

## Slavoj Zizek: A Primer

### Introduction

Slavoj Zizek was born in Slovenia, 1949. At the University of Ljubljana he studied philosophy and was later offered a position to study psychoanalysis with Lacan's disciple, J.-A. Miller, at Paris VIII. On returning to Ljubljana he took up a research post and founded the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis. Zizek was very active in the Alternative Movement in Slovenia and in, 1990, stood for the presidency in the first multi-party elections.

Often described as a postmodern thinker (e.g. Miklitsch, 1998), Zizek's interventions have been numerous - from cinema to cyberspace, cognitivism, theology, music and opera as well as social theory. Zizek, however, rejects postmodernism's preoccupation with *differentia specifica* in favour of philosophical transcendentalism and an ongoing commitment to political universalism.

Various works by the Essex School of discourse theory (e.g. Torfing, 1999; Stavrakakis, 1999) have tended to link Zizek with the postmarxist thought of Laclau and Mouffe and as an implicit supporter of radical democracy. In reality, Zizek gives only partial support for postmarxist theory and has criticised the project of radical democracy on the grounds that, despite its emphasis on antagonism, it does not place enough stress on the fundamentals of economic power (Zizek in Butler *et al*, 2000: 319).

Something similar can be said about Zizek's position vis-à-vis cultural studies. As a brilliant cultural commentator, his texts have become almost required reading for courses in cultural studies. Yet Zizek discerns in some forms of cultural a certain complicity with global capitalist relations (Zizek, 1999: 218; 2001a: 226). The typical concern with "pluralist" issues of race, gender, sexuality and so on, is viewed as not only obfuscating the basic dimensions of power and exclusion but also as underpinning the very forms of (liberal) discourse - the emphasis on difference, multiplicity, self-affirmation etc. - though which contemporary capitalism is reproduced.

Kay (2003), by contrast, characterises Zizek as a philosopher of the Real. While this is reasonable, the temptation to be avoided is that Zizek is limited to analysing the "unreadable kernel" of the Real in our social existence and/or the way in which we attempt to resolve the radical inconsistencies of reality. In many respects we could say virtually the opposite: Zizek does not elevate the Real into an absolute horizon of impossibility about which we can do nothing. His position is rather one that may be said to reflect an explicit ethical commitment the power of the miracle. Zizek's central point is that fundamental change can and does occur but that this means crucially assuming (rather than avoiding) the traumatic encounter with the Real itself (Zizek, 2001b: 84). For Zizek it is one of the great tragedies of our age that the miracle, and especially the political miracle, is not presently part of our (Western) imagination. Moreover this has created the very space in which today's forms of ideological cynicism and its more recent cousin, new age obscurantism, continue to

thrive.

This chapter focuses on what I take to be the main coordinates of Žižek's perspective. It then moves to a consideration of what is at stake in central ongoing debates with postmodern and postmarxist positions. Finally it looks at the consequences of Žižek's thought for a more radical approach to politics; a politics of the Real.

### **All too inhuman**

Following Kant, modern philosophical endeavour has tended to become less concerned with the "object" and more with the latter's conditions of possibility. With Kant it is not so much the particular questions that are important - what is the nature of the soul? what is good? etc. - but what has to be generically presupposed in order to formulate these questions in the first place. Simplifying, the general problem for Kant is not so much *what* is the world but rather *how* do we arrive at such a notion as "world" as an entity that can disclose information to us; on what type of transcendental a priori structure does it depend? This, of course, introduces the dimension of subjectivity to the world of objects and, in particular, the question of subjective engagement with that world.

From this point onwards what is rendered thematic in German idealism is an essential lack of fit between the human being and the world. We do not belong to any positive or predetermined order of Being and consequently our orientations are radically undecidable. We are thus *compelled* to ask (impossible) questions of ourselves in relation to the world precisely because of a fundamental asymmetry, an absence of any ecology of Being. As Trinity remarks to Neo in *The Matrix*, "It's the question that drives us..." What is behind the question (of our place/Being in the world) is this basic condition of dislocation. This means that the *positivisation* of Being is something that can take place only through a transcendental logic of negativity. Thus what Kant speculatively refers to as diabolical evil - i.e. an ethical commitment to evil along the lines of Sade - is clearly possible (although Kant himself cannot countenance its existence) precisely because of a constitutive negativity that, in principle, allows for an autonomy of Being, and disposition, beyond any pre-given or naturalistic order (Žižek, 1993: 101). This self-relating negativity is made even more explicit in Hegel and his notion of the human being as an entity constituted in and through a transcendent "night of the world": "The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity - an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him - or which are not present" (Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, cited in Žižek, 1999: 29).

Žižek affirms that psychoanalysis is the direct descendant of German idealism and that it articulates this dimension of self-relating negativity in terms of the idea of death drive (Žižek, 1999: 65-66). Death drive is the existential consequence of the very gap in the order of Being identified in German idealism. It is neither a cancellation nor any kind of physical death but is rather a certain excessive impulse that persists beyond mere existence or biological life. As Žižek argues: "Human life is never just life, it is always sustained by an excess of life" (Žižek, 2001b: 104). The

human being is precisely that entity that is sustained by a "more than human". It is this "inhuman" excess - born of a fundamental alienation - which is the death drive and which is constitutive of humanity as such. Death drive is a constant impulse to resolve the gap, or heal the wound, in the order of Being; to overcome dislocation and establish the full presence of subjectivity by finding its ultimate name/place in the world.

In this context - and against the grain of standard postmodern thinking - Žižek insists on the validity of the notion of subject (Žižek, 1999: 158-59). The subject is neither a positive entity nor an identifiable locus but is thoroughly de-substantialised - it is precisely "this empty nothing" of which Hegel speaks. This is why the Lacanian mark for the subject is  $\$$  (S-barred, the empty place or void that cannot be filled out in an ultimate sense).

In the earlier works of Žižek, the subject is presented in terms of an inherent point of failure (the limit) in all forms of subjectivity - the bone stuck in the throat of signification - that shows the ontological gap of Being. The subject is the subject of the signifier precisely because of its status of void/impossibility that is the very condition of possibility for an infinitude of signification (Žižek, 1989: 175). Subject and subjectivity exist in a symbiotic and dynamic relationship. Subjectivity will be more or less stable according to context. Under the impact of a traumatic experience, however, we experience a certain "night of the world" where coherence and cohesion become radically undermined: that is, the condition of subject.

In later works, Žižek gives an added twist to the notion of subject. Thus the subject is not simply the gap/void in the order of Being, it is also "the contingent-excessive gesture that constitutes the very universal order of Being" (1999: 160). As in Russell's paradoxical set of sets, the subject also functions as an excluded particularity that nonetheless generates the frame of universality as such. The frame of subjectivity is not constituted against an external force (the elimination of which would yield true subjectivity) but through an inherent blockage which is the subject (Žižek, 1999: 159). We might say that the subject gets caught in an impossible attempt to produce a framework of subjectivity (to find its name/place), but from which it is already ontologically excluded. In this sense, the subject marks the site where an irresolvable economy of lack and excess are played out.

This economy is perhaps best illustrated by the relationship between subject and its objects a (*objets petit a* - objects small Other). Lacan's object a refers to the object-cause of desire: that which is in the object more than the object and which makes us desire it in the first place. It alludes to the originally lost object (the missing element that would resolve drive and "restore" fulfilment) and, at the same time, functions as an embodiment of lack; as a loss positivised (Žižek, 1997: 81; Žižek, 1999: 107).

Object a bears witness to an empty structure of desire - a structure that can never be filled out. Desire is always elsewhere and alludes to an absence whose central reference is a fundamental void around which drive constantly circulates and constantly misses its target. It is in this sense that Žižek refers to object a in terms of a Kantian "negative magnitude": something that acts as a stand-in for

Nothingness (Zizek, 1999: 107). There exists a metonymy of lack whereby any empirical object can act as this stand-in. Object *a* is doubly paradoxical in that it refers to an original "lost" object (of completion/unity) that never existed, and also in that its own existence depends on its very unattainability.

The subject subsists in a kind of diabolical symmetry with its object(s) *a* wherein the latter (partially) embodies the lack designated by the former; a lack that constantly strives to be recognised/resolved in positive terms but which can never be fully achieved - subject and object never coincide. A well known e-mail circular is illustrative. A mock audit of staff morale is sent as an attachment in which the final exercise is one where you are asked to "click here" if you want a bigger salary, better conditions and so on. Of course, when you move your cursor to the relevant box, the "click here" simply moves and pops up somewhere else on the screen no matter how quickly or stealthily you try to approach it. In this sense, fulfilment (the satisfaction of desire) is always just a click away; a promise that is sustained by the very lack/impossibility of (total) fulfilment.

The subject strives for a fullness in the object that it lacks. This accounts for the passionate attachment to certain objects and toward which people may risk everything. Q. Tarantino's film, *Pulp Fiction*, is illustrative. In the boxer's story, the Bruce Willis character refuses to take a dive in a fixed fight and as a result falls foul of a local gangster. Instead of leaving town immediately, however, Bruce returns to his apartment to pick up his (dead) father's watch - thereby risking his life. Why do this? The answer is that this particular watch represents *object a*: a partial embodiment of the lost parent-child unity. It is this watch, and no other, that holds the promise of an ultimate reconciliation (to restore "lost" unity) and, at the same time underscores the fact that such reconciliation is always lacking; always a "click" away. Every object *a* is a reminder/remainder of a kind of pre-big bang consummate unity that has never existed. It is here that both lack (subject) and excess (identifications) - every "pathological" gesture to positivise void - may be said to coincide (Zizek, 1999: 107).

The "many" identifications and forms of collective objective life are made possible through the persistence of the "one" of radical negativity. The infinitude of signification is the result ultimately of the one true signified...void. For Zizek this is the starting point of a new approach to politics. We are political animals not in the sense of Aristotle who understood by this a certain capacity to recognise a pre-existing order of the good, but the opposite. It is precisely because there is no pre-existing order that we are "condemned" to be political animals. Without an ecology of Being, we are confronted with what Zizek, in his discussion of Schelling (1997), calls an unbridgeable abyss of freedom; an abyss that is simultaneously the source of universal rights and ethnic cleansing.

### **The Touch of the Real**

The persistence of radical negativity is what the later Lacan generically characterised as the Real: the ultimate "signified" around which all signification is constituted and simultaneously finds its limitation and inexorable failure. As is well documented elsewhere (e.g. Fink, 1995), the Real is inextricably linked with the

registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary and together these form a basic triadic structure for all (human) Being. In general terms, both the Symbolic and the Imaginary may be said to belong to the order of signification. While the Symbolic refers to the (potentially) infinite uses of signification through language and symbols, the Imaginary refers to the particular ways in which signification becomes arrested around certain fundamental images of ourselves that offer a sense of coherence and place in the world. It is through the Imaginary that we achieve particular forms of identification and which enable us to resolve the basic question(s) of who we are for the Other; we "narrate" ourselves around certain basic images with which we identify and/or wish to project.

The Real, on the other hand, not only does not belong (directly) to the order of signification but crucially represents its negation. The Real is rather the transcendental (and constitutive) dimension of resistance in every process of signification. This transcendental aspect is something that does not sit easily with the main trends in postmodern thought. According to Butler, for example, the idea of the Real, as something that cannot be integrated symbolically, is already logically inconsistent: "to claim that the real resists symbolization is still to symbolize the real as a kind of resistance. The former claim (the real resists symbolization) can only be true if the latter claim ("the real resists symbolization" is a symbolization) is true, but if the second claim is true, the first is necessarily false." (Butler, 1993: 207).

In other words, if you *posit* something as external to symbolization you can only do so through symbolization itself; you cannot signify anything beyond signification itself. But as Žižek points out, the Real should not be thought of as some kind of external entity (which would indeed invoke the *petitio principii* to which Butler alludes). The Real is rather strictly an internal point of failure, an inherent limit. Thus what we have is a paradox rather than a logical contradiction:

"The paradox...is that Butler is, in a way, right: yes, the Real is in fact internal/inherent to the Symbolic, not its external limit, *but for that very reason*, it cannot be symbolized. In other words, the paradox is that the Real as external, excluded from the Symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination - what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as the *inherent point of failure* of symbolization" (Žižek in Butler et al, 2000: 121).

The Real is experienced in terms of the Symbolic (dis)functioning itself. We touch the Real through those points where symbolization fails; through trauma, aversion, dislocation and all those markers of uncertainty where the Symbolic fails to deliver a consistent and coherent reality. While the Real cannot be directly represented - hence Lacan's dictum that nothing is lacking in the Real (lack can only be formulated through some form of symbolic endeavour but has no meaning in relation to radical negativity) - it can nonetheless be *shown* in terms of symbolic failure and can be alluded to through figurative embodiments of horror-excess that threaten disintegration (monsters, forces of nature, disease/viruses and so on).

J. Schumacher's *Flatliners* is illustrative. The film concerns a group of medical students who, in an almost Faustian way, attempt to penetrate to the mysteries of

death, and thereby our true nature, by stopping each other's hearts (flatlining them) and then, after a given period of time, resuscitating them. At the point of death, each student begins a fantasmatic journey that takes them to the very edge of their symbolic-imaginary universe. Once they reach that edge, what they find is not some ultimate truth but a particular marker of negation: an unbearable encounter that cannot be resolved/domesticated in their symbolic universe and from which they desperately try to escape; to "awaken" back into reality. Far from yielding a positive secret or tangible breakthrough, what their constant probing brings them into confrontation with is a thoroughly intangible and unsurpassable horizon of radical negativity. This is the point where we might say that rationalist (Enlightenment-led) subjectivity fails and is drawn into traumatic proximity with the subject qua night of the world; where it meets the subject as *an answer of the Real* (see Žižek, 1989: 178-182).

In his earlier work, Žižek tended to focus on the Real as a hard limit to signification. More recently, Žižek has developed a more subtle reading of the Real. Following the triadic structure of the Lacanian registers, Žižek stresses that there are in fact three basic orders of the Real: the real Real the symbolic Real and the imaginary Real (Žižek & Daly, 2003; Žižek, 2002: xii; Žižek, 2001b: 82-83). The real Real is the hard limit that functions as the horrifying Thing (the Alien, Medusa's head, maelstrom and so on) - a shattering force of negation. The symbolic Real refers to the anonymous symbols and codes (scientific formulae, digitalisation, empty signifiers...) that function in an indifferent manner as the abstract "texture" onto which, or out of which, reality is constituted. In *The Matrix*, for example, the symbolic Real is given expression at the point where Neo perceives "reality" in terms of the abstract streams of digital output. In the contemporary world, Žižek argues that it is capital itself that provides this essential backdrop to our reality and as such represents the symbolic Real of our age (Žižek, 1999: 222; 276).

With the imaginary Real we have precisely the (unsustainable) dimension of fantasmatic excess-negation that is explored in *Flatliners*. This is why cyberspace is such an ambiguous imaginary realm. At first sight it would appear to be totally impervious to the Real - a free-floating universe of infinite fantasizing. Yet it is precisely through cyberspace that we can take that "click" too far and be brought into unbearable proximity with our most intimate fears and anxieties: repugnance-fascination towards certain images/practices; morbid obsessions; an insufferable connection with Otherness ("am I really like that/them?").

It is particularly this aspect of the Real that Žižek emphasises in relation to 9/11 (Žižek, 2001c). What happened there was not so much that (Real) reality intruded into the fantasy world of US harmony, but rather that a certain fantasmatic excess intruded into reality (Žižek, 2001c: 18). What was so shocking about the WTC attack was this aspect of the imaginary Real - this nightmarish excess of apocalyptic destruction (already prefigured in numerous Hollywood blockbusters) - from which "we" could not awaken; could not leave behind in the cinema. In this way, the traumatic impact of September 11 could be said to have been doubly inscribed: as a terrible physical event and, even more intensely, as a trans-dimensional breach, a fundamental transgression of the subliminal injunction that the nightmare fantasy should "stay there!" and not come after us.

The central point is that the Real is strictly inherent to reality. The relationship between the two is not spatial but dimensional; one of mutual contamination. As Žižek argues, while reality is produced through a certain "grimace of the Real" - a constitutive impossibility that becomes distorted into reality (like the blinding Sun that generates illumination through being beyond illumination and whose outline can only be perceived by "looking awry") - the Real itself is "nothing but a grimace of reality" (Žižek, 2002: xvii), that which shines through the distorted perspective we call reality.

The Real is always that which is in reality more than reality. As with humanity itself, reality is sustained by an excess that cannot be incorporated within it (the indigestible bone in the throat). Returning to *The Matrix*, it is not that we have reality, on the one hand, and a potentially removable "splinter in your mind" that distorts it on the other. Rather reality itself is the very consequence of a mind splinter. Distortions in reality are always possible because of the basic distortion that is reality and which means that it can never be identical to itself; can never achieve an ontological fullness but always remains a perspectival orientation towards that which sustains and exceeds it.

This perspective undercuts the standard criticisms of psychoanalysis as simply a product of its age (a symptom of Victorian/Viennese repression) and/or as something that may have some benefit in treating individuals but which has no bearing on the collective world. What Žižek demonstrates is that such criticisms already miss the (Kantian-Hegelian) transcendental turn of psychoanalysis whereby the individual/collective division no longer holds. As he puts it: "The focus of psychoanalysis is entirely different: the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which *the individual has to relate*, something which *the individual* has to experience as an order which is minimally reified, externalized" (Žižek, 2002 : lxxii)

The question is rather, how does the "objective world" have to be organised in order for something like "subjectivity" to be possible (and *vice versa*)? The psychoanalytic response is that both subjective and objective should be considered as (unstable) dimensions of a continuum that is traversed by the impossible Real. The basic human condition is that both objectivity and subjectivity are lacking towards an excess and against which they try to achieve homeostasis and mutual reassurance. This means that we can never stand on neutral ground. We are always minimally engaged in some kind of orientation in respect of the Real; one that necessarily involves the repression/exclusion of alternative potential orientations. To reiterate, the human being is a political animal precisely because there is no pre-given/substantialist reality and that this always has to be forged as a matter of delusional consistency. It is in the context of this essential delusional (in)consistency of reality that Žižek has developed a thoroughgoing critique of ideology.

## **Delusions of Reality Ideology and Impossibility**

Zizek has been concerned crucially to demonstrate the way in which ideology serves to support reality as a concrete fully integrated totality - reality cannot be reproduced without initial ideological mystification. Ideology does not conceal or distort an underlying positivity (the way things really are), but quite the opposite. What ideology attempts to do is provide a certain positive consistency against the distorting and traumatizing effects of the Real (Zizek, 1989: 45).

All ideology presents reality as a full ontological totality, and in this way tries to repress the traumatic fact that the latter is ultimately a delusion; it tries to eliminate all traces of (Real) impossibility (Zizek, 1989: 49). The exemplary figure here is that of the cynic. The typical cynic is someone who is "pragmatic", who distances themselves from sincerely held beliefs, dismisses alternative visions of social existence as so much juvenile nonsense...and who, for all that, relies even more deeply on some absolutist conception of an independent fully-formed reality.

The cynic is the very model of an ideological subjectivity insofar as s/he is radically dependent on the idea of an externally ratified reality ("human nature", "the way it is" etc.). What the cynic fears most is that they might lose the support of this independent (Other) reality and consequently their sense of "place" in the world. The cynic gets involved in a certain short-circuiting procedure that is, in fact, generic to all ideological functioning: s/he is cynical towards every kind of ideological belief *except* his/her own fundamentalist belief in objectivist reality.

The cynical attitude is more widely reflected in today's predominant inclination towards "postmodern ironizing". The key philosopher is arguably R. Rorty. Rorty wants a world where individuals are free "to pursue private perfection in idiosyncratic ways" (Rorty, 1991: 19) and where the public realm is restricted to minimal functions and is essentially aesthetic in orientation (Rorty, 1989: 125). For Rorty the central obligation is to be sceptical towards any projects of substantial social engagement for fear that it might curtail individual pursuits of happiness and lead towards despotic forms of cruelty in the name of a higher (collective) Truth (see Daly, 1994). The basic inconsistency in Rorty's position is that "we" should exercise an ironic distancing towards every socio-political project *except* the liberal one: the one true reality whose (private/public) structuring of social relations represents "the last *conceptual* revolution" (Rorty, 1989: 63) and effectively suspends history.

This is why so much of what passes for contemporary postmodern thought should be understood as strictly ideological in character. With all its ironic distancing, disavowals of the authentic gesture and so on, it relies even more heavily on the functioning of the existing order as if it were a naturalistic, or immaculate, Other - a kind of preservation of the ontological dream through symbolic mortification. In other words, it tends to involve the very form of ideological identification which is formulated along the lines of "we know very well that there is no such thing as Reality but nonetheless we believe in it".

So how does ideology deal with its immanent impossibility, with the fact that it cannot deliver a fully integrated social order? Zizek's answer is that ideology



attempts to reify impossibility into some kind of external obstacle; to fantasmatically translate the impossibility of Society into the theft, or sabotage, of Society (see Daly, 1999). Transcendental impossibility is projected into some contingent historicised Other (e.g. the figure of "the Jew" in Nazi ideology) in such a way that the lost/stolen object (social harmony/purity) appears retrievable; an object which, of course, "we" have never possessed. By synonymizing the impossible-Real with a particular Other (Jews, Palestinians, Gypsies, immigrants...), the fantasy of holistic fulfilment through the (imagined or otherwise) elimination/suppression of the Other is thereby sustained.

Zizek has recently given this perspective a further more radical twist. Thus ideology not only presents a certain ideal of holistic fulfilment (Plato's Republic of Reason, Habermas' transparent modernity, Rorty's liberal utopia, multiculturalist harmony and so on), it also serves crucially to regulate a certain distance from it. The paradox of ideology is that it advances a particular fantasy of being reconciled with the Thing (of total fulfilment) but with the built-in proviso that we do not come too close to it. The psychoanalytic reason for this is clear: if you come too close to the Thing it either fragments irretrievably (like a digitally produced image) or, as in the Kantian sublime, produces unbearable anxiety and psychical disintegration.

The point is that ideology is always already engaged reflexively with its own impossibility. Impossibility is articulated through ideology and in such a way that it both structures reality and establishes the very sense of what is considered possible. Here we have a double inscription. First there is the basic operation of translating impossibility into an external obstacle (an Other). But second, there is a further deeper stage whereby the ideological objective itself is elevated to the status of impossibility precisely as a way of avoiding any direct encounter with it (see Zizek & Daly, 2003).

Ideology seeks to maintain a critical distance by keeping the Thing in focus but without coming so close that it begins to distort and fragment (see Daly, 1999: 235). The paradigmatic example is of someone who fantasises about an ideal object (a sexual scenario, a promotion, a public performance etc.) and when they actually encounter the object they are typically confronted with a de-idealisation of the object; a return of the Real. By keeping the object at a certain distance, however, ideology sustains the satisfaction derived from the fantasy of holistic fulfilment: "if only I had x I could achieve my dream". Ideology is the impossible dream not simply in terms of overcoming impossibility but of constructing the latter in an acceptable way; in a way that itself yields a certain satisfaction of both having and eating the cake. The idea of overcoming impossibility subsists as a deferred moment of realisation but without having to go through the pain of overcoming as such. Ideology regulates this fantasmatic distance as a way of avoiding the Real in the impossible - the trauma involved in any real change.

Let's take the case of Iraq and the so-called New World Order. With extensive military mobilisation, widespread social upheaval and a terrible human cost, the invasion of Iraq was undertaken precisely in order that the underlying structures of Western-U.S. socio-economic power can continue to function in a relatively undisturbed way. While the invasion was initially justified on the grounds of

international security this has, subsequent to a profound lack of evidence, been largely rearticulated in terms of a project of emancipation. And it is here that we get the ideological twist: "we are here to liberate/democratise Iraq...while recognising that a full implementation of the latter is impossible under present (any) circumstances". Thus the occupation of Iraq continues in full force. The message is, "in principle (you can have liberation), yes; in reality, no".

It is this hidden clause of deferral that effectively prevents any real attempt to realise the publicly stated objective. Along the lines of Henry Ford's famous declaration ("you can have any colour you like, as long as it's black") we see the same kind of forced choice at play: "the Iraqi people can have all the democracy they want, all the popular control over their oil and natural resources...as long as it is modelled on U.S.-Western liberal capitalism, as long as it does not undermine U.S.-Western interests".

With New World Order discourse we see a similar ideological process. Any genuine attempt to realise such an order would involve massive (traumatic) changes: power sharing, the eradication of poverty and systematic social exclusion, a globalisation of equal rights/participation and so on, as integral reflexive elements. In reality, the New World Order is routinely conjured as an indefinite ideal that serves precisely to prevent any real movement towards it. The same type of ideological clause is secretly functioning: "we are moving towards a New World Order that will not tolerate the Saddam Husseins of this world...while recognising that a true implementation of such an order (one that would be intolerant of all the autocrats and corporate profiteers/dictatorships) is currently/always impossible". In this way, the category of impossibility itself functions as an implicit-obscene ideological supplement in today's realpolitik; in today's cynical assertion of the way things actually are.

## **Real Politics**

Building on Laclau and Mouffe's compelling impossibility-of-Society thesis, Žižek's intervention is one that also stresses the importance of the converse: that is, the socialisation of impossibility. For Žižek the key question concerns not so much the fact of social impossibility, but how is society impossible; how is it dealt with politically?

In the postmodern age, the category of impossibility is one that underpins today's paradigmatic language of "provisionality", "partiality", "precariousness" and so on. To borrow an expression from Lyotard, there is widespread incredulity towards substantial forms of political engagement. Through a predominant culture of irony, ersatz and eternal deferral (Derrida's "to come"), such forms of engagement are typically disavowed as so much ideological nonsense. In our sincerely cynical times, the greatest taboo seems to be sincerity itself. The postmodern enthusiasm for impossibility is one that can all too readily feed into a type of politics that itself becomes overly partial and provisional; where political ambition is already limited by its own sense of limitation as such. It is a politics that tends to remain at the level of impossibility without ever seeking to possibilise the impossible; in Lacanian terms, without ever passing to the act.

To some degree, postmodern culture may be viewed as a form of collective obsessive neurosis: i.e. a culture that generates all kinds of concerns and different facilities for addressing problems, but only insofar as it is able to *avoid* any real substantial change. Thus with today's characteristic forms of Third Wayism we get the semblance of politics but without the pain of actual political confrontation/transformation. Here we see a certain mortification of politics in which the latter becomes consumed with problems of endless preparation, politically correct protocol, the creation of more and more focus groups and the idolatring of consensus. In Gramsci's language, it's as if the contemporary logic of hegemony is already hegemonised - effectively subsumed within wars of position (or positioning) without ever proceeding to any substantial war of manoeuvre.

This is reflected in the culture of political correctness. Recently there was a debate in the British media as to whether unemployed people should be allowed to refuse to work for Ann Summers (a chain of sex shops). The "politically correct" response was that diversity needs to be taken into account and that if people had moral, religious and/or cultural objections then alternatives should be found. What was not even questioned, however, was the underlying policy principle of forcing people to work in the first place; of compelling people to assume responsibility for their marginalisation in a liberal-capitalist economy that of *structural necessity* produces systematic unemployment, under-employment and widespread poverty. In this way, the latter are not viewed as the barbaric consequences of a political construction for which we are collectively responsible, but as simply features of the way things are.

Ideology functions in this way of absolving "us" from ethico-political responsibility. This is exemplified in the contemporary "ethical" approach to world-wide poverty and destitution. The predominant (Western) response is charity led where there is this model tendency towards ideological absolution: we are, in fact, *not* ultimately ethically responsible. The increasingly popular "adoption" schemes are emblematic of this and reflect an almost "zoological" approach to ethics in terms of this very type of absolution/distancing. With wildlife charities it is possible to make regular donations and thereby to "adopt" the animal of your choice: dolphin, elephant, gorilla etc. Similarly with human charities (especially those dealing with Africa and Asia) you can now "adopt" a grandmother and/or a child. In return for payment you receive personalised feedback - usually a photograph, a progress report and (in the case of the child) a minimum of two letters per year. Axial to this exchange is a certain type of gaze: the imagining of how the victim-Other perceives "us" as elevated benefactors. We connect with the Other on the grounds that they keep their distance, that they do not demand from us or assert their Being, but rather play the role of abstract/grateful victim. The perverse (postmodern) libidinal pleasure is one of having a relationship but without the relationship as such; without the Real in the relationship. Little wonder that the emotionally stunted Jack Nicholson character in *About Schmidt* found it so much easier to communicate with his assigned adoptee; someone who exists for him only through letters and drawings and onto whom he can project all kinds of fantasies. In general then, we can have our "ethical" relationship with the abject-Other and precisely in such a way that we are not ethically implicated in the system that produces abjection in

the first place. Abjection is always something that happens elsewhere - the result of unfortunate circumstances, acts of God, a barbarous lack of civilisation and so on - so that "we" are not responsible. This is the basic ideological alibi.

Zizek is concerned to confront this alibi head on and to oppose it with an ethics of the Real (see also Zupancic, 2000). This is an ethics in which we assume responsibility for our own actions and our inscription within the broader life-world up to and including the construction of socio-economic reality. This is not to embrace any kind of *carte blanche* approach to reality. The point is rather that we should address the full implications of the way in which our reality is reproduced in human terms and not as a cosmic order. We cannot hide behind terms like "globalisation", "pragmatism", "economic reality", "rationality" and so on, as if they described a neutral ontological order. On the contrary, we are obliged to confront the way in which such terms attempt to ideologically disguise the artificial nature of reality (this grimace of the Real) and, on that very basis, to make real (Real) ethical decisions: i.e. decisions that begin from the position that genuine transformation is always possible and always involves this traumatic dimension of the Real; this dimension of rupture with existing symbolic structures.

An ethics of the Real is not one of accepting impossibility in the sense of an indefinite ideal, but is rather one that entreats us to risk the impossible: to break out of the bonds of existing possibility. This opens the way to what Zizek refers to as *the act* and to overcome the symbolic mortification associated with the ideological-cynical attitude that revolves around, a fetishized notion of absolute reality. The Third Wayist perspective, for example, is largely stupefied by its master signifier "globalisation" and is consequently unable to mount any real challenge to the basic power structures. Global (capitalist) reality is in place, so it is chiefly a question of adjustment and of adopting a mature-pragmatic attitude. Politics is reduced to a repetitive logic of deliberation rather than active resistance; a politics of conformism towards a determinate order of reality rather than a reconfiguration of that reality. Like Hamlet, Third Wayism remains transfixed by the spectre of impossibility (the global Thing) and this renders it incapable of risking the impossible; of passing to the act.

Zizek's thought is concerned crucially to reactivate the dimension of the miraculous in political endeavour. For Zizek the miracle is that which coincides with trauma in the sense that it involves a fundamental moment of symbolic disintegration (2001b: 86). This is the mark of the act: a basic rupture in the weave of reality that opens up new possibilities and creates the space for a reconfiguration of reality itself. Like the miracle, the act is ultimately unsustainable - it cannot be reduced to, or incorporated directly within, the symbolic order. Yet it is through the act that we touch (and are touched by) the Real in such a way that the bonds of our symbolic universe are broken and that an alternative construction is enabled; reality is transformed in a Real sense.

The Real is not simply a force of negation against which we are helpless. In contrast to standard criticisms, what psychoanalysis demonstrates is that we are *not* victims of either unconscious motives or an infrastructural logic of the Real. If reality is a constitutive distortion then the ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that we are

responsible for its reproduction. Miracles can and do happen. We are capable of Real acts that give reality a new texture and direction; acts that reflect this gap in the order of Being, this abyss of freedom. If Freud - in his theory of the unconscious - affirms an essential autonomization of the signifier, then what Žižek emphasises is an essential autonomization of the act: a basic capacity to break out of existing structures/cycles of signification. Far from being constrained by the notion of impossibility, Žižek's perspective is sustained and energised by the ontological potential for achieving the "impossible" through Real intervention. In this sense, Žižek's conception of the Real may be said to constitute both an inherent limit and an inherent opening/beginning: the radically negative dimension that is the condition of *creatio ex nihilo* and the political itself.

Žižek's perspective functions as a powerful antidote to the type of politics that, in terms of their symbolic mandate, become overly procedural and deliberative. At the same time, I do not think that such a sharp distinction between the latter and a politics of action can so easily be drawn. We do not act in an abstract or acontextual way. On the contrary, we find the capacity to act (at least in part) in and through procedural and deliberative encounter and strategy. The paradox is that while both finally negate each other, both are needed. The movement towards a more ambitious and democratic universalism, for example, is consequent on a subversion of existing forms of globalisation; on releasing the emancipatory potentials that already exist within these forms. We might say that it is consequent on developing politically what is in globalisation more than globalisation.

Here I think we should rather speak of a *politics* of the Real (or a Real politics). While every form of political subversion must involve the dimension of the Real, the Real itself cannot dictate the nature or direction of subversion. Through a radical reading of psychoanalysis, Žižek cuts through the sterility of postmodern cynicism and charges us with the full (in)human capacity and responsibility to act. How we choose to act, however, cannot be answered by psychoanalysis alone. This will depend on political engagement. Žižek's perspective exhorts us to be passionate in this engagement.

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### **Further Reading**

A useful collection of Zizek's papers with commentary is provided in Wright, E & E. Wright (eds.) (1999), *The Zizek Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell. For texts that engage with Zizek's perspective see the following:

Copjec, J. (1994), *Read My Desire*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Copjec, J. (2003), *Imagine there's no Woman*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Daly, G. (1999), "Politics and the Impossible: Beyond Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction", *Theory Culture and Society*, 16(4), 75-98.

Glynos, J. (2001), "The Grip of Ideology", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 6 (2), June 2001, pp. 191-214.

For more critical appraisals of Zizek see:

Dews, P. (1995), "The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian Dialectics", *Radical Philosophy*, 72, 17-29.

Homer, S. (1996), "Psychoanalysis, Representation, Politics: On the (Im)possibility of a Psychoanalytic Theory of Ideology", *The Letter*, 7, 97-109.

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For a demystification of Lacanian terminology see:

Evans, D. (1996), *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.