

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Ten, Number Three

## Review Essay: On the “Subject” of Zizek

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Slavoj Zizek replies wittily to the Bulgaria-based Professor of Film and Literature Sean Homer’s ‘To Begin at the Beginning Again: Zizek in the Former Yugoslavia’, in a response published in the same edition of the *Slavic Review* as the original.<sup>1</sup> In reaction to Homer’s essay, which mixes occasionally supportive paraphrases of Zizek’s position with mostly withering criticism, Zizek writes: “To put it with some irony, I do not even agree with Homer where Homer agrees with me”.<sup>2</sup> But Homer should perhaps take comfort from the thought that Zizek also does not agree with himself when he agrees with himself. This is his Hegelian method. That is, just as Homer can be saying the right thing for the wrong reasons, so that Zizek can see a difference between them when they appear to be in agreement, Zizek for his part cannot exactly say what he means. There is always a difference between Zizek and himself or Zizek and what he says. And it is this difference that *is* Zizek, that is what Zizek is saying, rather than anything he actually says.

Where might we see this difference between Homer and Zizek in Homer’s essay? This difference between Homer and Zizek even when Homer is saying the same thing as Zizek? (And perhaps at this point it becomes difficult to say whether Homer is saying the same thing as Zizek or not, which is to suggest that this is not ultimately the point, that it is not one’s ability accurately to paraphrase Zizek that makes one Zizekian.) Here, in fact, we might turn to something I once said (although in this context it is exactly the meaning of “something I once said” that is in question). But, again, the good news for Homer is that I too, like Zizek, don’t agree with myself even when I agree with myself. Or, to put it another way, insofar as I am no Zizek, I am only now, thanks to Homer, able not to agree with myself. It is only by reading myself through Homer’s reading of me that I am able to say that Homer’s reading of me is a

misreading. I am only able not to agree with him – and this may be true even of Zizek – because I first of all agree with him. To invert Zizek’s original witticism, then – although it perhaps come down to the same thing – I am able to agree with Homer even when he does not agree with me.

I am referring here to a passage in Homer’s text where he speaks of Zizek’s conception of the “Party”, we might say the institutionalisation of politics. One of Homer’s long-running critiques of Zizek – both in ‘To Begin from the Beginning Again’ and in the recent collection *Slavoj Zizek and Radical Politics* – is that Zizek is unable to make the leap into actual politics, unable to provide practical solutions to real world problems. To cite just one passage from his 2001 essay ‘It’s the Political Economy, Stupid!: On Zizek’s Marxism’ to get a general taste of Homer’s argument: “It is [Zizek’s] commitment to the Lacanian notion of the Real that rules out the possibility of giving his political project any positive content and thus reduces the political act to one of [merely theoretical] dissidence and opposition” (*RP*, 24). And this can be seen more specifically in Homer’s commentary on Zizek’s notion of the Party, which as I say operates by means of a quotation of and commentary on a Reader’s Guide on Zizek I once wrote. In order to indict Zizek for the lack of a concrete political position, Homer argues that he is the theorist of what I describe as a politics of the “not-all” (*RP*, 45). And that for me (and for Zizek) what is “radical” about his politics is his “refusal to take sides and his insistence on maintaining a position of undecidability in politics” (*RP*, 46). We can see this, suggests Homer, in particular in Zizek’s notion of the Party, which is precisely only a “formal” category and can never be given definitive or even really temporary shape. Citing me, he writes:

‘The Party *formalises* the Revolution in the sense that it institutionalises it, gives it a structure, breaks with the ideology of “spontaneism” and “popular sentiment”... But at the same time as this “immanence”, there is also something else to be seen. It is to think that, despite the emphasis on the actual practice of Lenin, his institutionalisation of Marx, there is nevertheless a certain “Lenin” beyond any such “Leninism”. That is, if the destiny of Marxism is to be institutionalised, it is also to be what would render this forever incomplete’. Zizek’s language of the Party is ‘precise’, but we do not have to worry about the actualisation of the Party, insofar as it can never be immanently present (*RP*, 45).

This is consistent for Homer with other moments of Zizek’s work, such as his ambivalence as to whether or not to bomb Serbian forces during the siege of Kosovo (*RP*, 19), the shifting of his support from one ex-Yugoslav republic to another (*RP*, 37), his approval of the Greek opposition party Syriza’s acceptance of the European Union’s bailout conditions for Greece as though there were no alternative (*RP*, 63-4) and his inability to put forward any positive political program after an initial negative act, as opposed to Badiou (*RP*, 80-1). And it leads for Homer to the thought that such notions as “Party”, “class struggle” and “revolution” become “empty signifiers” (*RP*, 46) in Zizek’s work, undefined rallying calls in which we are meant to recognise ourselves in a manner Zizek has analysed with regard to other ideological systems. That is to say, far from being “radical” – and here, of course, Homer disagrees with both Zizek and the majority of his commentators – these concepts hide the *lack* of any concrete political program. A political “Party” conceived of in the way Zizek apparently does – and this would apply equally to “class struggle” and “revolution” – would operate as a merely “formal” (*RP*, 45) abstraction, leading to the failure of any left-wing politics or even to a conservative politics. (And at other moments of *Slavoj*

*Zizek and Radical Politics* Homes does indeed seek to locate instances of Zizek in fact being politically conservative, such as his support for the ethnic partitioning of the ex-Yugoslavia (*RP*, 7-8), his advocacy of a “retaliatory violence” (*RP*, 86) that leads to a reciprocal right-wing racism and finally his “extraordinary and appalling” (*RP*, 44) paragraph apparently approving of the deportation of a Roma family in Slovenia due to the concerns of the local population.)

But before we get ahead of ourselves, it is at this point, to borrow a phrase from Zizek, that I do not agree with Homer even when he agrees with me, which as we earlier signalled is perhaps only a symptom of the fact that at this point I do not entirely agree with myself even when I agree with me. For there is an important phrase or concept in the passage above that Homer elides or brushes over in his summary: “at the same time”. As he quotes it: “But at the same time as this ‘immanence’, there is also something else to be seen”. Although undoubtedly I did not make this clear at the time – as evidenced by Homer misunderstanding it and me not realising what I had written until Homer misunderstood it – this does *not* simply mean that the Party does not have to be actualised, insofar as it can never be made “immanently present”. Rather, it is to say that the Party is not realised, remains “formal”, only in and through being realised. Zizek is not advocating that the Party is something best left empty and not attempted to be made actual. On the contrary, what he is saying – and this is that formality he is talking about – is that it is subsequently grasped as empty and unrealisable only through the attempt to bring it about. And that the Party retains its power as a revolutionary concept not through keeping it abstract, like some idea that can never be made concrete, but through the fact that it incites the attempts to fulfil it, each of which attempts to make up for the failure before, and this from the very beginning.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, we can understand “Party” and any of those other terms Zizek uses in relation to radical politics as an empty or even a master signifier. But – and this is Zizek’s real ideological critique or decoding – “Party” also allows us to think this ideologically unifying signifier. It is in this way that “Party”, if it is an empty signifier, also reflects upon what produces this signifier, attempts to go beyond the transference, subjectivisation, in short, subjugation – even if in terms of a recognisable left-wing politics – that goes along with it. This is why “Party”, if always Communist or Leninist, also represents, in words of Zizek that Homer quotes at times almost derisively, a certain “Leninism beyond Lenin” (*RP*, 51). It is, to go back to that passage Homer cites earlier, what might be meant by Zizek’s thinking of Party as a “not-all”. Rather than an empty master signifier (an exception to the universal), Party is what Zizek calls a “concrete universal”, although again necessarily part of its status as a not-all concrete universal is that it can only be thought through or as a master signifier, the failure of the master signifier.

How so? To state again my difference from Homer’s paraphrase of what I think I (and Zizek) say. In terms of Party – and class struggle and revolution – it is not merely a matter of Zizek not attempting to realise it or say what it is. It is not something that should be kept empty and never attempted to be actualised. Rather – and this once more is the point of that “at the same time” – it is that every attempt to say what it is fails, that it is empty at the same time as it is filled, that it is empty insofar as it is filled. And this *is* Party, this *is* class struggle, this *is* revolution: at once what we always speak of and the fact that we always fail to speak of it. It is why we can say that Party and class struggle and revolution have not yet come about (and, within our current socio-political configuration, never will): not because they are not given, but

because every attempt to say what they are fails, fails exactly insofar as another is able to come along and in some sense legitimately contest its ability to speak for all of what is. Party and class struggle and revolution are endlessly contested, not as some neutral term that all of the various attempts to say what they are have in common or some quality that all of these attempts share but that can be claimed by none of them. Rather, Party is only what allows us to remark that there *is* a contest between these various attempts to say what it is, which does not remain outside of them and is entirely claimed by each of them. Party is not simply something that exists in advance that various parties aspire towards but always fall short of. It also exists only in retrospect as what allows us to realise that we have once again failed to say what it is. We necessarily set out to say what some Party is in advance, but the Party we leave behind is what allows us (or more likely someone else) to realise that we have once again failed to say what Party is.

It is in this sense that we must understand the hegemonic power of the master signifier. It is indicated by the fact both that it is always being spoken of and that it is never spoken of, but is what secretly determines the whole field, lying somewhere behind it. And that these are the same: that to speak of class is not (properly) to speak of class. Or to put it another way – and here the whole idea of the “unmasking” of ideology in Žižek – class, if it is always being spoken of, is also what is excluded to allow itself to be spoken of. Class, if it is a master signifier that is always being claimed, is also a master signifier – yes, in something like an “empty” sense – that is that place from where one speaks of class. This is why the proper ideological analysis in Žižek is not the search for some “inner meaning” (*DB*, 18) behind the externality of the act (and again, this is not Party, class struggle and revolution as master signifiers in the sense he means). On the contrary, we would almost want to say that there is nothing behind what is, that these concepts are true, effectively make the world over in their image, but we can also ask from *where* they are spoken. Once more, Party and class are always being spoken of – and, of course, exist only in being spoken of (Žižek’s “Party”, even if “empty”, is also an effort to speak of it, is not any final truth of the Party, though it might seek to be, but merely another attempt to claim this finality). But Party, if it is always being spoken of, is also what allows us to speak of how there has been a series of attempts to speak of it, and how each has inevitably fallen short. “Party” is just what allows us to speak of every attempt to speak of it as a failure. Party just *is* this failure.

And it is *this* that Žižek means when he speaks of class struggle as a “concrete universal” in his recent *Against the Double Blackmail*.<sup>4</sup> It is not some empty master signifier on the horizon of all other struggles in making them equivalent, but that which “overdetermines” them in accounting for their “‘inconsistent’ plurality” just as they are. As Žižek writes in the chapter ‘From the Culture Wars to Class Struggle’ of *Double Blackmail*: “[Overdetermination] does not mean that class struggle is the ultimate referent and horizon of all other struggles. It means that class struggle is the structuring principle that allows us to account for the very ‘inconsistent’ plurality of ways in which other antagonisms can be articulated” (*DB*, 61). And it is this again that we might mean by the difference between Party and class struggle as (masculine) exceptions allowing a universality and Party and class struggle as (feminine) not-all. They are not some “inner meaning” or abstract “formalism”, as Homer implies, but what at once is always included and always excluded. They are excluded in being included, or what is excluded to allow them to be included. As Žižek writes of the way in which it is class that allows us to discern and indeed choose between different kinds of feminism: “Class struggle is here the ‘concrete

universality' in the strict Hegelian sense. In relating to its otherness (other antagonisms), it relates to itself, which is to say that it (over-)determines the way it relates to other struggles" (*DB*, 61). And here – perhaps a little controversially – we would like to begin to think that it is the feminine economy of the not-all that *allows* the masculine economy of the universal and its exception. That class as an empty master signifier is able to be represented only insofar as class as concrete universal is left out. Class as included only stands in for class as excluded – although at the same time class as not-all concrete universality can only ever be seen as a series of exceptional, that is, failed, master signifiers.

It is at this point that we might turn to Žižek's political choices, which are ultimately the subject of Homer's book. In fact, Homer does not strictly deny that Žižek makes real political choices, seeks to build an actual politics of the Party. However, again citing or at least paraphrasing me, he says that these can only be "historically specific and contextually determined" (*RP*, 46). By which he means – consistent with his understanding of Party and class struggle in Žižek as empty signifiers – that they can only be contingent and essentially arbitrary interventions, with no underlying principle or purpose justifying or explaining them. In effect, there can be no connection between Party as a merely "formal" principle and any specific political choices. For Žižek, all political choices must in principle be unprincipled. His idea of Party *is* this assertion of politics as arbitrary or contingent. And this is, indeed, close to being true. All political choices are, in some sense, contingent or historically determined. And because our options are not made by but are given to us, they cannot be decided following some unswerving principle in advance. But this is not in no relation to the Party or is not to keep the Party outside of any decision-making. Rather, the Party is empty *because of* these decisions. It is not any kind of contradiction that has to be explained, but each implies the other. Žižek's conception of the Party is empty *and* his political decisions are always historically specific and contextually determined. Or even, to state the relationship more closely, the effect of Žižek's decisions is to show that the Party is empty and these decisions can be made only because the Party is empty.<sup>5</sup>

It is with this in mind that we might go into the specifics of Žižek's actual political decisions and the second part of Homer's critique of Žižek. The first, as we have seen, is that there is no coherent principle determining Žižek's decision-making. On the one hand, there is a series of signifiers that must be kept empty (Party, class struggle, revolution). On the other, there is a series of merely "historically specific" and "contingently determined" political choices. The second criticism is that, in a number of specific political circumstances, Žižek has in fact made the *wrong* decision, taken the *wrong* side. And, of course, the two are connected. It is *because* Žižek has no "coherent world view" (*RP*, 46) that he makes these wrong decisions. It is *because* Žižek possesses no "identifiable program or procedure" (*RP*, 46) – like an "orthodox" (*RP*, 21) Marxism – that his actual political decisions are subject to contingent factors: his own personal pathology, the particular circumstances of his background, a series of unexamined prejudices and preconceptions and so on. Thus, for example, with regard to the Balkans, Žižek can be seen to be advocating a variety of "conservative political positions" (*RP*, 3), including the pro-NATO bombing of Serbia (*RP*, 47). With regard to Greece, he continued to support the once-radical Syriza party even after it conducted a U-turn on its policies and decided to accept an EU bailout, which in effect meant debt was transferred from private banks to the Greek state (*RP*, 62). And, perhaps most controversially, or at least most currently, with the enormous number of refugees from Africa and the Middle East seeking to

enter Europe, Zizek was a member of Slovenia's Liberal Democracy Party that in the early 1990s passed a series of "anti-immigrant laws" (*RP*, 43), as well as writing that "appalling paragraph" advocating the resettling of a Roma family that would be indiscernible from such right-wing populists as Nicolas Sarkozy (*RP*, 44).<sup>6</sup>

But it is here that Zizek's real "method" emerges. It is with these real-world situations that the thinking of Party, class struggle and revolution as "concrete universals" and not empty signifiers makes a difference. To take the first of Homer's examples. Homer is very critical of Zizek's stance on the so-called Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. A number of the essays that make up *Slavoj Zizek and Radical Politics* address it. Indeed, we might even say that the logic of the first part of Homer's book, 'Zizek in the Balkans', sets out the problem, while the second part, 'Radicalising Zizek', in which he compares Zizek unfavourably to Badiou, offers something of a solution. The first criticism of Zizek on the Balkans that Homer makes is that for particular and analysable reasons Zizek has changed his opinions regarding them. In the opening essay of the book, 'It's the Political Economy, Stupid!', he takes us through the way that in 1999 Zizek reversed his stance on the NATO bombing of the Serbian forces that were at the time besieging Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia. In the essay 'Against the Double Blackmail', published in the influential Marxist journal *New Left Review*, Zizek appeared to be against both the NATO bombing and Milosevic, advocating a rejection of both alternatives, while in an earlier version of the essay that circulated on the internet Zizek appears to advocate the bombing of Milosevic's besieging forces. As Homer writes, citing the sentence from the original version of the essay that Zizek chose to leave out: "So, precisely as a Leftist, my answer to the dilemma "Bomb or not?" is: not yet ENOUGH bombs, and they are TOO LATE'. Yet, this sentence is strangely self-cancelling. What is the point of sending in more bombs if they will be too late anyway? For Zizek, therefore, the answer to the dilemma 'bomb or not?' is apparently 'yes and no!'" (*RP*, 19). The second criticism Homer makes – and it perhaps comes down to the same thing – is that Zizek simply has no political position on the Balkans. Ultimately – and his shifting of position on the issue is a sign of this – he does not want or is not able to make a decision concerning them. For Zizek, as we have seen before, the aim of philosophy is to not make decisions, to realise that all decisions are wrong. (This again is what it would mean to keep the Party empty.) As Homer writes in the 'Preface' to *Slavoj Zizek and Radical Politics*: "The ultimate achievement of psychoanalysis has been to outline the contours of a 'negativity', a disruptive force that undermines all collective projects... For many Zizekians, it is this recognition of the parallax gap and Zizek's steadfast refusal to offer a concrete alternative that is the mark of his radicalism" (*RP*, xiii-xiv).

However, the clinching case of both Zizek's shifting decision-making and his refusal to make decisions is undoubtedly his cutting of the lines "So, precisely as a Leftist, my answer to the dilemma 'Bomb or not?' is: not yet ENOUGH bombs, and they are TOO LATE" from the version of 'Against the Double Blackmail' published in *New Left Review* as opposed to the one mounted earlier online. For Homer, Zizek's decision to omit these lines indicates at once that he tailors his message to suit different audiences – willing to be seen as anti-Milosevic for a potentially local audience online and refusing to be seen as simply pro-NATO for the international audience of *New Left Review* – and the strangely "self-cancelling nature" of Zizek's solution, for again "what is the point of sending in more bombs if they will be too late anyway? For Zizek, therefore, the answer to the dilemma 'bomb or not?' is apparently 'yes and no!'" And yet, for all of Homer's accusation of Zizek's self-contradiction, it is also *Homer* who argues against himself and allows himself to ignore or push to one side

what he already knows. For, insofar as Zizek's suggestion is self-cancelling, how could its inclusion in the internet version make his essay any more nationalistic? And, indeed, Homer explicitly admits that, in order to make this reading, one would have to overlook the obvious meaning of Zizek's words in attributing his interpretation to some supposedly unsophisticated reader who is unable to grasp Zizek's intended message: "That is to say, there is a marked discrepancy between a sophisticated Lacanian understanding – that no amount of bombs at whatever time would be enough – and what we can call a naive or surface reading, which would suggest that NATO should have gone in *harder* and *sooner*" (RP, 19).

In fact, what is at stake here is the Lacanian notion of the "forced choice", which Homer alludes to at several points throughout *Slavoj Zizek and Radical Politics*. But the basis of the forced choice – the reason it strikes us as forced – is that it is also a *false* choice, both choices are unsatisfactory. Or, more precisely – and here again we return to Homer's accusation or observation that Zizek wants to keep such master signifiers as Party empty, that his political stance entails a simple refusal of choice – this forced choice at once forces choice and retrospectively reveals it as a false choice. It is in this sense that we must understand Zizek's remark with regard to Milosevic that there are "not yet enough bombs" and they are "too late". For "not yet enough" and "too late" imply both that we must act sooner and do more and that in retrospect we realise we were too late and did not do enough. And it is in *this* sense that we must understand Zizek's invocation of false choice throughout *Against the Double Blackmail*: the false choice between terrorism and anti-terrorism (DB, 88), the humanist identification with refugees and the racist rejection of refugees (DB, 7-8), the defence of Western values and the rejection of Western values (DB, 18-19), Islam and the critique of Islam (DB, 20-1). For ultimately this necessity of choice reveals that the existing range of choices is not-all, that although there is not a simple exception the existing choices do not occupy the entire field. That is to say, although we always do have to make a choice (life in Lacan's example,<sup>7</sup> to support the refugees in Zizek's), and although until the entire ideological field is transformed (and perhaps never) we can never make the right choice, we can also know that the choices we are making are not the best or only ones, indicated by the very fact that they keep on having to be made.

Can we say this again more slowly in order to bring out some of the complexities of Zizek's position? Zizek at various points in his work urges us not to choose, to realise that the existing choices do not cover all the possible options: "The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no discernible alternative" (DB, 108). But this does not mean that we are simply not to choose or even that the ultimate political achievement is not any longer to have to choose. In fact, Zizek always *does* choose and even not to choose is in a way to choose, or to put it another way in our current socio-political set up we already have effectively chosen or someone has already chosen for us. However, we choose risking that it is not the right choice, or we choose to reveal that it was not the right choice. We are always only mistaken, but we are able to see it as mistaken only because of the right empty choice, which we fail to choose each time. The right choice is realised only by our ability to say that we always make the wrong choice, which forces us to choose again, only for us once again to realise that it was the wrong choice.<sup>8</sup> And it is *this* that Zizek means when he lays out his political strategy in *Against the Double Blackmail* in a manner that can look suspiciously like liberal compromise or progressivism: "The political consequences of the paradox [we might say the fact that we never get to make the choice we want] is the properly dialectical

tension between long-term strategy and short-term alliances: although in the long term the very success of the radical-emancipatory struggle depends on mobilising the lower classes that are today often in thrall to fundamentalist populism, one should have no problems with concluding short-term alliances with egalitarian liberals as part of anti-sexist and anti-racist struggles (*DB*, 62-3). For here this “long-term” strategy is not simply undecided or what must remain empty, but at once is what forces us to make decisions and what can be thought only through these “short-term” alliances. The “long-term” would not exist outside of the “short-term” – or, to put it otherwise, the “long-term” is revealed to be (from the perspective of the “long-term”) merely a series of “short-term” alliances.

But it is here again that the real complexity of what Žižek is saying arises. As we have suggested, we must always choose. Non-choice, the fact that we have no real choice, can only be realised through the failure of choice. It can never be grasped as such, but is only that empty place from where we can remark the failure of choice, which forces us to choose again. (And, similarly, “long-term strategy” can never be grasped as such, but only through the repeated failure of “short-term alliances”.) And yet, if we can somehow know this – and Žižek can state the rule – in advance, why does it not lead to a certain “cynicism”? Why, if we know that each choice is wrong, if our short-term alliances are merely short-term, would we not make them or make them without our full commitment? But exactly Žižek’s Hegelian point here is that there is no abstract or “formal” knowledge in this sense, that knowledge is a kind of *choice*, that there is no knowledge without *choice*. To restate the distinction between “long-term strategy” and “short-term alliances” in terms of that distinction between “anticipatory” and “compensatory” utopias that Homer turns towards at the end of his book (*RP*, 103), we might say that, although there are only “compensatory” utopias, specific imaginings or utopias that arise in response to the failure of utopias before, this failure can be realised and these utopias can be imagined only from the point of view of an “anticipatory” utopia, just as this “anticipatory” utopia can only be retrospectively realised as or as a result of the failure of these “compensatory” utopias.

It is this remarking of what is from an empty point that is the proper task of philosophy. Adrian Johnston is right – in a statement Homer quotes several times derisively, as though it is obviously incorrect and merely a way of justifying Žižek’s reactionary politics and private pathologies – when he says that “non-textual interventions and socio-political situations are long forgotten by everyone save for a few specialist intellectual historians and biographers” (*RP*, 3, 41). But what exactly does it mean? It means, to return to what Žižek said earlier about ideological analysis, that it is not a matter of looking for some “deeper meaning” or “message hidden” behind things, as though there were some obscure truth awaiting its decryption at the hands of the philosopher. But equally it is not simply proposing an alternative to what is, challenging the facts of the situation, as though one were dividing the world up into two competing hypotheses, which is Homer’s dare I say it English “empirical” or even “common sense” approach, with its occasional allusions to his own practical experience on marches and in radical political organisations (*RP*, 5-6, 49). On the contrary, the aim of philosophy is to *double* things, to introduce a division not between the surface and what lies behind it, but between the surface and itself. What philosophy does is acknowledge that what is is all that there is, but it is so only for a completely different reason than the one it understands itself. Again, we must understand this condition of possibility not as something behind what is, a transcendental that must be kept empty, an exception of some kind – this is that



Kantian critique that Žižek after Hegel rejects – but as things themselves, which renders what is “not-all”. Things are split from themselves not because their condition of possibility is somewhere else behind them, but because it is in the things it makes possible itself.

It is something like this that we see played out in Žižek’s approach to politics. Once again, it is not a matter of searching for the “inner meaning” of what people do or say, as though there is something hidden or behind them, but – and this is the true Hegelian-Lacanian method – of asking *why* they do it. What they do or say is all they do or say, there is no other meaning to it, but it is split by the reason it is done or said, or what allows it to be done or said. It is this, for example, that is at stake in Žižek’s treatment of fundamentalist terrorism. He does not attempt to explain it in the sense of providing some other explanation for it, which inevitably has the effect of offering an excuse for it, with the proposed reason functioning as a kind of exception to the symbolic order.<sup>9</sup> Rather, as Žižek keeps on insisting, there is no excuse for terrorist acts. There is nothing else to be said about them and they must be absolutely condemned. But then he asks how this terrorism is possible, where is it done or said from? And it is at this point that Žižek speaks of its equivalent or counterpart, which is ultimately world capitalism: “Of course, the atrocities [in Paris in November 2015] should be unconditionally condemned, but – this ‘but’ doesn’t usher in any mitigating circumstances; there can be none – but it is just that they need to be really condemned... Now is the time to start raising unpleasant questions: how is it possible for the Islamic State to exist, to survive? We all know, in spite of the formal condemnation and rejection from all sides, there are forces and states that not only tolerate it, but help it” (*DB*, 2-3). But, again, this equivalent or counterpart is precisely chosen: it is not some other evil, equally bad, which would somehow excuse or justify terrorism. It is not some empty prediction awaiting its prophetic fulfilment, but is itself just this terrorism, able to be seen only through it. The two are equivalents or counterparts not in the sense that they divide up the world between them, each operating as a kind of “deeper” instance of the other, as that exception that renders it universal, but each is what means that the other is all that there is or is that “not-all” that ensures there are no excuses or exceptions. There is only the terrorist act, but only because of capitalism. There is only capitalism, but only because of the terrorist act.

But then the question that must be answered is: from where is this equivalence remarked? In fact, what both terrorism and the world capitalist order stand in for, what both are attempted solutions to, is *class struggle*. It is class struggle, as Žižek says, that “overdetermines” all of the other struggles and allows us to put them into a general “chain of equivalences”. But seen in this way “terrorism” and “capitalism” are not master signifiers attempting to quilt the whole ideological field, with capitalism (or secular Western modernity) and terrorism (or anti-secular Islam) as those exceptions that justify them, which is how they see themselves. Rather, as we say, true philosophical critique is to view each as equivalent insofar as each is total, in responding to and standing in for class struggle. It is class struggle that allows each to quilt the entire ideological field, but it is also class struggle that means that neither is simply all or represents a definitive solution, that there is a place (called in our ideological configuration “capitalism” and “terrorism”) from where we can remark each and thereby grasp it as not-all. But, of course, this is also to say that class struggle itself is never seen as such but only through those others, that class struggle is not some empty position outside of the various “equivalences” that stand in for it, but only ever one of them. Which is also to say that class struggle, if it splits others –

is that place from where they are spoken – is also split from itself, can never be spoken of except from a place that turns out to be spoken from somewhere else. That is, class struggle, as soon as it is spoken of, turns out to be merely another in that general “chain of equivalences” it allows us to see as equivalent. And class struggle is only this splitting of things from themselves, this doubling of the world by the place from where it is spoken.

And it is this split that explains how Žižek can argue, apparently inconsistently or with either a conscious or unconscious Western bias, for “universal” Western values against both Islamic terrorism and anti-immigrant racism: “In short, critics of Eurocentrism are rejecting Western cultural values at the very moment when, critically reinterpreted, many of them – egalitarianism, fundamental human rights, the welfare state, to name a few – can serve as a weapon against capitalist globalisation” (*DB*, 19). But the point here is that it is not “Western” values in anything like the sense of some “global solidarity” (*DB*, 90), in which we simply oppose terrorism or identify with asylum seekers as fellow human beings, as though we stand for finally identifiable values or even that asylum seekers themselves are one homogenous whole. It is not any “Western” or even “European” tradition or set of values that would allow us properly to oppose one and identify with the other. Rather, the Enlightenment revolution that Žižek defends and speaks in the name of is only a kind of endless self-splitting, the permanent contestation of all positive values from that empty point – the negative “subject” – from where they are spoken. It is not in terms of any Imaginary identification between two wholes that we would find any “solidarity” with refugees, but only insofar as both we and refugees are split, are both given our identity from somewhere else. The “West” (like, in fact, the stateless refugee) is only a word for this “concrete universality”, which moreover is not simply some empty point but does not exist outside of the specific cultures and peoples in which it has occurred. Again, as Žižek writes, understanding any identification between the West and refugees as necessarily something of a forced choice within our currently existing political circumstances and not a true “equivalence” between them: “One should therefore cut the link between refugees and humanitarian empathy... We should, rather, help them because it is our ethical duty to do so, because we cannot not do it if we want to remain decent people, but without any of the sentimentalism that breaks down the moment we realise that most of the refugees are not ‘people like us’ (not because they are foreign, but because we ourselves are not ‘people like us’)” (*DB*, 81-2).

It is this doubling or splitting that is Žižek’s intellectual method, as we have tried to show. It is demonstrated in his classic argumentative method, noted by any number of commentators, in which in a first move he outlines a usual “commonsense” position. Then, at some point in his argument, in that anti-commonsensual provocation for which he is known, he will inevitably expostulate: “But is it not exactly the opposite?” But, finally, in a reversal of this reversal that is not so frequently noted, he will return to that first “commonsense” position, but this now seen in a completely different way, necessarily perceived not directly or straightforwardly as it used to be, but only through the lens of that second, as the alternative to or rejection of that second. And it is just this doubling or change of context, which is not a form of empirical disputation or historical explanation, that Žižek understands by thought or philosophy. It is not to argue either for or against something but to provide some other ground for it. It is Kant’s “transcendental critique” – hence the allusion to the “ethical” in that passage above – but with Hegel’s twist added to it: that this “transcendental” is not some noumenal other space we must take into account

knowing we cannot get there, but something that is to be found amongst things themselves and only to be seen in terms of them. And it is to be attained not through some abstract process of logical reflection that must be separated from any act in the world, but is only to be realised through our acts, which if they always fall short of it also leap over it, so that it can be seen only in retrospect, as a consequences of them.

But all of this imposes certain conditions upon the critic wishing to argue against Zizek, at least if they want to do so in terms that Zizek himself would recognise. Homer spends a good deal of time in his book appealing empirically against Zizek, contesting him on the level of fact, or arguing that he is inconsistent or unprincipled in the decisions he makes insofar as he can change sides, take opposite sides or even two sides at once with regard to the real-world issues he addresses. But, as even Homer recognises at times, this is not really to touch Zizek, it being in Johnston's words only of interest to a "few specialist intellectual historians and biographers". It is not enough to accuse Zizek of taking different sides in an argument or even both at once, insofar as Zizek consistently makes the point that both sides within our current socio-political configuration are the same. Equally, it is not enough to accuse Zizek of both choosing and not choosing sides, insofar as he again argues that to choose sides is not to choose and not to choose is to choose. Rather, as Homer himself acknowledges at times, the only proper mode of argument is to read Zizek against Zizek or Zizek beyond Zizek (*RP*, 60). Which is to suggest that Zizek is not properly applying his own method, or that Zizek is unable entirely to apply his own method, that he must necessarily fall short. In a way, it is to *double* Zizek, to locate that empty point from where he speaks, which is also to be seen only through Zizek. To put it otherwise, the real test of Zizek is not that he picks one side and then the other or that he both chooses and does not choose. On the contrary, we must judge Zizek precisely to the extent that he *does* show us that to pick one side *is* to pick another, that to choose is *not* to choose. Put simply, the real test of Zizek is how well he is able to indicate through what he *does* choose what *cannot* be chosen.<sup>10</sup>

We find a similar ambivalence and even shifting of sides in other critics on Zizek. The American theological scholar Adam Kotsko has also written a series of commentaries on Zizek's writings on the refugee crisis in Europe. In the first of these, Kotsko offers a defence of Zizek's position, making the point that for Zizek it is a matter not of directly arguing against one's opponent, insofar as this assumes a "shared frame of reference", but of a kind of "frame-shifting" that changes the terms of the argument itself.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Kotsko contends, those who accuse Zizek of being "racist" are wrong, insofar as he is neither simply agreeing nor, indeed, disagreeing with racists, but rather asking *why* they are saying what they are saying, even in a manner unknown to themselves: "Zizek says essentially: yes, they are expressing legitimate concerns, but not the ones they think they're expressing" ('HR'). Here Kotsko correctly grasps that the real issue is that what Zizek is saying is "arguable" ('HRR'), in the sense that what he is suggesting is neither right or wrong, but opens up an undecidability, the possibility that things are not simply what they appear to be (but, equally, that we can "argue" against Zizek only in his own terms, by bringing about something similar with regard to his own work): "The same could be said of Zizek's work as a whole: the point isn't so much to learn about a topic as to be jolted into a new (and, yes, disturbing) perspective on the familiar" ('HR'). But – in a similar way to Homer's ambivalence towards Zizek, in which he first agrees and then disagrees with him – Kotsko then argues *against* Zizek, suggesting that in the end his positions are too much like the racism he opposes, or risk being seen as such by readers who do not

know, like Kotsko, Zizek's true beliefs. As he writes of Zizek in a blog post devoted to the topic, 'Would Not the Most Radical Political Intervention for Zizek be Precisely to STOP?!': "[Zizek's opinions] do not provoke discussion of the actual issues at hand, but instead turn all attention to how we are to assess Slavoj Zizek the individual – is he a Eurocentric Islamophobic racist?"

Kotsko's rather hubristic conclusion – advocating the one thing that is strictly impossible in any properly dialectical argument – is that Zizek should simply "stop": "He's not good at it. Some readers are still making really heroic efforts to construe his political columns positively, but if you need a supporter to write a 2000 + word defence of your pithy political intervention – indeed, if most readers construe it as meaning the opposite of what you intended – then you are doing it wrong" ('S?!'). But here, it could be suggested, first, it is Kotsko who is falsely ideological in supposing, in an interpassive way, some hypothetical naïve reader who is unable to understand what Zizek is saying and, second, it is Kotsko himself who is this reader in seemingly forgetting what he had earlier said in Zizek's defence. That is to say, while in an earlier posting, 'How to Read Zizek on the Refugee Crisis', Kotsko had argued that when Zizek suggests that anti-immigrant racists have a point it is "not the point they think they have" and that it is only those "ostensibly Left-wing parties", ie, Democratic Liberal Parties in Western democracies, who concede to the Right for this reason, now he is suggesting that it is *Zizek himself* who makes this concession. Claiming to be paraphrasing Zizek, Kotsko writes in his post 'Zizek and Shame': "Yet when we look at [Zizek's] actual recommendations, they are anything but bold – we should admit that the racist reactionaries 'have a point', for instance, which is exactly the kind of centrist gesture that he critiqued in earlier works like *Tarrying with the Negative*". Indeed, beyond attributing to Zizek the very point that he is attempting to undermine, it is arguably *Kotsko himself* who, beyond any paraphrase of Zizek, appears to endorse the notion of common "values" that operate as a justification both for the pathetic human identification with refugees and the racist defence of particular lifestyles against refugees. In his summary of Zizek on anti-immigrant racism, Kotsko writes: "I will admit that, broadly speaking, there are important differences that may make it difficult for people of [Western and Islamic] cultures to live together in close quarters. I hope everyone would be better than that, but people are people" ('HRR'). But "people are people" is exactly *not* what Zizek is saying or certainly not where he leaves it. Rather, Zizek's position – as seen in his earlier reminder that "we ourselves are not 'people like us'" – is that people are not simply people, nothing is anything without also being (thought from) something else.

It is not that Kotsko is obviously wrong or that he cannot be critical of Zizek. But, if Zizek ever says something like "people are people", it is only in the sense in which he says something like "law is law", in which the second occurrence is not a tautology but stands in for that "crime" or "outlaw" that allows the first to be stated.<sup>12</sup> And it is in this sense that "people", like any other political choice, is not self-identical but split from itself. It is not that we cannot choose something like the "people" – as Kotsko writes, "one must take sides in order to have access to the truth" ('HR') – but that the choice we make must also be able to show that it is not the right choice, to point towards that for which the choice stands in. It is for this reason that at various points in *Against the Double Blackmail* Zizek can appear to be supporting Islamic terrorism, refugees, right-wing racists and liberal anti-racists. But it is also why Zizek supports none of them as such. And it is undoubtedly this that can lead to frustration and incomprehension, not only from those supposedly ordinary readers hypothesised by Homer and Kotsko, but even for Homer and Kotsko themselves (and, inevitably, as

some future reader will show, me).<sup>13</sup> However, it is the very ability to say that others, including Žižek, have got it wrong, that we have not yet made the right choice, that is the critical possibility that Žižek unleashes by his thought. And that in a way we will never get right. Because from where is this accusation made each time? From the place of a “negative” (*RP*, 70), a negative that is not simply negative but indicated only by the positive, by the mistakes of positive thought. Everything that Žižek says, as Homer and Kotsko make clear, is wrong, mistaken, inconsistent, arbitrary. But that place from where he speaks and the fact that he keeps on speaking and does not “shut up”, is right. It is just that – like a terrorist, a refugee, a right-wing racist and a liberal anti-racist – he does not know what he is saying. Or perhaps even – this being the ideological twist Žižek analyses – he does know what he is saying – that he is still not making the right choices – and still he keeps on saying it. But for us to know this we have to listen and read carefully.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sean Homer, ‘To Begin at the Beginning Again: Žižek in the Former Yugoslavia’. Reprinted as ‘To Begin at the Beginning Again: Žižek in Yugoslavia’, in *Slavoj Žižek and Radical Politics*. All further references to Homer’s book will be indicated by the initials *RP* in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Reply’, p. 771.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, as we will see, this “at the same time” more has the sense of at once before and after. Our attempt to make up for the failure of the Party leads to the failure we attempt to make up. In this sense, it resembles the logic of the Lacanian “subject”, whose attempt “retrospectively to fill the gap sustains and generates the gap itself” (*RB*, 76).

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*, p. 60. All further references to this book will be indicated by the initials *DB* in the main text.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between Party and decision here is complex, insofar as it cannot be one of explanation or justification. We might compare it to the Lacanian conception of “cause”, which is always missing or operates as a “gap” between things. See on this Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 21-3.

<sup>6</sup> Although it is not our intention to “defend” Žižek here – because that is not how thought works – it must be said that Žižek is not simply offering a “concrete solution” to a “very real problem” by agreeing that the Roma should have been moved on, as Homer implies (*RP*, 44). Rather, if we read the original passage in question, we will see that Žižek approves neither of moving the Roma on nor of not moving the Roma on, in suggesting that there is *no* “concrete solution” to a “very *unreal* problem”.

<sup>7</sup> *The Four Fundamentals*, p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> This is why Melville’s *Bartleby* does not merely not choose but opens up that space from where choice is made. His is not so much a refusal as a refusal of refusal: he does “not prefer to” but “prefers not to”. This is why Žižek will later characterise our relationship to refugees in terms of a double negative: “We should, rather, help them... because we cannot not do it if we want to remain decent people” (*DB*, 82).

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if we were to be critical of any aspect of Žižek’s analysis in *Against the Double Blackmail*, it would be his treatment of the incident in which newly arrived refugees sexually assaulted women at Cologne train station during New Year’s Eve celebrations in 2015. Žižek’s adducing of a tradition of the “carnavalesque” going all the way back to the so-called “Great Cat Massacres” of the 1730s comes suspiciously close to a “historical” explanation or genealogy, in other words, a real attempt at explanation and justification.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, contra Homer, the true critique of Žižek is not that his choices are empty but that they are not *empty enough*, that the choices he makes do not allow us to think that empty place from where they are made. Indeed, it is inevitable not that Žižek’s concrete examples are not concrete enough but that they are always too concrete, too determined by the ideological system he opposes. Another way of putting this is that we must ask not merely whether Žižek’s (or anybody else’s) choices help us to think what to do now but also *what to do next*, after they have proven insufficient.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Kotsko, ‘How to Read Žižek’. All further references to this essay will be indicated by the initials ‘HR’ in the main text. Similarly all further references to the follow-up postings ‘How to Read Žižek on the Refugee Crisis’ and ‘Would Not the Most Radical Political Intervention for Žižek be Precisely to STOP?!’ will be indicated by the initials ‘HRR’ and ‘S?!’ respectively in the main text.

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 204. See also Žižek on the Hegelian “one One”, pp. 51-3.

<sup>13</sup> Here we might touch on the opposition Homer draws between Badiou and Žižek. For Homer, it is Badiou who thinks an “affirmation” after the revolutionary event, while Žižek remains merely “negative” (*RP*, 70). However, Žižek is not arguing against Badiou’s positivism, but in that manner we have tried to make clear, attempts to think positive and negative at once. Žižek’s “subject” is not opposed to any “subjectivisation”, but is the very “circularity” (*RP*, 76) between the two. Indeed, for Žižek, it is Badiou in his assertion of an exceptional subject who stands out against the order of being who remains “Kantian”. In Badiou, for Žižek, we have a “universal order of being and the contingent excess that punches a hole in this universal order” (*RP*, 76). All this might be why the Bartleby politics of “doing nothing”, preparation for a revolutionary Act and engagements in local pragmatic interventions (*RP*, 52) cannot be separated and in a way are even the same thing.

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