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“Then We Will Fight Them in the Shadows!” Seven Parataxic Views, On Žižek’s Style

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1.

As the best entertainers have always said, let me begin by attempting something never before ventured in public. The author will now start a piece on Slavoj Žižek by citing from Xenophon. The context is from near the centre of the *Memorabilia*, book III. Interestingly, this book of the *Memorabilia* is the most seemingly aleatory, random collection of anecdotes on Socrates, Xenophon’s hero.¹ *Sans* explication, it runs from savory advice Socrates gave to people who aspired (or should have) to noble pursuits (III.1-7); how Socrates refuted Aristippus’ sophistical attempts to trap him concerning what is good and fine (II.8); Socrates’ discourse on what is envy, leisure, the true claim to rule, the best occupations for men (III.9); his advice to craftsmen concerning what is fitting in the different plastic arts (III.10); Socrates’ conversation with a beautiful courtesan, Theodote (III.11); on the need for physical training (III.12); six aperçus on the need for manliness in matters mundane, particularly concerning slaves; (III.13), then three closing vignettes on Socrates’ table manners (III.14)!

The conversation that concerns us is with one “Pericles”. Yet this is not the great

strategos, he of the funeral oration's paean to democratic Athens. It is his son and namesake. In our conversation, the young Pericles, aspiring to generalship himself, launches into the most far-reaching criticism of the decadence of the Athenian democracy his very father had immortally sung. Our young Pericles, out of heart with his fatherland, instead praises her enemy, the barracks society of Sparta:

'You imply,' said Pericles, 'that our country is a long way from true goodness. Are the Athenians ever likely to equal the Spartans in showing respect for their elders, when they despise anyone older than themselves beginning with their fathers, or in developing their bodies, when they not only care nothing for physical fitness themselves but jeer at those who care about it? Will they ever have as much obedience to authority, when they pride themselves on despising authority? Will they ever have as much unanimity, when, so far from working together for their common interest, they are more envious and abusive towards one another than towards the rest of the world, quarrel more in their meetings, both private and public, than any other people, and bring the greatest number of actions against one another; when they prefer to gain in this way at one another's expense rather than by cooperation, and, while treating public duties as no personal concern of theirs, at the same time fight over them, taking the greatest delight in the qualities that fit them for such quarrelling? As a result of this, a great deal of harm and mischief is developing in our city, and a great deal of mutual enmity and hatred is growing in the hearts of our people; and for this reason I, for my part, am in constant dread that some intolerable disaster will fall upon our city.' (*Mem.* III.6. 13-17)

Socrates, soon to be accused by the Athenians of turning young men against the democracy and their fathers, is then put by Xenophon in the position of putting the young Pericles' anti-democratic animus to rest. Things are not so dire:

'Really Pericles', said Socrates, 'you mustn't imagine that the Athenians are suffering from such incurable depravity as that. Don't you see how well-disciplined they are in the navy, and how punctiliously they obey the officials in athletic meetings, and how, when they are members of a chorus, they follow the directions of their trainers as thoroughly as anyone?' (*Mem.* III.5, 18-19).

It is not that Socrates, who has suggested the Spartan "model" to Pericles, admires Sparta, and its highly regimented, militaristic form of political organisation—although we note that Socrates defends the Spartan standards of regimented discipline and obedience here, as the very *means* to patriotically defend Athens. It is only that the Athenians, particularly in military matters, need more "expert direction" by people who know—just as musicians and singers and dancers, and Olympic wrestlers need leadership by those who know concerning these fields. (III.5, 20) It is not that one reason for the distrust Socrates,

Plato, and Xenophon were all held in by the Athenians was because of their suspected admiration for the laconic virtue and militaristic regimentation of the Spartans, and their extreme, if extremely stable, Lycurgean constitution. Perhaps the young Pericles, surpassing his democratic father, shall become himself an expert in how to move men, since (Socrates prods) he would surely never aspire to generalship without acquiring the relevant expertise in ruling human beings? Perhaps the young Pericles will even listen to Socrates' advice concerning the need to place lightly armed Athenian soldiers in the mountains surrounding their threatened polis, on a model taken from the Mysians, who continue defiantly to resist the king of Persia by conducting guerrilla warfare? (III.5. 25-27) Granted, we seem a long way from the very modern, 'postmodern' texts, stylings, or concerns of twenty-first century Slovenian political theorist Slavoj Žižek. Yet readers of Žižek know very well that very nearly all things are not as they appear—and that the striking paratactic segue between the most seemingly distant topics or fields is always a rhetorical question, paragraph or section break away.

Žižek's voracious intellect does not desist from entering, and taking sides, in the ancient Hellenic world, any more than it does in other epistemic field. First,, then, by a small displacement: Žižek with Xenophon. In *In Defence of Lost Causes*, Žižek refers at an interesting point in his argument to the ancient poet Simonides. Yet Simonides was another Xenophontic mouthpiece, alongside or in place of Socrates—not in the *Memorabilia*, but in the dialogue *Hiero: On Tyranny*. Here, Simonides is depicted (as he was famous for doing) giving advice to the notorious tyrant on how to better his reign, which one sympathetic modern critic has called “amazingly amoral”. (Strauss 2000, p. 94) Žižek in *In Defence of Lost Causes* uses Simonides to provide a reliable definition of what it is to be a “cadre”. He does so, having cut to this question direct from a rumination on Stalin's last purge of the doctors, in the midst of a section entitled “Subjective and Objective Guilt”, and a discussion of the perverse objectification of the physical body (as *objet a*) in Stalinist discourse.

Žižek's cites Simonides' saying, central also to Plato's *Protagoras*: “It is arduous to be an able, a truly able man; in hands and feet as well as in mind square [*tetragonos*] without fault.” Simonides' authority, or relevance, here is not hence immediately transparent. Also unclear is how this, seemingly approving digression on the term ‘cadre’ sits with the, seemingly critical, discussion of the “perversion” of Stalinist discourse which centres the section. Žižek feels it necessary to add, via a comment on Malevich's “Black Square on a White Background”: “So, to put it in Heideggerese, the essence of the cadre

is to provide a *cadre* (square, frame) for the essence itself.” (cf. Žižek 2008, pp. 219-22) We then return to Stalinism, with one further paragraph leading to this conclusion: ‘the cadre’s sublime body is the ethereal support of this direct self-consciousness of the historical absolute Subject.’ (Žižek 2008, 222) It was in the name of this Subject that Stalin subordinated historical fact to its “objective Meaning” as nominated subjectively by the Party, in a double-think which licensed the practice of violently contradicting his own earlier edicts (like opposing the fascists) and the ready creation of new ‘enemies of the People’. (Žižek 2008, p. 230)

Second: Žižek with Sparta. The ancient barracks society young-Pericles admires above, and whose standards Socrates adopts to ‘defend’ Athens, is not absent from Žižek’s two most recent, long books: *The Parallax View* (2006) and *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008).² In *In Defence of Lost Causes*, at one point we are advised that “the entire globe tends to function as a universal Sparta with three classes, now emerging as the First, Second, and Third Worlds ...” (Žižek 2008, p. 363) The US is the failing oligarchic ruling class; Europe, the Latin American countries, and the Asian giants are the manufacturing class; and the underdeveloped nations are our helots: so “equality and universalism are rapidly disappearing as actual political principles ...” (Žižek 2008, p. 363)

In *Parallax View*, Sparta emerges at a pivotal point in Žižek’s argumentation. Here he considers what is arguably *the* question for the “Lacanian Left”. This is the question of whether the Lacanian critique of ideologies or regimes as always leaning, for their symbolic legitimacy, on an obscene underside of *Jouissance* structured according to fantasy, does not point towards the possibility of a new form of society. This would be a regime in which power would be severed from this obscene underbelly. This direction would be that in sought for by thinkers like Yannis Stavrakakis, who recur to Lacanian categories to animate a theory of radical democracy: as the only regime which institutionalises the constitutive “not-all”, inconsistency, of the big Other posited fantasmatically by hegemonic ideologies. History seems to confirm the sad necessity that all regimes “relapse” into a “tension” between symbolic ideals and the fantasmatic dependency on this obscene *Jouissance*, Žižek tells us here. He would make one surprising exception, as follows:

On only a couple of occasions have political regimes tried to mitigate the tension, *most notably in the Spartan state*, which represented a uniquely pure realisation of a certain model of societal organisation. Its three-caste pyramid of social hierarchy (the ruling warrior *homoi* [the equals], the artisans and merchants below them, and

the mass of helots at the bottom who were just slaves exploited for physical labor) condensed with crystal clarity the historical succession of serfdom, capitalism, and egalitarian communism: in a way, Sparta was all three at the same time: feudalism for the lower class, capitalism for the middle class, and communism for the ruling class. (Žižek 2006, p. 306)

Let us accept this (unusual, historicising type of) claim for the “polity”-like, mixed regime-like, nature of Sparta. How does it, as described, answer to the Lacanian dilemma Žižek has raised concerning the possibility of a regime without a tension between fantasy/ideological disidentification/ *Jouissance*/inherent transgression? Here is the sequel:

The ethico-ideological predicament of the rulers is of special interest here: despite the absolute power they enjoyed, they had to live not only in a permanent state of emergency, at war with their own subjects, but also as if their own position were obscene and illegal. While in military training, for example, adolescents were given insufficient food on purpose, so they had to steal it: if, however, they were caught, they were severely punished—not for stealing, but for *getting caught*, thus being pushed into learning the art of secret stealing. Or, with regard to marriage: the married soldier continued to live with his comrades in military barracks; he could visit his wife only secretly, during the night, as if committing a clandestine act of transgression. The most acute case of this twisted logic was the key ordeal of young trainees: in order to earn their acceptance into masculine society, they had secretly to murder one of the unsuspecting helots—in the ruling class, the transgression and the law thus directly coincided. (Žižek 2006, p. 306)

In other words, Žižek’s example directly contradicts the possibility it has been adduced to illustrate. If we accept, as Žižek asks us, that Sparta “tried to mitigate” the tension of obscene power versus symbolic legitimacy, the result was a regime in which the tension was reflexively internalised, not transcended.

The “important lesson” of this extreme Spartan case, Žižek clarifies, is “that in it, the ‘truth’ about power as such comes to light: that it is an obscene excess (over the social body). That is to say ... the attempt to establish a ‘pure’ power necessarily reverts to its opposite, a power which has to relate to itself as an obscene excess.” (Žižek 2006, p. 307) It is understandable then why, when Žižek goes on to consider the possibility that what Lacanians might do in the ‘atonal world’ of late capitalism is to nominate some new Master signifier, he asks: ‘how, *structurally*, does this new Master differ from the previous, overthrown one (and its new fantasmatic support from the old one)?’ The ‘resigned conservative wisdom’ which sees all political revolutions as cases of ‘meet the new boss, same as the old boss’—to quote a classic rock song—seems the unavoidable inference. (Žižek 2006, p. 307) Less understandable is Žižek’s initial, seemingly redemptive framing

of ancient Sparta as one possible exemplar of a post-fantasmatic political regime. Does it indicate any kind of political sympathy, one which would align him with philosophers' perennial sympathy for the Spartans over classical Athens, from Plato and Xenophon through to Jean-Jacques Rousseau? There is one further reference to Sparta in Žižek's two most recent, theoretical works. It comes in the context of Žižek's brilliant reading of the *Hollywood* blockbuster on the heroic, suicidal Spartan campaign at Thermopylae, 300.

2.

Concerning Žižek's style, the thing one should do is to begin with the question of his reception. Does this reception not represent one instance of Lacan's formula for all true communication, in which the sender gets his true message back from the Other in an inverted form? Greg Harpham, in one of only few extended analyses of Žižek's style, claims an 'obscure disquiet' (Harpham, 2003, p. 454) has met Žižek's work in the English-speaking world. It is easier to diagnose a continuing fascination. The first thing that encounters readers of Žižek is the seeming novelty of Žižek's style. No one else writes books like Žižek. So while there have been few extended analyses of his style, it is obligatory in commentaries to begin with comments on Žižek's stylistic idiosyncrasy. Here for instance is Terry Eagleton on *The Parallax View*:

... the book remembers from time to time that it is about parallax, before instantly forgetting it again. What it is actually about can be summed up in one word: everything. Its author's wide-eyed intellectual carnivorousness is in a way more American than European. *The Parallax View* ranges from Kant to brain science, Derrida to the demilitarised zone in Korea, Sade to Star Wars. There are brilliant riffs on evil, Kierkegaard, God, seduction, anti-Semitism, quantum physics, Mrs Robinson from *The Graduate*, and a great deal more. It is a positive orgy of ideas. Like a man with a surfeit of intellectual testosterone, Žižek is unable to keep still for a moment, and his books leap around like a frisky adolescent. (Eagleton 2006, p. 1)

Sometimes, some itemising of the rhetorical tropes Žižek has made famous might follow: rhetorical questions (is this not ...? does this not?) which typically signal sudden paratactic changes of subject; bold, assertoric statements ('here one should...'; 'what one must do is ...'; 'here the thing to do is'); a taste for paradox, striking reversals of received common sense, and the predominant received wisdom on any given topic (so virtual reality is not virtual enough; ideological identification turns on species of disidentification; Abu Ghraib as not a betrayal of American culture, but its hidden truth; postmodern violence and

racism is not caused by the loss of a sense of reality in the media-saturated lifeworld of later capitalism, but by the over-proximity of the Real; it is not that the Other does not exist, as Cartesian philosophy leads us to wonder: the subject himself does not exist ...); a patented disregard for the distance between high and low culture; the sheer speed of Žižek's creations, whether between books, or within books, in the topics between which he splices and cuts; the frequent recourse to jokes and salacious humor; his effortless mastery of the most esoteric high theory; the ability to see Lacan or Hegel's *Logic* in everything from the idiotic bumbblings of George W. Bush to the calorific promises on your can of soup; then there is how Žižek's books do not conclude, so much as just end—to evoke one of Ernesto Laclau's 1989 formulations. (Laclau 1989, p. xii)

The idiosyncrasy of Žižek's style is answered by the idiosyncrasy in how he has been received. On one hand, Žižek has become an unlikely postmodern celebrity, in a way like few other intellectuals, outside of France. His books have been compared to websites: his paragraphs or sections like so many 'links' one can navigate one's way around as one pleases. So they are perfect for the neoliberal consumer, so proverbially rushed that we do not have the leisure to engage with works of extended argument and analysis. There has been a fan film about 'a day in the life', entitled *Žižek!*, with the exclamation mark in the original. There has been an art exhibition (entitled 'Slavoj Žižek does not exist,' after a central rubric from the master). Žižek has produced a line of T-shirts for Weblog Online Store (with paradoxical, edgy-sounding slogans like 'resistance is surrender'). Then there is *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, an entertaining three-part Channel 4 documentary of Žižek analysing his favourite Hollywood and European films. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has described Žižek as 'the Elvis of cultural theory'. Žižek's rascally persona, his thick Slovenian accent, his charismatic self-certainty, his ability to monologue about theory '24-7' ('discussing Hegel and Lacan is like breathing for Žižek'—Judith Butler), and his streetwise, shoot-from-the-hip charm has seen Žižek described as 'central casting's pick for the role of Eastern European intellectual.' His books' blurbs typically advertise his 'brio and boldness' [*The Fragile Absolute*], and repeat that 'he will entertain and offend, but never bore' [*Iraq: the Borrowed Kettle*]. Žižek's 'mixture of sage, clown, jester, and guru' (Eagleton 2006, p. 1) has made Žižek hot property on the trans-Atlantic academic lecture circuit.

Yet Žižek is a deeply anti-postmodernist thinker, in content if not in form. One real source of fascination about Žižek-reception (what we are tempted to call 'Žižekology' (cf. Žižek 2008, pp. 219-22)) is that Žižek typically derides the hegemonic new Left

sensibilities of elements of the Western humanities academy (principally in literary and cultural studies): being the unexamined assumptions that transgression, difference, becoming, change, anti-hegemony, minoritarianism ... are unequivocally positive, ethically, aesthetically, culturally, politically: anything. Žižek has taken to deriding this hegemonic currency as 'the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects'. (Žižek 2006, p. 11) Yet the more Žižek derides these suspects, the more he seems to be loved by them—whereas in other elements of Western academe, for example philosophy departments, his work is generally ignored.

Žižek's fighting opposition to the predominant intellectual fashions of his adoptive West has led to a further opposed, more or less openly dismissive ways of reading him. Perhaps Žižek is simply a reactive figure: a polemicist or gadfly only: a kind of postmodern Socrates or our Diogenes (the self-proclaimed 'angry Socrates'), but with a word processor and frequent fliers, not a barrel. Žižek is someone, the surest guide to whose positions is to take the accepted opinions on a topic and automatically turn them on their heads. 'Žižek has only to clap eyes on a position to feel the intolerable itch to deface it', says Terry Eagleton:

when heterodoxies become orthodox, Žižek can be seen dropping them like hot bricks. He needs the goads of awkwardness and antagonism to come alive. If there was now to be a mass conversion to his own case, he might jettison it immediately and argue that Scientology, dialectically understood, is the only true materialism.' (Eagleton 2006, p. 1)

Taking his lead from this type of observation, combined with the frenzied nature of Žižek's intellectual production, Denise Gigante claims to see in Žižek's work 'the vortex of madness' Žižek sees in Schelling's tortured God. (Gigante 1998) Underlying it, there is nothing or, in the language of German idealism so central to Žižek's work, pure negativity itself. The comparison with Socrates above then holds, in the sense Kierkegaard (a key reference for Žižek, from around 1999) saw in Socrates' patented philosophical irony:

...irony [is] the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony established nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.... Irony is a qualification of subjectivity. In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there. He is free from the constraint in which the given actuality holds the subject, but he is negatively free and as such is suspended, because there is nothing that holds him. But this very

freedom, this suspension, gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities.... This points to the historical turning point where subjectivity made its appearance for the first time, and with this we have come to Socrates.... For him, the whole given actuality had entirely lost its validity; he had become alien to the actuality of the whole substantial world. This is one side of irony, but on the other hand he used irony as he destroyed Greek culture. His conduct toward it was at all times ironic; he was ignorant and knew nothing but was continually seeking information from others; yet as he let the existing go on existing, it foundered. He kept on using this tactic until the very last, as was especially evident when he was accused. But his fervor in this service consumed him, and in the end irony overwhelmed; he became dizzy, and everything lost its reality. (cited at Storm 1996-2010, from Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, pp. 262 ff.).

More sceptical readers have not resisted the temptations of psychologising, fetishising, and sociologising forms of *ad hominem*. Žižek is an instance of someone ruined by success: the rigor of his work the first casualty of his own celebrity. No one serious can think and write as quickly and as much as Slavoj Žižek. Or Žižek is less a man than a 'phenomenon', a kind of theory-Thing, 'like punk rock or Hurricane Katrina'. (Eagleton 2006, p. 1; 2008, p. 2) Žižek's works are like his own self-analysis, in the language of theory, with we the readers as his posited Other. (La Berge 2007) Žižek has confessed to his own obsessional structure, and his resistance of analysis by Jacques-Alain Miller. (Boynton 1998) Perhaps here we should see a 'pathological' key to the aggression teeming beneath the surface of Žižek's wholesale dismissal of the contemporary West, the inauthenticity of its academics, the perversity of its popular culture and predominant form of subjectivity, and his often bitter responses to critics. (Valentine 2007) Žižek's hostility to Western academic niceties underlies his idiosyncratic failure to follow the ordinary rules of writing academic works. So his texts contain innumerable sins against historical reality, and the protocols of exegesis. (eg: Gilbert 2007, pp. 63-7; Johnson 2009, pp. 122-5; Kellogg 2007, pp. 9-13) As Hegel once said of Schelling, Žižek is conducting his own philosophical or political education in public.

3.

What then should one say concerning Žižek's politics, and its connection to his style? What in particular should we say concerning the relationship between Žižek's style and his political positions, which have received their most extended statement in *In Defence of Lost Causes*? Here one should resist the temptation to argue that the style is contingent to the substance of Žižek's position, as if one could make a few comments on the style,

before setting down to the 'real work' of isolating the true content.³ Does not Žižek himself repeat as a materialist dictum the claim that the truth is out there, in the surface of things, and the contortions of the surface of things, rather than in any hidden depths? (eg: Žižek 1997, pp. 3-7) The Lacanian unconscious, too, is 'out there'. There is no repression which does not engender the return of the repressed. Echoing an argumentative form perfected by Hegel and Heidegger as philosophers of finitude, Žižek again and again shows how features which we might be tempted to consider merely contingently related to a phenomenon are in truth necessary to it. This is one form of what are often described as Žižek's 'reversals' or paradoxes. Here is one example, which is also germane to the substance of what follows:

One should be careful not to throw out the baby with the dirty water—although one is tempted to turn this metaphor around, and claim that it is the liberal-democratic critique [of the totalitarian legacy] which wants to do this (say, throwing out the dirty water of terror, while retaining the pure baby of authentic socialist democracy), forgetting thereby that the water was originally pure, that all the dirt in it comes from the baby. (Žižek 2008, 7)

In the same way, one should surely be careful here to resist the temptation of writing off Žižek's 'writerly' style. (Laclau 1989, p. xii) We are tempted to go further here, and to venture the opposite hypothesis: what if the truth of Žižek's political ontology *is* the form of his texts? What if the humorous, aleatory appearance of these texts, the ultimate postmodern, relativistic and ludic documents, is the mode of appearance of something closer its opposite? What if the very contortions, exceptional moments and extreme provocations which liberal readers are tempted to dismiss or forgive in Žižek signal those propositions that he wants his 'us,' his 'one', to take most seriously? In the 'Preface' to *The Žižek Reader*, Žižek has commented concerning the user-friendly, humorous surface of his work:

Far from being simply misleading, this aspect of my work is a proper symbolic lure In contrast to the cliché of an academic writer beneath whose impassive style one can catch the glimpse of a so-called lively personality, I always perceived myself as the author books whose excessively and compulsively 'witty' texture serves as the envelope of a fundamental *coldness*, of a 'machinic' deployment of the line of thought which follows its path with utter *indifference* towards the pathology of so-called human considerations ... (Žižek 1999, p. viii)

Greg Harpham's 'Doing the Impossible: Slavoj Žižek and the End of Knowledge' is perhaps the only piece which, as far as we are aware, has dared to take seriously this

provocation. (Harpham 2003) What then is Harpham's contention concerning Žižek's style? Harpham's first move is to situate this style politically: in terms of Žižek's origins in the Communist bloc. Žižek's education was in a country wherein censorship and persecution were known political data. (In *IDLC*, Žižek talks of Article 153 in the ex-Yugoslav constitution which could always be appealed to imprison writers (Žižek 2008, 201-202) For this reason, he was unaware of—and perhaps disdainful of—the invisible protocols governing writing and scholarship in the liberal West. Then Harpham notes an idiosyncrasy in what we are tempted to term, in Lacanese, the logical temporality of Žižek's mode of argument. Ordinary scholarly protocol dictates the presentation of hypotheses, then the consideration of evidence, counter-evidence, claim and counter-claim. Then there is the conclusion:

Žižek's work by contrast seems to be formed almost entirely of endgames in which the sense of conclusion, with its payoffs and rewards, is almost always present. A sharply diminished experience of orderly progress is compensated for by the continual feeling of arrival and by the constant surprises afforded by an exceptionally rich and quirky use of examples ... the effect is that of a stream of non-consecutive units arranged in arbitrary sequences which solicit a sporadic and discontinuous attention ... (Harpham 2003, p. 455)

Echoing Laclau's comment concerning the absence of any conclusion in Žižek's endings, Harpham interestingly comments: 'even the earnest reader who begins at page one has the impression of having opened the book up somewhere in the middle. The sense of continuous middle is achieved by reducing the conventional middle to almost zero.' (Harpham 2003, p. 455) A universal impatience characterises the whole: so positions with which Žižek disagrees are always 'boring', 'typical', even 'tiresome', 'standard', while 'of course' 'what one should do' is agree with Žižek's counter-positions, which ignore or turn on their heads the unregenerately dull opponents'. The 'typical unit' of a Žižek text is between five and fifteen pages, wittily titled. It begins with a confident assertion of a principle and then proceeds to exemplifications, demonstrations, restatements: 'no sense of fairness attends the terminus and no invitation to further work by others is implied.' (Harpham 2003, p. 456) There is a politics to this style, Harpham contends. It is a politics which reflects Žižek's education in the closed society of socialist Yugoslavia. Žižek's impatience reflects the volatile military and political situation in the Yugoslavia of his youth and early adulthood; the sense of the truth being exactly opposed to what appears the case 'could be grasped as both a utopian leap out of Stalinism into an unmapped future ...'

However, it might also have a different political implication. This is as a 'totalitarian' residue, 'an emphatic habit of mind which was learned early as the preferred dialectical manner of refuting capitalist self-assertion.' (Harpham 2003, p. 456)

Adam Kirsch's 'The Deadly Jester' was published in response to *IDLC*. (Kirsch 2008) It argues a complimentary position to Harpham's concerning the politics of Žižek's style, in the context of a wider attack on Žižek's post-millennial, political works. Kirsch notes the growing frequency in Žižek's texts of strident anti-liberal statements. These statements, read anything like literally, indicate that Žižek has embraced some species of Stalinism or Left-fascism. (cf. Johnson 2009, pp. 123-5) Alongside provocative comments Žižek has made in interviews and public speaking engagements, Kirsch cites a veritable column of these extremely provocative lines: 'better the worst Stalinist terror than the most liberal capitalist democracy', Žižek writes in his intervention on the Iraq conflict; a baleful political terminus which means that 'everything is to be endorsed here, up to and including religious fanaticism' (also *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*); the way to fight the rise of racist hatred in the postmodern world 'is not through its immediate counterpart, ethnic tolerance; on the contrary, what we need is even more hatred, but proper political hatred', writes *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For*, concerning the 11 September terrorists, 'while they pursue what appear to us to be evil means, the very form of their activity meets the highest standards of the good' (from *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*) (all preceding citations from Kirsch 2008, p. 2); and, what Kirsch argues is most unforgivable, responding to critics who suggests that Žižek's advocacy of a revolutionary Act, without any ideal of social justice, means that his position has bid farewell to the progressive Left:

... to be clear and brutal to the end, there is a lesson to be learned from Hermann Goering's reply, in the early 1940s, to a fanatical Nazi who asked him why he protected a well-known Jew from deportation: 'In this city, we decide who is a Jew!' ... In this city, it is we who decide what is left, so we should simply ignore accusations of inconsistency. (Žižek 2008, p. 136)

Žižek clearly wishes to break the mould of what he often attacks in other contemporary theorists. This mould is a kind of *faux* radicalism which, he argues in a characteristic reversal, actually *sustains* fidelity to the liberal-capitalist order: 'this is how the establishment likes its 'subversive' theorists; harmless gadflies who sting us and thus awaken us to the inconsistencies and imperfections of our democratic enterprise--God forbid that they might take the project seriously and try to *live* it.' (Žižek 2008, pp. 106-7)

Propositions like those cited above, which we are multiplied in *IDLC*, would accord with Žižek's desire to try to *live*, or rather to *motivate* in others as their prophet, some kind of actual revolutionary practice.

Yet critics continue to see Žižek, again and again, as though he were just such a harmless gadfly or jester, as we saw above. Even *IDLC*, Žižek's by far most radical text, has been received as one more, wry prod at the conscience and apathy of the Left. Its blurb describes it as 'a witty, adrenalin-filled manifesto for universal values.' (at Kirsch 2008, p. 2) Terry Eagleton argues that, in contrast to the appearance of many of Žižek's most extreme statements, 'Žižek is by no means an advocate of political terror.' (Eagleton 2008, p. 3) In this edition of *IJZS*, Robert Sinnerbrink argues similarly that Žižek is to be read as keeping open the possibility—*some* possibility—of a real third way, between neoliberal globalization (with or without a social democratic 'human face') and religious fundamentalism, actually liberal-capitalism's necessary or inherent consequence. (Sinnerbrink 2010)

How does Kirsch account for this disparity between the way Žižek seems to want to be received, as the unarmed prophet of new modes and orders, and the continuing, disarming charity with which his provocations are received? Here is where Kirsch makes a new claim concerning Žižek's style. Kirsch argues that Žižek's omnipresent humor, including his own self-deprecations, his quick-fire illustrations of difficult philosophical and Lacanian concepts through popular movies, advertising and television series, has a wider function. This function stands in relation to Žižek's political project. The reason is that the humor and rush 'seems to signal a suspension of earnestness'. (Kirsch 2008, p. 2) Kirsch cites what he calls two 'laugh lines', Žižek's claim that Keanu Reeves' character in *The Matrix* is modelled on Wagner's Parsifal, and that *Jurassic Park* is a 'chamber drama' based on the trauma of paternity. Such examples, which we saw Žižek knows forms the principal reason for his popular profile, also frame his political statements: 'They relieve his reader with an expectation of comic hyperbole, and this expectation is then carried over to Žižek's political proclamations, which are certainly hyperbolic but not at all comic.' (Kirsch 2008, p. 2) One example illustrating Kirsch's claims is Terry Eagleton, usually the most urbanely sceptical of readers, concerning *Parallax View*: 'though there is less clowning in this book (which he evidently regards as his *magnum opus*) than in most of his work, it is at usual at times hard to know just how convinced he is of his own arguments. Asking whether he is sincere is like asking whether a juggler is sincere.' (Eagleton 2006, p. 2) Here, in the spirit of Žižek's *Parallax View*, we are tempted to propose the unheard-of

hypothesis that *both* Harpham/Kirsch *and* Eagleton/Sinnerbrink are right. To speak Hegelese or Žižekese, perhaps what one should do here is pass from the level of determinate reflection to reflexive determination, in this way learning to see in the divided reflection of Žižek's texts the veridical index of their own, divided, paratactic, layered surfaces.

4.

Umberto Eco's *Misreadings* is a study in the kind of intellectual *jeux d'esprit* which fascinate Žižek. (Eco 1993) It answers well to one description offered of Žižek's works, that of Wittgenstein's famous quip that a work of philosophy could be wholly written in jokes. What then is the key to these 'misreadings'? While it would be too quick to discern one principle operating in all of Eco's parries, it is possible to say that each of Eco's fifteen *Misreadings* play upon species of what psychoanalysis calls 'displacement'. In Eco's displacements, an accepted revered object of our cultural heritage is ripped out of its context, and of the way we standardly see it. Perhaps with no change to its content—or perhaps with a single reversal, as in 'Granita', a spoof on Nabakov's *Lolita* written from the perspective of the fugitive pursuer of a lascivious granny—the object is then re-presented in a new frame. So, in 'Fragments', we see fragments of the lyrics of popular songs from circa 1980 (like 'we live in a material world'; 'I'm singin' in the rain ...') through the eyes of a learned archaeologist from a future society, after 'the Explosion' destroyed our present civilisation (Eco 1993, 21-22); in 'Regretfully, We are Returning Your ...', we read letters of rejection offered to the *Pentateuch*, Dantes's *Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet* ...—as if these sacred works had been submitted to contemporary publishing houses. (Eco 1993, 33-46)

In Lacanese, one is tempted to argue that what Eco's 'misreadings' in each case draw our attention to is the difference between the ideal ego (the imaginary ideal point of a person's identification) and the ego ideal (their point of symbolic identification, that 'big Other' or perspective within which their ideal ego can appear as lovable or desirable). Typically, of course, the ego misrecognises or remains unaware of its own ego ideal, and the way that this symbolic frame, perspective or gaze (say, some paternal gaze in the case of female hysterics), actually shapes the person's own imaginary identifications (as flirtatious, vulnerable, etc.). Eco's art in *Misreadings* is to show how, when this ego ideal-frame is changed, even the most revered cultural objects appear very differently from we usually take them to be: is 'Singin' in the rain' perhaps a fertility song, associated with various rites? ('... the delicate words evoke the image of maidens in white veils dancing at

sowing time in some *pervigilium ...*' (Eco 1993, 21); or isn't the *Pentateuch* something of 'a monster omnibus. It seems to have something for everybody, but ends up appealing to nobody. And acquiring the rights from all those authors will mean big headaches, unless the editor takes care of that himself. The editor's name, by the way, doesn't appear anywhere on the manuscript, not even in the table of contents. Is there some reason for keeping his identity a secret?' (Eco 1993, p. 34)

Slavoj Žižek is of course the master of analysing the mechanisms and vicissitudes of such comic, revealing plays in everyday life and high culture. The central chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* contains perhaps his most extensive account of ideological interpellation. (Žižek 1989, pp. 87-129) Against that background, Žižek illustrates the distinction between ideal ego and ego ideal with an example worthy of *Misreadings* itself. Of Charles Dickens' famous, warm descriptions of the honesty, foibles, and charms of the poor folk of nineteenth century London, Žižek asks: from what perspective (or ego ideal) do the lower classes appear as so benign and lovable? Žižek's answer is unmistakably veridical: from the perspective of an external gaze, that of the benevolent, middle class author, out of heart with 'the corrupted world of power and money' (Žižek 1989, 107) who actually does not live amongst them. If we were to ask how a member of the lower classes themselves would present 'the good common people', we would have an effect not altogether dissimilar to that provoked by Eco's ingenious re-framings. That is, we would all of a sudden see a different side to Dickens' redemptive poor: one awake to all the vulgar features of the everyday life of the urban poor before the political organisation of the working classes, the cunning and cynicism necessary to survive, the petty rivalries, jealousies, and moral compromises, etc. (Žižek 1989, p. 107)

One of the most telling Ecoian *Misreadings* is the ninth chapter, 'The End is at Hand'. The piece reads like a kind of strange amalgam of all of the motifs of European *kulturpessimismus* from the radical Right and despairing Left of the last century: tropes appear from the Spenglerian narrative of the 'decline of the West'; the Adorno-Horkheimerian 'dialectic of enlightenment' and critique of the 'culture industry'; Heidegger's critique of *technik*; the standard reactionary critique of the shallowness of democratic mass culture and its 'mass men', its 'levelling' out of all high and rare things, its reduction of the high arts to spiritless formulae, playing to the lowest and most vulgar tastes, etc. The sting in the tale (pun intended), however, is that the ego ideal from which this critique is written is not a late twentieth century deracinated intellectual (references to suspiciously-named 'ancient' critics 'Adornos' and 'Bloomides' notwithstanding). 'The End is at Hand' is written

from the perspective of a classical Greek cultural critic, an out-of-heart contemporary of Plato and Xenophon:

'Heraclitus deposited the book in the temple of Artemis, and some way that he deliberately wrote it in obscure language so only those capable of reading it would approach it, and not in a lighter tone, which would expose him to the contempt of the crowd ...' [Diogenes Laertius] ... But Heraclitus is gone, and his book has been thrown open to all the savant monkeys who desire to approach it, writing reviews and footnotes. And his disciples know much more than he ever did. Which means that Heraclitus has been defeated by the mob, and, much to our sorrow, we witness today the triumph of mass-man ... (Eco 1993, 94)

And so it goes on. 'That crony Plato' (Eco 1993, 97) and Aristotle, Herodotus, Xenophon, and Thucydides, Aristophanes and the tragedians, Alcibiades and Pericles, reappear under the acerbic pen of this classical habitant of Hotel Abyss not as the august objects of high-cultural idealisation, but as the Johnny-come-lately harbingers of decadent, 'democratic Athens, [its] Philistine fondness for conversation, ... [its citizens'] satisfaction with the philosophic alibi that the Lyceum and the Peripatos kindly offer [every man] and with the noise in which he encloses himself ..., the 'distraction' that he has raised to the level of a religion.' (Eco 1993, p. 95) Here, that is, one cannot but be reminded of the Hegelian *bon mot* to which Slavoj Žižek often recurs: that the secrets of the Egyptians were secrets for the Egyptians themselves. The decadence of the modern liberal world, denounced by philosophers from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard through to Leo Strauss or Slavoj Žižek; a decadence with which one typically contrasts the nobility of the classical Greeks, Athenians or Spartans, politicians or philosophers, depending upon one's taste (cf. Strauss 1939, pp. 530-1 esp.); was already the decadence of the Greeks themselves. As with all objects of fantasy, as Lacan teaches us, our idealisation of the Greeks depends on our distance from them. Their sublimity for us is a function of our own subjective division, a *fantasm* that dissolves if we transport ourselves back into the ego-ideal or perspective of their contemporaries.

But here also we are tempted to go one step further. Perhaps here what one should do is to recall Hegel's famous motto that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk. Philosophy, even in Greece, of course appears only once the Periclean moment has passed, and Sparta's military ascendancy over the democratic imperial *polis* has become clear. But, following Eco's *Misreadings*, shouldn't one turn Hegel on his head? Shouldn't one also add that, from the perspective of the philosophical owl, the political and cultural life of democracies is permanently a dusk, if not a cave? So not only is Fukuyama in a way right (eg: Žižek

2008, 421), that today we live in the end of history: philosophically considered, history has been at its end, and our culture in decline, since shortly after the glorious defeat at Thermopylae.

5.

Perhaps the clearest exemplification of Lacan's distinction between ideal ego and ego ideal, and its relation to the politics of style, however, comes from Lacan himself. 'The style is the man himself', Jacques Lacan begins his *Écrits*: 'if we simply add to it: the man one addresses ...' (Lacan 2006, p. 3/9) The ego ideal is the addressee-Other of one's *écrits*. And how one writes is bound to be shaped primarily by who one takes oneself to be addressing, including what one takes it that they (are capable of) want(ing). Jean-Claude Milner, in *Oeuvre Claire*, makes an important analysis of Lacan's own fiercely difficult or esoteric writing style. Centrally, Milner compares Lacan's ways of speaking and writing to the practices of esotericism in the classical philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. (Milner 1995) Lacan turns on their heads the relations between speaking and writing operating in Plato and Aristotle. In these ancients, the spoken teaching was esoteric, restricted to initiates in the Academy and Lyceum. The writings we have, at least of Plato, are exoteric only (Aristotle's texts are in all likelihood transcripts from his lectures). In Lacan's case, the spoken seminars are comparatively exoteric, open to their auditors and readers of their transcriptions; while the *Écrits* are manifestly esoteric, condensing the results of Lacan's seminars in ways notoriously closed to almost all those who happen upon them. (Milner 1995, pp. 20-5) What Milner's analysis concerning the ancients misses however is the kind of reflexive redoubling of the exoteric-esoteric distinction in their writing practices. It was not simply that their writings were indeed exoteric, so that, in the words of Eco's Athenian's reactionary lament in 'The End is At Hand':

... the culture industry will offer Attic mass-man, if debate does not satisfy him, a wisdom even more immediate, diluted, moreover, in attractive digest, as his taste demands. And the master of that art is the above-mentioned Plato, who has a real gift for presenting the harshest truths of ancient philosophy in the most digestible form: dialogue. Plato doesn't hesitate to turn concepts into pleasant and superficial examples (the white horse and the black horse, the shadows in the cave, and so on). So what was deep (and what Heraclitus was careful not to bring to the light) is raised to the surface, up to the level of comprehension of the most idle listener. The final infamy ... (Eco 1993, 123)

The exoteric dialogues themselves arguably contain an esoteric dimension, carried in the

very literary tropes which make them seem open to the casual readers (in their action, setting, metaphors, examples, digressions, narrative outcomes, etc.)

In the twentieth century, the man (in)famous for rediscovering the esoteric dimension to the way premodern philosophers wrote is Leo Strauss. Strauss' 1948 *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, according to one of his best students, made him one of the most hated and ridiculed men in American academe. (Rosen 1987, p. 107) Yet Strauss' hypothesis, which he backs with manifold evidences, is based on a highly plausible sociological hypothesis. This is the hypothesis that, in closed, pre- or non-liberal societies where writers faced persecution—perhaps the fate of Socrates—for publishing heterodox opinions, writers who called into question received religious and political credos had to write layered texts. (Strauss 1988, pp. 22-6) There is a political reality that shapes authors' ways of writing: so that the distortions of linear or transparent forms of argumentation, at least in the works of the great minds, reflect the force of politics in the texts. As Slavoj Žižek cites Strauss' *On Tyranny* in his 'Introduction' to *Parallax View*, Strauss' open assessment of philosophers' politics, and their style, is this:

... philosophic politics consists in satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short that they are not irresponsible adventurers, but the best citizens. (Leo Strauss, at Žižek 2006, p. 7)

Yet, beneath this level of salutary accommodations to accepted opinions, philosophers would convey their true beliefs 'between the lines' to a few careful readers, particularly the young (the 'puppies of the race' (Strauss 1988, p. 36), if not 'gentlemen' and potential rulers. (Strauss 1965, p. 142) Strauss would later reflect that he devoted seven sentences in the title essay of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* to the means the philosophers used to convey esoteric meanings in exoteric texts. (Strauss 1954, p. 223) These include: contradictions concerning given topics in different parts of texts, contradictions of the implications of positions; use of ambiguous words, placing one's authentic; controversial beliefs in unlikely places (like the middle of essays, chapters, books, lists (eg: Strauss 1988, pp. 24, 185); in the mouths of seeming opponents (like the young Pericles in the Xenophon fragment we began by citing); in the mouths of disreputable characters (like clowns, fools, jesters, madmen (Strauss 1988, p. 36); repeating ideas with small, true but plausibly deniable omissions or additions; use of fables, allegories and metaphors; loaded selections of examples; availing oneself of 'the specific immunity of the commentator'

(Strauss 1945, p. 375 [19]; 1988, p. 13) and innocuous, orthodox sounding introductions and conclusions to books or chapters. Strauss' essays examine a series of other devices. (esp. Strauss 1988, pp. 27-9, 30-2) These include playing off positions with which the author disagrees against each other (so Spinoza for instance could play off sympathies of liberal theologians against orthodox theologians, when his lasting aim was to secure freedom to philosophise from all priestly control (Strauss 1954, pp. 225-6); attributing particular significances to numbers (so '26' and multiples means God, the new Prince, or the prophet as teacher of princes (eg: Strauss 1958, p. 52) and expressing heterodox opinions as if in passing, as premises in arguments whose conclusions (seem to) accord with accepted *doxa*. Then there is the art of qualifying one's most controversial opinions; by framing them in conditionals ('what if ...'), rhetorical questions ('is this not ...'), and qualifiers ('perhaps ...') All of these allow (they are designed to) allow plausible deniability. (Strauss 1988, p. 26)

To illustrate the hypothesis, Strauss uses the example of a writer in a (former) Communist country who wished to express contrary opinions, possibly to inspire resistance to the State, aware of the possibility of his persecution. (Strauss 1988, pp. 24-5) Žižek for example speaks in *IDLC* of the two-layered productions the composer Shostokovich was forced to produce under Stalinism. (Žižek 2008, p. 243) Parataxis, passing between ideas while leaving readers to fill in for themselves the hidden or suppressed premises or links is a further technique such a writer can be expected to deploy. (eg: Strauss 1958, p. 50) In Strauss' reading of the great Attic comedian Aristophanes, incidentally, the vulgar appearance of comedy (slander, gutter talk, levity in general ...)—and, differently, of Aristophanes' own rustic, 'back-to-the-spirit-of-Marathon' conservatism⁴—is held to be a properly symbolic⁴ lure whereby Aristophanes hides from all but his most serious audience his own more subversive, perhaps philosophic, intent. (Strauss 1989, pp. 110-2)

But why then was Strauss so hated for making this plausible—if unavoidably open to abuse and equivocation, he notes (Strauss 1954, p. 223; 1988, pp. 30-1)—interpretive wager? One reason seems to be that the esoteric teaching Strauss locates in the ancient philosophers attributes to them what he calls in *On Tyranny* a "tyrannical teaching". Strauss' immediate object in this controversial commentary is Xenophon's *Hiero*, whence the poet Simonides gives advice to the notorious tyrant Hiero as to how he can moderate and enable his lawless regime. Yet recurring to the *Memorabilia* book III, Strauss argues that, although Xenophon wisely positioned Simonides (not his hero Socrates) as his most

open friend to a tyrant (Strauss 2000, pp. 76-7):

Xenophon's Socrates makes it clear that there is only one sufficient title to rule: only knowledge, and not force and fraud or election, or, we may add, inheritance makes a man a king or a ruler. If this is the case, 'constitutional' rule, derived from elections in particular, is not essentially more legitimate than tyrannical rule, rule derived from force or fraud. Tyrannical rule as well as 'constitutional' rule will be legitimate to the extent to which the tyrant or the 'constitutional' rulers will listen to the counsels of him who 'speaks well' because he 'thinks well.' *At any rate, the rule of a tyrant who, after having come to power by means of force and fraud, or after having committed any number of crimes, listens to the suggestions of reasonable men, is essentially more legitimate than the rule of elected magistrates who refuse to listen to such suggestions, i.e. than the rule of elected magistrates as such.* (Strauss 2000, pp. 75-6 [our italics])

Such a theoretical teaching, incidentally, would explain the enigma of why Strauss himself increasingly practiced forms of esotericism, exactly *after* he arrived in the liberal United States in 1938, fleeing Nazi persecution. In this teaching concerning tyranny, the philosopher is positioned as ideally the teacher and advisor of tyrants, if not the philosopher-King himself. (Strauss 2000, p. 86) In this sense, the philosopher as law-founder is higher or more exalted even than the Prince. Strauss' own esoteric 1958 masterpiece *Thoughts on Machiavelli* argues at least that Niccolo Machiavelli was an unarmed prophet, a kind of political Columbus who discovered, or rather philosophically founded, the modern age ('new modes or orders'). (Strauss 1958, pp. 85-8) Xenophon himself, as readers of classical history know, was—despite his apparently hopelessly dull, moralistic prose in the *Memorabilia*⁵—very close to an irresponsible adventurer, a *xenos* whose close association with the Persians (he served Cyrus as a mercenary general) and admiration for the Spartans saw him exiled from Athens. (cf. Strauss 1972, p. 179; also Strauss 2000, pp. 96-9)⁶

Of course, one 'control' criteria Leo Strauss does place on the applicability of esoteric reading is that the author himself should have himself, at some point in his *oeuvre*, reflected on the need and practice of esotericism. (Strauss 1954, p. 224) Plato for instance attacks writing, for reasons Derrida has widely disseminated, in the *Phaedrus* (Derrida 1981 [1972]); as well as in the *Seventh Letter*—in which Plato's own ambivalent political career (including advising the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius) is the central theme. Here Plato suggests that 'no serious man' ever wrote down clearly and openly his deepest philosophical beliefs. (*7th Let.*, 344c) In the 'Introduction' to *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides lists seven species of deliberate contradictions the wise practice. He then

graciously points his reader to those types he himself is about to apply in the *Guide* itself. (Maimonides 1956, pp. 9-11) In his response to the critical essays collected in *The Truth of Žižek*, Slavoj Žižek has confessed to the following form of deceiving his audience, as a means of showing up the empty vacuity of Western cultural studies academics:

In the 'Introduction' to my book, *The Fright of Real Tears*, I invoke an experience of mine in order to exemplify the sad state of cultural studies today: "Some months ago, at an art round table, I was asked to comment on a painting I saw there for the first time. I did not have *any* idea about it, so I engaged in total bluff, which went on something like this: the frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame: there is another, invisible, frame, implied by the structure of the painting, the frame that enframes our perception of the painting, and these two frames do not overlap—there is an invisible gap separating the two ... to my surprise, this brief intervention was a huge success, and many following participants referred to the dimension of the between-the-two-frames, elevating it into a term. This very success made me sad, very sad ..." One hundred and fifty pages later, in the book [*Fright of Real Tears*]'s last chapter, I bring in the same example of 'between-the-two-frames', this time without irony, as a straight-forward theoretical concept ... even some of my friends missed the point—most of those who noted the repetition read it either as a self-parodic indication of how I do not take my own theories seriously, or as a sign of my growing senility ... (Žižek 2007, pp. 197-8)

Interestingly, the 'Introductions' to both *The Parallax View* (in which Žižek cites Leo Strauss, as above) and *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* contain evocative promises that all is not what it might seem in the long works that follow, which Žižek clearly does regard as amongst his most important works. In *PV* first: 'If, however, a resolute democrat-to-come manages to slip in [to read *PV*], he or she should be warned that a number of cruel traps have been set for her throughout the book.' (Žižek 2006, p. 11) Then there are closing remarks in the 'Introduction' of *IDLC*. We will conclude this section by citing them, as follows:

Although the present volume may often appear to indulge in excessively confrontational and 'provocative' statements (what today can be more 'provocative' than displaying even a minimal sympathy for or understanding of revolutionary terror?), it rather practices a displacement ...: where the truth is that I don't give a damn about my opponent, I say there is a slight misunderstanding; where what is at stake is a new theoretico-political shared field of struggle, it may appear that I am talking about academic friendships and alliances ... In such cases, it is up to the reader to unravel the clues which lie before her. (Žižek 2008, 8)

6.

Someone might object that if anyone were to seriously contend that Slavoj Žižek was indulging in esoteric writing *praxeis*, they would need above all to account for the following thing. In what (in Lacanese) we are tempted to call the purest instance of the transferenceal elevation of *le sujet suppose savoir*, Leo Strauss presupposes “logographic necessity” in the texts of the great philosophers (Strauss 1964, p. 53). This means that we must hold that every word, heading, subheading—even every blunder or contradiction—has been artfully placed by the author. (eg: Strauss 1988, p. 64) Yet Žižek’s work, and the very pace of its production, speaks against anything like any such attribution to Žižek. And would not the best way to present such a case be to present it in a way that ironically repeated these practices, shifting tack without marking this to all but attentive readers? Here indeed we are tempted to take things to the end, and to ask: has not Žižek made his own views concerning ‘liberal’ readers, they who ‘want revolution without revolution’ as much as coffee without caffeine (Žižek 2008, p. 163), clear enough in a number of works now (‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn!’ (Žižek 2008, p. 8)? In this spirit, one is tempted to say that those readers who try to ‘save’ Žižek from the conclusion that he stands in a long line of philosophers since Xenophon drawn to forms of military dictatorship *run the risk of betraying him*. In this spirit—and in what one is tempted to call in Hegelese a ‘coincidence of the opposites’—wouldn’t the thing to do here be instead to suppose that Žižek *demand*s a hostile, sceptical, even combative reception, one that takes his most extreme provocations as the most serious, and the ‘excessively and compulsively ‘witty’ texture’ of his writings as exoteric only, “cruel traps” set for the ‘democracy-to-come’, *café-lite*-subversive crowd?

Contradiction by implication: in *IDLC*, Žižek is drawn to respond to Yannis Stavrakakis’ charge that Žižek is in favour of “a progressive military dictatorship”. (Žižek 2008, p. 325) One possible implication of this charge is that Žižek *and Žižek alone* is drawn to such a progressive military dictatorship. If Žižek was so inclined, so that he wished (a) not directly to deny this controversial charge (since it is true) and (b) yet keep open some plausible ambivalence about his conviction (since it is so politically heterodox), one way to parry the charge would be to contradict its implication. As we all learn as children, if one is accused of some misdemeanour, one move available is to assert that, after all, one was not alone. Someone else, whom the accuser supposed innocent, was also guilty. Just so, Žižek in *IDLC*:

It is deeply symptomatic that Stavrakakis is silent about a key shift in Laclau's writings over the last few years: in his *Populist Reason*, Laclau clearly changed his position from 'radical democracy' to 'populism' ... when Stavrakakis criticises my claim that a 'progressive military dictatorship' can play a positive role, he is obviously not aware of my implicit reference to Laclau. (Žižek 2008, p. 325)

This is the end of a digression.

Enucleation: It is arguably symptomatic that defenders of *IDLC* as a kind of pomoSocratic provocation typically are drawn to appeal to statements at the opening and close of the book. It is in the *Apology of Socrates*, with his hero on trial for his life, that Plato instructs us concerning Socrates' ignorance: that Socrates' wisdom was only his knowing only how much he does not know; that he aimed only to be a gadfly to Athens' ethical laxity, etc. From time to time, Žižek repeats what reads like his own version of this formulation, with small variations. At *IDLC* page 384, for instance: 'Today, for example, the true antagonism is not between liberal multiculturalism and fundamentalism, but between the very field of their opposition and the excluded Third (radical emancipatory politics).' (Žižek 2008, p. 384) Žižek's aim is to keep that third way open: 'a third term is missing'. (Žižek 2008, p. 386) Page 6 of the 'Introduction' to *IDLC* is similar: 'the true aim of the 'defence of lost causes' is not to defend Stalinist terror and so on, but to make problematic the all-too-easy-liberal-democratic alternative.' (Žižek 2008, p. 6) His considerations of Maoism, the Jacobin Terror, and Stalinism do not indicate their authors' praise, taste, or admiration.⁷ They are the means for the Left to reshape itself, on terrain not chosen by the democratic-fundamentalist, liberal-capitalist opponent: 'the terrorist past has to be accepted even—or precisely because—it is critically rejected.' (Žižek 2008, p. 160) The final page of *IDLC* also lists 'the four moments of what [Alain] Badiou calls the 'eternal idea' of revolutionary-egalitarian Justice'. (Žižek 2008) By the rather forbidding-sounding '*strict egalitarian justice*', Žižek instructs us that he means only that one should be equitable in the demands on all nations facing greenhouse gas emission cuts; by 'terror' what is meant here is not the spectacular use of violence, including murder and targeted assassinations; but 'ruthless punishment of all who violate the imposed protective measures, inclusive of severe limitations on liberal 'freedoms', technological control of prospective law-breakers)', all acceptable enough to first world, left-liberal sympathies; by the again potentially ambiguous '*trust in the people*' he advocates he intends not delivering any empty mantra justifying extra-legal forms of rule; he means the 'wager' that the majority of people will support these measures on global climate change; and although this

'trust' will involve 'the reactivation of one of the figures of all egalitarian-revolutionary terrors, the 'informer' ...'; here again, one should not be fooled. Žižek does not mean agents hired by the State or Party to 'denounce the culprit to the authorities', but examples like the ethical, non-state 'insiders' who tipped off relevant authorities concerning the financial misdemeanours of *Enron*. (Žižek 2008, p. 461)

The Ecology of Slavoj Žižek: So Žižek's entire edifice in *IDLC* is apparently motivated by the ecological fate of the world of late capitalism. (Žižek 2008, 461) Certainly, Žižek provides the timeless Machiavellian, 'shock doctrine'-type advice that in general, crisis means 'a blessing in disguise' or political opportunity for those with sufficient *virtu* or voluntarism, whether Right or Left. (Žižek 2008, p. 275) The last chapter of *IDLC*, '*Unbehagen in der Natur*', nominates the ecological collapse as what Badiou would call an 'evental site', the potential crisis-lever to overthrow global capitalism. (Žižek 2008, p. 421; 461) Yet towards the centre of the chapter, Žižek's statements concerning ecology suggest a different sensibility, even an anti-ecological position. Not only does ecology represent a potential new 'opium for the masses' or religion-as-ideology (Žižek 2008, p. 441; 439). The ecological appreciation for the interconnectedness of the ecosystem is a *fantasm* in the strict Lacanian sense: nature as Žižek sees it is "a meaningless composite of multiples" (Žižek 2008, p. 444); the sublime landscapes of ecologists' sensibilities are more truly 'nature run amok, full of pathological cancerous protuberances' (Žižek 2008, p. 444). What "one should love", according to '*Unbehagen in der Natur*', is actually a Tarkovskian-style post-industrial wasteland, "including its grey decaying buildings and sulphurous smells ...' The reason is less ecological than political: 'all this stands for *history*, threatened with erasure by the post-historical First World and pre-historical [sic.] third world ..."(Žižek 2008, p. 451)

The Eternal Egalitarian Idea: Žižek frames *IDLC* by repeated reference to what he calls the 'Eternal Idea' of 'egalitarian-revolutionary politics', a double recourse to Plato and Alain Badiou, the latter to whom the book is dedicated. (eg: Žižek 2008, p. 401) The reader would expect that Žižek would then oppose species of inequality, such as that of a Nietzsche—who of course argued that philosophical esotericism was necessary consequence whenever authors believe in the fundamental *inequality* of readers, 'in short wherever one believed in an order of rank and *not* in equality and equal rights.' (Nietzsche 2003, p. 61 [#30])⁸ A belief in the virtue of equality, indeed in its fundamental truth, is arguably the minimal criterion for a position to be progressive or on the modern Left. Here is Žižek's conclusion to the *IDLC* Chapter 'Why Populism is Good Enough in Practice ...':

This is why egalitarianism itself should never be accepted at face value: the notion (and practice) of egalitarian justice, insofar as it is sustained by envy, relies on the inversion of the standard renunciation accomplished to benefit others: 'I am ready to renounce it, so that others will (also) not (be able to) have it!' Far from being opposed to the spirit of sacrifice, Evil is the very spirit of sacrifice itself, ready to ignore one's own wellbeing—if, through my sacrifice, I can deprive the Other of his *Jouissance* ... The distinction between fundamentalism and liberalism is sustained by a shared underlying feature: they are both permeated by the negative passion of resentment. (Žižek 2008, p. 333)

Repeating Heidegger: Chapter 6 of *IDLC* is Žižek's critique of forms of populism.

Populism is good enough in practice: unlike liberalism and species of radical or procedural democracy, it can fire people's political passions, and this at least or above all is what Žižek wants. (Žižek 2008, p. 267) Yet an elementary ignorance or 'refusal to understand' lies at its heart (Žižek 2008, p. 282): the desire to simplify things down to a simplistic 'point of decision', wherein the world is divided into friends and enemies. (Žižek 2008, p. 385) This is why, although Heidegger made the right step in 1933 by embracing fascism, according to *IDLC*, he chose wrongly, so his violence was not 'essential' enough. (Žižek 2008, p. 151) Fascism aims to prop up the fantasy of an organic *Gemeinschaft* (in Lacanese, some big Other). Populism always at its base 'harbors "in the last instance" a proto-fascist tendency' in this way. (Žižek 2008, p. 280) Yet Heidegger is a key figure in Žižek's closing case (see below) that we should move 'from fear to trembling' in *Unbehagen in der Natur*: "we must first call for someone capable of instilling terror in our *Dasein* again"... (The thing to note here is that Heidegger uses the word "terror" and not "anxiety"). (Žižek 2008, 431; cf. 431-2, 435, 447-450) In 'Why Populism is Good Enough in Practice ...', Žižek answers his own question as to what Europe's situation is today, with the following extended repetition of Heidegger's notorious 1935 lecture course *The Introduction to Metaphysics*. Repeating Heidegger in the contemporary setting, Žižek reels off several of the standard populist motifs of the inter-war radical European Right (cf. eg. McCormick 1997, pp. 95-108):

Europe today is caught between the great pincers of America on the one side, and China on the other: America and China, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the identical hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and the rootless organisation of the average man. When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technically and can be exploited economically: when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like: when, through TV 'live coverage', you can simultaneously 'experience' a battle in the Iraqi

desert and an opera performance in Beijing: when, in the global digital network, time is nothing but speed, instantaneity, and simultaneity: when a winner in a reality TCV show counts as the great man of the people: then, yes, still looming like a spectre over all this uproar are the questions: What is it for? Where are we going? What is to be done? (Žižek 2008, p. 274; see pp. 478-9, note 11)

As 'readers with even a minimal knowledge of Heidegger's politics will know (cf. Žižek 2008, 478, note 11), *Introduction to Metaphysics* is the 1935 lecture series containing the infamous quote concerning the 'inner truth and greatness' of National Socialism (Heidegger 1959 [1935], p. 199). Žižek endnotes his own deeply ambiguous gesture of repeating Heidegger. It is not signalled as such in-text.

Democracy is (not) democracy: Žižek's commitment to the egalitarian-revolutionary Idea places him on a continuum with the radical democratic political tradition with which his earlier work is usually associated. Democracy, rule of and by the people, implies some minimal commitment to egalitarianism, however conceived. Yet, following Badiou, and associating democracy with contemporary liberal-democracy, Žižek at several points indicates that faith in democracy today is the Enemy to be overcome: 'What, today, prevents the radical questioning of capitalism itself is precisely *the belief in the democratic form of the struggle against capitalism.*' (Žižek 2008, p. 183) At several points, Žižek recurs to a split between what we are tempted to call 'democracy in its becoming' (after Kierkegaard or Nietzsche), 'constituting democracy' (after Schmitt) or 'law-making democracy' (after Benjamin). This he opposes to 'constituted' or 'law-preserving democracy'. (eg: Žižek 2008, pp. 415-416) The latter is the administrative, procedural type of actually-existing electoral democracy to which Žižek is violently, or rather passionately, opposed. The former is what Žižek is unconditionally, or rather profoundly, attracted to. It involves the utopian moment of radical negativity, in which the old regime is overthrown and suddenly we confront an indefinite, open future, shorn of any 'big Other' defining what is possible and impossible, permitted and prohibited ('Nothing should be accepted as inviolable in this new re-foundation, neither the need for economic 'modernisation' nor the most sacred liberal and democratic fetishes' (Žižek 2008, p. 276); 'the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' names the zero-degree in which the difference between legitimate and illegitimate authority is suspended ...' (Žižek 2008, p. 416)

The problem is how to institutionalise this founding negativity and radical, degree-zero politics. Sometimes for Žižek, democracy in something like the forms we know it seems able of doing this; or else radical democracy in the tradition of thinkers like the

earlier Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, the earlier Žižek, and Yannis Stavrakakis. This is since it inscribes ‘the antagonistic logic of equivalences [between different political forces] ... into the very political system, as its basic structural feature.’; ‘Thus democracy, it seems, not only can include antagonism, it is the only political form that solicits and presupposes it, that *institutionalises* it’ (Žižek 2008, p. 283; 284; cf. 412-413)⁹

Yet Žižek also repeats the formula ‘democracy is terror’. He does so precisely as another answer to the question of ‘how to regulate/institutionalise the very violent egalitarian-democratic impulse, how to prevent it from being drowned in democracy in the second sense of the term (regulated procedure).’ (Žižek 2008, 417). ‘The harsh consequence to be accepted here is that the notion of egalitarian democracy over the democratic procedure can only ‘institutionalise’ itself in the guise of its opposite, as revolutionary *terror*. (Žižek 2008, 266, compare p. 175¹⁰) The fact that ‘totalitarianism’ ‘alienates “empirical people” [quotes in original] *from themselves*’, Žižek explains ‘of course in no way implies a simple plea for democracy and rejection of “totalitarianism”; there is, on the contrary, a moment of truth in “totalitarianism” ...’ (Žižek 2008, 370) This moment of truth relates to Žižek’s praise of Robespierre’s ‘Mastery’ in the full Hegelian sense: as ‘the figure of sovereignty, who is ready to risk everything’, acting alone, in the first-person singular (Žižek 2008, p. 168)—like, we are tempted to add, the Philosopher *per se*, whom Descartes once described as always *seul et dans les tenebres* (alone and in the shadows), in his heroic pursuit of higher Truths. (Strauss 1945, p. 410 [20])

Yet for nearly each of these extremely provocative statements, it is as if Žižek withdraws—sometimes more or less immediately—to a more familiar, radical-democratic sounding opposite. Consider the strong formulation ‘The Orwellian proposition ‘democracy is terror’ is thus democracy’s ‘infinite judgment’, its highest speculative identity’, which we read at *IDLC* page 417, towards the end of an eight page section with the unlikely title: ‘*Give the dictatorship of the proletariat a chance!*’ (Žižek 2008, p. 412) What immediately follows this remarkable terminus is over one page recounting familiar, exegetical claims concerning Claude Lefort’s account of democracy as involving an ‘empty place of power’ (Žižek 2008, pp. 417-8), then Jacques-Alain Miller’s Lacanian attempt to situate democracy as a signifier of the barred Other (Žižek 2008, p. 418). ‘It is easy to note’, Žižek concludes this subsection, ‘how from within this Kantian horizon of democracy the ‘terroristic’ aspect of democracy can only appear as its ‘totalitarian distortion; in other words, how, within this horizon, the line that separates the authentic democratic explosion of revolutionary terror from the totalitarian party-state regime ... is obliterated.’ (Žižek

2008, p. 418) We then pass, ‘against this background,’ to a one-paragraph critique of Jacques Ranciere’s political aesthetics. This culminates again in some claims concerning ‘the brutal imposition of a new order’, how ‘the more ‘authentic’ the rebellion, the more ‘terroristic’ is this institutionalisation’. (Žižek 2008, p. 419)

Good enough in theory: Žižek repeats several arguments to separate Left-terrorism from fascist-Right terrorism. ‘We’ do not experience the fascist disasters as betraying any utopian ideal. (Žižek 2008, 141) The fascist spectacle of revolution and terror was there to hide the continuing economic-capitalist social relations, whence Nazism ‘was not essential enough’. (Žižek 2008, 151) Again and again, Žižek recurs to the claim that not only fascism, but also Stalinism, Maoism, and populism each in different ways keep in place the negatively ‘fear-ful’—versus positively ‘terrifying’ (Žižek 2008, pp. 434-435)—(pre)supposition of a consistent Other: whether History, dialectical materialism, race theory and the *Volk*. One way to tell that a regime, like Stalinist Russia, had submitted to a fascist, populist logic is when it ceases talking of the ‘proletariat’—a category which presupposes the antagonism of which the proles form one pole—and talks instead of ‘the people’. Žižek argues this at *IDLC* pages 414-415. Talk of ‘the People’ preserves the arch-ideological fantasy of a unitary Other, whose finitude is caused by an ideologically/fantasmatically posed enemy-Other:

The people is inclusive, the proletariat is exclusive; the people fights intruders, parasites, those who abstract its full self-assertion, the proletariat fights a struggle which divides the people in its very core. The people wants to assert itself, the proletariat wants to abolish itself. (Žižek 2008, 415 [italics in original])

Here though what one should do is to repeat Žižek’s concluding argument in *IDLC* that ‘we should return to the four moments of what Badiou calls the ‘eternal Idea’ of revolutionary-egalitarian Justice’. Last ‘but not least’ of these moments is ‘all this combined with *trust in the people* ... a combination of terror and trust in the people.’ (Žižek 2008, 461)

7.

The visitor to Thermopylae today can still ascend the small mound where the last Spartan warriors perished, hopelessly overwhelmed by the invading Persian forces. On the wooded hill top, you will read a reproduction, on a square tablet, of the immortal words of the poet Simonides:

ἽΩ ξεῖν', ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῆδε
κείμεθα, τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι
['Stranger, go tell the Spartans that [here] dead
We lie, to their Laws obedient'].

Other legendary laconic sayings—the types for which the Spartans were renowned—surround this sublime, almost-kamikaze-style campaign (cf. Žižek 2008, p. 170). In it, 300 of the Spartan elite, with a small handful of Hellenes, marched to their certain deaths against the ten-thousand strong forces of the Persian King. Legend tells "*Μολών λαβέ*" ("Come and get them!") was King Leonides' answer to Xerxes' demand that the Greeks give up their weapons. The Persians are said to have warned the Spartans that their arrows would fall so thick upon them that they would block out the sun. 'Then we will fight them in the shadows', was the response of Dienekes, a Spartan Prince. The almost-ridiculous, suicidal bravado of such sayings reminds a contemporary reader of nothing so much as the kind of one-liners uttered between gritted teeth by *Hollywood* 'hard men' in the latest, high-budget blockbusters. As Eco's out of heart Hellenocritic already complained of Herodotus' pandering to mob taste in his reportage of Thermopylae in 'The End is at Hand':

And nowadays [mass-man] *can* know everything. You see what happened at Thermopylae. Only a day after the event a messenger brought the news, and someone had already thought to package it, simplifying and reducing it to an advertising slogan: 'Our arrows will hide the sun. Good! We will fight in the shade! The echolalic Herodotus had done his duty to that tyrant, the crowd with a hundred ears. (Eco 1993, 99)

One can also be reminded of sayings like those of the 'ultra-macho' heroes of graphic novels, or that which opens a Gothic DVD game to which Žižek refers in *IDLC*: 'Each Event is preceded by a prophecy. But without a Hero there is no Event'. Žižek sees the parallel between this 'obscure wisdom' and his friend Alain Badiou's formula: 'Only if there is a subject, can an Event occur within an evental site.' (Žižek 2008, p. 386)

So then: back to Žižek and Sparta. Does Žižek's strange use of the example of the Spartan caste society as a candidate for a non-fantasmatic political regime in *PV* (Žižek 2006, 306-307) indicate no larger sympathy with this closed, barracks society? The Thermopylae campaign has in fact been made into a Hollywood blockbuster, Zack Snyder's *300*. The film is based on a graphic novel telling Leonides' last stand. Žižek's analysis of the film in *IDLC* is the third reference of three in *PV* and *IDLC* to the

hierarchical, militaristic Spartan regime, a regime which left behind no great literature, art, architecture, or philosophy.¹¹ Žižek's *300*-analysis highlights the brilliance of his acumen as political film critic. When the film was set to appear in 2007, there were anxieties that the film's depiction of the heroic 'Western' Greeks fighting for their political freedom against the 'Eastern despotism' of the Persians would inflame passions in the 'war on terror'. Was *300* not a provocative affirmation of occidental arrogance in this context?:

Western racist investment in the battle of Thermopylae is evident: it was widely read as the first and decisive victory of the free West against the despotic East—no wonder Hitler and Goering compared the German defeat at Stalingrad in 1943 to Leonides' heroic death at Thermopylae. (Žižek 2008, 69)

Žižek adroitly turns these anxieties on their heads. If we do wish to superimpose the foes in the 'war on terror' onto the Thermopylae combatants, we see immediately that the America-led Empire has no right to identify with the heroic, ascetic, poor Spartans—desperate *cadres* from a small provincial backwater arrayed against a greatly militarily superior, vastly more wealthy superpower claiming the right to conquest. (Žižek 2008, 68) Even the way the Persians in Xerxes' train appear in the film, Žižek notes, inescapably remind the early twenty-first century urbanite viewer of nothing more than the clientele at the most exclusive clubs in our decadent metropolises:

And is not Xerxes' court not depicted as a kind of multiculturalist different-lifestyles paradise? Everyone participates in orgies there, different races, lesbians and gays, the handicapped, and so forth? (Žižek 2008, p. 69)

What then is Žižek's position concerning *300*, and the combatants it represents? It does not sit four-square with what his brilliant 180 degree turn around of the hegemonic reception of the film might lead us to expect. For all that, Žižek sees *300* as pointing towards the type of Hollywood Left he could identify with. (Žižek 2008, 68) Žižek's citation of Goering and Hitler in this context might alert us that there is something manifoldly ambiguous about a Western progressive political philosopher wanting to reclaim the heroic-self-sacrificing Spartan heritage as our own. Could such a regime approximate to the vision of a post-revolutionary regime in Žižek's prophecy, if only his texts might bring into being a Hero, a Leader (Žižek 2008, p. 378), or *cadres* with sufficient courage to force it upon the post-historical world? (cf. Žižek 2008, pp. 309-311; 314-316) 'But what about the apparent absurdity of the idea of dignity, freedom, and reason, sustained by extreme military discipline, including of the practice of discarding weak children?', Žižek asks,

registering this liberal anxiety. *IDLC* itself properly has the last word:

This “absurdity” is simply the price of freedom—freedom is not free as they put it in the film ... Spartan ruthless military discipline is not simply the external opposite of Athenian ‘liberal democracy,’ it is its inherent condition, it lays the foundation for it: the free subject of Reason can only emerge through ruthless self-discipline ... No wonder that all the eighteenth-century egalitarian radicals, from Rousseau to the Jacobins imagined republican France as the new Sparta: there is an emancipatory core to the Spartan spirit of military discipline which survives even when we subtract all the historical paraphernalia of Spartan class rule, ruthless exploitation of and terror over the slaves, and so forth—no wonder too that Trotsky himself called the Soviet Union in the difficult years of ‘war communism’ a ‘proletarian Sparta’. (Žižek 2008, 71)

- ¹ Translations in what follows all come from (Xenophon 1990).
- ² Hereafter, respectively *PV* and *IDLC*, in-text.
- ³ For one example of such an egregious error, see Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: a Little Piece of the Real* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2004).
- ⁴ Marathon was a great, unlikely victory won by the Athenians in the Persian wars, whence also the Spartan Thermopylae campaign. See section 7 below.
- ⁵ Notably, even someone as acute as Kierkegaard reads Xenophon in this way. He writes in *Concept of Irony*: “As a preliminary, we must recall that Xenophon had an objective (this is already a deficiency or an irksome redundancy)—namely, to show what a scandalous injustice it was for the Athenians to condemn Socrates to death. ...for Xenophon defends Socrates in such a way that he renders him not only innocent but also altogether innocuous—so much so that we wonder greatly about what kind of *daimon* must have bewitched the Athenians to such a degree that they were able to see more in him than in any other good-natured, garrulous, droll character who does neither good nor evil, does not stand in anyone’s way, and is so fervently well-intentioned toward the whole world if only it will listen to his slipshod nonsense (p. 15f.)” (at Storm 1996-2010).
- ⁶ On this basis B.G Niebuhr, reflecting ‘the now prevailing view of Xenophon’, has commented : ‘truly no state has ever expelled a more degenerate son than this Xenophon. Plato too was not a good citizen; he was not worthy of Athens, he has taken incomprehensible steps, he stands like a sinner against the saints, Thucydides and Demosthenes, but yet how altogether different from this old fool!’ Leo Strauss (Strauss 1972, p. 179) responds more charitably. He argues that the reason for Niebuhr’s unjust or unwise assessment reflects that Niebuhr was ‘himself a patriot who was insufficiently aware of the fact that ‘patriotism is not enough’ and hence that there are times and circumstances in which it is more noble to desert to the enemy and fight against one’s fatherland than to do what is ordinarily most noble.’
- ⁷ Žižek does indeed critique all of these forms of totalitarian or ‘totalitarian’ regimes. Each of them turned upon, or came to turn upon, a reliance on some unbarred big Other (p. 224); Stalin remained a humanist, whose recourse to Terror was an imp of perversity in which the revolution’s lost, voluntaristic or utopian kernel returned (pp. 250-252); Mao failed to understand the ‘negation of the negation’ in a sufficiently Hegelian or other manner (pp. 181-193) (which would have led him to see the need to completely change the forms of life of the Chinese (pp. 193-198), which is how Žižek explains Maoism’s recent accommodation, and acceleration, of Western capitalism; Stalin and Mao, unlike Robespierre, both refused to count themselves heroically in the terrors they unleashed, which would have made them ‘traditional Masters’ (Žižek 2008, 232—as against mere ‘Lord of Misrule’); thus relinquishing their fidelity to the Stalinist attempt to completely change the Russian forms of life and habits and the comparable task of the Cultural Revolution, which we should reattempt: ‘Try again. Fail again. Fail better’ (Žižek 2008, p. 210 [last words, Chapter 4: ‘Revolutionary Terror’]).
- ⁸ Nietzsche, never central for Lacan or in Žižek’s earlier works, has an unusually large place in *IDLC*. Žižek defends his radicalism against Wendy Brown (2008, pp. 102-107); cites him as the key to cipher Stalin’s ‘imoral ethics’, versus the ‘unethical morality’ of law-followers, ‘the target of Nietzsche’s critique of *ressentiment*’ (Žižek 2008, 224); and Nietzsche is given the last word in *IDLC* chapter 5, the central chapter (‘... in Nietzsche’s terms, it [Nazism] was a profoundly *re-active* phenomenon.’ (2008, p. 263) as well as the last words in Chapter 6, as cited in-text.
- ⁹ Compare Žižek’s ambiguous closure to the section ‘... but not good enough in theory’ (2008, pp. 276-285), besides *Parallax View* pp. 359-365, the section entitled boldly: ‘Over the Rainbow Coalition’. Žižek closes ‘... but not good enough in theory’: ‘A more general remark should be made about single-issue popular movements, for example, the ‘tax revolts’ in the US: although they function in a populist manner, mobilising the people around a demand which is not met by the democratic institutions, they do *not* seem to rely on a complex chain of equivalences but remain focused on one singular demand.’ (2006, pp. 384-385)
- ¹⁰ The following, from *IDLC*, p. 175 is (nearly) exactly repeated in the citation in-text: ‘The harsh consequence to be accepted here is that this excess of egalitarian democracy over and above the democratic procedure can only ‘institutionalise’ itself in the guise of its opposite, as revolutionary-*democratic* terror’. The italicised word is omitted in the repetition at p. 266.
- ¹¹ There are other philosophical traditions to the one we are criticising here, stemming from Plato and Xenophon. Compare Aristotle, *Politics*, criticising this tradition of philosophic *philotyrrannia*: “...and nearly of the same opinion with these are some persons who have written lately, who, by praising the Lacedaemonian state, show they approve of the intention of the legislator in making war and victory the end of his government. But how contrary to reason this is, is easily proved by argument, and has already been proved by facts (but as the generality of men desire to have an extensive command, that they may have everything desirable in the greater abundance; so Thibron and others who have written on that state seem to approve of their legislator for having procured them an extensive command by continually

ensuring them to all sorts of dangers and hardships): for it is evident, since the Lacedemonians have now no hope that the supreme power will be in their own hand, that neither are they happy nor was their legislator wise. This also is ridiculous, that while they preserved an obedience to their laws, and no one opposed their being governed by them, they lost the means of being honorable: but these people understand not rightly what sort of government it is which ought to reflect honor on the legislator; for a government of freemen is nobler than despotic power, and more consonant to virtue." (Pol. VII.2.1333b)

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