a little noble lie thrown in here and there? Even so, I am not so sure that cynical whitewashing is really Father Brown's game here.

True — as they approach the welcome light of a tavern, Father Brown does declare to Flambeau at the end of his tale about St. Clare, in a passage Žižek also quotes, that "Millions who never knew him shall love him like a father — this man whom the last few that knew him dealt with like dung. He shall be a saint; and the truth shall never be told of him, because I have made up my mind at last." Father Brown will hold his peace for the sake of "England" and the "loyalty" that makes such an England possible. That is the "public Good" he is willing to serve — so long as, we should note, no innocent man is slandered or blamed. Only then, Father Brown vows, will he speak publicly.

So Father Brown's pilgrimage was for his own sake, to know what to say, and when to say it, about St. Clare. It was also for Flambeau's sake, to bring him to the edge of redemption by gazing into the nihilistic abyss of what evils unchecked human nature is capable of doing, then to recoil into the arms of personal redemption. The importance of this for Chesterton should not be underestimated, for the real Father O'Connor had galvanized Chesterton's own moral and spiritual imagination with just such a tale of human depravity. In his autobiography, Chesterton tells us how and why Father O'Connor had such an effect on him when they first met. Chesterton had proposed to publish his views on "some rather sordid questions of vice and crime," but the priest, convinced that Chesterton was completely off the mark and wanting to

save him from embarrassment, told him

...certain facts he knew about perverted practices which I certainly shall not set down or discuss here. I have confessed . . . that in my own youth I had imagined for myself any amount of iniquity; and it was a curious experience to find that this quiet and pleasant celibate had plumbed those abysses far deeper than I. I had not imaged that the world could hold such horrors.⁵

Chesterton's Victorian restraint prevents him from going into detail, but obviously the abyss of iniquity that Chesterton had imagined for himself was a sexual one. The connection with crime, and the hint of extravagance and cruelty in these imaginings ("any amount of iniquity"), points directly to the figure of St. Clare. But what St. Clare indulged in, Chesterton ultimately recoiled from, and Chesterton attributes his redemption to that first meeting with Father O'Connor:

It brought me in a manner face to face once more with those morbid but vivid problems of the soul, to which I have earlier alluded [he means those extravagant, insistent, and lawless sexual imaginings of his youth], and gave me a great and growing sense that I had not found any real spiritual solution of them; though in certain external ways of proportion and practice, they trouble a man less in manhood than they do in youth. They still troubled me a good deal; but I might have sunk more and more into some sort of compromise or surrender of mere weariness, but for this sudden glimpse of the pit that is at all our feet. I was surprised by my own surprise. That the Catholic Church knew more about good than I did was easy to believe. That she knew more about evil than I did seemed incredible.⁶

For Chesterton, an unrestrained sexuality is an abyss, a "pit" that can pull the ground out from under him — and from us all. This is not, I think, because he sees sexuality itself as evil; he is not a puritanical prude. Rather, he recognizes the human need for Dionysian transcendence, and he also recognizes that *this* form of ecstasy, completely unbound sexuality, if indulged in fully, can corrode the soul. It can do so, it can open up that pit, because indulging that desire so completely individuates a person that he loses all human feeling. He becomes a traitor, not merely to fellow soldiers or to country, but to all humanity, because such a desire is tyrannical: it will sacrifice anyone and anything for its own transgressive satisfaction. Sexuality then ceases to be Dionysian, a road to transcendence, and becomes a path to self-indulgence, cruelty, and alienation.

Which brings us back to the narrative structure of the "The Sign of the Broken Sword": although Father Brown remains silent (to all but Flambeau) about the crime of St. Clare, Chesterton tells the tale to all the world! He betrays the father! Why? Tales of fornication, sadism, betrayal and murder may not seem all that shocking to our jaded sensibilities, but recall that this story was published in 1911, before Freud had, as a matter of general cultural impact,

exploded the Victorian prudery and simplicity about human sexuality, and before the mechanized mass death of World War One had eviscerated Europe's faith in its own innocence and progress. Chesterton was a British patriot, but in a time when patriotism was as demanding as any piety, he was willing to go against the grain. He opposed the Boer War, for example. And if someone objects that the tale of St. Clare is fiction now and was fiction then, it is worth emphasizing that in 1911, even a fictional account of such sexual vice and treason against country would have been deeply shocking to the general public. So what is Chesterton's game, if it is not the same as Father Brown's? Perhaps the "greater Good" he seeks is to put as many of us as possible, like Flambeau, like Chesterton himself, on the edge of that abyss, where we can see, or at least imagine, the depravity that human nature is capable of, and to consider what, if anything, can redeem us from it. So, in betraying the fictional Father Brown, he repays the actual Father O'Connor with interest.

And one last point about the story: it is called "The Sign of the Broken Sword." Most prosaically, that is the name of the tavern at which Father Brown and Flambeau arrive after their long, dark journey. But Chesterton's story is not about a pub. It is about the sword as *sign*. At a somewhat less prosaic level, *this* broken sword is a sign of murder, because, to Father Brown, it is an anomaly, and therefore a clue. In the whitewashed world of patriotism, a soldier's sword is a sign of many things: his willingness to transcend his individuality to protect the nation or the people, to act, and to act violently, to enter the ranks and take orders for "the greater Good," to kill and to die, if necessary. A broken sword is usually a sign of defeat, dishonor, or humiliation, but in the public hagiography of St. Clare, the usual sign of defeat achieves transcendent significance, for the soldier, even in death and military defeat had achieved a higher victory: he had upheld, on the one hand, his nation's valor and honor even under the worst of trials, and, on the other, he had proved himself a true Christian. His defeat in battle was thus a victory for the common good of this world and the promise of an even greater victory in the next world — the common good doubly upheld. For an officer, of course, the sword is a sign of his rank and his authority. An officer draws his sword to lead the charge, that moment in battle when death and fear must be faced most resolutely and when the power to command is most at stake. Which is why Father Brown, in describing St. Clare's behavior before the final assault remarks, "There was one other little and enormous thing. When the general urged them to their chivalric charge he half drew his sword from the scabbard; and then, as if ashamed of such melodrama, thrust it back again. The sword again, you see."

Which brings us to another sign of the sword. Of course, St. Clare could not draw it because it was already broken and would give him away. But in a man whose overwhelming

vice is lust and fornication, can there be much doubt about what else the sword signifies? We know it already: Chesterton himself suffered from the same temptations. The sword represents all the force and sexual authority of manhood, and St. Clare has broken his. Even without murdering Murray, breaking the point off in his body, St. Clare has lost his manhood, or rather, he has exposed it in a way that cannot be tolerated in a community that demands subordination of private desire for the common good. His fellow soldiers guess the truth. They hang him, with his pointless sword around his neck. Can there be any surer sign of what is at stake in devotion to the common good than this? Military discipline, military honor, military valor all depend on the individual sublimating, transforming, and sublating his personal desires by devoting himself to the common good. And the military is only a more intense version, or more vivid symbol, of what is needed by the authentic political community in general. But what is more ancient than the recognition that sexual desire is what can most radically individuate us to seek our own good, no matter what the consequence to the sexual object or to society as a whole? Consider Gilgamesh. Consider David and Bathsheba. Consider Thrasymachus' enticement to the pleasures of tyranny. Consider Glaucon's tale of the ring of Gyges. All of them point to a transgressive (rather than transcendent) sexuality that threatens to engulf the community in tyranny. While the male sexual urge (and the maleness of all these stories is no accident) can be harnessed to the common good, it must first be broken, in one way or another.

III. Redemption

Like Father Brown leading Flambeau on a seemingly interminable trek through England, seeking some form of redemption from the awful tale of General St. Clare, Žižek leads his reader on a picaresque road trip through the misadventures (and worse) of 20th century political and intellectual engagement. The horror he confronts us with is the terror and the blood of that century's revolutionary upheavals, and the fact that so many supposedly great thinkers, such as Foucault and Heidegger, gave their support to what turned out to be failures or outright abominations. Žižek's startling gambit is to seek redemption not just for (at least some of) the participants in those upheavals, even a Nazi like Heidegger, but more significantly, for the intellectual *observers* of these events. Describing Foucault's fascination with the Iranian revolution of 1979, Žižek writes,

What matters is not the miserable reality that ensued [sic] the upheavals, the bloody confrontations, the new oppressive measure [sic], etc., but the enthusiasm that the events in Iran gave rise to in the external (Western) observer, confirming his hope into [sic] the

possibility of a new form of spiritualized political collective. (10)

At issue is political imagination itself, the capacity to envision a dramatically “new form” of community. Borrowing from Kant’s description of his “enthusiasm” for the French Revolution, Žižek locates the occasion for redemption in precisely this *Stimmung* of enthusiasm, and so he argues that Foucault’s or Kant’s redemptive enthusiasms can serve as a model for many others:

. . . one could redeem [there’s that word again] in the same way not only the enthusiasm evoked by Stalinist Russia in many Western intellectuals and artists in the 1930s and 1940s, but even the enthusiasm evoked in those who were otherwise bitter critics of Stalinism by the Maoist Cultural Revolution: what matters is not the brutal violence and terror in China, but the enthusiasm generated by this spectacle in its Western observers... (And, why not, one could redeem also the fascination by some Western observers by the Nazi Germany in the first four years of Hitler’s rule when unemployment fell rapidly, etc.!) (10)

Furthermore, recall that Žižek wants to deconstruct the distinction between “observer” and “direct participant” in revolutionary events (10). Like Chesterton using the tale told by Father Brown, it seems Žižek wants to extend the possibility of redemption to us, his readers, so that we can all participate in the liberating enthusiasm of the moment, breaking through the deflating distance that fictional narrative, historical separation, or geographic remoteness would otherwise impose on the potential to be inspired by an event.

But *enthusiasm* is a powerful force, and we should think carefully about what mood we are being summoned to here. At its Greek root, *enthousiasmos* means inspiration by a god, to be driven to a frenzy by *possession* from a god. It is a kind of intoxicating transport, a Dionysian mania, a self-forgetting and an ecstatic merging with something beyond one’s monadic self. Žižek seeks a redemptive enthusiasm, one that will do two things. First, it will lift us from our bourgeois complacency and transport us to a form of *revolt* that has a surprisingly Kantian quality: “revolt is an act of freedom which momentarily suspends the nexus of historical causality, i.e., in revolt, the noumenal dimension transpires” (11). This is revolt as the Badiouian “Event” that Žižek refers to often (e.g., 14): a moment of absolute rupture in the causal chain of events where freedom has the opportunity to make real something radically new. This is why Žižek echoes Foucault in distinguishing *revolt* from *revolution*; the latter “designates the reinscription of a revolt into the process of strategic-political calculation: revolution is a process by means of which the revolt is ‘colonized by *realpolitik*’” (12). Revolt is raw freedom in the authentic moment of pure possibility when something genuinely new may occur; revolution is

the process in which new forms coalesce and take control of potential and make it something actual, for good or bad.

Which brings us to the second point: by this argument, in revolt there is the ecstatic transport of enthusiasm; in revolution, the rapidly ossifying strictures of a new piety. Does this mean that Žižek opposes revolution altogether? I don't think so, but the crucial thing here is what the revolt puts us in touch with in the Event of enthusiasm. Žižek emphasizes, once again with Foucault, that what is so important about uprising and revolt is the enthusiasm for the "spark of life" that ignites in a community bound up in such an event:

What took place in Iran in the interstice of two epochs of social reality was not the explosion of the People as a substantial entity with a set of properties, but the event of becoming-People.

The point is thus not the shift in relations of power and domination between actual socio-political agents, the redistribution of social control, etc., but the very fact of transcending — or, rather, momentarily canceling — this very domain, of the emergence of a totally different domain of 'collective will' as a pure Sense-Event in which all differences are obliterated, rendered irrelevant. (11)

The divinity, then, by which we may be possessed in the enthusiasm of the revolt is the coming to awareness of a collective will in which a People, in a Dionysian moment of orgiastic ecstasy, lose their divisions and conflicts. In the intoxicating unity of this "Sense-Event," they discover the pure potential of the Event and its freedom to inscribe new forms on their social world. Žižek quotes Foucault approvingly: "I thought the collective will was like God, like the soul, something one would never encounter.... but we met, in Tehran and throughout Iran, the collective will of a people" (12).

Reading passages like this, I was reminded of this one in "On the Jewish Question," where Marx begins with a quote from Rousseau:

Rousseau correctly described the abstract idea of political man as follows:

"Whoever dares undertake to establish a people's institutions must feel himself capable of *changing*, as it were, *human nature* itself, of *transforming* each individual, who, in isolation, is a complete but solitary whole, into a *part* of something greater than himself, from which in a sense, he derives his life and his being ... of substituting a limited and moral existence for the physical and independent life.... His task, in short, is to take from *a man his own powers*, and to give him in exchange alien powers which he can only employ with the help of other men."

Every emancipation is a *restoration* of the human world and of human relationships to

man himself.

Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand to a member of civil society, an *independent* and *egoistic* individual, and on the other hand, to a *citizen*, to a moral person.

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers ... as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power.⁷

The fulfillment of Rousseau's idea of the general will is Marx's dream here: true political emancipation will never be achieved simply by giving various previously oppressed or excluded groups, such as the Jews, full civil rights as citizens of the state, on the one hand, and as monadic individuals in civil society on the other. Instead, for true human liberation, the very division between civil society, as the realm of private, egoistic action, and the state, as the realm of a citizen's devotion to a higher community, must be abolished. While such abolition does eliminate the state as the merely *abstract* location of each human being's capacity for devotion to community, it does not abolish the individual; instead, it *fulfills* individuals by allowing them to realize themselves as freely and actually contributing to their universal nature, their "species-being," as the expression of their everyday life, not just as extraordinary moments in life. And of course, Žižek's Event of revolt, this moment of enthusiastic absorption in a People's common will, follows directly in this tradition. Only in that Dionysian enthusiasm can we imagine human nature changing — and not just "as it were," but really, as a transformed "measure" (3) of what it means to *be* human: neither under state control, nor living under a false individualism, nor even as the right balance between the two. Marx's vision, if we may call it that, is one that allows Žižek's ecstasy of the Event to remain actual as the *lived* reality, beyond the events of the uprising; it is the revolt made permanent. And Žižek seeks something like this too, for he insists upon *living*, not just dreaming. True redemption for human beings comes through the reconciliation of the individual to the whole of humanity, a worldly, not an otherworldly transcendence of the self.

There are two fundamental problems with Žižek's reprise of the Rousseauian-Marxian vision of enthusiasm made flesh. The first has to do with what Leszek Kolakowski has called this "dream of perfect unity" in his essay, "The Myth of Human Self-Identity." The second has to do with the point of history.

IV. The Dream of Perfect Unity

Let me hazard a premise: a, if not *the*, foundation of the political problem for human beings is the disjunction (apparent or real) of the good between individual and society. In the *Politics*, Aristotle says, “the human being is by nature the political animal” (1253a2). But he also says that we are not political animals in the way that ants or bees are: animals like that build their complex communities without thinking or talking about it; they just do it, by nature, by instinct. They may *communicate* (we know now about the waggle dance of the bee, the pheromone trail of the ant), but they do not *deliberate* about justice or right and wrong. True: for Aristotle, a just community looks to the common good or advantage (1279a17), but precisely what that is, is itself a matter for discussion in every particular case. And while the ant or the bee does not need to convince or sublimate itself into the communal identity, it simply always already *is* that identity, human beings always seem to cut themselves up over the finer points of justice, the distinction between *one’s own* good and the *common* good.

At the very least, politics seeks to reconcile the two, if only by way of a temporary alliance. In the *Republic*, Socrates suggests that the political problem won’t be solved until citizens learn to say “my own” about everything in the city; the best city will be one that has “a community of pains and pleasures” (464a), by which he means that each citizen will feel a complete ownership in all the affairs of the city, feel all its sorrows and joys as his or her own, without any alienation and with complete dedication. In his imagined city, Kallipolis, the city in speech,⁸ this means overcoming sexuality’s transcendent wildness: all sex will be strictly regulated. There will be no private love affairs and no private families, because the disjunction between private and public good opens up in the unbridled love of one’s own that appears most powerfully in the exclusive erotic attachment of couples to each other and then in their exclusive, or at least highly partial, love for their progeny. That love must be broken, redirected and absorbed by the whole. And someone must do the breaking, redirecting and absorbing: the philosopher-kings and queens, the ones who rig the mating rituals and who disseminate the noble lie that is meant to persuade the people that they are all born of one mother, the earth, and are therefore united as a single family (414d-415c). The Dionysian private *eros* must become an Apollonian public one.

Žižek operates in the ambit of this ancient problem in referring to an “Event” of “revolt” in which the individual is at once authentically discovered and fully absorbed in the will of the community. He notices something called “capitalism” and its “supplement,” liberal democracy, as well as “the bourgeoisie,” all of which stand in the way of a potentially final solution,

championed by a force called “the Left,” to the problem of human alienation. Of course, I am being coy: we all *know* what these terms mean, don’t we? Or do we? Žižek deploys them as if they were the most obvious things in the world, but perhaps they are not. Not any more.

In “The Myth of Human Self-Identity,” Kolakowski writes:

The dream of perfect unity [in social life] could be realized only as a caricature that would deny its original intention: as an artificial unity imposed by force from above, with the political body preventing real conflicts and real segmentation of the civil society from expressing themselves. This body is almost automatically compelled to crush all spontaneous forms of economic, political, and cultural life. Thus the rift between civil and political society, instead of being healed, is deepened.⁹

Surely this is the unmistakable lesson of the 20th century’s attempts, by regimes both “Left” and “Right,” to achieve the absolute redemption of self in society by obliterating the divide between civil society and the state. Kolakowski refers to the crushing of “spontaneous forms of economic, political, and cultural life,” but in keeping with the most ancient framing of this problem in Plato, I want to emphasize that the most fundamental sphere to be subjected to this colonization is the erotic one. While I cannot make the case in detail here, Plato’s great lesson, in *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, is that *eros* is capable both of most thoroughly individuating us *and* of taking us beyond ourselves to a larger whole; it is what must most be redirected and reabsorbed by the community if the dream of human unity is to be achieved. *Eros* is any overwhelming, Dionysian desire that beckons us beyond ourselves in seeking our own good. Sexual desire is just one manifestation of *eros*; as such, it can lead us beyond ourselves into love, patriotism, or philosophy, or, like General St. Clare, into a kind of solipsistic idolatry of the self’s desire. To read the *Republic* well is to learn that politics has its Dionysian moment, but to ask too much of it, to expect that ecstasy to be permanent and total requires a regime that must crush all the spontaneity in human *eros*. A wise politics recognizes the necessarily Dionysian dimension of political life, makes room for it, but does not ask more than it can bear. The Dionysian and the Apollonian must be balanced by *phronêsis*, practical wisdom.

Which is why Žižek’s choice of Chesterton’s tale of St. Clare is so ironically appropriate. Military life, as I have suggested above, is not just a metaphor for political life, it is often the closest approximation human beings can experience of that dream of the perfect unity of self and society. As Lawrence LeShan has argued, human beings are driven to a *love* of war because it provides a lived experience of a simultaneous individuation (we each must show ourselves at our most heroic) and de-individuation (we merge ourselves into a unity and a cause with magnificent purpose).¹⁰ War is one way (a very dangerous one) that human beings can

fulfill their Dionysian *eros*, their longing for belonging. But General St. Clare is the perfect traitor because he betrays the transcendent potential of *eros* itself: his broken sword embodies his sacrifice of the communal for the purely personal.

St. Clare's god turns out to be not Dionysus (broadly speaking: the god of self-forgetting transcendence), as his comrades and country expect and require, but Dionysus' son Priapus. To paraphrase Marx, the first generation comes in tragedy, the second in farce: Dionysus' nature includes the *eros* of sexual desire, but as one possible avenue to ecstatic transcendence. Priapus, his son, is pure male desire, always absurdly aroused, always selfish, never concerned for the other, only for his own lust. In the most common variant of the myth, he is the son of Dionysus and Aphrodite; born with a possibly enviable but ultimately ludicrous masculine deformity, he attempted to force himself upon the sleeping nymph, Lotus, but was thwarted by the braying of Silenus' ass and exposed to ridicule in Dionysus' troop.¹¹ Like St. Clare, Priapus is unappeasable, aggressive, callous; a violator who never achieves complete or lasting satisfaction of his desire. What is the political meaning of the tale of St. Clare, if the general's projected piety and his apparent dedication to country cover over a remorselessly priapic sexuality that betrays everything? The difficulty is the alienation and selfishness of Priapus: how can that map onto politics, which is precisely the realm of the communal? As an absurd but awful *distortion* of the political: as the longing for a communal self-identity that can never be sustained, that never be consummated, except by the most brutal of methods. A *priapic politics*, then, would be one that constantly arouses the longing for communal unity, but which forever sacrifices the objects of this desire in the violent and ruthless attempt to impose this unity.

V. The Pointlessness of History

For Marx, the communism that fulfills both self and society in a perfect unity is both the goal and the end of history's dialectic; it is predicated on humankind's progress through the dialectical conflicts of history, because only through that history will humanity develop the science, the technology, and the modes of production that make it possible for human beings to overcome their alienation from nature. Because we began our history with nature as an adversary, as the realm of necessity that oppressed us with unavoidable demands (for food, shelter, etc.), human beings were forced into the division of labor, which alienated us from each other and, for most, from our work. Only because of the developments introduced by bourgeois

capitalism (science, technology, and productive forces) has humanity, for Marx, come to the point where we can overcome our alienation from nature, to discover it as the inorganic extension of ourselves, and thereby realize an unalienated sense of our social power.

This is all Marxism 101, of course, but it is important to remind ourselves of it. Because if Žižek holds true to the Lacanian notion that the “true courage of an act is always the courage to accept the inexistence of the big Other” (40), then surely Marx’s dream of perfect human unity at the end of history is as much a “big Other” as the other targets of the Nietzschean assault on metaphysical phantoms:

God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. — And we — we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.¹²

God, the noumenal realm, History, indeed, any meta-narrative, as Lyotard calls it, any transcendental signifier, any last key that would seek to explain everything and give it a final, authoritative meaning, is the target of the postmodern attack. And surely the “general will” of a “People” would be another such “big Other.”

But if History, the People, the General Will are all each just another Big Other, why isn’t all this talk of revolt and Event just another Big Bother, one that will end, as so many others have, with our domination and violation by just another Big Brother? If, like General St. Clare’s sword, history has no point, we must ask, where are we being led by this call to priapic enthusiasm? The general knows he cannot draw his sword to command the charge without betraying himself. Žižek tells us that “Heidegger made the right step in 1933” — “albeit in the wrong direction.” But does not the very notion of *direction* imply that that there is or can be a meaning and a purpose to historical events? Isn’t such *direction* precluded by the inexistence of the Big Other? Like Marx, perhaps Žižek could say, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.”¹³ Perhaps tactical interventions, as Foucault often seems to argue, can also be meaningful and purposive. But all advocacy for change *presumes* some interpretation, some understanding of what is and what should be, some notion of the *point* of action. But here the point is lacking.

Žižek tells us that the problem with Nazism, as an Event that had the courage to make a move (albeit in the wrong direction), “is not that it ‘went too far’” but that “it did *not* go far enough, i.e., that its violence was an impotent acting out” (20), because it did not act violently enough against the true root of human degradation: capitalism. He tells us that “Hitler did *not* ‘have the balls’ to really change things; he did not really act” (39). He tells us that the 1928 “Stalinist revolution,” one “for which one truly had to ‘have the balls’” was also “*not radical*

enough" (39) because it could not really change the existing social order of capitalism and bourgeois complacency to forge a new world in which we could truly *live* a new vision.

What is one to make of this ballsy priapic politics, this call to charge the enemy (capitalism), to take steps without direction, no matter what the cost? Nietzsche again:

Indeed, I should wish that a few great experiments might prove that in a socialist society life negates itself, cuts off its own roots. The earth is large enough and man still sufficiently unexhausted; hence such a practical instruction and *demonstratio ad absurdum* would not strike me as undesirable, even if it were gained and paid for with a tremendous expenditure of human lives.¹⁴

Nietzsche might well "have the balls" to write that in 1885, but haven't we had enough such experiments in the intervening 122 years? And let me be clear: Žižek is surely broadly right that we human beings are in a great deal of trouble in 2007. Global capitalism, rather than proving itself the panacea at the end of history, has in many ways exacerbated the failures of global politics and the degradation of the planet. We need new thinking and new directions. But Žižek, like General St. Clare reading his Bible, is far too mechanically *pious* in his recitations of the evils of "capitalism" and the promise of "the Left." For capitalism, while unleashing forces never before seen in history at the same scale, is nevertheless only a modern manifestation of that ancient problem of the common good: how to reconcile the interests of the individual and of society. For a final overcoming of that divide, we would have to listen to Socrates' advice in the *Republic*: realizing the ideal city would be "hard but in some way possible.... All those who happen to be older than ten they will send out into the countryside" (540d-541a). We know what that euphemism means: the "countryside" is the killing fields of Pol Pot, the death camps of Hitler, the terror of Stalin and Mao. That's what it means to "have the balls" to realize these priapic dreams of unity: one must purify the people and make way for the self-identity of a new generation. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more" — and this time we'll get our satisfaction. So beckons the recurring dream of priapic politics.

VI. Where's Your Point?

In his lecture course, "On the Essence of Truth," delivered in the Winter Semester of 1933-34, during his time as Rector of the University of Freiburg as an ardent National Socialist, Heidegger reprises his attack on Plato's "doctrine of the ideas":

If one interprets ideas as representations and thoughts that contain a value, a norm, a law, a rule, such that ideas then become conceived of as norms, then the subject of these norms is the human being — not the historical human being, but rather the human being in general, the human being in itself, or humanity. Hence, the conception of the human being is one of a *rational being in general*. In the Enlightenment and in liberalism, this conception achieves a definite form. Here all of the powers to be struggled against today have their root.¹⁵

Heidegger traces the crisis of modernity back to Plato, and he lays at Plato's feet the development of the universalism of the Enlightenment and of liberalism that threatens to reduce all human belonging and meaning to a homogenized abstraction of rights and laws, all grounded in an absolute realm of ideas transcending time and place.¹⁶ "Against this conception," he goes on to say in that same passage, "is opposed the *finitude, temporality, and historicity* of human beings." As I have argued in *Heidegger's Polemos*, Heidegger in this period understands his own confrontation with the history of Being and its first inception with the Greeks as intersecting with what he takes as the National Socialist attempt to resist the globalizing forces of liberal homogenization. But if Being itself is a *polemos*, an unending confrontation of meanings that unfolds through time, then while that historical conflicts may *unfold* through time and have a *trajectory*, it can have no ultimate *telos*, no goal or final completion.

Instead, Heidegger takes his stand on the radical finitude of historical belonging, of belonging to a particular people at a particular place in a particular time, and *struggling* to make sense, unendingly, of what it means to *be* that people. It is worth noting that in this lecture course, Heidegger presents one of his most sustained attacks on the more orthodox Nazi understanding of the people as having a fixed biological essence.¹⁷ His target is Erwin Kolbenheyer, a lecturer and functionary of the Prussian Academy of the Arts under the Nazis: "On the basis of the blindness of this biologism to the historical, existentiell, fundamental actuality of man or of a people, Kolbenheyer is incapable of truly seeing and grasping today's *historical-political German* actuality; and this actuality was not there at all in his speech—to the contrary: the revolution was falsified into a mere *organizational operation*." Heidegger, as Žižek suggests, also seeks a revolution that will be an ongoing, enduring "Event," one that leaves no room for men like Kolbenheyer, "a reactionary national and popular bourgeois" for whom "the 'political' is an unspiritual, disagreeable sphere which one leaves to certain people who then, for example, make a revolution...."¹⁸ For Heidegger, at least in this period, *being* a people, as a form of authentic Dasein, demands engaging in politics as a permanent revolution, an ongoing *confrontation* with the historical meaning of oneself, both as an individual self and as a people, which is "possible only on the basis of *freedom*." To reduce the human to "biological functional

capacities” only “*perverts* decision—engagement—freedom—the courage for sacrifice into a procedure which is encumbered *from the outside* and fit into the biological actuality which has been presupposed as the sole definitive actuality”¹⁹

It should give us pause that Heidegger could be a Nazi while opposing biological racism, while espousing a radical freedom that makes revolution permanent as a way of life, and while despising the resort to law and principle as bourgeois liberalism. Heidegger was a “national socialist” because he believed in the *people* (hence the “socialist”) as the proper field of the political, for as Dasein, one only belongs to a historical community; but he denied what he took to be the essentially Platonic-Christian-liberal notion that “the people” could ever be homogenized to the global level (hence the “national”). Furthermore, Heidegger’s own descent into priapic politics is unmistakable in this period. In the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he writes, “this standing-there, this taking and maintaining a *stand* that stands erected high in itself, is what the Greeks understood as Being.”²⁰ This would be laughable if it weren’t so dangerous. Consider this passage: “Dasein is the constant urgency of defeat and of the renewed resurgence of the act of violence against Being, in such a way that the almighty sway of Being violates [*ver-gewaltigt*: from *vergewaltigen*, to overpower, to violate, and, specifically, to rape] Dasein (in the literal sense), makes Dasein into the site of its appearing, envelops and pervades Dasein in its sway, and thereby holds it within Being.”²¹ For Heidegger, truly creative human beings must live up to this priapic challenge of taking a tragic stand against the overwhelming power of Being, of becoming *hupsipolis-apolis*, of being *deinon* (uncanny and terrible), of engaging in an ontological violence which has no concern for the ontic consequences of its action.²²

Žižek says of Heidegger’s Nazi engagement that “the tragedy is that he was *almost right*, deploying the structure of a revolutionary act and then distorting it by giving it a Fascist twist” (31). But what exactly is it about the “Fascist twist” that makes Heidegger’s “step” move in the “wrong direction”? Žižek writes that “the problem with Hitler was that *he was not violent enough*.... Nazism was not radical enough, it did not dare to disturb the basic structure of the modern capitalist social space (which is why it had to invent and focus on destroying an external enemy, Jews)” (39). So, despite whatever potential Heidegger might have seen in it, the Nazi revolution was stillborn; it immediately calcified and dispensed with the “Event.” But Žižek also says, as we have seen, that Stalinism “*was not radical enough*” (39). Both “the Right” and “the Left,” then, have despised “bourgeois self-complacency” (40), but neither have (yet) had the courage truly to attack and transform the “capitalist social space” and “the capitalist relations of production” (40). Žižek suggests that “Heidegger was right in his doubt about liberal democracy;

what he refused to consider was a radical Leftist engagement” (19). But, really, what distinguishes the radical “Left” from the radical “Right” in their revolutionary dreams of creating a truly unitary “social space,” except that for one, this ecstatic unity will be national and bounded, for the other, international and global? And let’s not forget, “Leftists” have invented their own “external” enemies to the people’s unity, be they Kulaks or “rootless cosmopolitans.” Indeed, Marx, in “On the Jewish Question,” declares that “the *emancipation of the Jews* is the emancipation of mankind from *Judaism*.”²³

And to return to the point: if there is no Big Other, on what possible grounds can Žižek appoint “the Left” as the proper champion of history and of a post-bourgeois, permanently revolutionary society? Isn’t the commitment to “the Left” then purely arbitrary? Like St. Clare, Žižek calls on a broken authority to lead his charge. What’s his point? Or rather, *where* is it? In what body does it lie embedded? Žižek believes in no Big Other. Major Murry, the truly pious puritan, confronted St. Clare and died for it. The corpse that Žižek would bury in the mountain of corpses produced by his ballsy new experiments is the body of “the Left.” The only difference in the socialist experiments of the 20th century that matters is that some were nationalist and others internationalist. And all the (temporarily) successful internationalist ones have turned out to be no more than nationalist in the end. If history is pointless, if no step is in the right direction, there is no meaning to the distinction between “Right” and “Left.” A terminological dualism born in the halls of Chamber of Deputies during the French Revolution has finally been finished off. Unlike General St. Clare’s loyal soldiers, who followed him to their deaths before their survivors realized the truth, perhaps those inclined to follow a call like Žižek’s should first examine the corpse already lying at their feet.

VII. *Enthousiasmos and Phronêsis, Dionysus and Apollo*

“Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.” This passage from Luke 8:33 comes from the epigraph to Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, perhaps the single greatest novel depicting the lure and the danger of what I am calling a priapic politics. Dostoevsky had followed closely the career of Sergei Nechaev, the Russian nihilist, fabulist and Machiavellian revolutionary, basing the character of Pyotr Verkhovensky upon him. In *Demons*, he shows how such a character, unbound by all principle, can orchestrate a madness and destructiveness that overwhelms a community with revolutionary enthusiasm.

The difficulty is that human beings yearn for the Dionysian. We hunger for a possession that transports us beyond ourselves, a divine enthusiasm in which we merge with something greater than ourselves. Politics cannot and should not ignore or despise this aspect of the human spirit. If it does so, that yearning will erupt in a mania for a belonging and purpose that exceeds all bounds. The Dionysian must be tempered by the Apollonian.

Which brings us back to the innocence of Father Brown. Chesterton depicts him as having a *phronêsis*, a practical wisdom, a prudence, underlying his naïve exterior. Žižek, by contrast, spurns prudence, “maturity,” and “pragmatic politics” (31). “What if,” he asks, “if we are to see with the ontological eye, our ontic eye has to be blinded?” (21), which means, briefly, that to be truly open to genuinely revolutionary ruptures in history, one will not be able to see the practical outcome of such Events. For Žižek, prudence seems to represent the domestication of the imagination, the betrayal of the possibility of a life beyond the compromises of bourgeois, liberal democracy, a life in which the revolutionary enthusiasm of complete belonging is a lived present, and not just an exception, the mythic foundation of the past or a fantasy of the future (see, for example, 4-5 and 7-8). Žižek, following Foucault, seeks a truly “revolutionary Event, the sublime enthusiasm of the united people where all internal differences are momentarily suspended” (15), except he does not want that enthusiasm to be momentary and compromised by the pragmatics of practical politics. This is why he can say that the uprisings against the falling Communist regimes “are not Events, merely pseudo-Events, because they were lacking the moment of properly utopian opening” (15). This means that the moment of revolutionary rupture is deeply at risk from the consequent efforts to regularize the new reality:

This is why, also, the opposition between noumenal enthusiasm and particular strategic interests does not cover the entire field – if it were so, then we would remain stuck forever in the opposition between emancipatory outbursts and the sobering “day after” when life returns to its pragmatic normal run. From this constrained perspective, every attempt to avoid and/or postpone this sobering return to the normal run of things amounts to terror, to the reversal of enthusiasm into monstrosity. What if, however, *this* is what is truly at stake in a true emancipatory process: in Jacques Ranciere’s terms, how to unite the political and the police, how to transpose the political emancipatory outburst into the concrete regulation of policing. What can be more sublime than the creation of a new “liberated territory,” of a positive order of being which escapes the grasp of the existing order? (15)

As I read him, Žižek seems to be saying that revolutionary efforts to keep the utopian community of collective enthusiasm alive will *appear* as terror to those who, whatever their claims to revolutionary zeal, really wish to revert to bourgeois comfort and monadic alienation.

This is why enthusiasts admire the French Revolution, the Paris Commune and the October Revolution, but spurn the American Revolution as a “pseudo-Event.” But if Kolakowski is right, the “policing” of revolutionary enthusiasm only crushes the spontaneity of human life and deepens the divide between private and communal life. In Federalist No. 10, James Madison writes, “There are two methods of curing the mischief of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other by controlling its effects.” Faction, of course, is what we have recognized all along as whatever separates us and prevents the realization of the complete community. Madison continues: “There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.”²⁴ The utopian society can only be achieved by *forcing* the self-identity of collective enthusiasm, but then it only undermines the ontological freedom that it assumes as its foundation. If we can’t change human nature, and make it more like that of the ant or bee, then the only option is to control faction with prudence and to balance the competing forces against one another. The Apollonian measures that Madison suggests — law, constitution, and the balance of powers — are the only methods we have for ensuring a public life that is *open* to the Dionysian enthusiasm of belonging but not *overwhelmed* by it. This is not to say that there is not very considerable work to be done all the time to strive for a better approximation of justice, but this striving must imply *some* faith, one that can be rationally articulated, in the “big Other” of justice.²⁵ It requires prudence, not just enthusiasm, in seeking it. We must remember that Dionysus is a redemptive but tragic figure, and his son Priapus, a farcical but dangerous one. Let Silenus’ ass bray. Apollo can restore the balance that a decent political life requires.

¹ I owe a debt of thanks to the following friends and colleagues, who helped me formulate and develop the ideas in this essay: Evgenia Cherkasova, Nir Eisikovits, Christina Hardway, and Richard Polt. The responsibility for the results is my own.

Slavoj Žižek, "Resistance is Surrender," in *London Review of Books*, 15 Nov. 2007, available online at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01_.html.

² See Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos: From Being to Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 4-14.

³ In the following, I will use the same online version of the story as Žižek: G. K. Chesterton, "The Sign of the Broken Sword," available online at <http://books.eserver.org/fiction/innocence/brokensword.html>.

⁴ See Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos*, op. cit., 106-7, 160-62, 215-18.

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography G. K. Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936), 337-8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁷ Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), 46.

⁸ See David Roachnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 8.

⁹ Leszek Kolakowski, "The Myth of Human Self-Identity," in *My Correct Views on Everything*, ed. Zbigniew Janowski (South Bend, Indiana: Saint Augustine's Press, 2005), 60.

¹⁰ Lawrence LeShan, *The Psychology of War: Understanding Its Mystique and Its Madness* (Chicago: Noble Press, 2002).

¹¹ For one account, see Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, trans. A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 391-92.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), section 108.

¹³ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in op. cit., 145.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), section 125.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 36/37, *Sein und Wahrheit*, ed. Hartmut Tietjen (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001), 166; my translation.

¹⁶ For a critique of this treatment of Plato, see my "Back to the Cave: A Platonic Rejoinder to Heidegger," in *Heidegger and the Greeks*, ed. Drew Hyland and John P. Manoussakis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," op. cit., 209-213.

¹⁸ Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," op. cit., 211; translation by Richard Polt.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 63.

²¹ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, *ibid.*, 190.

²² See *Introduction to Metaphysics*, *ibid.*, 159-176.

²³ *Op. cit.*, 49.

²⁴ This and the previous quote are from Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Charles Kesler and Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor, 1999), 46.

²⁵ See my "Back to the Cave," op. cit.