

Causes for Concern
Žižek's Politics of Loving Terror

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‘On 19 December 1916, just before Christmas in the last December of the Romanov empire, a corpse bobbed to the surface of the Malaya Nevka river in Petrograd; ice-encrusted with a mutilated face. But the most startling thing was its hands. Its bound hands were raised. For there under the icy water that extraordinary individual, although beaten and shot, had still been alive, had still been trying to break free of its fetters. And, as the police would later write in their report, great numbers of people hurried down to the river with flasks, jugs and buckets to ladle up the water in which the awful body had just been floating. They wanted to scoop up with the water the deceased's diabolical, improbable strength, of which all Russia had heard’ (Radzinsky, 2000: 1)

The corpse in question is, of course, none other than that of the holy terror, Grigory Rasputin. In his admirable biography, Radzinsky demonstrates the legendary charisma of Rasputin – a strange mix of charm and naiveté, asceticism and decadence, victim and miracle maker – and the power of fascination that he exercised over the Romanov court. Beyond this familiar picture, however, Radzinsky also suggests a deeper historical significance in respect of the gathering Bolshevik movement. In the same way that John the Baptist foreshadowed the coming of the true messenger, Christ, Rasputin may be seen as a kind of *force majeure* who created the space for a new sense of the possible and potentiality that would later be realized by Lenin. Indeed, for Kerensky, this was almost a common-sense observation: ‘without Rasputin there would have been no Lenin’ (cited in Radzinsky, 2000: 218). And it is perhaps no coincidence that, less than a year after the murder of Rasputin, the Tsarist regime was finally vanquished by revolutionary popular forces.

At one level, Rasputin acted as a catalyst for de-stabilizing the political edifice in forcing the issue of autocratic versus popular sovereignty. Against all attempts at Royal suppression, the parliament insisted on the right of the Russian press to publish articles detailing Rasputin's ‘mystical debauchery’ among the female aristocracy and thereby driving a wedge between the Duma and the Romanovs from which the latter would never recover. In Lacanian terms, these articles had the effect of disclosing the lack in the Other (Tsarist authority) and of undermining the proper Kantian distanciation between public duty and private enjoyment. Rasputin came to symbolise a certain obscene excess, a basic corruption, at the heart of the State. And it was as a result of the increasingly desperate attempts by the Romanovs to, as it were, digest their own excess – to restore the distance between public image and private *jouissance* – that Rasputin was to meet his gruesome end. Yet arguably Rasputin remained a popular figure precisely *because* of the excess he embodied and in such a way as to fuel a new kind of imagination: ‘if a mere peasant can rise to the exalted

levels of imperial status (and even sleep with royalty) then surely anything is possible'. Rasputin was living proof that the chain of fate could be broken and in this regard demonstrated Hegel's aphorism that the spirit is always a bone. From peasant to prophet, Rasputin had the capacity to be both and neither. Even his name bears witness to a strange re-doubling. Depending on the choice of name-root, Rasputin can mean either Spring or rascal.

It is in this aspect of excess that Rasputin exemplifies the human being as a paradoxical entity that is sustained by a 'more than human'. Rasputin's 'diabolical improbable strength of which all Russia had heard' reflected in the macabre figure of the corpse with hands raised in frozen heroic defiance, is a paradigmatic expression of the Freudian death drive. This death drive, which is not any kind of annulment or finality, is a constant impulse to break free of all forms of fettered existence and to transcend all forms of symbolic mortification. It is the unaccountable surplus that persists beyond both biological death and life. As Lacan put it, death drive is this 'will to create from zero, a will to begin again' (Lacan, 1992: 212). Death drive derives its surplus ballistic energy *ex nihilo*, as a negative impulse, from the originary fissure – the constitutive gap between being and void - and as such constantly re-inscribes the inhesion of existential negativity. What we see in the death drive is a particular ethical fidelity to the 'metonymy of our being' (Lacan, 1992: 321).

It is in this context that we find a certain resonance with Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes*. To some extent, Rasputin can be seen as a reflection of a lost cause: i.e. as someone who was from the beginning doomed (in a historical sense) but whose drive sought to transcend this condition. Everything depends here on perspective. Viewed from one angle, Rasputin appears as a figure who gravitated towards a 'space' that was already prepared for him. That is to say, he emerged as a symptom of the Tsarist imagination; as someone who confronted the Royal Court with its own decadence. In Žižekian terms, he functioned as the excess of the excess (or the decadence of decadence) whose power of fascination derived from the Romanov's own thirst for the Real – up to, and including, a thirst for self-destruction.

Yet viewed from a different angle, Rasputin can be seen as a figure that opened up an alternative kind of space in which it became possible to think the impossible. This resides not so much, or not only, in Rasputin's proto-Bolshevism (the fact that, via the tsarina, he tried to effect a fairer distribution of wealth and improve working conditions for the peasantry) but that his excess did not remain simply at the level of the carnivalesque (i.e. as a court distraction) but became something far more threatening; something which disturbed the matrix of Russian power. Here we might say that Rasputin also responded to a different kind of thirst for the Real. It is perhaps this which lay behind the rather grim communion of the water collectors at the site of his death. That is to say, what the collectors appeared to acknowledge, and sought to capture, was precisely that which in a Lacanian sense was in Rasputin more than Rasputin; not only defiance but perhaps, more strongly, the promise of a new beginning, a social miracle.

An abiding concern in Žižek's writings is with the social miracle and with staking out the space(s) for the miraculous within the contemporary world. Here the spatial does not designate a separate realm but the gaps and inconsistencies that are inherent to the power structures and through which the Real of the evental continues to shine

through. It is in this context that Žižek approaches the question of the lost causes. Such causes (of revolutionary universalism) are not lost in the sense of being somewhere else or in the past. Rather they reflect the failure (and potential) of existing forms of universality – the universal more than the universal. The communist spectre of Marx and Engels, for example, does not refer simply to a ghost of something departed. On the contrary, the spectre refers to the promise-spirit, or secret dream, born of capitalism itself: communism as a lifestyle that only the wealthy can afford.

Are social miracles possible in today's world? Can they even be imagined? If so, what would such miracles consist of and how might we connect with them in terms of developing a positive transfigurative politics? *In Defense* represents an exploration of these questions. It takes up the challenge of the 'struggling theories' of Marxism and psychoanalysis and confronts two central taboos of the modern age: economy and terror. Žižek's point is that the capitalist economy (like all economies) rely upon implicit and disavowed forms of terror; terror that is systematized, gentrified and even embraced as a way of identifying with, and of finding a place within, its horizon of possibility. Lenin had already observed that capital was fully capable of breaking with, and actually does break with, any historical fidelity it might have shared with particular states (Lenin, 1975: 76-77). Capital transcends all political formations and re-colonizes the colonizers as part of its global empire. Moreover, with the continuing rise of authoritarian Chinese capitalism (an Asiatic mode of capitalist production?) we can see how the standard view of a universal and triumphant amalgamation of liberal-democratic-capitalism is dissolving before our eyes.

According to Žižek, the crises of capitalism are beginning to reach apocalyptic proportions. The old 'solutions' of capitalism – colonization, domination of world markets, outsourcing of economic violence, exportation of poverty and so on – are becoming less and less effective. We are increasingly confronted with the excess of the excesses of capitalism. This is especially the case with the rise of international terrorism as a symptom of economic terror. Nor is this simply a matter of reflexivity along the lines of the risk society thesis. Rather it draws into focus the very logic of capitalist reflexivity itself: the ways in which capitalism paradigmatically addresses and engages with its own problems. What the present conjuncture is tending to bring about is a far more direct encounter with the drive-dynamics (or Hegelian spirit) of capitalism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way in which today's politics connects with the international economy. The global reach of capitalism and its attendant crises (*viz* the over-production of credit precipitating 'toxic debt' on a hitherto unknown scale) means that markets require increasing levels of political intervention in order to preserve their viability. Against the regulationist notions that the economy can, and should, be submitted to direct political manipulation, what we are witnessing today is precisely the opposite: the reduction of politics to a practice of global economic sustainability. Notwithstanding the diversity of antagonisms and all the sites of resistance, it is more and more the Saint Simonian nightmare of governance limited to the administration of things (market mechanisms) that is prevailing.

What then is a properly political intervention? What type of radical politics – political intervention beyond today's political interventions – is possible? Postmodern and postmarxist theory have tended to respond to these types of question by giving a

renewed emphasis to the themes of hegemony and radical subversion: emancipation involves essentially an acceptance of the existential nature of contingency and a celebration of the infinite play of democratic demands and articulations. The logic of the political is here seen to be always in excess of any body of politics. This distinction, between politics and the political, has taken on an increasing centrality in contemporary thought and is associated chiefly with the work of Lefort. For him the term politics – conceived as a particular level of the social whole (administrative complex, the sphere of decision-making, governance, elections and so on) - needs to be distinguished from the more radical idea of the political (*le politique*) as the moment(s) of rupture and contestation in which the very organising principles of the social whole are drawn into question. The political is not a demarcated level but rather a dimension (if only in potential) of every form of human endeavour wherein holism is undermined, subverted and rendered undecidable/historical.

But is this distinction so clear cut? Badiou, for example, argues convincingly that what is called the political cannot be universalised or resolved philosophically in a once-and-for-all manner (Badiou, 2006). The political, in this regard, is always bound by *a* politics (Badiou, 2006: 16-25). Moreover Lefort's characterisation of politics (*la politique*) as essentially a formal-spatial realm is arguably too simplistic. As was familiar to Hegel, the state does not exist in its own positive terms but is always accompanied by an inherent Otherness and negativity with which it seeks to engage in order to (re-)produce itself. Politics, in this sense, strives to recognise and mediate its own failures and forms of subversion. The distinction Lefort makes between politics and the political becomes consequently more blurred. There exists rather an ongoing interweaving of the two moments (of politics and the political), in characteristic fashion, within the terms of a broader configuration which we might call the historical mode of politics.

In this context, the logics of subversion are essentially ambiguous. What appears, on the surface, as contestation and challenge against a social totality may in reality become caught up in the latter and actually serve to reinforce and stabilise it: e.g. democratic subversion as an outlet for protest and good conscience but which implicitly accepts, and legitimises, the rules/grammar of political encounter. In order to reach the dimension of politics proper, the more radical question is whether forms of subversion can be developed that are capable of subverting the very logics of existing subversion.¹ This is a pressing task for today's left, and one which Žižek continues to undertake.

Totalitarian Democracy

A commonplace today is that democracy comprises a unique historical configuration which is able to contemplate its own contingency and to thereby assign a proper materialist dignity to the dimension of the political. Democracy contains the promise of a new form of engagement in which political subjects acknowledge hegemony as a basic existential and demonstrate an awareness of their historical limitations and the provisional and partial basis of their interventions. In this way hegemony and the political are presented as categories that are reaching their full maturation in the context of the logics of contemporary democracy.

Yet for Žižek it is more or less the opposite that pertains: the ascendance of the hegemonic form of politics is one in which the materialist force of the political is itself becoming more and more displaced and domesticated. A key reference here is Hegel. In postmodern and postmarxist thought, a distinction is made typically between necessity and contingency, where hegemony and the political are viewed as allied to the latter. As Žižek points out, this distinction is, from a Hegelian perspective, considerably overdrawn (e.g. Žižek, 1999: 98-103; Žižek in Butler *et al*, 2000: 227; Žižek, 2006: 75-76). For Hegel the point is rather to see how necessity develops (retroactively) in the very midst of contingency; or, to put it in the opposing register, how contingency itself is always experienced as a circumscribed or 'systematic contingency' (see Burbidge, 2007). In other words, what is overlooked is an account of the speculative dimension of spirit: i.e. the continually unfolding historical attempts to realise a rational consistency vis-à-vis lived existence. Spirit is something that marks the supernatural and contingent character of our engagement with the world. Spirit does not refer to anything outside itself but is entirely self-positing with the sole purpose of attempting to produce and actualize its consciousness in objective terms: to disclose and reify the fundamental principles and character of our engagement with the world.

In this sense Hegel can be seen to add a third element, a kind of negation of the negation. In classical democracy there is the positing of democracy as a communitarian ideal (an elite polis). With modern democracy there is a progressive rejection of this ideal and a new emphasis on contingency and the autonomy of politics. Finally there emerges an Hegelian auto-reflective dimension of democracy: something that refines the paradigmatic quality of democratisation with its own non-ideal/Othering and thereby underscores its constitutive limits. From this viewpoint, democracy (even radical democracy) should not be thought of as simply liberating 'the political' as such, but rather as something that gives rise to a specific historical spirit of the political. In the terms of Luhmann, the political becomes part of the autopoietic and 'necessitarian' development of the systemic whole. The liberal-capitalist-democratic imagination and its attempts to realise a world order, for example, shows how the dominant paradigm is speculatively engaging with its inherent Othering and trying to take its own dissonances and counter-forces into account. Thus the 'contingent' antagonisms of terrorism, civilization clashes and so on, are presented as the ongoing birth pangs in the inevitable development of a global system. It is precisely this necessity that is reflected in George Bush's view that freedom and democracy are 'God's gift to humanity' (the dispensing of which falls, of course, to America – God's ultimate witness).

It is against this background that we should reintroduce the notion of totality. From an Hegelian perspective, a totality functions less as a straightforward closure and more as a characteristic form of movement-processing that gives rise to a specific mode of engagement with Otherness. Totalities emerge (retroactively) precisely when their own subversions come to be naturalised and when there is implicit acceptance as to the ways in which the gaps and inconsistencies should be addressed and resolved. A totality draws its strength not so much from the positive articulation of its elements but rather from its capacity to harness and direct its own failures. In this way, subversion itself becomes drawn into a totality's dynamic and starts to function as a (disavowed) technique in its economy of 'necessity'. Following Hegel, the question of necessity is not so much *whether* it exists but rather *how* is it produced in concrete

terms? Yet here it could be argued that Hegel's thought reaches a certain limit. That is to say, what is overlooked is the way in which the production of necessity (world spirit) ceases to be a means to an end but becomes an end in itself: an economy of avoiding full disclosure in order to sustain the economy as such. The name which psychoanalysis gives to this economy is, of course, drive in which the pulsional energies circulate, and result from, a central void in the order of being. The (by-) product here is the elusive, and constantly recycled, *jouissance*. In drive what is enjoyed is the void-as-object (*objet a*). In other words, the object of drive – its true *aim* (as opposed to contingent goals: the realisation of particular ambitions etc.) – is the continuation of itself. The transcendental (Real) character of drive-jouissance renders it indifferent to all finitude, and lays at the base of the endemic human capacity for counter-rationalist activity up to, and including, self-destruction – in all drive there is the promise of a new beginning.

In order to function, a signifying totality requires an imaginary point of liquefaction (S1) that is beyond it. As Žižek argues, this means that a Master-Signifier is something that represents the void for all signifiers and which shows the impossibility of representation as such (Žižek, 2002: 27). The S1 marks an irresolvable gap between the symbolic and the void which it tries to finesse by alluding to a Thing of enjoyment ('My Country!'), and the more it refers to itself the more it fails to represent it as such. In this way, the jouissance-Thing acts not only as a stand-in for the void but also as the object-cause for the signifying totality.

The distinction between the object and the object-cause of desire can be illustrated in the context of today's charity-driven approach to global ethics. The object of desire is essentially the liberal model of Society (e.g. Rorty's 'liberal utopia') where suffering is alleviated and individual opportunity maximized. The object-cause of desire, however, operates more at the level of an organicist conception of Civilization: i.e. the elevated, and inaccessible, sense of a Western 'us' that would give a global society its paradigmatic, libidinally invested, form. This fantasmatic economy is sutured at the level of gaze. A basic scheme in many charities is that of 'adoption' (adopt a child/orphan/granny etc.). In return for donations, regular feedback is provided from the beneficiaries – progress reports, photographs, letters... Effectively what we have is a reification of how the Other perceives 'us' (the donators) as elevated benefactors. The suture is effected in this way of staging the gaze of the Other in such a way that our own gaze is returned to us. As one charity puts it, 'you get to see and feel the difference your support makes, through the eyes of your sponsored child and their regular letters and photographs' ([www. worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org)). Thus what is suturing is the very fantasy about the Other's fantasy. It is here that our special stuff (*a*) – the x (or, extra) factor that is projected into the gaze of the Other – is found and made palpable.

There exists no simple division between (interior) objectivity and (exterior) Otherness. By zooming out, as it were, what we see is a speculative totality that attempts to traverse this division and to articulate both sides as inherent (spectral) dimensions within itself. A crucial contribution of psychoanalysis has been to show how such a totality is (retroactively) given 'foundations' through the mechanism of suture: that is to say, a reflexive fantasy that frames the way the Other sees 'us' as the authentic bearer of *jouissance* and who is consequently motivated to possess, thwart, destroy and/or be part of the latter.

Democracy and Ideology

Traditional liberalism was committed to a rationalistic free-market orthodoxy in whose name it was prepared to undertake extreme and highly authoritarian measures (viz. colonization). With today's postmodern liberal democracy, however, the emphasis is far more on recognising difference and Otherness. On this basis, neo-liberal organisations such as the Adam Smith and Cato institutes, among others, are wide of the mark in denouncing initiatives such as Fair-Trade, drop-the-debt, 'eco-radicalism' and so on, for disturbing the normal running of the free-market. The point is rather to see how these initiatives can develop in such a way that they serve as a *supplement* to the latter. As Paul Hawken, the inventor of 'natural capitalism', and a model of postmodern-progressive liberalism, puts it:

'Ironically, organizations like Earth First!, Rainforest Action Network, and Greenpeace have now become the real capitalists. By addressing such issues as greenhouse gases, chemical contamination, and the loss of fisheries, wildlife corridors, and primary forests, they are doing more to preserve a viable business future than are all the chambers of commerce put together.' (Hawken, 1997: 15)

This view is explored more fully in his latest book, *Blessed Unrest* (2007). The central assertion is that our age is marked by the spontaneous and ongoing development of a new movement in response to the excesses of modernity and capitalism. This movement is not centralised or hierarchical but informal and rhizomatic in character and revolves around three central themes: the environment, human rights and social justice. It is 'nonideological', 'eminently pragmatic' and comprises essentially 'that part of humanity which has assumed the task of protecting and saving itself' (Hawken, 2007: 18 & 141). One might, of course, respond by asking which ideology does not see itself, in some way, as involved in saving humanity?

Yet, for Hawken, this movement is distinguished in that it has no utopian vision and 'doesn't attempt to disprove capitalism, globalization or religious fundamentalism'. Rather it 'tries to make sense of what it discovers in forests, favelas, farms...' and is ultimately a reflection of 'humanity's immune response to toxins like political corruption, economic disease, and ecological degradations' (Hawken, 2007: 141-142). The resistance-threat of the movement is directed more towards practices than principles as such:

'The stereotype of civil society is groups resisting corporations, and that is true as outlined in previous chapters. What is also true, however, is that nonprofit groups have formed productive relationships with corporations to help them develop in more benign ways.' (2007: 181)

At play here is a kind of makeover discourse. As an agent of the big Other, this 'unnamed movement' acts not only as the custodian of humanity but as a conveyor of ancient and practical wisdom/know-how whose expertise needs to be properly sourced and applied in order to achieve a harmonious reconciliation between our socio-economic and ecological systems. In other words, it is a movement that acts on behalf of the dominant paradigm and seeks critically to reinforce it. This is where the Hegelian form of the liberal-capitalist totality is reached proper: i.e. through an engagement with its own subversion and negativity. A totality is not defined simply in

relation to what it excludes as threat-negativity but rather through symbolizing, and making sense of, this very division within itself - it succeeds through the constitutive recognition of its failures and through providing a certain grammar for its transformation. Put differently, a totality is at its strongest when it is able to circumscribe the very terms of its own subversion. It becomes an anonymous horizon that defines the possible and the necessary.

This allows for a more nuanced approach to the question of ideology and closure. In Laclau (1996) the ideological illusion subsists in the idea of extra-discursive closure. More especially the ideological operation is one of attempting to attribute the impossible role of closure to a particular content: that is, the belief in a specific 'social arrangement which can bring about the closure and transparency of the community' (Laclau, 1996: 206). Closure cannot be fully achieved; it can only be incarnated through the equivalential deformation of the elements making up a discursive field (e.g. the concatenation of 'democracy', 'freedom of the press', 'civilization' and so on).

By contrast, Žižek argues that the ideological does not simply comprise the belief in a specific closure but connotes the broader and more complex configuration of a fantasmatic economy that supports such a belief (Žižek in Žižek & Daly, 2004: 70-79). Paradoxically, the issue is not so much closure but how ideology maintains a certain *non-closure*; how it regulates a vital distance with the Thing of closure (see also Daly, 1999: 234); how it inscribes non-closure within itself. Ideology sustains in critical tension precisely this gap and is rooted in a kind of libidinal clause of non-realizability – the drive in service of itself. Thus it is not so much the 'grip of ideology', as Glynos (2001) puts it, but rather the *ideologisation of grip*. The ideological subject derives a perverse satisfaction from being in the very grip of something that cannot, or should not, be approached too closely. As with courtly love, it is something that must remain de-reified and beyond tangible reach in order to maintain its libidinal spell. This is how today's notion of a New World Order tends to function: i.e. as a Thing of fantasy whose payoff relies upon not being engaged directly. In order to avoid the pain of real transformation (power-sharing, the eradication of poverty, the development of equality and liberty in a meaningful sense etc.), the NWO is something that should not be realised - 'Of course this is our ultimate (impossible) objective but at present we need to deal with reality...'

This represents something of an inversion of Laclau's schema. Thus the ideological operation consists not so much in attributing (impossible) closure to a particular content, but rather in making a particular content appear impossible as a way of avoiding any direct encounter with it. In this way it seeks to sustain fantasmatically what is disavowed at the level of actualisation. It is through such regulated non-closure that the ideological reproduces itself. The distinction between ideology, as extra-discursive closure, and the political, as the moment of openness/contingency, is not clear-cut. While ideology produces and conjures with its own non-closure, the logic of the political is not innocent of its generative conditions and can function to bring about *de facto* closure. This is one of the problems with contemporary democratic discourse. That is to say, what is overlooked is the way in which the very emphasis on the 'empty place', contingency and reactivating the political can become its most insidious ideological aspect. Along the lines of a smoker who boasts that s/he could give up any time they want, democratic ideology is one that reproduces the

fantasy that it can submit everything (including global economic activity) to conscious political control and that we could change if we *really* wanted to.

Here we might say that democratic discourse presents us with the ultimate makeover fantasy. Where there is marginalisation there is the possibility of mobilisation (drawing upon the appropriate resources, expertise etc.). Through standard references to widening antagonisms and increasing numbers of social movements, resistance appears as something that is already contained within democracy and its declared potential for infinite adaptability. The failures of democracy are taken as indicators of its success and the themes of impossibility, undecidability and so on, become part of the mythic appeal of democracy as a kind of systematicity without a system. It feeds off itself precisely in a self-positing way. If there is no credible alternative ('all the others are worse', as Churchill put it) then democracy and humanity are seen to comprise a single destiny as parts of a naturalistic state of affairs. In a more pervasive way than any totalitarianism, closure can be achieved through the very culture of democratic openness.

Democracy as De-politicized Radicalism

What's class got to do with it?

In his debate with Laclau and Butler, Žižek draws attention to how today's culture of radicalism gives rise to a basic impasse:

'either we must blind ourselves to the necessary ultimate failure of our endeavour – regress to naivety, and let ourselves be caught up in the enthusiasm – or we must adopt a stance of cynical distance, participating in the game while being fully aware that the result will be disappointing?' (Žižek in Butler *et al*, 2000: 316-317).

In Defense can be seen as a full-blooded attempt to transcend, or perhaps break out of, this impasse. In this undertaking, Žižek addresses the ways in which the contemporary left imaginary is increasingly combined with the themes of multi-culturalism and radical democracy. The issue of liberal democracy is central. For radical democrats, the main priority is to deepen and sharpen the principles of the liberal-democratic imagination as a way of taking on not only capitalist repression but anti-democratic power structures in general. Žižek takes the opposite view, arguing that we should resist such an imagination precisely on the grounds that it tends to reproduce a neutralist, or *de facto*, end of history with infinite potential; a kind of last conceptual revolution for the last (democratic) men and women. The problem is that in seeking to inscribe historicity, the radicalisation of liberal-democracy becomes forgetful of its own position within the historical conjuncture.

From a Žižekian viewpoint, one of the problems with radical democracy is that it does not provide a systematic account of today's symptoms: i.e. of those who are in a position to hold up the mirror to cosmopolitan capitalism. In arguing for equivalences to be established between all disaffected groups within the terms of the democratic imaginary, the propensity exists for radical democracy to become removed from the more basic and constitutive forms of exclusion and to become increasingly entangled in endless cycles of socio-political networking. On that basis political subjectivity

would become prone to hyper-activity - endlessly fascinated by its own positions, continually refining itself and so forth - but incapable of *acting* as such. So the danger exists that radical democracy could devolve into a rather empty proceduralism: regulating the provisional character of all political engagement, repeatedly marking the empty place of the universal, always reinforcing its own prohibition concerning the privileging of one democratic struggle over another and so on. In addition, the reticence over prioritising certain political struggles and identifying concrete objectives – other than a general flourishing of democratic culture – arguably renders this perspective aloof and somewhat ‘beautiful soul’ in outlook. The radical democratic process of articulating chains of equivalence could become an end-in-itself – a process of enchainment with little real (or Real) political momentum. As in Coleridge’s famous characterisation of Hamlet, there is a problem of continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve.

This hyperactive inactivity is increasingly a feature of our culture. The website *Facebook*, for example, operates a kind of self-driving centrifuge. People sign up to it because others are already signed up; it thereby becomes a medium for communication, self-expression, flirtation, competition and so on. More than a mere cyber diary, *Facebook* becomes the means for playing out one’s life in the collective eye – accumulating more and more friends, joining more and more (often eccentric) groups, recording thoughts and observations in real time and so on. Facebook provides a space for expressing life’s rich tapestry of differences *in the same way*. This certainly does not mean that we should reject cyber-space as a potential site of resistance – indeed it is through the sharing of music, information, technology, supplies of every kind in cyber-space that a new sense of ‘the commons’ might be reinvented. The point is rather that we should be alive to the ways in which participation can be manipulated towards particular outcomes. With *Facebook* there has been a rapid increase in commercialisation and there are plans to introduce fees. Moreover, if the level of participation for person x is not deemed to be satisfactory then *Facebook* informs their contacts that ‘x is only 42% active’ and advise the contacts that they should write something on x’s wall, suggest friends for them, write them an email and so on. This implicit injunction to participate in an inconsequential manner is inscribed further in today’s ‘ethical’ forms of consumption. Not only should we buy appropriate Green/Fair Trade goods, but increasingly there is the expectation that the act of purchasing should simultaneously involve charity (online donations, supermarket tokens to express your preferred charitable organisation etc.). In this way consumption and ethical participation become symbiotic aspects of today’s collective conscience.

This also applies to democracy and its central showpiece, elections. With increasing levels of apathy and non-voting, there is a real risk that elections will become reduced to the status of an irrelevant sham and, more importantly, that the mythical hold of democracy will start to disintegrate. It is in this context that we can understand the growing authoritarian tendency in democracies, across the globe, to embrace various forms of compulsory voting. On the one hand, this can be seen as a way of attempting to neutralize populist excesses (especially in Latin America where compulsory voting is widespread) by eradicating the distinction between demos (conceived as voters) and the people. On the other hand, it can be seen as something which gives a nightmarish twist to the Rousseauian idea of forcing people to be free: that is to say, compulsory voting (forcing people to participate in political freedom) becomes a way of trying to

prevent people from directing their critical energies in more challenging and subversive directions.. As with the myth of market freedom, the contemporary myth of democratic freedom is something which is beginning to require more and more political intervention to sustain it. Today's political weapon of collective discipline is not so much the Foucauldian one (on a straightforward reading) of state prohibition/repression but precisely participation. It is (acceptable) participatory critique and subversion that sustains the dynamic life of a totality.

It is in this context that we can make sense of Žižek's reference to the Melville character, Bartleby, and his 'I would prefer not to'. Thus what is being affirmed is a *strategic* form of non-intervention and a refusal to participate in what Žižek calls the '*rumspringa* of resistance': that is, a refusal of 'all the forms of resisting which help the system to reproduce itself by ensuring our participation in it' (Žižek, 2006: 381-385). The problem is not so much direct participation in the system but rather the implicit forms of participation in the hegemonic practices and rituals that are *expected* of contemporary democratic-multiculturalist left resistance: it is *this* type of resistance (resistance-as-surrender) that needs to be resisted. So what needs to be developed is a kind of aggressive-passivity along the lines of "I would prefer not to give to charity to support a Black orphan in Africa, engage in the struggle to prevent oil-drilling in a wildlife swamp, send books to educate our liberal-feminist-spirited women in Afghanistan" (Žižek, 2006: 383).

And here I think that Stavrakakis misses his target when he criticises Žižek for arguing the case for political withdrawal: '(s)urely "to do nothing" does not make sense as a remedy against those who supposedly argue that "nothing should happen"' (Stavrakakis, 2007: 133). Žižek's argument needs to be read in terms of the discourse of the obsessive-neurotic in which there is engagement in all kinds of frantic activity (filling up the gaps/silences) precisely in order that nothing Real should happen. So what we have is rather a *paradox* wherein the possibility of genuine transformation is repressed through hyperactivity; an activism without action. The point is that 'we' (i.e. the Left) should not participate in the terms of today's dominant ethos of obsessive-neurosis and its hyperactive culture of political inaction.

To avoid misunderstanding, the argument is not that we are obliged to choose between choosing and not-choosing or between capitulation and full scale assault on the existing mode of choosing. There is more ambiguity than may appear at first sight. A particular choice may be 'officially' permitted and yet implicitly prohibited (e.g. the declaration of atheism in American public life) and thus the making of that choice 'within' an existing modality may very well have the effect of undermining the modal logic. Equally, refusing to engage in making decisions or, what amounts to the same thing, making 'impossible demands' without any real substance can very quickly evoke a beautiful-soul-syndrome and an intrinsic passivity/inaction in the face of existing states of affairs. Insurrection, as Engels argued, is an art: it is a process where, quoting Danton, one must 'dare, dare and dare again' (Engels in Marx & Engels, 1969: 377). Such an art, I would argue, involves the subversion of subversion: that is to say, the development of forms of subversion that do not condone existing logics of subversion but which seek rather to undermine and repudiate the latter and to thereby open up new spaces of political possibility and creativity. It would mean not only breaking with the implicit grammar and interdictions of political discourse (the veiled agreements over the 'need' for low corporate taxation, for re-capitalizing

global markets, for continuing with providing incentives for financiers-investors and so on), but also more direct, and even violent, forms of confrontation as well. Both are ultimately aspects of the same undertaking: the de-identification with 'due process' and the existing horizons of possibility and political choice. Through subtlety, inspiration and terror the modal logics themselves become subject to a radical historicity. This marks the approach to what Lacan calls the act, and to what Badiou identifies as the evental.

It is here too that the notion of class needs to be revived and perhaps re-worked. Postmarxist thought has provided strong grounds for rejecting the Marxist idea of class: (i) the relative homogeneity of the working class in early capitalism has virtually dissolved; (ii) the political orientation of class cannot be guaranteed in advance (see Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 75-85). Class has little/no analytical content and will not play the role that classical Marxism intended for it. Laclau and Mouffe consequently reject the Marxist view of class because it presents a closed and necessitarian picture of identity that does not reflect the true nature of contingent undecidable identities and their basic materialism.

Yet it is precisely this distinction that is under question. To affirm the authenticity of contingent-plural identities against the falsity of class necessity is perhaps already to adopt a certain socio-political gaze and to disavow the nature of capitalism as a power-totality (Žižek in Butler *et al*, 2000: 319-320; Žižek, 2004: 99-102; Žižek, 2006: 55-56). From a Žižekian perspective, class should not be thought so much as a positive agency (the bearer of a historic mission) but more as a kind of *non-position*: the outcast, the drudges, the slum-dwellers (Žižek's 'living dead' of capitalism) and all those who do not 'count' and/or who cannot (or will not) be 'named' or integrated within capitalist logics. So while postmarxism is right to critique the positivistic status of class, what it tends to overlook is a view of class as symptomatically resistant to a modern capitalism striving to realise itself as a necessity. In this sense we might say that class functions as a kind of objectified unconscious: the collective markers of constitutive repression inherent to the reproduction of the global political economy.

Class struggle should not be thought of as an infrastructural datum to which all politics can be reduced ultimately, but precisely the opposite. Class struggle is the 'part of no part' (an indigestible bone in the throat of global capitalism) that manifests the irreducible nature of politics (Žižek, 2008: 295). Class struggle, in this sense, is testimony to the thoroughly political, and non-all, character of the capitalist totality. Far from comprising a positive category, class struggle marks the dimension of the Real and persists as a radical undecidable. It is on this basis that Žižek speculates that at the most extreme edges of class resistance-blockage – the rise of mega-networks of slums – there is real potential for the development of new forms of political subjectivity; subjectivity that will be created *ex nihilo* as the part of no part.

The Four Antagonisms of the Apocalypse

In the concluding chapter of *In Defense* Žižek identifies four central antagonisms in which capitalist logics are threatening to implode:

(i) Ecological – the radical character of bio-environmental intervention which cannot be circumscribed by any cunning of reason and which brings us face-to-face with the immanent possibilities of our annihilation.

(ii) Intellectual property – the commodification of knowledge to such a degree that speculative thought and creativity will be effectively privatised out of existence.

(iii) Bio-genetics – the extent to which the science and technology of genetic manipulation is realizing (literally) the de-grounded character of human being.

(iv) Global apartheid – the rise of new walls of exclusion (detention centres, migrant labour camps etc.) and, in particular, the rapid expansion of slums attached to the emerging megalopolises (there are currently estimated to be around a billion slum-dwellers rising to two billions in 2030). Such slums confront us increasingly with the geo-political reality of the systematic generation of legions of humanity that are reduced to the part of no part.

The three central strands of Žižek's thought are clearly in evidence here. As a Hegelian dialectician, Žižek is concerned crucially to show how the different dimensions of the capitalist milieu (including its auto-reflexive forms of subversion) function as a totality. And as he stresses repeatedly, such a totality is non-all. This is where Marxism and psychoanalysis – the other two 'lost' (as in struggling) theoretical causes – come in. In identifying the four central antagonisms, what Žižek is alluding to are the ways in which the symbolic-organic purchase of this structure is being undermined and even exposed at key (nodal) points. With ecology, what is emerging is an ecology (of bio-technological intervention) without cosmic-rational limitation; with biogenetics, it is the possibility of humanity without a naturalistic human being or destiny; with intellectual property, it is the possibility of knowledge without ownership; with the megalopolitan slums, is the possibility of a collective without a community. In each of these cases we see an ongoing decline of today's big Other and its ability to maintain consistency. What this decline is opening up is the terrifying abyss of freedom.

And yet could we not add a fifth antagonism of the apocalypse: that of the drive of capital itself? As 'we' are drawn into a world of 'financial literacy' (as mortgage recipients, pension and trust holders, debtors of every kind, stockholders and so on), is there not a growing realization that virtual capitalism is faithless and makes a fool of every attempt at economic organization (including national and international organization)? In other words, what we are forced increasingly to confront is the traumatic Marxist knowledge of money (value) without trust.

In this regard, *In Defense* provides compelling grounds for an effective theoretico-political reinvention of the left in today's world. Unlike radical democracy, it does not flinch from prioritizing certain struggles or from seeking to define the terrain for substantial political engagement. Žižek's political allegiance is not to any group that, in the sense of Laclau (Laclau in Critchley & Marchart, 2004: 297), occupies the position of 'underdog' in democratic struggle (this is precisely where the 'progressive' hegemonic practices can get caught up in the acceptable forms of subversion – i.e. what is overlooked is the extent to which today's forms of hegemony tend to be already hegemonized in assuming the rules/grammar of the existing political game). For Žižek, the left does indeed need to privilege a particular 'group', namely the 'de-structured masses' (the slum-dwellers and the radically excluded) who stand for universality and for the indictment of today's failed universalism. Put in

other terms, the left should be less democratic – in the sense of simply accepting the mythical terms of contemporary democratic engagement – and more dialectical – in the sense of waging a ruthless and ‘divine’ prosecution of the structural causes responsible for such mass exclusion.

At stake here are distinctive approaches to the Lacanian idea of traversing the fantasy. In radical democratic thought, the lesson of the traversal is one that tends to imply that we should assume a proper distancing in order to avoid getting caught up in the ‘cataclysmic desire of fantasy’ (Stavrakakis, 2007: 282). The problem therefore is one of adopting the right predisposition: to detach ourselves from object (a) and to thereby affect a condition where we can ‘really enjoy our partial enjoyment’ (Stavrakakis, 2007: 282). Radical politics should consequently restrict itself to revolutionary-reform rather than revolution as such. In general political engagement should not be excessive but should avoid substantial projects of overhaul in favour of the finite, provisional and pragmatic.

Yet for Žižek traversing the fantasy does not mean to proceed to a non-fantasmatic or even a post-fantasmatic universe defined simply in terms of a containment and/or domestication of excess (this in itself would be something of a fantasy). There is no transcendence of the fantasmatic (the structuring of desire) as such. Traversal in this sense is the opposite of exorcism. The point is not simply to expel excess but rather to inflect/assume the latter: to take responsibility for the inherency of excess that is integral to human drive. Traversal, in this sense, puts one in touch with the object of drive – the hole presupposed by all demand and around which Being revolves. The freedom which is gained here is thus not one of overcoming alienation (or the fantasmatic) but precisely a freedom through alienation in its most radical sense: i.e. the acceptance of the fact that the imbalance/excess is our most basic condition towards which we cannot exercise any pre-given partiality or disposition. Traversing the fantasy means assuming the responsibility for, taking account of, the excesses that emerge as symptoms – this is precisely the Freudian *wo es war*. It also means coming to terms with a basic terrifying freedom. While we can never escape, or domesticate, the fantasmatic we are nonetheless free essentially to change the direction and composition of the latter; we are, in effect, free to choose our fate(s). This, in essence, functions as a sublime monstrosity within the order of the human.

It is in this context that Žižek broaches the taboo of terror. We reject terror only at the cost of accepting implicitly the violence and terror contained in the global capitalist logics and the fantasmatic structures that support them. Traversal and terror are fundamentally linked here. Just as the analysand’s sense of self/agalma is terrorised in psychoanalysis, a politics that aims at traversing the fantasmatic structures of capitalism is one that would seek to dislodge-terrorise the nodal points that are central to the reproduction of those structures. This means identifying with our symptoms-excess in a relentless unforgiving way in order to find (construct) common cause between the symbolic classes and the radically excluded. On these grounds, Žižek argues the need for a new type of egalitarian terror which, following Badiou, would consist of four basic elements: egalitarian justice (universal standards); terror (universal punishment of violations); voluntarism (collective decisions); and trust in the people (the idea that the majority would support such measures). While these are pitched at a rather general level (and perhaps necessarily so), their main thrust is clear: to render explicit the implicit terror and violence of our socio-economic

systems, and to wrest the execution of such terror and violence away from private-corporate interests and to place them within the domain of the commons (the control and regulation of violence is always a primary constitutive act). In this regard, I would say that the fourth aspect, trust in the people, is the most interesting and perhaps the most problematic. Do not all ideological groups, from radical anarchists to neo-fascists, claim to place their trust in the people? Does it not thereby raise the spectre of populism that Žižek has tried to distance himself from?

Trust in the people is simultaneously a construction of the latter. What Žižek appears to be utilizing here is the logic of the future anterior: i.e. an affirmation of the idea of the people as if a future construction of the people was already in place. It is certainly not the populism of Laclau. If it is a populism at all, it is more a populism-without-a-people. In fact, it might be more accurate to characterize it as the idea of a people without populism. That is to say, its first allegiance is a negative one: that is, an allegiance to the universality of the excluded. There is evidence of this all around. As well as slum-dwellers who, in different (and non-idealized) ways, are being forced to adapt and to develop new kinds of social initiative, there are numerous groups who may be said to reflect, at some level, a non-systematised universality. With all the ambiguity that surrounds the functioning of today's charities, there are other types of group – especially those that have developed along self-help lines – care, shelter, food, information, health, informal networks of common support – that reflect a universality that is in excess of existing universality and show precisely the limits and failure of the latter.

Today's thirst for the Real elicits a number of mythical responses. In the so-called South (and especially Latin America), we see a massive expansion of a new type of Christian Pentecostalism based on evangelism and the idea of miraculous transformation (Žižek, 2008: 424). In the North, by contrast, the paradigmatic response has been largely a mix of New Age culture (including the Harry Potter phenomenon) and Romantic individualism (e.g. the heroes of mythic violence - Bond, Bourne, Bauer and so on – who overcome all odds and transcend every limitation). The task of the left surely is to provide a different type of response by inventing a new sense of the commons and of universal emancipation. I consider Žižek's politics of a loving kind of terror to be a major step forward in this undertaking.

Notes

1. One of the editors has raised an important question: if certain forms of subversion are, in reality, facilitating the reproduction of a totality then does this not contradict the idea of subversion? To subvert means to undermine authority, but if the latter is actually being reproduced/reinforced then surely there is no real subversion. Following Hegel, Žižek has shown how in order to sustain itself an authority engages simultaneously with its own undermining (inherent transgressions, the superegoic rituals of obscene enjoyment and so on). So what we have here is a paradox rather than a contradiction. The authority/subversive-undermining distinction is, in this sense, a false one.

This also calls into question Laclau and Mouffe's thematic understanding of subversion in terms of the 'presence of the contingent in the necessary' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 114). I do not think that the contingent and the necessary can be so easily separated in the manner they imply. The lesson of Hegelian dialectics has been to show not only how necessity emerges within the contingent but how the lived experience of contingency is shaped by necessity. Perhaps the ultimate example here is capital. Capital is radically subversive in the sense that it sweeps away all previously existing 'fixed, fast-frozen' social relations (i.e. shows their contingency) but only insofar as it imposes the necessary character of the social relation of capital itself. Moreover, in Laclau and Mouffe the idea of subversion is something that comes across as a kind of unconcealment (i.e. as a disclosure of the contingent at work in necessity). What this tends to overlook is what I would call the mode of subversion. Subversion is not simply a neutral practice; rather it is something that takes place in a historically structured way. With today's multiculturalist ethos we get all kinds of subversions which, although they do challenge existing authorities and do denaturalize a whole range of social/sexual relations, do not manage to threaten the underlying principles of the socio-economic order itself – on the contrary, such subversions often serve as a way of preserving the very dynamism of that order. Subversion is split between its historical modes of practice and the way in which those modes themselves can be undermined and rendered undecidable. This split is inherent and cannot be resolved. An understanding of this split-ness is, I believe, crucial to a revitalization of the left imagination. In order to develop more radical forms of intervention, the left may well have to withdraw (subtract itself) from what are perceived as progressive forms of subversion. It is in this sense that I would speak of subverting subversion; of effectively challenging the ground rules and accepted grammar of subversive engagement.

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