

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Eight, Number Two

Reinventing the Notion of Ethics: Žižek on the Invisible Violence of Capitalism

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INTRODUCTION

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. (Žižek 2008: 1)

Racism, sexism, and so on - these situations and issues are what commonly provoke clear and immediate ethical responses – more so, these problems become the very building blocks in ensuing a creation of proper ethical and legal systematic measures. However, it is crucial to note that in every “subjective violence” – or violence that has a clear and identifiable agent – there is an objective background that invisibly sustains and over-determines it. This objective frame, often imperceptible, contains a systemic and more perilous violence, for it is, in fact, a violence that prolongs and generates the very subjective violence that we are fighting and responding against.

By simply watching news channels, visiting the internet, even watching diverse films, my observations led me to conclude that in today’s globalized world, different forms of subjective violence are what commonly occupy our attention. Consequently, this failure to perceive the more critical “objective violence” that globally envelopes our time today puts us into a deadlock in solving the pressing problems of our time, be it ethical, political or social.

In an attempt to contribute to the discourse of ethics, my musings directed my attention to this type of violence, namely objective violence, which, I think, needs more critical attention than the subjective violence that misleadingly arouses our impulses to act. For only by truly accounting for this objective frame can we make sense of these different forms of subjective violence in the first place.

Accordingly, I would argue that a reinvention of how we view a truly ethical act is necessary in today's globalized world. My claim is that the challenge for a truly globalized ethics is that it is not enough to simply respond to these different forms of subjective violence occurring in different parts of the world by merely punishing and isolating the agents involved. Instead, what is more gripping to consider is to shamelessly question the objective violence upon which these different forms of subjective violence are inherent, reacting against, and being sustained by in the first place – i.e. the inherent violence produced by the predominance of global capitalism. Put it in more concrete terms, it is not enough that we give charity to the poor over and over again, but to question and try to give a solution why poverty is normally sustained in our given order.

In doing so, I will follow the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, and his meticulous cognitive mapping of our contemporary time. His detailed analyses led him to conclude that “we experience a kind of *Unbehagen* in global capitalism. The key question now is who will articulate this discontent?” (Žižek 2010: ix) For Žižek, all the violence, big or small – Khmer Rouge or pussy riots – “is conceivable only against the background of the constitutive antagonism of today's capitalism” (Žižek 1993: 224-225). Subsequently, what necessitates this collective ethical response is based on a simple premise: “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” (Žižek 2010: x). Let us have a quick assessment of the deadlocks that inhere in our order today.

I. An Assessment of the Deadlocks of our Global Order

It is of little doubt that the successful invisibility of the objective violence from much of our attention is nothing but the victory of global capitalism to establish its unquestionable supremacy. Many social scientists continue to perceive most of our urgent ethical concerns today – from environment to food, even poverty – from the standpoint of production, recycling, responsibility, discipline, and many others; in other words, from the standpoint of the capitalist doctrine. What this misses is the convincing fact that indeed the norms and formulas of the

capitalist dynamic, in spite of its seeming infinite adaptability, are evidently reaching an impasse it can no longer sustain. Žižek claims that this appears in at least four different guises:

The most noticeable among the four is the problem of ecology. This predicament has only concerned us during the last 50 or so years, due to the uncontrollable production that the system inevitably maneuvers. The way capitalism adapts from this issue is to advocate immense subjective response of the three R's: Reuse, Reduce, Recycle. More than this, through its undying marriage with technological production, what capitalism tries to innovate are environment-friendly appliances that are then sold to the market, making the consumers feel that they are buying these things for an ethical cause. What is noticeable in this strategy is how the burden of the invisible objective violence of rampant production is transferred to the individuals as a burden for them to respond to under the banner of innocent ethical responsibility. But what is more crucial is that these simplified reactions, if pushed to its limits, will arrive at a deadlock that can create unprecedented ecological catastrophes around the world.

Secondly, another problem that should be taken into serious consideration is the problem of private property. During a conference in India that I attended, someone raised the valid question concerning the high prices of medicines sold to third world countries and how are we to deal with this predicament. Disturbingly, the speaker, using a capitalist rhetoric, simply responded that perhaps if the researches of medicines will be transferred to the universities, prices will be hopefully lowered. This kind of argument although convincing sounding, is obviously subscribing to the objective violence of the system. This mode of argumentation sets priority on the circulation of profit over the health requirements of the people.

However, the more crucial and weirder paradoxical issues regarding this point are emerging now. Gathering from Žižek, "in India, local communities can suddenly discover that medical practices and materials they are using for centuries are now owned by American companies, so they should be bought from them"(Žižek 2007: Unpaginated). Along with this concern on medicines, territorial disputes are also of great trepidation in different countries. These disputes are profoundly informed by political and economic interests. This inherent imbalance in how the system works should be noted with intense precision.

The third problem is the unprecedented, yet extremely probable consequences of the biogenetic revolution. Even the great popularizer of liberal capitalism, Francis Fukuyama who declared it as the best possible model of societies, was shocked with this predicament. He was even forced to recant this statement upon analyzing in detail the unparalleled possibilities of this scientific discovery (Fukuyama 2002).¹ Although the responsibility for dealing with the

consequences of this revolution has not fallen onto our laps as of this moment, it is our task today not to leave such exceptional concern unchecked. But if we allow the system to use its rhetorical strategy in convincing us that this will give us a better and easier life, then we may be due some immense predicaments never before encountered in history.

Finally, last, but not the least, is the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions. For instance, in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, new forms of apartheid are emerging. “Hidden in the outskirts of the cities, often literally behind the walls, are tens of thousands of ‘invisible’ immigrant workers doing all the dirty work, from servicing to construction, separated from their families and refused all privileges” (Žižek 2010: x).² No less than the Philippines itself is experiencing an upsurge in the growth of slum areas and inhabitants.

This seemingly necessary exclusion and division can be said to be the product of the widening gap of the privilege and less fortunate due to the inescapable systemic process of global capital. As to how global capital tries to respond to its inherent poison – its own self-destructive tendency – is by providing more and more charity works that even persuade us, so called responsible individuals, to participate for a global cause. In fact, this logic has already been inscribed into our consumerism. Take for instance Starbucks which serves not only good coffee but also a sense of ethical responsibility, for every time you buy a cup of cappuccino, you are also giving donations to children starving in Africa. However, the problem with this is that instead of really alleviating them from poverty, one simply prolongs their victimhood from the hands of the capitalist. Further, upon a more careful hindsight, this process obfuscates the issue by letting the consumers believe that through this, they can help diminish if not remove poverty altogether.

The compelling question that naively imposes itself is “Why are we simply allowing the dominion of global capitalism to extend its violent invisible hand without us questioning its very contours in the first place?” Žižek appraises at least three convincing reasons for this: one is that he characterized late capitalist society as being dominated by what he calls Nietzschean “Last Men” (Žižek 2010: xv) or cynical individuals who vegetate in the eventless utilitarian hedonism of consumerist society, unable to fight for a higher purpose or ideal. In this way, demonstrations, violence here and there, are simply disregarded most especially if it happens from the other side of the world. These people exemplify a fetishistic disavowal whose logic can be summarized in the expression “I know very well but...” “I know very well that the capitalist system cannot provide solutions to our predicaments but who cares I won’t live to see the day of its destruction.”

Secondly, capitalism itself has done a good job in creating a straw-man figure of any radical political projects that sought to challenge the order. They label any attempt to change the system as a possible candidate for the revival of totalitarian regimes that wrought havoc in the 20th century: “instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it [liberal-democracy] describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively prevents us from thinking” (Žižek 2001: 3).

Consequently, this leads to the third reason namely that if no political alternatives are possible, then we need to accept that global capitalism is here to stay; all we can do is to bombard it with impossible demands. With this limitation, all our problems, instead of being solved, are simply put into a circular deadlock within the capitalist language, which only prolongs the system’s and our own destruction. The problem with all these positions can be succinctly put as both the lack and the deprivation of a certain political – worse, even a theoretical – alternative that can prove to be a viable solution to confront the global turmoil. Such a post-political attitude tends to conceal the issues and neutralize the people, for even attempting to venture into more radical solutions that can confront these major problems that require every bit of our critical attention, is deemed dangerous and futile. “‘Post-political’ is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration” (Žižek 2008: 34).

Consequently, this leaves the job for the experts to think so that the people remain at bay, drunk within the vicious cycle of consumerism and self-expression. No wonder our academic institutions today are focused on producing experts and professionals in the field of the sciences. For Žižek, the trouble with experts is that the problems they solve are formulated by other people, particularly those who are in power (Bolman and Raghuvier 2012: Unpaginated). What this means is that the questions and problems themselves are formulated in such a way that nothing will change, that the system will remain intact.

However, in Žižek’s view, we are living in strange times where any traditional standards can no longer suffice to provide solutions to the serious problems that the global order is experiencing and continually breeding. That a step-by-step cure according to the same coordinates of the system cannot but fail to be a utopian dream of a solution-to-come (Žižek 2009: video).³ This has led him to gather tools from different areas of knowledge in order for him to forge a theoretical hardware that will hope to deal with the task ahead. Discernibly, his account points to a kind of ethical stance that will attempt to resolutely and affirmatively risk the proper engagement required to question the existing order.

II. Reinvention of Ethics: An Act Beyond the Ethical

What demands an ethical gesture is the globalized world within which we are situated. For us, even in view of our easy access to serious issues through our televisions and the internet, it is still disturbingly easy for us to shrug those off mainly because it does not concern the current ideology today, or the area of the world where we belong, our nation, our city, and, ultimately – ourselves. 9-11 was a wakeup call for the Americans and for the rest of the world because it can be said that it occurred at the heart of liberal capitalism. But the so called “deadliest war” happening now in Congo is left unnoticed by most of us. Be it ideological mystification, hegemonic concerns or other excuses that we may raise, the problem is, at least, can be surmised in the vegetative cynicism of our era.

In our current state, more than ever in the history of the world, responsibility not only for ourselves and our sovereign nations should be set, but more importantly, the responsibility for the very universal Spirit that occupies our worldviews and informs the way we understand socio-political relations. Disregard for responsibility is not only observable from the people around us, but also it manifest in our consumerist society. What we call decaffeinated coffee, non-alcoholic beer, non-fat milk, sugar free ice cream, chocolate laxative, vegetable chicharrón, electronic cigarettes, even dating agencies that endorse a love without the fall; and it is also tempting to include here capitalism with charity (Žižek 2004: Unpaginated) are undeniable symptoms. For it is safe to conclude that all these are embodiments of our desire to get what we want, while excluding the responsibility – the poison – inclusive in them.

These manifestations are very telling with regard to what enters the frame of common sense today. Why would you risk falling in love and getting hurt if you have dating agencies to fix it for you? Why would eat a pork chicharrón if it can give you a heart attack? To enjoy the pleasure, one is inclined to avoid all these necessary consequences. Accordingly, among the enemies of common sense, philosophy, at least in the Western sense, is the exceptional candidate. Since Descartes, philosophy has become the harbinger of radical thoughts. More than this, Plato has said to have uttered that the beginning of philosophy is the human being’s sense of wonder, and, arguably, this subtle amazement about the world pushes itself to locate the very conditions that made this world possible: “philosophy begins the moment we do not

simply accept what exists as given... but raise the question how is what we encounter as actual also possible" (Žižek 1993: 2).

Thus, reading the current state of affairs from a philosophical standpoint we can at least conclude one important point: a truly radical stance today is to fully assume the responsibility of instigating the revolutionary act that will redefine the whole constellation of the current order. The valid philosophical question therefore that needs to be raised is no longer "What constitutes an ethical act?" or "How are we to be ethical?", but a more daring one – namely "How does an ethical norm emerge in the first place?" Through this backtrack we can perceive the radical dimension of ethics.

Consequently, in this sense, the need to reinvent how we understand ethics today is crucial at this point. Against the traditional understanding of an ethical act as a response to the universal norms of the system,⁴ our ethical action today should rather respond to break and replace this very universal system. In more concrete terms, to change and replace the system of global capitalism itself on account of which destructive and violent predicaments are left unsolved. This important shift takes into account the very conditions that establish ethical norms – rewinding what is actually existing to the possibility of its existence. This step back enables to understand that ethical acts does not subscribe to the norms, but establishes them to deal with the predicaments concerning our lives.

Particularly, what this means is that ethics becomes grounded only on itself, on pure contingency, no longer to a kind of necessary/*a priori* guarantor of rightness and wrongness. This kind of understanding of ethics steps outside the boundaries of what can be understood within the frame of common sense as good and evil – an ethics that goes beyond what is understood as good, but, decisively, can be misunderstood as radical evil.⁵ Inevitably, what we call here as an ethical act will appear as a transgression of the norms, as subjective violence. But this act differs from a mere transgression of the given order. Instead, the change happens at the universal level. Put it in a different way, we can say that it is easy to identify that murder is a crime in relation to the law. But one will find it difficult to assert that the reinstatement of a new law to replace the old law is a crime, for such a procedure is outside the bounds of the existing law itself.

It is against this frame of understanding that the ethical act that I'm referring is conceivable. It does not transgress the law; rather it is an act beyond the law. But what is more interesting to note is that upon the accomplishment of this radical ethical act, it retroactively redeems itself as good – that is to say, it redefines what counts as good and evil (Žižek 2001: 170). When an existing law is replaced by the new law, it redefines what is lawful and what is

not. Indeed, it is not easy to discount such a formidable theoretical account, most especially if one is truly engaged in dealing with the deadlock of our current order. But in the same way, it is very easy to fall into the trap of believing that one is doing her ethical duty if she is simply undermining the current order. This is the reason why responsibility takes an unprecedented importance in this scenario. If an ethical act becomes grounded fully on itself, it therefore does not only mean that one should be ready to face the consequences of one's action, but also one should be fully responsible in choosing what one's own duty should be.

Epilogue

Although Žižek's powerful account is hypnotically tempting in a way for both psychological and political reasons, still one has the responsibility to carefully evaluate proceedings with a critical engagement towards both his approach and towards the order itself. Moreover, his account still remains open in itself. Much of his theoretical considerations are still spiritual in nature. As a result, it still remains to be translated into more concrete political alternatives. From the looks of things, although the concrete signs are emerging, there are still a lot to be surmised and considered. No necessary conclusion can be given at this point in time.

Conversely, indeed, I am still one with Žižek in endorsing the exact opposite of Marx's thesis 11: "the first task today is not to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility: 'What can one do against global Capital?'),", but rather to interpret the world again, "...to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates" (Žižek 2001: Unpaginated) of today's socio-political order.

At the very least, what is needed today is not a reckless and reactive attempt to undermine the regime. What is more important to achieve is an unbreakable fidelity and enthusiasm for the Event that can make way for the ethical act to take place. In every revolutionary achievement, be it in the realm of sciences or politics, the resiliency of one's fidelity to one's own cause or project is what makes possible the achievement of a revolution. In terms of political demonstrations, the most important factor to be considered is the morning after the demonstration. If the demonstrators return to their normal lives, fidelity is indeed lacking. And without this fidelity, it is impossible to complete the full circle of the revolution.

Thus, the task, for the meantime, is to arouse and maintain this enthusiasm and fidelity to this ethical cause even though there is no assurance as to whether one is on the right path or not. This preliminary task can possibly be the springboard upon which a global ethical act that can break the violent deadlock of the current order can insinuate. Along with Žižek, it is indeed

compelling to declare that it is “better to take the risk and engage in the fidelity to a Truth-Event, even if it ends in catastrophe, than to vegetate in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival” (Žižek 2010: xv) For what else is the aim of life than the “pursuit of the great and the impossible”?(Nietzsche 1997: 9)

END NOTES

¹ See Francis Fukuyama’s less popular book that tackles the vicissitudes and probable consequences of biogenetics, which forced him to recant his infamous formula of the end of history. Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

² Cf. Johann Hari, “A Morally Bankrupt Dictatorship built by Slave Labor” *Independent* (27 November 2009), p. 6 in Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p. x.

³ Slavoj Žižek, “What does it mean to be Revolutionary Today?” see link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD69Cc20rw>. But even with a stronger conviction, Žižek would even go so far as to claim that the liberal-democratic ideology, in choosing to remain within the same coordinates of the capitalist regime, obfuscates the critical points by simply asking to throw the dirty water out of the tub in order to save the baby. Little do they know that in the first place the water became dirty because of the baby – that is to say, the problems are not simply misplaced issues, stains, accidentally emerging from the harmony of the global order; on the contrary, the problems are, in fact, generated out of and springing from the totality itself.

⁴ It is interesting to recall Kierkegaard’s Religious Suspension of the Ethical. When Kierkegaard, following Hegel, conceived ethics as a form of subjection and subscription to the universal, he implicitly acknowledged the fact that ethics is only conceivable against the contours that has a preexisting norm. Ethics, here, relies on a kind of guarantor of rightness and wrongness.

⁵ This is where Žižek locates the Kant’s ambivalence about the paradox of an act done out of absolute duty and an act of diabolical evil. Apparently, following Kant, both acts are done as an end-in-itself, entirely grounded on itself. The paradox resides in Kant’s empty space of the moral law. And this empty space generates the speculative identity of an act of diabolical evil and absolute duty. The only conclusion for Žižek is whether it is an act of diabolical evil or absolute duty is beside the point. For you, as the agent of the act responding to the moral law is not only responsible for your act, but more importantly you are responsible what your duty is.

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