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Politics After Finitude: Žižek's Redoubling of the Real and its Implications for The Left

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Abstract

Slavoj Žižek, alongside Quinton Meillassoux, takes up the position that correlationism – the idea that one can only know the world as it appears for one's subjective perception of it – fails to account for its own articulation, and thus depoliticizes the formal space from which it can arise. Through his reading of Hegel and locating of the Kantian thing-in-itself within reality, Žižek claims that he can subvert Kantian correlationism and its consequent political 'celebration of failure'.¹ This paper, however, argues that Žižek's Hegelian move, with its corresponding notion of the Act, fails to politicize the formal space that he criticizes Kantianism and the contemporary left for failing to consider. That is, Žižek's alternative, his use of Marxism to delineate and politicize the formal Real space of capital, falls short. His Marxist construction and analysis of capital, since it relies upon the labor theory of value, which Žižek himself criticizes, results in an unwarranted speculation. Without a plausible construction, his claim to avoid Kantian impotence has little ground to stand on. The left is forced back to the drawing board; without Žižek's alternative it is forced to revise Žižek's concept of the Act, Marxist construction, or re-confront the political limits of Kantian finitude and correlationism.

One of the core tenants of Slavoj Žižek's theoretical and political edifice is to rid philosophy of what has been referred to as the modern remnant of skepticism, the Kantian thing-in-itself. Žižek, arguing along the lines of Quentin Meillassoux, contends that Kantian imposed finitude or 'correlationism' (the idea that subject and object are

inextricably linked and must be considered in tandem), has led to a situation where one is left to talk about the world only as it is constituted for their subjective position and as it appears for their particular form of consciousness without ever theorizing the formal political background against which that particular form of consciousness can arise in the first place.² Critical philosophy and much of the left, which has implicitly adopted its standards, is here, for Žižek, forced into a type of quietism and unable to think the objective, ontic, formal components of political reality; that is, the ways in which subjective positions are objectively mediated. It fails to account for the space and form in which the subject-object correlation arises in the first place.

Kantianism and correlationism, then, for Žižek, creates a theory that is either politically impotent and unable to theorize (and subsequently politicize) the formal framework of reality, or, one that is politically 'opened,' creating a position in which philosophy, because it is always correlated with form of life, is barred from making claims about the nature of the world without a human subject.³ Correlationism relegates claims about the in-itself to a question of belief and, in so doing, opens the door for a type of impotent formalism where the political is considered to be outside philosophical thought.⁴ Žižek's critical move, which he argues provides an answer to this problem of formalism's celebration of failure, is the shift from Kant to Hegel, to locate the thing-in-itself within reality, to "make the step from negative access to the Absolute to Absolute itself as negativity."⁵

Initially this move may seem nonsensical and contradictory. How can Žižek locate the thing-in-itself, defined as that which is unknowable and beyond subjective experience, within subjective reality? For Žižek, however, the thing-in-itself is not simply the unknowable beyond experience; rather, it is closer to what he calls the 'parallax Real' —the pure difference or non-coincidence between two positions, which has "no substantial density in itself."⁶ Thus, locating the thing-in-itself within reality means engaging in a shift in perspective where one sees the very inconsistencies that prevent them from getting at universal truth, the Kantian antinomies of reason, as universal truth itself. The thing preventing access to 'objective reality,' viewed from a different perspective, becomes its own solution; it, pure difference is the truth beyond experience that was sought after. One then arrives at truth not when things or objects directly

correspond to some unmediated reality but rather, when things do not match up, when one reaches an antagonism, a point of complete, contingent, un-decidability. Žižek applies this to the political realm and argues that the truth of politics and of any political form of life, is the point at which it breaks down –its formal structural antagonism that it must repress in order to appear to be a consistent whole.⁷ Žižek’s concept of the Act, as that which intervenes from this point of social exclusion, is an attempt to politicize this formal space and thus avoid Kantian quietism or political impotence.

That is to say, Žižek asserts that this Hegelian move enables him to avoid the twin pitfalls of pre-Kantianism, which posits a directly assessable reality, and a politically impotent Kantian correlationism, which, again, fails to consider the effect of what Žižek calls the formal structure of politics.⁸ Through the move from Kant to Hegel, and the Act as the political correlate to this move, Žižek purports to give a third option, a politically charged theoretical paradigm for the left; one that calls on the left to universalize the formal repressed Real of society (what Žižek, borrowing from Rancière, refers to as the ‘part of no part’).⁹

However, despite Žižek’s popularity, few have seriously considered his Hegelian-Lacanian ontology as a consistent system, let alone as one providing a potentially valuable move past formalism and Kantian finitude. Much of the secondary scholarship on Žižek has fallen into one of three camps. The first is the journalistic commentary and critique of people like John Gray, Jerome Roos, Noam Chomsky among many others, who claim that Žižek is a dangerous charlatan. They often take out-of-context quotes, such as Žižek’s claim that Hitler was “not violent enough” (without considering Žižek’s definition of violence), to accuse him of thinly veiled fascism.¹⁰ On the more academic and theoretical side, there are those like Ian Parker who assert that there is “no Žižekian” system as such. Parker argues that Žižek is mainly a re-hashing of previous thinkers. He asserts that Žižek’s concepts are free-floating, have different signification at almost every point, and that there is no real stable core to his interesting but often tangential insights.¹¹ Third, there are those scholars like Jodi Dean and David Gunkel who focus on the relationship of one of Žižek’s concepts, track its development, and use it in conjunction with their own work. The problem, however, is that the abundance of Žižekian scholarship, nevertheless, masks a certain lack. Paradoxically what has, in

part, remained neglected by some of the most academic and theoretically inclined readers of Žižek, is the same thing that the journalistic hark on – his grandiose political claims and use of Marxism not just as an analysis of ideology but as an analytic tool for delineating the location of the Real of capital and a political Act (an intervention that brings about the non-all of the symbolic order and the unconscious structure of society). While some theorists have addressed Žižek’s particular political claims (for example, Ernesto Laclau), they critique them for empirical reasons. Few have addressed his particular political affiliations in connection to the Act and his theoretical edifice –for how the Hegelian move is able to avoid political impotence in the first place.¹²

This neglect is problematic. A large component of Žižek’s thought, as partially evident by his constant return to the Leninist question “what is to be done”, is meant to tackle the question of theory and politics. He critiques other theorists (see Žižek’s writings on Deleuze, Laclau, Badiou among others) because they fail to make the ‘Hegelian move’ and as a result end up in ‘Kantian formalism’ and an inadequate political theory.¹³ If scholars disregard Žižek’s particular political claims in relation to his Hegelian ontology, then they disregard one of Žižek’s major declarations: a way out of celebrating failure and a way towards politicizing the formal, structural, Real antagonism. The left misses out on a potential answer to Meillassoux’s Kantian problematic – a way past finitudes’ failure to theorize the formal objective components of political reality. A way, which, for Žižek, can be partially seen in figures like Hugo Chavez, who politicized and gained power from the symbolically excluded spheres of political life (the barrios in Venezuela for instance).¹⁴

Some may object that politics is, for psychoanalysis, Real and unknowable, and as such, no precise political connection between theory and politics can be drawn; politics can remain separate from theory. However, if Žižek, as he claims to be doing, is to avoid celebrating failure and political impotence, his conception of the Real must ‘tarry’ with the Real of politics. So, even though there is never an exact correspondence between form and content (theory and its actualization), Žižek, to remain consistent, must be able to politicize or affect this very (non)relationship. That is, if Žižek is to reinvigorate and re-politicize the contemporary left as his theoretical and political interventions often seek to do, then there must be a Real that is capable of being

politicized. There must be something politically that formalism misses which Žižek does not.

Žižek has recently expressed a desire for more serious critics, that is, for ones that critique him from an 'internal' perspective (without relying upon the existence of an external system or a non-lacking big Other).¹⁵ What follows is an attempt to give Žižek what he asks for, to critique him by his own standards, and to examine if he can indeed provide a way out of the Meillassoux and Kantian problematic. So the task is double: to reveal the systematic logic behind Žižek's often dispersed political thoughts and second, to test if such a system works. That is, to see if it can live up to the high standards that Žižek sets –if it can answer the Kantian-Meillassoux-ian problematic; if it can provide a political theory that avoids the 'celebration of failure' which, Žižek warns, will be the end result of leftist movements like Occupy if it opts for an individual, moralizing, 'de-caffeinated protest' and compromises on its Real universal systemic potential (to bring to light the part of no part).

Accordingly, this paper, in contrast to Parker and the criticisms of the first camp, argues that there is indeed a coherent Žižekian system; one can coherently link Žižek's Hegelian move and redoubling of the Real with his concept of the Act and use of Marxism to delineate the site of such an Act. Second, against the common critique, which asserts that it is impossible to politicize psychoanalysis without contradiction (positing a non-lacking big Other) or without amounting to pure atheoretical speculation (non-thought), this paper argues that if one considers Žižek's Marxist analysis as a Freudian construction then such a move is indeed possible.* Žižek's critique of contemporary philosophy (Laclau and others mentioned above) for failing to theorize structural difference indeed stands; his concerns about the contemporary left and liberal democratic movements for failing to address systemic forces is grounded. However, although one may admit that the space for this critique exists, that is, although one may

* Adrian Johnston succinctly defines the big Other as, "The overarching 'objective spirit' of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions. ... [and the] ideas of anonymous authoritative power and/or knowledge (whether that of God, Nature, History, Society, State, Party, Science, or the analyst as the "subject supposed to know" (*sujet supposé savoir*)." Positioning the big Other as non-lacking, then, means to assume that the Real is whole and as such our actions can be objectively guaranteed –a position similar to metaphysical dogmatism which Lacan, Žižek, and the vast majority of contemporary philosophy strongly condemns. Quotation from: Johnston, Adrian, "Jacques Lacan", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

accept the criticism of formalism, when examined closely, Žižek's delineation of the Act fails to convincingly politicize this space. His Marxist construction and analysis of capital, since it relies upon the labor theory of value that Žižek himself criticizes, results in an unwarranted speculation. There is no reason to assume Žižek's analysis of capital over any other. Without a plausible construction, Žižek's claim that he avoids Kantian impotence has little ground to stand on.

Žižek is indeed in accordance with Lacanian theory. The problem is not that any political move contradicts theory, but rather that every political move, without a convincing Marxist analysis to fall back on, can accommodate itself to Žižek's paradigm and call to politicize the formal structuring space of capital. As a result the Žižekian paradigm may support both impotent and potent action. The problem with this however, is that, in the examples that Žižek himself provides, other non-Hegelians achieve authentic Acts as well. If other theoretical paradigms have an equal chance of hitting upon the Real then Žižek's critique of Kantianism, Laclau, and several others for failing to make this move becomes ungrounded. That is, since subject is always acting in political space (to choose not to choose is still a choice) and all actions or non-actions, without a plausible construction, have an equal chance at hitting the Real (as Žižek, apropos Bartley, notes, sometimes not doing anything can be the most radical thing to do), then Žižek's imperative to Act (to take the equal chance) fails to avoid celebrating failure anymore than does the formalism he critiques (since formalism too is always implicitly engaged in political space). So, what is it about the Žižekian paradigm that enables the taking of the equal chance that formalism misses? Without an answer to this question, Žižek's imperative to shift from Kant to Hegel seems to be, from a political standpoint, superfluous. This paper concludes by suggesting that Žižek must either limit his politically open theory—to support his practical use of Marxism and the Labor Theory of Value or, if not, to explain how it is possible to critique others for their political openness or impotence while this is an inherent aspect of the Hegelian system as well. It poses an imperative to get back to the drawing board –to either revise his Hegelian move and notion of the Act, or accept failure and Kantian finitude – that is, an inability of the left to provide a political alternative to formalism and what Žižek calls the 'celebration of failure'.

Žižek's Alternative, The real-Real

The crucial shift in Žižek's theoretical edifice, which he claims enables him to escape the Act as a celebration of failure, comes after his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989).¹⁶ His subsequent publications, particularly *Enjoyment as a Political Fact*, have critiqued *The Sublime Object* for failing to eliminate the last remnants of the external Kantian thing-it-itself. The key move which, Žižek argues, marks his turn completely towards Hegel and away from Kant (as well as from Laclau's theory of radical democracy) is to reflect the Lacanian triad, Real-Imaginary-Symbolic, within each of its three elements. The main result for the purposes of this discussion is the formulation of the real-Real, the symbolic-Real, and the imaginary-Real. The Real is defined as that which resists symbolization. The real-Real, for Žižek, is the Freudian unconscious, the primordial repression, fundamental fantasy, and *das Ding* which can never come to conscious awareness. It is that which must be presupposed to account for reality.* This primordial repression (R1) is the structuring difference against which all particular differences in symbolic reality can take place and which "pulverizes sameness into the multitude of appearances".¹⁷ It provides the very background against which the symbolic-Real (R2) and the imaginary-Real (R2) occur. Further, the symbolic order can be defined as the 'objective' social conditions –the language, social norms, and rules which human-beings are thrown into. The real-symbolic, then, is the breakdown of these rules and symbols. As Žižek writes, it is "the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like quantum physics formulas which can no longer be translated back into - or related to - the everyday experience of our life-world."¹⁸ Lastly, the Imaginary realm is the domain of images and conscious identifications. The imaginary-Real is "the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable 'something' on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object."¹⁹ To recapitulate, R1 is the primordial, unconscious split which causes R2 the specific antagonisms within reality. This R1 can never become conscious. That is, since, for Žižek and psychoanalysis, R1's being unconscious is constitutive of subjective

* *Das Ding* refers to the pre-symbolic and thus structurally un-representable object. It is characterized by and only perceivable through its effects.

reality (its precondition) if it ever were to appear in reality, there would no subject to perceive it, or it (R1) would no longer be it, that is, *das Ding* would be displaced onto something else. R1 thus cannot be directly translated into political-symbolic reality; encounters with the Real are always missed encounters.

So how does this splitting of the Real in Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanian theory enable him to avoid what he coins as politically impotent 'formalism'? That is, how does Žižek affectively theorize, and then politicize, R1, or the formal unconscious structure of reality? More so, how might this be attributed to appraising the current left? This relationship can be best approached through Žižek's use of Laclau's theory of hegemony and universality. Laclau's theory is premised on the claim that 'society does not exist' and is always permeated by an irresponsible antagonism subverting any attempt at totalization.²⁰ Reality for Laclau and Žižek is thus always 'non-all' and resists complete encapsulation. This is because, to put it in oversimplified Badiouian set theory parlance, there is no set which can include all particulars without itself being a particular. I can never take into account my own act of enunciation; in every attempt at totality the act of my attempting is always excluded. (There is no direct set of all sets since such a set necessarily excludes itself.) For Žižek, the further crucial move that Laclau makes is to inscribe this external difference internally (into the differences within society itself) –to have a set that includes itself as its own member. As Žižek writes,

The key feature of the concept of hegemony lies in the contingent connection between intrasocial differences [R2] (elements within the social space) and the limit that separates society itself from non-society [R1] (chaos, utter decadence, dissolution of all social links) - the limit between the social and its exteriority, the non-social, can articulate itself only in the guise of a difference (by mapping itself on to a difference) between elements of social space. In other words, radical antagonism can be represented only in a distorted way, through the particular differences internal to the system.²¹

The key point is that the impossibility of articulating the difference between society and non-society (the impossibility for a set to be all encompassing) is mapped onto the difference within society itself (differences within class, gender, race, income, sex and so on). That is, since it is impossible to directly articulate R1 (the non-all of society is itself in-articulable – the difference between society and non-society is impossible to delineate) R1's existence is only visible within the social field; within the way one

particular element (difference) is *doubly inscribed*. External differences are always-already internal and to be found within the subjects particular form of life. The task is to pinpoint the element in the field that simultaneously determines itself (the species that is its own genius or what Žižek refers to as the Concrete Universal). For Laclau and Mouffe this element signifies democracy. That is, Democracy is the signifier which represents the 'nodal point' and thus plays a determining role of particular struggles while simultaneously being one of these struggles. For example, the Laclauian social field of intrasocial differences consist of democracy (R2), gender, race, class, human rights, and so on *and democracy* (R1). In Lacanian terms, democracy, for Laclau and Mouffe, represents the Master signifier that stops the infinite sliding of meaning and 'quilts' the entire field of discourse. It is subsequently the location and battle sight of politics. Žižek summarizing this Laclauian point writes,

All other struggles (socialist, feminist...) could be conceived as the gradual radicalization, extension, application of the democratic project to new domains... the particular struggle [democracy for Laclau] playing a hegemonic role opens up the very space for the relative autonomy of the particular struggles: the feminist struggle, for example, is made possible only through reference to democratic-egalitarian political discourse.²²

This hegemonic master signifier is contingent (dependent upon random historical occurrences) but nonetheless necessary for the entire field of language and political discourse to take place. Again, it is the antagonism (R1), or the non-all of society that for Laclau and Žižek opens up the space of universality. But, this gap, since it is also inscribed into R2, is never fully closed. That is why for Laclau universality is never 'objective' but rather hegemonic –always the result of a contingent struggle for the conceptualization of society –for how external difference will be articulated as internal difference. However, for Laclau, R1 cannot be changed (for him this is synonymous with the claim that society can never become all). As a result, although the left is not entirely barred from political activity, it can only solve a 'variety of partial problems' and make the intrasocial notion of democracy as inclusive as possible. Laclau writes,

If hegemony means the representation, by a particular social sector, of an impossible totality with which it is incommensurable, then it is enough that we make the space of topological substitutions fully visible, to enable the hegemonic logic to operate freely. If the fullness of society is unachievable, the attempts at reaching it will necessarily fail, although they will be able, in

the search for that impossible object, to solve a variety of partial problems.²³

The political task, for Laclau, is to fight for the lefts own progressive hegemonic articulation of democracy and expand it to other social fields. This would entail, for example, democratizing gender or the economy by allowing for a wider array of sexual identities or having worker owned collectives. Again, these democratic interventions, for Laclau, never alter the primordial difference R1, but rather solve a 'variety of partial problems.'

The crucial distinction between the post-1989 Žižek and Laclau now comes into play. For Žižek, Laclau mistakenly takes a Kantian approach to this problem of difference, viewing it as a formal, unachievable, thing-in-itself barred from political activity. That is, by asserting that politics is only the struggle for the meaning of a historically contingent master signifier, Laclau, like Kant, neglects the effect that the formal Real antagonism (R1) has on the space in which the struggle for hegemony can occur. This initial antagonism, for Žižek, represents the 'structuring principal' of society. However, again, Laclau rejects the ability of interventions into the symbolic to influence the Real antagonism itself. For Laclau the only way to change this initial antagonism would be to posit a society as a complete existing whole, which for Laclau (and Žižek), is an ideological fantasy.

Žižek's critical move away from *The Sublime Object* is marked by his reconceptualization of this dichotomy. Žižek insists that although the left is not able to obliterate the constitutive antagonism, it can nonetheless alter it. According to Žižek, there is an historical example of such a formal shift. Žižek writes, "the passage from feudal monarchy to capitalist democracy, while it failed to reach the 'impossible fullness of society', certainly did more than just solve a variety of partial problems."²⁴ So even if one grants Laclau the assumption that democracy is the master signifier of the contemporary political order (its quilting point), Žižek's critique is that Laclau does not include the capitalist background against which democracy can take place. This means that, for Žižek, although the left may democratize things like gender, race and even the economy, this would still ignore the basic market mode of production that provides the background against which these struggles can function. Radical democracy, Žižek claims, de-politicizes democracy. It fails to question the constitutive limits of political

democracy and the socio-economic space (the capitalist mode of production) from which it arises in the first place. Subsequently, radical democracy, for Žižek, has missed the forest for the trees –in its effort to politicize all the multiple fields of struggle (human rights, feminism, minority rights, and so on) it has failed to politicize the structuring space in which these struggles operate (the market and private property, for instance). The left has conflated two levels of exclusion.

To clarify, the level of exclusion that Laclau addresses (R2) is the exclusion of intrasocial difference –of how a certain group may be excluded from society (homosexuals in Saudi Arabia for example). The second more fundamental exclusion (R1), for Žižek, is the constitutive fantasy (primordial repression), the Freudian unconscious *Ding* which, if it ever were to come to light, would restructure the entire field itself. So the task, for Žižek, is not only to “unmask the particular content of inclusions/ exclusions involved in the game [that is, the exclusion of minorities, third world countries, women and so on], but to account for the enigmatic emergence of the space of universality itself.”²⁵ Without considering R1, Kantianism, as Johnston summarizing Žižek writes, “succumbs to the fate whereby, in its attempt to combat ahistorical transcendental formalism, it ends up becoming that which it fights against (it elevates situated contingency into the unsurpassable condition of possibility for any and every phenomenon).”²⁶ For Žižek there is a ‘third way’ that goes beyond the pre-Kantian/ Kantian dichotomy. This method, which Žižek occasionally refers to as *historicist* asserts that there is an “ahistorical motor to historicity and, moreover, that the manner in which the ahistorical (as the Real) affects and is dealt with by the historical (as Imaginary-Symbolic reality) is itself a relationship that undergoes shifts and transformations over time.”²⁷ The name of this formal relationship (R1) that Laclau and Kantianism neglect is, for Žižek, the political economy.

A few have criticized Žižek for this move claiming that he reverts back to an outdated, essentialist Marxist notion of the economy (and a type of pre-Kantian metaphysics) where the base plays the sole determining role in the superstructure. Žižek, here, is considered an old-fashioned leftist refusing to give way on a historically determined teleology of history where the antagonism in the base of the economy will inevitably lead to Communism. He is accused of escaping formalist celebration of failure

only by reverting to a dogmatic, pre-Kantian, essentialist politics.²⁸ However, what this criticism fails to see is how the economy, as the mode of production or the organizational structure of society, is, for Žižek, always antagonistic. It is driven by its non-closure and differentiation from itself. Class antagonism is the Real name of this split and politics is its result.²⁹ The political economy and class antagonism, put simply, are names for the formal R1 and radical primordial difference.³⁰

Žižek can then re-conceptualize the Marxist base-superstructure dichotomy with two main alterations. First, since society, like Lacan's well-known formulation regarding sexual relationships, does not exist, there is no harmonious, historically guaranteed, Communist utopia which will erase class antagonism. Second, because the base is non-all and always antagonistic, it can no longer be the sole determining force of the superstructure. The economy "cannot be reduced to a sphere of the positive 'order of being', precisely insofar as it is always political, insofar as political ('class') struggle is at its very heart."³¹ The political economy, then, is not the "hidden meta-essence which then expresses itself within a two-level-distance in a cultural struggle" but rather "it [the economy] is the absent X which circulates between the multiple levels of the social field (economic, political, ideological, legal...), distributing them in their specific articulation."³² So the political economy, for Žižek, is the R1 which simultaneously inscribes itself into R2, the particular fields of struggle.³³ Laclau and Kantianism fail to account for this formal political-economic dimension. But what, then, is Žižek's alternative? How can the left identify the R1 if it is purely parallaxic (only visible through the relationship between two positions)? Or, to use Johnston's parlance, how can the left effect the relationship between the ahistorical Real and symbolic-imaginary reality? How does Žižek's Hegelian move avoid celebrating political impotence and effect change to R1?

The Act

Answering these questions will first require an elaboration of Žižek's notion of the Lacanian Act (occasionally referred to as an Event). The Act is an explosion of the Real that breaks the continuity of the symbolic order and brings about its structural inconsistency (R1), while simultaneously reconfiguring it. Thus, an authentic Act, is

always the courage to act without a 'big Other', to act without any guaranteed meaning, without knowing what one is doing is objectively correct.³⁴ Instead, the Act is grounded in itself. It always initially appears as irrational because it refigures and retroactively reconstitutes the very standards by which it is judged. To paraphrase Žižek, a revolutionary action does not just break eggs in order to make omelets; rather it makes omelets in order to break eggs.³⁵ It is a traumatic intrusion into the symbolic order, from the point of its excluded content, which simultaneously re-creates the frame of this content.

Thus, the Act, since it reconstitutes the inherently unconscious R1, can never be anticipated in a precise sense. It only receives its meaning retroactively from the perspective of the re-constituted subject of the future. (This has the structure of the future perfect tense –the Act will have been authentic.) The Act comes 'out of nowhere.' It is an instance where the symbolic order has not yet 'caught-up' with the unconscious Real that the agent responds to. Again, this is because an Act, as originating from the position of the antagonism, destroys and re-creates the very standards by which it is to be judged. (One could, for instance, following Žižek, consider the spontaneous descending of those from the Caracas slums and barrios in 2002, fending off a United States right-wing supported coup, such an Act).³⁶

Intuitively, if one conceives of the Act only in this way, as an unexpected, re-structuring, intrusion, it seems to unavoidably lead to an apolitical relativistic position. That is, if the Act cannot be predicted from the symbolic order, then this appears to promote a position of celebrating failure where the task of the left is to wait for a radical rupture to occur and maintain fidelity to this break. However, an Act does more than just change what counts as reality; it also internally exposes how reality is never complete (non-all). As Žižek writes, "an Act disturbs the symbolic field into which it intervenes not out of nowhere, but precisely from the standpoint of this inherent impossibility, stumbling block, which is its hidden, disavowed, structuring principle".³⁷ So politics for Žižek does not simply involve waiting around for the Real (a politics of idly standing by and watching for a contingent event to occur). Rather, the Act also includes an element of subjective engagement where the subject critiques and identifies with the renounced truth that ties him or her to the symbolic order, the placeholder of lack –object *a*, the

object cause of desire. The subject achieves the authentic Act when he or she lets go of the object *a*, the thing that the subject does all its activity for. Žižek, in several of his works, gives the provocative example from the film, *The Usual Suspects*. In the movie the character Keyser Soze (Kevin Spacey) kills his family, thus liberating himself from the binds of the men who have taken his family hostage. This Act releases Soze from the hold of the hunters and reconstructs the very coordinates of reality –putting them on the defensive. The radical act, like Soze’s action, is purely abyssal, it sacrifices the sacrifice itself (sacrifices the thing the subject does everything for –that which gives him symbolic identity) and in so doing reconstructs the very radical difference, or primordial fantasy (R1) that constitutes him as subject in the first place.³⁸

As Alenka Zupančič notes, even though, “there is no hero of the event” (no subject of the Act), this does not preclude political action.³⁹ That is, although the subject does not accomplish the Act directly by ‘brining about the Real, this does not lead to complete impotence. Rather, the Real, because it is nothing but the non-coincidence between points, can be tangentially produced by the subject when it cuts off its ties to the big Other (namely object *a*) and identifies with the non-all of society (identifies with the symptom). Here, by identifying with this non-all point of symbolic breakdown (“from the standpoint of inherent impossibility”), the subject chooses the worse in Lacan’s *le père ou pire*, the father (as the symbolic order of meaning) or worse (subjective destitution). This choice, only available after the subject identifies with the lack in the big Other, effectively (re)chooses one of the parallaxic points of reference thus altering the Real itself. Žižek refers to this Act as the “traversing of the fantasy” and it is this traversal, by identifying with the antagonistic non-all of the symbolic, which changes the Real and hence represents Žižek’s theorization and politicization of the formal R1.

It is, then, possible to say, against those like Parker, that there is a Žižekian system as such. That is, by linking the redoubling of the Real with Žižek’s notion of an antagonistic political economy and the Act as that which intervenes at the level of the Real (the concrete universal) to alter it (R1), one establishes a coherent theoretical paradigm. Žižek’s political musings are thus not a flurry of disparate theoretical frameworks but rather, a central Hegelian move with its corresponding theory of the Act, as that which touches upon the Real (R1). The more problematic point, however, as this

paper will explore, is how to reconcile this injunction with Žižek's particular political calls –his identifications of the symptom –Žižek's practical politics.

The Actuality of the Act, Žižek's Marxist Analysis

Žižek, using a Marxist analysis, delineates this symptomal point of inherent impossibility, following Agamben, as *Homo Sacer* (bare life), the part of no-part, or what Badiou calls the countless, –the millions of people who live in slums across the world.⁴⁰ These slum-dwellers are the disemboweled component of society who literally live outside recognized government. This part of the population (what Marx calls the *Lumpenproletariat*) along with the proletariat, are, for Žižek, the Real of capital – that which structures productivity and surplus and must remain invisible if the capitalist fantasy of a non-lacking harmonious symbolic order is to continue.⁴¹ For Žižek, the capitalist disavows the fact that the poor slums are an inherent feature of capitalism itself; the truth of the fantasy is that there is no surplus value (profit/productivity) without exploitation and the commodification of labor.⁴²

Subsequently, by identifying with the part of no part, one reveals a structuring principal of capital and thus exposes the object *a* and the non-all of the capitalist symbolic order. The authentic Act arises once this symptomal point is exposed and, as demonstrated by Keizer Soze, the subject destroys the object *a* (capitalist profit) that ties him or her down to the big Other, thus altering the Real. Moreover, since the part of no part (the Real antagonism) is disemboweled by society, Žižek claims the slum-dwellers are in a pre-disposition to recognize the non-existence of the big Other and thus a likely site of an authentic, politically explosive, Act.⁴³ That is, since the part of no-part resist symbolic-reintegration (to acknowledge the complete presence of this element would make the capitalist fantasy conscious), problematizing and politicizing this component of capital can function to disturb the very form of capitalism itself (R1) and thus potentially lead the way for radical change.

Several Lacanians have critiqued Žižek for making this type of political move.⁴⁴ They argue that by bringing Lacan out of the psychoanalytic setting, and identifying a particular element in the 'real' political world (the slum-dwellers in this case), Žižek

forsakes Lacanian theory. Brett Levinson, for example, develops this idea; his thesis is that in “[psychoanalytic] theory, politics does not exist.” That is, in order to make a political claim (delineate the slums and favelas as the Real symptom of capital), Žižek must either revert to a pre-Kantian, essentialist, empirical, claim and rely upon a guarantee from the big Other to ground his intervention, or admit that his located Real antagonism of capital is pure speculation.⁴⁵ In the latter instance, Žižek politics amounts to valueless guesswork and unable is to counter alternative interpretations (Levinson calls this ‘non-thought’); and in the former, Žižek re-inscribes himself into the hegemonic big Other (posits it as non-lacking) and thus contradicts a Lacanian ontology of non-all. Žižek, then, according to Levinson, is only able to achieve a political stance and point to the Real of capital by contradicting, or simply stepping-out-of, psychoanalytic theory.

The problem with this reading is that it paints Žižek’s reading of Lacan and psychoanalysis as an anti-essentialist, Kantian, endeavor where the political task merely to point to the inconsistencies in the big Other without putting forth a positive analysis. With such an understanding, Levinson misses the implications of Žižek’s ‘third way’, the re-doubling of the Real and the politicization of the fundamental fantasy. Levinson rejects, as pure atheoretical speculation, the naming of the Real –Žižek’s designating the favelas as the Real symptom of capital. However, psychoanalytic theory, particular Freud’s notion of construction accounts for this move. Žižek’s naming of the Real is correlative to the analyst naming the structural fantasy (Freud’s naming of the Oedipus complex for example). Such an analysis for both Freud and Žižek is not pure pre-analytical or theoretical speculation but rather that which must be presupposed in order to account for the present state of things. As Jan De Vos writes,

Žižek’s partisan choice, making the Real of class struggle visible, can be understood as a *construction* in the proper Freudian sense. “Real people and natural objects” are then purely logical explanatory presuppositions, like the second stage (*I am being beaten by my father*) of the child’s fantasy of “a child is being beaten”, which for Freud is so radically unconscious that it cannot even be remembered. *This engaged recourse to “real people” brings Žižek not to empirical psychology but to psychoanalysis.* Žižek’s ontology passes over psychoanalysis: the rock of class struggle refers to the rock of castration; class antagonism is homologous to sexual antagonism [emphasis added].⁴⁶

Levinson falls back into the dichotomy of Pre-Kantianism versus Kantianism without fully taking into account Freudian analytic construction – Žižek's 'third way' of concrete universality – where primordial external difference (R1) always inscribes itself internally. So, for Žižek, it is only through the partisan engagement in the symbolic order that the subject can reach its 'objective' truth, the fundamental fantasy and the point of the concrete universal. This truth, again, as argued by De Vos, is not reliant upon some historical big Other to guarantee its validity but rather is like the truth of a construction and only known retroactively through the patient's reaction.

De Vos leaves his discussion here settling with the claim that, although some Lacanians may be unable to contemplate a political position, Žižek, at least, "wrestles with" this question.⁴⁷ One should, however, push things a little further. Given that a link between psychoanalysis and political intervention has been established, there exist two pressing questions. The first is, if Žižek's construction is correct, why have things not changed? That is, why does the Real structure of capital seem to go on unaffected? For Freud, if an analysis is indeed correct and the patient is close to touching the fundamental fantasy, then there is "an unmistakable aggravation of his (the patients) symptoms and of his general condition." If the analysis is wrong, there is no change in the patient. "The patient remains as though he were untouched by what has been said and reacts to it with neither a yes nor a no." The truth of analysis or construction "become[s] clear in the course of future developments."⁴⁸ That is, there is good reason to think an analysis is correct if one notices that features relating to the symptom have changed.⁴⁹ Yet, capitalism has seemed to respond with apathy to Žižek and Lacan. Although Žižek is relatively popular as an intellectual figure, his Marxist analysis of capital has not seemed to provoke many global sustained reactions. The symptoms of capitalism remain the same – the part of no part continues to grow. This would seem, according to Freud, to point to a failure in the analysis. Here, the stakes are high, if Žižek's analysis is indeed wrong, and there is no name for R1, the contemporary left is thrown back into the field of undifferentiated intrasocial differences; there becomes no way meaningful way to differentiate R1 and R2.

Žižek could, however, retort that the effects of analysis on a social structure take longer than that on a patient and, moreover, there has indeed been visible acting-out

from capitalism. Žižek can (and does) assert that Authoritarian Singaporean Capitalism or what he refers to as “Capitalism with Asian Values” represents such a symptomal reaction to radical potential. For instance, he claims that China’s laws prohibiting public media from portraying alternate realities should be read as a sign of capitalisms uneasiness; for Žižek, “[China’s censorship] is a good sign. They at least need the prohibition.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Žižek may even claim that the violent reactions against his own work demonstrate a type of symptomal reaction (he has been thrashed as an extremely dangerous thinker, a charlatan, and a clown from such diverse sources as the New York Times, The New Republic, and Noam Chomsky, a fellow leftist). Lastly, even if one does not accept some of these arguments, it may just be the case that other ideological constructions are beating out Žižek’s analysis and are responsible for the lack to change. So, Žižek is, here, able to escape potential criticism.

The second, more problematic, question is what does Žižek’s analysis do to politicize the space of R1 that formalism does not? That is, why should the left remain faithful to Žižek’s analysis of capital as opposed to some other diagnosis? Laclau, for instance, argues that the Favelas are a hot bed for political activity, not the Real symptomal point of capital with radical potential.⁵¹ It could even be said that animals represent the true part of no part; they are the radically excluded, countless, who can be ‘killed without it being called murder.’⁵² For Žižek, Marx identified the symptom, but what suggests that this identification and Žižek’s construction is correct? What indicates that Marx is the right psychoanalyst for the contemporary left?⁵³ Although a construction is never certain, Žižek will need to make a case for his (or, if not, then a case for why a, nameless, purely abstract, distinction between R1 and R2 avoids the failures of radical democracy).⁵⁴ Again, without such a construction the distinction between R1 and R2 seems hopelessly abstract. There appears little political significance in holding onto it. Without a name for R1, any particular struggle could be the crucial determining one. The left would lose any orientation and would be thrown back into a politics where all intrasocial struggles (since there is nothing to ground a choice) are considered equal – a position that obliterates the significance of R1 and, furthermore, one that Žižek has spent much time critiquing.

Potential Problems With Žižek's Marxism

Marx's capitalist analysis is grounded in the Labor Theory of Value (LTV); that is, without it, Marx's notion of class struggle and surplus value does not hold. This dependence can be demonstrated. For Marx surplus-value (capitalist profit) is created when society moves from C-M-C to M-C-M; –when it moves from a situation where a commodity is traded for money into another commodity, to one where money is traded for a commodity and this commodity 'magically' turns out more money. However, Marx famously argues that this magic only occurs because labor is a commodity like no other – when it is put on the market (commodified) it creates surplus value. Labor (the proletariat) is only exploited because the surplus it creates is then appropriated by the bourgeoisie class (the owners of the means of production). So, if the LTV does not hold, there, then, would be no reason to conceive of the proletariat as the profit producing and thus a constitutively exploited class. They would no longer represent the part of no part or be the symptomal point of capitalism (they would lose their Real status). Moreover, if the exploitation/exclusion of labor is not an inherent feature of profit and capitalism then there is little reason to believe that the problems of poverty and exclusion cannot be fixed within the current form of R1 (the market framework). No Act that restructures the Real would be required.

This poses a problem since, for Žižek, the labor theory of value does not directly hold today. He admits, for example, that if one uses the LTV as a tool of analysis he or she would have to bizarrely conclude that Venezuela is “unambiguously exploiting” the U.S. and other western countries. Žižek writes:

You cannot mechanically apply Marx's so-called labor theory of value. Because you have to conclude, for instance, today, that Venezuela is exploiting the United States through oil profits. But Marx tries to demonstrate in *Capital* that natural resources are not a source of value. So this means that we need to rethink the category of exploitation.⁵⁵

But without rethinking this “category of exploitation”, Žižek's claim that Marx invented the symptom seems implausible and to amount to ungrounded speculation. The creation of surplus value in capitalism remains a mystery. The symptomal point has not yet been identified.

Žižek admits that the left needs a new theory of exploitation today but, nonetheless, he continues to use a Marxist-Lacanian analysis of the symptom. He continues to assert that radical politics is to be found in the part of no part and identify object *a* as surplus value. Is not this, strangely enough, the exact formula of ideology that Žižek identifies and critiques in *Sublime Object* and throughout his writings? For Žižek the predominate form of ideology today is a cynical one where one publically disavow his or her actions while nonetheless participating in them. Contemporary beliefs function in the objective existence of people's actions. The formula for this modern form of ideology is: "I know very well but nonetheless I continue to do it."⁵⁶ I know very well, for instance, that the environment is a threat to humanity but nonetheless I cannot really believe it, I continue to go on living normally.⁵⁷ The Laclauian formalist version of this, perhaps, would be: I know very well that society does not exist and I believe that, because of this fact, fundamental change is impossible. Moreover, I know that inequality is a feature of capitalism and, I know that the current global economic system requires this inequality (the health of wall street dictates the health of main street); but, nonetheless, I strangely continue to refer to myself as a leftist and support radical politics that aim at altering these problems. Cannot one, however, apply a similar ideological critique to Žižek himself? The Žižekian form of this being: I know very well that Marx's Labor Theory of Value does not hold, but nonetheless I continue to act as if Marx was right; I continue to use this analysis in my writing and political activity.

To summarize, when faced with the objection: 'How is one to resolve varying analyses of the Real (the divergent analysis of where the Real, symptomal point of capital lies) without falling into dogmatism and positing a non-lacking big Other?' the answer this paper has provided thus far is construction; —that is, interventions into the Real are based on partisan analytic suggestions discerning signs from the future and as such never certain.⁵⁸ But, the problem, here, with such an answer, is that Žižek's construction (his use of Marxism to identify the symptom), as argued above, seems to amount to ungrounded speculation. There is little, without the labor theory of value, to suggest that Žižek's analysis is indeed correct. And, without such a ground for analysis, there is no reason to affirm that Žižek's succeeds in avoiding the celebration of failure;

the construction-less left, unable to differentiate between R1 and R2, is thus thrown back into a homogeneous field of democratic intrasocial struggles.

Žižek's retort, here, could be simply to implore the left to take this risk. Initially, considering the fact that analysis is always uncertain, this seems to be an acceptable response (amounting to more than just non-thought). That is, Žižek can encourage the left to accept the risk that something may go wrong, that the left may end up in Soviet-era catastrophe, but, nonetheless, assert that the subject must act anyway and go to the end.⁵⁹ This is because, for Žižek, capitalism has already peaked; it is heading towards a society with growing inequality, apartheid division, and a dystopia where only a minority of the population lives in relative prosperity. The risk and ambiguities of the Act are warranted since the alternatives of choosing not to act are far worse. As Žižek often emphasizes, "we are forced to invent something new."⁶⁰ So although one may disagree with Žižek's particular analysis, Žižek could nonetheless argue that the strength of his Lacanian-Hegelian position is that it confronts the left with the imperative to Act and to choose a construction in which to base it (thus avoiding the celebration of failure).

Yet, although the left may accept the inherent risk of any intervention, another problem persists: Is the imperative to act, without a viable construction, substantial enough to move Žižek past the formalist political failure and the Laclauian radical democracy, which he critiques? Do not other theoretical paradigms, such as radical democracy, also confront the left with such an imperative to act? That is to say, if the Act is to avoid political impotence and provide an improvement over the Kantian approach, then it must also *do something* –it must provide some advantage over other political theories –it must be better suited to confront the fundamental antagonism (do a better job of confronting the left with an imperative to act). If it fails to provide a theoretical advantage according to its own standards, then there is no reason to adopt its framework. That is, if it provides little advantage over a Laclauian perspective then it neither avoids celebrating political failure nor effectively politicizes the space of R1.

What advantage, then, without a viable construction, can the Lacanian-Hegelian notion of the Act provide? Žižek fully admits that many who engage in genuine political activity do so without a Hegelian theoretical background and accidentally touch upon the

Real (see, for instance, Žižek's praise of Clinton and Obama's attempts at universal health care as constituting a "type of act").⁶¹ The Act, then, is not an exclusive dimension that is unavailable to Kantians or non-Hegelians. On the contrary; the only option that remains, then, is to take the negative answer –that is, Žižek can argue that the Act does not guarantee political impotence but it does, by rejecting the big Other, prevent direct obfuscation of class antagonism. Thus keeping this framework in mind can help discern the particular battles, which, if the left pushes hard, might hit upon the Real. While Kantianism a priori closes this space, the Act acknowledges the existence R1 and enables the left to strategically intervene. In the same way that an analyst who accepts the structuring role of the unconscious has a better chance of affecting an unconscious change so too does the Žižekian Act stand a better chance at politically potent action. One might, for example, say that alertness towards R1 better enables the left to quickly discern and support the authentic radical potential in a political movement. Consider the Occupy Wall Street Movement for example. Perhaps it is easier for those who keep R1 in mind to identify with the Occupy slogan, 'system change not climate change'. Without such a distinction between R1 and R2 many might instead opt to support the more symbolically acceptable liberal-democratic elements of Occupy –that is, the call for better banking regulations, more funding for social service programs, minority rights, and so on. As an alternative, the Žižekian, when faced with the question that plagued Occupy, 'what are your demands?' would perhaps reply, "we want to resist hegemonic symbolic integration and to universalize the Real of capital, the part of no part." The presupposition here is that such an answer is better attuned with R1 than the liberal-democratic one.

An issue, however, arises if it can be demonstrated that the Act, in attempting to politicize the part of no part, may also serve to disavow the fundamental social antagonism. That is, if an Act may or may not touch upon the Real, then, since all ordinary actions already take place in social space, and also may or may not touch upon the Real, Žižek's imperative to act without guarantee would be shown to be make no substantial difference. This is because, again, without a construction, all actions (assuming one can indeed co-opt the theoretical framework of Žižek's Act), (1) have an equal chance of hitting upon R1 (since the intrasocial field of distinctions would be lost

all actions may or may not effect the Real) and (2) it is impossible not to partake in symbolic-political space; even if the subject is not conscious of her involvement, to choose not to choose is still a choice and a non-action can sometimes be the most radical action. Thus, without a Marxist construction, Žižek cannot simply assert that he avoids celebration of failure simply by providing a Lacanian imperative to take the risk and act, since such an abstract imperative and framework (for reasons 1 and 2 listed above) would be superfluous. Thus, if the framework of the Act is indeed susceptible to appropriation, there would neither be reason to adopt Žižek's conceptual political framework over a formalist one nor grounds to critique Laclau and the formalist left for political failure. Žižek, perhaps aware of the need to distinguish the Act from pseudo and regressive political interventions, has often taken time to differentiate his position from Nazism and anti-Semitism. Žižek writes,

An authentic Act disturbs the underlying fantasy attacking it from the point of 'social symptom'...the so called Nazi revolution, with its disavowal/displacement of the fundamental social antagonism (class struggle that divides the social edifice from within) –with its projection/ externalization of the cause of social antagonisms into the figure of the Jew, and the consequent reassertion of the corporatist notion of society as an organic Whole – clearly avoids confrontation with social antagonism: the Nazi revolution is the exemplary case of a pseudo change... [in contrast] a true Act intervenes not out of nowhere, but precisely from the standpoint of this inherent impossibility, stumbling black, which is its hidden, disavowed structuring principal.⁶²

The argument here is that Nazism, since it attempts to get rid of the disturbing symptomal element (the Jew), assumes it can remove the constitutive Real antagonism. The Žižekian rejects Nazism not based on any empirical content (even if Jew's were actually poisoning wells Nazism would still be wrong) but because of its 'ontological flaw' –the fact that it posits society as 'all' and assumes that there is some harmonious society to be achieved. Every Nazi act can then be seen, fundamentally, as a reaction – as a conservative shying away from the implications of the Real void (the fact that society is non-all). Once the idea of society as whole is taken away, the figure of the Jew simply cannot appear. That is, since in Lacanian ontology the disturbance is primordial, there can be no space for pinpointing an element (the Jew) which prevents society from realizing its completeness. This is why Žižek provocatively states that the

problem with Hitler was that he was “not violent enough”. Hitler’s actions were an example of political impotence; he failed to theorize or politicize the space of R1; all of his violent interventions functioned to mask the true violence of a radical antagonism. So, for now, Žižek can maintain that the ontological foundations of the Act *a priori* reject actions that seek to obfuscate the antagonistic Real and, consequently, that his redoubling of the Real and corresponding theory of the Act (since it prohibits these kinds of impotent action) is indeed more likely to change the Real than a formalist alternative.

The Act as Politically Impotent

Žižek’s argument works as a critique of Hitler, but what about the contemporary anti-Semite who has ‘read Lacan’ and accepts a primordial, structural, antagonism? That is to say, what if it is possible to formulate a position that accepts a constitutive antagonism but is, nonetheless, deplorably fascist? What if Hitler had switched his terms around? For example, an anti-Semite could claim that the object *a* of capital is not surplus-value but Jews and that the symptom of capital is not the slum dwellers of the world but rather animals. The anti-Semite would be traversing the fantasy, identifying with the symptom, and politicizing the excluded sphere of capitalism by promoting, for example, the inclusion of animals. So instead of Marx’s Labor Theory of Value which points to the proletariat as the creator of surplus, anti-Semitism could simply posit an ‘Animal Theory of Value’ (ATV). The Jew, as object *a* would be the object cause of desire (that which the subject does everything for) and the motivating factor behind production. The anti-Semite could, in the same way that Žižek links object *a* to exploitation, constitutively link the production of the Jew to the exploitation of animals. Thus, the anti-Semite Lacanian could argue that if one wants to reconfigure the symbolic order, to change this inherent feature, he or she must kill (like Kaiser Soze does) this specific form of object *a* –in this case the Jew (in Žižek’s case capitalist profit). Just like Žižek does not have to reject surplus as such (object *a*) to reject its capitalist form (profit), the anti-Semite does not have to reject the existence of surplus object *a* (the non-closure of society) to advocate the killing of object *a*’s capitalist form

(today's Jews). The anti-Semite could maintain that he is attacking the fundamental fantasy of capitalism (R1). Anti-Semitism, here, is not shying away from any constitutive or formal antagonism. Rather it is accepting the antagonistic nature of society as such; it simply picks different points of what generates this antagonism and where this antagonism lies. Žižek, then, has no defense against the anti-Semite who has read Lacan and who formulates his or her position this way. Without a construction there is little to suggest that the LTV and a Marxist analysis of Capital should take priority over an anti-Semitic ATV.⁶³ The positions are conceptually analogous. Žižek does not label the slum dwellers as the excluded symptomal point because of their revolutionary potential; rather they have revolutionary potential because they are the excluded. The ATV functions the same way. Without a plausible LTV construction suggesting otherwise, why not say that animals are the excluded symptomal point and thus have revolutionary potential? The absurdity is the point; without a construction Žižek's political position is hopelessly open to this kind of appropriation.

It is not enough, then, to 'accept the inherent risk' in any political Act. Not only does this risk face the possibility of a genuine attempt failing to achieve its ideal (Robespierre/Lenin) but it also faces appropriation from racist anti-Semitism and any other political theory that can simply shift its terms to accommodate Žižek's Lacan (incorporate R1). The Act, as evident by this reformulated anti-Semitism, can also serve to obfuscate the Real. Thus Žižek's Lacanian analysis of society may or may not be radical; it may or may not be correct in identifying the fundamental fantasy; it may or may not obfuscate the true R1 with a false one (the Jew); and it may or may not, like Žižek accuses Laclau of, leave the formal R1 as a depoliticized sphere.

Can one, then, for reasons 1 and 2 listed earlier, not also say the same for any other political theory or action? Laclau may or may not touch upon R1 when he advocates for some specific democratic change. (Again, Barrack Obama and Bill Clinton, liberal democrats, even touch upon the Real according to Žižek.) Why, then, should one use a Lacanian political framework over any other? Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanian ontology, without a justifiable construction and analysis of capital, cannot make a meaningful distinction between R1 and R2. All varieties of intrasocial political struggles (feminist, environmental, humanitarian, and so on), without a plausible

analysis suggesting which one to privilege as a nodal point, must then be considered in tandem and equally privileged. As a result the left is implicitly thrown back into a type of postmodernism or Laclauian struggle for a broader incorporation of symbolic differences within R2. And, without a plausible construction, the injunction to act, since the subject is always-already acting in political space, too fails to politicize this space (amounting to a superfluous injunction). Žižek, then, it seems, is no closer to politicizing the formal R1 than the formalism he critiques.

Conclusion

So there are two potential problems with Žižek's politics beyond Kant and critique of formalism. First, there appears to be very little reason today, without the labor theory of value, to believe that Žižek is correct in his identification of the symptom. Žižek's analysis of the part of no part as the symptomal point of capitalism and surplus value as object *a* seems to amount to either speculation or a case of ideological disembowelment.⁶⁴ Second, although Žižek might argue that the redoubling of the Real best confronts the left with the necessity to engage in risky action (the risk of any construction), this would still fail to address the point that the Act, as shown through the case of a Lacanian anti-Semite, may or may not serve to obfuscate the Real. The Act, then, may or may not function to celebrate failure. However, again, if, as Žižek notes, those who have not made the Hegelian move can still accomplish a radical Act, then, Laclau and Kantian formalism are at no political disadvantage. That is, they too, in an undifferentiated field of R2 (since it is impossible not to act or to directly opt-out of political space), have an equal chance of hitting upon the Real (even if they, theoretically, deny that possibility). Accordingly, Žižek's Hegelian injunction to act may be considered superfluous; it does not politicize the space of R1 any more than a formalist radical democracy (regardless of whether formalism rejects the possibility of intervention into this space). The choice to adopt Žižek's Hegelian shift and redoubling of the Real, without a viable construction, appears to make no political difference. A Žižekian imperative to act, without a viable construction, is not enough to move past formalism.

To avoid a potential misconception, there is, perhaps, a need to distinguish the criticisms put-forth in this paper from the, often-misguided, critique (espoused by those

like Simon Critchley) that lambast Žižek for failing to provide a concrete answer or plan for the left (Žižek, readily admits he has none).⁶⁵ This paper, in contrast, has attempted to ask a different type of question; how can Žižek criticize a formalist ontology from a Hegelian perspective if Žižek's ontology too falls victim to the celebration of failure? That is, if, without a viable construction, everyone is taking stabs at the dark, which may or may not alter the Real of capital, then this begs the question of why, politically, should one be a Hegelian today?

One may assert that it is only the Hegelian, non-all ontology that truly confronts the subject with its own freedom (since it confronts the subject with the fact that it can alter R1). But, again, as demonstrated above, because we are always-already acting, does not a formalist radical democracy also accomplish this (even if it is not entirely conscious of the primordial Real)? In theory, Žižek's redoubling of the Real may seemingly provide a way past the celebration of failure, but in practice, without a plausible construction, there is no substantial difference. This is problematic, for Žižek, because, again, there is a relationship between theory and politics (flaws located in the carrying-out of an idea must be reflected back onto the idea itself).⁶⁶ So, if, in shifting from radical democracy to a Hegelian re-doubling of the Real, there is no difference in practical reality, then both positions, in theory, are all too similar as well.

That is, since the Real is nothing but the space between two parallax positions, our shifting in positions (from radical democracy to an Hegelian non-all ontology), if it is indeed an authentic shift, must alter the Real as well. However, this paper has not been able to find any substantial change between the two perspectives. Even further, Agamben, Badiou, Butler, Laclau, and Rancière among others, who Žižek categorizes as formalist, similarly argue that the part of no part are key to subversive action. Many formalists, alongside Žižek, support the political organization of leftist parties like Syriza (*The Guardian* even recently published an article entitled "Why Ernesto Laclau is the intellectual figurehead for Syriza and Podemos").⁶⁷ If there is a relationship between theory and politics (even, again, if this relationship is Real) then, without a viable construction, why are there neither theoretical nor political ramifications when one shifts their perspective from Laclau's formalism to Žižek's Hegelian ontology?

This is all to say that, if one accepts Žižek's rejection of an absolute split between

theory and politics, then Žižek's theoretical break with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and the politics of formalism may not be as radical as is often indicated. Subsequently, there appears to be a need to either re-confront the problems of finitude and look to develop a notion of radical difference that has political consequences or, re-do a critique of Laclau and formalism in such a way whereas it does not depend upon the criticism of its celebration of failure (since, again, this is a feature of a Hegelian non-all paradigm as well). Thus, a potentially crucial question for the left today is, does it need a different theory of Act that resists appropriation, an updated construction and labor theory of value, or a different political critique of formalism? Either-way, there appears to be an ever more pertinent need to re-think Meillassoux's problematic and to continue to contemplate difference (the Real for psychoanalysis) and its structuring political role.

Notes

¹ Žižek, *Enjoyment as a political Factor*, xii, xvii.

² Johnston. *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*. P 214-30

³ Meillassoux gives the example of correlationist being unable to account for "ancestral" realm or events that happen before mankind. He writes: "*what is it that happened 4.56 billion years ago? Did the accretion of the earth happen, yes or no?* In one sense, yes, the correlationist will reply, because the scientific statements pointing to such an event are objective, in other words, intersubjectively verifiable. But in another sense, no, he will go on, because the referent of such statements cannot have existed in the way in which it is naively described, i.e. as non-correlated with a consciousness. But then we end up with a rather extraordinary claim: *the ancestral statement is a true statement*, in that it is objective, but *one whose referent cannot possibly have actually existed in the way this truth describes it.*" Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 31-32.

⁴ Žižek, et al. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. P. 111. Also see Žižek's critique of Buddhism found in: Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*. P. 127-35.

⁵ Žižek, *Parallax View*, 27.

⁶ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* p. 127.

⁷ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 237. See also, Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 18.

⁸ For Žižek, political theory does influence political positions. As he writes, "What, however, if philosophical differences do matter politically, and if, as a consequence, this political congruence between philosophers tells us something crucial about their pertinent philosophical stance? What if, in spite of the great passionate public debates between deconstructionists, pragmatists, Habermasians and cognitivists, they none the less share a series of philosophical premises - what if there is an unacknowledged proximity between them? And what if the task

today is precisely to break with this terrain of shared premises?" Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. p 128.

⁹ Rancière, *Disagreement*. 1999 P.14. Also, for Žižek's repeated use of part of no part, see: *Living In the End Times, In Defense of Lost Causes, and First as Tragedy Then as Farce* among other works.

¹⁰ See Gray, *The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek*, 2012; Ross, *The dangerous dreams of Slavoj Žižek*, 2013; and Žižek, *Some Bewildered Clarifications*, IJOZS.

¹¹ Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, 2.

¹² A few noteworthy exceptions to this rule include Adrian Johnston, Jodi Dean, Matthew Sharpe, and Fabio Vighi. However, although they certainly systematize Žižek's ontology in relationship to his political thought, they don't necessarily challenge Žižek on his particular, partisan, choice of Marxism.

¹³ See for example, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. P. 111 and Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* p. 125-70.

¹⁴ Žižek, on multiple occasions, praises (although he also acknowledges its ultimate shortcomings) the Chavez regime for mobilizing support of the excluded in order to fend off a right-wing United States coup and restore Chávez to his post. See Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, Verso, 2009. p. 105-6.

¹⁵ See Žižek's essay in the final chapter of Paul Bowman's *The Truth of Žižek*.

¹⁶ Žižek, *Enjoyment as a political Factor*, xii, xvii.

¹⁷ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* p. 127.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Žižek equates the non-all of society with the Lacanian claim that 'there is no sexual relationship.'

²¹ Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. p 92.

²² Ibid, 97.

²³ Ibid, 93.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 104.

²⁶ Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, p.119–20.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. P 223

²⁹ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p, 55.

³⁰ This is also why for Žižek that the economy is always already the political economy. 'Neutral' and 'objective' political positions are never neutral; they are always determined by a partisan element revealing such a primordial split.

³¹ Rex Butler, *Žižek's Dictionary*, 76.

³² Ibid

³³ Žižek gives the example of how a simple democratic demand (universal voting rights), if insisted on long enough might have to include a restructuring of the very form of democracy (a restructuring on the very things one votes about (who owns the means of production for instance)).

³⁴ Define big other --the overarching "objective spirit" of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions. Relatedly, the Symbolic big Other also can refer to (often fantasmatic/fictional) ideas of anonymous authoritative power

and/or knowledge (whether that of God, Nature, History, Society, State, Party, Science, or the analyst as the “subject supposed to know” [*sujet supposé savoir*]).

³⁵ See Žižek’s foreword to Bob Avakian’s *Marxism and the call of the Future*.

³⁶ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 423-427

³⁷ Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. p 125.

³⁸ Rebecca Comay, in her analysis of the French Revolution, particularly the moment of Louie XIV’s execution, delineates a historical example of the authentic Act. For Comay, by executing the King, the revolutionaries killed the very law which subjectivized them, constituted their symbolic order, and gave thus them their identity. They therefore enacted the death of the big Other. Thus, in this moment, they experienced what Žižek calls ‘subjective destitution’ or in Comay’s words “became witnesses at their own funeral.” That is, since the revolutionaries were wrong and guilty by the standards of their symbolic order (the laws of Louie XVI) they found justification outside the symbolic order itself-by exposing founding gesture (structuring fantasy) of law –how law itself is guilty and contingent.

³⁹ Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*. P. 236.

⁴⁰ See Slavoj Žižek, *How to Begin From the Beginning*. *The New Left Review* 57. May-June 2009.

⁴¹ “My (Marxist) thesis remains that if one does not take this abstraction seriously, then ‘other aspects of the social totality would not be seen’ in their concrete role within social totality. Capitalism is not just the outcome of multiple discursive strategies and struggles for hegemony – the ‘logic of the capital’ is a singular matrix which designates its Real.” From Žižek, *With Defenders Like These Who Needs Attackers*.

⁴² See Žižek, *Objet a as Inherent Limit to Capitalism: on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri*. 2005. Available at <http://www.lacan.com/zizmultitude.htm>

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See for example Bellamy, Elizabeth J. 1993. “Can Psychoanalysis Be Political?” *Diacritics* 23(1): 23-38.

⁴⁵ Levinson, *In Theory Politics Does Not Exist*. Available at:

https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/summary/v018/18.1.levinson.html

⁴⁶ Butler, et al. *The Žižek Dictionary*, p.164.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁸ Bokanowski, *On Freud’s Construction in Analysis*, p. 261-65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Žižek and Julian Assange with Amy Goodman. *Democracy Now*. August, 2012. Available at: http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2012/8/16/from_our_archives_full_video_of_wikileaks_julian_assange_philosopher_slavoj_iek_with_amy_goodman

⁵¹ Laclau, “Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics.” p. 670-80.

⁵² Judith Butler in her *Frames of War* defines Homo Saucer as those who can be killed without it being called Murder.

⁵³ The patient can be easily identified — it is the system as such, capitalism. The patient, however, calls for analysis in its outburst of anti-Semitism, racism, class struggle, protest etc.). The key question, thus, is a question of analysis — of figuring out what the patient effectively *is* — of identifying the structure of the system and symptom of capital. Moreover, although one may think to the contrary, the question of what something *is*, is ultimately a question of analysis. This is because analysis strives to get at the determinate symptom of the patient — that which remains after the traversal of the fantasy — the sinthome. The question of what the patient really is, then, since that patient is nothing more than a sinthome (the other at its core) is thus a

question for, and of, analysis.

⁵⁴ Here it may be important to emphasize that this skeptical problem is not unique to the politicization of psychoanalysis (the same issues persist in clinical analysis; –the analyst never knows if a particular interpretation will work).

⁵⁵ *The Occupy movement, a renascent Left, and Marxism today: An interview with Slavoj Žižek*, available at, http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=1823

⁵⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 27-31

⁵⁷ Žižek, “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses,” found at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm>

⁵⁸ Žižek writes: “In a concrete situation, its universal truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly partisan position; truth is by definition one-sided.” From: Žižek, *A Plea For Leninist Intolerance*. Critical Inquiry, Winter 2002. Available at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/a-plea-for-leninist-intolerance/>

⁵⁹ See Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology*, p. 263-4.

⁶⁰ See for instance *Democracy Now*, Slavoj Žižek: Far Right and Anti-Immigrant Politicians on the Rise in Europe. Available at

http://www.democracynow.org/2010/10/18/slavoj_zizek_far_right_and_anti

⁶¹ Žižek writes, “Although Clinton’s presidency epitomizes the Third Way of today’s (ex-)Left succumbing to the Rightist ideological blackmail, his health-care reform program would nonetheless amount to a kind of act, at least in today’s conditions, since it would have been based on the rejection of the hegemonic notions of the need to curtail Big State expenditure and administration — in a way, it would “do the impossible.”

Žižek, *Leninist Freedom*. 2001. Available at

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ot/zizek.htm>

⁶² Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 124-5.

⁶³ Even further, any recourse to empirical argument which critiques Nazism because Jew’s don’t actually control things, according to Žižek himself, “already losses”. That is, Žižek does not want to take this empirical route since it would be an external critique –relying upon empiricism as some objective standard. Ibid, 126.

⁶⁴ Moreover, even if the Marxist theory of value did hold, a potential political problem arises in what can be called solving ‘disputes of the Real’? That is, what argumentation could one use, without positing a big Other, to show that one analysis of capital is the ‘correct’ analysis? Openness and ambiguity, then, may not simply be a failure of translation of psychoanalysis to politics but rather a problematic point of psychoanalysis (construction) as such.

⁶⁵ See for instance, Simon Critchley, *Violent Thoughts About Slavoj Žižek*, Naked Punch, 21 October 2009. Available at <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/39>.

⁶⁶ Žižek, et al. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* p.127-8.

⁶⁷ Dan Hancox, “Why Ernesto Laclau is the intellectual figurehead for Syriza and Podemos,” 9, February, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/09/ernesto-laclau-intellectual-figurehead-syriza-podemos>

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