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Žižek, Antagonism and the Syrian Crisis

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Abstract:

As an outspoken public intellectual Slavoj Žižek's comments on today's refugee crisis, particularly in relation to Syria, have been widely criticized. The following essay looks at the philosophy and politics of Žižek in relation to theorists such as Ranciere, Laclau and Mouffe in order to explore where Žižek's dismissal of migrant struggle highlights the failure of his Lacan inspired Kantian transcendentalism and State based class politics to explore the political and subversive potentials of alternative sites of struggle. While Žižek's exploration of antagonism as a site of politics remains useful, his vision of State politics and class struggle as the only true bearers of anti- or alter-capitalist struggle, based on a Universalist politics and transcendental subject, fails to consider the multifarious political aspects of global mobility.

Introduction

Slavoj Žižek has recently come under fire for his views on the Syrian refugee crisis and how Europe should respond. The statements in question are representative of the Žižekian project, which places the importance of class struggle over other forms of political struggle. Firstly, Žižek claims that European concern for the migrant is a form of self-flagellation—in that Western liberals feel the moral compulsion to accept the refugee as some signification of an

enlightened liberal value based on Human Rights (Žižek 2016a). This liberal inclusion takes as its enemy working-class-based xenophobic fear and racism of the migrant other, as promoted by the far right. The concurrent debate between the left and the right for Žižek is one that simply establishes empty signifiers of political discourse, as they do not evoke or enable systemic changes that actually need to happen. They instead promote a Capitalist status quo in the global environment, as class difference remains intact and is in fact strengthened by this pseudo-inclusion of the Other. Refugees for Žižek represent the problems of global capital—the displacement of people due to economic and physical conflict. Then, simply accepting refugees into the Capitalist west as the solution to the problem ignores the actual problems underneath: that there will always be refugees under global capital; that problematic differences amongst cultures do not go away under “multiculturalism”; and that class struggle will persist if not confronted first and foremost. In other words, the European left should stop enabling counterproductive inclusionary politics.

I argue in the following essay that this position brings to light the central weaknesses in Žižek’s politics and philosophy: his vision of state politics as the only bearer of an anti-or alter-capitalist revolution, based on a Universalist politics and transcendental subject. Žižek’s vision and—as I will argue later in the essay—his political history actually betrays the politics of antagonism that he brilliantly laid out through Lacan with engagements alongside Laclau, Mouffe, Badiou and Rancière. Counter to Žižek’s original project—a politics of antagonism that is dependent on the State—it will be argued that the refugee crisis, and the issue of migration in the global context today in general, instead provide avenues to start rethinking the Greco-Roman based conception of politics that Žižek is specifically relying on—his unrelenting loyalty to State politics, the Universal, and neo-Kantian transcendentalism. The hope is to instead utilize the trajectory of antagonistic politics in order to work towards an anti-capitalist society that does not rely on Greco-Roman political structures—those which will always remain blind to the power of the excluded.

A Quick Detour to Set the Context

Žižek’s view on the Syrian refugee crisis can be boiled down to a few basic points:

Firstly, the above mentioned notion that simply including migrants into the capitalist west does not solve the crisis, but actually enables the conditions under which the global migrant is created to continue (global capital, resource war, Islamic fundamentalism, imperialism). This is a particular source of annoyance for Žižek in the current context wherein the “radical

emancipatory movements” in the beginning of 2015, e.g. Syriza and Podemos, have been replaced in mainstream discourse by the “humanitarian” topic of the Syrian refugee crisis. Žižek states, “class struggle was literally repressed and replaced by the liberal-cultural topic of tolerance and solidarity” (2015a). Class struggle was replaced by another struggle, considered far less pressing in the eyes of Žižek in part because it has been utilized and usurped in some ways by the liberal left.

Second, the inclusion of the refugee into the West, via western liberal standards, coincides with multicultural sentiments. For Žižek, multiculturalism is akin to cultural relativism and enforces the acceptance of certain ‘non-west’ traits, e.g. violence against women, into Western society (2015a). Instead of multiculturalism, if we are to accept the non-west Other, there should be a base cultural enforcement, in which certain Western-cultural features are enforced upon the newcomers. In a sweeping generalization Žižek states, “Another taboo we must address concerns norms and rules. It is a fact that most of the refugees come from a culture that is incompatible with Western European notions of human rights” (2015a). Žižek claims we should instead openly confront and discuss, “without a compromise with racism,” cultural difference in order to hash out the “difficult issues of cohabitation.” He calls this “culture lite,” wherein certain European cultural standards are enforced. However, he continuously fails to map out what this would look like—what kinds of lines would be drawn, or not, in terms of cultural enforcement (2015b; 2016a). And police enforcement would certainly be involved: “And if norms and communication don’t work, then the force of law should be applied in all its forms” (2015a). This point coincides with a praise of a certain European democratic rationalism, of which all Europeans and newcomers alike should abide by: “the time has come to drop leftist mantras critiquing Eurocentrism” (2015a). Žižek calls for a Marxist Eurocentrism including values such as “egalitarianism, fundamental rights, freedom of the press, the welfare-state, etc.” to combat capitalist globalization (2015a). This generalization of the non-west makes two assumptions if read at face value:

- 1) all or perhaps most non-Europeans do not value egalitarianism, fundamental rights, freedom of the press, the welfare state, etc.
- 2) European values, if respected, naturally enable egalitarianism. (Žižek’s most repeated example of non-West cultural traits is violence against women in Muslim communities. One might ask him to look at issues of rampant domestic abuse in the enlightened Europe and U.S.)

Thirdly comes the issue of state surveillance. Žižek has emphasized that migrants and refugees should always succumb to the sovereignty of the state to which they wish to either pass through or end up in. Migrants should always register through the state bureaucracy and make their full identity, biometrics and other data known in order for the state to better organize and channel their movement. Žižek states, “We have to register you. And usually they shout, ‘no we are not cattle we are humans, we want freedom.’ *But fuck you.* You want this freedom and then you want to go to Norway” (2015b). This comment came at the end of an anecdote about “dozens” of Syrian refugees that were interviewed on Slovenian T.V. who said they did not want to stay in Slovenia because it was too poor. Žižek’s solution to this registration/channeling problem “includes but is not limited to: reception centers near to the crisis (Turkey, Lebanon, the Libyan coast), transportation of those granted entrance to European way stations, and their redistribution to potential settlements” (2015a). It is unclear how these reception centers differ from the detention centers we know today. As Žižek states in the same paragraph, “The military is the only agent that can do such a big task in an organized way.” For Žižek, this emergency—read exception—begins to appear as a justification of state-militarization in the Carl Schmitt sense. In this way for Žižek, “the right to ‘free movement’ should be limited by the state, as it decides how to handle the flow of bodies” (2015a).

As a side note, I know that Žižek’s views are more nuanced than this. If one was to comb through all of Žižek’s work I am sure many contradictions in these views would be found. However, it is essential from both a theoretical and political position to critique the power Žižek has accumulated as a public intellectual and what he chooses to do with it. But most importantly here, it is from this position where you can most clearly see the central issues in his philosophy and politics.

Žižek is asking of us (and himself) to define a Universal struggle that can be expressed amongst all migrants and non-migrants alike. This would be the establishment of a Cause through which universal loyalty is strong enough to traverse and unite different communities/groups/struggles. This universal solidarity requires a basic ethical/cultural meeting ground to be carved out as mentioned in the preceding points (2016a; 2016b). The Universal he is referring to is class struggle.

Žižek’s statements in varying ways claim Syrian refugees should only be allowed to come into Europe if they give up certain cultural traits, succumb to the sovereignty of the state per the requirement of the welfare state, and in some sense adapt their own ethnic and ethical identity to cohere with the needs of the State and class struggle in general.

Four Antagonisms and the Problem of the Migrant

Žižek's vision of mass change to the socio-political-economic structures of global capitalism (following the final failure of the Communist project that spanned from 1917-1989) is one that utilizes *antagonistic* drives that simultaneously call into question the symbolic, social, political and economic order (pulling influence from Lacan, early Laclau and Mouffe's vision of antagonist politics, and Badiou's Event). Rather than promoting a movement driven by one romanticized communist vision, the movement should be directed by social antagonisms that "generate the need for communism" (2009a; 2009b; 2010) and thus promote the true Communist Hypotheses or Ideal (Badiou 2006; 2008). This is a rejection of an idealist Communism in favor of a communist project that reacts directly to the specific historically contingent antagonisms of the current Capitalist context—ruptures in the system to be seized upon, or Badiou's Communist Events (2006)—that incite a return to a commons and a rejection of enclosure and property all together. The sites where this is most likely to come to a head are referred to by Žižek as the four antagonisms:

The looming threat of ecological catastrophe; the inappropriateness of private property for so-called intellectual property; the socio-ethical implications of new techno scientific developments, especially in biogenetics; and last, but not least, new forms of social apartheid—new walls and slums. (2009a: 53)

All of these antagonisms are rifts in the system—fissures that create a crisis in order, sustenance, well-being, etc. and thus also provide sites for resistance and a unified movement against the processes that have enabled their existence (Capitalism).

Žižek's notion of four antagonisms follows dialogue with works by Jacques Lacan as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) that mapped out a conception of antagonism as the site of fissure and political change.

Briefly, Žižek's (1989) interpretation of Lacan is as follows: all consciousness longs to transcend the socially developed symbolic ordering of experience (the nagging and watchful eye of the big Other) in order to reach what lays beyond. The Symbolic register is the site of consciousness that is ordered by society (essentially, social norms), which is linguistically organized and socially policed via social structures and the workings of the unconscious on the self (the Superego). The "drive" for an experience that lays beyond what is acceptable within the Symbolic register/order is what drives humanity; it is also the site of regulation and repression, as drives beyond the Symbolic are unacceptable within society. The Real is that which is not represented by the Symbolic order. It is this sought after unknown. While expressing or

experiencing the Real would be traumatic, it is something all people are drawn towards—a drive to fulfill the lacking of the Real. All drives are defined by this notion of Lack. The Real is traumatic for the very reason that it lays beyond our Symbolic abilities. Thus, while desiring this unknown, we simultaneously buffer our everyday with fantasy—socially constructed desires that protect us from our drive of the unknown Real.

On the other hand, for Žižek, in Lacan’s acknowledgement of this “death drive” (symbolic death) towards symbolic negation, one might find hope in the unconscious—in the split subject that always desires what lays beyond the current Symbolic register—and the possibilities of altering the Symbolic realm. The antagonism of something beyond our present day experience, creates a constant yearning for that which is unknown, or in this case that which exists outside of the experience of Capitalism.

Thus, across Žižek’s work, antagonism appears in two forms:

- 1) The human drives—formed as desire that risks ‘castration’ and ‘symbolic death’ by pressing on towards a new traumatic experience—that which cannot be symbolized in the current order
- 2) A process that manifests in the symbolic order itself, which is a fissure or tension in the social experience (ecological catastrophe being one example)

Either way, antagonism, or negation, calls into question the status quo—it stirs the pot. It carries the potential for alternative behaviors to arise.

Likewise, antagonism for Laclau and Mouffe (Mouffe 1995; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) is a site of politics as well as potential transformation. Žižek’s interpretation is based on a Lacanian dialectic—a Hegelian influenced process of continual confrontation between the lacking split-consciousness and the fissure of the Real. This is also why Žižek engages with Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of Democracy as antagonism. Difference, antagonism, and a celebration of the death drive (Symbolic death drive) is fodder for a healthier democracy, in which people may begin to push towards new ways of living outside of the dominant order (Capitalism, exploitation, etc.). Žižek is trying to find a way to unite such antagonistic moments, whether in the death drive or more specifically in these traumatic global moments of fissure for the purposes of communist emancipation.

To return to the four antagonisms then, the last of the four for Žižek takes precedence above all else: the exclusion of certain subjects from a social unification should be “resisted by force if necessary” (2009a: 53). The commons, or shared social being, from which subjects are increasingly excluded via Capital, includes “means of communication and education and shared

infrastructure such as public transport, electricity, post, etc.... the commons of external nature...the commons of internal nature, the biogenetic inheritance of humanity” (2009a: 53). To return these resources back to the commons (communism) out of the hands of privatization (capitalism, walls, slums) is the primary antagonism that is required for the survival of a communist humanity. Enclosure/exclusion (walls, slums) have allowed for processes of “self-annihilation” via Capitalism (2009a) as well as the failure of the communist project via Soviet Socialism (2009b: 95).

Further, processes of inclusion/exclusion can render anti-capitalist struggles against capitalist processes banal in most cases if the capitalist system is not the primary target. Žižek gives the example of the polluting Other. Environmental activism that does not engage with a critique of capital, or involve a unified global struggle against capital, lends itself to exploitation. We see situations where a concern for the environment is translated into the need for the World Bank to promote profit-driven, green-washed sustainable investment projects in the ‘Third World,’ which in turn serve to displace and exploit the people living there. Environmental concern is included in main stream politics, while those most-affected by it remain excluded. For Žižek then, if we don’t deal with exclusion first, via unification of struggles, the hope for a Universal struggle against Capital is stifled by the exploitation, reappropriation, deterritorialization and splitting up of people into contentious groups, which Capital is so good at accomplishing.

It is here that Žižek calls forward Rancière (1998) and his theory of the “part of no parts.” Rancière’s idea is that democracy always involves a part of no parts—an excluded portion of society that is not ‘counted’ in the political sphere of democracy. This antagonistic relationship should instead be seen as a site of politics: to continuously call into question who is included/excluded is politics in its pure form, according to Rancière. However, democracy as we know it in its liberal, capitalist forms instead enacts exclusion/inclusion for the purposes of Capital, so as long as the inclusion/exclusion enables the economic system to function. Inclusion into Capital is only the exclusion of a liberated Commons.

However, here is where Žižek misses an opportunity to understand the political power of the excluded. Summoning Agamben (1998), Žižek maintains that unless we emancipate a movement in reaction to the antagonism of exclusion, in favor of an inclusive Communist Universalist project (of the emancipated Commons, communist inclusion), we will all soon become the excluded in the eyes of capital: subject-less,

apolitical beings swaying to the whims of global capital and simply *homo sacer* in the eyes of the state (2009a: 55).

Žižek is attempting to unite a notion of an antagonistic social-being that is unified in its struggle against Capital. For Žižek doing away with exclusion within the borders of the struggle must be maintained in order to challenge the ever growing exclusion of people from the Commons on a global scale. Most importantly, this inclusion *must be expressed as a unification of class struggle*. While praising the political opportunity of antagonistic exclusion (in Rancière's terms) Žižek seeks to envelope or *include* the excluded into his vision—to unite a notion of an antagonistic social-being that is unified in its struggle against Capital.

One can only assume that migrants and refugees are part of this exclusion/inclusion (fourth antagonism). As Žižek states, “There is nothing more private than a state community which perceives the excluded as a threat and worries how to keep them at a proper distance” (2009a: 54, 2009b: 97). However, if the excluded are not in line with Žižek's communist project of class struggle, what is he to do with them? If involving the ‘excluded’ in an emancipatory antagonism is the only way towards a communist future, what will Žižek do with those who do not play along, have a different world view, or prioritize getting their family immediate shelter in the moment of flight over joining his long game of communal revolution? Perhaps this is far too literal a reading of Žižek, but his theory and his politics nonetheless appear to be creating certain antinomies here. I argue that these antinomies are central to his philosophical project and cause seriously concerning politics.

Žižek, Universalism, Transcendentalism and the State

It is here where I would like to try to understand how Žižek comes so close to a Rancierian politics of difference and antagonism, realizing the political power of the excluded, and instead runs backwards into an almost-totalitarian vision of a class struggle based in State politics in rejection of other forms of dissent.

Firstly, Žižek's Lacanian project is a return to the ‘Cartesian’ subject, i.e. the notion of a universal trait of all subjects as thinking minds. Counter to Descartes and Kant, however, for Žižek/Lacan the subject is a “split being”—a psychological entity affected by the unconscious mind while navigating the conscious social experience (affected by the interpellation of the superstructure) (Sharpe 2004: 5). While Žižek remains critical of Kant in some ways, his ontology is a form of transcendentalism and intentionally so. Žižek's work is in praise of the

project of Enlightenment and an intentional critique of post-structuralism (Sharpe 2004). Instead, however, the transcendental subject is the Lacanian split subject, replacing Kant's rational mind with the neurotic. The transcendental subject remains. Žižek then pairs his Kant-inspired transcendentalism with Hegel. The split subject is a form of Hegelian dialectics; however, it is a dialectic without absolute spirit—with no end game. What we have with Žižek is an eternally split subject—a relentless dialectic between the conscious and unconscious, desire and drive.

For Žižek, Capitalism—its hegemonies—is so powerful because it most effectively manipulates and takes advantage of this universally experienced split consciousness. While we understand deep down that the system is a farce, i.e. exploitive, destructive, etc., our ideological fantasies—our imaginary and symbolic registers—are more readily influenced by the movements of Capital. Hence, we know what we are doing but we do it anyway (1989: 16, 24-25) (i.e. overconsumption, exploitation, self-exploitation, and so on).

This split consciousness, which is so easily influenced by the whims of capital, is easily co-opted by the Universal, regardless of a detachment from the particular. Speaking in terms of Symbolic ordering and linguistic signification, the Universal signifier for Žižek is that which hegemony, society or the symbolic order uses to signify an idea or ideology. Politics for Žižek is the framing of that Universal—"politics is the struggle for the content of the empty signifier" that can be applied for the sake of power/ideology (1999: 177). So, for example, the Universal ideal of the Capitalist Democratic State as a protectorate of 'the people' through equality, fairness, justice, etc. is an empty Universal signifier that is maintained through fantasy, hegemony, ideology, etc., regardless of its felt particulars that often contradict the Universal in the everyday. The relationship between the particular (the split-subject) and the Universal (State as protectorate of the people) in that sense is always one of negation, lack, antagonism, but one that is easily glossed-over by fantasy, hegemony, interpellation.

Žižek's transcendental split subject will always be susceptible to the whims of fantasy corrupted by Capital. The Universal in this order will then always be defined by Capitalist hegemony—the interpellation of consumerist mindsets. In this way one can see that it is nearly impossible for the split-subject to find its way towards alternative Universal signifiers—to alternative ways of thinking about the world, as Laclau would will for us (Laclau 2000) (Žižek 1999: 177).

In Žižek we have a transcendental subject that is condemned to manipulation.

And here is where Žižek's Leninist tendencies come in. Žižek is requiring of us a shift in hegemony to that of an anti-capitalist struggle—to fight Universal with Universal—to replace the

current hegemony with one driven by the antagonisms experienced by this split subject and in favor of class emancipation. However, the dictatorship of the proletariat will not happen organically. Given the weakness of this split subject, the inability to self-castrate and actively move out of the Symbolic register towards new beginnings, leadership is needed—professional theorists that will keep the path straight and narrow and in line with class emancipation and “inclusion” of those excluded from the class struggle for the Commons. Žižek writes:

One of the mantras of the postmodern Left has been that we should finally leave behind the "Jacobin-Leninist" paradigm of centralized dictatorial power. But perhaps the time has now come to turn this mantra around and admit that a good dose of just that "Jacobin-Leninist" paradigm is precisely what the Left needs today. Now, more than ever, one should insist on what Badiou calls the "eternal" Idea of Communism, or the communist "invariants" –the "four fundamental concepts" at work from Plato through the medieval millenarian revolts and on to Jacobinism, Leninism and Maoism: strict egalitarian justice, disciplinary terror, political voluntarism, and trust in the people. (2009b: 125-126)

And so what we have left with Žižek’s universally split subject is a need for a Universalist revolution of class struggle. Such a struggle, however, cannot happen as disparately as his theory of antagonisms would have us believe. At times, we find a Žižek who is critical of the Communist Ideal, in favor of a disperse struggle (class struggle, but nonetheless disperse) amongst the antagonisms of Late Capital (the four antagonisms), enabled by the antagonistic spirit of the split subject and the part of no parts. However, at other times, Žižek’s split subject appears always susceptible to the Universal signifiers of capital—the sinthome of commodity fetishism and cynicism. Seemingly, the only way to unite a struggle in this way is through some form of Jacobinism, Leninism, Maoism. We find here, some serious antinomies when it comes to applying Žižek’s philosophy and ontology to actual political action and struggle.

Laclau provides a thorough critique of this aspect of Žižek’s work. He states, “Žižek had told us that he wanted to overthrow capitalism; now we are served notice that he also wants to do away with liberal democratic regimes – to be replaced, it is true, by a thoroughly different regime which he does not have the courtesy of letting us know anything about. One can only guess.” (Laclau 2000: 289). And here is where Žižek’s critique of multiculturalism comes into view. As Laclau notes, Žižek’s Universality of struggle on a global level depends predominantly on class struggle, as that Universal struggle that would get at the root of the capitalist system. Other struggles that might fall under the name of multiculturalism, i.e. concerns for identity,

gender, culture, racism, etc., “would be more prone to particularism and as a result easier to integrate into the present system of domination” (Laclau 2000: 292). Anything that resembles a struggle that is not explicitly tied to class struggle, is a threat to class struggle for Žižek (Laclau 2000: 303).

Thus we return to the original problem of the Syrian refugee crisis and migrants in general. We might begin to understand why it is so difficult for Žižek to conceive of an emancipatory or just way to discuss the refugee crisis. What do you do with a mass movement of people that are demanding fair treatment and emancipation on the international stage, who are in essence calling into question the very structures of State and the economy in the very act of their mobile presence, but are not making claims explicitly in the name of a class struggle? Žižek’s class-struggle politics rejects multiculturalism and tolerance if they do not call into question the structures of Capital. Žižek states, “There is nothing to be said against tolerance. But when you buy this multiculturalist tolerance, you buy many other things with it. Isn’t it symptomatic that multiculturalism exploded at the very historic moment when the last traces of working-class politics disappeared from political space?” (Reul and Deichman 2001, cited in Bjelić 2011: 117).

We may now perhaps better locate Žižek’s politics in relation to the Syrian crisis. Here we find a political, philosophical and pop-cultural icon calling for the detention of countless peoples-on-the-move, who are in an act of refusal and flight from warfare and terrorism, which has been sparked by a series of international conflicts and tensions. Žižek’s annoyance that the crisis has taken precedence in global concern over the more class-based Greek financial crisis, propels him to dismiss the issue as liberal multicultural banality. His answer to the crisis is to establish detention centers near to the crisis and military organization via “transportation of those granted entrance to European way stations, and their redistribution to potential settlements” (2015a). Coinciding with Žižek’s statements that claim Syrian refugees should only be allowed to come into Europe if they give up certain cultural traits, succumb to the sovereignty of that state per the requirement of the welfare state, and adapt their ethnic and ethical identity to cohere with the needs of both the State and class struggle in general, these political suggestions resemble the totalitarianism that poisoned the Communist project of the 20th century.

It is worthwhile, then, to examine Žižek’s political history, to fully understand the problems that arise when such theories are applied to the ‘real.’ Balkans scholar Dušan Bjelić (2011) explores how within Slovenian politics, Žižek has in fact promoted a violently nationalist,

Orientalist and state-centric program. Žižek, who became a prominent public figure in Slovenia in post-war Yugoslavia, headed a group of Lacanian theorists in Ljubljana whose psychoanalytic discourse posited a Western Slovenian identity against a barbarism presumably located in the other post-Yugoslavian states, in order to understand the conflict and craft a post-war political program. Bjelić traces the trajectory of Žižek and his Slovenian followers, who theorized social change in the Balkans by “focusing on the Lacanian concept of the Real – that which can’t be symbolized – analogous to Freud’s concept of the ‘unconscious.’” For Žižek, discourse of the Real, “soon acquired a useful political application in the construction of the essence of the non-Slovene Balkan people as pre-symbolic and a threat to Slovene national security.” Bjelić continues, “Through application of this Lacanian psychoanalytic concept, Žižek accommodated the formation of Slovene post-Yugoslav nationalism and its politics of exclusion directed at non-Slovene Yugoslavs” (2011: 94).

Thus, Žižek’s Universalist concept of the Real, the split subject, and the Lacanian discourse in general lead Žižek into some murky political waters. The story begins with Žižek losing his bid for a seat on the Slovene collective presidency in 1990 through the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The Party did manage to come to power, without Žižek at the head of the table, but he remained a political and intellectual adviser in the party through the decade it was in power. Žižek stayed loyal to the party through the country’s transition from socialist Yugoslavia to the neoliberal state it is today, and, most damningly, Žižek “remained silent about a serious humanitarian and legal crisis created by his party with regard to its policies toward immigrant labor” (Bjelić 2011: 119). I find it of value to quote Bjelić’s account of this scenario at length:

The most significant symptom of the neoliberal violence promoted by LDP was the party’s policies with regard to ex-Yugoslav immigrants known as “naši tujci” (“our foreigners”), and also as “južnjaci,” (“Southerners”), a racialized term... when the Yugoslav Federation fell apart and the Slovene borders became new national borders, the immigrant population there found itself in a foreign country. Following the declaration of its independence from Yugoslavia in June of 1991, Slovenia promised citizenship to 200,000 “internal immigrants,” most of whom were laborers recruited from Southern and less developed Yugoslav republics. They held Yugoslavian citizenship at the time of Slovene independence from the Yugoslav Federation, but for them to remain in Slovenia after its independence they had to obtain Slovene citizenship. Most of them were, as the Slovene social scientist Marta Gregorčič

identifies, “precarious” manual labor “dependent on the grace, and the arbitrary will of employment” (Gregorčič, 2008: 122). The Slovene government upheld its promise to around 170,000 of these immigrants. Of the remaining 30,000, 11,000 left Slovenia, but the rest failed to apply for citizenship for all sorts of reasons. On February 26, 1992, the deadline for applying for citizenship, the Ministry of the Interior led by Igor Bavčar of the Liberal Party (part of the DEMOS–Slovene Democratic Opposition), simply erased these people from the register of permanent residents. They instantly became illegal immigrants – criminals. The immigrants so affected had no prior notice that they would lose their residence if they did not apply by the deadline. Erasure of documents, revoking citizenship, making application for permanent residence as a time-consuming complicated and humiliating procedure, numerous arrests, deportations, were practices that Borut Mekina has called “soft ethnic cleansing” (Mekina, 2002: 5).....According to Matevz Krivic, the legal defender of the Association of the Erased Residents and former constitutional judge, “The story of erasure involved planned and carefully controlled ethnic cleansing, whereby the ruling power presumably followed the principle of national homogenization to ‘do away with’ those others” (Krivic, 2003: Jalušič, 2003: 19). According to Marta Gregorčič the erasure has a structural cause, in order to carry on its oppressive policies the system creates a gray zone enabling oppressive apparatuses to carry out exclusions, exploitation, and disappearances of all sorts, not excluding murder. (2011: 119-120)

While Žižek has been questioned about this scenario on many occasions he refuses to acknowledge the issue and has never spoken out against it in public. As Bjelić maintains: “In that respect Žižek’s discourse on the Balkans as the Real and the anti-Balkan policies of his party coincided” (2001:119). Thus, looking back on our analysis of Žižek’s transcendental application of Lacanian theory in coordination with his State based Universalist approach to class struggle (as the only means to anti-capitalist progression) we find a Žižek who is seemingly mirroring the Stalinism that was born out of the Leninist revolution. It is here that we have to take Žižek at his word, not just as a hyperbolic charismatic character. Žižek’s dedication to Class Struggle results in the real suppression of other forms of struggle, involving those which call into question the State form, i.e. immigrant struggle (including immigrant labor struggle). Žižek has a very real political history tied to the suppression of alternative struggles. One might then find his

suggestion that we establish military camps to cordon off and thus efficiently channel global refugees in a certain light. Foreshadowing Žižek's comments on the Syrian refugee crisis, Bjelić wrote in relation to the Slovenian immigrant crisis:

Immigrant workers unwilling to assimilate and universalize their existence, choosing instead to retain their cultural particularity, become an obstacle to the alliance between the neo-Jacobins and the state. The radical intellectual taking hold of state power in order to act according to the transcendent principle of "Truth" becomes the embodiment of an abstract principle but also the agent of state terror. (2001: 118)

Antagonism, Migration and Multiple Sites of Struggle

In Žižek's work we find a return to Kantian-transcendentalism and a revolutionary project based on a singular Universal: class struggle. Both of these concepts severely limit other potentially valuable sites of struggle, out of a fear that any struggle other than class struggle will be reincorporated by Capital, e.g. through liberal multiculturalism, as Capital is so efficient at manipulating the transcendental split-subject. I argue that this transcendentalism/Universalism in fact contradicts the most subversive elements of Žižek's theory: that of antagonism. While antagonism is mostly limited to the transcendental Split-consciousness in Žižek, it still provides us with a view—if we can reject the transcendental imposition of the subject—that some subjects may at times feel compelled to act subversively against a predominant social or 'symbolic' order. The theory of antagonism also brings to light the fissures or ruptures in society that naturally antagonize the dominant social order and call into question the systems and structures that are quite potentially calling forth the limits of Capital and our existence within: these being the four antagonisms highlighted by Žižek. However, I would maintain that if we are to take these notions of antagonism seriously—that it is antagonism, negation and difference that most greatly call into question the Capitalist order—then we have to completely reject the Transcendental Subject as well as the Universal imposition of class struggle to understand the multitudinous ways in which people are calling Capital into question on a daily basis at these sites of antagonism, particularly in a time of economic and ecological crises.

It is here where we can return to Rancière (1998) as a more consistent champion of antagonism. To understand the potentials of 'democracy' and resistance, Rancière also valorizes moments of difference, contention and miscount. Rancière's concern is with the state

of democracy—being a system that promotes the will of a mythical ‘people’ instead of the will of actual people(s). For Rancière, democracy as we know it today is: State based; parliamentary (based on representation); theoretically based on consensus (representation of the ‘people’ as a homogenous community or sets of parties within a community that come to agreement through political speech); based on law, expert knowledge, and state institutions to administer democracy, justice and logic; and based on contract theory (protection of people from themselves by the state). This form of democracy as law based consensus is in practice for Rancière actually forced homogenization to a logic of State and Capital in today’s context. Not all opinions are respected, not all Others are accepted, and only sterile ‘difference’ that fits within the confines of consensus/community are allowed (not true difference). Any view within this democracy that promotes something truly disruptive in the dominant order is instead handled by the police (social and literal), by the racists, by the law/state.

As Rancière shows, Democracy was founded on the “miscount”—the notion that not all ‘subjects’ are allowed political voice in the *polis*. Modern day democracy, at least in its Form, glosses over this basic principle: modern day liberal State politics promotes a guise of Equality and inclusion. This however, is an illusion. Instead today we have postdemocracy: “postdemocracy is government practice and conceptual legitimization of democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount and dispute of the people...reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests” (1998, pp. 102). Under this system, the ‘form’ and ‘content’ of politics assume an illusion of singularity, which is unified by the institutions of the State. The only will that is actually exercised is that of the State contract, however, with no room for true diversions. All parties and viewpoints largely represent the same thing, with the illusion of difference/antagonism. This Rancière calls the Tyranny of Consensus. We have predestined identities that we are expected to subscribe to—republican, democratic—which are the only banal differences we are allowed. This homogenizes groups and neglects anything truly disruptive, disparate or antagonistic. No ‘events’ happen, in the Badiou sense, as everything is cleanly moderated and presented scientifically. Consensus (which is false consensus) then is representation within postdemocracy and neglects the potentials of dissensus as a meaningful means of democracy.

For Rancière, instead, the miscount—exclusion—then is actually the antagonistic site of true politics today—the site where such systems and structures are called into question. The miscount has not disappeared; postdemocracy just pretends it isn’t there. Rancière’s conception

of politics then are the moments when the miscount forces its way into the *polis*, calling into question the entire dominant order.

Returning to the question of the refugee or migrant then: Rancière provides a nuanced view of migration, not as an apolitical problem to be solved by Human Rights, but a site where politics takes its true form. The validity of the postdemocratic system is called into question by the presence of the migrant. The stateless bring to light the inadequacies of the current state form as we know it. This is particularly the case when we see millions of refugees and undocumented migrants transgressing borders every year in situations such as the Syrian crisis. Rancière then provides a far more nuanced and subversive point of departure to understand politics, antagonism, resistance and struggle, which is not wholly based on class, for instance. An essentially anti-Universalist politics is revealed. Politics for Rancière, as shown by the refugee question, is that which calls Universal principles of ‘politics’ into question—and challenges postdemocracy, the State forms as we know them, from a far more transformative position.

In *Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?* Rancière (2004) examines mass migration and the movement of stateless people through a critique of state-based Greco-Roman political discourse, which is not equipped to deal with the ‘Universal Human Rights’ issue. There is one basic antinome at the heart of this question: those people who so greatly enact the need for a ‘human rights’ do not have a ‘duty bearer’ or a state to protect those rights. The very idea of a universal ‘human rights’ falls flat on its face in postdemocracy. It is a paradox. This antinome was actually first outlined by Hannah Arendt (1968). For Rancière, however, Arendt cannot see a way out of the antinome because her “archipolitical” concept of politics relies on the same concepts that enable the antinome—the Platonic political ideal, wherein everything has its place—a harmonious organization of people and tasks in society—e.g. Arendt’s distinction between Work, Labor and Action (nostalgia for the exclusivity of the *polis*). Someone who does not have a place, who is coming from the outside, in this model is inherently antithetical to the system and thus cannot be comprehended by it. Thus when Arendt tries to comprehend the issues of the refugee—who has no place in the State-based public *polis*, she cannot find a way out of the conundrum, through her own Greco-Roman discourse.

The same critique applies to Agamben’s notion of the State of Exception. *Zoe* or Bare Life, being those actors who are ‘beyond oppression’ (in Arendt’s terms), are those who are simply cast aside in the eyes of the State. In this framework, actors outside the *polis* have no relevancy to the State, have no rights, and are thus apolitical. Žižek falls into the same trap in

his reference to Agamben. For Žižek, unless we maintain an inclusive Communist Universalist project (of the emancipated Commons, communist inclusion), we will all soon become the excluded in the eyes of Capital and the State: subject-less, apolitical beings, simply *homo sacer* (2009a). Žižek's similarly limited political discourse falls short of understanding the political power of the miscount—those who call the system into question from the outside in multifarious ways.

In reference to Arendt, Rancière states, “her attempt to preserve the political from the contamination of private, social, apolitical life ... depopulates the political stage by sweeping aside its always-ambiguous actors,” (2004: 301-302). We might say the same for Agamben and Žižek. Rancière continues:

If you do this, of course, you must deny the reality of the struggles led outside of the frame of the national constitutional state and assume that the situation of the “merely” human person deprived of national rights is the implementation of the abstractedness of those rights. The conclusion is in fact a vicious circle. It merely reasserts the division between those who are worthy or not worthy of doing politics that was presupposed at the very beginning. (2004: 306)

For Rancière, to solve this we have to reset what ‘politics’ means from the beginning. For Rancière, Rights of Man are the “rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not” (2004). Rights are created in the act of demand: “the subject of rights is the subject, or more accurately the process of subjectivization, that bridges the interval between two forms of existence of those rights” (2004: 302). And this is where Rancière's enactment of dissensus comes in. The act of movement in a world system that continuously attempts to register, restrict, and channel movement represents the ability of those without Rights to demonstrate Rights through public action and thus demonstrate that they can actually enact those rights they are supposedly denied—by asserting the right of participation in a system that does not attempt to offer that option.

In this sense the refugee is a truly political subject—one who embodies the capacity for staging such dissensus, testing the power of the State, pushing it to its limits. The void between those with rights and the ‘rightless’ for Rancière is transgressed by the political actor.

Žižek recognizes the void as a site of politics, antagonism, etc., but only sees the void as one that should be sutured by class struggle. Similarly Arendt and Agamben present politics and rights as that which can only be gifted in relation to the State—through State recognition—

missing the fact that the act of demanding rights, by those who do not 'have them', is the upmost political act.

It is here that Rancière's work works well with Chantal Mouffe (1995), who insists that we must take the Enlightenment critique of theology and apply it to Enlightenment notions of transcendental rationalism. Mouffe brings an anti-essentialist/anti-rationalist approach to critical theory, through a critique of Habermas. For Mouffe, true democracy relies on pluralism and thus must refuse transcendentalist—or enlightenment—thought, which reduces subjectivity to an essential rationality, by calling into question human nature, universal reason and rational autonomous subjectivity. The same critique should be applied to Agamben and Arendt's reliance on the *polis*, as well as Žižek's transcendental split-subject and Universal class struggle. To understand the power of antagonism in global politics, we have to reject the Universal.

Conclusion

In *How to Begin from the Beginning*, Žižek states, "Western Marxism has also engaged in a constant search for others who could play the role of the revolutionary agent, as the understudy replacing the indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students and intellectuals, the excluded" (2009a). Žižek maintains that this search is fueled by the fear of having to actually do the work of the revolutionary Event. This leads Žižek down a path in which he attempts to universalize the Western split-subject, as the only political actor that matters. All work for the communist project should involve uniting and including all those who are willing to overcome class struggle. This path, as we have seen, leads Žižek into some troubling conclusions when his philosophy is applied.

Instead, a return to the antagonism that is otherwise promising in Žižek's work through Rancière is far more helpful for understanding the multitudinous antagonisms that present revolutionary change on the world scale today. The example of persistent migration, as a potentially political act that calls into question the structures of the post-democratic state with very material resistances, subversive movements, and pure antagonisms, can only be pushed aside in Žižek's narrow political praxis.

Žižek's transcendental subject, Universalism and State-centric politics maintain postdemocratic 'inclusion' through Universalism and actually neglect the sites where exclusion, or the miscount, present space where revolutionary change could happen. The desire for a Universal class struggle misses the point at which multiple struggles, for multiple reasons, can bring forth subversive events.

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