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Credo Quia Absurdum: No Strawman for the Revolution

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The best definition of avant-garde cultural praxis we have today, one that is adequate to contemporary forms of socially engaged art and to the political economy of culture as we know it, is that proposed by John Roberts in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (Roberts, 2015). While Roberts' theory has some affinity with that of Jacques Rancière in the sense that he first distinguishes between the ontology of art and the heteronomy of non-art, he further proposes that art's worldly materials are part of art's "ontology of conceptualization," an end of art historicity that understands art as not only adisciplinary and non-identitarian, but reflexive and experimental, a post-art condition that opens radical avant-garde art practices to knowledge of its history, its failures, and to mass techniques of production (Roberts, 2014; Rancière, 2009). Art's extended conceptualization in this respect often eludes the interest of activist artists and becomes the responsibility of engaged theorists, or artist-theorists. Because of this by no means

absolute tendency, one should be wary of efforts to model theory on an ostensibly pre-theoretical ethnography of activist self-conception, or alternately, on theories of socially engaged art that limit themselves to pragmatist philosophies because those are the ones that are most typically suited to the temperament and assumptions of those same activists (Kester, 2011). We should also reject the separation of art and theory for the sake of instrumental social effectivity insofar as a naive approaches to art and social reality allow art institutions and funding bodies to more easily tolerate social projects in the traditional terms of bourgeois reformism, petty bourgeois goodwill, or as an adjunct to the neoliberal destruction of the welfare state. In this regard Roberts distinguishes avant-garde art from the primary economy of the art market but also from the bohemian coordinates of the creative class. The post-art condition of the avant garde implies collective struggle and oppositionality as the basis of real democratization and communization.

One small modification that I would propose to Roberts' theory of art's ontology of conceptualization is the Lacanian-Žižekian notion of the Real as an epistemological-ontological mediation or ontological failure, a further aspect of the inability to fully know the art "thing," and as Slavoj Žižek puts it, the transposition of an epistemological obstacle into the thing itself (Žižek, 2012). In this sense the only pre-Kantian, Spinozist bit of "naïve" reality that is necessary to maintain is that of *objet a* as rupture. This pre-transcendental gap affords us a theory of revolution as deadlock, castration, social difference, or antagonism, and it provides us with various other Lacanian concepts as dialectical mediations of the problems of symbolization and social relation. This Lacanian approach helps to develop an understanding of why it is, as Roberts puts it in relation to Theodor Adorno, that art is not reducible to non-art. Given this, the only added problem is that non-art has no further ontological consistency and so historicity itself is pressured by forms of subjectivization, which in the case of Alain Badiou has been developed in terms of truth procedure as fidelity to the event (Badiou, 2013).

As I hope to demonstrate, the question of ontological failure is not merely a matter of individual pathology but essential to theories of ideology that impact cultural and political praxis. Foremost on the activist agenda is the ecological threat, which all would agree must be made a priority for collective action. Addressing McKenzie Wark's recent writings on the Anthropocene, I hope to show, with reference to Žižek's work and to the

recent debate between these two scholars, that the issue of global warming is not one that can be solved by considering, as Wark wishes to do, only the social forces and relations of production (Wark, 2014; Žižek, 2015; Wark, 2015c). Wark proposes a new kind of proletarian culture but what kind of Proletkult can we imagine today? From here I turn to recent writings by Sven Lütticken and Yates McKee and address the shift from the 1960s to the present, from the Situationists to Occupy Wall Street, where transformations to cultural praxis raise the important question concerning the effectiveness of the current forms of organization (Lütticken, 2014; McKee, 2013). In contrast to horizontalist approaches to grassroots democracy, Žižek has explored the potentials of the Lacanian Discourse of the Master for further insights into ideology critique. In response, however, the status of the Lacanian Real and the virtuality of subjectivity have been an irritant to activists who are looking for the perfect formula for praxis. Against the various trends on the horizontalist left, Žižekian dialectics and in particular his recent turn to the Discourse of the Master will be approached as a contribution to the definition of a contemporary vanguard art and politics.

Beyond the Anthropocene

In *The Spectacle of Disintegration*, McKenzie Wark returns to Guy Debord's 1967 text on *The Society of the Spectacle* in order to gauge the metabolic rifts that have affected the ecosphere since the time when the spectacle could be neatly divided into the two Cold War camps: the concentrated spectacles of the totalitarian East, with its images of the leader – Stalin, Mao, Che – being eclipsed by the diffuse spectacle, with its endless parade of movie stars and fashion models (Wark, 2013: 2). By 1988, the same year that Claude Lefort had thought to diagnose the failure of '68, Debord had written his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* and according to Wark considered that the diffuse spectacle had not simply won out but harbored forms of concentration through the integrated power of a shadow state plutocracy. Wark likewise proposes that what we are confronted with today is a "disintegrating spectacle" for which state mechanisms can no longer be managed with any pretense to popular interest. The spectacle of disintegration, he argues, is immune to all of the single issue problems we throw back at it: "The disintegrating spectacle can countenance the end of everything except the end of itself. It can contemplate with equanimity melting ice sheets, seas of junk, peak oil, but the spectacle itself lives on" (Wark, 2013: 3).

But these examples are not all the same since for Wark, writing more recently in *Molecular Red*, the condition of the biosphere signals the key metabolic rift and the main terrain of struggle. After all of the liberation movements of the last three centuries, the theme of the Anthropocene – a Marxian universal history adjusted to twenty-first century environmental end times – brings us to the last line of defense: the Carbon Liberation Front (Wark, 2015a; Wark, 2015b). Against solutions to the climate crisis that focus solely on the market, technology, individual choice, or romantic anti-modernism, the CLF seeks to integrate these different levels of economic, political, technical and cultural analysis and transform the totality of their arrangements. This of course also entails changing ourselves, but more importantly, it includes the Marxist strategy of identifying labour as a central category of experience and politics. With regard to this transformation, Wark proposes a kind of “queer” theory of metabolic change produced by expanding capitalist productivity through which subjective and social life is changed beyond the “normal” state of things. In his review of *Molecular Red*, Slavoj Žižek agrees that the rift in nature signals also a rift within humanity, but that in this regard Wark does not go far enough with his theory of alienation and that the modern science of particle physics and quantum waves teaches us that there is no rhizomatic, micro-level or queer metabolism that can be elevated into a reality of last resort (Žižek, 2015).¹ Instead, the productive interruption of shared life is what one might call an event, not an expression of low-level positivity but of negativity, a cut in reality raised to the infinite power of Understanding and the Real that is obfuscated by the multiplicity of social conflicts, which alone and in their multiplicity are unable to be explained in their own terms.

By focusing on the economic base and taking from this some implications for ideology, Wark’s hack of what Andreas Malm calls the “Anthropocene Myth” is consistent with the Marxist notion of universal history, noting that the carbon-based economy is coextensive with the capitalist mode of production, something that was not solved by Soviet modernism and that is today a problem of global dimensions (Wark, 2015b, Malm, 2015). The fact that we are dealing with an ideological problem that takes the form of denial can be noticed in the simultaneity of awareness of global warming and the growth in global emissions, from one percent annually in the 1990s to three percent in the 2000s, with most of this expansion due to foreign investment in commodity production and surplus extraction in China, where a growing population is a source of cheap labour

and where communist dirigisme guarantees labour discipline. Beyond production, there is unevenness also in consumption, where the average North American wastes 1000 times more than people living in sub-Saharan Africa. Carbon exploitation is therefore a direct result of both class exploitation and uneven development and with this Malm disputes the myth of any Anthropocene narrative that lays blame on an undifferentiated species-thinking and humanity-bashing (Malm, 2015).

Given the overwhelming evidence, one might wonder why the Anthropocene Myth persists. But the question is posed backwards: it is because of the overwhelming evidence of man-made change under conditions of exploitation and overproduction that the myth emerges. In a lecture on “Ecology as the New Opium of the Masses,” Žižek lists ecology as one of the major antagonisms that poses a real threat to the infinite expansion of market logic. He argues: “In spite of the infinite adaptability of capitalism, which, in the case of an acute ecological catastrophe or crisis, can easily turn ecology into a new field of capitalist investment and competition, the very nature of the risk involved fundamentally precludes market solutions” (Žižek, 2007; see also Žižek, 2010). The radical implication of the environmental threat is that it no longer holds that whatever we do, history will go on. The twist in his argument is that it is today’s excluded, the newly proletarianized in China and the Third World, the Palestinians trapped behind apartheid walls, and the millions of slum dwellers in South America, Africa, India and South-East Asia who today directly stand for universality. It is their reality that poses a threat to state control of the market. Without considering this excluded domain, he argues, ecology loses its subversive edge. The problem, then, is that one can fight for ecology but not question the ideological conditions that separate the Included and the Excluded.

Ecology, as it currently stands in liberal and social democratic discourse, allows us to ignore the true universality. Fear of radical political solutions buttresses a post-political biocapitalism that seeks to leave behind old ideological struggles. The way that this political fear is displaced today, however, is through fear of environmental disaster, which becomes a new form of global ideology, a new opium for the masses based in a real dread of change. For Žižek, the upshot is that we should accept the contingency of our existence and the utter groundlessness of nature. This is in fact the basis of the social ecology movement (Bookchin, 1989). However, the radical contingency of choice

implies that we could, for fear of the necessary political change, make the wrong decision and choose to act in a self-destructive manner. Today, Žižek argues, the real problem is believing in and assuming responsibility for this radical uncertainty: “we find ourselves constantly in the position of having to decide about matters that will fundamentally affect our lives, but without a proper foundation in knowledge” (Žižek, 2007). Belief in ecological catastrophe and the inevitability of neoliberal governance come to function in terms of fetishistic disavowal: we believe in it and we don’t believe in it. In this, Žižek asserts, we have not only a way of understanding ideology, but culture, which relies on a big Other, a social unconscious or superego, that does not know. In contrast to the function of the analyst, who acts as the “subject supposed to know,” the elementary rule of culture, according to Žižek, is to know when and how to *not* know, to not notice, or “to go on and act as if something which happened did not happen” (Žižek, 2007). From this point of view, we must come to believe that the catastrophe is possible since we do not have the knowledge that would allow us to make the qualified choice that betrays the fact that no real choices are on offer.

This is a fundamentally different argument from Wark, who proposes that the abolition of capital for the sake of the environment would not automatically solve all of our problems since we would still need to “provide energy and shelter and food for seven billion people without *completely* destabilizing planetary metabolic systems” (Wark, 2015c). From this perspective, the question of alienation is posed in terms of survival and necessity, something very different from the terms of analysis that Žižek is noted to have introduced in such texts as *For They Know Not What They Do* (Žižek, 2008). In recent articles, Wark has begun to depict Žižek as an authoritative big Other figure who needs to be displaced. This is not merely disingenuous since the essence of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to show how the fact that there is no big Other leads to various conditions of transference, fantasy, repression, and so on. Insofar as Wark suggests that the question of gap, the Real and social antagonism is where Žižek’s “philosophy revs its engines” and “anticipates an open road” that is “not amenable to empirical inquiry,” he obviates both psychoanalysis and dialectics (Wark, 2015c). We might find the sources of Wark’s rejection in the work of Gilles Deleuze, for whom, as Badiou explains, politics was never a matter of ideological superstructure. Rather, according to Badiou, Deleuze’s transcendental metaphysics and ‘open road’ of rhizomatics, molecular rifts and paradigm

shifts, were derived from Nietzsche and Bergson. As Badiou puts it, this “vitalist terrorism”

presupposes the consensual nature of the very norm that needs to be examined and established, to wit, that movement is superior to immobility, life superior to the concept, time to space, affirmation to negation, difference to identity, and so on. In these latent ‘certainties,’ which command the peremptory metaphorical style of Deleuze’s vitalist and anti-categorical exegesis, there is a kind of speculative demagogy whose entire strength lies in addressing itself to each and everyone’s animal disquiet, to our confused desires, to everything that makes us scurry about blindly on the desolate surface of the earth (Badiou, 2006: 70).

As an example of how this plays in out Wark, we find that he considers all speculative thought to be ‘molar’ abstraction. “Philosophy,” he writes, “is that which has the capacity to reduce differences to the same” (Wark, 2015c). His concern, further, is that such ‘high theory’ as someone like Žižek practices, is able to decide what kinds of differences matter, such as for instance class antagonism over and above the antagonism between labour and nature. Wark writes:

From this point of view, Žižek borrows from philosophy a certain authority-gesture, where causal chains stop at a peak term beyond which there can be no questioning. Only that last term is no longer the God or the Goddess, and still less Man, but the Void. Everything ascends and descends from this key term, of which the philosopher is the guardian. The Subject, the Object, even the Subject’s encounter with the Other are always antagonisms riven by the self-same impossibility. The philosopher’s self-appointed task is to show how any and all labors encounter the same limit of which the philosopher is the keeper of the essential names (Wark, 2015c).²

If this is true then those names are primarily the Imaginary, the Real and the Symbolic, with the panoply of other potential theoretical terms. The essence of the void for Žižek is the question of fantasy at the heart of ideology. This represents for Lacan a conjunction of subject and object, and hardly a reduction of difference to sameness; in fact, the opposite is closer to being accurate. Subjectivity is a “subject effect” and a function of

the gaze as big Other, an impersonal symbolic order and set of social rules that are impossible for the individual to fully assimilate, in particular, as they are themselves inconsistent. For Žižek, the abolition of capital and the meeting of material necessities would not solve all of our problems since for psychoanalysis our subjective relationship to the world and vice versa “make sense only against the background of this absolute unknowableness” (Žižek, 2008: 199). Žižek provides a description of this in terms of Lacan’s theory of the subject of the signifier:

Nature is simply unknown, its unknowableness is epistemological, whereas the Other *qua* another person is ontologically unknowable; its unknowableness is the way its very being is ontologically constituted, disclosed to us. Freud already had a presentiment of this when he wrote about a “foreign kernel” [*fremdes Kern*] in the very midst of our neighbour [*Nebenmensch*]: the Kantian unknowable “Thing-in-itself” is ultimately man himself (Žižek, 2008: 200).

For Lacan, the subject’s alienation in the Other is transposed into the Other itself. Žižek locates dialectical materialism in this irreducible difference between subject and object, and not as Wark proposes, in either the sameness or absolute opposition between the two. Nor are subject and object in Lacan what Wark elsewhere refers to as “pre-constituted categories” (Wark, 2014). Against Wark’s view of the Lacanian subject as an absolute, it is better and perhaps easier to understand it as a concept similar to what Marx understood as the proletariat, not the complement to bourgeois ideology, but a subject with no proper place in its edifice – in other words, a lack that causes the bourgeoisie to assume it can impose even more exploitation. In this regard, Wark’s counter-cultural stance towards Master Signifiers like high and low, reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s least useful metaphors, avoids the ways in which such oppositions are means to contain antagonism, and further, to impose empirical content where there is lack.

So what does Wark propose for objective metaphysical thought, or for what he refers to as a Bogdanovian realism of sensations and media theory? Wark looks not only to the effects of humankind as a geological force transforming the planet, but a humankind that is able to control and alter the *infrastructural* mode of production and social relations of production. He defines the Carbon Liberation Front a “poetics and technics for the

organization of knowledge” and takes as his reference point the work of the Soviet scientist, philosopher and fiction writer Alexander Bogdanov (Wark, 2015b). Expelled from the Bolshevik Party in 1909, largely as a result of his disputes with Lenin, Bogdanov, according to Wark, held that philosophy, oriented to the needs of the working class and its organic intellectuals, could become effective in reorganizing the relationship of labour to knowledge. The specialized knowledge of science and social science could be integrated with everyday life and philosophy in its reorganization of nature. Echoing Žižek’s view that ideology is not merely constituted by abstract ideas, but that ideology itself is the very basis of everyday life, which designs propositions and makes them practically inhabitable as rules and rituals, Wark recovers Bogdanov for the spectacle of disintegration insofar as Bogdanov understood how ideology motivates organizational labour. For Bogdanov, writing in *The Philosophy of Living Experience*, labour is subsumed within a totality that is greater than itself and comes into being as it resists and seeks to repurpose nature.³ In its experiments with nature, labour comes to a new understanding of causality, viewing energy as the outcome of the human transformation of carbon sources. Inspired by Bogdanov’s alternative ecological vision, notably in his science-fiction novel *Red Star*, the contemporary novelist Kim Stanley Robinson proposes in his “Mars Trilogy” that the Bogdanov position, represented by the character Arkady Bogdanov, is not to carve out a space of refuge within the existing totality, but to expand and transform the modes of organization, making into a general condition the “most advanced forms of collaborative labour” (Wark, 2015b). Such utopian visions, according to Wark, bring into existence new structures of feeling and a new boundary against exploitative and militarized forms of life. While in Bogdanov’s *Red Star* the Martians had not yet achieved a new organizational form and social formation, the seeds of the future might be contained in the current struggles, which for Bogdanov, in his day, were found in the proletarian art movement of Proletkult.

Precarity and Postcontemporaneity

What sites of possibility are there for Proletkult in the age of social media networking, creative industries and biopolitical protest? Here I will limit myself to the reflections of two contemporary theorists of the politicization of culture: Sven Lütticken and Yates McKee. In his recent essay on “cultural revolution,” Sven Lütticken wonders how the Leninist call for a socialist culture has been transformed since Guy Debord appropriated

this idea in the 1960s and shifted the terms of discussion from the takeover of state power to that of an avant-garde excavation of the promise of communism (Lütticken, 2014). Lütticken's concern is to address the idea of cultural revolution as a problematic term but also as a productive concept. His approach relies on the much maligned model of base and superstructure, with the implication that the field of art and the field of politics are distinct aspects of the superstructure – an understanding that is often implicit within the intellectual or academic strands of institutional critique but ignored in the more voluntarist camps of art activism, where base and superstructure are more typically collapsed into a kind of Althusserian structuralism. Less convinced of the total subsumption of labour than many autonomist thinkers, Lütticken proposes that a new class composition comprised of students, intellectuals, artists and bohemians might serve as a catalyst for new forms of revolutionary action.

Among several sources of ideas, Lütticken mentions the importance of Herbert Marcuse for a counter-cultural theory of the proletariat. In an unpublished text from circa 1970, Marcuse notes that the popular forms of counter-cultural rebellion might be useful in “preparing the soil” for political revolution, that is, if it were not for the fact that they tend, rather – and insofar as the working class is now absorbed into a white-collar class of salaried employees, technicians and service workers – to integrate the sphere of cultural production into the sphere of the capitalist structural revolution (Lütticken, 2014: 117). In this regard the manifest revolutions of collective social action in response to the contradictions of capitalism were mixed and mired in cultural forms of revolt. As 1960s prosperity turned into 70s economic crisis, this same culture was increasingly corporatized and by the 90s artistic labour itself became the model of work for the new creative economy. Undeterred, French postmodern theorists held that libidinal economies and micro-politics could successfully sabotage dominant forms in such a way that the molecular revolution made the vanguard party redundant. The significance of this shift in the 1970s and 80s is that such formations as micro-politics, punk and autonomedia were *economical* as much as they were cultural, internal to the acceleration of capitalist change – a permanent counter-revolution (Lütticken, 2014: 119-22). For Lütticken, these formations may very well be part of today's art world establishment but they did contain the “seeds of the future” mentioned earlier.

By the 1990s artists and intellectuals largely sought individual roads to success as cultural entrepreneurs. Reacting to neoconservative backlash, they put forward a new cultural politics of representation that struggled according to a mostly superstructural definition of culture. Today, this entrepreneurial model reaches a limit and Lütticken gives as examples the culture of permanent auditioning and volunteering in which, in 2013, 1600 people applied for a cloakroom job at the Rijksmuseum, and 19,000 people applied for a few posts as attendants in the Prado (Lütticken, 2014: 125). Insofar as people refuse to identify as a class but rather as a multitude or an angry swarm, there is no social project to which the term cultural revolution might refer. Instead, the current forms of collaboration and self-organization such as Occupy Wall Street, comprised of lumpenfreelancers, artists and intellectuals, rely on a narrow class identification that is rather, in Lütticken's estimation, an assemblage or montage of temporarily connected "sub-classes" and "ex-classes" who are prey to the overwhelming privatization of economic capital in the hands of the upper-class. Small and informal counter-institutions that are concerned with sustainable forms of exchange are nevertheless operating in a situation in which they exploit themselves to an even higher degree than in the past and act as innovators of an informational primitive accumulation, whether one call it immaterial or not. Hacking capitalism's informational structural revolution, as Edward Snowden has done, might warrant the status of folk hero, but it remains for Lütticken a form of institutional critique, a liberal politics performed by the biopolitical outcasts of today's surveillance society. If the biocapitalist watchword for sustainability is recycle, the same might be said for today's cultural revolution, with its re-use of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde strategies. Such neurotic repetitions, according to Lütticken, need nevertheless to be read as symptoms of a potentially liberating break from teleological certainty (Lütticken, 2002).

One such tactical break from inevitability is the "postcontemporary" art of Strike Debt, as defined and described by Yates McKee (McKee, 2013; Ray, 2007). In his analysis of what he terms the "revolutionary struggle" of Strike Debt, McKee follows Peter Bürger's well-known formula that the goal of the historical avant gardes was the sublation of art into life (McKee, 2013: 798; Bürger, 1984; see more recently McKee, 2016). With little theoretical elaboration, McKee considers that the work of Strike Debt represents an altogether "new" programme of politicized art. Despite this claim, Suzanne Lacy outlined some twenty years ago already a "critical language for public art" and "art activism" in

her anthology on “new genre public art” (Lacy, 1995). A passing reference to Claire Bishop’s writing on antecedents to the contemporary social turn or to Gregory Sholette’s work on the art strike could also have added some nuance to McKee’s claim of innovation (Bishop, 2012; Sholette, 2015). In my own jargon, and given the fact that such activist work as Strike Debt is being produced on this side of the anti-globalization movement and after 9/11, the war on terror, and after a widespread awareness of workerist concepts in the cultural field, one could refer to this kind of practice as not simply “activist,” but more complexly as “post-political bio-activism” (Léger, 2012). The point of this kind of grassroots community art is to be effective in real life and to not waste time with too much concern for high theory or art world values. This effort to escape art and theory into politics is in many ways a strength, especially for the artists themselves. It is a weakness, however, insofar as this kind of work is limited to utopian socialism, pragmatic ameliorism and social reform. One might wonder where the vanguardism comes in exactly if the most effective tactic of Strike Debt has been to make socially progressive use of the secondary debt market, an idea put forward by the artist and organizer Thomas Gokey (McKee, 2013: 793). For McKee, however, the main innovative principle of postcontemporary art is not the Rolling Jubilee itself – the raising of funds as an example of “microtopian” alternative economies – but the conceptualization of the artist as an *organizer*, someone who facilitates assemblies, devises strategies and tactics, designs propaganda, stages performances, delivers workshops, cultivates alliances and administers media platforms (McKee, 2013: 784). None of these practices would in and of themselves be considered artistically relevant if it was not for the fact that in the case of both Occupy Wall Street and Strike Debt, a large number of organizers also happen to be artists whose creativity is essential to the movement. Although such artists may be supported by institutions, they take their cues from the new forms of grassroots political subjectivity.

In contrast to the avant-gardist stance cultivated by some artists to exploit art world values for the promise of potential or future social effectivity, Strike Debt does not focus on art tactics such as irony, defamiliarization or critical autonomy, but rather distances itself from any concern with genre classifications such as “social practice art” and from contemporaneity in art and culture. What is important is what happens in terms of social effectiveness. Moreover, what is important is the social bond of solidarity that is created in the process. As McKee puts it, Strike Debt could be seen to be a biopolitical

laboratory for self-management and freeing of the commons (McKee, 2013: 798). The cooperative nature of such projects extends from a single set of issues to the whole of organic subjectivity: activists want not only to solve a particular problem, but want to bring the whole of personhood into the unfolding of the movement.

Given all of the lifestyle concerns and anti-authority patterns that coincide with the rising hegemony of the petty bourgeois habitus, it makes sense that artists today are particularly drawn to participatory political engagement (Bourdieu, 1984; Bennett, 2007). The forms of anti-authority struggle are only apparent, however, insofar as they do not put forward a political programme and rely on indeterminate and always changing criteria of moral discipline (Giri, 2013). As a defensive rather than inclusive measure, the space of activism becomes a scene for insiders rather than members. Some of the features of this appeal, according to McKee, would include attention to language, affect and imagination oriented towards love, caring and mutual aid. The enlistment of the affect of caring corresponds in some ways to Michel Foucault's notion of biopower as the extension of care through capitalist institutions. In terms of the Marxian presuppositions of social movement theorists like Sylvia Federici, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, these custodial impulses within biopower are not in themselves to be eliminated but rather further socialized. While this contemporary attention to affect might seem to revisit the idealism of the late sixties, it adds to this a desire to go beyond the counter-cultural critique of 'the system' and put forward a strategic vision that would be better able to challenge the prevailing economic and political hegemony. In the case of Strike Debt, "witness testimonies" and "conversion narratives" form the shared experience of crippling student, credit card, health care and mortgage debt. Strike Debt builds an affective space of care against the predatory practices of Wall Street and large banks that is based on mutual concerns and that raises the spectre of an "Invisible Army of Defaulters" that could act cohesively and strategically against the corruption of moneyed interests, thereby prefiguring noncapitalist social bonds (McKee, 2013: 793).

McKee's postcontemporary art resembles Wark's Bogdanovian proletarian art movement and Lütticken's neo-avant-garde formations, but with the added feature of a characteristically American populism and participatory ethos. But as Žižek has observed, the tragedy of such anarchist populism is that despite its critique of authoritarian rules it tends to create microtopian enclaves with their own forms of authority and charismatic

personalities. Žižek suggests that the anti-hierarchical and consensus-based organizational principles of social movement activists often rely on unwritten rules and unacknowledged sources of authority, preventing awareness of the pretense to equality. “In order to safeguard this equality,” Žižek argues, “you have a more sinister figure of the master, who puts pressure on the others to safeguard the purity of the non-hierarchical principle” (Žižek in Henwood and Bertsch, 2002). This barely begins to address the additional problems regarding how consensus-based organization sacrifices decision-making ability, political effectiveness, general public interest and expertise (Poletta, 2015).

Confronting Freedom

Since the recent setbacks following of the Arab Spring, OWS and other movement protests, Žižek has turned to Lacan’s Discourse of the Master for insight into the distinction between an authentic master and a false master. The real master is more terrible in a sense than the political leader – say, someone like Stalin – insofar as s/he does not tell people how to act and what to obey, but confronts them with the deadlock of their own freedom, and in the example of Mao, the rightness of the rebellion of the masses against the bourgeois communist bureaucracy (Žižek, 2014c; Badiou, 2005). However, Žižek’s development of the Discourse of the Master has met with expected resistance, for instance, from the anarcho-communist point of view of Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen in an article titled “Is the Revolution Going to Be Communist?” (Rasmussen, 2015). The purpose of Rasmussen’s text is to defend the theory of revolution from three deviations: a vanguard political leadership, which he associates with Žižek’s idea of the Master; Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin’s reformist *Kilburn Manifesto* (and with this the focus on wealth redistribution by the parties Syriza and Podemos); and Hardt and Negri’s optimism concerning the multitudes’ refusal of neoliberal capitalism. I will not address the latter two as neither of these propose the function of a political vanguard.

For the sake of political effectivity, Rasmussen’s article glosses over what it is that Žižek understands by the Master. The passage on Žižek in his text is brief and somewhat misleading – even if in some sense it also understands what it is that Žižek is concerned with. While Žižek’s position is associated by Rasmussen with that of Lenin’s theory of

the vanguard party, it should be mentioned that what Žižek retains the most from Lenin is his rejection of the notion of teleology, the view that the laws of History are not automatically written into or guaranteed by the necessity of a dialectical overcoming of capitalism through proletarian negation (Žižek, 2002; Žižek, 2006). The situation that Lenin confronted in Russia was the relative absence of advanced relations of industrial production and the possibility of enlisting peasant forces. At the moment of betrayal by bourgeois allies, it was deemed necessary by the Bolsheviks to develop an alternative party apparatus so as to save the revolution. These were contingencies that implied that the situation was not altogether closed, and that there was a possibility of acting in these circumstances in ways that were not predetermined. It is this idea of an “authentic act” that does not fall under pre-given laws of causality and necessity that interests Žižek in his Lacanian-inspired approach to post-transcendental idealism, and thus his rejection of various forms of contemporary historicism, materialism and social constructionism. The question of how the Discourse of the Master relates to the function of a political vanguard relates very specifically to his ongoing effort to rehabilitate a theory of dialectical materialism against the overwhelming intellectual status quo. Like it or not, it is this status quo that forms the bloc of certitude that has shaped much contemporary activism. It should in this regard be acknowledged the extent to which Žižek and Badiou have almost single-handedly led theory out of the post-structuralism of the 1980s and 90s, which had consigned the avant garde and cultural revolution to a Fukuyaman position on the inevitability of capitalism. For a Lacanian, it is not only that there is no outside to capitalism, but also that there is no inside.

According to Rasmussen, Žižek argues that we need a Master rather than a Deleuzian leaderless multitude. In this regard Žižek is said to oppose horizontality, endless deliberation, episodic protests and network-based organization without leaders. This in other words represents a critique of the notion of direct democracy. So much is more or less accurate. For some reason, however, Rasmussen then adds: “Žižek uses a problematic idea of the political subject as an individual and shows a remarkable lack of trust in the critical potential of the mass, as well as complete disregard for history” (Rasmussen, 2015). But the critique of “spontaneism” and “massism” is well-rehearsed on the revolutionary Marxist left and there is no reason why Rasmussen would attribute this to Žižek in particular. What is unexpected, however, is how from this Rasmussen assumes that, hypothetically speaking, Žižek would consider neoliberalism to be the

product of Thatcherite leadership rather than the outcome of restructuring in the 1970s. There are two different assertions here, the second of which asks us to decide whether the economic base is determining of neoliberal ideology – here associated with the person of Thatcher, whom Rasmussen wrongly assumes Žižek would consider a Master – or vice versa. Rasmussen himself opts for the overdetermining aspects of the social relations and economic base over any “great wo/man” theory of history – the first assertion – which as such misses the point of Žižek’s argument. For Rasmussen, Thatcherism was the outcome of material historical forces rather than the product of neo-conservative leadership. His conclusion is that Žižek’s work is indifferent to structural constraints and “does not engage in a meaningful critique of political economy” (Rasmussen, 2015). Wrapped up in this assertion are the stakes of political agency and the possibility of political solidarity. Rasmussen then draws his conclusions from the above findings – summed up in between the lines as Žižek’s focus on ideology over and against the economic base – and uses these to account for Žižek’s recent emphasis on the Discourse of the Master. Žižek, he argues, defends the idea of a strong leader and of a leftist authoritarian party, a repetition of Lenin’s vanguard model. This is perhaps not such a terrible statement when we consider that Wark considers Žižek’s communist project “a peculiarly perverse version of Stalinist apologetics” (Wark, 2014).

As I mentioned previously, Žižek has always maintained that what needs to be repeated in Lenin is not the model of the party that the Bolsheviks created, but the notion that the potential of an authentic act is not guaranteed and covered over by a big Other, interpreted here as the determinations of the Historical situation. Rasmussen’s dismissal adds insult to the spectacle of Žižek insisting repeatedly that twentieth-century experiments in revolution are definitely a thing of the past. With regard to the need for radical change, however, Žižek is not satisfied to write only the kind of ‘high theory’ that will take three decades to filter into the zeitgeist. And so we discover that his discussion of the Discourse of the Master is presented as a prologue to *Absolute Recoil*, but also in a simplified popular version in *Trouble in Paradise* (Žižek, 2014a; Žižek, 2014b).

Žižek’s more recent approach to the Discourse of the Master is not altogether new, however, and we find one version of it in his contribution to the second volume of *The Idea of Communism*, which indeed calls for both leadership and a political programme (Žižek, 2013). The question of the Master enters in this discussion through Žižek’s

response to Ayn Rand's view that the abolition of private property and the elimination of the profit motive would require even greater organizational control of the economy from above. While this argument is put forward by an arch-conservative, it clears the table from the half-measures of reformism and responds immediately to the demands of the multitude. Žižek's reply to Rand is that such domination, if it is to be worthy of the name communism, would have to be a communist organization of the relations of production. This would be a necessary corrective to the present global capitalism, which does not afford any possibility for civil freedom and democracy but relies increasingly on exclusion and brutal domination (Žižek, 2013: 197). Žižek here rejects the one-party rule of contemporary China and so it is clear that what he understands by a communist party is not one that serves economic power but that serves a leftist alternative.

Insofar as Žižek broaches the question of agency and political mass subject, the question that he asks is properly dialectical, meaning historicist as well as, in a Lacanian sense, resistant to historicism, relativism and vulgar reduction. What do we do after so many of the protests of 2011 and 2012 have been rolled back? Žižek *adds* to the questions of enlightenment, universal history and mode of production the fact that the cultural studies of the 1980s and 90s have largely failed as a response to neoliberal capitalism and so there is today a need to return to matters of class struggle. The question for him is not what we do not want, but what do we want: "What social organization can replace the existing capitalism? What types of new leaders do we need? What organs, including those of control and repression? *The twentieth-century alternatives did not work, obviously*" (my emphasis) (Žižek, 2013: 198). He adds: "the open-ended debates will have to coalesce not only in some *new Master Signifiers*, but also in concrete answers to the old Leninist question 'What is to be done?'" (my emphasis) (Žižek, 2013: 198). The idea of a Master does not necessarily represent an individual like Hugo Chavez, for example, but a political process like the Bolivarian Constitution, a new set of social institutions that allow the mass of the excluded to have political influence. Insofar as Žižek has repeated on several occasions that he does not consider the Venezuelan model under Chavez, or the indigenous perspective of Evo Morales, to be radical enough, it is some wonder that he even points to them in these more recent texts. His approach is to focus on the emancipatory potential within *any* situation.

In *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek explains that Lacan's Master is a vanishing mediator "who delivers you to the abyss of your freedom" since we cannot directly accede to what it is that we want, and so, to what is to be done, without some external *objet petit a* (Žižek, 2014a: 45). There is no absolute escape from the virtuality of the big Other. Žižek's point in this regard is that there is no pure immanence to political economy without ideological remainder. There is always in effect some notion of the big Other that is operative in society, however unconscious it may be. A Master is not someone who tells us what to do in the same way that symbolic representations tell us how to enjoy; it is rather an agent who, in Žižek's estimation, disturbs us into freedom. In the present democratic conjuncture, we are compelled to accept capitalist domination as a free choice and deterritorialization as opportunity. There is no freedom in this. The Master, in contrast, is not an exemplary figure who must be followed or emulated, since, in Lacanian terms, the Master is inherently inconsistent: the Master figure is exemplary insofar as s/he refuses the situation and refuses the kind of negation that relies on the disavowed underside of the obscene Law. The Master is not a demagogue, Žižek adds, who "pretends to know better than the people themselves what people really want (what is really good for them) and enforces it on them even against their will" (Žižek, 2014a: 46). Seen in these terms, Žižek's Master comes full circle to describe, despite himself perhaps, the effectiveness of such unaccountable "anarchist" actors whose "propaganda of the deed" may not represent an actual, effective solution to today's problems, but whose exemplary act of will and rejection of the status quo inspire other similar acts of solidarity.

The conclusion that Žižek draws from his analysis of the Master is consistent with Lacan's discussion of the Four Discourses in his seminars from the late 1960s (Lacan, 2007). The relation of transference between the Master and the Slave in the Discourse of the Master is one of impossibility. The Master here simply embodies the Law that is inevitably always suspended. The specific place of the slave is in the orbit of knowledge and the function of the big Other. For Žižek, this Lacanian view of knowledge implies that "freedom cannot be handed down to us by a benevolent master but has to be won through hard struggle" (Žižek, 2014a: 47). This, one has to say, is not the conclusion of Žižek's research, but only a starting point for cultural revolution, not unlike and no more simple than Marx's study of the commodity.

Žižek concludes his passage on the Master in *Absolute Recoil* with the assertion that the Master “is not a subject supposed to know” and “not a subject of transference” (Žižek, 2014a: 47). In this regard I myself wonder how it is possible for the subject in the Discourse of the Master to “traverse the fantasy” and move on to organization rather than dwell in psychosis. It is worth noting that for Lacan one must pass through the Discourse of the Master in order to then move towards the Discourse of the Analyst, but that effectively there is no end to the movement of *objet a* in the various schema. The advantage of the Discourse of the Master is that it is also a Discourse *on* the Master and in this regard it may in fact be a useful way to address the question of politics as a field that is different from other superstructures.

Insofar as we are speaking of Lacanian rather than Foucauldian and Deleuzian versions of discourse, the Discourse of the Master is one that must be passed through, however temporarily, and so Žižek is honest to his project to incorporate this figure into his philosophy. With regard to the Master, there is something very specific that Žižek wishes to develop in relation to the network of knowledge and signifiers that will confront us in our revolution to come. As for the masses and the subjective agency that Rasmussen mentions, the point of radicality that Lacan addresses is the possibility of a subject to emerge from out of the system of knowledge and from the system of the pure signifier and its status as a vanishing mediator (Master). Insofar as master signifiers mediate the figures of production, Lacan’s dialectics offer an alternative to the immanentism of today’s metaphysical materialism and as such, provide some of the elements necessary to the theory of avant-garde art and cultural revolution.

Abolish Class Society (A Useful May 68 Slogan)

The problem with today’s postcontemporary art organizing is only that it remains for the time being somewhat timid and in some cases not anarchist enough. The point of such movements from below, according to anthropologist David Graeber, is that they have understood the Situationist lesson of lowering one’s ambition and scope to the level of everyday acts of creative subversion, avoiding the seizure of state power and thus avoiding the creation of new rules and regulations (Graeber, 2015). For Graeber, the cultural revolution will not be a single moment of rupture, like a civil war for example, but a slow-building cumulative movement towards a world without capitalism, which he

argues requires overcoming habituated laziness and the violent stupidity of bureaucracy. In other words, Graeber only half agrees with Žižek's often repeated statement that what is important is not the day of carnivalesque protest, but what happens the morning after, the more or less enduring features of new social infrastructures and values. Graeber leaves us to understand that May '68, the Arab Spring and OWS are more radical and lasting events in terms of social experience than events like the Chinese Cultural Revolution or Cuban Revolution, which resorted to violent armed struggle and which eventually led to bureaucratic state centralism. He proposes that the "new, emerging conception of revolution" that comes from insurrectionary movements makes use of imagination to throw open the horizons of possibility (Graeber, 2015: 97-100). Graeber's version of relative structurelessness, however, is just so much bad infinity (or bad affinity) insofar as issues like climate change, the socialization of capital, employment policy, energy policy, health care, and so on, require enormous organizational systems and planning and in some cases can imply that local planning is inadequate and even wasteful (Sharzer, 2012). It serves no one to dismiss the struggles that produced something like the welfare state in terms of violence, stupidity, laziness or "fear of play." Graeber is aware of this but he nevertheless wants to promote a political theory based in small autonomous movements and collectives. Such politics play the alternative new left against the radical old left and preclude a supersession of organizational programme. It leaves out, for instance, the programme of Cornelius Castoriadis and the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* that did not call for the dissolution of revolutionary parties but for a change in their bureaucratic mechanisms so that they could become open to direct election and subject to instant recall, so that they could better serve the principle of equality rather than greater transparency, as Graeber would have it, within a "Marxist-Leninist" administration.

Žižek's effort at renewing dialectical materialism cautions us against abandoning Hegelian and Marxist dialectics for an immanentist politics of horizontality. The truth about May '68 is that although radicals were turning away from the French Communist Party, they were not turning away from communism as such, but rather were becoming more deeply Marxist by turning to Maoism. In their reflections on the student protests that were published in the September 1969 issue of *L'Internationale Situationniste*, in particular in the essay "The Beginning of an Era," the S.I. acknowledged that among those groups of students who did the most to spearhead the strikes and occupations

were those who had been educated in Trotskyite and Maoist political movements – in other words, those who understood what they were doing in terms of the return of the proletariat as a historical class (SI, 1981). Given the new and emerging class compositions, it is necessary for today's precarious service workers and creative class to find ways to renew class politics, and for this to be possible, vanguard functions will be required. Beyond playful subversion and culture jamming, the Situationists were committed to just such an avant-garde approach to cultural revolution. But of course many things have changed since the time of Debord. Today's anti-capitalists often seek to sidestep the contradictions that Wark identifies as the ways in which the integrated and diffuse spectacles are combined. Rather than be captivated by this reality, what can we do to keep in mind the radical uncertainty of any situation and the need to face up to radical conclusions? As Žižek likes to say, the light at the end of the tunnel is just another train approaching. The left needs to turn this perspective around and be that train.

Notes

1. In a different but related sense, David Harvey argues that the problems and contradictions of capitalism must be understood as interdependent but ultimately distinct from political questions having to do with inequalities based on gender, race and sexuality (Harvey, 2015).

2. A similarly unsubstantiated 'attack meme,' which pretends to distinguish the "queer" Bogdanov from the "patriarchal" Lenin is put out by Wark in a different text, where he writes: "We need another worldview ... that works as low theory extracted from worker and hacker practices, rather than a high theory trying to legislate about them from above. It is not hard to see here what infuriated Lenin about Bogdanov. For Bogdanov, both proletkult and tektology are experimental practices, of prototyping ideas and things, trying them out, modifying them. There's no correct and controlling über-theory, as there is in different ways in Lenin or Lukács. There is more of a hacker ethos here, rather than of the authoritarian worldview one still finds in a Lenin or a Lukács or in parody form in Žižek, where those in command of the correct dialectical materialist worldview are beyond question" (Wark, 2015e; see also Wark, 2015d). One is tempted to reply,

according to the familiar discussion by Žižek, that the traditional father is less authoritarian than the postmodern father, not to mention potentially also less capitalist. The free choice, say, between Bogdanov and Lenin, that is presented by the postmodern father is not simply imposed, but presented as one that we should simply prefer, thereby emphasizing the logic of choice that is today a feature of capitalist “reflexivization.” In this case, of course, the correct choice is Bogdanov. Žižek elsewhere compares this logic to the hacker ethos and its obsession with symbolic mandates. “Believing there is a code to be cracked,” Žižek says, “is of course much the same as believing in the existence of some Big Other: in every case what is wanted is an agent who will give structure to our chaotic lives” (Žižek, 1999).

3. In these terms Wark could readily have cited the work of Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 2009).

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