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The Specter of Liberation: Emancipatory Possibilities in the Political Theory of Marcuse and Žižek

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Abstract

For Herbert Marcuse, the terrifying specter of communism at the end of the 1960s served the interests of counterrevolution in discrediting revolutionary aims and legitimizing all necessary repressive counter-measures against emancipatory programs. Slavoj Žižek adds a second function, namely, that during the Cold War the specter of communism also served to humanize Western liberal democracy, necessitating strong social welfare measures and thus forming capitalism with a human face. But with the fall of the Eastern Bloc the threat to this system has become more spectral than ever, because any mild deviations from a neoliberal vision of free market capitalism now bring with them charges of totalitarianism. In the face of such formidable obstacles, Marcuse and Žižek argue that the nature and means of emancipation necessarily remain indeterminate. Hence, the emancipatory possibilities that they do sketch out remain overwhelmingly negative and spectral. This raises the question of whether a political theory ought to be sufficiently detailed as to be directly actionable. I conclude that their work largely satisfies the set of justifiable criteria for a successful political theory articulated or implied by Kant and Horkheimer, and therefore, remains highly relevant to our thinking of the political.

Key words

Herbert Marcuse, Slavoj Žižek, Emancipation, Marxism, Totalitarianism, Political Theory, Counterrevolution

But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.1.

A Specter is Haunting Europe—the Specter of Communism. All the
powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this
specter

Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*

The nature of a specter is that it insubstantially haunts the present from out of a possible future without any clear temporal, spatial, or definitional limitation or identification. We do not know precisely what the specter is, only that it is sublime and disquieting, carrying with it the possibility of an overwhelming historical, normative, and critical force against the day. It is simultaneously transcendent in its potential and its immateriality, and immanent in its portentous appearance amongst us. Therefore, it is useful for all kinds of possible purposes. In Herbert Marcuse and Slavoj Žižek, as in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the spectral character of communism and liberation both describes their tentative emancipatory visions of the future and serves the forces of reaction and counterrevolution against any alteration in the status quo. In counterrevolutionary thought, the specter of communism, like Hamlet's undiscover'd country, becomes a terrorizing apocalyptic vision of revolutionary aims, distorting and therefore discrediting any emancipatory change. In revolutionary thought, the valence is completely different, but its vision of radical change remains spectral in both form and detail. Indeed, Marcuse and Žižek agree in general outline both in their analyses of the ideological problems obstructing revolution and in their hesitancy to articulate the nature and conditions of genuine emancipation. However, to the extent that we can identify such emancipatory possibilities in their work, there is a marked contrast between the earnest project of New Left liberation in Marcuse's work of the 1960s and Žižek's ironic

Lacanian inversions of the meaning of emancipation and oppression.¹ Where Žižek's ironic quietism at times celebrates non-action as the highest mode of action, Marcuse's schematic vision of the transcendent and immanent forces within the human provides for both the ineradicable possibilities and the justification of liberation. But neither, for theoretical reasons, offers sufficient detail on the nature of the transformation and revolution as to be directly actionable. But rather than assessing merely whether a political theory ought to be sufficiently detailed to enable its concrete enactment in isolation, as many have done, I assess the work of Marcuse and Žižek by reference to the more robust set of criteria for a successful political theory that can be drawn from Kant and Horkheimer. By this means, we can determine more clearly the significance and merit of Marcuse's and Žižek's philosophies of emancipation for political theory.

The Identification of the Problem:

The space for leftist, non-capitalist alternatives is already radically delimited in both Marcuse and Žižek. Marcuse explains the absence of revolution in part by reference to counterrevolutionary measures. Capitalism does not constitute a passive object for future critique, but rather an active mechanism for sustaining the operations of oppression precisely by invoking the terrifying specter of communism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, counterrevolution responds to 1960s left protest movements around the world by preventive mechanisms in advance of any actual revolution, a move that is therefore warranted only by fear of the spectral revolution. "Here, there is no recent revolution to be undone, and there is none in the offing" (Marcuse 1972: 2). It is rather "fear of revolution [that] creates the common interest [and] links the various stages and forms of the counterrevolution ... run[ning] the whole gamut from parliamentary democracy via the police state to open dictatorship" (Ibid.). In response to this fear, "[c]apitalism reorganizes itself to meet the threat of a revolution which would be the most radical of all historical revolutions" (ibid.). The result of this preemptive war is that the Left is overwhelmed and badly weakened through the direct inversion of its vision of liberation into totalitarianism, thus making the task of revolution far more difficult.

What makes this false construction of communist revolution particularly effective for counterrevolutionary purposes is that it is only one element in a wider system of ideology or false consciousness that constitutes Marcuse's main explanation for Western tranquility in the midst of capitalist oppression. Ideology restricts the range of possible systems to a Manichaean duality in which capitalism is the seat of everything good and communism the seat of everything evil. Even the inequalities of capitalism are posited as a necessary condition of its maximization of freedom and social utility. Moreover, this ideology incorporates within the proletarian target audience a set of consumer norms, the rejection of which alienates the movement from the workers it seeks to convert. Thus, the very measures of counter-behavior by which the Left enables a radical counter-image to the capitalist universe "isolate, in open hostility, the radical movement from 'the people'" (Marcuse 1972: 31). Because socialist and Marxist forms are not grounded in the working population and "the radical difference between a free society and the existing one remains obscured—as do the very real possibilities of establishing a free society[,] [!]liberation thus appears a threat: it becomes taboo" (ibid.). Ideology may itself be impotent to conceal the ongoing dissolution of its capitalist conditions, but its formerly open status is now "incorporated in the goods and services of the consumer society; they sustain the false consciousness of the good life" (Marcuse 1972: 85). So, people do not rebel because they do not realize that they have it bad. And they do not realize how bad they have it or how society might change to their benefit, because ideology has retreated into concealment from open theoretical exposure, so that it is no longer subject to public critique and refutation. In other words, Marcuse argues that capitalist hegemony is sustained by its psychological and linguistic incorporation below the sphere of our conscious systems of evaluation and acceptance.

This identification of the barriers to liberation very much dictates the measures to be taken. Because he regards the primary problems as the dominance of false consciousness, the productivity principle, and the defensive measures of conservative institutions, Marcuse argues that revolution entails a transformation in consciousness, language, and the rigidified forms of capitalist ideology.² Yet, as we have seen, the very measures by which revolution is to be attained alienate the people even further from the revolutionaries. Hence, the inability to see the nature and value of

liberation constitutes an almost insuperable barrier to emancipation. If the proletariat will not act for itself, it must be led to action by others conscious of the revolutionary situation as a whole. For this reason, Marcuse accepts a classically Marxist analysis of the revolutionary actors, a combination of the proletariat and revolutionary vanguard. He argues that the power structures sustaining social domination “can be brought down only by those who still sustain the established work process, who constitute its human base, who reproduce its profits and its power,” but this revolutionary base requires help, for “the emancipation of *consciousness*” is the primary condition for revolution within this group, the working class, sections of the middle class, and the intelligentsia (Marcuse 1972: 132). This form of emancipation is crucial to revolution not only because it enables these classes to recognize their true interests,³ as in traditional accounts, but also because it targets the most insidious form of capitalist domination, a falsely harmonizing realist consciousness. For this reason, critical theory is crucial to revolution. Marcuse argues that the comprehension of the interrelation of positive and negative facts about our social existence “shatters the harmonizing consciousness and its false realism. Critics’ thought strives to define the irrational character of the established rationality (which becomes increasingly obvious) and to define the tendencies which cause this rationality to generate its own transformation” (Marcuse 1964: 231). Critical theory responds to the need for an emancipatory consciousness by making explicit for consciousness the dissonant positive and negative facts of social domination, the irrationality of rational enlightenment forms of domination.

Against this general structure of capitalist ideology, Marcuse’s Freudian constitution of an alternative to capitalism targets the internal limitations contained within the unconscious and subconscious rules for language, thought, and valuation. Hence, he identifies the construction of an alternative language as a prerequisite for revolt. An entire system of oppression is incorporated within language. In order to combat this inherently reconciliatory language, a new language is essential, because “of the need for an effective *communication* of the indictment of the established reality and of the goals of liberation” (Marcuse 1972: 79). Therefore, cultural revolution requires “the effort to find forms of communication that may break the oppressive rule of the established language and images over the mind and body of man—language and

images which have long since become a means of domination, indoctrination, and deception” (ibid.). There is some Orwellian linguistic determinism in this notion that language is a means of domination and that the overthrow of the existing society requires the transformation of language. Marcuse argues that “[c]ommunication of the radically nonconformist, new historical goals of the revolution requires an equally nonconformist language (in the widest sense), a language that reaches a population which has introjected the needs and values of their masters and managers and made them their own, thus reproducing the established system in their minds, their consciousness, their senses and instincts” (Marcuse 1972: 79-80). In Marcuse’s analysis, then, there are psychological-linguistic as well as political means of domination, but the two are connected, for there is a linguistic and psychological mirroring, originating causally in the linguistic rules and psychological process of introjection, between general social structures and individual valuations and ways of thinking. The causal direction is from universal to singular: dominance on the social level determines obedience on the individual level.

Combatting this linear dominance requires the transformation of linguistic rules. But such a transformation cannot occur *ex nihilo*, for it entails the adaptation of “the language of the oppressed,” in so far as this language, in contrast to hegemonic language, contains “a natural affinity to protest and refusal,” and thus, as in “black language,” “strengthens solidarity, the consciousness of [black] identity, and of [its] repressed or distorted cultural tradition,” “militat[ing] against generalization” (Marcuse 1972: 80). The logical objection is that if the hegemonic language is itself the problem to be overcome, in so far as it is dominating and most dominating with respect to the most highly oppressed class, then there cannot be an extant language of the oppressed that constitutes something radically other.⁴ Marcuse’s response is that this alternative language has itself been “permitted, sanctioned” by the tradition (ibid.). Hence, the tradition already contains within itself a means for its critique. A second means by which the dominant social structures can be questioned and transformed is art, which can radically alter the sensuous perceptions of individuals and “express the experience of the body (*and* the ‘soul’), not as vehicles of labor power and resignation, but as vehicles of liberation”; a sensuous culture would involve “the radical transformation of man’s

sense experience and receptivity: their emancipation from a self-propelling, profitable, and mutilating productivity” (Marcuse 1972: 82). Art thus provides a model for the emancipatory transformation of experiential receptivity.⁵ The transformation of the social totality, then, originates in the transformation of individual forms of experience and language.

Marcuse’s Positive Vision of Liberation:

But if Marcuse extends possibilities for liberation to forms of thought, language, politics, economy, and human relationships, his vision of that liberation, like his construction of revolution in the Great Refusal, is primarily negative, a cancelling out of current power structures and their replacement by liberation movements. He justifies this reluctance to spell out the character of the future society by his view that the revolution cannot be proleptically identified in its nature and conditions in advance of events. In the long term, capitalism will fall, but “Marxian theory cannot prophesy which form of society (if any) will replace it” (Marcuse 1972: 29). Nor can the sorts of activities in that utopian state be delineated by reference to the present, because, as he says in a late interview in response to accusations of vagueness, “[i]n this kind of criticism you take people as they are today - managed, greatly repressed, and so on and transpose them to a free society which will not only have entirely different institutions, but also entirely different human beings ... in an entirely different society ... [t]hey will damn well know what to do” (Marcuse 1981: 368). The mere negation of present institutions and human practices cannot spell out in advance the nature of a radically altered society. Hence, Marcuse’s positive notions of liberation, revolution, and utopia are highly provisional for good reason. He argues that the aim of revolution is liberation, and liberation requires the thoroughgoing transformation of the physiological, economic, political, and psychological forms of domination. But he cannot specify the precise or even general nature of such an emancipation, for it can be envisioned and actualized only within that future emancipated society.

Yet, Marcuse elsewhere problematizes this justification in arguing that what is to come arises from out of the historical situation and that it is only from out of our historical situation that we can project possibilities for the future. Indeed, an

accurate historical understanding is essential to emancipation on this account, in so far as he locates the primary barrier to emancipation in the proletariat's false consciousness. Hence, even as he denies this connection in order to escape the need to set forth any determinate vision of the future, he positively asserts the connection of the future to the present. But in order to articulate this future vision from out of the historical situation, he would first have to articulate a coherent theoretical apparatus for determining the nature of reality non-ideologically, whether in the past, present, or future. As Tomash Dabrowski argues, he lacks any such mechanism, for he precludes any positivistic or factual description of the present by claiming that such descriptions simultaneously entail normative or evaluative perspectives, and he lacks any overarching mechanism for integrating normative and factual descriptions of society as such (Dabrowski 2015: 8-9). Thus, before examining the details of an emancipated society that Marcuse does divulge, it is important to understand that he never resolves the problem of how to understand and thus describe a society as a whole non-ideologically, yet normatively, whether in the past, present, or future.

On the level of government, he argues that were this most spectral of possibilities to realize itself in revolution, the capitalist superpower would be replaced "by a government of the liberation movements committed to introduce long overdue radical social and economic changes," changes that would extend to the Soviet world as well as the capitalist countries (Marcuse 1972: 2). To understand these changes, we cannot look merely to past revolutions. Marcuse envisions this revolution as radical in quality, rather than quantity, though also differential in degree, according to the status of present economies and states. "[I]n the capitalist countries themselves, the revolution would be *qualitatively* different from its abortive precursors ... In its most advanced tendencies, this revolution could break the repressive continuum which today still ties socialist reconstruction competitively to capitalist progress," thereby enabling socialism to "overcome the fetishism of the 'productive forces'" (ibid.). Recall here Marcuse's critique of the productivity principle. Even socialist governments fetishized or set up as the be-all and end-all of economy the unceasing development of productive forces in their battle with the West. Because the productivity principle is itself characteristic of capitalism, which universalizes and internalizes industrial economic drives, a true

alternative to capitalism cannot merely refine the productivity principle or re-direct it toward the people. What is required instead is the transformation of the oppressive structures incorporated in individuals.

Now, by Marcuse's account, capitalism was itself already transforming itself toward liberation in advance of the revolution. This immanent move within capitalism itself, which involves the transformation of the economy from industrial, material production to creative labor, intellectual work (Marcuse 1981: 368), simultaneously enables a humanizing move, a movement to

living labor, ... which could open the possibility of changing the direction and goals of material production itself. Human labor, instead of being a commodity... could produce for human needs in accordance with the law of freedom—the needs of a liberated human existence; an alternative ... which would involve the subversion of the material *and* intellectual culture. The consumer society raises the specter not only of an economic but also of a cultural revolution: a new civilization where culture ... shapes society in its entirety ... and which radically changes prevalent values and aspirations (Marcuse 1972: 30-31).

Hence, for Marcuse, capitalism's own internalization in the shift from industrial material production to internal, intellectual or living labor holds the possibility for a complete transformation of its methods, purposes, and values. The prospect of this de-alienation of labor is therefore quite radical, although the gradualism implicit in this account would seem the precise target of Žižek's criticisms of "liberal communist" meliorism. To this point, we have seen little in Marcuse's vision that does not merely adopt the form of (in)determinate negation. Everything liberatory takes the form of the non-; the future society will be non-productive, non-oppressive, non-capitalist, etc. Even free, living labor is defined indeterminately as non-repressive and non-commodified. This 'tarrying with the negative' is predominantly the case as well in the revolutionary images and possibilities that Marcuse glimpses in the aptly-named Great Refusal, the array of third world revolutions and first world revolts taking place at the end of the 1960s. In these movements, there are counter-images of revolutionary practice, which "foreshadow" the changes to come.

The exhibition of a noncompetitive behavior, the rejection of brutal 'virility', the debunking of the capitalist productivity of work, the affirmation of the sensibility, sensuality of the body, the ecological protest, the contempt for the false heroism in outer space and colonial wars, the Women's Liberation Movement [conceived not as an equality defined on masculine terms] ... the rejection of the anti-erotic, puritan cult of plastic beauty and cleanliness—all these tendencies contribute to the weakening of the Performance Principle, ... [and] 'anticipate' on an individual and small group level the extreme 'utopian' aspects of socialism" (Marcuse 1972: 31).

Emerging revolutionary practices, not bloodless political theory, thus, trace out possibilities for a future liberated society, but mainly by crossing out and cancelling the current power structure, being non-competitive, denying capitalist productivity, protesting ecological destruction, disdaining the false heroism of space travel and colonial warfare, rejecting masculine dominance and the anti-erotic. To be sure, Marcuse also positively affirms sensibility and bodily sensuality, and taken as a whole his list of negatives provides for a clearer picture of a future noncompetitive society in which masculine virtues and the productivity principle no longer govern, and ecology, sensibility, bodily sensuality, and eros are paramount.

But he also undermines his theoretical justification for withholding details about the emancipated society by denying that there is any great difference between it and the current radical movements. Marcuse argues that the concrete political practice of young revolutionaries coincides closely with, though surpassing, his own hypotheses.

They have again raised a specter (and this time a specter which haunts not only the bourgeoisie but all exploitative bureaucracies): the specter of a revolution which subordinates the productive forces and higher standards of living to the requirements of creating solidarity for the human species, for abolishing poverty and misery beyond all national frontiers and spheres of interest, for the attainment of peace ... they have taken the idea of revolution out of the continuum of repression and placed it into its authentic dimension: that of liberation (Marcuse 1969: ix-x).

Hence, the outlines of the future society are already being constituted for him in revolutionary practice, independently of the intellectual. Nevertheless, the intellectual remains crucial. Revolution requires an instinctual rebellion “accompanied and guided by the rebellion of reason”; by rending the “technological and ideological veil” concealing the total structure of domination, people can “become free to develop their own needs, to build, in solidarity, their own world” (Marcuse 1972: 131). Here the transformation of theory becomes paramount. The weak New Left needs “the restoration of Marxian theory: its emancipation from its own fetishism and ritualization, from the petrified rhetoric which arrests its dialectical development” (CR29); ideology and false consciousness are “rampant on the New as well as Old Left” (Marcuse 1972: 29). As an enterprise primarily of the transformation of consciousness, liberation entails that the left combine a newly revitalized critical theory with concrete revolutionary political practices. The movement by which liberation could occur would be “an effectively organized radical Left, assuming the vast task of *political education*, dispelling the false and mutilated consciousness of the people, so that they themselves experience their condition, and its abolition, as vital need, and apprehend the ways and means of their liberation” (Marcuse 1972: 28).⁶ Economic conditions delimit the possibilities for change but also enable them in so far as they bring to consciousness the falsity of ideological constructions of society. Therein lies the possibility of freedom. “Within the framework of the objective conditions, the alternatives (fascism or socialism) depend on the intelligence and the will, the consciousness and the sensibility, of human beings. It depends on their still-existing *freedom*” (Marcuse 1972: 29). Thus, there is an element of methodological individualism in Marcuse’s work in tension with his communitarian priority of society to the individual. He argues that cultural revolution aims directly “at the roots of capitalism in the individuals themselves” (Marcuse 1972: 82); “[t]he end of reification is the beginning of the individual: the new Subject of radical reconstruction” (Marcuse 1972: 131). But this subject is historically constructed, for its own genesis depends on “a process which shatters the traditional framework of radical theory and practice,” founded “in the actual historical situation” (ibid.). The theoretical and practical elements necessary for revolution are thus synthesized in Marcuse’s analysis of liberation through the transformation of the unconscious and subconscious

limits on individual consciousness. This identification of the problem is itself hidebound and ideological, of the character of generations of Marxist doctrine. But there is also a future-oriented approach in Marcuse.

He argues that critical theory has heretofore limited itself to the determination of the existing nature and status of present and past societies and indications of future-directed tendencies, but the time has come to think about the utopian possibilities for the future (Marcuse 1969: 3). While the powers of technological rationality contain utopian possibilities for the elimination of all want, they hold no means of eliminating repression and domination (Marcuse 1969: 4). The prospects of total revolution remain dim and extant power structures might well prepare far more totalitarian means of containment, yet “beyond these limits, there is also the space, both physical and mental, for building a realm of freedom which is not that of the present: liberation also from the liberties of the exploitative order – a liberation which must precede the construction of a free society, one which necessitates an historical break with the present order” (Marcuse 1969: viii). The question then becomes how individuals can liberate themselves before their society, which means that they must first avoid repressing themselves through their internalization of social demands (Marcuse 1969: 4). Where capitalism involves the “steered satisfaction of material needs” (Marcuse 1972: 14), self-liberation involves the autonomous or autochthonous generation of our own needs. We must change the very needs and forms of satisfactions that currently reproduce social structures of domination even in the satisfaction of these needs (Marcuse 1969: 4). “The revolution involves a radical transformation of the needs and aspirations themselves, cultural as well as material; of consciousness and sensibility; of the work process as well as leisure” (Marcuse 1972: 16-17).

Marcuse, like Derrida, picking up on Freud’s late metapsychological writings in *Eros and Civilization*, sees in the fundamental drives of *eros* and *thanatos* the essential basis for this transformation of society in accordance with human nature. This move is simultaneously revolutionary and conservative, in that it identifies a constant, unchangeable human essence immanent within us, beneath all superficial changes, as the means for constituting a transcendent critique and radical transformation of human society. Nature is immanent to the extent that it constitutes what we are and what we

can become, in shaping our potential, but it is also transcendent in its difference from our social constitution and ideological consciousness. This resistance to facticity provides the otherness, the alterity, necessary to constitute a radically different system. Of course, there is something metaphysical and ahistorical in Marcuse's non-experiential postulate of an identifying, unifying Ur-drive of Eros as a natural force acting beneath, explaining, and generating possibilities for resistance to extant social structures. Indeed, the very notion that nature is ever-present, and thus, ineliminable, but also absent, because not instantiated, depends on an equivocation between nature as act and potency. But this problem can be raised of any political theory. And Marcuse is not so unorthodox a Marxist as to deny that political theory must take account of social and historical, as well as natural, forces. Thus, he stresses the importance of the historical situation and, in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, he lauds cultural revolution for drawing "into the political struggle the realm of nonmaterial needs (of self-determination, nonalienated human relationships), and the physiological dimension of existence: the realm of nature" (Marcuse 1972: 129). Revolution for Marcuse involves the transcendent and immanent dimensions of our autonomy, our corporeal nature, and our greater communal relations.

Žižek's Analysis:

While he similarly privileges ideology and fear in explaining Western quiescence in the face of domination, Žižek's analysis of the obstacles to revolution adds two distinct positive mechanisms to Marcuse's account. First, he argues that the specter of communism, coupled with the actual historical co-presence of communist states, served as a justification not only for repressive counterrevolutionary measures, but also for a strong social welfare state. The linkage of communism with Stalinist totalitarianism that we see in Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* was used as a pretext for rejecting genuinely emancipatory measures. "Throughout its entire career, 'totalitarianism' was an ideological notion that sustained the complex operation of 'taming free radicals', of guaranteeing the liberal-democratic hegemony, dismissing the Leftist critique of liberal democracy as the obverse, the 'twin', of the Rightist Fascist

dictatorship ... the moment one accepts the notion of 'totalitarianism', one is firmly located within the liberal-democratic horizon" (Žižek 2011: 3). Hence, the specter of totalitarianism served to rule out any emancipatory alternatives to neo-liberalism. But during the Cold War the threat of actually existing communist states also served to *humanize* the liberal-democratic hegemonic order, to pacify a population otherwise potentially susceptible to communist appeals. Hence, we had what Žižek calls "capitalism with a human face." The defensive provision of a welfare state, together with broad, unheard of prosperity and strict counterrevolutionary measures, helps to account for the absence of revolution in Western democracies during the period in which Marcuse was writing *Eros and Civilization*, *One-Dimensional Man*, and *Counterrevolution and Revolt*.

In order to account for the continued popular docility since the end of the Cold War, Žižek proposes a second mechanism that similarly gives capitalism a human face, but in the private sector. The fall of the Eastern Bloc brought with it the demise of any extant alternatives to capitalism. "With the collapse of the Communist states, humanity has abandoned the old millenarian utopian dreams and accepted the constraints of reality (read: of capitalist socio-economic reality) with all its attendant impossibilities: *You cannot* ... engage in collective political acts (which necessarily end in totalitarian terror), or cling to the old Welfare State (it makes you non-competitive and leads to economic crisis) ... Such is life in the post-political era of the naturalized economy" (Žižek 2011a: 419). The consequent ideological narrowing of horizons eliminated the perceived self-interest of Western governments to humanize liberal democracies. Accordingly, we have seen over the past quarter century a radical privatization of government and the commons, from auxiliary military functions to ownership of utilities, public schools, the airwaves, and personal data. The tactics of fear-mongering ensure that the most radical transfer of public good to private hands takes place under the aegis of free market liberation. And ideology insures that the most emancipatory rhetoric of the 1960s is used in service of the greatest Orwellian and oligarchic projects to capture and exploit for profit all individual and collective properties and identities. With the concomitant weakening of the welfare state and the exacerbation of political and economic inequality, popular emancipatory projects have

been drained of money and support, and channeled instead into alternative private sector enterprises that, in some cases, integrate within the very consumerist act, the ethical concern for the environment, fair wages, and so on (Žižek 2011a: 356). This form of ethical capitalism, in contrast to Marcuse's view of a transformative, yet immanent form of humanizing capitalist progression, entrenches corporate capitalism by providing a safety valve for the very tensions that the system creates and appropriating anti-capitalist ethical positions for the preservation of the capitalist system. Hence, communism becomes less and less of a threat than ever before, despite massive economic and environmental dislocation.

However, as the threat of communism becomes increasingly spectral, it comes to be applied to increasingly minute deviations from the prevailing brand of economic neo-liberalism as a means of shutting down the possibility of any emancipatory change. Even mild, almost inconsequential variations on a certain vision of free market capitalism such as the Affordable Care Act's privatized insurance market, conceived originally by the rightwing Heritage Foundation as a bulwark against single payer government insurance, now bring with them charges of totalitarianism (fascism, socialism, communism), in utter contrast to the reality of the policies. Under these very different circumstances, Hannah Arendt's identification of non-capitalist movements as totalitarian still provides the implicit basis for this rejection of any attempt to conceive of emancipatory alternatives to capitalism. "[T]he notion of 'totalitarianism', far from being an effective theoretical concept, ... instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes[,] ... relieves us of the duty to think or even actively *prevents* us from thinking" (Žižek 2011: 3). Thinking about alternatives becomes impossible within the narrow borders of liberal-democratic thought, because anything other constitutes, by definition, an impossible totalitarianism. Hence, "the moment one shows the slightest inclination to engage in political projects that aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: 'Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!'" (Žižek 2011: 3-4). Emancipatory projects always remain within the narrow bounds of an ameliorated version of capitalism. We cannot even begin the process of envisioning something other in a conceptual world in which there is either the current system or the Gulag or Holocaust, which function "as

the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical engagement” (Žižek 2011: 4). The space for radical emancipatory projects is eliminated in advance from the possibility of discussion.

We see in this emphasis on the possibility of thinking otherwise precisely why Žižek’s ultimate emphasis is not on practical solutions or strategies for the overcoming of capitalism. If he provides us no “coherent political or ethical program,” as Butler charges (Homer 2013: 714),⁷ the reason is that he believes that rather than ‘unthinking’ action, our first task is thinking. By breaking through the stultifying, disabling categories of present political theory, we enable action.⁸ But if our task is not primarily to act, but to enable action through thinking, we should not adopt a postmodernist approach to justice, according to Žižek. A Derridean account of society as structurally undecidable and justice as an impossible otherness that is always futural or ‘to come’ would necessarily cast aside all action “as potentially ‘totalitarian’,” as ideationally totalizing presence in its enclosure of the totality of its utopian endstate (Žižek 2011: 6). We must be engaged in a process of bringing the future to presence, rather than asserting that it can never arrive without eo ipso becoming totalitarian. Yet, reflection places the very nature of action in question, for Žižek argues that revolution can occur through the mode of non-action. “The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a ‘critical’ participation, a dialogue, to silence ... Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do” (Žižek 2008: 217). Hence, he variously champions not voting or submitting blank ballots, “reject[ing] the very frame of decision” (Žižek 2008: 214, 216), offering silence and non-action in the face of the 2008 financial collapse, and withdrawing, like Lenin in WWI, into the position of passive observer of systematic self-destruction (Žižek 2012a: 109). Although such tactics all too often result in the consolidation of repressive power, rather than its subversion, there is still a certain reasonability to this logic of non-participation, a sort of ideational simulacrum of Marcuse’s Great Refusal. To refrain from action in the face of the destruction of the capitalist financial system in 2008, for instance, would have enabled precisely this self-destruction, as the Federal Reserve provided at least \$12.3 trillion in liquidity and short-term loans to large corporations, financial and others, to prevent the markets from total collapse.⁹ Hence, the most radical political act may sometimes

consist in withdrawal from action into thought, rather than blind action. Voting could not in any case be the solution, on Žižek's reading, because democracy as presently constituted is too restricted to get at the fundamental problems.

We do not get to vote on who owns what, or on relations in a factory and so on, for all this is deemed beyond the sphere of the political, and it is illusory to expect that one can actually change things by 'extending' democracy to this sphere, by, say, organizing 'democratic' banks under the people's control. Radical changes in this domain should be made outside the sphere of legal 'rights', etcetera ... It is the 'democratic illusion', the acceptance of democratic procedures as the sole framework for any possible change, that blocks any radical transformation of capitalist relations (Žižek 2012a: 87).

What is to be overthrown consists not in political actors and institutions per se, but in ideas, for they form the real terms of the state. As Sean Homer argues, the revolutionary act for Žižek involves engaging in the "patient ideological-critical work" of thinking about the idea of communism (Homer, 708). In this sense, the reflective act is a necessary precursor and element of the revolutionary act. The need is not only to offer "solutions to the problems posed by 'society' (the state and capital), but to reflect on the very form these 'problems' take, to re-formulate them, to discern a problem in the very way we perceive such problems" (Žižek 2011a: 411). As Deleuze argues, we do not only have right and wrong solutions; we also have right and wrong problems (Žižek 2008: 129).

Solution as Problem-Construction:

The far-reaching transformation of social ontology that Žižek posits in his reflection on the nature of the problems goes well beyond Marcuse's critique of hegemonic language, because it shifts from contingent questions of the identity of those who determine its particular grammar and vocabulary to a radical reconstruction of what is meant by reality itself. Žižek's Lacanian transformation of political ontology recognizes that revolution entails questioning the long-standing ideational links between capitalism, empiricism, and realism. The analysis and overcoming of capitalism in its concrete

universality cannot grapple with its reality as long as it relies on a straightforward flesh and blood understanding of the nature of the real as constituted by objects and individuals. As Žižek argues in his account of M. Night Shyamalan's film, *The Village*, "there is more reality in the haunting specters than in direct reality itself" (Žižek 2008: 221n13). Hence, we cannot merely

claim that the specter of [capitalism as] this self-engendering monster that pursues its path disregarding any human or environmental concern is an ideological abstraction and that behind this abstraction there are real people and natural objects on whose productive capacities and resources capital's circulation is based on which it feeds like a gigantic parasite. The problem is that this 'abstraction' is not only in our financial speculators' misperception of social reality, but that it is 'real' in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes: the fate of whole strata of the population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the 'solipsistic' speculative dance of capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality (Žižek 2008: 12).

As in Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, reality is not to be defined nominalistically merely by individual entities, but also by the conditions enabling the determination of social structures and processes. However, there is a difference. For Žižek, it is impossible to grasp "*the social reality of material production and social interaction*" in the absence of "the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes," and which defines "the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism" (Žižek 2008: 12). The ideological superstructure of capitalism is its real basis, and it has a greater claim to reality than particular actions and physical entities, since this abstraction is precisely what enables the entire system. Hence, Žižek rejects Marcuse's account of capitalist ideology as false consciousness to be dispelled by a realist portrait of society, because he recognizes the real material significance of that ideological picture of the world. The ideological picture is itself the determining force behind capitalism. For this reason, the aim of a critique of capitalism is first to recognize the reality of the metaphysical dance of capitalism. The speculative realm is the realm of reality in a capitalist society.

Žižek's account of the structural violence of the state further demonstrates his identification of emancipation with thought's transformation of reality. The state's structural violence depends on this same inversion and transformation of the opposition between the real and the ideal to revolutionarily reconstitute the meaning of reality and the means by which revolution can occur and be justified. On this view, our typical nominalist understanding of violence in terms of individual, material acts blinds us to the essential structural violence grounding and sustaining the state. There is an enormous difference in scale and persistence between the two, for the state's structural violence is universal in scale, normalized, systematic, and unrelenting, if largely unremarked, whereas individual, material acts of violence tend to be, by comparison, sporadic, feeble, and unsystematic, despite their wide publicity. The proper emancipatory response is to engage on the massive scale of structural violence. Hence, for Žižek, actual universality is not a mode of peaceful reconciliation; it is strife, "the negativity of a particular identity," which occurs when the oppressed, the part of no part, engages in collective struggle (Žižek 2008: 157).

By re-situating violence within the normal structure of capitalism, rather than in isolated physical acts,¹⁰ Žižek reconceives the nature and locus of violence and provides alternative possibilities for its justification, transformation, and re-direction. One possibility is considerably rougher than his metaphysical games and ironic modes of non-action would suggest. His account of structural violence forgives and even legitimates the finite series of individual physical acts necessary to overthrow the capitalist state, since the massive scale of existing structural violence necessarily dwarfs individual acts of resistance. Although it is unclear that an alternative emancipatory politics would lessen structural violence, we can see in this general analysis why he commends the subjective violence advocated in Bertolt Brecht's poem, "The Interrogation of the Good." Brecht asks, "what should be done with the good man?" The answer is that the good man, who bears resemblance to what Žižek calls the "liberal communist" meliorist, should be shot "with a good bullet from a good gun" (Žižek 2008: 38-39). Žižek's approving use of this poem seems to favor 'subjective' acts of violence against all who stand in the way of the revolution, including those whose philanthropic acts reduce revolutionary tensions, rather than undermine the system. On

this account, the violence of revolution would never be as bad as sustaining the status quo, and so individual acts of violence would be justified. Along these lines, it seems that he would justify violence against even those ameliorative interventions that set forth alternative economies and other emancipatory possibilities (universal basic income, community scrip, grocery cooperatives), in so far as they too diminish the tensions underlying a possible revolution.¹¹

A second, more radical element of Žižek's position is that we should direct ourselves against structural, symbolic or objective violence. On this view, his focus on structural violence means that he champions an ideational transformation of the nature of capitalist reality in order to destroy its truly speculative reality, the metaphysical dance of capitalism. This method entails structural transformation, and hence, massive structural violence, even if it does not require anything other than peaceful, "non-violent" resistance coupled with the violent intellectual revaluation of all values. "The ultimate difference between radical-emancipatory politics and ... outbursts of impotent violence is that an authentic political gesture is *active*, it imposes, enforces a vision, while outbursts of impotent violence are fundamentally *reactive*" (Žižek 2008: 212-13). Indeed, individual acts of violence would not necessarily undermine the system's ideational underpinnings. Thus, liberation entails ideological, rather than physical, attacks.

This violence would be spectral, rather than individual, but its effects would be wide-ranging and basic to life. And in the transformation of society, there would be no resolution of strife, for struggle is not reconciled even in the allied transformation of language, in contrast to Marcuse's account. This approach breaks down the dichotomy between peaceful civil society and violent revolution by re-situating violence within the origins but also the *preservation* of civil society. For Žižek, the political act is necessarily paradoxical, in that "the unity and law of a civil society is imposed onto the people by an act of violence whose agent is not motivated by any moral considerations" (Žižek 2011a: 32). Violence is internal even to social contract theory, whose hypothetical founders require force, as Kant argues, "to establish the juridical condition, on the compulsion of which public law will later be established" (Žižek 2011a: 32). Hence, violence is a feature necessary to the grounding of authority, under

whose conditions of force alone it will become possible for a moral society to arise and be sustained. Hence, the preservation of civil society also constitutes a form of structural violence. The “fundamental systemic violence of capitalism” consists, as we have seen, in capitalism’s metaphysical speculation (Žižek 2008: 12). Hence, Žižek undermines the terror of revolution by subverting the posited distinction between civil society and the state of war. It is not only the state of nature and international relations among sovereign states that constitute a war of all against all, as in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, but also the state itself. In Kleist’s novella, *Michael Kohlhaas*, “it is not the law-founding violence which, once its rule is established, becomes law-preserving; on the contrary, it is the very law-preserving violence which, brought to its extreme, turns into the violent founding of a new law” (Žižek 2011: 33). This form of law-preserving, structural violence has the potential to quantitatively dwarf the manifold acts of revolutionary violence. One example is of a devastating economic crisis, which manifests as a natural force but really constitutes violence (Žižek 2011a: 387). And even revolutionary violence may attain an ex post facto justification on the Kantian model, for Kant argues that while revolutionary acts against an existing, if bad, constitution would be rightly punishable, “[i]f a violent revolution, engendered by a bad constitution, introduces by illegal means a more legal constitution, to lead the people back to the earlier constitution would not be permitted” (in Žižek 2011a: 32). Violence is contained within the very form of the state, underlying the possibility of peace, and therefore it is radically sublimated, removed from the possibility of its questioning. The act of identifying this subterranean form of violence, then, is a revolutionary act in that it exposes the conditions for a critique of the de facto state, and thereby makes possible the justification of its overthrow. The political act accomplishes precisely this transformation, in so far as it creates the conditions and criteria for its own success. We cannot then determine in advance the nature of the political act. What is to be done cannot be divided up into a dichotomy between particular and universal actions, for “we must insist first on the dialectical link between the particular [local pragmatic interventions] and the universal [“a radical violent Act, a total revolutionary upheaval”], as a result of which the very focus on an apparently particular problem can trigger a global transformation” (Žižek 2011a: 398). The local thus becomes global and the global

local in the nexus of pragmatic interventions and radical *passage à l'acte*. But this requires a direct linkage of particular and universal struggle. Žižek argues that “[t]he only way to break the deadlock is to propose and fight for a positive universal project shared by all participants. This is why a crucial task of those struggling for emancipation today is to move beyond mere respect for others towards a positive emancipatory *Leitkultur* which alone can sustain an authentic coexistence and immixing of different cultures” (Žižek 2011a: 416). Liberation consists here not in a particular positive substance or a negative absence of external constraints, for

the Real of an indigestible traumatic encounter ... [is] not opposed to freedom – it is its very condition ... [the shock of encountering the mysterious other] opens up a gap which the subject is free to fill in with his (ultimately failed) endeavors to symbolize it. Freedom is ultimately *nothing but* the space opened up by the traumatic encounter, the space to be filled in by its contingent/inadequate symbolizations/translations ... [and as such this message] is the ‘vanishing mediator’ between determinism and hermeneutics ... by breaking the determinist causal chain, it opens up the space for signification(s) (Žižek 2011: 58-59).

By its very nature, then, the radical political act cannot constitute the positivity of ethical substance as a set of specified actions and rules. Liberation entails an immanent enactment of the space of freedom even and precisely as the impossibility of its closure in a fully specified, anticipatory political sphere. This again is why Žižek, like Marcuse, will provide no such absolutely articulated utopian characterization of a future emancipation. There is something in the nature of liberation itself that forecloses any such attempt. The want of particular details does not consist in the poverty of liberatory imagination. Emancipation necessarily remains spectral. But it is precisely the indigestible traumatic encounter with the spectral other, the movement into the antagonism of the social class, that enables emancipation from the totalizing individual ‘autonomy’ of liberal atomism.

What we should expect of Marcuse’s and Žižek’s political theories:

To this point, we have been describing and judging the emancipatory political theories of Marcuse and Žižek without properly examining the standards by which they ought to be judged. In order to determine their significance for political theory, we ought to be asking, first, what exactly are the proper standards for a successful political theory and, second, how do their theories accord with these standards? Now, if we think about the kinds of criticisms to which political theories are generally subject, it seems clear that ideally we would want a political theory to be critical, self-reflexive, prescriptive, predictive, productive, performative, practical, historical, genealogical, and true, even if we may not reasonably expect that any particular theory will accept or fulfill all of these criteria. A political theory should be critical and self-reflexive in order to articulate the extant problems and future potential of human society and to take account of how the political theorist's activity affects the nature of the theory. Political theory should be prescriptive or normative, so that we can assess history and the contemporary critically and posit visionary standards for what ought to be done in the future. In order to connect facticity to this visionary standard, political theory should be able to predict the future, in so far as it is relevant to the truth of the theory, and accurately describe the past and the origins of the present, so that it can chart the course of history that would or ought to justify or describe the conditions of the theory's enactment. Hence, it should also be able to account for the conditions under which it might be enacted and the problems that its enactment might bring. For these reasons, it should also be historical, genealogical, and true. Finally, so as to engender the very change in society for which it calls, it should be practical, performative, and productive. It must account appropriately for the conditions of its determination in human nature, its history, drives, desires, and motives, and the economic and social state of society. But it must also articulate such a compelling template for change that its very dissemination leads to its realization.

We can see many of these criteria presented, if not affirmed or effected, in Kant and Horkheimer, two figures heavily influential on Marcuse and Žižek. Kant's political essays adopt these empyrean standards only in so far as they are conceived in rational or speculative terms removed from any possible empirical refutation. On his view, political theory is responsible only for articulating the basic principles and

justificatory criteria of social right. Hence, it is unencumbered with establishing the precise details of its implementation and improvement. As a set of general rules or principles “abstracted from numerous conditions which, nonetheless, necessarily influence their practical application,” theory is removed from factual descriptions of contingent singulars (“On the Common Saying,” Kant 1996: 61). Because it remains at the level of the universal, it requires judgment as the middle term between the universal and the singular, theory and practice, in order to establish how the universals ought to be applied to the world. Therefore, the universals cannot be concrete enough to establish the precise nature and position of the singulars or how the transition between universals and singulars can occur. Focus on empirical singularity would be wrong-headed, for the operative question of political theory is the rational *quid iuris?*, not the empirical *quid factum?* “I put my trust in the theory of what the relationships between men and states *ought to be* according to the principle of right” (“On the Common Saying,” Kant 1996: 92); “experience cannot provide knowledge of what is right, and there is a *theory* of political right to which practice must conform before it can be valid” (“On the Common Saying,” Kant 1996: 86). Therefore, political right cannot be judged by reference to practice; practice must be judged by political right. Given this focus on the rational determination of political right over factuality, a genealogy or history of society is necessary only as a heuristic device involving conjectures from imagination and reason, “an exercise in which the imagination, supported by reason, may be allowed to indulge as a healthy mental recreation” (“Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History,” Kant 1996: 221), rather than an absolutely true, evidence-based story of the historical state of nature and the origins of civilization or the basis for an inductive generalization of political right from experience. Since human history is not law-governed (being ruled as a whole neither by instinct, nor rational cosmopolitan laws), we cannot connect the series of events in history by a law-like rational order but only propose a purposive conception of a natural history of planless beings (“Idea for a Universal History,” Kant 1996: 41-42). Hence, “[a] philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of mankind, must be regarded as possible and even as capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself”; this history would advance this purpose “in explaining the

thoroughly confused interplay of human affairs and in prophesying future political changes,” enabling us to project forward an image of the full development of human capacities on earth and to provide a “*justification* of nature” (“Idea for a Universal History,” Kant 1996: 51-53). Thus, political theory utilizes history only as a means to chart the futural possibilities of actualizing our ideal and hence, morally prescribed, capacities. In so doing, theory conceptualizes this ideal standard by which we might judge the present and toward which we can predict society moving in the future.

Therefore, we can describe theory’s rational reconstruction of history as simultaneously prophetic, predictive, and prescriptive as the purposive development of human nature that transcends empirical contingency in constituting the meaning or justification of nature as such. For this reason, Kant denies that political theory must be practical and historical.

Yet, theory has a productive function precisely in its ideational status. As an idea of reason, the social contract “nonetheless has undoubted practical reality; for it can oblige every legislator to frame his laws in such a way that they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation” (“On the Common Saying,” Kant 1996: 79). Because of its distance from the factual, theory is productive or performative in that it obligates legislators by its rational standard of the universalizability of the general will, which sets laws for how all rational beings ought to act, rather than physically compelling them to act. Hence, what is true in theory, namely, the theoretical determination of right, still sets the lawful standard for practice. “[E]verything in morals which is true in theory must also be valid in practice. ... For all this experience will not in any way help us to escape the precepts of theory, but at most to learn how to apply it in better and more universal ways after we have assimilated it into our principles” (“On the Common Saying,” Kant 1996: 72).

Kant’s substantial influence on the Frankfurt School is evident in Max Horkheimer’s foundational 1937 essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory.” Horkheimer, Marcuse’s contemporary and boss as head of the Institute for Social Research,¹² sets forth virtually the same criteria for political theory, while adding a stronger focus on the role of the theoretician. He argues that the distinction between traditional and critical theory begins with the attempt to liberate theory from total fealty to empirical facts by

judging factuality by reference to irreducible values non-identical with existing social norms in a critical, reflexive relationship to the self and the extant social world. Hence, critical theory is prescriptive and productive, but also reflexive. Critical theory must be “a force for change” to produce “the idea of a future society [“a rational society”] as a community of free men, which is possible through technical means already at hand ... and to it there must be fidelity amid all change,” for this idea means “that the dismemberment and irrationality of society can now be eliminated”; the present “fragmented society in which material and ideological power operates to maintain privileges ... [can be transformed into] an association of free men in which each has the same possibility of self-development” (Horkheimer 2002: 215, 217, 219). Critical theory’s aim is “a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression, in which an all-embracing subject, namely self-aware mankind, exists, and in which it is possible to speak of a unified theoretical creation and a thinking that transcends individuals” (Horkheimer 2002: 241). Yet, critical theory cannot in itself bring this about and its liberatory potential cannot be detailed in advance of this future, for “there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future” (Horkheimer 2002: 220-21). Thus, critical theory cannot posit a concrete vision of the future. It has real society as its target but recognizes that it emerges from society, is constituted by it, depends in reciprocal interaction on the material character of society, and must judge it in terms of higher values. Theory must reconceive the nature of the knowing individual, as well as the scientist, from their very roots, cognizant of the limits of its own inquiry, rather than taking “human and nonhuman nature in its entirety as given,” as in the social sciences (Horkheimer 2002: 199). This process is historical, both in the “character of the object perceived and ... the perceiving organ,” neither of which can be understood as purely nature, in isolation from human historical activity (Horkheimer 2002: 200). This historical process is in itself characterized by values as a process mediated by the social totality. So, for Horkheimer, a proper theory, critical theory, will be based on a self-reflexive conception of human society as it is and human history in the course of its development; it will be guided telically by a general understanding of the final prescriptive end of human society, a non-oppressive, rational community of free individuals; and it will play

a crucial role in the achievement of this end, because it is no isolated form of seeing. Although he thought that such a society was already technically realizable, a belief he shared with left and right American technocrats of the 1930s,¹³ he did not believe that a critical theory could absolutely determine either the nature of the free society, or the criteria for a successful theory, because critique attempts to unveil and judge historical processes that themselves constitute the methods and proper objects of critique (Horkheimer 2002: 199-202). Hence, critical theory cannot be judged for predictions of future events, since we do not know what they will be.

By Kantian standards of political theory, then, the theories of Marcuse and Žižek would not need to be pragmatic, experiential, historical, or factual in the sense of establishing the practical conditions of their success or giving a true determination of history and experience. However, they would need to incorporate a fundamentally moral understanding of human nature and be true in their principles, prescriptive, rational, and possible, which is to say, “founded on the *concept of duty*,” where to be worthy of the name, duty must be possible in experience (“On the Common Saying,” Kant 1996: 62). The very articulation of their theories must productively influence their implementation (without necessarily bringing into being the possibility of this realization). They must provide a speculative genealogical picture of human nature and society to enable our thinking about how history might direct itself or be actively oriented toward its ideal future from out of this genealogical past. And for Horkheimer, these theories must also be critical and self-reflexive.

There is no straightforward way to assess whether Marcuse and Žižek accept and fulfil these criteria for a successful political theory, because while their accounts accord with Kantian theory in various ways and adopt Horkheimer’s reflexive criticality, Žižek radically reconceives the Kantian standards that Marcuse arguably accepts. Moreover, the attempt to assess whether they meet these standards is hamstrung by the fact that they armor their theories against possible empirical refutation. Thus, for instance, while they both in some sense provide genealogical sketches of human nature, whether literal or phantasmatic, as a means of determining the nature and possibilities of liberation, their accounts, like that of Kant, allude to a purely speculative domain with a heuristic function, and hence, are unverifiable.

Similarly, on their own terms, if the liberation that they affirm does not occur at any given time, that is no strike against them, because they have made no such determinate predictions. If they postulate no specific means by which liberation can occur, that too is no mark of their theoretical inadequacy, because they regard such theories as overly positivistic. And if they fail to articulate the pathway to, and the precise nature of, that future socialist society, this is merely a feature of a materialist account in which the current social structure prevents any determination of an entirely transformed future society. Nevertheless, if their ability to influence relatively widespread belief (on the left) in their predictions, prescriptions, and critiques speaks well to their performative, productive character, they have to admit that their failure to move society as such toward liberation is damning. This explains, in part, why they place such a heavy emphasis on explaining the continued dominance of capitalism in the face of serious and evident indictments of its own promises.¹⁴ They realize that their theories are not being enacted and that they need to be.

Indeed, if we examine Marcuse's theory more closely on its own terms, it arguably falls short of the Kantian criteria for a successful political theory, to the extent that it can be tested. The claim that he needs to meet these criteria derives not only from Horkheimer and Kant, but from Marcuse himself. Because he identifies false consciousness and a lack of consciousness of the nature and value of liberation as its primary obstacle, and charges the intellectual class, the revolutionary vanguard of political theorists, with responsibility for bringing the masses to full consciousness of their situation, he certainly owes us both a substantial critique of capitalist oppression and a clear and appealing vision of the nature and value of emancipation. The assumption underlying this criticism is that while theory need not predict or at least be judged by its prediction of the future, it is charged with the responsibility for providing a genealogy and proleptic vision that would articulate how the conditions immanent within contemporary capitalism might enable or give rise to a particular communist society that is determined concretely in its constitutional and economic structure, if not its precise details and laws. As Marcuse indicates, he also owes us a method of communication by which this theory might performatively lead to its own enactment. On his own terms,

then, a successful political theory must be genealogical, critical, descriptive, performative, prescriptive, and predictive.

Although he lacks any theory or practice concerning the exact supra-ideological description of the present or historical state of society, Marcuse certainly sets forth a wide-ranging, complex, and still timely general indictment of late industrial and early postindustrial, service capitalism in its psychological domination, exploitative character, alienating economic structure, and subjection to the performance principle. His analysis of 1960s American capitalism in *One-Dimensional Man* is remarkably prescient and useful in so far as it identifies incipient forces that have only grown over the intervening decades. In *Eros and Civilization* and elsewhere, he certainly provides a critique of present society, a prediction of, and prescription for, the future, and a genealogical picture of human being in the state of nature (both in terms of the drives, *eros* and *thanatos*, and the originary dominating Freudian father and the primal meal that incorporates his power into the state (in the totemic animal) when he is killed and eaten by his sons).¹⁵ His work is clearly critical in its attempts to disrupt the harmonizing, realistic consciousness of contemporary society by elucidating its dissonant elements through critical theory. He also provides substantial and fairly compelling accounts of the obstacles to liberation in his own time. But his willingness and ability to set forth the nature of the pathway forward and its end in a liberated society are far less clear. While he sketches out in primarily negative fashion something of the nature of a liberated society and argues rightly that the vanguard's ability to construct new means of communication, new 'languages', is crucial to the process of liberation, he provides neither this new language, nor a clear vision of liberation. Liberation requires that he set forth its nature and values in advance, but this is impossible, because there can be no prior determination of the future society. Thus, Marcuse seems to assert the impossibility of his own project, for he accepts that he must articulate a clear vision of the utopian emancipatory future even as he both disclaims and excludes any attempt to do so.

Nominally, Žižek might well be regarded to occupy a similar stance toward Kant and Horkheimer's criteria for a successful political theory. In *Living in the End Times*, in particular, he sets forth a predictive model of the direction of world history and

the means by which the future ideal society might be realized, namely, from the weakly apocalyptic, economic, environmental, and demographic crises that we now face. He too disclaims the necessity and desirability of setting forth a concrete historical genealogy and detailed proleptic vision of the future communist society, but he provides considerably less detail on either than Marcuse. In place of an account of human nature, as in other political theorists, Žižek turns to language as a means of reconceiving reality and its differences from the imaginary and the symbolic. As a Lacanian, rather than a Freudian, Žižek transposes Marcuse's account of the natural drives into the dimension of the symbolic, but the forces of the symbolic have an equally significant function in covertly shaping all human experience and events. This reconception is crucial to the radicality and possibility of emancipation, on his view. He also accepts that theory should be performative in an inverted sense. By changing the parameters of reality itself, theory enables the possibility of a revolution worthy of the name by challenging all that is constitutive of capitalism in its (spectral) reality. Yet, this approach also undermines the idea of a concrete plan of action through its inversion of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. On Žižek's account, radical action consists in the mode of non-action, silence, withdrawal, rather than an action that sustains the present coordinates of reality even if it ameliorates society as it is. Thus, he delineates a possible line of defense of Adorno against the critique of failing to articulate a concrete plan of action by saying that "[o]ne is tempted to claim that, far from representing a simple failure on Adorno's part, this reluctance to take the step into positive normativity signals his fidelity to the Marxist revolutionary project" (Žižek 2011a: 384). Fidelity to revolution may sometimes entail withdrawal from the framework of action, decision, and even critical participation (which in taking part in the system implicitly validates it), in favor of silence and critical thought, constituted by questioning this framework in which non-totalitarian change is regarded as impossible. But this does not mean that radical resistance to contemporary society is definable in terms of the disengaged ironic satire of ideology. Žižek suggests that the German band Rammstein's obscene intensification of the nonsense of Nazi ideology constitutes a superior means of undermining totalitarian ideology to ironic mimesis or liberal tolerance, because it "directly confront[s] us with its obscene materiality and thereby suspend[s] its efficacy" (Žižek 2011a: 386-

87). By exposing the aims and imaginaries of totalitarian ideology through their obscene intensification, the revolutionary resists these given normative structures and thereby retains the link of the present to the desired future, in contradistinction to the Derridean refusal to ever resolve the 'undecidable' future to come. Žižek's is not a move into the prescriptive in the sense of endorsing any specific course of action. While he adopts the prescriptive in the simple sense of validating critique and emancipation, he also reconceives the prescriptive within his linguistic 'ontology' more radically in such a way as to dissolve the fact-value distinction. He argues powerfully that the very construction of frameworks of reality is a sort of transcendental imaginary or symbolic articulation assuming, determining, and underwriting evaluative considerations. By reexamining this transcendental imaginary and recognizing that the Real must be conceived as open, traumatic, and indigestibly spectral, he changes the very coordinates of reality, in a Lacanian sense. In this way, Žižek sets forth a truly revolutionary reconception of the nature and possibilities of a political theory by appropriating and subverting each of the criteria for a successful political theory, from the prescriptive, predictive, performative, and natural to the critical, genealogical, and true, for the criteria themselves turn out to be complicit with the extant system and hence, incompatible with radical emancipation.

Notes:

¹ Žižek first encountered the work of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School in the 1960s, and they have obvious common interests, criticisms, and precursors, such as Hegel, Marx, Adorno, and psychology, but Žižek's Lacanian Marxist-Leninism differs from Marcuse's Heideggerian, Freudian, and Frankfurt School Marxism. Žižek criticizes Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* for missing "the excess of pleasure [the Lacanian *jouissance*] produced by 'repression itself'," which would be eliminated with the abolition of repression (Žižek 2012: 308). And he accepts Vaclav Havel's critique of Marcuse's sole engagement with Stalinism, *Soviet Marxism*, his "least passionate and arguably worst book, a strangely neutral analysis of the Soviet ideology with no clear commitment" (Žižek 2011: 92). Žižek argues that the Frankfurt School's silence on Stalinism enabled them "to maintain their inconsistent position of underlying solidarity with Western liberal democracy, without losing their official mask of 'radical' Leftist critique" (Žižek 2011: 93).

² As illusory forms of transformation, art can function in a revolutionary context only by transforming individual means of perception, but this assumes methodological individualism. The problem is that if society is constituted by pre-existing atoms, the implication seems to be that individuals and their preferences determine the identity and normative standards of society, a view that typically justifies a minimal libertarian state with strong limits on collective action.

³ Like Alan Johnson, Michael Walzer excoriates Marcuse for affirming a revolution from above and relying on the capacities of a redirected technical program for satisfying real human needs, which Walzer attributes to Marcuse's alleged distance from the society and population that he so harshly criticized

(Walzer 2002: 186, 188). Walzer does scorn well and I agree with his criticism that Marcuse uncritically subjects the revolutionary to technical expertise, but any revolutionary programs require an intertwined grassroots basis and an ideational framework within which a critique and transformation of society become possible, intelligible, and desirable.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre's objection is to the notion in Marcuse that language determines thinking and ontology (MacIntyre 1970: 92, 97). MacIntyre is right that language, as one particular, contingent feature of our experience, should not be identified with thinking and being, but we very often think in language and think about things in accordance with our linguistic categories, of subjects, objects, and particular demarcations of social reality, so he far overstates his case. How we define reality terminologically obviously carries powerful social effects. In retrospect, we might also add that the specific languages of the marginalized and oppressed often balkanize marginalized groups from each other and further alienate the masses from them, actually undermining the chances for liberation, even as they create new spaces for identity construction, resistance, and realization.

⁵ Thus, on Joseph Winters's account, "[f]or Marcuse, political change depends on the possibility of experiencing the world differently, of cultivating more receptive relationships with those who cohabit our lifeworlds. This receptivity requires greater sensitivity to the violence we ... inflict on others, being more open and patient with [different forms of life]" and cultivating more generous and caring, rather than dominating, relationships (Winters 2013: 153).

⁶ This project of promoting revolution through political education and the critical broadening of experience is similar in form, though obviously more revolutionary in intention and extent, to Adorno's project of democratic pedagogy and leadership in *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*, as Shannon Mariotti describes it in *Adorno and Democracy*.

⁷ Homer charges Žižek with hypocrisy for his unsympathetic stance toward migrant workers and Roma in his native Slovenia both in practice as a member of the ruling liberal democratic party DEMOS in the early 1990s and in later writings (Homer 2013). Žižek's response is that his Liberal Democratic Party was not a part of DEMOS and did not enter power until several months after the erasure of the migrant workers, which he did not support, and that he did not support any repressive measures against the Roma in the passage in question (Žižek 2013: 771).

⁸ As Santiago Zabala points out, Žižek agrees here with Heidegger in "Kant's Thesis about Being" to the priority of thinking to transformative praxis (Zabala 2013: 147).

⁹ In addition to slashing institutional interest rates to near zero, the Fed secretly provided \$3.3 trillion in liquidity and \$9 trillion in loans to large corporations, the details of which were made public only through the actions of Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) in attaching a rider to a bill. This total excludes other federal measures such as the \$787 billion stimulus bill. See John Nichols, "Fed's 'Backdoor Bailout' Provided \$3.3 Trillion in Loans to Banks, Corporations," *The Nation*, December 2, 2010.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/feds-backdoor-bailout-provided-33-trillion-loans-banks-corporations/>

¹⁰ However, there is a certain kind of radical act according to which it is "better to take the risk and engage in fidelity to a Truth-Event, even if it ends in catastrophe, than to vegetate in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival of what Nietzsche called the 'last men'" (Žižek 2011a: xv).

¹¹ This is his response to unnuanced criticisms such as those of Alan Johnson that his form of new communism champions totalitarian violence (Johnson 2012).

¹² Axel Honneth questions the proximity of this relationship between Marcuse and Horkheimer on grounds that the former, as a Berliner, differed markedly in temperament, style, and thinking from the other members of inner circle of the Frankfurt School, and hence, was criticized by them, especially Adorno (but never in writing by the diplomatic Horkheimer), as romantic, naïve, affirmative, and academic, rather than experimental, in style (Honneth 2003: 497-98). However, he then identifies the substance of the philosophies of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse by their shared negative reading of present society in its instrumentalist degeneration of Hegelian reason and reification of human beings and their dependence on Hegel, Lukács, and Freud (Honneth 2003: 498-99).

¹³ Influenced by Thorstein Veblen, technocrats in the Industrial Engineering program at Columbia University, in the same era as the Frankfurt School's association with Columbia, famously promulgated the idea, shared by both right and left technocrats, that society's advancing industrial ability to eliminate material want and physical labor was leading it toward economic collapse but that a technocratic solution was possible (Ramírez 2012: 38-39). While Marcuse's views aligned with the left American technocrats, other Frankfurt School thinkers in the 1940s shifted away from right technocratic state planning in part because it had been discredited by Hitler, Roosevelt, and Stalin (Ramírez 2012: 33-34).

¹⁴ Marcuse and Žižek dispense with Kant's purposive understanding of nature and laissez faire approach to economic inequality, while Kant would argue that their thick conception of the good, their positive conception of reason's entailments, and their focus on the irrational sphere of emotion, imagination, and desire, would contradict the solely rational basis of society, which concerns civil liberty alone. Government's interest in the satisfaction of natural inclinations, which differ for different people, would entail unjustifiable further restrictions on liberty.

¹⁵ As Janet Stewart argues, Marcuse's concept of utopia is "removed from historical time but residing in the idea of rediscovering the lost origins hidden in man's prehistory, and simultaneously appearing as the 'unspeakable', as a state of not-yet-Being, of which only traces could be divined from the past," as a liberating "future-oriented memory" (Stewart 2007: 36-37).

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