

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Ten, Number Three

## The Sublime Gesture of Ideology. An Adornian Response to Žižek

Ciprian Bogdan, Babes-Bolyai University, Romania

### Abstract

One of the central charges that Žižek levels down against Adorno is that his critique of ideology comes dangerously close to a post-ideological position in which all ideological contents, political actions or rituals are reduced to a cynical consciousness which automatically obeys certain social imperatives though being aware of their falsity. Against this, Žižek comes up with an alternative understanding of cynicism as operating not at the level of consciousness, but everyday practices. What the present article tries to show is that Žižek's critique is misplaced, for Adorno has a much more subtle approach in which the problem of ideology lies neither simply in theory, nor in practice, but somewhere in-between, in the compulsion of gestures. Moreover, from an Adornian perspective, Žižek's commitment to a Hegelian self-referential approach (based on double negation/compulsion of subjective gestures) obliterates the double-edge character of determinate negation, that of addressing both the present social-historical context and the possibility of an alternative social reality.

As one of the main causes for the quasi-miraculous revival of the Marxist critique of ideology in contemporary theory, Slavoj Žižek points his finger not only at postmodern or postcolonial theories (that are critical about everything except one thing: capitalism), but also at the first generation of Frankfurt School, most notably Adorno. Despite elaborating a sophisticated version of critique of ideology in which the concept of ideology is not reduced to a crude “false consciousness” hiding a “true” reality, Adorno seems, in Žižek’s view, to implicitly advocate an attitude dangerously close to a contemporary *post-ideological* stance. While rightly noticing that capitalist reality and ideology are not different realms, but two faces of the same coin - what Marx calls “real abstraction” - Adorno associates this with the global spreading of a cynical consciousness no longer interested in truthness or falseness. “They know very well it is false and still doing it!”: the new motto of 20<sup>th</sup> century ideology. But what Adorno misses in his diagnosis is the level at which this cynicism actually operates: we are fetishistic not in theory, at the level of our consciousness, but in our very actions. According to Žižek, we know that money don’t have any magical quality in them, but we act as if they do. Or, to give another famous example, we know that Santa Claus does not exist, but we still act, by reproducing the Christmas ritual, as if he does. So, by remaining at the level of theory, Adorno actually reduces all ideological contents, political actions or rituals to an ideologically immune cynical consciousness which automatically obeys certain social imperatives without, in fact, believing in them. For Žižek, of course, this apparent lack of belief is an ideological illusion since we believe as much as ever, but we do it unconsciously, at the level of our daily practices. However, this post-ideological stance, supposedly endorsed by Adorno, has an additional problem: it also implies that Adorno’s position dilutes its critical edge to the point that all we are left with is *resignation* (this is a widespread critique against Adorno). We think it is time to provide a defense of Adorno’s “lost cause”.

***“This is not really a concept at all, but a gesture”***

Žižek’s critique addresses the relationship between theory and practice. From this point of view, Adorno is not able to see the extent at which ideology has permeated reality operating within our innermost practical habits. But is this really the case? Is not Adorno aware of the problem? What if, actually, Adorno goes even further than Žižek when noticing the ideological mystification in capitalist society? In answering this, we should

be clear about something from the very beginning: Žižek and most commentators totally miss the central importance of *gesture* in Adorno's works. In *Negative Dialectics*, for instance, he makes a puzzling observation: in passing from the theoretical will to praxis, there is an "addendum" or "supplementary" moment or, better said, an "impulse" that is neither simply theoretical nor practical, neither simply conceptual nor somatic, but a moment of inflection that makes possible the connection and, in the same time, the difference between theory and practice (Adorno 2004: 226-230). We can fairly say that this "addendum" or "supplementary" moment is another word for Aristotle's *tode ti*. As Adorno himself notices, "this is not really a concept at all, but a gesture", something non-conceptual. "Tode ti amounts to 'this' and points to something". Later on in scholasticism, however, *tode ti* would turn into a concept, *haecceitas*, a "given" or a "datum" (Adorno 2001: 35). So, Aristotle's gesture seems to cover a third moment which mediates between the theoretical and practical sphere. As we know, Adorno's main concern is to disrupt the temptation of a philosophical enterprise to reduce particular objects to universal concepts. "Identity-thinking" covers the tendency to equate inner or external nature with abstract theory. But what is usually missed is that identity-thinking can operate only through another, less visible repression, that of the mediating moment of the human gesture which points towards a particular object. Otherwise put, the collapse of nature in our conceptual apparatus is made possible only by the preliminary erasure of a silent, referential gesture working in the background. This erasure is central to any ideological enterprise simply because, at a closer scrutiny, human gesture constitutes an embodiment of the "non-identity" between reason and nature, that which allows both the relationship and the difference between them. A gesture is the locus of a paradoxical moment: it implies, *on one hand*, an intentional side which allows the mind to *transcend* its own sphere by pointing towards an object and, thus, *relates* human spirit to nature while, *on the other*, it has an *immanent*, non-conceptual dimension as an extension of our mimetic, bodily background and, thus, preserves the *gap* between mind and (internal) nature. This can also give us a better glimpse on the emancipatory character of "determinate negation": a concept negates a particular object "without sacrifice" only when it is oriented by a gesture indicating a concrete object. When this gestural moment is reified and turned into a concept, determinate negation itself turns into an "abstract negation" sacrificing particular objects in the name of abstractions.

For Adorno, "identity-thinking" constitutes the *Ur-form* of any ideological position. Since the "non-identity" between concepts and reality is constitutive, ideology cannot

simply assert their identity, but to mask or negate their difference. That is why, every “identity-thinking” or ideology is, at its most elementary level, a “*negation of negation*”, Hegel’s double negation. In Adorno’s words: “to equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form” (Adorno 2004: 158). Hegel does not only discover the emancipatory moment of determinate negation, but also its very opposite: the negation of negation as the ideological principle *par excellence*. As an expression of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, Hegel’s Absolute spirit captures the very substance of liberal ideology understood as an illusion “added to things as a vindication or complement” masking the social inequalities between bourgeoisie and working class. At this point, ideology is really a “false consciousness” meant to hide away social discrepancies. But while this false consciousness still points in an indirect manner towards a true consciousness, in 20<sup>th</sup> century monopoly capitalism, ideology is no longer a complement added to reality, instead ideology becomes reality itself. “Infrastructure has become its own superstructure” (Adorno 2004: 267-268). When double negation itself is negated and becomes full positivity, what we have is a pseudo-Nietzschean double affirmation. (It is no accident that Adorno constantly mentions Nietzsche’s famous dictum *Become what you are!* in the context of both Nazi propaganda and consumerist society). The masking goes so far as to eliminate almost all of its traces. What „is” becomes an imperative. Reality can no longer be masked or hidden away by ideology since the ideological distortion is now present in reality itself.

### ***And gesture turns into ideology***

According to Adorno, 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal ideology remains deeply ambivalent: it tries to mask structural inequalities, but still preserves a gap between itself and reality, theory and practice. Despite the bourgeois attempt to idealize its values (liberty, equality and fraternity), the social gap remains visible: while the bourgeoisie contemplates opera or theater performances, the working class must perform repetitive activities in large factories in order to survive. Thus, liberal ideology targets only the bodies of the workers constrained to sell their labor-force on the capitalist market, but not their consciousness (Adorno 2002: 189). Precisely this gap between the compulsive work in large factories and the political awareness allowed Marx to dream about a proletarian revolution in the near future. However, Adorno also detects this kind of ambivalence in

early 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Is not Hegel the perfect example here as the one who simultaneously preserves the gap as determinate negation and tries to cover it by using double negation? And isn't Hegel's formula of double negation the first philosophical expression of understanding identity not as a fixed, eternal reality, but as a repetition or compulsion of negations (or gestures)? That is why, Adorno identifies two Hegel's: one who uses a "mimetic", "gestural or curvilinear writing" gravitating around particular objects and another one who wavers bombastic, abstract gestures (in the name of Absolute spirit, Reason etc.) inherited from Kantian and Enlightenment jargon (Adorno 1993: 122). Despite being the philosopher of the Prussian state, Hegel also testifies for the negativity that lies at the foundation of the bourgeois society. By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, this negativity is slowly obliterated by a monopoly capitalism that allows for an almost total rationalization of society paving the way for a new systemic reality in which bourgeois and workers are equally integrated. Reification (*via* Lukács) manipulates both the body and the mind of individuals. The extension of reification from practice to consciousness is possible, however, only by making invisible the very *gap* between them, more concretely, by occupying the mimetic background as the source of our most intimate and spontaneous *gestures*. At this point, Richard Wagner's music might give us a clue about the magnitude of the social change that Adorno has in mind. Adorno criticizes Wagner for being the first important musician to conceive music as being centered around the "gesticulation of striking" (*Gestik des Schlagens*) in which, for instance, the conductor's main role is to hypnotize the audience by using repetitive gestures (Adorno 1997: 28). While for previous composers such as Beethoven (who is the musical counterpart of Hegelian philosophy), gestures were thought as being intermittent (negative) moments, in Wagner they become a structuring principle of composition. Thus, Wagner's repression of the mimetic background is reflected in the transformation of gestures into gesticulation or compulsion. In this way, the temporality of a work of art is replaced by a spatiality in which "bare gestures" (*Bargeste*) simply point to the fact that "nothing has happened" (*Nichts-ist-geschehen*), that we are caught up in an eternal repetition of things (Adorno 1997: 37-39). Wagner reflects, of course, a larger social repression which comes with the "process of civilization" constraining people to "have contact with their own tabooed mimetic traits only through certain gestures and forms of behavior they encounter in others, as isolated, shameful residues in their rationalized environment. What repels them as alien is all too familiar. It lurks in the contagious gestures of an immediacy suppressed by civilization: gestures of

touching, nestling, soothing, coaxing” (Adorno 2002: 149). In this context, Adorno and Horkheimer make an interesting observation, namely that all we are left with in contemporary society is “action” or, more accurately put, a widespread “pseudo-activity” (Adorno 1997a: 651-652). We can easily detect this both in fascism where one of the basic slogans is that action must replace talking or in the consumerist imperative (“do it yourself!”) of learning how to assemble products you buy (Adorno 1997a: 651-652). It’s almost like an ironical fulfillment of Marx’s vision for a society in which ideas and theories will be a form of practice. Ironical because contemporary praxis is, in fact, a rationalized mimesis, a “mimesis of mimesis” consisting in “the monotonous repetition of words and gestures” (Adorno 2002: 152). Is not Hitler the perfect embodiment of this kind of compulsive gesticulation strikingly similar - as Chaplin nicely emphasized - with the stereotypical image of the Jew portrayed as someone dominated by mimetic behavior? Far from being an irrational outburst, Hitler’s gesticulation is, to some extent, a conscious device of manipulating the masses by imitating the very object of their hatred. In other words, “all the gesticulations devised by the *Führer* and his followers are pretexts for giving way to the mimetic temptation without openly violating the reality principle – with honor, as it were. They detest the Jews and imitate them constantly” (Adorno 2002: 151). But we should not miss Adorno and Horkheimer’s point and end up in saying, as Žižek does, that fascism simply consists in a cynical consciousness knowing all too well that their propaganda is false and still doing it. At stake here is something more subtle for not only gesticulation has turned into pure compulsion, but consciousness itself. So, Hitler’s awareness of the emptiness of his ideological position does not mean he has some sort of *distance* from it. Not at all, because, in the end, there is *no real difference* between practice and consciousness. When social rationalization captures even our most spontaneous gestures, there is no longer a gap between theory and practice and these repressed gestures return as generalized compulsion. Everything becomes a “pseudo-activity”, even our mind. That is why, after rationalizing production (19<sup>th</sup> century), theory itself imitates the repetitive work in a factory (20<sup>th</sup> century). Ideas become stereotypical, mental gesticulation. The best example is the *Jargon of Authenticity* in which Adorno criticizes not directly Heidegger, but rather the vast epigonic literature imitating him. Once again, the problem lies in the compulsion of gestures. “It is true that he does use the word 'authenticity' centrally in *Sein und Zeit*, and most of the familiar short hand is spread around over his best known text- spread with gestures, of incontestable authority, which the mass of the authentic then mechanically

imitate" (Adorno 1973: 49). All this literature uses "sublime" (Adorno 1973: 65), bombastic gestures to recuperate human "authenticity" against the impersonal evolution of modern society. However, the "gesture of radicalism" (Adorno 1973: 60) in the name of a "sublime" humanism is an empty gesture, an abstract negation of society operating as a mask for the powerlessness felt in the face of social processes. This "jargon" is nothing but a massified thinking that in its rhetorical statements is just an extension of modern mass society. The explosion of intellectual "sublime" gestures is strictly correlative to the abstractness of society and the liquidation of concrete, material objects. For Adorno, gesticulation is ideology at its purest simply because it occupies and imitates the very space (authentic gesture) that testifies for the *transcendence* or *otherness* of the material world. Gestures become sublime only after objects themselves are emptied out of any sublimity as if trying to preserve the illusion of being alive to something already dead.

### ***The bizzaro world of (critique of) ideology***

Already in his early book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek leaves no room for interpretations: the (Marxist) critique of ideology is back again after thirty years of deconstruction and with more paradoxes than ever before. From this point of view, Žižek and not Habermas seems to be the heir of Adorno's legacy as the one who in deploying a highly sophisticated theoretical apparatus shifts the perspective once again towards the ideological symptoms of capitalist totality. And yet, Žižek's main references are Lacan, Althusser and, of course, Kant, Hegel and Marx. Adorno is a left liberal whom you can quote sometimes, but mostly you can simply dismiss. In a sense, this reaction is somewhat justified considering the "temperamental" differences between them. Adorno and Žižek resemble one *Seinfeld* episode in which the main characters of the show have an opposite version in the bizzaro world. They are alike, yet they are opposites. So, if Adorno is pessimistic, polite, writing in a dense, convoluted style, miniatural, self-consistent, critical towards pop-culture (his rejection of jazz is well-known) and Wagner etc., Žižek looks like his opposite: he likes dirty jokes, he is impolite, fond of a transparent style, contradictory, enjoys pop-culture and, of course, Wagner etc. Yet, they both have a similar (equally bizzare) tendency to apply dialectical paradoxes to the most unlikely cultural details considered as symptoms for some ideological distortion of the capitalist system. This is something that Žižek doesn't really share with anyone else.

There is, however, a similar relationship underneath this surface, at the level of theoretical structure itself. Let's have a glimpse on it.

When Žižek (wrongly) charges Adorno for reducing contemporary ideology to a cynical consciousness instead of grasping it at the level of our practices, he further complicates things by introducing a Lacanian distinction, that between the "Real", "symbolic" and "imaginary". Ideology is not some mask covering an unbearable "reality" (as Adorno thought about liberal ideology) since this very "reality" is nothing but the networks of practices and social discourses that structure our world at the symbolic level. What ideology covers is not "reality", but the "Real of our desire", or, as Žižek puts it more recently, the Freudian "death-drive",<sup>1</sup> the blind compulsion of human unconscious which always escapes total symbolic domestication and erupts in small, meaningless objects (*objets petit a*). So, the Real constitutes the leftover of the symbolic process, the remainder of its failure to signify totality. However, the ideological process of covering the Real is only possible when the symbolic level is coupled with our fantasy (imaginary level). And this is so only because our fantasies (crystallized in our dreams, for instance) directly address "the hard kernel of the Real" by promising the fulfilment of our (most secret) desires (Žižek 2008: 48). This is exactly what Frankfurt School or postmodernists are unable to grasp, namely that ideology cannot be located in the prejudices of an "authoritarian personality" or in our discursive practices, but in the hard, non-discursive kernel of our fantasy "which resists symbolic 'perlaboration,' i.e., which as it were anchors an ideology in some 'substantial' point and thus provides a constant frame for the symbolic interplay" (Žižek 1993: 212). And this kernel is what Žižek calls "the sublime object of ideology", the Thing itself (*Cosa nostra*) of a community promising a "*jouissance*" (fulfilling the fantasy) which, in fact, cannot deliver (the Real resists any attempt to capture it). And that is why, the classical ideological operation is to cover up the impossible task of fulfilling the fantasy by blaming the others (usually, Jews, Muslims, blacks, gypsies etc.) for stealing the *jouissance*. So, instead of accepting the imaginary nature of the Thing, communities tend to *externalize* real antagonism (the ontological inconsistency of the subject or, at the social level, even the class struggle) by projecting it onto the others: "because of them, we lack harmony (we cannot enjoy)!". However, what ideology also needs to cover up is the fact that the sublime object can appear only because at ontological level there is an empty subject who can identify with it and, thus, fill emptiness with a certain (ideological) content. For Žižek like for Lacan, the subject is not a given, but a hole in the social substance who enters in the symbolic



order only by assuming a particular symbolic content or a specific identity. And now comes Hegel, Žižek's hero. In his startling interpretation of Hegel's philosophy, the narrative of the Absolute spirit is no longer seen as the first anticipation of a total society (Adorno) or the last metaphysical remnant in a post-metaphysical world (Habermas), but as the most powerful illustration of what Marx would later call *critique of ideology*. As such, Žižek emphatically rejects the false image of an "idealist" Hegel:

There are two ways to break out of this "idealism": either one rejects Hegel's dialectics as such, dismissing the notion of the subjective "mediation" of all substantial content as irreducibly "idealist," proposing to replace it with a radically different matrix (Althusser: structural (over)determination; Deleuze: difference and repetition; Derrida: *différance*; Adorno: negative dialectics with its "preponderance of the objective"); or one rejects such a reading of Hegel (focused on the idea of "reconciliation" as the subjective appropriation of the alienated substantial content) as "idealist," as a misreading which remains blind to the true subversive core of Hegel's dialectic. This is our position: the Hegel of the absolute Subject swallowing up all objective content is a retroactive fantasy of his critics, starting with late Schelling's turn to "positive philosophy." This "positivity" is found also in the young Marx, in the guise of the Aristotelian reassertion of positive forces or potentials of Being pre-existing logical or notional mediation. One should thus question the very image of Hegel-the-absolute-idealist presupposed by his critics—they attack the wrong Hegel, a straw man. What are they unable to think? The pure processuality of the subject which emerges as "its own result." This is why talk about the subject's "self-alienation" is deceptive, as if the subject somehow precedes its alienation—what this misses is the way the subject emerges through the "self-alienation" of the substance, *not* of itself (Žižek 2012: 261).

In Žižek's reading, Hegel radicalises Kant's idealism by placing the gap not in the heart of transcendental subjectivity (incapable of having immediate and full access to its own core or to things), but in ontology itself. Anticipating Lacan, Hegel's subject is nothing but the very gap within this substance, the mark of a non-closed totality. Even more importantly, Hegel also unravels the *self-referential* logic silently operating within any ideological mechanism. His famous double negation testifies for the necessary injunction of repetitive *subjective* moments (or *gestures*) in the dynamic of world substance. Žižek underlines this point with an example provided by Hegel himself in his *Philosophy of*

*History.* If we take a look at the context created by Julius Caesar, what we have is a double sequence, a repetition: *first*, Julius Caesar decides to accumulate the whole political power in the (*objective*) context of an impotent Roman Republic. The supporters of the Republic perceive this gesture as being an *accident* and they kill him. However, Caesar's failure makes possible the *second* moment, the removal of the old Republic and the birth of Caesarism, thus, (retroactively) proving that Caesar was right from the very beginning, that his act was not an accident (Žižek 2005: 53-56). The apparent clearness of this example might be a little misleading in regard to Žižek's interpretation of Hegel. Despite the fact that Julius Caesar acts in accordance with an objective situation (the old Republic is dying), his *decision* - according to Žižek's overall philosophical perspective - is not really the *result* of this context. Strangely enough, Žižek tries to squeeze here Friedrich Schelling, a bitter critic of Hegel's philosophy. One of Schelling's central points is that human consciousness is not the simple effect of some "unconscious" drives, but of "the very founding gesture of consciousness", an "act of decision" which allows consciousness to institute itself and its otherness, the unconscious. There is nothing prior to this decision (Žižek 2012: 274). If we are to take this reference seriously, then Hegel's example about Caesar should come with an important twist: Caesar decision to take power is not reflecting an objective situation (the old Republic is dying), but his decision creates the situation by splitting things into two: a dying Republic *or* a new order. So, if we are to go this way, as Žižek seems to do quite often mostly in his late books,<sup>2</sup> the Hegelian *first* negation constitutes a subjective decision that instead of emerging from an objective situation, it institutes it. However, only the *second* negation really allows the passage from *contingency* (Caesar taking power and his failure) to *necessity* (the abolition of Republic and the institution of Caesarism). Instead of the banal (Aristotelian) model of actualizing some latent possibilities, Žižek believes that for Hegel evolution becomes necessary only after the "tautological" "gesture" or "*the subject's (free) act of 'dotting the i' which retroactively installs necessity*" (Žižek 1993: 149). (To mention Hegel's example once again, Augustus is the one who retroactively establishes that Julius Caesar's decision to replace the Republic is a necessary act and, thus, reshapes the entire past in accordance to the ideological constraints of the present). And it is precisely this tautological operation that ideologies usually hide away when talking about a *mysterious* national or racial substance, irreducible to social and historical contingencies. Thus, for an Anti-Semite, the "Jew" is *more* than a simple collection of negative traits (exploiter, greedy etc.), he is

the mysterious, substantial X who connects all these contingent features (Žižek 1993: 148). The tautological gesture of ideology adds nothing new, it simply asserts that the object “presupposes itself” (Žižek 1993: 147) by assuming, for instance, that when an Anti-Semite talks about Jews, he believes there *is* such a Thing as a “Jew”. So, only this second *subjective gesture* institutes the sublime object. And it is precisely this subjective injunction that, Žižek believes, tends to be forgotten once Western Marxism passes from the critique of *political economy* understood as a social reality historically determined (Lukács) to the critique of *instrumental reason* (the Frankfurt School) conceived as an “anthropological”, “quasi-transcendental” reality (Adorno 1994: 9). On the other hand, this evolution within Marxism is the symptom of a more pervasive phenomenon affecting both totalitarian regimes like Soviet Union and Western capitalist societies, namely *cynicism*. Žižek begins by noticing the difference between the Marxist understanding of ideology as commodity fetishism, “they don’t know what they are doing but they are nonetheless doing it!”, and the cynicism that operates in contemporary capitalist societies as described by Peter Sloterdijk (and Adorno himself): “they know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it!”. It seems obvious that Marx’s definition still draws an implicit distinction between a commodity fetishism operating at the level of unconscious practices and the belief in a true (Marxist) knowledge of the way capitalism functions that, eventually, would trigger a political revolution. “Knowledge can set us free!”, seems to be Marx’s underlying message. But what happens today is a much more perverse ideological mystification. In spite of the widespread ironical attitude seemingly suspending any belief, we believe more than ever before with a small and decisive twist: our beliefs are no longer assumed at the level of our consciousness (as Marx does with his belief in knowledge), but at the level of our unconscious practices. Belief, in this case, is, of course, another word for fantasy. Our daily practices are the ones that still preserve the fantasy of grasping the Real despite our conscious, ironical distance against any such attempt. We don’t believe in Santa Claus, but we stick to the ritual every year as if he does exist. This can also be one of the secrets of the survival of capitalist system itself. We harshly criticize capitalism (as the Frankfurt School does) while, in the same time, enjoying our comfortable Western lives and doing nothing to take the political power in order to change the existing situation (the Frankfurt School’s negative reaction to the student movements from 1960’ might be easily invoked here).

In this context, Žižek rejects the idea that the central gesture of a critique of ideology would consist in gaining *distance* from an ideological content. What if the opposite is true, namely, that the only way to fight cynicism would mean that the subject explicitly identifies with a certain ideological content? Such an identification would not be a regression to ideological dogmatism for it is a *tragic* gesture, in the same time *necessary* (only this way the subject can acquire a particular identity and be part of the symbolic world) and *impossible* (this identity remains incomplete, the subject cannot be filled entirely by it). Only such a *heroic* attitude would make a difference in a capitalist world of generalized ironical distance in which identification is automatically labelled as fanaticism or totalitarianism. From this point of view, Adorno's caution to assume a straightforward leftist position fits perfectly contemporary cynicism and the acceptance of capitalist system.

### ***What's left (of the critique)?***

In one of his texts, Žižek admits, however, that there is an obvious similarity between the Lacanian Real and Adorno's "priority of the objective" (Adorno 2001: 87) since in both cases there is something *non-mediated* which can manifest itself only in an oblique manner through the very *failure* of the symbolic or conceptual structure to capture it. That would be the reason why the standard critique of negative dialectics as being "inconsistent" misses the point for "negative dialectics" "effectively IS 'inconsistent'" (Adorno 2001: 88), the failure is inscribed in its own existence. According to Žižek, there are two ways to solve this inconsistency: the first one is Habermas's communicative theory which, basically, advocates a return to Kant's regulative ideals and the second is, of course, Lacanian theory which "elaborates the *concept* of what Adorno deployed as dialectical paradoxes: the concept of the 'barred' subject who exists only through its own impossibility; the concept of the Real as the inherent, not external, limitation of reality" (Adorno 2001: 89). Ironically, however, this rare moment when Žižek defends Adorno might also be seen as the very symptom of the gap between them. Thus, Žižek's strategy consists in ontologizing Adorno's dialectics (like he also does with Hegel): inconsistency is an attribute of being itself. However, this move distorts Adorno (and even Hegel, to some extent) since it annihilates his entire effort to go against any (abstract) ontology by stubbornly pointing toward *singular* ways in which subject (mediation) and object (non-mediation) penetrate each other and to the fact that

interpenetration is made possible only by the inflection of a spontaneous *gesture* relating abstract concepts to particular things. Seen from Adorno's perspective, this kind of distortion is not, however, accidental, but expresses Žižek's own theoretical commitment to ontology while his understanding of "gesture" might be easily seen as the very symptom for this commitment. Like for Adorno, Žižek seems to admit that gestures (or "radical acts") constitute an intermediary level between theoretical abstractions and repetitive social practices. Gesture is a negation, an inflection in the existing reality. But contrary to Adorno, he fully endorses the Hegelian logic of double negation for only the immanent compulsion of the spirit (anticipating the Freudian death-drive) is able to denounce possible attempts of returning to some kind of transcendent metaphysical reality. However, the most striking consequence of this interpretation is the (more or less intended) evacuation of the "objective" Hegelian dimension. And by "objective", we mean something denoting socially and historically mediated *objects* or what Adorno thinks is Hegel's most important legacy: his "gestural" writings which constantly make thought to gravitate around particular things. So, what Žižek loses from sight is precisely this *referential* feature of a gesture pointing towards *an* object. In Žižek's bold and idiosyncratic interpretation, Hegel's Absolute spirit is reduced to the repetition of subjective gestures meant to preserve its continual dynamic. If the first negation is a subjective rupture in the existing reality, a contingent and groundless *decision* (close, we might notice, to Alain Badiou's description of an "evental" decision), the second is a *tautology* retroactively instituting necessity. But from Adorno's perspective, Žižek attempt to "subjectivize" Hegel in order to recuperate him as a philosopher of immanence and contingency also means to throw the baby out with the bathwater for he evacuates the most important Hegelian legacy, that of *determinate negation*.<sup>3</sup> We can be faithful to Hegel only by resisting the temptation to supplement determinate negation with another negation in a self-referential twist. What needs to be preserved is, according to Adorno, the openness of determinate negation that operates as an *immanent transcendence*, as a critical gesture that is born *from* the objective social-historical context and that also goes *against* it as a utopian impulse anticipating a better world. Without this *double edge*, the critical gesture ends up in what Adorno and Horkheimer described as "dialectic of Enlightenment": a compulsive reason turning its immanence into a blind transcendence of decisionistic sequences.

And this problem is nowhere more pressing than in Žižek's attempt to bring together Hegel and Marx. How can we accommodate, after all, Hegel's self-referential ontology

operating through retroactive totalisation with the Marxist prospect of overcoming capitalism? How can we synthesize two different approaches, that of reflexively assuming the past with the impulse of radically changing the future?<sup>4</sup> When criticizing Adorno for not being able to fully anticipate the Lacanian Real, Žižek interprets the former's "priority of the objective" as the last remnant of a metaphysical transcendence. Only the Lacanian Real can do the job and remain totally immanent for it is not an *outside*, but simply the *limit* of our signifying capacity, the blind-spot resisting full totalization. Isn't, however, Žižek's Lacanian position dangerously close to a new type of idealism (after all, the Real is the Real of *our desire* or, later on, death-drive)? And isn't rather problematic the way Žižek can justify the overcome of existing capitalist system as long as there is nothing outside it that would provide an emancipatory horizon? Actually, things are much more ironical since capitalism seems to work in almost perfect Hegelian/Lacanian terms: instead of masking its limits, capitalism is the only system, as Marx already taught us, that feeds from its own crises. So, a naive, but irrepressible question emerges: if capitalism reflects ontology better than any other social system, why change it? The full-blown acceptance of a self-referential Hegelian ontology comes with a price that Žižek does not seem willing to pay: to ban any prospect of imagining an alternative future<sup>5</sup>. Despite Adorno's somewhat vague political positioning (here Žižek and other critics are to some extent right), his immanent transcendent critique (or determinate negation) is better equipped for addressing the needs of contemporary left, both to critically understand present (and past) social constraints and obliquely point towards alternative social realities. However, such a task to actualize and reconstruct Critical Theory would imply, no doubt, a longer detour in Žižek's works than in the works of the second and third generation of Frankfurt School. Since, after all, Adorno and Žižek remain the perfect (anti-)couple in the (bizzaro) world of the critique of ideology<sup>6</sup>.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "As Žižek himself concedes, the crucial intellectual shift that subtends the political opposition between his early, radical-democratic work and his recent, revolutionary vanguardist work is the shift from the 'subject of desire' to the 'subject of the drives' (*FTKN*, pp. xvii–xviii, xxxi–xxxii)" (Sharpe and Boucher 2010: 7).

<sup>2</sup> „Our major argument about the division in Žižek's work and his politics structures the book. Our claim is that there are, conceptually speaking, effectively *two* Žižeks: the Radical-Democratic 'Žižek1' and the Revolutionary-Vanguardist 'Žižek2'. These Žižeks are divided by a remarkable moment in Žižek's career. This

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was the moment, between 1996 and 1997, when Žižek delved into the Romantic philosopher Gottfried Schelling, and his rather esoteric account of how God gave birth to the world (AF; *IR*; Johnston 2008)” (Sharpe and Boucher 2010: 24).

One of Schelling’s most important philosophical contribution is the justification of a primordial, groundless decision: „First, what is at stake in Schelling’s theogony is a founding, Radical Act. Because this decision comes before the Symbolic Order, it cannot be rational (because it cannot be signified). ‘The abyss of an act of decision breaks up the causal chain, since it is grounded only in itself’ (AF 32). It suspends the principle of sufficient reason, which means that all events have a preceding cause or reason that explains how it came to be. It is completely groundless, utterly arbitrary. And its result is to create a (new) world. This sort of a decision ‘taken in the Real’ will become the model for Žižek’s Political Act.” (Sharpe and Boucher 2010: 118-119).

<sup>3</sup> There is an irony in this since Žižek himself criticizes other leftists for not being faithful to the Hegelian legacy of „determinate negation”: „With typical acuity, Žižek diagnoses that the academic Left, and the wider Left today, is facing a ‘crisis of determinate negation’ (*IDLC* 3379). Recall that determinate negation was Hegel’s term, taken on by Marx, for the way something (say, a political regime) can be ‘negated’ or overcome when it contains some ‘immanent’ potential (like an organised but exploited working class) whose realisation would mean that the entire substance would have to change (say, by a revolution wherein the workers take control of the state, factories and corporations). Determinate negation is different from merely ‘abstract negation’. This is what is involved when we deny or ‘negate’ something from the outside, or with reference to a wholly different set of ideals – as in the Iranian revolution briefly embraced by Michel Foucault, for instance, which ‘negated’ that nation’s Westernised regime in the name of a highly regressive form of Islamic religion (*IDLC* 107–17). Determinate negation mediates between a theoretical account of the political world and practical conclusions, for it theoretically identifies points in the political world where political change and new forces can reasonably be identified, and identified with. However, Žižek says, today’s Left can generally not see any such potentials. Žižek’s key, typically acute criticism of Laclau, Balibar, Badiou and Rancière in *The Ticklish Subject*, is to note how their thought is structured around an abstract opposition between the existing regime (the order of Being in Badiou, or of ‘the police’ in Rancière) and some event or possibility that would wholly overturn the existing situation from the outside (*TS* 171–244)” (Sharpe and Boucher 2010: 172).

Judith Butler also questions Žižek’s commitment to determinate negation considering his Lacanian (and to some extent Kantian) interpretation of Hegel: „The interesting irony is that for Žižek, the turn to Hegel offers a theory of reflexivity that is transcendental in its scope, even as transcendentalism now indicates, through the figure of *extimité*, a radical gap or fissure within its structure. So it seems important to recognize that this is not the traditional transcendentalism at work in Žižek’s work. If formalism is disrupted by a radical gap or fissure within its structure, is this a gap or negation that remains in relation to that which is fissured by its presence? In other words, is this a determinate negation of some sort, one that is defined by precisely what it negates? Or is it – as I think Žižek would insist – an indeterminate negation, an originary power of negation, one might say, which forms the condition and the constitutive ‘principle’ of every object constituted within its the field? To read this negativity as indeterminate, as I believe the doctrine of the Real requires, is thus quite different from reading it as determinate”. (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000: 272)

<sup>4</sup> Žižek is well aware of this tension as we can see from this passage: “Hegel is, of course, fully aware of the fact that our thinking wants to “jump ahead of its time” and project a future; his point is that such thinking is always and by definition “ideological,” mistaken: its intervention into Being generates something unexpected, totally different from what was projected. Therein resides the lesson of the French Revolution: the pure thought of universal equality and freedom, imposing itself onto social Being, generated the Terror. Marx’s counter-argument here is that his revolutionary theory is not a utopian projection into the future: it merely extrapolates tendencies and possibilities from the antagonisms of the present. Hegel is wrong in his basic presupposition that one can rationally grasp the Present as a Totality: it cannot be done because our historical Present is in itself split, traversed by antagonisms, incomplete—the only way to concretely grasp it as a rational totality is from the standpoint of the revolutionary agent which will resolve those antagonisms. Present antagonisms are not “readable” on their own terms; they are like the Benjaminian traces which are readable only from the future. What Hegel rejects is precisely such a totalization-from-the-future: the only totality accessible to us is the flawed totality of the present, and the task of Thought is to “recognize the Heart in the Cross of the present,” to grasp how the Totality of the Present is complete in its very incompleteness, how this Totality is sustained by those very features which appear as its obstacles or fatal flaws” (Žižek 2012: 259-260).

<sup>5</sup> Žižek tries to solve this problem by using the (French) distinction between “*futur*” and “*avenir*”. “But, again, what does this mean for our ability to act, to intervene in history? There are in French two words for the “future” which cannot be adequately rendered in English: *futur* and *avenir*. *Futur* stands for the future as the continuation of the present, as the full actualization of tendencies which are already present, while *avenir* points more towards a radical break, a discontinuity with the present—*avenir* is what is to come (*à venir*), not just what will be. For example, in the contemporary apocalyptic situation, the ultimate horizon of the “future” is what Jean-Pierre

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Dupuy calls the dystopian "fixed point," the zero-point of ecological breakdown, global economic and social chaos, etc. - even if it is indefinitely postponed, this zero-point is the virtual "attractor" towards which our reality, left to itself, tends. The way to combat the future catastrophe is through acts which interrupt this drifting towards the dystopian "fixed point," acts which take upon themselves the risk of giving birth to some radical Otherness "to come." We can see here how ambiguous the slogan "no future" is: at a deeper level, it designates not the impossibility of change, but precisely what we should be striving for - to break the hold the catastrophic "future" has over us, and thereby to open up the space for something New "to come." (Žižek 2012: 264)

Despite Žižek's own claims, this solution is not a Hegelian one. It simply assumes a modest, negative future (instead of a utopian projection) which still remains at odds with the Hegelian retroactive totalisation.<sup>6</sup> The strange similarity between Adorno's and Žižek's critique of ideology remains to be further developed. At this point, we could simply give a few hints for such an extended comparison. Adorno's analysis of fascism as a symptom of a "fatherless" society resembles, to some extent, Žižek's Lacanian emphasis put on the father figure. Adorno also anticipates Žižek when criticizing the ascetic dimension of capitalist consumerism forcing us to enjoy in order to better fit social expectations. The problem with capitalism is not consumerism, but the lack of it. And a last sample, Adorno and Žižek would also agree on the contemporary tendency to neutralise "great passion" (Adorno) by transforming love in a safe, totally controlled human relationship. "Love without *falling* in love", as Žižek would put it.

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