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Towards a Violent Absolute: Some Reflections on Žižekian Theology and Violence

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“Life” of course as Kierkegaard told us “can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” Obviously the intended observation was on the way human individuals are confronted with an abyss of nauseating freedom from which the only likely emotional reaction is anxiety. However, on the other hand, it does speculate on how privileged an analysis is in hindsight. This form of analysis seems to be the only appropriate one in which to ascertain the evolution of thought, and analysing Slavoj Žižek’s evolution of thought will be no different. By way of an introduction to this essay I will briefly familiarise and put into context the current issues that concern Žižek’s thought, before placing them in their wider context both in his repertoire and modern philosophical paradigms as a whole. I will then discuss what I want to achieve in this essay and how Žižek’s commentary on violence might interact with other domains such as religion, popular culture and political economy.

Žižek soon earned himself notoriety after his first English language publication *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989 and became widely discussed in academic areas, but after the events of 9/11, which he responded to with his popular *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, he became well known to a wider audience as no mere academic but an “intellectual rock star” as well as the “Elvis of cultural theory.” After the death of Jacques Derrida, Žižek became, as one writer puts it, “not only the most famous living philosopher, but perhaps the *only* properly famous living

philosopher” (Kotsko 2008: 1). He continued to print political commentary in some of the most influential and widely read publications in America and Britain such as *The New York Times*, *London Review of Books*, *In These Times*, *The Guardian* and *Foreign Policy*. His mix of Hegelian polemic, Lacanian interpretations of popular culture and resuscitation of subjects such as ideology made him something of a hero to those whose pursuits were – as the title of one of Žižek’s books denotes – *In Defense of Lost Causes* and put in jeopardy by the likes of the postmodernists, post-theorists and post-Marxists of all stripes.

It was in 1999 that Žižek’s mode of thought took a sharp turn in his book *The Ticklish Subject* which devoted a whole chapter to a recent book by fellow left-wing philosopher Alain Badiou entitled *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. It was here that Žižek’s work took what we might call a theological turn. And this turn was to be the subject of the following books *The Fragile Absolute* in 2000, *On Belief* in 2001 and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* in 2003, not to mention the space he allocated it in his self-appointed magnum opus *The Parallax View* in 2006. Although he published and edited texts on other subjects during this time this was to be how he was defined from then on, becoming the figurehead in a newly found interest in St Paul the Apostle in radical politics along with Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. The basic tenets of this theological turn was to rejuvenate left-wing politics with appeals to Pauline Christianity. For Žižek it started out as a way of combining Christianity and Marxism as a means of combating the “postmodern spiritual mush,” as Steven Pool for *The Guardian* put it in his review. But as the project developed further in Žižek’s other books on the topic he demanded that dialectical materialists “should go through the Christian experience” (Žižek 2003: 6). What did he mean by this?

Like Kierkegaard, Žižek insists that we read Paul from within the Jewish tradition, to emphasise the radical break and show “Christianity-in-becoming”, to show not that Christianity has repressed its Jewish roots, but rather “the true location of Christianity’s rupture with Judaism” (Žižek 2003: 10). The main focus on Paul in these analyses is of someone who, from inside the Jewish tradition, transgressed the law, constituting the universal love of God, rather than inside the particular dimension of Judaism. According to the Romans 15:16, the mission of Paul was to carry out ‘a priestly ministry’ at the service of God in order that ‘the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable.’ The perverse core of Christianity in this sense, for Žižek, is precisely demonstrated by Paul’s struggles on “how to avoid the trap of perversion, that is, of a Law that generates its transgression, since it needs it in order to assert itself as Law” (Žižek 1999: 148). That is the equivalent of the superego injunction to Enjoy! to transgress the law without falling short into the realm of perversion. In other words it

is the rejection of the Jewish stance towards the law and the reintroduction of the pagan one that composes Christianity's "perverse core".

What exactly does it mean to transgress this law as Paul did and why is it an important factor for dialectical materialists? Namely that it opened up an emergent social order that anyone, regardless of their position in society ("There is neither Jew nor Greek" *Gal. 3:28*) could be part of, and also that it was an example of sociality that didn't have an inherent ulterior motive or, to contrast it with its complete opposite, what is said in Romans 3:8, "do evil that good may result" (Kotsko 2008: 96).

The book that my main focus will be on in this essay however will be the 2008 publication *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* and my main priority with this text will be to analyse it in a wider capacity, offering some of my own reflections in parallel to Žižek's of how the types of violence he deals with in his text penetrate the current political and economic landscape. Among other things my reflections will explore how Žižek's notion of violence is significant to his previous studies on theology which I have now introduced. Furthermore, I will also attempt to utilise some of Žižek's concepts to iron out some inherent antinomies present in traditional liberal ethics with regards to violence.

To place Žižek's understanding of violence into some sort of familiar perspective, I will compare it to the event of religious conversion, and then allow myself space to justify my doing so. It would seem by contrast that a religious conversion, if we are to accept the accounts given by certain individuals, is much more abrupt and explosive than a conversion to atheism, which might normally take a while to become fully subjectivised and accepted. Some would argue that this says something about the difference between theism and atheism that the former can appear like a shattering that takes a matter of seconds to assume, whereas the latter is a painful process of disengaging, doubting and sacrifice into the pursuit of rational and critical thought. This is not to say that atheists cannot experience something akin to spirituality, and it is certainly not to say that the explosiveness of religious conversion deals it any truthfulness. At this point we might imagine an atheist utilising Locke in uttering, "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

Although, this would be a most unfair opinion since there are some bad reasons to become an atheist as well as foolish ones for being a theist (I'm thinking of the rather too accepted reason of being raised in Northern Ireland amid Catholic and Protestant violence; although I can understand why this might lead one to see the absurdity of organised religion, which occasionally conceals a true violent *raison d'être*, I can't necessarily see why the next logical step would be not to believe in a

God. Such flimsy argument was the reason Rev. Alistair McGrath, Richard Dawkins' most outspoken critic, was once an atheist. Its no wonder he converted to Christianity).

So what might an explosive religious conversion look like? Let us take the example of Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project. The story goes that as Collins was hiking in the Cascade Mountains, unexpectedly seeing a frozen waterfall hundreds of feet high, an unimaginable feeling overwhelmed him of "God's creation". The next morning he felt compelled to surrender to Jesus Christ. Whether or not we accept this as good reason to be religious, one cannot object to the notion that such an experience of complete wonderment is entirely possible. Indeed from a critical standpoint Collins' experience needn't have any appeals to the divine in order to be encountered as a beautiful, spiritual moment. This is what it looks like from the outside, whereas for Collins it was an affirmation that God exists and has created the beauty of the waterfall for Collins to experience at the site of his divine explosion.

Applied to the domain of practical politics an explosion like this is what Žižek has identified as "divine violence," a term first developed by Marxist critic Walter Benjamin in order to designate an act or brutal disruption which exists external to any law that could maintain it. It should be contrasted with "mythic violence" which is a means of establishing the rules of law, or the legal social order (the domain in which, as Hannah Arendt recounts, Adolf Eichmann tried to defend himself during his trial in Israel, by appealing to Kantian duty for his part in the "Final Solution" (Arendt 1963: 120-1)). "Divine Violence" is just one example of violence that Žižek gives in his *six sideways reflections*.

Žižek's first task is to distinguish subjective violence from its objective counterpoint. Subjective violence is the perceptibly obvious violence seen on the news or on the streets in the form of "crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict" whereas objective violence is the unseen form of violence that takes the form of either the symbolic (bound in language and its forms, reminiscent of the point made by Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim that to speak or write about Hitler gave him a posthumous life) or the systemic (the catastrophic consequences of our economy when it is functioning as normal). The very notion that this objective violence is unseen sustains the level with which we perceive something as subjectively violent.

As I have mentioned previously, the only way to do justice to Žižek's examples of the level at which objective violence is unseen and subjective violence is perceived is by displaying ones own examples in parallel in order to reflect properly on the extent to which his points are significant. It would be appropriate at this stage

to observe two divergent examples that maintain Žižek's task; that something can be so obviously present it becomes unnoticeable, and that some violent ideology can be at play simultaneously in its shamelessly obvious and concealed forms. Firstly I am reminded of an advert recently promoting a plug-in air freshner which frequently changes scent "So You Can Really Notice." The point of its frequent change is not because the smell slowly fades into the inertia of all surrounding smells, but rather the opposite, that the smell is so present it fails to arouse any nasal response, that is to say the constancy of the air freshner is so, that a disturbance of a different scent is needed to take place in order to recapture its perfumed essence. (does this not perfectly characterise Hegel's notion of history, that it repeats itself so individuals are able to fully identify with and determine the plausibility of their particular social situation?). Another way to look at it is to imagine that one walks past the same red postbox everyday, that postbox does not fade into the colour of its surroundings in a literal sense, but one becomes so used to it being there that it becomes unnoticeable. It only becomes really noticeable when someone paints it black.

A second analogous example of how objective violence is sustained can be found in another event that caught my eye recently on the matter of Iranian plans for a car designed specially for a woman. The car producer Iran Khodro have made plans for the vehicles to be feminine in colour, will feature aids to make parking more efficient and a jack for easier removal of tyres. For this explicit turn of ideology one is tempted to be outraged at the sexism and patronisation such plans demand from the western liberal subject. But this subject is offended *only* by the explicit ideology, not the car itself for which such designs are already in existence in the western capitalist world. What is most unpalatable about the plan is the honesty, where western capitalism would conceal this sort of dogma under the illusion of a totally free choice.

So one could argue that a Žižekian view of capitalism might be that it promotes a society that pretends everything is running smoothly, that we are free to consume whatever we like, buy two cars, surf the internet, whereas the actual reality of capitalism is one that conceals its true core of authoritarianism, that encourages the upper middle classes to forget the poor, that disregards the third world and ecological matters. But this is only partly true. Žižek identified during his study of violence a new strata of capitalist rationale which has been ironically qualified as "liberal communism" by a group of entrepreneurs at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Some other terms in this Newspeak include "Creative", "Frictionless" or "Smart Capitalism," though we might just as simply understand the philosophy as "capitalism with a conscience". Its proponents include Bill Gates and George Soros the Chief Executives of Google, IBM, Intel and eBay. What is so

unique about these characters is that they perceive themselves as philanthropists first and businessmen second, who advocate social responsibility and the breakdown of bureaucratisation, set up humanitarian programs and wax lyrical about the environment, and, sure, if they make a little money in the running what is the harm (in the words of Ted Turner, the largest individual landowner in North America, “its how you use [wealth]. So you have to say I can do better, and I will feel better by giving this up, than I’ll do if I just keep it”).

We can see Žižek’s logic here; of course these billionaires can give up their cash for world hunger, its no skin off their backs. But Žižek’s critique is much more than that. Whether certain figureheads for capitalism have a conscience or not is quite beside the point, what is important here, for Žižek, is that capitalism still has its underlying logic, and that is the ruthless pursuit of profit. The charity element is a way to conceal the truth, a way to appease guilt, or at least to be perceived as appeasing guilt. Furthermore, it is quite clear how this functions as “objective violence” precisely that the charitable element of capitalism provides the perfect red herring for the systemic “catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” (Žižek 2008b: 1)

Žižek’s work always manages to encompass the particular question of the day – his work since 9/11 has matured into a practical system, and one that, since this date, has been the topic of much debate, especially in America regarding certain imperial pursuits ranging from issues about Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo Bay. The focus on violence amid the ongoing war in Iraq has raised a new set of questions on the problem of torture and the rules of war in general. Philosophers such as A.C. Grayling whose book *Among the Dead Cities* (2006) deals with the legality of “carpet” or “area” bombing during World War II came at a particular time as to belong to the debate of whether war had rules and regulations or not, and whether certain elements of that war were within legal bounds when it came to bombing innocent civilians, issues that are a matter of course in debates centred around the war on terror.

Another book that deals with notions that have re-emerged in philosophical debate since the Iraq war is Julian Baggini’s *The Pig That Wants to be Eaten* (2005). In particular is the 17th experiment in his book that deals with a hypothetical “Torture Option”. Hadi has a group of captives and one of those captives is Brad who has planted a bomb that could kill thousands of innocent civilians. Only Brad knows where the bomb is and he won’t tell anyone anything. Intelligence informs Hadi that though nothing one can do to Brad will get him to talk, perhaps if Hadi sanctions the torture of Wesley, Brad’s son, Brad will talk. Hadi, who wouldn’t usually permit torture

on moral grounds, is in a quandary. Does he allow the torture of one innocent to save the lives of thousands of civilians even though he would normally be morally opposed? The obvious problem here is the overproximity of the torturer and the tortured, that even though Hadi knows lives will be saved through his act, it is he who must bear the burden of responsibility for the the tortured innocent. Sam Harris, during his plea for ethical torture in his atheist polemic *The End of Faith*, which Žižek critiques in *Violence*, designates an imaginary “truth pill” as an antidote to the anxiety of the torturer. A pill that seems to do nothing to the tortured subject from the outside, but actually submits him in the throes of paralysis that no human could possibly withstand a second dose of.

After filling in for Harris to tell the reader that the KGB psychiatric unit did invent an equivalent to the “truth pill”, Žižek notes that the problematic for the torturer is that he perceives the tortured subject as the Judaeo-Christian Neighbour, “too-close”. The notion of the neighbour decrees that one has the right of ethical treatment, that we are all entitled in equal measure to rights and duties. A Declaration drafted by Dr. Hans Küng was signed at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993 by over 200 religious leaders of 40 different faith schools, proclaiming the Golden Rule which legitimates rights to the neighbour. The case for torture to save the lives of many others in certain cases (“do evil that good may result”) precisely tries to make obsolete this ethic of reciprocity. To be sure, the Baggini example is even more relevant than the example made of/by Harris, because we know for sure that the tortured subject will be innocent and, in theory, should enjoy the rights of a neighbour.

Returning to the point, we can see why Žižek has chosen to designate the “truth pill” as an example of “objective violence”. The true level of objective violence, like the “truth pill”, is sustained by an invisibility that is itself sustained by the level which one perceives subjective violence. In other words, if one took away the key ingredient of the hypothetical “truth pill” – that being the appearance of induced sleep while the torture is occurring – the violence would therefore be measured by the same standard as subjective violence. But, crucially, the “truth pill” conceals from the perceiver the true level of violence being administered to the tortured subject. This categorically summarises Žižek’s position on how to contrast objective from subjective violence; the level at which we perceive violence – that is subjective violence – allows objective violence to be hidden, and it is precisely at this level that Žižek points to the likes of Bill Gates and George Soros. They create a philanthropic standard for themselves at which they desire to be perceived, when in fact the more appropriate standard to which one should perceive them is at the concealed level of

their function in Capitalist exploitation. For instance when their philanthropy is contrasted to a street robber it is clear who the violent criminal is, but when we start to analyse that which may not be readily perceptible – objective violence - we start to understand their violent criminality at another level which the philanthropy has been used to camouflage.

Though Žižek's book offers consummate explanation on the playing field of violence and its arrangement in political economy, the study did lack a cross referencing of the materialist kernel of Christianity that should be retained for dialectical materialism. What I mean is the study of violence should have been properly appropriated into Žižek's theological turn, especially as the the topic of religious violence has been briefly hinted at before, for example in his chapter *Neighbours and Other Monsters*, but never properly elaborated on. The type of religious violence I am hinting at here could be drawn from the example of Arijuna, the King who hesitated to wage bloody war when he recognised his own friends and relatives on the other side of the battlefield, a story that features in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the Hindu holy book. He confides in Sri Krishna whom Hindus believe to be an incarnation of God that he feels it wrong to slay kinsmen. Sri Krishna warned Arijuna that it would be a sin to retreat as he is a warrior, a *Kshatriya* (bearer of authority) whose duty to God it is to serve in battle.

The message is quite clear; in this instance it is duty to God that acts as the theoretical groundwork for the warrior, and it would be wrong and cowardly for him to opt out of the fight, because sometimes, to quote Žižek, "doing nothing is the most violent thing to do." But the materialist kernel is even clearer: a political *praxis* – remembering its full Marxist weight – is necessarily founded upon clear theoretical grounds, not idle emotional reaction, and Arijuna's political action might have been disturbed by his emotional dispositions were it not until Sri Krishna provided him with the clear political motives for combat. This should not be interpreted as saying that the progressive left be subservient pawns to a higher power, but rather the opposite, that democratic politics be about strength and foresight, not blind reaction and fear. To exemplify real political action, it is clear how ineffective May Day looting and rioting – an indiscriminate, stupid and blind series of violent acts - is in comparison to, say, a Venezuelan factory takeover. The specific theological root should not be forgotten in this instance of political action, and although Žižek's *Violence* didn't explore this more, room has been made available by the work to progress into such a development.

To explore further, however, Žižek's conclusion about violence, he suggests that it is often the case wherein we – nations and individuals - haven't properly analysed the violent situation with which we might be situated. And we could be blindly throwing punches when we have no idea what we are fighting for, or indeed what we think we might achieve from it. Žižek's radical solution to this: do nothing! He appeals to Badiou in saying "better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent" or precisely that today's threat is from those who need to appear to be "active" in order to keep concealed some deeper level of violence, apropos the "liberal communists". As this violence is so well concealed doing nothing, for Žižek, is often the only thing one can be sure that they are doing right.

The conclusion I drew from Žižek's study of violence is that to do nothing is the only responsible thing to do when the pursuit only serves to strengthen the current violent order – that being liberal capitalism. But what might have helped this radical conclusion would be for Žižek to detail an appropriate form of violence, in opposition to the traditional liberal approach of "greatest happiness" with all its inherent problems (such as the example of the "torture option" or the case of Alan Dershowitz (i). Also the study could have made explicit references to the Žižek *et al* theological turn. But it is easy to just say this, what issues could Žižek make reference to in a theory of ethical violent theology?

He comes closest to it in the aforementioned chapter *Neighbours and Other Monsters* where he recalls Emmanuel Levinas' notion that ethics "is not just about life, but something more than life" (Žižek, Santner, Reinhard 2005: 150). He describes ethics as the gap that separates Judaism and Christianity, in the former the ethical task is how "to be without being a murderer," whereas Christianity in the latter believes it can overcome this "murderer" finitude by entering into a blessed state and realising a utopia. The deadlock inherent to this utopia, for Žižek, is that it cuts short a link between spiritual salvation and worldly justice by transposing the blessed state "into an Elsewhere"(ibid) – in a word it shifts the Christian ethical task into the position of a compromise, one to be made with "the masters of this world, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" (ibid) (ii).

To this we might ask *How can the dialectical materialist experience of Christianity solve this problem?* For a start the Christian problem here is the same as the Marxist one, it needs to initiate the "blessed state" on the grounds of a political *praxis*, that is to say of a proper synthesis between theory and practice that can promote action that does not simply serve to strengthen the dominant class, but can transgress that compromise and find political salvation (not in the redundant way that

ethical systems are said to replace religiously moral systems, but, rather, to do as Paul and Arijuna did). Like Mosaic Law, inherent to Capitalism is the injunction to transgress its barriers, and like Paul's mission, the progressive left should act carefully in order not to, by intending to destroy it, promote the very core of transgression it feeds upon. Any further correlation of the conclusions Žižek has reached in his separate studies on violence and his theological turn should be a major philosophical step in breaking down the current political and economic climate.

Notes

- (i) In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek deals a well directed blow to Jonathan Alter and Alan Dershowitz for their justification of torture methods. As Žižek points out, is it not that Dershowitz "is succumbing to the terrorist lure, since his argumentation against terrorism already endorses terrorism's basic premise." (Žižek 2003: 37-8)
- (ii) Does this not bear resemblance to, how G.K. Chesterton describes it "I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered it was orthodoxy" (Chesterton 2004: 15) – that is to say the Christian project to promote political antagonism to the Roman order found that its solution did little to change it, but was actually correlative to it, in a compromising exchange?

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