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Resisting the urge to do nothing

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Abstract

Within Foucault's assertion that society exists as a totalised field of actions upon actions, 'doing nothing' perhaps takes on the role of a radically subversive excess. This suggestion is consistent with Zizek's politics of withdrawal, or Bartleby politics. However Zizek's politics has come under much criticism in particular for the simple fact that he seems to be promoting indolent passivity in the face of systemic violence of contemporary liberal-democratic capitalism. This article seeks to critically examine two attempts at resisting the urge to 'do nothing', in particular the post-anarchist politics of Saul Newman and the Adrian Johnston's critique of the cadence of change. It is argued here that both authors structure their arguments around the subversive excess of 'doing nothing'.

Introduction

In his article “The subject and power” Foucault (1982) argues that society exists as a totalised field of actions upon actions. As possibly the world’s leading philosopher on ‘de-totalising’ discourses at the time, such a comment appears out of place. Indeed, his works on power and resistance, particularly his work on how modern forms of disciplinary power operate throughout society and their impacts on people at the micro- level of their everyday lives, argue that power can never totalise the social field due to immanent possibilities for resistance. However, his reference to ‘actions upon actions’ indicates a different form of totalisation of the social field based on the exclusion of ‘doing nothing’. From Foucault’s perspective it would appear that claims of ‘doing nothing’ in the face of power and injustice rest on an incomplete or misplaced analysis of the social order. That is, there are always acts of resistance against power, one just needs to know where to look for them. Furthermore, in this view of power relations the effects of ideology are shown to be incomplete because people are resisting power despite the dominant ideology.

When considering the ‘field’ and the actions that take place within them, many scholars have criticised Foucault’s theory of resistance as doing nothing to transform the field (e.g., Newman 2004a, Copjec 1994, Žižek 2006, Vighi and Feldner 2007). Or in Lacanian terms, acts of resistance do nothing to destabilise the symbolic order and its big Other. From this Lacanian perspective, perhaps one can argue that ‘doing nothing’ is the constitutive excess of the field of actions upon actions, a jouissance of silence and inaction that is as threatening and ominous as Žižek (2012a) claims. That is, what if doing nothing were in a way the most subversive form of resistance? This idea that ‘doing nothing’ can be a radical political gesture is the basis of Žižek’s politics of withdrawal, or Bartleby politics (see for example, Žižek 2006, 2009a, 2012b). In short, Bartleby politics produces a shift from an act of transgression that is external to power, to power’s inherent transgression. Therefore, Žižek (2009b: 334) argues, it is

Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly...The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active”, to “participate”, to mask the Nothingness of what goes on.

However Žižek’s politics has come under much criticism. Much of this criticism tends to focus on one simple point – that we can’t possibly sit back and do nothing! This article seeks to critically examine two attempts to deal with ‘doing nothing’ as the disruptive excess of the social

field. The first section examines the work of British post-anarchist scholar Saul Newman and his attempts to locate and define the space or gap within Foucault's edifice and reclaim its emancipatory potential. The second section examines Adrian Johnston's critique of Zizek's Bartleby politics. Both authors turn to psychoanalytic theory to construct their arguments against 'doing nothing' and reassert the primacy of a politics of doing as the means for emancipatory transformation. This paper argues that in their own different ways, both Newman and Johnston in attempting to overcome threat of 'doing action' both end up settling back into a position of 'doing nothing in the appearance of doing something', thereby disavowing the revolutionary potential of 'doing nothing'.

Displacing 'Doing Nothing' Through the Empty Place of Power

British post-anarchism scholar Saul Newman (2004a: 148) claims that, "Foucault's theory of power ran into its own conceptual difficulties, particularly in relation to: the all pervasiveness of power; explaining the actual mechanisms of subjection; and allowing a theoretical space for resistance". Whilst Foucault claims that the dynamic of power and resistance means that there are always possibilities for destabilising power relations, Newman (2004a) argues that power operates through its own transgression. Therefore, for Newman, every act of resistance only reaffirms the power it is supposedly working against. Newman (2004a:150) claims that this is "the ruse of power according to Foucault" that rather than there being an essential subject that is repressed by power, "subjectivity is produced in such a way that its assertion or identification, rather than being an act of liberation that transgresses power, is something that only supports or reaffirms power". This leads Newman (2004a:152) to propose, "there needs to be some sort of 'space' beyond power if a coherent project of resistance is to be conceptualised". Other authors have also noted that this lack of a reference to a principle or space outside the regime of power as the key problem to Foucault's politics of resistance (e.g., see Copjec 1994). Indeed, even some of his most ardent supporters cannot escape this problem. For example, Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 207) at the end of their extensive coverage of Foucault's work conclude, "Is there any way to resist the disciplinary society other than to understand how it works and to thwart it whenever possible?"

In a series of three articles, Newman (2004a, 2004b, 2004c) seeks to explicate this 'space beyond power' in order to conceive of a politics that can effectively free itself from the reciprocity of power and its transgression. In the first article, he turns to the work of Lacan and psychoanalysis in order to locate a psychic dimension linked to desire which he claims

Foucault's notion of power has no space for. A key aspect of this approach is that whereas for Foucault the subject is wholly constituted by power and discourse, for Lacan, the identity of the subject is always incomplete (Newman 2004a). As such, there is a 'lack' in the symbolic identity of the subject (i.e., in subjectivity), and it is this lack that *is* the subject. Therefore, for Foucault identity is based on successful interpellation into the discursive field, whereas for Lacan, identity is based on a failed interpellation in which there is a surplus or excess meaning produced by this failed encounter with the symbolic (Newman 2004a). Thus for Lacan there is "a radical void in the structures of subjectivity that it cannot master, and that both jeopardizes and constitutes its identity" (Newman 2004a, p. 155); that is, the Lacanian Real. It is the Real that Newman (2004a) claims provides a theoretical ground through which resistance to power can be conceptualised and explained. Not only is there something external to our subjectivity that undermines and constitutes it (i.e. the subject of the Real) but power itself must also have something which it cannot entirely grasp (Newman 2004a). Similarly, Žižek (1996: 3) argues, "every power structure is necessarily split, inconsistent; there is a crack in the very foundation of its edifice – and this crack can be used as a lever for the effective subversion of the power structure".

The need for a 'space' beyond power leads Newman to reclaim an ideological dimension in the understanding of power. Newman explains (2004a: 163), "In political terms, this means that there is a gap in social representation itself. The role of ideology is to cover over, to patch up this void – to sustain the fantasy of fullness and wholeness". Thus, according to Newman, ideology does not conceal social reality but the lack at the heart of social reality itself. That is, the role of ideology is to mask the theoretical space that allows for resistance to power. As a result, we are maintained as acting within the limits created by the hegemonic power relation. This link between power and ideology leads Newman (2004a: 164) to claim that "the question of resistance to power...is also the question of resistance to the ideological dimension through which structures and relations of power are sustained, articulated and extended". As he states, "Here the ideological distortion would be not at the level of its objective content, but rather in the position of power from which it is articulated" (Newman 2004a: 162). Ideological fantasy attempts to deal with the trauma by masking this lack in symbolic reality itself (Stavrakakis 1999). It is important to point out here that "fantasy is not the opposite of reality but, rather, the dimension that sustains it" (Newman 2004a: 163). As Žižek (1989: 21) comments, "Ideology is not simply 'false consciousness', an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ideological". Newman explains, "In political terms, this

means that there is a gap in social representation itself. The role of ideology is to cover over, to patch up this void – to sustain the fantasy of fullness and wholeness” (Newman 2004a: 163).

In a second article, *Interrogating the Master*, Newman (2004b) furthers the analysis above by linking it to Lacan’s four discourses of psychoanalysis. The starting point in this article is the reassertion of his previous position that resistance reinforces the power it aims to overthrow. However, he takes this claim a step further by showing how the very identity of the protestor or the revolutionary relies on the figure of the master, or power. By referencing Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic (in which the slave recognizes and desires the Master, yet the identity of the Master is also dependent on recognition by the slave) he argues, “It is precisely this hidden connection between revolutionary desire and the domination it contests, between transgression and authority, that is the central problem of revolutionary politics” (Newman 2004b: 302). Here we see the same Lacanian argument that the Other exists only so long as we act in accordance with it. Or in other words, doing *something* effectively amounts to doing *nothing* from the perspective of social and political transformation. This is a fundamental point in Newman’s search for a place outside power that is free from the imposition of any Master. Furthermore, building on his notion of ideology in the previous paper, Newman (2004b: 302-303) shows how rather than being “confronted with the impossibility of one’s desire, one objectivises it – that is, one invents an external impediment to it that functions as an excuse for it not being realised”. In this way, the problem of our incomplete identity (linked to the fantasy of fullness) is displaced onto an external obstacle such as the Master that prevents us from achieving full self-enclosed identity. However, and this is Newman’s critical point, without the existence of this authority the revolutionary subject would be unable to see itself in this way.

This leads Newman to invoke Lacan’s four discourses of psychoanalysis. He claims that “if one fails to recognize this discursive structure (i.e., the Master’s discourse) then all one does is replace one Master with another” (Newman 2004b: 305). However, Newman (2004a) is all too aware that the social field does not exist without the symbolic dimension organized around the big Other. Therefore, the key task of his post-anarchism is to construct an Other that is not really a Master, but an Other that can organize the social field in a way that maintains autonomous and plural political action beyond Foucauldian acts of transgression. Newman attempts to use the other discursive structures of psychoanalysis to construct this radical political project. Newman (2004b) argues that although the only way to undermine the Master is through the discourse of the Analyst, this process can only begin through the discourse of the

Hysteric. In the latter, the hysteric realizes that there is a lack of the object to complete her identity and therefore interrogates the Master who “in trying to conceal his lack and shore up his position of authority, provides answers that only expose his impotence and lack all the more” (Newman 2004b: 306). However, for Newman, the position of the hysteric is still dependent on the Master in order to sustain her insurrectionary desire. Nonetheless, he does see revolutionary potential in the Hysteric’s discourse. What is required for this revolutionary potential to be realised is the discourse of the Analyst.

The key feature of the analyst is the way that he assumes the position of the lack in the Other (a). For Newman (2004b), this means the analyst abandons the fantasy of utopian fullness and fully asserts that the Other is lacking. What the position of the analyst amounts to is a moment of rupture which “might be seen in terms of a fundamental political event, which is contingent, indeterminate and whose effects are undecidable...it would be this kind of space between two structural positions or signifying regimes that could be truly said to be political” (Newman 2004b: 309). Thus for him, this openness enables a field of different identities and forms of engagement. Newman then highlights a number of thinkers that have tried to theorize this rupturing of existing power relations, including the work of Žižek. As an anarchist, Newman (2004b) dismisses Žižek’s perspective on this moment of indeterminacy which for him seeks to reassert a new Master and therefore undermine this openness. Rather, for Newman (2004b: 311), “perhaps instead one could remain faithful to [the] constitutive openness and its radically contingent possibilities. This would imply a radical political ethics of suspension and indeterminacy that refuses to be grounded in a concrete ontological order”. Newman here appears close to a politics of ‘doing nothing’ in making reference to ‘suspension’ of the big Other that opens up the field of radically contingent possibilities. Nonetheless, Newman is keen to steer clear of such an interpretation and it is at this point that Newman attempts to bring some concreteness to his rethinking of resistance by linking it to the ‘anti-globalization movement’. He argues that this movement is unified around a common struggle that is not determined in advance, but is articulated in a contingent way during the struggle. In particular, Newman (2004b: 311) claims, it “now targets new sites of oppression and domination within the capitalist system: corporate power and greed, G-M products, workplace surveillance, environmental degradation, and so on”. Although he suggests the movement is perhaps quilted around a general politics of ‘anti-capitalism’, he goes on to claim that “perhaps it may be more precise to say that the master signifier here is *empty* or lacking in content.

Therefore, Newman sees the place beyond power as enabling the proliferation of political action and identities which would be closed off with the imposition of a new determinant Master (that is, this free proliferation would be traded for an identity determined by the Master and simple transgressions in support of the Master). Knowing full well that the product of the discourse of the Analyst is the assertion of a new Master, Newman's assertion of a master signifier that is empty is his attempt to have his cake and eat it too. Furthermore, this assertion seems to miss the point that any master signifier is essentially 'empty', adding no new content to the field of signifiers. Therefore the master signifier functions not by adding some new determinate content, but rather by elevating one from the series of 'ordinary' signifiers into the position of Master. As empty, the Master reframes the social field. This provides a particular challenge for Newman to conceptualise the necessity of a Master without it repressing opportunities for the assertion of a plurality of subjective identities. This leads into the third and final article in Newman's series on this topic, *The Place of Power in Politics* (Newman 2004c). For Newman, 'the place of power' refers to an abstract symbolic position through which both power relations and political identities are organized and constituted. Traditionally, through thinkers like Hobbes and Marx, the political field was reduced to a central struggle between a place of power and a place of subjectivity; for example, the State and the proletariat. Foucault's analytics of power then showed that there was no longer a privileged site of either power or resistance, but rather power relations were constitutive of all social identities (Newman, 2004c). Therefore, Foucault's decapitation of the sovereign led to the abandonment of a place of power and the subject that seeks to emancipate itself from it (Newman 2004c). Newman seeks an alternative model that reclaims a place of power, but one that is constituted around an "empty place of power".

Building on his previous point about the inherent lack in the Other, Newman invokes the work of Ernesto Laclau. He states, for Laclau "society is an 'impossible object' – that is, it can never be fully represented or grasped, precisely because of the internal limit of representation itself. This applies to any ideological attempt (whether conservative, liberal, or radical) to represent the social field" (Newman 2004c: 146). This leads Newman (2004c:148) to argue,

although there is no longer an essential division between the place of power and the place of resistance, we can theorize a notion of a partially constituted place – one that allows a contingency of identities and political actions, yet, at the same time, provides certain discursive and, indeed, ethical limits to the political field.

It is here that he references Claude Lefort's (1988) notion of the 'empty place of power'. For Newman (2004c: 150), "Unlike the Foucauldian idea of conflict which leads...to the dissolution of society (to eliminate the place entirely), Lefort's idea of conflict retains the idea of place, yet sees it as empty". That is, the decapitation of the sovereign left society with an empty place of power, that the place remains, but it is now empty. Furthermore, the implication of this for resistance is the structural imperative for various political actors and identities to seek to 'fill it' by claiming to represent the whole of society. Thus, similar to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) "New Social Movements", Newman argues that rather than a politics of difference in which particular identities compete with each other, there is competition for hegemony over the partial fixing of the empty place of power. Thus, in the concept of the 'empty place of power', Newman appears to have found his big Other that refuses to act like any other Master. That is, it is a benevolent type of Master that enables the proliferation of political action and identities rather than thwarting them.

In this way, Newman's politics could perhaps be described as constant vigilance of political action against potential usurpers of the empty place of power. For example, Newman (2010: 167) argues, "We should think of autonomy, then, as an open ended project – as something constructed through ongoing practices of opposition and democratisation". Indeed, he takes issue with several political thinkers who he claims, in one way or the other, rely on the imposition of a Master that thwarts the proliferation of subjective identities and inclusive participation (Newman 2010). In the case of Laclau (2005), he is against a form of populism that requires an enigmatic, inspiring leader who ends up controlling and determining the desire of the masses, even though he may claim to 'represent' them. With Hardt and Negri (2004), Newman takes issue with the passiveness of the evolutionary staging of the revolution that emphasises the ever expanding multitude resulting from the advancement of capitalism in relation to its full self-realization. Such an evolutionary approach deprives the masses their participation in effecting the revolution. Finally he heavily criticises Badiou (2005) for the rare and miraculous nature of the Event that he claims ends up in nothing but passivity because of the opaqueness of precisely what is necessary to create an Event. What underpins Newman's rejection of these authors is that they all impose, directly or indirectly, an Other that acts as a Master who deprives us of the autonomy to assert different subjectivities in an inclusive and participatory manner. It is a critique he also applies to Žižek, who "argues that in times of revolution or social disintegration, it is the master who provides a new quilting point that stabilizes the situation" (Newman 2004b: 310-311). In terms of the four discourses of

psychoanalysis, Newman claims that the discourse of the Analyst is the end-game and that any positing of a new Master only returns us to the discourse of the Master where we act for power, in accordance with it, thereby undermining the autonomy and participation of the masses. In contrast to these thinkers, Newman (2010, p. 167, italics added).claims post-anarchism is,

a utopianism that is deeply engaged in political struggles *rather than retreating into passivity*. In other words, it is important to think of the inevitable utopian dimension of radical politics *in terms of action rather than stasis, engagement rather than escape*; as a certain political space of insurgency and contestation through which the sovereignty of the existing order is confronted in the name of something other.

This is perhaps Newman's strongest rejection of 'doing nothing'. However, perhaps the critical question to ask here is, does his politics aimed at maintaining the empty place of power succeed in overcoming 'doing nothing' as a false mode of resistance in our contemporary liberal-democratic capitalist era? For example, in contrast to Newman's position Fabio Vighi (2010: 113) argues that action aimed at undermining master-signifiers whilst necessary "is less and less sufficient, for the simple reason that the rejection or exposure of *explicit* forms of authority is one of the key conditions upon which capital thrives". From this position, we are continually being threatened by metonymic authoritarian negations wanting to usurp the empty place of power and deny us of these deep democratic freedoms. This fits precisely with Lefort's (and subsequently Newman's position) democratic invention and the liberal empty place of power. Therefore, the task of liberal-resistance is to restore the empty place of power in an endless cycle of negating the way power negates our democratic freedoms. As Zizek (2008: 267) explains,

Lefort's fundamental thesis – which has today already acquired the status of a commonplace – is that with the advent of the 'democratic invention', the locus of Power becomes an empty place...In pre-democratic societies, there is always a legitimate pretender to the place of Power, somebody who is fully entitled to occupy it, and the one who violently overthrows him has simply the status of a usurper, whereas within the democratic horizon, everyone who occupies the locus of power is by definition a usurper.

However, the important point to make here is that the place of power is not an a-priori empty place, but is rather it is constructed and this construction displaces that constitutive gap in society. For example Zizek (2008: 276, italics added) continues,

The fundamental operation of the 'democratic invention' is thus of a purely symbolic nature: it is misleading to say that the 'democratic invention' finds the locus of power empty – the point is rather that it constitutes, constructs it as empty; *that reinterprets the 'empirical' fact of interregnum into a 'transcendental' condition of the legitimate exercise of power*'.

In this way the empty place of power positivizes or masks the fundamental lack, thereby providing the fantasy space upon which the multitude of forms of anti-capitalist movements – targeting 'new sites of oppression and domination within the capitalist system: corporate power and greed, G-M products, workplace surveillance, environmental degradation, and so on' – appear as transformative politics. Although Newman claims that certain conceptualizations of resistance displace the antagonistic gap at the heart of the social order, by emphasising the empty place of power he falls into this same trap. Perhaps another way to approach this is through the different ways that Žižek and Newman conceptualise ideological fantasy. Newman (2004a, 2004b) challenges the fantasy of belief in a utopian fullness, that is, a society without antagonism and therefore the key task of ideology critique is to accept the impossibility of this fullness. Žižek takes up this same point in his critique of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) to posit a different perspective on the functioning of ideology. In response to Laclau's notion of the impossible fullness of Society (also underpinning Newman's argument), Žižek (2000: 100-101) argues,

My conclusion would thus be to emphasize that the impossibility at work in Laclau's notion of antagonism is *double*: not only does 'radical antagonism' mean that it is impossible adequately to represent/articulate the *fullness* of Society – on an even more radical level, *it is also impossible adequately to represent/articulate this very antagonism/negativity that prevents Society from achieving its full ontological realization*. This means that ideological fantasy is not simply the fantasy of the impossible fullness of Society: not only is Society impossible, this impossibility itself is distortedly represented-positivised within an ideological field – *that is the role of ideological fantasy (say the Jewish plot)*. When this very impossibility is represented in a positive element, inherent impossibility is changed into external obstacle. 'Ideology is also the name for the guarantee that *the negativity which prevents Society from achieving its fullness does actually exist*, that it has a positive existence in the guise of a big Other who pulls the strings of social life.

Thus whereas for Newman the challenge is to resist locating the absence of fullness in some 'other' and accept the impossibility of society, for Žižek it is not that the one blames the obstacle for preventing the realisation of the fantasy of fullness, but rather that the fantasy object is presented as the obstacle preventing the openness of society. In a further twist, Žižek (2004: 70) later uses a different argument as a revision of this logic, claiming,

I am no longer satisfied with my own definition of ideology where the point was that ideology is the illusion which fills the gap of impossibility and inherent impossibility is transposed onto an external obstacle, and that what needs to be done is to reassert the original impossibility. This is the result of a certain transcendentalist logic: you have an a priori void, an original impossibility, and the cheating of ideology is to translate this inherent impossibility into an external obstacle; the illusion is that by overcoming this obstacle you get the Real Thing. I am almost tempted to say that the ultimate ideological operation is the opposite one: that is, the very elevation of something into impossibility as a means of postponing or avoiding encountering it.

From this perspective Newman's elevation of society into impossibility (supported by the presupposition of the empty place of power) allows him to develop a politics that avoids the necessity of the Act that (re-)structures the social order. That is, it forever postpones the difficult work of creating a new social order. And perhaps the two go hand in hand – positing the impossibility of society, of avoiding the Master supports our constant engagement in activities aimed at maintaining this impossibility. As mentioned earlier, Newman (2004a) is only too aware of the symbolic dimension of the social order and that any social order cannot do without one. However, in drawing on the discourse of the Analyst he only accepts part of this discursive structure. What he does not want to accept is that this discursive structure produces a new Master-Signifier. The only possible outcome of his politics which refuses to accept any Master is the discourse of the University in which the master signifier is disavowed. It is perhaps not a matter of simple coincidence that in *Interrogating the Master*, Newman (2004b) omits any discussion on Lacan's discourse of the University.

In summary, Newman's interest is in giving direction to Foucault's actions upon actions whilst at the same time maintaining individual agency. He sees Foucault's resistance as too diffuse within the power edifice rather than targeting the key site of power required to effect its transformation. Although it is not clear if he was able to conceptualise a direct relationship between the gap in power and 'doing nothing', however what is clear is that for him any

imposition of a master results in passivity where our actions can only be in support of power and not against it. In order to enable this to happen he posited the empty place of power as a stand-in fantasy screen for the gap in power to ensure the primacy of action remained.

The Vanishing Silence of the Analyst

Johnston's (2009) critique is undertaken from the opposite perspective to Newman. That is, he seeks to reject the possibility of 'doing nothing' as the basis for a radical politics. In *Badiou, Zizek, and Political Transformations*, Johnston (2009) undertakes to critically examine the way Badiou and Zizek conceptualise the trajectory of political transformation and identify the key philosophical and political problems plaguing the Event and the Act. His central thesis is that both authors "tend to favour models of change that risk discouraging in advance precisely the sorts of efforts at transforming the world of today that they so ardently desire" (Johnston 2009: xxviii). That is, according to Johnston, Badiou and Zizek's politics lead to one accepting the impossibility of political transformation, subsequently resulting in "a lazy, inactive complacency by divorcing truly effective interventions from any sort of subjective agency" (Johnston 2009: 113). Regarding Badiou's notion of Event, Johnston's main concern is with Badiou's claim that there is no connection between pre-evental activity and the Event. Regarding Zizek, whilst he agrees with Zizek's call for the role of ideological critique in creating the conditions for an Act, Johnston's concern is that the transformative moment of the Act is only recognized miraculously and retrospectively, that is, that we only become aware that an Act occurred after the (f)Act. As Johnston (2009: xviii) argues, "Zizek...celebrates the potential for revolutionary acts as untimely interventions that appear possible only after the fact of actually transpiring - and before which such interventions are impossible qua unimaginable in the eyes of the popular political imagination". In both cases, Johnston identifies an element of indolent passivity linked to an absence of predictability. Thus, he argues,

This drastic dichotomy splitting the temporal dynamics and rhythms of socio-political processes between either mere actions hopelessly embedded within the lurching continuous flow of a given situated reality (i.e., the stasis of repetition) and spectacular evental acts emerging with a seemingly immeasurable infinite speed (a speed incapable of being captured by chronology) so as to explode the order of the statist Other in an instantaneous gesture of rupture (i.e., the kinesis of becoming) is questionable and problematic (Johnston 2009: xxx).

In contrast, whilst Johnston does not go so far as to claim that there is a direct relationship between pre-Event/Act actions and subsequent political transformation, his project wagers on the fact that for him, there is no Act without actions. That is, although there is no direct relationship between actions and a transformative Act, actions are nonetheless essential as they may eventually tip the scale in favour of an Act. Thus for Johnston (2009: xxx), “Badiou and Zizek often tend hastily to dismiss ‘gradual evolution’ as involving no real change at all”, and instead favour passively waiting for transformative change.

The theoretical concerns underpinning Johnston’s critique of Zizek’s politics of transformation focus firstly on Zizek’s own fetishist disavowal centring around the impossibility qua interventions in the contemporary capitalist social order; and secondly on Zizek’s overemphasis on the miraculous aspect of the Lacanian Act. Regarding the claim that Zizek relies on a fetishist disavowal in order to make his own politics possible he makes reference to Sarah Kay (2003) who argues that Zizek exercises pessimism about the current situation but an optimism that it can change. For Johnston (2009: 109), this pessimism-optimism “might very well indicate, in a symptomatic fashion, the effective presence of something akin to an unacknowledged fetishistic split” in which Zizek “allows himself to sustain a cynical distance from the present state of the capitalist situation”. A similar point is made by Simon Critchley (2010) who argues,

Zizek’s work leaves us in a fearful and fateful deadlock, both a transcendental-philosophical deadlock and a practical-political deadlock: the only thing to do is to do nothing. We should just sit and wait. Don’t act, never commit, and continue to dream of an absolute, cataclysmic revolutionary act of violence...His work lingers in endless postponement and over-production. He ridicules others’ attempts at thinking about commitment, resistance and action - people like me and many others - while doing nothing himself.

According to Johnston (2009: 142), what underpins Zizek’s position is the way he “deploys a Lacan-derived distinction central to his political thought: false activity versus true activity of acts”. Furthermore, he argues,

Zizek’s conclusion that, in the current situation, inaction is preferable to action (at least to false ‘pseudo-activity’ of ‘aggressive passivity’) is derived not only from careful observation of contemporary socio-political circumstances – another factor driving Zizek

into this position is his mode of distinguishing between actions and acts (Johnston 2009: 143).

It is Zizek's perhaps over-reliance on this action-act dichotomy that Johnston (2009) claims prevents the former from being able to conceive of actions that can lead to an act. Or rather, it risks Zizek rejecting all actions as irrelevant to political transformation thereby promoting impotent passivity. More to the point, Johnston seems to be making the claim here that whilst the current political situation may indeed call for inaction, Zizek's position in relation to the action-act dichotomy makes this call more plausible than it would otherwise seem. However, although Johnston sees this argument as convincing in itself, he claims that there is another reason behind Zizek's rallying cry to inaction: his reading of the Lacanian Act. According to Johnston (2009: 158),

As regards Lacan's notion of the act, one must acknowledge an important difference between what could be described as the spectacular act versus the vanishing act...In those places where he remains enthralled by the spectacular side of the Lacanian act, Zizek is in danger of paralyzing himself into inaction by raising the bar so high for what would constitute an authentically revolutionary intervention that no foreseeable possible courses of action in the reality of contemporary sociopolitical world stand a chance of measuring up to the demanded magnitude of a 'real act'.

Johnston argues that Zizek fetishizes the miraculous version of the Lacanian Act to at once claim that all actions are false actions that simply reinforce parasitical nature of capitalism, whilst at the same time disavowing this stifling closure of possibilities by believing 'the impossible happens'. Johnston sees this as promoting a passivity similar to Marx's evolutionary approach to capitalism which argues that the antagonisms and contradictions of capitalism will eventuate in its inevitable demise. In both cases, "the danger is that the very analyses...might serve to facilitate the sustenance of the cynical distance whose underlying complicity with the current state of affairs he describes so well" (Johnston 2009: 126). Thus, for Johnston, this is a fetishist disavowal that allows one to maintain a position of withdrawal in the present and not commit to any political project, whilst claiming that this will ensure the impossible will happen.

In contrast to this emphasis on the spectacular act, Johnston argues for the vanishing act as the key to an effective politics of transformation. According to Johnston (2009: 158), this reading of the Lacanian analytic act points "to the possibility of a modest but nonetheless revolutionary

vanishing act as an auto-erasing moment that generates true change through quietly receding into the background". He links this vanishing act with Lacan's 'discourse of the Analyst' in which Lacan argues the analyst becomes the 'reject' (object a) of the discursive arrangement "established and sustained by the analyst's angle *for acting*" (Johnston 2009: 151, italics added). In this way, Johnston claims that the analyst commits 'suicide' by giving up his or her position as the Other supposed to know for the analysand.

Thus it is clear from these comments that Johnston sees the actions of the analyst as the driving force behind the rupture of Other, and 'doing nothing' only as the end product of therapy that must be maintained. But can it not be argued here that Johnston too falls prey to a fetishist disavowal by simply emphasising a different element of the Lacanian Act, namely the vanishing mediator? That is, while he argues that Žižek's disavowal enables him to acknowledge the difficulty of transforming capitalism and that by believing the impossible happens, he can simply do nothing, Johnston's reaction to the closure of political possibilities wagers on the point that the impossibility must be willed, that although we do not know which action will be 'the one', we must nonetheless continue acting just in case. Further, in explaining how the urge to be active is integral to the ideological fantasy of contemporary communicative capitalism, Dean (2005: 61) writes,

if Freud is correct in saying that a fetish not only covers over a trauma but that in doing so it also helps one through a trauma, what might serve as an analogous socio-political trauma today? In my view, in the US a likely answer can be found in the loss of opportunities for political impact and efficacy.

Therefore, Dean (2005) observes that because of this political closure it is not surprising that many might want to be more active and might feel that seeking increased spaces for action, particularly online spaces, is a way of getting their voice heard and of making a contribution. The fetish therefore enables one to go about his or her life relieved of the guilt that he or she might not be doing their part and secure in the belief that we are all informed, engaged citizens (Dean 2005).

One is tempted here to make a distinction between Johnston's fetishist disavowal and the one he claims Žižek is engaged in. Johnston claims Žižek's disavowal operates in the traditional Žižekian mode of 'I know very well, but...' That is, that Žižek knows very well that identifying and engaging in options for destabilising capitalism is impossible, but nonetheless, he believes the

impossible happens. At first appearance, Johnston appears to be engaged in the same mode of disavowal, as perhaps supported by his comments that “Although an act is indeed not an action (and although far from every action can or does become an act), there is, nonetheless, *no act without action*” (Johnston 2009: 117). That is, I know very well the difficulties of an action leading to an act, but nonetheless I believe that each action will lead to an act and therefore remain engaged in them. In this way, one could argue that this enables Johnston to take a cynical distance towards precisely what is necessary to perform an Act, and carry on with the active belief that any one action or combination of actions could potentially be the one that matters.

However, we should perhaps read Johnston’s fetishist disavowal in a different manner. In one of his recent works, Žižek (2014: 52) argues for a different version of the fetishist disavowal that renders knowledge itself incomplete; that is, because knowledge is ‘not-all’ we still have to act as though we believe. In this tautological version, rather than there being belief despite knowledge (I know very well, but nonetheless I believe otherwise) there is belief supplementing knowledge in the form of ‘I know very well, but nonetheless I still believe what I know’. For Žižek, (2014) this form of the fetishist disavowal uncovers the lack at the heart of knowledge itself. In this instance, one could claim that Johnston knows very well that actions are necessary for an act, but nonetheless he needs to believe that actions will lead to an act. Therefore, it can be argued that Johnston does not promote action despite the knowledge that there are limited possibilities for affecting transformation in the current liberal-democratic capitalist predicament, but rather he must supplement his knowledge of the fact that there is no Act without actions with the belief that this is so in order to disavow the unpredictability of the Act. This enables Johnston to take a cynical distance towards the unpredictability and contingency between actions and an Act and to keep believing that the gradual evolution of actions will eventually lead to political transformation. In a way, he simply replaces the term ‘thinking’ in his critique of Žižek with the term ‘acting’. That is, Johnston argues that Žižek’s position is one in which as long as he keeps engaged in critical thinking then the impossibility of change is bearable; for Johnston, the impossibility of knowing which action will lead to an Act is bearable only so long as we remain active in our belief that our actions will lead to change.

What supports Johnston’s fetish is the particular emphasis he places on the discourse of the Analyst. Firstly, he sees ‘doing nothing’ as only the end point of therapy, that is, that the analyst is actively engaged in therapy until the analysand has traversed the fantasy, after which time the analyst must be silent. In short, Johnston argues that the work (action) of the analyst in refusing

the libidinal questioning from the analysand results in the break of transference in which the analyst vanishes into the background. It is at this point of the analyst's vanishing that Johnston argues results in a deafening silence of the analysand's 'solitary mortal being'. Furthermore, it is at this moment that the analyst must also remain silent. As Johnston (2009: 155, italics added) describes it, "In refusing to continue posturing as yet another 'supposed to know' agent representing a fraudulently authoritative big Other, the analyst must remain silent apropos the potential subtractions to which he or she leaves patients *after their analyses are over*".

But is there not another reading of the position of the analyst? In the discourse of the Analyst, the position of the subject (\$) indicates that it is the analysand and not the analyst that does the vanishing. That is, once the new master signifier is posited, the position from which this positing was done (that is, the position of the subject) disappears, is masked over. As Žižek (2008: 190) explains it, "The moment when the *subject* 'posits his presupposition' is the very moment of his effacement as subject, *the moment he vanishes as a mediator*". In a similar manner, Vighi (2010: 128 italics added) claims, "In a political context, to be transformative the moment of sublimation must be thoroughly creative, if only because it changes the revolutionary premises to the extent of reinventing them, with good peace for the *revolutionary subject who must be prepared to vanish*".

Therefore, if we accept that it is the analysand who must perform the vanishing act, then what becomes of the role of the analyst in the discourse of the Analyst? Rather than being active to the point of suicide, it is the silent-inactive posture of the analyst that is the key to the therapeutic process. For example, Dolan (2006: 124, italics added) writes,

The analyst had to keep silent, at least in principle and the great majority of the time. But here a curious reversal takes place: it is the analyst, with his or her silence, who becomes the embodiment of the voice as the object. She or he is the personification, the embodiment, of the voice, the voice incarnate, the aphonic silent voice. This is not His Master's Voice, not the voice of command or of the superego, but rather the impossible voice to which one has to respond. It is the voice which does not say anything, and the voice which cannot be said. It is the silent voice of an appeal, a call, an appeal to respond, to assume one's stance as the subject. One is called upon to speak, and one would say anything that happens to come into one's mind to interrupt the silence, to silence this voice, to silence the silence; but perhaps the whole process of analysis is a way to learn how assume this voice.

From this reading, it can be argued that the position of the analyst during the therapeutic session is one of effectively 'doing nothing', and it is this position (of the object a) that the analysand responds to, filling it with speech. Indeed, as the last sentence suggests, the goal of therapy is for a 'mutual silence' in which the analysand, in response to the analyst's silence, also learns to assume this position.

This point can be made clearer by examining Johnston's point that Zizek's work is often criticised on the basis of a questionable theoretical move of extrapolating from the individual-focused psychoanalytic therapy to collective society. In the concluding discussions of Johnston's book, he seems to be implicitly siding with this critique by leaving his analysis in the analyst's room. However, if we extrapolate his discussion to the level of society, then a critical question that arises is where does one locate the position of the analyst in the social order? Vighi (2010) provides an answer when he argues that whilst a politics of withdrawal should be fully endorsed as a means of unveiling the instability of the social order, any social order is constituted by a human excess who are simultaneously produced by and excluded from the social order. In Vighi's (2010: 137) words,

What are the actual potentialities of politicizing this drive towards non-participation in our current constellation? More to the point: do we not already have this Bartleby of non-participation, of clearing the ground for the act, in the infernal yet 'liberated' territories of the slums, or more generally, in relation to any instance of exclusion? Once again, my contention is that if the term surplus has any meaning today, it must be in connection with the social entropy of capitalist production.

Therefore, it is perhaps inaccurate to speak of the analyst's suicide and vanishing only at the end of the treatment. The presence of the 'already inactive' shows that "every social link has its internal impediment, its lost object that cannot be integrated and from which *any subversive strategy should begin*" (Vighi 2010: 21). In the social field, this surplus is identified as the 'excluded' or the 'proletariat' (the latter being viewed no longer in narrow Marxian terms). In the therapy session, it is the analyst who assumes this position of the already inactive and silent in order to provide the basis for the subject's own 'subversive strategy'. That is, the human excess of society is already in the position of the silent/inactive analyst, and the task of transformative politics is to mobilise other acting subjects to join in the silence, to form a silent and inactive alliance. As Vighi (2010: 88) explains it,

The emancipatory step away from compulsive enjoyment requires that, to put it in the terms of Žižek's specific 'hauntology', we join arms with those 'living dead' who already populate our socio-symbolic space in growing numbers... In this context, our immediate goal – the goal that Žižek has described as 'Bartleby politics' – should be to gain a distance from the relentless and obscene (shameless) call to participate creatively and proactively in a system whose only goal is to reproduce itself and, collaterally, global misery.

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