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## A Hermeneutic of Hope: Problematising Žižek's Apocalypticism

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In this paper, I wish to problematize Slavoj Žižek's use of the apocalyptic tradition in his political philosophy, especially focusing on the consequences it has for his understanding of hope.<sup>1</sup> Especially, I find his strong emphasis on the disjunction between the state before and after the radical event implies a radical discontinuity between the present state and the state of emancipation, that the possibility falls away of any kind of criteria for a useful distinction between authentic and inauthentic events. Such a lack of a more developed hermeneutics of discernment opens up for a potential 'decisionism' in Žižek's work despite itself; decisionism in the sense of the eventual decision itself provides the criteria for what counts as a legitimate emancipation rather than any preconceived criteria. This means, in turn, that the heavy emphasis on discontinuity between the state before the event and after,

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results in a philosophical version of ‘supersessionism’ – that is, for example, the theological understanding that the Jewish people was superseded or replaced by the Christian church – that belie any continuity between the memory of what once was and the hope for what is to come. If there is only little or no continuity whatsoever between the state before and the state after the event between memory and hope, does this not mean the end of hope as we know it? My critique against Žižek, then, is that his weak sense of hope makes emancipation almost unimaginable here and now, and more like a leap into the dark rather than a condition to be desired even when one can only partially imagine what it might be like. I shall proceed this inquiry of hope by means of a theological critique, however, my purpose is to call attention to a latent weakness in Žižek’s political conception.

I begin by clarifying some of the key concepts of my argument, especially ‘apocalypticism’, ‘eschatology’ and ‘hope’ and with introducing the apocalyptic tradition in Christianity, its hermeneutic challenges, as well as the relation between the more general concept eschatology and its relation to alterity. I then proceed with a summary of philosopher and psychoanalyst, Jonathan Lear’s understanding of ‘radical hope’. It is at this juncture that I return to Žižek, where I explore the ways he relates to the ‘apocalyptic’ heritage. Here I discuss the act of hoping and the object of hope – on loss as well as a possible future – and will discuss Žižek’s dialectical understanding of hope in relation to Lear’s conception and, specifically, what Žižek’s understanding of hope might imply in terms of possibilities to discern the emancipatory quality of an event. In my concluding section I summarize my argument in relation to the potential decisionism and supersessionism in Žižek’s work and why this might imply the end of hope as we know it.

### **Eschatology and Alterity**

As a kind of general background to my argument, I shall begin with a very short exposition of theological understandings of apocalypse and eschatology and their relation to alterity. Such an exposition could aptly begin where the Christian Bible ends: In the *Book of Revelation* in the New Testament, also known as *The Apocalypse* from the first (Greek) word of the text. Here the reader gets a graphic description of the world to come. After the seven seals are broken and the seven trumpets have sounded, after the fights with the dragon and the beasts are over, after the seven angels with the seven plagues of God’s wrath have flown, after the

thousand years of the millennial kingdom is over and Satan has been released, there is a vision of a New Jerusalem. According to chapter 21, this is a quite extraordinary city, given that it is built of jasper, gold as pure as glass, pearls, and every kind of precious stone. Not only is the building material amazing, it is a city that promises everlasting peace and where the nations will come to heal. Through it a river of the water of life will flow. This provides a vision of a city that will inform the imagery of Christian eschatology for centuries. The Bible starts in Genesis with a formless and empty earth which then continues into a garden, but ends as a city; an image of both human and divine community.

The image of the city in *Revelation* puts one before an immediate hermeneutic obstacle. A city of gold where the foundations of city walls are made of jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth and amethyst seem wildly impractical. Even allowing for a hermeneutic gap of almost two thousand years where one cannot be sure what the original readers thought of all these precious stones, there must have been readers of *Revelation* even then wondering what to do with such an imagery that hardly could be taken literally. (Or, rather, can it? Given the obscene affluence of some of the world's super-rich today, is it actually thinkable that such a city could be appealing to someone?) Perhaps, and this is a conjecture, such imagery is chosen because it deliberately wants to draw attention to the impossibility of taking it at face value, thus forcing the reader to imagine a city beyond our present conditions. If this is correct – and it certainly is for some historical exegetes – then the purpose of the strange imagery is to evoke the image of a city discontinuous with our present, more contemporary cities. This is perhaps an obvious point to make, but it nevertheless illustrates the dilemma which any discussion of the future, whether it be political or theological, faces: is the future merely a prolongation of the present or will it be different? The image of the city in *Revelation* (a book that throughout history has inspired many emancipatory movements) is obviously on the side of imagining a different future. But, how different is this different future? In my illustration of the New Jerusalem in *Revelation*, there is both continuity and discontinuity: we recognise the image of the city even when it is a different city from all present cities.

I shall not deal here with the extraordinary rich, problematic and extremely varied history of interpretation of the imagery detailed in the *Book of Revelation*, the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament, a text which has always been

recognized by the Christian tradition as being very difficult to interpret. To note two prominent historical interpretations, Augustine (354–430) interpreted the millennial kingdom in chapter 20, verses 1–6 as an ahistorical allegory for the time between the first and the second coming of Christ, whereas Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) thought of it as an actual, historical period, a peaceable kingdom *in* history rather than *after* history (Svenungsson 2014: 65, 76 f.). These differing interpretations of the millennial period are representative of how these authors interpret *Revelation* in general, particularly given these authors' different yet equally prominent *Wirkungsgeschichten* or effective histories. Neither of these authors consider the image of the peaceful city as a literal image of the world to come. However, the function of propagating this particularly abstruse imagery is to alert the reader that the New Jerusalem is quite unlike the old one as well as any city known to us. The emphasis, perhaps, is on the discontinuity between the new and the old rather than continuity. The image of the New Jerusalem not only raises the general question of the continuity and discontinuity between this world and the world to come for Christian theology, but also, specifically in Joachim's case, the continuity and discontinuity between different eras in history.

Eschatology is the *locus* in Christian theology that deals with this question, not only with regard to things to come in a futural or historical sense, but in its entirety: if God is transcendent, which incidentally does not only mean that God is far away but *alter*, how *alter* is this *alter*? What is the *end* of the world, in the sense both of its final chapter and its semogenic context? Theology in an eschatological mode deals with questions concerning the relation between continuity and discontinuity, whether regarding the alterity of God, the form of the coming peaceable kingdom, or the resurrection of the dead. If the coming world of peace is too like our own, one may suspect that it will not be as peaceable as one hopes. But if it is completely different, then what is the point of hoping for it, as it will be completely unrecognizable to us? Eschatology needs to strike a balance between continuity and discontinuity, so as to avoid the extremes of trite permanence and irrelevant alterity. The image of the city in the *Book of Revelation* attempts to recognize this. As the British theologian Gerald Loughlin puts it: 'We can only imagine paradise on the basis of our knowledge of earthly gardens' (Loughlin 2004: 281). Likewise, one cannot imagine divine cities other than through earthly cities.

Eschatology, then, deals with the question of alterity, or how to strike a balance between continuity and discontinuity. To someone outside of the scope of Christian theology or belief, such eschatology as the one presented thus far might appear perplexing. The questions that Christian eschatology deals with could be more generalized, however. The question of hope, for example, is neither limited to the Christian tradition nor to any religious tradition, yet, at the same time appears prominently in secular philosophy, emancipatory politics as well as some factions of psychoanalysis. In the Christian tradition, hope is counted among the theological virtues along with love and faith. But regardless of the genealogy of the concept, that act of hoping is clearly recognizable far outside of this tradition. Nevertheless, in its political as well as psychoanalytical forms, hope shares with eschatology the question of continuity and discontinuity and their relation to each other.

### **Hope in the Face of Cultural Devastation**

One of the best recent philosophical accounts of hope is given by philosopher and psychoanalyst, Jonathan Lear in his text, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006). Here, Lear retells the story of a chief of the Crow nation, Plenty Coups, who had to handle the very likely collapse of the traditional way of life in his Indian tribe. I shall, however, focus on a more structural account of his understanding of hope with the intention of using this as a tool for critical comparison to Žižek's account of hope. Central to Lear's argument is how the Crow nation in its traditional form ruined at the end of the nineteenth century, and more precisely, ruined beyond the possibility of repair. This devastation did not only mean an external destruction of the Crow way of life, but it also signified an internal ruin. All the coordinates through which a Crow Indian made sense of his life disappeared. To be an optimist in such a situation would just be a form of wishful thinking, and in in this case, dreaming that the Crow nation somehow would be miraculously restored is not sufficient. Optimism does not recognize how vast the cultural devastation actually was for this Indian tribe. In my terms, optimism equals an untroubled continuity, a wish for more of the same. Apocalyptic imagery as the one we find in *Revelation* is hardly the expression of optimism, as it, relatively speaking, puts more emphasis on alterity than continuity. Hope, on the other hand, is more radical in that it recognizes the cultural trauma, but, nevertheless, *hopes* that there might be a way of continuing the Crow life under different circumstances and in a different way. Lear writes: 'This hope is radical in

that it is aiming for a subjectivity that is at once Crow and does not yet exist' (104). In other words, there is continuity as this new life that is hoped for is still recognizable as a Crow in some way. But there is also discontinuity in that this new Crow life does not yet exist and it is difficult to visualise what it might be. Hoping, then, is not knowing or projecting a known past into an unknown future, but rather to trust that newness is possible in the face of likely despair. The past remains as memory, not as fetish.

Whence this trust? To Plenty Coups, in Lear's account, a divine omen appeared in a dream. Not a divine omen that told him that everything will be well, that the devastation his nation had suffered was not real or that he would be bestowed with supernatural powers to set everything right. In that sense at least, the dream was not a form of wishful thinking. The dream was instrumental in providing some kind of legitimacy to the hope that there was a way forward at all, not in the sense of giving information of how this would come about, but in a deeper sense of actually giving trust. Lear relates agnostically to this dream, and generalizes its importance in suggesting that the legitimacy of hope is dependent upon some kind of goodness that 'transcends our finite powers to grasp it' (121). Here, Lear is intentionally vague, as he wishes to avoid committing himself to any particular metaphysics. However, he makes it clear that such a view is founded on human beings as erotic creatures, always striving towards something that transcends us. Such transcendence need not be of theological nature, however, nor need it be a 'thing'; we could regard it as a kind of immanent transcending process as long as there is something 'other' than human resources involved. According to Lear, such a transcendence or transcending is compatible also with several non-religious world-views. In a term often employed by Žižek, one could perhaps think of Plenty Coup's dream as a 'vanishing mediator': a structurally necessary object that will fall away when its work is done. It is easy to spot why Lear thinks that such goodness is necessary: the alternative is despair and cynicism that has given up on hope, concluding that the yearning of human beings is ultimately pointless.

Hope too, then, tries to strike a balance between continuity and discontinuity, as in the example of Christian eschatology. To formulate this with the help of Lear's account in *Radical Hope*: to wish for the mere continuation of the Crow nation after its cultural devastation would not be hope but just optimism or wishful thinking that does not take the impact of the destruction seriously. Discontinuity, on the other

hand, would be to despair of any meaningful continuation of the Crow nation whatsoever. Hope is trusting that a way forward is possible that is both somehow continuous with earlier Crow life in that it is still recognizably Crow but still discontinuous as it will have to be 'in a form that is not yet intelligible' (95). Beyond the Crow nation as well as Christian eschatology, the same structure, presumably, also informs our present personal and political *hoping*. The political vision of another society, which is a more just society, needs to be discontinuous with our present society. If it is not, it is just a projection of more of the same. However, at the same time it is, in some sense, recognizably continuous with what we know now of how a just society would be if the concept of justice is not to be thoroughly ambiguous. Note, as an example, Karl Marx's well-known description of the communist society in the *The German Ideology*:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic (Marx 1845).

Marx has been criticized for putting forward some very particular ideals of his own cultural context as an ideal for the coming society. Regardless as to whether this point of critique is legitimate or not, the question remains as to how he could have envisioned otherwise, particularly, if he wanted to convey an image of a coming society that would have been intelligible to his time? Maybe he errs on the side of continuity by not stressing enough of discontinuity, but nevertheless, even Marx should be allowed to imagine paradise on the basis of his knowledge of earthly gardens. If we did not recognise somehow, however preliminary, what this coming society would look like, would we even find it worth striving for? Can we yearn for what is utterly unknown to us, continuous with our present in just the negative sense of not being like that? After now having set the scene regarding apocalypse, eschatology and hope, this is the question I wish to pose regarding Žižek's political philosophy.

## Apocalyptic Žižek

Increasingly, Slavoj Žižek has associated his political philosophy with the apocalyptic tradition. Especially in *Living in the End Times* (2010), Žižek begins with alluding to the 'four riders of the apocalypse' from the *Book of Revelation*, suggesting that these in our present time consist of the ecological crisis, the biogenetic revolution, systemic imbalances and social divisions. All these developments lead to the premise of the book: "the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point" (x). Apocalypticism, to Žižek, denotes a cultural revolution, the kind of cultural devastation described in Lear's book, where it becomes impossible to go on as before. There is a need, then, for a radical re-orientation with regard to economy and social policy but also, with regard to the human subject itself. Apocalypse means that subjectivity itself needs to be revolutionized rather than reformed; the term radical, as often pointed out, is etymologically derived from the Latin term *radix* which means 'root', and the call for radical change in Žižek has primarily to do with the need for uprooting the subject from the current symbolic system if true change is to be achieved. That this is so becomes clear if one looks at the three current versions of apocalypticism that Žižek suggests characterize our times: "Christian fundamentalist, New Age, and techno-digital-post-human" (336). In *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (2009), Žižek actually cites four versions, which includes "secular ecologism" (94). However, the three versions differ according to their respective ontologies, and even if the Christian fundamentalist version "is considered the most ridiculous", this is still the version that Žižek sees as "closest to a radical "millenarian" emancipatory logic" (Žižek 2010: 337). How come? Why is this? I claim that the account Žižek gives of each one of them is rather a broad outline than a nuanced exposition, and it is clear that his interest lies more with presenting his own alternative than giving an understanding of rival traditions. Nevertheless, the main complaint that Žižek holds against both New Age and "techno-digital-post-human" apocalypticism is that they are not radical enough. These versions of apocalypticism do not question the fundamental coordinates of the liberal-autonomous subject; all through the radical, historical changes announced by them this subject remains intact. On the foundation of a basically unbroken subject, they propose modest, pragmatic change, reformism rather than revolution. For Žižek, they do not acknowledge the basic traumatic cut,



the inescapable alienation of the subject or the fundamental discontinuity of a present with a future.

Žižek's critique of New Age and "techno-digital-post-human" apocalypticism – which hardly deserve the epithet apocalypticism at all, in his account – are similar to his often repeated distinction between New Age spirituality or Western Buddhism and Christianity, where dialectical materialism falls on the side of Christianity. According to Žižek, Christian love, *agape*, actually means the "uncoupling" of the subject, a "symbolic death", where "one has to 'die for the law' (Saint Paul) that regulates our tradition, our "social substance" (Žižek 2000: 127). The appearance of Christ is traumatic, in that it forces a choice that belies any naïve attempt to experience an untroubled identification with one's original community. Thus, "to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience" (Žižek 2003: 6). Further, one needs to be 'born again', which means that one goes through such an experience of 'unplugging' or 'uprooting' from one's cultural, ethnic or social context. Only at this juncture is one able to form, together with other 'born again' subjects, and create a truly alternative collective not founded on the reigning symbolic system. This could also be described in a more psychoanalytic terminology as 'traversing the fantasy' and also as a 'subjective destitution' or moment of madness. But the message is essentially the same: anything less radical than this will not result in thorough change, as it will not take the gravity of the cultural devastation or the subjective alienation serious enough. According to Žižek, the subject is doubly alienated: not only from the current political situation but also in relation to the coming future; we are as ourselves a problem to and for our own future. A radical re-orientation of human subjectivity is needed to respond to the challenges posed by the contemporary 'four riders of the apocalypse'. Such a radical re-orientation is undoubtedly hard work and thus does not evolve spontaneously. This is also the reason why it is easier to imagine the end of the world, as in the ever so popular apocalyptic film genre of Hollywood, than to imagine a change of economic system from capitalism to something else.<sup>2</sup> This is why Žižek appeals to the 'authentic Christian apocalyptic tradition', since its *agapeic* love can express itself in a new political order: "The form of appearance of this love is so-

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<sup>2</sup> This saying, often alluded to by Žižek, seems to have its origin in Jameson 2003: 76: 'Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.' Who this 'someone' is remains unclear however.

called apocalyptic millenarianism, or the Idea of Communism: the urge to realize an egalitarian social order of solidarity” (Žižek 2010: 117). But even if the radical re-orientation is challenging, it still is not necessarily grounded in work, but rather, in grace (in the theological sense), which is an ungrounded apocalyptic event that throws overboard the current cultural coordinates.

However, Žižek himself does not subscribe to a Christian version of apocalypticism. As he has made abundantly clear, he considers himself an atheist at the same time that he believes that his version of dialectical materialism is the true inheritor of the Christian legacy. In other words, there is a dialectical relation towards the Christian tradition from Žižek.<sup>3</sup> One reason for his rejection of at least some versions of a theistic variant of the Christian tradition is to avoid identifying God with the big Other. This reason could be exemplified by an illuminating discussion in another of his apocalyptic-themed books, *Trouble in Paradise*. Here Žižek wishes to distinguish between eschatology and apocalypticism. Eschatology here stands for the big Other, an “agent of total accountability that can take into account the consequences of our own acts” (Žižek 2014: 129). The concern that Žižek expresses is for an eschatology that claims to know where history is going. This is a kind of historical determinism and not only a problem, according to Žižek, inherent in Christian eschatology but also with a Marxism that has inherited this notion of historical determinism from Christianity. But as Žižek claims, history is contingent, which means that one cannot predict, neither the consequences of our acts, nor the outcome of history. This means that we have to take full responsibility for our activities. In other words, “the thing to do is to separate apocalyptic experience from eschatology: we are now approaching a certain zero-point – ecologically, economically, socially – things will change, and the change will be most radical if we do nothing, but there is no eschatological turn ahead pointing towards the act of global Salvation” (*ibid.*). The apocalyptic experience is thus something different from eschatology, which means that Žižek’s legitimate critique of (such) eschatology does not force him to abandon apocalypticism for a “happy, liberal-progressive, ‘post-metaphysical’ view of modest, risky but cautious pragmatic interventions” (*ibid.*). The essence of Žižek’s critique of eschatology – in both Christianity, versions of Marxism, and also in New Age and ‘techno-digital-post-human’ apocalypticism – is that it

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<sup>3</sup> I have dealt with this question in detail in Sigurdson 2012 and there is no need to repeat this discussion here.

suffers from too much continuity and does not acknowledge the traumatic cut necessary for true emancipation.

However, Žižek's distinction between eschatology and apocalypticism is a somewhat awkward distinction from a theological perspective. This is because of the way that the concept of eschatology is often used today, as the genus of which apocalypticism is a species (McGinn 1998: xvi). When I use this concept, I do so as a more generic term that encompasses very different ideas of how the *eschaton* or 'the end' is figured, including non-futural versions. Nevertheless, another distinction between eschatology and apocalypticism is often used as one that leads us back to the differing interpretations of the millennial kingdom in *Revelation 20:1–6*. Augustine could be described as a non-apocalyptic eschatological theologian in that any speculation of how and when the world was coming to an end was far from his mind even if he saw all of history in the light of the end, whereas Joachim of Fiore was more convinced of 'living in the end times' or in other words, undertook an interpretation where biblical visions actually referred to historical happenings in his own time. This is more typical for an apocalyptic perspective. The Greek term *apokalypsis* actually means 'revelation' or 'disclosure', and a generic characteristic of the apocalyptic tradition is the claim of a deeper insight into the happenings of history. Unlike Žižek's distinction, historically speaking it is actually apocalypticism rather than eschatology that is prone to historical determinism. This is not Žižek's point in alluding to the apocalyptic imagery, and he certainly makes this clear. His intention is to highlight the imminence of the end. As Bernard McGinn, one of the foremost scholars on apocalyptic thought, puts it: there is a vast difference "between viewing the events of one's own time in the light of the End of history and seeing them as the last events themselves" (McGinn 1998: 4). Žižek clearly is in favour of the latter alternative. In fact, it is generally suggested that the kind of intra-historical apocalypticism that the Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore introduced in the twelfth century has been instrumental in giving rise to religious as well as secular emancipatory and revolutionary thought throughout history (Svenungsson 2014; Taubes 2009) – an effective historical context which we also find Žižek's apocalypticism. What clearly distinguishes a philosopher such as Žižek from at least some of his precursors among the apocalyptic thinkers is his emphasis on the active responsibility of humanity for history; apocalyptic thought can, as history has shown, also give rise to a passive stance in the face of the imminent end. What also

distinguishes Žižek from someone like Joachim of Fiore is Žižek's disregard for any transcendent dimension of eschatology outside the bounds of history. But even if there is traditional accounts of eschatology that look like those Žižek is critical of, this does not imply that his critique is equally valid for all of them. In fact, much historical and present eschatology had or have a keen understanding of the discontinuity that any possible future will implicate. As I outline above, a key question to consider is rather how to balance discontinuity with continuity. And I pose this is question to Žižek.

In a way, Žižek recognises such a question: "The key question is: what happens the day after? How will this emancipatory explosion be translated into a new social order?" (Žižek 2014: 102). One of the functions of a true emancipatory event, according to Žižek, is to change the coordinates of the old social order. It is not enough to get rid of the tyrant; one must also get rid of the society that gave birth to the tyrant (104). Anything less would most likely result in a return to the starting point – the old tyrant would just be replaced by a new tyrant if a more fundamental change does not take place. This is the reason why so many revolutions fail: no political agent seizes the moment to turn the happening into a true emancipatory event and thus there is no big Other that guarantees success and longevity of a new social order. After the initial moment when the tyrant is toppled, there is a need of a repetition of the revolution where the illusions of the first enthusiasm are shattered; then begins the hard and conflict-ridden work of finding out where to draw the line between true emancipation and illusory emancipation according to the old order. What begins as an initial enthusiastic moment that might well be within the confines or the reforms of the system, can eventually take on a wider, more revolutionary significance, such as, Martin Luther King's call for abolishment of racial segregation that evolved into a more radical call for equality and emancipation. However, the opposite also takes place, where after the initial revolutionary moment life returns to normal. What matters, in other words, is what happens the day after. Whereas Žižek earlier, could be interpreted as suggesting that because alienation belongs to *la condition humaine* so that no non-alienated political system is possible, our only way out is a permanent revolution, today he explicitly distances himself from such a position. It is in 'the domain of citizen's passivity' that real change needs to take place; as Žižek puts it: "it is (relatively) easy to have a big ecstatic spectacle of sublime unity, but how will ordinary people feel the difference in their daily lives?"

(127). Enthusiastic emancipatory moments can even have a conservative effect in the long run, if they are taken to show that no real change is actually possible. It is now time to turn to the question how Žižek understands the disjuncture between continuity and discontinuity in relation to the future.

### **Fully Accomplished Loss**

As we have seen already in the above section on apocalypticism, Žižek's work emphasises heavily a discontinuity between the present state and the coming future. Let me here refer back to Lear's account of radical hope to compare it with Žižek's understanding of hope, or rather his understanding of the loss necessary for true emancipation. I shall here focus upon the act of hoping and then, in the next section turn to the object of hope.

In terms of the Crow Indians' possible return to a life that is somehow recognizably Crow, under radically different circumstances, Žižek would probably deny both the possibility and the desirability (from an emancipatory perspective) of such a return. Compare a line of reasoning that could be found in *Trouble in Paradise*: in discussing the colonization of India by the British Empire, Žižek denies that the liberation of colonies ought to mean a return to the conditions prior to colonization. Rather, it is quite the opposite, as the colonization creates the conditions of true liberation. It is possible to talk of colonization as an 'unconscious tool of history' and not as an expression of a teleology of history, but rather, as a recognition of the fortuitous circumstances that gave rise to emancipation for India. It provided the tools that made it possible not only to liberate India from the colonizers, but also to liberate Indian citizens from their own tradition, thus a 'double liberation' occurs (Žižek 2014: 164). Therefore, "The true victory over colonization is not the return to any "authentic" pre-colonial existence, even less any "synthesis" between modern civilization and pre-modern origins – but, paradoxically, the *fully accomplished loss of these pre-modern origins*" (169). Colonization appears as an 'unconscious tool of history' as a two-fold stage: First, as the liberation of India from its pre-colonial existence through the British Empire and then as the impulse to liberation from the colonizers themselves. 'The very disintegration of traditional forms open up the space of liberation' (171). It is as if the colonizers appear as the 'vanishing mediator' or the external impulse of an emancipation that would never have taken place except for this 'disturbance'. As Žižek puts it, "we cannot accede to

our freedom directly – in order to gain this access we have to be pushed from the outside, since our “natural state” is one of inert hedonism” (188).

In relation to the Crow nation, it seems that Žižek’s advice would be to give up on any recognizable Crow way of life. Not in an undialectical way, to be sure. The ‘cultural devastation’ can be interpreted as the ‘unconscious tool of history’ that, firstly liberated the Crow from the constraints of their own history. To accomplish the necessary reiteration of liberation and not just sink in despair, the Crow needed Plenty Coups and his prophetic dream as a ‘vanishing mediator’, showing them their way to an even more authentic liberation. Plenty Coups appears to embody Žižek’s concept of a ‘Master’, since it is only through such that a people can accede to freedom. The ‘Master’ is someone that both crystallizes and reveals the true nature of people’s desire: “true leaders do not do what people want or plan; they tell the people what they want, and it is only through them that they realize what they want” (Žižek 2014: 190). But when the ‘Master’, in this case Plenty Coups, have made people realize what they want, he has accomplished his mission and should wither away (I cannot think Žižek means it in any other way). Plenty Coups’ function, in other words, is to achieve the second stage of liberation. The Crow can trust Plenty Coups, and Plenty Coups trusts the omen he received in a dream. But when both Plenty Coups and the omen has fulfilled their mission, these small pieces of continuity between the conditions before and after the cultural devastation can be let go. This would, supposedly, mean the ‘disintegration’, not the ‘reintegration’, of a traditional form of Crow life. Thus, the only fulfilment of hope seems to be to let go of hope.

Let me sum up what this means in terms of continuity and discontinuity. A straightforward continuity is of course out of the question, both in the account we find in Lear and in Žižek. Just continuity would mean a nostalgic and ultimately impossible return to the conditions before the cultural devastation, and to dream of it would not be to recognize how radical this trauma is. Žižek’s emphasis is indeed on discontinuity, as in the quote above where he speaks of a “fully accomplished loss” of the pre-modern or pre-colonial conditions. The full accomplishment of such a loss is not helped by a direct discontinuity, however, as this would mean either biological

death or a despair supposedly ending in melancholy that never lets go of its past.<sup>4</sup> Such a full accomplishment must be dialectical in acknowledging the need for hope and trust and consequently some kind of continuity – but only as an intermediate stage. This intermediate stage would help the Crow to make their way into the future and not melancholically get stuck in the past. Rather, it is an intermediate stage not necessary from the point of view of the future, only from the point of view of the past. Žižek's understanding of hope is, in other words, quite different from Lear's, as Lear thinks that hope aims for a subjectivity 'that is at once Crow and does not yet exist'. Žižek on the other hand, asks himself, quoting George Orwell from *The Road to Wigan Pier*: "Is 'to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person' not an event of radical self-transformation comparable to rebirth?" (Žižek 2014: 174). This is another understanding of subjectivity than the one exemplified in Lear's account, which also corresponds to a different concept of hope, as we have seen. It is also, at least compared to most traditional versions of apocalypticism, a version that puts all of the emphasis on discontinuity rather than trying to balance continuity and discontinuity in some way. If Žižek faults eschatology in not acknowledging discontinuity enough, his apocalypticism is more discontinuous than most.

### **Signs from the Future**

What does this mean in terms of what is being hoped for? Is it possible to say something about the object of hope now, even before the emancipatory event? Naturally, to expect a thorough description of a coming society would be to deny the newness of it as well as the extent of our alienation. But vice versa, not to be able to say something about what to expect or to hope for would be to think that we are in a state of such complete alienation that a new society would be senseless to us. If the New Jerusalem we are hoping for does not resemble the Old Jerusalem, what are we hoping for *at all* as then these two cities, the new and the old, have nothing in common and the New Jerusalem would be another city for a completely different subjectivity, perhaps of no concern to us. We would then not have any idea of what emancipation, equality, justice and so on, would actually mean in such a context and if these concepts would necessarily have anything in common with the here and now

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<sup>4</sup> It would be worthwhile, I think, to explore how Žižek uses 'mourning' and 'melancholy' in relation to hope, but this undertaking has to wait for another occasion.

– before the unfolding of the event – think of as emancipation, equality, justice and so on, however our rudimentary ideas of them would be in the present state. As Terry Eagleton puts it when he reflects upon alienation as a way to be able to experience oppression as oppression, it is required that some part of us can imagine what it would be like to exist in a state free from oppression; “nobody is ever *wholly* mystified” (Eagleton 2007: xxiii). This means that we should be able to express *some* idea of what a non-oppressive society might look like. Such an inkling of the object of our hope is also needed to be able to discern between good or bad, or better or worse.

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Žižek is reticent to offer any concrete imagery of the hoped for society, the “egalitarian social order of solidarity” as he puts it in *Living in the End Times* (Žižek 2010: 117). We would certainly not expect him to offer an apocalyptic vision as the one in *Revelation*, but what *could* be asked for is if there are any social movements *already* that somehow display those virtues that should characterize a future and more just society? Or, to take a step back even further, ask whether this is even impossible? Would any form of prefiguration of this more just society compromise the newness of it, in forcing it to conform to our present, alienated subjectivity? Žižek has, at least in his later writings, actually offered some ideas of what such a prefiguration of a coming just society would look like. In *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, he has a chapter on “Signs From the Future” (Žižek 2012: 127–135). Here he suggests that there is a need to strike a balance between continuity and discontinuity: “openness alone ends in a decisionist nihilism that impels us to leap into the void, while taking the signs of the future for granted risks succumbing to the temptation of determinist planning” (129). This balance is, however, not a ‘middle way’ or a philosophy of history, but the prefiguration of a coming society that is only visible to the engaged subjective perspective – a kind of Pascalian wager according to Žižek. There is a good reason for Žižek to speak of ‘signs from the future’ rather than, for instance, ‘positive trajectories of the present’ as it is not a matter of a continuation of the present but rather something that is ‘to come’ (134). These signs cannot be understood as part of our present conditions but only as a part of the future to come. So what are those signs from the future? In *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* Žižek offers a rather abstract definition: “limited, distorted (sometimes even perverted) fragments of a utopian future that lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential” (128). Supposedly, then, what is presented in



the bulk of the book – namely, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street in 2011 – could be seen as such signs, despite their ambivalence. Such signs are not signs of what is to come in any determinist sense, but rather, they signal that here and now another future is actually possible. Even if the full potential of these 2011 events were not realised there and then – Žižek’s latter view of them in *Trouble in Paradise* seems quite bleak – they nevertheless they signalled the possibility of newness.

Both the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street figure with Žižek as enthusiastic moments, but not necessarily as the second stage of liberation (where the first enthusiasm is shattered). This means that they could be (and are) taken for examples that radical change is impossible according to a conservative logic. One of the few examples I have found of an event that is not an enthusiastic moment – and that also could be seen as such a ‘sign from the future’ – comes from *Living in the End Times*, where Žižek discuss the mutual resistance and common struggle towards the demolition of the village Bilin on the West Bank between Jewish lesbians and conservative Palestinian women (Žižek 2010: 138). This is a telling example as it both grounds Žižek’s hope for emancipation in the here and now, as well as clothes the bare bones of the struggle for universality with some contextual flesh. Nevertheless, very little is said about the life-world of the Jewish lesbians and Palestinian women, including their own hopes for the future, hopes that probably are more substantial or at least more rooted in their present conditions than “a shared struggle on behalf of a universality which cuts diagonally across both communities” (*ibid.*). One may suspect, if we follow the logic of Žižek, that someone participating in this struggle would be surprised to learn that the successful dialectical outcome of this struggle would be a ‘fully accomplished loss’ of their Judaism or Palestinian or lesbian identity. Would that not just mean that the struggle was lost, and their respective identities sacrificed to some higher necessity? Perhaps, but one could supposedly reply that the ‘fully accomplished loss’ is the second stage of the liberation, which is not intelligible as such from the point of view of the first stage. When the Jewish lesbians and the Palestinian women engage in their struggle, they will eventually learn that the way forward is to give up their particular identities for the communist collective. But how for sure, do we know that this will be the result, except for some kind of insight that we can have here and now into the dialectics of history, an insight that will provide us with a hermeneutic principle with which we can discern what the future will or should look like? Might this mean that Žižek is apocalyptic, not

only in the sense according to which the end is imminent but also according to the sense of a 'revelation' or 'disclosure' that gives a deeper insight into the happenings of history? If not, then how is his version of apocalypticism different from decisionism in his own sense quoted above: a "leap into the void"? In other words, how does Žižek negotiate between continuity and discontinuity?

### **The End of Hope?**

I continually return to the question of the relationship between continuity and discontinuity as a way of interrogating various claims of Žižek's. I would like to conclude by posing the questions as to whether Žižek's emphasis on discontinuity entails that his philosophy does not have certain decisionist and supersessionist tendencies, and if so, whether this means the end of hope as we know it.

Žižek repeatedly returns to the question of demarcation between three different responses to the current crisis: non-change, as in the liberal-capitalist-New Age response, pseudo-change, as in Fascism, and real change, as in the emancipatory event (Žižek 2014: 145). Some kind of a hermeneutics of discernment is consequently involved, as it is necessary to discriminate between true and false events. Such judgment is only possible from an engaged perspective, however, and is not shaped by the circumstances around the enthusiastic moment as such. This is actually what the apocalyptic tradition usually says: not anybody can read the signs of the imminence of the end. As we have seen, however, Žižek emphatically denies himself or anyone else some deeper insight into the course of history, even, presumably, from a perspective that is committed to the Communist cause. What he also denies himself is those memories and traditions from where the apocalyptic tradition made sense of their hopes and fears. As the Swedish theologian Jayne Svenungsson puts it in a critique of the decisionist tendencies in Žižek's political philosophy: in Judaic apocalyptic thought "the messianic Event is never severed from the Law – the sign of the Covenant – which, more substantially, means that it is uncompromisingly tied to the *past* – to memories, promises and commitments" (Svenungsson 2010: 12). Such 'memories, promises and commitments' seems to be denied in Žižek's version of apocalypticism, thus depriving him of the fundamental instrument of discernment available to traditional apocalypticism. Whatever we might think of such apocalypticism, the Jewish or Christian tradition seldom or never claimed – at least until modern times – an unmediated insight into the future directly

given by God. Such insight only came in a mediated form, through the careful exposition of the relevant texts that were in principle available to all. Even, then, if apocalypticism in history has been prone to lead away from reflections on such things as bodies, institutions and interpretative practices, it seldom let go of these completely, but retained a relation to memory through biblical text. My point here is not that we need to return to 'authentic apocalypticism' whatever that is, only that such 'memories, promises and commitments' provide the traditional apocalyptic thought with a substantial horizon through which a more developed hermeneutics of discernment is possible. The concrete, material conditions of the possibility of an emancipatory event are remarkably absent in Žižek's claims, most likely since he thinks they would, in principle, jeopardize the newness of the coming society. But is the relation of continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new not much more complex than a choice of either/or, even in its dialectical version?

What characterizes Žižek's apocalypticism more than anything else is his very sharp disjunction between the past and the future, between the engaged perspective and other, perhaps equally engaged perspectives. This is also what gives his philosophy a certain decisionist tone. Through his understanding of dialectics, and in relation to hope, the emphasis falls heavy on the side of discontinuity to the extent that one might ask what distinguishes Žižek's own perspective from the "decisionist nihilism that impels us to leap into the void". Is there any criterion for discerning what is a genuine emancipatory event and what is not, that transcends the emancipatory event itself and the actual political situation? In other words, the only fulfilment of hope seems to be to let go of such hope that could be recognizably *mine* or *ours*. On the rhetorical side, his philosophy is often put forward in terms of 'Pascalian wagers', 'zero-points' and, of course, 'fully accomplished losses' that conjure up images of discontinuity. Subjectivity undergoes a 'rebirth', another image of discontinuity. Further, his understanding of particular identities, such as the Indian in relation to the British Empire, is that they will be dialectically overcome, falling away on behalf of a more abstract universality. 'Supersessionism' in theology is the (infamous) idea that the Christian church has superseded and consequently replaced the Jewish people as the chosen people of God. To the extent that Žižek is a theologian, he seems to be a supersessionist theologian, and to the extent that he is not a theologian, he still seems to be decidedly supersessionist. For Žižek it seems that there is no earthly city through which he can make sense of, if not heavenly so at least the coming

future city. The future city is not a New Jerusalem, but an entirely different city that has little to do with the Old Jerusalem. It is not a Jerusalem at all, it is just New.

The reason I hesitate is that I wonder if it is possible to dissociate Žižek's dialectics from his hyperbolic language. I can perhaps understand the rhetorical need for such an extreme language, given the need to avoid the possibility of submerging his philosophy of emancipation into a more processual or organic understanding of social change and thus depriving it of its critical edge. But on the other hand, history is littered of examples where a particular age has deluded itself of its own radical newness; from the hindsight of little more than half a century Swedish modernity appears as a reworking of earlier Swedish cultural, religious and social traditions rather than being at the 'zero-point' which some of its proponents repeatedly claimed in quite apocalyptic language (Sigurdson 2014). A radical rhetoric of discontinuity – combined with a certain national hubris – prevented this particular societal event from seeing how complex and entangled the relation between the memories of the past and hopes for the future actually were. No doubt Swedish modernization could be dismissed as another failed revolution, but so can, as far as I can see, any revolution in Žižek's perspective. Undoubtedly, a more dialectical understanding of societal change is enlightening, but the supersessionism that has plagued dialectics at least since Hegel (or even longer) seems to come in the way of understanding how true emancipatory change has and can come about. In the worst case, a position such as Žižek's could exchange radical hope for a kind of retrogressive radical gesturing eminently compatible with a resigned politics of piecemeal engineering (yes, I am thinking of Sweden again). This would actually mean the end of hope, the hope for a future that is distinctly new, but still in some way, *our* future. What I would like to have from Žižek is a more explicit, and perhaps also more complex, hermeneutics of discernment; a hermeneutics of hope that – of course – takes discontinuity with as much seriousness as one could expect, but still able to explain in what sense a coming future is actually worth hoping for, still recognizably the object of *our* hope. At least to me, the road between decisionism and defeatism is too short.

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