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Preferring Žižek's Bartleby Politics

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Abstract

Zizek's battle cry to 'do nothing', or what is termed Bartleby politics, has been met with much criticism. At best, it seems, his Bartleby politics simply enables us to see the limits of society, and at worst, it leaves us in a state of impotent passivity. This article takes a position of preferring Bartleby politics. This paper reflects on Žižek's Bartleby politics. It starts with briefly outlining the basic tenets of Bartleby politics, including concepts of the superego, enjoyment and the Act. Next the paper examines different reactions to Žižek's Bartleby politics, and how these help us to further think about the concept. The paper concludes with some reflections on the practicalities of Zizek's Bartleby politics.

Keywords: Bartleby Politics; Doing Nothing; Zizek

Introduction

Žižek observes that a Foucauldian politics of resistance is the hegemonic form of political action today, and therefore it should serve as the starting point for any critique of political action. A well-known limitation of Foucault's resistance is the way that power and resistance exist in a reciprocal relationship, with both producing and inciting the other. Indeed, Foucault (1982) describes society as a totalized field of actions upon actions. Within such a context it is difficult to identify any options for overthrowing power as every act of resistance only reaffirms the power it is supposedly working against (Newman 2004). Žižek's politics escapes this problematic (Krips (2012)). For example, Feldner and Vighi (2007: 2) observe how the "Žižekian battle-cry 'Discourse analysts of all countries get Real!'" provides a critical point of distinction between Žižek and Foucault inspired acts of resistance that allows the former to conceptualise a radical politics 'Beyond Foucault'. Žižek (2000: 248) highlights how the absence of the unconscious Real in Foucault's politics of power and resistance helps to explain why any act of resistance is nothing more than a simple transgression of power that enacts "the secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse". The key task for Žižek therefore in the face of Foucault's account of power and resistance is to insist on this disavowed negative dimension at the heart of both society and the subject as the sight of a radical politics. This disavowed negativity at the heart of Foucault's totalized society of actions upon actions signals the radical possibility of 'doing nothing', or what Žižek describes as 'Bartleby Politics' (see Žižek 2006, 2009a, 2012a).

This paper reflects on Žižek's Bartleby politics. It starts with briefly outlining the basic tenets of Bartleby politics, including concepts of the superego, enjoyment and the Act. Next the paper examines different reactions to Žižek's Bartleby politics, and how these help us to further think about the concept. The paper concludes with some reflections on the practicalities of Žižek's Bartleby politics.

A brief overview of Žižek's Bartleby Politics

The term 'Bartleby' in Žižek's Bartleby politics is derived from Herman Melville's (1853) short story titled 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street' in which the main character, Bartleby, repeatedly responds to the demands of his boss with the statement 'I'd prefer not to'. Unlike other authors who have extensively analyzed the text (e.g., Agamben 1999; Deleuze 1997) Žižek demonstrates little interest in the Bartleby narrative (Dean 2006). For Žižek, this Bartleby gesture of refusal typifies his broader politics of withdrawal or subtraction. The importance of Bartleby's gesture of refusal is that it is seen as not just a negation of the explicit demands of power, but also a refusal to partake in acts of resistance/transgression. As Žižek (2006: 393) argues,

This is how we pass from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation', which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation...This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference.

Rather than doing nothing in the guise of doing something Bartleby embodies the disruptive object that disturbs the existing order of things (Dean 2006). Therefore, Žižek (2009b: 334) argues, it is

Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly...The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active", to "participate", to mask the Nothingness of what goes on.

Indeed, Žižek (2009b, p, 334) emphasizes that "Those in power often prefer even a critical participation, a dialogue, to silence – just to engage us in a 'dialogue', to make sure our ominous passivity is broken" (Žižek 2009b: 334). He made a similar point to the protestors of the Occupy Movement in New York when he stated, "All we say now

can be taken (recuperated) from us – everything except our silence. This silence, this rejection of dialogue, of all forms of clinching, is our “terror”, ominous and threatening as it should be” (Žižek 2012a: 334).

What is it that leads Žižek to seeing the subversive potential in Bartleby’s refusal? What underpins his urgent call to ‘do nothing’ and to ‘silence’ as a threatening gesture of emancipatory politics? A key theoretical concept underpinning Žižek’s Bartleby politics is the Lacanian (1967-68) distinction between actions and an Act, made in the latter’s fifteenth seminar “The Psychoanalytic Act”. ‘Actions’ for Lacan refer to mundane, routine activities, or what Žižek calls “false actions”. An Act on the other hand “has Symbolic repercussions: it transgresses the rules of a symbolic order, thereby destabilizing the big Other in revealing its flaws, inconsistencies, and vulnerabilities” (Johnston 2009: 110). Thus, Žižek opposes his Bartleby politics of ‘doing nothing’ to false actions:

[I oppose] true activity (fidelity to the act proper) and false activity (which merely reproduces the existing constellation...we are active all the time to make sure that nothing will change). It is argued here that what is needed for the transformation of power relations is a gesture of refraining from this repetitive action. The condition for true change (a true act) is to stop false activity, or as Badiou puts it in a sentence I quote repeatedly: ‘It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent (Žižek 2009b: 309).

In this way the Act interrupts or suspends the normal run of things, and is therefore “at once the highest embodiment of agency/change, *and* another name for stasis – for the exceptional emergence of an explosive impasse within a regime of continuous activity” (Feldner & Vighi 2007: 111). Here we find ourselves at an Hegelian ‘identity of opposites’ in which “The paradox is thus that, in an authentic act, the highest freedom coincides with the utmost passivity” (Žižek 2000: 375).

Another key element of the subversive power of Bartleby is the way he relates to the superego. Rather than Bartleby politics, some authors describe Žižek's use of the superego as his 'politics of over-conformity' (e.g. Krips 2012). According to Krips (2012), Žižek's politics of over-conformity means taking the explicit rules of the law more seriously than the law itself wants them to be taken. To understand the functioning of this politics of over-conformity, one must first consider the different levels at which 'the law' operates, which consists of a three level network of interlocking rules and tactics:

The first level consists of *explicit*, officially sanctioned rules; for example, anti-plagiarism rules written up in university handbooks, official building codes, legal statutes etc. The second level consists of *implicit* rules or tactics – loopholes, tricks of the trade, shortcuts etc, picked up through experience – supplementing the explicit rules, and which, although in conflict with the explicit rules (and with each other) have normative force in their own right (Krips 2012: 307-308).

The third level of the law, and the level which a politics of over-conformity targets, is what Žižek (1998) terms 'the obscene underside of the law', which "consists of a shadowy zone of illicit tactics to which, despite their illegality, [power] turns a blind eye...for example, petty tax evasion, stealing ideas...etc" (Krips 2012: 308). In a concrete social space the explicit rules that tell us how we can and cannot act, are not enough. Rather, "in order to truly be a member of a certain social space, a community, what one must know are not simply the rules but the meta-rules which tell you how to treat these rules...rules that basically solicit you secretly" (Žižek 2009c: 83). In short, this third level of the law is the way power does not take itself seriously, or is the way power undermines its own explicit (and implicit) rules through what Žižek (1998) terms an 'inherent transgression'. This inherent transgression is not some meaningless aberration or corrupting of power, but rather it is a *necessary* support to power. Any hegemonic social order is inherently inconsistent with itself and this point of inconsistency allows one to take a distance towards the explicit rules of this society, to allow us to not take the rules seriously. Žižek (1998) argues that taking a distance from the explicit rules that structures society is itself ideology at its purest. As Johnston

(2009: 92) writes, “Subjects acquiesce to a system of rules, norms and conventions...so long as they are somehow able to sustain a minimal sense of sane selfhood or individuality vis-à-vis conceiving of themselves as skeptics reluctantly going along with the run of things”.

If one simply needs to over-identify with the law in order to undermine power, then what is it that keeps us from doing just that? It is here that Žižek directs us to the role of the *superego* and how it links to this obscene underside of power. The superego has a direct relationship with the inherent transgression through what Lacan terms *jouissance*. By demanding that we ‘Enjoy!’ the superego evokes our desire to transgress the law. The superego’s permissiveness (that is, the way it pressures us to ‘Enjoy’) is far more powerful than an explicitly authoritarian power. As such, “it is the purely formal, unwritten, internalised, and thus all the more irresistible injunction to enjoy (i.e., to transgress) that secretly sustains the very space of the law” (Feldner & Vighi 2007: 114). Žižek (2014a) uses the example of the Greek debt to the European Union to help explain the superego link to guilt. He explains, “The Greek failure is part of the game. Here, the goal of politico-economic analysis is to deploy strategies of how to step out of this infernal circle of debt and guilt” (Žižek 2014a: 46).

Therefore, in order to enact a politics of over-conformity, rather than simply resisting or repressing the superego excesses, what is needed is the recognition of their symptomatic revolutionary potential (Feldner and Vighi 2007). As Feldner and Vighi (2007: 136) argue,

since the ultimate support of ideology is a nonsensical kernel of enjoyment, the best way to expose the failure of ideology to coincide with itself (to impose itself as a self-transparent, neutral and consistent set of ideas) is *to identify with it completely, inclusive of its concealed underside of obscene enjoyment*. Since obscene enjoyment is nothing but a gentrification (the positive side) of the abyssal inconsistency of ideology, bringing this obscene enjoyment to the surface is tantamount to revealing the inconsistency of the ideological edifice.

This politics of over-conformity is, however, not distinct from Žižek's Bartleby politics. Indeed, in 'Notes Towards a Politics of Bartleby', Žižek (2006) discusses at length the obscene underside of the law and the superego injunction to enjoy. Although there appears to be an abrupt leap from one to the other in the concluding section of the article, one can perhaps read it in the manner of installing a Master Signifier that adds no new content but retroactively re-interprets what was already there. Indeed, Dean (2006) observes that for Žižek Bartleby is an empty container. As such, one could argue that prior to Žižek's use of the term one can find all the components of Žižek's Bartleby politics (linked to enjoyment, the superego, the Act and so on), but it was not until he starting using the term that these components became known as 'Bartleby politics'.

Therefore, Žižek sees Bartleby's gesture as a shift from an act of transgression that is external to power to identifying with power's inherent transgression by opening up a place in law by subtracting from law its superego supplement (Dean 2006). Rather than actively resisting power, the Bartleby gesture of 'preferring not to' suspends the subject's libidinal investment in it (Žižek 2010: 400-401). It is in this way that Žižek (2006: 382) describes Bartleby's refusal as "what remains of the supplement to the Law when its place is emptied of all its obscene superego content". This is the subversive nature of Bartleby's gesture – by claiming 'I prefer not to', he is not committed to something else (an act of transgression that feeds the Other with jouissance), he is only committed to 'not to'. As Deleuze (1997) puts it, the "abrupt termination, NOT TO...leaves what it rejects undetermined". Similarly, Žižek argues that we should neither glorify the superego as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes power but insist on its undecidable character. Thus, Dean (2006: 131) argues "In a way, Bartleby is less an alternative than he is a realization, an acknowledgment of the contemporary political-economic impasse". In discussing the necessary gesture of moving beyond the superego to object a, Dean (2006: 22) suggests that Žižek's Bartleby politics is one possible model:

“The potential of this figure rests in the way that it reverses the standard notion of the subject as active and the object as passive. Having shown that the subject is fundamentally passive, one who submits, who is subjected, Žižek considers the way that the object objects, disturbing the established order of things. Bartleby’s inert refusal thus suggests the movement of an object, an objection to capitalist activity and circulation and to liberal fantasies of freedom”.

Therefore Žižek’s Bartleby politics is not simply about ‘doing nothing’ as we commonly understand it. Rather, it signifies a refusal to ‘do nothing’ in the guise of radical acts of resistance, as well as a refusal to take a cynical distance from the Law/Power; rather it breaks free from the cycle of guilt and occupies Power’s inner void.

Reactions to Žižek’s Bartleby Politics

Žižek’s call to do nothing has triggered a range of reactions from both supporters (e.g. Vighi 2010) and critics (e.g., see Critchley 2010; Sharpe & Boucher, 2010; Johnston, 2009) alike. On the side of the critics for example, Simon Critchley (2010) criticizes Žižek for counselling us “to do *nothing* in the face of the objective, systemic violence of the world. We should just sit and wait and have the courage to do nothing”. Further, he claims Žižek is caught in an obsessional fantasy in which, “the only authentic stance to take in dark times is to do nothing, to refuse all commitment, to be paralyzed like Bartleby” (Critchley 2010). Sharpe and Boucher (2010) argue “Žižek’s own hesitations about what is to be done perhaps speak, symptomatically, of the insufficiency of his critique of ideology and theory of the subject – brilliant as both are – by themselves to make up a political theory or orient an emancipatory politics”. Even some of Žižek’s supporters are cautious about his Bartleby politics. Vighi (2010: 113) writes Žižek’s theory is “at risk of remaining suffocated by its own demand for a liberated terrain upon which to articulate itself. If not complemented by an effort of creative daring, the ‘politics of subtraction’ is in danger of turning into (yet another) case of ‘subtraction from politics’”.

Perhaps an important starting point for understanding the criticism of Žižek's Bartleby politics is in light of the earlier discussion on the Lacanian distinction between Acts and actions. Important to consider here is that an Act does not stop at the moment of wiping the slate clean as it were. Rather, as described by the discourse of the Analyst, what must necessarily follow this moment is the instalment of a new "master signifier" that restructures the big Other. As Vighi (2010: 127) explains, "In epistemological terms, the first subversive intervention (the endorsement of the drive...) entails an *evacuation of knowledge*, and has to be followed by the difficult work concerning the transformation of this *tabula rasa* into a new order". Žižek (2002) argues that when one performs an Act, one does so 'without guarantees'. That is, one does not know the full implications of the Act, of what kind of society it will lead to. This claim is linked to the way Žižek reads the Lacanian Act as a 'miraculous' occurrence that seems to appear out of nowhere and is only recognized retrospectively. Given that actions are determined by the existing power structure, and inevitably reinforce this same structure, Žižek argues that a new Master cannot be asserted within the existing coordinates of the big Other. This is a point he shares with French philosopher Alain Badiou who, in his theory of the Event, argues that there is no link between the pre-evental site (or what above was referred to as the initial subversive intervention) and the Event. Or in other words, prior to an Event, one cannot predict how the post-evental world will look. All this means that a true Act occurs without the guarantees of a pre-determined ethical edifice. Vighi (2010) suggests that this issue is underpinned by a persistent concern throughout Žižek's work regarding the alignment of freedom and necessity, or contingency and necessity. As Vighi (2010: 139) argues, "This question becomes particularly pressing if conceived in direct political terms: how can we think of subjective freedom towards a political cause (freedom to act in the name of a cause) if the actuality of the cause is strictly tied to a radically contingent historical dimension?" Or in other words, how can one wilfully act to bring about transformation if the outcome of such actions is unpredictable, or caused independently of those actions? This unpredictability has a tendency to lead towards negative politics in which one simply engages in the criticism of the existing order whilst avoiding the risk of proposing something new (Johnston 2009; Vighi 2010).

For critics then, the question of the temporality and intentionality of the Žižekian political Act further compounds the undesirability of his call ‘to do nothing’. Perhaps one of the more extensive theoretical critiques of Žižek’s Bartleby politics in this regard is provided by Adrian Johnston. In line with the above discussion, a key target of Johnston’s critique is what he suggests is Žižek’s over-reliance on the action-Act dichotomy, which he claims prevents Žižek from being able to conceive of actions that can lead to an Act. Or more directly, Johnston argues that it risks Žižek rejecting all actions as irrelevant to political transformation thereby promoting impotent passivity. Furthermore, Johnston seems to be making the claim here that whilst the current political situation may indeed call for inaction, Žižek’s position in relation to the action-Act dichotomy makes this call more plausible than it would otherwise seem. A central part of this position, according to Johnston, is the specific emphasis Žižek places on the Lacanian Act. As Johnston (2009: 158) explains,

As regards Lacan’s notion of the act, one must acknowledge an important difference between what could be described as the spectacular act versus the vanishing act...In those places where he remains enthralled by the spectacular side of the Lacanian act, Žižek is in danger of paralyzing himself into inaction by raising the bar so high for what would constitute an authentically revolutionary intervention that no foreseeable possible courses of action in the reality of contemporary sociopolitical world stand a chance of measuring up to the demanded magnitude of a ‘real act’.

Johnston argues that Žižek fetishizes this spectacular reading of the Lacanian Act to at once claim that all actions are false actions that simply reinforce the parasitical nature of capitalism, whilst at the same time disavowing this stifling closure of possibilities by believing ‘the impossible happens’. Johnston sees this as promoting a passivity similar to Marx’s evolutionary approach to capitalism which argues that the antagonisms and contradictions of capitalism will eventuate in its inevitable demise. In both cases, “the danger is that the very analyses...might serve to facilitate the

sustenance of the cynical distance whose underlying complicity with the current state of affairs he describes so well” (Johnston 2009: 126). Thus, for Johnston, this is a fetishist disavowal that allows one to maintain a position of withdrawal in the present and not commit to any political project, whilst claiming that this will ensure the impossible will happen.

In contrast to this emphasis on the spectacular act, Johnston argues for the vanishing act as the key to an effective politics of transformation. According to Johnston (2009: 158), this reading of the Lacanian analytic act points “to the possibility of a modest but nonetheless revolutionary vanishing act as an auto-erasing moment that generates true change through quietly receding into the background”. He links this vanishing act with Lacan’s ‘discourse of the Analyst’ in which, according to Johnston, Lacan argues the analyst becomes the ‘reject’ (object a) of the discursive arrangement “established and sustained by the analyst’s angle *for acting*” (Johnston 2009: 151, italics added). In this way, Johnston claims that the analyst commits ‘suicide’ by giving up his or her position as the Other supposed to know for the analysand.

But can it not be argued here that Johnston too falls prey to a fetishist disavowal by simply emphasising a different element of the Lacanian Act, namely the vanishing mediator? That is, by fetishising this aspect of the Act, Johnston enables himself to also disavow the contemporary closure of the political imagination under liberal-democratic capitalism and continue with the fantasy of actions that lead to an Act. One is tempted here to make a distinction between Johnston’s fetishist disavowal and the one he claims Žižek is engaged in. Johnston claims Žižek’s disavowal operates in the traditional Žižekian mode of ‘I know very well, but...’ That is, that Žižek knows very well that identifying and engaging in options for destabilising capitalism is impossible, but nonetheless, he believes the impossible happens. At first appearance, Johnston appears to be engaged in the same mode of disavowal, as perhaps supported by his comments that “Although an act is indeed not an action (and although far from every action can or does become an act), there is, nonetheless, *no act without action*” (Johnston 2009: 117). That is, I know very well the difficulties of an action leading to an

act, but nonetheless I believe that actions will lead to an act and therefore remain engaged in them. In this way, one could argue that this enables Johnston to take a cynical distance towards precisely what is necessary to perform an Act, and carry on with the active belief that any one action or combination of actions could potentially be the one that matters.

However, we should perhaps read Johnston's fetishist disavowal in a different manner. In his recent work, Žižek (2014b: 52) argues for a different version of the fetishist disavowal that renders knowledge itself incomplete; that is, because knowledge is 'not-all' we still have to act as though we believe. In this tautological version, rather than there being belief despite knowledge (I know very well, but nonetheless I believe otherwise) there is belief supplementing knowledge in the form of 'I know very well, but nonetheless I still need to believe what I know'. For Žižek, (2014b) this form of the fetishist disavowal uncovers the lack at the heart of knowledge itself. In this instance, one could claim that Johnston knows very well that actions are necessary for an act, but nonetheless he needs to believe that actions will lead to an act because he does not know what action is necessary to perform an Act. This enables Johnston to take a cynical distance towards the unpredictability and contingency between actions and an Act. In a way, he simply replaces the term 'thinking' in his critique of Žižek with the term 'acting'. That is, Johnston argues that Žižek's position is one in which as long as he keeps engaged in critical thinking then the impossibility of change is bearable; for Johnston, the impossibility of knowing which action will lead to an Act is bearable only so long as we remain active in our belief that our actions will (eventually) lead to change.

What supports Johnston's fetish is the particular emphasis he places on the discourse of the Analyst. Firstly, he sees silence and inaction as only the end point of therapy, that is, that the analyst is actively engaged in therapy until the analysand has traversed the fantasy, after which time the analyst must be silent. In short, Johnston argues that the work (action) of the that results in the break of transference in which the analyst vanishes into the background. It is at this point of the analyst's vanishing that

Johnston argues results in a deafening silence of the analysand's 'solitary mortal being'. Furthermore, it is at this moment that, "the analyst must remain silent apropos the potential subtractions to which he or she leaves patients *after their analyses are over*" (Johnston 2009: 155).

This interpretation of the analyst's position leads Johnston to claim that the 'vanishing' is done by the analyst. Or in Johnston's words, the analyst must commit an act of suicide in which he no longer acts as an Other for the analysand in order to enable the latter to construct a new Other. But is there not another possible reading of the position of the analyst and of the vanishing mediator? One that indicates that it is the analysand and not the analyst that does the vanishing? In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek (1993: 33) writes - in a section titled 'The Subject as "Vanishing Mediator"' - that understanding the subject as the crack in the Other,

"hinges on the notion of the subject as the 'vanishing mediator' in the precise sense of the Freudian-Lacanian Real, i.e., the structure of an element which, although nowhere actually present and as such inaccessible to our experience nonetheless has to be retroactively constructed, presupposed if all elements are to retain their consistency".

Furthermore, as explained by the discourse of the Analyst, once the new master signifier is posited the position from which this positing was done (that is, the position of the subject) disappears, is masked over. As Žižek (2008: 190) explains it, "The moment when the *subject* 'posits his presupposition' is the very moment of his effacement as subject, *the moment he vanishes as a mediator*". In a similar manner, Vighi (2010: 128 italics added) claims, "In a political context, to be transformative the moment of sublimation must be thoroughly creative, if only because it changes the revolutionary premises to the extent of reinventing them, with good peace for the *revolutionary subject who must be prepared to vanish*".

Therefore, if we accept that it is the analysand who must perform the vanishing act, then what becomes of the role of the analyst in the discourse of the Analyst? Rather than being active to the point of suicide, it is the silent and inactive posture of the analyst that is the key to the therapeutic process. For example, Dolar (2006: 124, italics added) writes,

The analyst had to keep silent, at least in principle and the great majority of the time. But here a curious reversal takes place: *it is the analyst, with his or her silence, who becomes the embodiment of the voice as the object*. She or he is the personification, the embodiment, of the voice, the voice incarnate, the aphonic silent voice. This is not His Master's Voice, not the voice of command or of the superego, but rather the impossible voice to which one has to respond. It is the voice which does not say anything, and the voice which cannot be said. It is the silent voice of an appeal, a call, an appeal to respond, to assume one's stance as the subject. One is called upon to speak, and one would say anything that happens to come into one's mind to interrupt the silence, to silence this voice, to silence the silence; but perhaps the whole process of analysis is a way to learn how assume this voice.

Similarly, Dean (2006: xviii) highlights how "In psychoanalysis, the analyst just sits there...the analyst steadfastly refuses to provide the analysand with any answers whatsoever. No ideals, no moral certainty, no goals, no choices. Nothing". Therefore we can understand the position of the analyst as that of Bartleby politics, of a persistent occupation of the gap in the Other and as a refusal to act as the voice of the Law or of the command of the superego.

Extending Žižek's Bartleby Politics

Žižek's work is often criticised on the basis of its applicability to real life social and political action. How does one enact Bartleby politics? Where does one begin? Vighi (2010) suggests an answer when he argues that whilst Bartleby politics should be fully endorsed as a means of unveiling the instability of the social order, any social order is

constituted by a human excess (what one might be tempted to call the 'already inactive') who are simultaneously produced by and excluded from the social order. In Vighi's (2010: 137) words,

What are the actual potentialities of politicizing this drive towards non-participation in our current constellation? More to the point: do we not already have this Bartleby of non-participation, of clearing the ground for the act, in the infernal yet 'liberated' territories of the slums, or more generally, in relation to any instance of exclusion? Once again, my contention is that if the term surplus has any meaning today, it must be in connection with the social entropy of capitalist production.

Therefore, the presence of the 'already inactive' as the internal limit of liberal-democratic capitalism, as its unassimilable object, is the point from which *any subversive strategy should begin* (Vighi 2010). In the social field, this surplus is identified as the 'excluded' or the 'proletariat' (the latter being viewed no longer in narrow Marxian terms). In the therapy session, it is the analyst who assumes this position of the already inactive in order to provide the basis for the subject's own 'subversive strategy'. That is, the human excess of society is already in the position of the silent/inactive analyst, and the task of transformative politics is to mobilise other acting subjects to join in the silence, to form a silent and inactive alliance. As Vighi (2010: 88) explains it,

The emancipatory step away from compulsive enjoyment requires that, to put it in the terms of Žižek's specific 'hauntology', we join arms with those 'living dead' who already populate our socio-symbolic space in growing numbers...In this context, our immediate goal – the goal that Žižek has described as 'Bartleby politics' – should be to gain a distance from the relentless and obscene (shameless) call to participate creatively and proactively in a system whose only goal is to reproduce itself and, collaterally, global misery.

Therefore, rather than simply seeking to withdraw from the existing social order a radical politics of doing nothing could also proceed from the awareness that subtracted masses resulting from the logic of capitalist expansion already exist, and as such are in urgent need of political organization. In a related way, Jodi Dean (2006, 2012) outlines the role of the Communist Party in this task of organizing or politicizing the already inactive. She draws on Žižek's point that from the perspective of the Party class struggle is the Form of the Social and that "Once we recognize the formal role of the Party, we can understand why Žižek answers the question 'what is to be done?' in one word: nothing" (Dean 2006: 197). Dean (2006: 197) further emphasizes how this answer, this call to do nothing, "points to Žižek's rejection of the idea that the revolutionary act is the act of a willing, choosing subject and his provision, in its place, of the Bartleby politics of an object and the Party's role in retroactively determining the act".

We perhaps find our way back to the issue of the temporality of the Act and the role of Bartleby politics in generating it. The discussion thus far perhaps implies that there is a clearly identifiable distinction between clearing the ground for the Act and the Act itself. However, things are perhaps more ambiguous. Rex Butler (2005) discusses at length the ambiguity in Žižek's notion of the Act, attempting to highlight that rather than seeing the Act as including two separate moments, the clearing of the ground and the instalment of a new Master, Žižek continuously attempts to explain the Act as these two moments occurring simultaneously. This perspective is consistent with the aim of Lacanian psychoanalysis of bringing about the overlap between the surplus of subjectivity (i.e., the Subject proper) and object a (the surplus of the objective order). That is, the discourse of the analyst represents a fleeting moment when the gap in our subjectivity overlaps with the gap in the Other. This suggests that at this moment, there is no distinction between analyst and subject, they are both at the same place, and this brief moment ends with the installment of a new Master. Žižek (1993) describes this moment with reference to a picture of the overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania. He explains, the mass of protestors "participated in the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief, passing moment,

the hole in the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible” (Žižek 1993: 1). Žižek explains further that the role of the critical intellectual is to occupy all the time this hole, even when the new Master harmonizes the social order in order to render visible the contingency of the produced Master. One is tempted here, then, to suggest the double nature of Bartleby. As object, Bartleby occupies the gap in the Other and he is always already there occupying this place. As subject, he represents the necessary gesture of withdrawal from the active reproduction of his subjectivity under the Law. But one cannot separate the two, he is always both at the same time. He is both refusal and refuse. It is only at the point of subjective withdrawal from the activity of the Other and its superego that we realize Bartleby was already there. Of course, in “reality” the subtracted masses already exist. But it is not until we withdraw from pre-conceived ethical frames that we recognize in them the potential for revolutionary transformation. This is why for Žižek, as well as for Dean and for Badiou, the crowd of protestors is *not all*. Somewhere in the crowd is the Truth, the Universal expression of Humanity. Somewhere in the crowd is Bartleby. Although the hysterical position of the crowd can render visible the inconsistency of the Other, it is this inconsistency which sets in motion fetishist desires that act to displace the lack in the Other. Therefore, until the crowd recognizes Bartleby is among them, there remains the risk of the possibility for appropriation of the revolutionary potential of crowd as they seek a response from the Other to their demands. As Žižek (1994: 2) explains it in relation to the example of Romania, “all ideological appropriations (from the nationalistic to the liberal-democratic) entered at the stage afterwards and endeavoured to ‘kidnap’ the process which was originally not their own”. Indeed, in light of capitalism’s propensity to reappropriate its excesses, Žižek (2009d: 55) stresses that the “predominant liberal notion of democracy also deals with those excluded, but in a radically different mode: it focuses on their inclusion, as minority voices”.

An example of this liberal-inclusive appropriation of the historical opening occurred during the democratization process in the Pacific Island nation of Fiji from 2012-2014. Important to note is that the 2006 military coup in Fiji was the country’s fourth since independence in 1970, and each time the coup was followed by the establishment of a

new constitution and/or parliamentary elections. Therefore, as the country embarked on its democratization process – starting with the development of a new constitution and ending with the 2014 elections – the most pertinent question to be asking was ‘what will be different this time?’ Indeed this hysterical style question was asked of the head of the Constitution Commission who replied that the 2012 process would be more *inclusive* than any of the previous efforts. Similarly, in an article in the *Fiji Sun* (Bolatiki 2012), Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama claimed that the answer to stopping coups in Fiji was in allowing as many people as possible to voice their needs to the Constitutional Commission. He argued, “An inclusive constitution, a document that really takes into consideration what the people need will stop the coup and that is what the government is working on now” (Bolatiki 2012: 2). Another example, of the failure to enact Bartley politics occurred during the lead up to the September 2014 elections in a series of television and radio commercials developed by a local non-government organization. Similar to the earlier example, the commercials began with a group of four or five people questioning why they should bother participating in the upcoming Fiji elections. As the commercial progressed, the people began to express a variety of motivations for voting in the elections. For example, one woman commented that she would like to have a career; another commented that she wanted an end to violence against women. The implicit message of the advertisement was that the source of the inability for Fijians to realize their aspirations, human rights, and so on lies in the lack of participation in democratic processes, in particular elections. However, where the advertisement failed was in its rejection of the initial hysterical position portrayed at the beginning of the commercial. The doubt expressed by the people at the beginning of the commercials is precisely this kind of hysterical act that put under question the natural call for a return to liberal parliamentary democracy through elections. The different reasons given for why the participants in the commercial would nonetheless vote represent different desires that enable them to disavow this doubt or the failure of the liberal parliamentary democracy. Therefore, the move from this hysterical questioning to participation is made by a fetishist disavowal– that is, ‘I know very well that my participation in the elections will change nothing, but nonetheless, I will participate in the elections’. Rather, what people should have done following the initial hysterical questioning and reply from

the liberal Master is simply to say, 'I'd prefer not to'. By holding open the space of doubt, Fijians could have provided an opportunity to seek a new Fijian society, perhaps seeking to organize the 30% of so of Fijians that have continued to live below the poverty line as coups and democratically elected governments have come and gone.

More recently, Žižek lucidly emphasized a missed opportunity for enacting Bartleby politics during the 2016 US Presidential election campaign. Following the Democratic nominations won by Hilary Clinton, Bernie Sanders publically endorsed Hilary Clinton as the Democratic candidate. In response, Žižek (2016) wrote "Trump hit the mark when he compared his endorsement of Hilary to an Occupy partisan endorsing Lehman Brothers. Sanders should just withdraw and retain a dignified silence so that his absence would weigh heavily over the Hilary celebrations, reminding us of what is missing and, in this way, keep the space open for more radical alternatives in future".

Therefore, in contrast to an emphasis on inclusiveness, Žižek (2002) asserts the need to reach out to the Bartleby that is already there. He claims that in order to overcome late capitalist ideology,

we cannot go directly from capitalist to revolutionary subjectivity: the abstraction, the foreclosure of others, the blindness to the other's suffering and pain, has first to be broken in a gesture of taking the risk and reaching directly out to the suffering other (Žižek 2002: 252).

This is why the Dean asserts the critical importance of the Party, as those who take a partisan stance with the excluded. Only the (Communist) Party can recognize the revolutionary potential of Bartleby in the crowd and enable us to recognize ourselves in him. As Žižek explains (2009d: 55),

The new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians who have 'nothing to lose but their chains', we

are in danger of losing everything. The threat is that we will be reduced to an abstract, empty Cartesian subject dispossessed of all our symbolic content, with our genetic base manipulated, vegetating in an unliveable environment. This triple threat makes us all proletarians, reduced to 'substanceless subjectivity', as Marx put it in the Grundrisse. The figure of the 'part of no part' confronts us with the truth of our own position; and the ethico political challenge is to recognize ourselves in this figure.

Therefore in tying together the threads of Žižek's Bartleby politics, Vighi's 'already inactive' and Dean's call for the Party, one could examine how Bartleby politics could be extended across the temporal spectrum of political transformation. Indeed, this has more or less been done in Badiou's (2012) analysis of the Arab Spring and Dean's (2016) commentary of the Occupy movement. In both cases, they emphasise the contingent nature of the "democratic" readings or outcomes of such movements and how such readings occlude the revolutionary potential that existed amongst the protestors.

Conclusion

Rather than Žižek's Bartleby politics leaving us impotent with passivity, it is a refusal to 'do nothing' in the guise 'doing something', and it is a refusal to take a cynical distance from the Law/Power; rather it breaks free from the cycle of guilt and transgression sustained by the superego injunction to enjoy and instead occupies the inner void of the Other. In making such claims, one can consider how 'doing nothing' takes on four forms within discussions of power, resistance and political transformation. In the first, 'doing nothing' is commonly understood to be the outcome of the oppressive exercise of power and ideology. In this way, power and ideology prevent people from not only mobilising against structural violence, but even from recognizing that there is a problem in the first place. The second form of 'doing nothing' emerged with the rise of postmodern critiques of the first kind. Such critiques argue that power is not total in its effects and ideology is ineffective in determining the agency of the masses. Rather, there are always possibilities for resistance within the social field. However, the outcome of this

theoretical perspective is a politics of 'doing nothing in the guise of doing something' where resistance only served to reinforce the power it claimed to be working against. In contrast to these two forms of 'doing nothing', Žižek's Bartleby politics radicalizes 'doing nothing' such that it is the basis for revolutionary transformation. In the first instance, 'doing nothing' is precisely a rejection of the first two forms just described. Such a gesture, is a necessary refusal to act within the ideological coordinates of liberal capitalism, thereby showing the latter's failure or inconsistency. The second way that Bartleby politics helps us rethink 'doing nothing' is in relation to the 'already inactive' who precisely embody the inconsistency of liberal capitalist power. In short, Bartleby politics calls for a violent gesture of refusing to act in line with premises of liberal-democratic capitalism – in particular, inclusive nonviolent participation and voice - and instead seeks to mobilise or politicize the 'already inactive' in society.

More than just theoretical, it has urgent practical application. In a practical sense Žižek's Bartleby politics helps us understand how liberal-capitalist ideological desire invites us to take action, to enter into dialogue or to participate and be inclusive, in order to displace the failure of the existing liberal-capitalist social order. In the face of this, Bartleby politics urges us to not only 'prefer not to', but to engage in the organization and mobilization of him and those like him.

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