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Objective Violence: A New Collaborative Philosophical Project

Tessa-May Kristina Zirnsak, La Trobe University, Australia

Abstract:

Žižek's objective violence presents a radical contribution to understanding how violence occurs, and broadening our understandings of what can be theorized as violence. However, a full account of objective violence spans across multiple texts, and at times lacks full detail. This article addresses this problem by first giving an account for objective violence based on a variety of Žižek's works, and then analyzing how other theorists outside philosophy have used this theoretical tool in their own research contexts. Through this method, the conclusion is drawn that the lack of detail in Žižek's work has created the capacity for a collaborative philosophical project whereby theorists have been able to appropriate key features of this tool in order to make it relevant to a variety of research contexts.

Introduction

Slavoj Žižek has made a significant contribution to theorizing violence in his text *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2009a). His reconceptualization of violence represents not only a radical challenge to how we conceptualize and understand violence, but also to what can be understood as violence. As this article will demonstrate, a key strength of Žižek's objective violence theory is that it can be appropriated to suit a variety of contexts. However, a key trade off for this strength is a vagueness present in this original work. For this reason, much of what has been written about objective violence is not solely criticism or evaluation, but theorists filling in the missing detail to make his arguments and theories more cogent and specific, often to their own theoretical or empirical research contexts. Put simply, these theorists have been able to adapt this theory to suit their specific research contexts, creating a collaborative philosophical project. In order to demonstrate the value of this as a strength, this work will provide a mapping of Žižek's theory of objective violence from his 2009a *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, which houses the primary definitions of the concepts of subjective and objective violence. To enhance this, this work will then provide a summary and analysis of his relevant theories of violence from other texts in his oeuvre and an analysis of applications of this theory performed by other theorists. This will demonstrate the value of Žižek's objective violence as a collaborative philosophical project.

Before commencing an exploration of objective violence, it is first useful to outline some of the more superficial weaknesses that became apparent through a close reading of Žižek's violence theory, and that become apparent through engaging with other theorist's use of objective violence. Žižek is a theorist with many interests and ideas. In many ways, this is what has made him so significant in contemporary philosophy. However, at times his texts focus of a wide range of content and phenomenon, clouding his central argument.¹ In addition, to fully understand his violence theory, the reader needs to be at least familiar with *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2009a) and the afterword to the second addition of *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2009b), even though parts of these texts have the same passages almost word for word. Žižek's 2011 article *The Violent Silence of a*

New Beginning and his chapter in *Democracy: In What State?* (Agamben et. al 2012: 100-120) contain a working example of divine violence. Therefore, in order to have a complete understanding of Žižek's theory of objective violence, a reader needs to be familiar with many texts, some of which are no longer in print. It is for this reason that this article is useful to the study of Žižek's philosophy.

Žižek's Objective Violence from *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*

Žižek gets straight to the point, with the bulk of his definitional work outlined on page one. There are two kinds of violence, subjective and objective. The first and simplest to define of these is subjective violence, which are direct acts of physical violence and terror (Žižek 2009a: 1). These are enacted by 'social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds' (Žižek 2009a: 10). Žižek goes on to argue that focusing on this kind of violence leads us to ignore their true cause, and even participate in the conditions that make this violence possible (Žižek 2009a: 9). One of the most significant defining features of subjective violence is that it is viewed in the public domain as a departure from the normal "peaceful" state of things (Žižek 2009a: 2).² Examples are this are violent shootings, hitting, kicking, etc.

The second of the two types of violence is objective violence, defined as violence 'inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence' (Žižek 2009, p. 8). This form of violence has two sub-categories. The first of these two sub-categories is systemic violence, defined as 'the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems' (Žižek 2009a: 1). This kind of violence exists in 'the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent (Žižek 2009a: 2). Žižek (2009a: 2) elaborates that 'it may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make of what otherwise seem to be "irrational" explosions of subjective violence', demonstrating an inherent link between objective and subjective violence. The second form of objective violence is symbolic violence. This form of violence is found in language, producing social domination and incitement of subjective violence (Žižek 2009a: 1). Some examples of this might be global poverty due to the functioning of capitalism, people falling through the cracks in their state healthcare system or the acceptance of ableist slurs in dominant English.

Žižek goes on to argue that objective violence is not clearly visible because the way that we are fed stories of violence through the media prevents us from really thinking about the underlying causes for the subjective violence (Žižek 2009: 3). This is exacerbated by discourses that suggest we must act against violence now; there is no time for reflection (Žižek 2009a: 6). In this way, we only see individual crises, not the bigger picture of violence occurring around us every day in multiple forms across multiple sites (Žižek 2009a: 2-6). He argues that we need to reflect and learn about what is making subjective violence occur (Žižek 2009a: 6-7).³ In summation of Žižek's initial argument, I would like to offer his paraphrasing of Brecht; 'what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a bank? In other words, what is the robbery that violates the law compared to the robbery that takes place within the confines of the law?' (Žižek 2009a: 100).

As an example of the functioning of objective and subjective violence, we can consider Žižek's reading of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.⁴ As this is a deeply complex issue with many vested interests, Žižek's take on it tells us much about him. He presents a substantial argument, but I have been selective about what parts I am sharing here for the sake of relevancy to his theory of objective violence. Žižek (2009a: 99) states from the outset that he holds Palestinian sympathies, and sees a two state solution as an obvious solution that should have been enacted long ago (Žižek 2009: 104). His argument follows thus; Israel is based on the violent past of every nation state, yet there is a great disapproval of the ongoing violence of this state then there has been historically and in other regions. Perhaps this is because this particular conflict demonstrates the fragility of the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate power (Žižek 2009a: 99). He argues that if both sides were able to release their sovereign claim to Jerusalem, then true reconciliation can occur. After all, Žižek points out, the significance of Jerusalem is a shared characteristic and cause for reconciliation (Žižek 2009a: 109). For this reason, it is a '*false* conflict, with a conflict that blurs and mystifies the true front line; (Žižek 2009a: 109, emphasis in original), evoking his broader concern about the mystification of violence. In this particular case of international conflict, Žižek (2009a: 103-104) raises concern with the manipulation of a holocaust narrative to justify migration-causing violence that we have found across multiple political events occurring within a similar time frame (e.g. German fighting on the eastern front and the rise of the Soviet Union). 'Because it was easier, the Jews took land from the Palestinians and not from those who caused

them so much suffering and thus owed them repatriation' (Žižek 2009a: 103). Here he is contextualizing the Israel/Palestine conflict as a product of the violence and destruction of the holocaust, rendering the conflict and potential solutions more complex. However, he sees the construction of Israel as a paradox; it is representative of western liberal democracy in the middle east, while enacting a religious fundamentalist claim to land (Žižek 2009a: 105), emphasizing that such a claim is the genesis of much violence. Therefore, it is not surprising that Žižek sees a difficulty whereby the state of Israel is a violent consequence of further historical violence.^{5, 6}

Theories of Violence from Other Texts in Žižek's Oeuvre

Žižek discusses a third kind of violence in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*; Divine Violence. However a complete definition of divine violence is not found in this text alone, but rather in conjunction with the afterword of the 2009 edition of *In Defense of Lost Causes* and Žižek's chapter in *Democracy: In What State?* (Agamben et. al 2012: 100-120). Analyzing Divine violence helps us to further theorize the roles of both objective and subjective violence, and how their interactions with each other assists us in understanding their nature. This helps us to identify the value of further fleshing out Žižek's theory of objective violence.

Influenced by his understandings of Walter Benjamin and Agamben, Žižek defines divine violence as 'precisely the direct subjectivisation of (or, rather, the direct subjective reaction to) this objective violence' (Žižek 2009b: 481). As divine violence is a response to 'years, centuries even, of systematic state violence and economic exploitation', it is 'beyond good and evil' (Žižek 2009b: 478). Therefore, 'although we are dealing with what, to an ordinary moral consciousness, cannot but appear as "immoral" acts of killing, one has no right to condemn them, since they replied to years – centuries even – of systematic state and economic violence and exploitation' (Agamben et. al 2012: 115). For this reason, Žižek argues, 'we would have dirtied [our hands] precisely had we *refused* to engage in violence' (Žižek 2009b: 485, emphasis added).^{7, 8}

Žižek's (2011: unpaginated) analysis of the Occupy Movement, titled *The Violent Silence of a New Beginning* gives us the most succinct account for these three forms of violence defined in Žižek's oeuvre.⁹ In particular, this text is highly useful in assisting in an understanding of his outline of divine violence from the

second, 2009 edition of *In Defense of Lost Causes* and the 2012 *Democracy: In What State?* book chapter. Žižek (2011: unpaginated) concedes that the Occupy protesters are committing acts of violence, but 'in the sense that Mahatma Gandhi was violent'. The protests provide us with an example of violence as a response to objective violence, thus meeting Žižek's definition of divine violence. 'What is [violence perpetrated by the occupy protesters] compared to the violence needed to sustain the smooth functioning of the global capitalist system?' (Žižek 2011: unpaginated). While Žižek does not directly name this violence as objective violence, we can still see here that he is using identical words to the definition of objective violence from his 2009 *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Žižek 2009a: 1). He elaborates here;

The Wall Street speculations that led to the crash of 2008 erased more hard-earned private property than if the protestors were to be destroying it night and day. Think of the thousands of homes foreclosed [...]. [The protestors] are not destroying anything. They are reacting to a system that is gradually destroying itself' (Žižek 2011: unpaginated),

clearly using the discourse he outlines in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Žižek 2009a: 100). 'The protestors are dismissed as dreamers, but the true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are, just with some cosmetic changes' (Žižek 2011: unpaginated). He continues; 'The protestors are called "losers" - but the true losers are on Wall Street, bailed out by hundreds of billions of our money' (Žižek 2011: unpaginated).^{10, 11}

This example works on a few levels. Firstly, what could be more demonstrative of the objective violence inherent in the efficient performance of capitalism than Wall Street, especially given Žižek has backed this statement up with the evidence of home foreclosures, a widely known piece of knowledge. Secondly, the Occupy protestor's acts of vandalism and violence against police fit the few criteria we are given of subjective violence. When we consider how these two kinds of violence are interacting within this context, we can see a clear example of divine violence, based on Žižek's definitional work on the term. This is because these acts of subjective violence serve to demystify, render visible and subjectivise the acts of objective violence perpetuated by Wall Street. Because of the way the occupy movement shaped the discourse, the objective violence of wall street was reformed in the public discourse rendering the objective violence perpetuated on wall street

visible. Following this, the subjective acts of violence from the protesters become divine violence, as they serve to make visible the objective violence perpetuated on Wall Street. Furthermore, Žižek's own applications of objective and subjective violence to the Occupy protests give us a version of how he intended for his theory to work.

Using Other Theorist's to Work Get more out of Žižek

As Žižek's outline of objective violence theory is missing much of the specific detail for how this theory functions in real life circumstances, we can examine what other theorists have been able to draw out of this theory, and how this has informed or altered an initial reading of Žižek. What Žižek has to offer, as these theorists demonstrate, is a theory that can be appropriated. There is something significant to be said for that achievement. By turning to thorough applications of Žižek's theory of objective violence, we are able to use their explanatory power to further interpret and solidify Žižek's theory of objective violence. In this section, I will demonstrate this by engaging with accounts of objective violence from other theorists, with a focus on understanding the similarities these reading have with the reading presented in the previous section, and with each other.

These sources were located through standard library and database searching, as well as performing a detailed examination of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies*. These applications are cross-disciplinary, and different theorists emphasized different aspects to suit their material. There were no major disagreements between theorists on the substance of Žižek's objective violence theory. In examining these works we can better examine the ways in which this theory draws out theoretical conclusions that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Jack Quirk (2018) uses objective violence as a theoretical approach to understanding gender violence in the Australian play *The Removalists*, written by David Williamson in 1971. A key strength of this work is that the play in question is finite in its scope, however the situation to what the author applies this theory is one of domestic violence, so still relevant to a real-world context. Furthermore, it seems that the play is trying to demonstrate how attitudes inform and perpetuate subjective violence, in line with the general gist of Žižek's theory. The significant plot points of the play are adequately outlined by Quirk to limit any confusion.

Quirk (2018: 2) understands *The Removalists* as 'an interrogation of the socio-ideological aspects of Australian masculinity and manhood that bring about violence'. As such, his commentary on the original play centers around the notion that the acts of violence in the play are a part of the natural consequences of Australian toxic masculinity (Quirk 2018: 2-3). The main plot points are as such; Kenny commits an act of subjective violence, specifically, beating his wife Fiona (Quirk 2018: 5). This violence is a natural part of Kenny's commitment to the 'ocker' masculine Australian stereotype, and is rationalized because his wife had not cleaned the kitchen (Quirk 2018: 6).

Later, in defending these actions to police Sargent Simmonds, he expands on his ideological beliefs, lamenting the bygone era where violence as a form of domestic and political gender control was not only accepted, but seen as necessary in the smooth functioning of the hegemonic structure of domestic life [...]. [Kenny] is so indoctrinated with ocker ideologies of masculinity and manhood, that consequently, from his ideological standpoint he is unable to see his beating of Fiona as an act of violence at all; merely the maintenance of the proper order of things' (Quirk 2018: 6).

In supporting this, Quirk argues (2018: 7), that as the subjective violence against Fiona occurs before the timeline of the play begins, the audience does not see it. Therefore, the reactions to the unseen act of subjective violence are what we find abhorrent in this play, highlighting the presence and significance of the objective violence.

This brings us to a discussion of the police response, which Quirk argues was a further perpetuation of objective violence. The sergeant involved tells Fiona and her sister that the police tend to avoid getting involved if the wife is still alive, and thus, the officer elicits the view that men 'are permitted to inflict violence upon their wives, to a certain extent'. This in itself is a form of objective violence, in that it has a role in creating the conditions for subjective violence to occur and removing the necessary avenues that people would access to escape a violent situation (Quirk 2018: 11).

The two forms of objective violence outlined by Quirk; the abuse of power and nonchalance of the police in conjunction with Kenny's violent ideology and tendencies lead him to argue that

the society shown in *The Removalists* is one in which the invisible form of social-symbolic and systemic violence against women is not merely sustained by individual men like Kenny, acting independently under a common umbrella of masculine ideology, but rather, a society in which

such violence *is* the very function of the judicial system. In other words, it *is* the *status quo*. (Quirk 2018: 13).

And further that

we are all passively and unconsciously participating in and perpetuating the objective, gender-based violence inherent to Australian ideologies of masculinity and manhood of which physical, subjective violence is only a counterpart and symptom (Quirk 2018: 14),

Calling for a shift in how we conceptualize violence against women in the Australian context.¹²

This work does a lot to demonstrate a reading of Žižek which suggests that objective violence creates the conditions for contact violence to occur. It defines objective violence as symbolic/structural violence that creates the conditions for contact violence. It takes us through many of the factors that are objectively violent within the society outlined, using Fiona's experiences to show their impact. Furthermore, while Kenny's ideology directly results in subjective violence, the actions of the police does not, demonstrating both how objective violence is actualized into subjective violence, and that objective violence does not always have to result in subjective violence to be violent or oppressive. This highlights a reading that suggests that objective violence needs to come from multiple sources. While the argument is made that Kenny's ideology is objective violence, it is far more powerful to argue for a strong presence of objective violence in this play once the police response is also taken into consideration. Quirk is showing us that objective violence permeates many functions of a society. For Quirk, one situation cannot be objective violence, but rather objective violence exclusively thrives in the judiciary and our base social constructs.

Howie's 2011 article *They Were Created by Man...and They Have a Plan: Subjective and Objective Violence in Battlestar Galactica and the War on Terror* examines the *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG) series with direct reference to the War on Terror, applying Žižek's objective violence as an analytical tool. *Battlestar Galactica* emphasizes the repetition of violence, which works well alongside Žižek (Howie 2011: 2), and draws a parallel between the violence in *Battlestar Galactica* and the violence of the War on Terror. In both cases, the author argues, sustained ongoing fear is objective violence (Howie 2011: 2). The author draws parallels between the paranoia about cylons in BSG, and the anti-Muslim harassment against members of the American public after 9/11 (Howie 2011: 10-11). 'The post-9/11 world was a

liberated space where some chose to indulge their racist desires in a more socially permissible atmosphere' (Howie 2011: 11). Later, the author argues that this is also the case for cylons in BSG, where even those with good intentions are seen as unable to refrain from causing harm. This work argues that the war on terror has made future violence inevitable (Howie 2011: 2). 'As we wait and worry about the next terrorist disaster, BSG in a post-9/11 world reminds us that the next generation of terrorists will likely emerge from some familiar places and for some clear reasons' (Howie 2011: 2).

Žižek's theory of objective violence highlights the author's contention that the War on Terror features of US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and torture of suspected terrorists were responses to the subjective violence of the 9/11 attacks (Howie 2011: 4). This relates back to BSG, as the author further argues that 'the subjective and objective violence present in BSG mirrors the subjective and objective violence of the "War on Terror"' (Howie 2011: 5). Howie (2011: 16) emphasizes US support of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980's as a contributing factor to the conditions that have created the possibility for the 9/11 attack, and subsequently the "War on Terror". The author leaves us with this chilling conclusion, drawn from the application of objective violence to understand future subjective violence; 'Whilst I cannot tell you where the next 9/11 will occur I can tell you that the next generation of terrorists will likely emerge in response to the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have defined the first decade of the 21st century' (Howie 2011: 17).

This application contributes to understanding Žižek's theory of objective violence in several ways. First and foremost, it is valuable because it applies this theory to an empirical example. It outlines BSG and the objective and subjective forms of violence in this series, it does the same for 9/11, and then it attempts to link the two. The authors link to BSG can be considered tenuous however, in part because BSG is a fantasy world. Furthermore, as the BSG universe was originally created in the 70's, this undermines the authors claim that the remake was based on a post 9/11 world, although there are compelling similarities. The author adopts a tone and uses examples in ways that are similar to Žižek's original works. This is interesting because much of Žižek's style can be difficult for a new reader to understand, but in this work this writing style contributes to the legitimacy of Howie's reading of Žižek. The argument that 9/11 could have been prevented demonstrates a potential understanding of how objective violence leads to acts of subjective

violence, however the authors claims are more compelling if we expand our understanding of objective violence to include contact violence. Despite the interesting nature of these claims, they are thoroughly inconsistent with the reading of Žižek presented at the start of this paper. This source contributes to the literature on Žižek's objective violence by considering his earlier work on psychoanalytics to inform his perspective of objective violence (see for example; Howie 2011: 3). Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the outline of America's involvement in the middle east in the 80's as a precursor to the 9/11 attacks and ongoing violence seems to further suggest that contact violence can be a form of objective violence. This complicates Žižek's theory somewhat, but is not inconsistent with *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2009).¹³

Of the sources selected, Atluri's 2015 *Mild Curry, Mildly Queer: India, Sex and Slavoj Žižek* draws from the most diverse pool of Žižek's work, in order to 're-frame debates about sexuality in India in relation to the global economy and the "war on terror" (Atluri 2015: 2). Atluri argues that in this context, the criminalization of homosexual acts was a remnant form British rule, and its removal is significant to Indian national identity, despite opposition (Atluri 2012: 3). For Atluri (2015: 2), Žižek provides a valuable theoretical background because 'his writings offer a necessary intervention by demanding that questions of gender and sexuality be thought of in relation to larger structures of capitalism'. This author also discusses tolerance, and like the Howie (2011) piece discussed above, this work also examines the war on terror. While this isn't enough to signify a trend in the sorts of things Žižek's theory of objective violence is relevant to, it does highlight for us the differences in the individual readings done by these theorists.

This author doesn't interpret *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* as solely significant, and as such uses this work to support other theories of violence that are more relevant to their analysis. However, this is also telling because not only does it show us the value of Žižek's theory of objective violence as a tool for expanding other theories of violence and oppression, it also shows us how to do this effectively to get the most out of Žižek's Objective Violence.

The 2012 book chapter *The Violence of Tolerance in a Multicultural Workplace: Examples from Nursing* by T Rudge, V Mapedzahama, S West and A Perron apply Žižek's theory of objective violence to a healthcare setting. This is particularly interesting for our purposes, as analysis in the healthcare sector is

significantly different from the other applications published at the time of this analysis. This book chapter examines tolerance as a form of objective violence. According to the authors, Žižek's violence theory in relation to tolerance illuminates a situation in which people from ethnically diverse backgrounds face greater barriers and stigma both to providing healthcare and feeling safe and supported in the workplace. This is due to structural intolerance, and an unwillingness of those around them to accept multicultural communities as anything other than an Other, even when they are positioned within the host society (Rudge et al 2012: 35). The authors do this by arguing that tolerance gives the tolerator all of the power, rendering the tolerated person powerless. This fits in with the authors scope, which limits them to specifically examining the experience of migrant nurses, particularly nurses who have been brought over on skilled migrant visas to meet a nurse shortage in the host society.

By focusing on race, the authors argue that tolerance of this people group constitutes objective violence. The authors argue that the tolerated party (in their work, migrant nurses brought to Australia on a skilled migrant visa) lose their social power through the attitude of tolerance performed by another agent. In context; these nurses feel excluded from the natural comradery of their peers, but are 'tolerated', so they must persevere through their exclusion, or leave the workplace. Furthermore, these researchers identify that conflicts within the healthcare system were blamed on "the migrant", hence 'maintaining the violence of racism'. Furthermore, they elaborate; 'A Žižekian analysis exposes that when violence is *objective*, and experienced as *subjective*, "naturalized" exclusionary outcomes for visibly different migrants are anything but natural and instead reproduce the dominance of "whiteness" in the Australian healthcare workplace' (Rudge 2012: 44).

In making this argument, the authors claim that Žižek's ideas 'expose how tolerance masks such violence and operates ideologically to silence the racialized "Other". Such analysis is necessary, given [their] contention that the very act of tolerance is experienced by racialized groups as an act of violence' (Rudge et. al 2012: 32). They draw further from this as a theoretical background, emphasizing that 'for Žižek, each form of violence is not to be viewed as an opposite pole; rather each is implicated and implicit in the activities and operations of the other' (Rudge et. al 2012: 34). These authors also draw from Žižek's writings on multiculturalism and the rise of anti-immigration groups who emphasize assimilation (Rudge et. al 2012: 35).

Therefore, we can understand that for these authors, the construction of the other is key to the application of the theory of objective violence, and to their conclusion that these constructions of the other harm racially diverse nursing staff in a professional setting. They argue; 'Žižek maintains that ideologies of multiculturalism are central to the smooth operation of contemporary capitalism, and therefore part of the *objective* violence of the system, rather than the solution to *intercultural, subjective* violence' (Rudge et. al 2012: 36, emphasis in original).

This application is significant for enhancing Žižek's theory of objective violence because it applies the theory to a real world situation, and as such is a significant empirical experiment for the validity of Žižek's theory. The main contribution to understanding Žižek that this piece gives us is its version of the construction of the other as a natural pre-requisite for objective violence; something that comes naturally from a reading of Žižek that he does not make explicit. This is particularly relevant to the analysis from these authors, because they're dealing with violence experienced by skilled migrants who have been sought out to fill a gap in Australian healthcare.

Pourgouris' 2012 *The Phenomenology of Hoods: Some Reflections on the 2008 Violence in Greece* applies Žižek's theory of objective violence to the riots in Greece in 2008, following the police murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos, a 15-year-old student (Pourgouris 2010: 227). Pourgouris discusses 3 events or phenomena that work well with Žižek's theory of objective violence. First, is the fact of the protestors literally wearing hoods over their faces to prevent identification. However, 'in the act of covering up, these few "known-unknowns" unwittingly unveiled the violent force of a spectacle that was always already present in the systemic shortcomings of both the political and social structure in Greece (Pourgouris 2012: 229). 'The covered rioters where not merely hiding themselves behind the anonymity of a mask – they were in fact revealing themselves to the State and to the media *as masked*' (Pourgouris 2010: 230, emphasis in original). This is then placed in conjunction with the insight that 'on the one side, we saw young people whose faces were covered with hoods, motorcycle helmets, scarves etc. On the other side, we were confronted with similarly masked policemen who were covered with, or protected by, the official riot gear of the State: helmets, gas masks, shields, batons etc.' (Pourgouris 2012: 229). This highlights the symmetry between the state using violence to enact its

political will and civilians using violence to enact their own political will, thus delegitimizing the use of violence by the state.

The second phenomena is a symbolic gesture made by a policeman imitating shooting protestors with his fingers held like a gun is interpreted by Pourgouris (2010: 231) as an example of symbolic violence. It does not cause direct physical harm, but shows the wish of the police officer to harm the protestors.

And thirdly, Pourgouris (2012: 231) recounts an anecdote of the destruction of a state Christmas tree. The tree was destroyed by protestors, and the state responded by replacing it and appointing armed guards. In Pourgouris's reading, the return of the tree demonstrates a state interest in a return to the normal, peaceful state of things. However, this normalcy was in many ways the provocation for the violence, the murder of Alexis serving as the catalyst. 'Hence, the strange image of the protestors and the riot police gathering around the Christmas tree points to a staging of systemic violence as an event that is always measured against (to return to Žižek's description) "a zero level standard"' (Pourgouris 2012: 231).

The primary strength of this piece is its breadth. The Christmas tree anecdote illuminates what the zero level is for perceiving subjective violence, so that can be worked in to enhance Žižek's definitions. The author also applies other theorists and theories of violence. The author seems to defend or justify the protests in his analysis, but his closing remark (following Arendt) argues that violence begets further violence. In this sense this analysis in some ways serves to defend Žižek against the common critiques that he defends civilian acts of violence. Pourgouris' analysis uses the theory that receives this critique, but ends with a condemnation of all contact violence. Pourgouris' work also supports Žižek's discussions where he compares state violence to civilian violence, but in a visible way, rather than with regard to abstract phenomena, such as the economy or wall street. The use of direct, visible examples supports Žižek's claims regarding the abstract phenomena of objective violence, so that we can better understand it.

From examining these applications we have been able to learn a few things. These theorists have highlighted for us the potential capacity for generating new findings about empirical or abstract phenomenon once we apply Žižek. Others have shown us the power of Žižek's theory as a way to warn about the current global conditions that may be a catalyst for future subjective violence. This demonstrates to

us not only that we can use these applications to build an understanding of Žižek's theory, but that they are able to give more than this theory does on its own.

Conclusion

In this work I have provided a summary of Žižek's argument for objective violence including an examination of his arguments about violence from other texts, to gain a full picture of this theoretical framework. In order to enhance this picture, engagement with theorists from disciplines other than philosophy has shown that objective violence has evolved, in part due to a lack of specificity in the original text. Because of this feature, the account for Žižek's Objective Violence found in this article can be thought of as a collaborative philosophical project, which has used the work of others to build up this theory into a working theoretical framework. This is significant as it reimagines this theoretical framework in a variety of different ways, and demonstrates the adaptability of this theory to a wide variety of different circumstances. Through studying objective violence in this way, we enhance its significance to understanding the zero-level objective violence that permeates almost every aspect of our social structures and lives.

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Notes:

¹ For example, his analogies from film and fiction can distract the reader from his main argument, especially given that often the conclusion he is trying to draw from the analogy is not necessarily one that the original artist tried to convey. However, theorist Ruez (2011, p. 156) disagrees, claiming that 'Žižek's readings of popular films and philosophical classics are engaging'.

² It is also important to note that Žižek provides little examination of the phenomena of subjective violence. This is still deeply significant to his work, as there is much literature on subjective violence (typically just called "violence"). As Žižek does not explore this concept much himself, it invites the reader to fill in their own detail on this phenomenon; both a strength and weakness of Žižek's overall work.

³ Žižek wants his reader to maintain distance from the horror of subjective violence, to transcend our empathetic responses which he argues further mystifies violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012, pp. 421-422), however this is something for which he has been critiqued, as some of Žižek's conclusions can be quite 'upsetting' for the reader (Brandom 2010: unpaginated).

⁴ Wood (2012, p. 260) fills in some detail on Žižek's objective violence, emphasizing as an example the 'millions who have died because of capitalist globalization, from Mexico in the 1500s to the Belgian Congo in the 1800s'. She further surmises; 'we in the West benefit from the suffering of

millions in the Third World, so it is no wonder that we remain unaware of the systemic violence of capitalism' (Wood 2012, pp. 260-261, emphasis in original).

⁵ As example of Žižek's unclear use of analogies, we can consider an analogy from Brecht that he uses to explain his perspective on Jerusalem in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict (Žižek 2009a: 108). A mother and step-mother who have a disagreement regarding custody of a baby. A judge places the child in a circle and instructs the women to pull the child in opposite directions. Whoever pulls the hardest and gets the child out of the circle shall have custody. 'When the real mother saw that the child was being hurt by being pulled in opposite directions, she released her hold out of compassion'. She was awarded the child, due to her display of true maternal love. Are we then to understand that neither the Israeli Occupiers or Palestinian community are deserving of control of Jerusalem? Or that neither have a valid claim to the territory, given they both want control of it? While Žižek does not argue this directly, it is easy to see how this analogy raises more questions than it answers. In acknowledging these problems, we must remind ourselves that this is not enough to warrant discarding the text altogether. Rather, it is important for the reader to remain vigilant with regard to the way these analogies are being used, and their potential implications.

⁶ Brandom (2010: unpaginated) asks of *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*; 'Is the analytic here worked out simply a way to think about that violence which is acceptable in pursuing and defending specific instances of subtraction?'. On the other hand, we have theorists such as Ruez (2011: 155), who argues that Žižek 'is trying to argue that we ought to be more intolerant of exploitation and injustice'. The fact that Ruez (2011) and Brandom (2010) have produced such a different reading to Brandom tells us that Žižek's work lacks a lot of finer detail, and as each reader fills this in for themselves, they produce a sometimes substantially different reading of Žižek.

⁷ Divine violence must be transformative; 'the goal of revolutionary violence is not to take over the state power but to transform it, radically changing its functioning, its relation to its base etc' (Agamben et. al 2012, p. 117).

⁸ Brandom (2010: unpaginated) fills in some of the detail on divine violence with his claims that divine violence is identified with 'the terror of the radical emptiness of the subject'. He also presents a rephrasing of divine violence as 'not law making but beyond the law', a change from Žižek's direct quote; 'not law making but law destroying' (2009b, p. 477).

⁹ Žižek has alienated theorists through his inappropriate use of analogies. Both in terms of the cogency of his argument, and because at time the subject material he uses for an analogy may be tasteless or fail to articulately support his argument. For example, consider this excerpt from *The Violent Silence of a New Beginning* (Žižek 2011: 25);

Are the [occupy] protests un-American? When conservative fundamentalists claim that America is a Christian nation, one should remember what Christianity is: the Holy Spirit, the free egalitarian community united by love. It is the protesters who are the Holy Spirit, while on Wall Street pagans worship false idols.

Of course, any analogy concerning religion is likely to raise eyebrows within some circles. In the above analogy, he is correct that Christianity is fundamentally a religion of love, but neglects the strong ties modern Christian culture has to social, moral, political and economic conservatism. This is problematic, as it erodes the message of the analogy and mystifies the violence of the conservative Christian community, famous for their whitewashing of images of Christ and religious conservatism in political policy. This may also demonstrate a particular lack of sensitivity toward certain issues.

¹⁰ McGowan (2013: 46) further illuminates Žižek; 'True violence is not slaughtering six million Jews but transforming one's own relationship to the ruling order, an act Hitler could not accomplish because he could not [...] lash out at himself'. This helps contextualise Žižek's (2009a: 183) contentious claim that 'crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough'. Without the context emphasised by McGowan, Žižek's claim can be taken out of context much more easily, and with disastrous consequences.

¹¹ Following this argument, Khader (2013: 10) argues that the only way that neo-liberal democracy can be subjectivised is 'by lashing out at ourselves and at our faith in democracy as the end of history, to allow for the radical interrogation of global capitalism'.

¹² Ndlovu-Gatsheni' (2012: 421) is unique in her analysis of objective violence in that she follows Žižek's suggestion to use "'Sideways glances'" to understand violence, recommendation largely ignored in other applications of Žižek's theory.

¹³ It would be interesting to further examine this in relation to divine violence, however that is beyond the scope of this paper.