

**BETWEEN MARXISM AND POSTMODERNISM:
SLAVOJ ZIZEK DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE**

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The aim of my research is to shed light on the works of an author who is, from my perspective, consistently either over- or undervalued by the many scholars whose gazes have settled on him. Slavoj Žižek requires little introduction: he is well known as a prolific writer with vast credentials.¹ His unique style, which combines dirty jokes with Lacanian psychoanalysis and ‘old-fashioned Marxist criticism’, is at the very least a source of entertainment, if not enlightenment, to scholars and non-scholars alike. What seems much more open to debate, however, is what in fact Žižek is all about – the literature which specializes in Žižek’s philosophy is hugely disparate, encompassing positions that range from outrageous fanboyism and zealotry to stances which border on slander in their depiction of his theoretical and political allegiances. Žižek scholarship can hardly be faulted as inept, however: Žižek’s quintessentially opaque and at times rhetorical writing style does not render him easily comprehensible, and his texts are riddled with seemingly contradictory positions that force certain difficulties on any reader’s attempt to render an account of his thought.

In brief, these are the obstacles and objects which my research wishes to confront and grasp, respectively. My work is thus composed of a two-pronged foray into Žižek scholarship: my objects of study consist of, firstly, the works of Žižek himself and, secondly, works *on* Žižek. It is this latter engagement that, in exploiting a gap in the literature, allows me to deploy a more general ontology of philosophy and textual production that seeks to answer questions of what it means to read political theory and how political theory functions. In this respect, the works of

¹ Here is a selection of the texts I will be engaging in, along with the original years of publication. To give an idea of Žižek’s industriousness, all of the texts below with the exception of *A Leninist Gesture Today* are full length books:
 The Parallax View 2006
 A Leninist Gesture Today: Against Populist Temptation 2007
 Afterword: With Defenders Like These, Who Needs Attackers? 2007
 In Defense of Lost Causes 2008
 Violence 2008
 First as Tragedy, Then as Farce 2009
 Living in the End Times 2010

Zizek act as ‘case studies’ of sorts, providing empirical validation and practical examples of theory in action. Because one of the main issues addressed implicitly by Zizek scholarship is the question of how to resolve apparent contradictions in Zizek’s work, this ontology will lay out certain methodological and literary injunctions which, when obeyed, can produce more intellectually fruitful readings than the literature reviewed below. Similarly, in speaking more explicitly to questions of opacity in political philosophy in general and Zizek’s writings in particular, the methodology I will lay out in the following chapter can hope to make a novel contribution to the fields of Zizek studies and critical methodology alike.

Particularly in the past 5 years, there has been an explosive proliferation of published texts and widely disseminated audio-visual lectures or film commentaries nearly outweighing all of Zizek’s productions between 1990 and 2005.² In terms of books and journal articles, the numbers stand at about just over 150 for the years 1989-2005, and nearly 140 for the years 2005-present, though the bibliography cited does not seem to include Zizek’s contributions to published ‘anthologies’ such as *Lenin Reloaded* or *L’Idée du Communisme* (the English version of which has just recently been released). I have limited my study of Zizek here to notable publications from 2005-2010, for two reasons: firstly, to wrestle with more than this would just make for an unwieldy exercise, and would at times be anachronistic. While there are themes that are as present today as they were in Zizek’s works ten years ago, they occasionally exist in embryonic form and are more fully developed in his later texts; likewise, there are those themes and concepts which disappear entirely, or take a recognizable backseat to Zizek’s current concerns. Basically, the past five years have seen somewhat of a crystallization of Zizek’s thought, which leads to the second reason behind limiting myself to the period of 2005-2010. In

² “Bibliography Slavoj Zizek” <http://www.lacan.com/bibliographyzi.htm> (does not include audio-visual interventions).

short, these texts typically share the common feature of revolving around a handful of concepts, each work acting to simply reiterate (and occasionally elaborate) the same general ideas found in its predecessor. In this sense, this body of texts almost functions as a monolithic whole when read in its entirety; indeed, often one is literally reading the same passage across multiple texts, either copied by Žižek verbatim or redeployed in spirit. In short, 2005/2006 seems a good enough place to mark Žižek's writings as more performative than previously, and I measure this performativity through the sheer frequency of themes that are consistently repeated in the years that followed.

This kind of bibliographical demarcation is typically not a hallmark of Žižek scholarship, which has no problem discussing a text from the 90s in the same breath as his latest work. Ultimately, the abundance of material produced by Žižek is shadowed by a veritable army of Žižek scholars, comprising both fans and critics. The reality of Žižek scholarship, which is considerably large and committed to the study of diverse subject matters, makes the study of Žižek extremely difficult for any serious work which wishes to contribute something new to the discourse. In the same vein, the fact that Žižek still walks among the living – unlike the dead thinkers usually objectified by the field of political thought – makes definition of his work difficult to fix absolutely. Nonetheless, a carefully cultivated research question that seeks to insert itself very specifically into the existing literature and particular themes of Žižek can produce fruitful results; my own research question, which effectively poses the questions of 'how should we read Žižek?' and 'what is Žižek doing through his textual interventions?' can thus allow for a more narrowed and nuanced approach to the existing literature.

Methodologically, I emphasize three features of philosophy which, when recognized explicitly during encounters with theoretical works, aid the reader in identifying what is at stake

in textual productions, and how the text functions as an act which sets out to transform the field it inserts itself into, rather than simply a conveyor of a series of neutral truth-claims. Certain of these features are far from novel, and there is a distinct history of political philosophers who are well noted for their efforts in furnishing what I have called reading methodologies. The novelty of my research, and its purpose, is not to reinvent the wheel in this respect. Rather, it is to deploy a specific reading methodology (which certain theorists in this tradition would probably have few qualms about) which interprets Zizek, against what I find to be a poverty of such approaches in Zizek scholarship.

I have opted to bracket questions of ‘validity’ and ‘truth’ when it comes to Zizek’s philosophical contributions and propositions, since what is at stake in my work is not whether or not Zizek successfully and accurately diagnoses global capitalism and pop films but, rather, the performative aspect of these diagnoses, which I shall elaborate on later. This being said, I have thus opted to bracket most of the scholarly work on Zizek that wrestles with both the truth-value of his claims and his fidelity to his philosophical heritages, with several important and notable exceptions. While these approaches are certainly doing valuable work, they do not exactly concern my own research, which has as one of its aims a clarification of what is at stake in Zizek’s oeuvre as a performative, political act, rather than as a series of truth-claims or logical propositions. The exceptions to this are, of course, those critical interpretations which combine a dissection of the validity of Zizek’s conceptual work with a critique of the implications of this work for political action; i.e. those approaches which, while remaining in many respects at the level of the text itself, at least engage with the political (if not performative per se) side of Zizek’s theory rather than more erudite and scholastic pursuits, such as Zizek’s reading of Schelling or his authority as a psychoanalyst. Ultimately, what is at stake in the literature

reviewed briefly below is authors' implicit reading methodologies, and how these methodologies (whether implicit or explicit) produce the final analyses of Žižek that they do.

The Other Roosters in the Hen House

In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Žižek and co-author Ernesto Laclau engage in an interesting dialogue about the nature of political struggle and the role of Marxist political theory in their respective contributions. Laclau's critique of Žižek revolves around two basic claims. First is that Žižek does not respect developments in the history of Marxist thought and that, consequently, his political concepts are 'old-fashioned,'³ thus reading Žižek as effectively rehashing anachronistic notions from the pre-Gramscian era of the Russian Revolution. Laclau's second claim is closely intertwined with the first: not only is Žižek anachronistic, but without a positive political strategy and a rigorous definition of the concepts he throws around so loosely, Žižek's "anti-capitalism is mere empty talk."⁴ In effect, Laclau presumes that when Žižek says X (e.g. postmodern leftism's "proponents, as a rule, leave out the resignation at its heart – the acceptance of capitalism as 'the only game in town', the renunciation of any real attempt to overcome the existing capitalist liberal regime"),⁵ he either means X (and must therefore defend and refine it in a conceptually clear and rigorous manner – i.e. he must answer the questions of "what is his political strategy to achieve these rather peculiar aims? What is the alternative model of society that he is postulating?")⁶ or, failing this, be 'really' proposing a crypto-totalitarian project (there is simply no other positive referent possible). Thus, when Laclau reads Žižek's claim that postmodernists presuppose that 'capitalism is the only game in town', he can only react by claiming that "[t]he difficulty with assertions like this is that they mean absolutely

³ Laclau p. 204, 206, 289, 290, 301.

⁴ Ibid. 206.

⁵ Žižek 2000. p. 95.

⁶ Laclau p. 206.

nothing...unless he has a secret strategic plan of which he is very careful not to inform anybody.”⁷ Laclau’s (occasionally venomous) accusations that Žižek secretly harbours a longing for Soviet-style socialism cannot be seen as inconsistent reactions once his reading methodology is grasped as one that does not surpass a strict, closed reading of the text and which consequently relies on attributing to Žižek an existing politico-theoretical coordinate to explain away potential ambiguity.

Laclau is not the only high profile theorist Žižek has tumbled with. For some time after the publication of Žižek’s book *Violence* in 2008, an interesting exchange took place between him and Simon Critchley, which has been carried out over the internet and in scattered remarks throughout both authors’ works.⁸ There are two distinctive features of Simon Critchley’s account of Žižek. First, he tends to insist that Žižek supplement his Lacanian diagnoses of film and culture with positive, substantive political proposals; like other critics, he claims that without a positive, practical component political thought is akin to useless erudition. Additionally, Critchley attempts to reconcile what he understands to be the major contradiction in Žižek’s work by a detour through psychology, namely the use of the concept of ‘obsessional fantasy’.

Critchley adds that Žižek simply “betrays a nostalgia, which is macho and finally manneristic, for dictatorship, political violence and ruthlessness,”⁹ and that at root in Žižek’s writings is an eccentric hero worship of Lenin and authoritarianism (Critchley: “what Bakunin calls ‘crypto-Bismarckians’”).¹⁰ Critchley’s reactions to certain of Žižek’s theses appear to solidly parallel Laclau’s own (vis-à-vis ‘these assertions mean nothing’, etc.). In comparison to

⁷ Ibid. 206.

⁸ For example, see Žižek’s engagement with Critchley’s political theses in Žižek 2008A, as well as Critchley’s catty foreword to Žižek 2007B.

⁹ Critchley 2009.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Laclau, however, Critchley does not align Zizek with a political coordinate but rather deploys psychologistic jargon to excuse the author's bizarre penchants for authoritarianism and Lenin.

Leigh Claire La Berge follows Critchley's vulgar psychologism when she describes Zizek as the 'analysand of modernity.' La Berge nominates Zizek's readership as the collective analyst which must engage with Zizek's repetitive, 'desperate', and hidden demands.¹¹ Leaving aside the specific psychoanalytic jargon that buttresses La Berge's claims, what is worth noting in this approach is its dialogical understanding of the character of Zizek's theses, which take on legibility only through their prolonged and insistent engagement with a recurring series of detested Others, namely postmodernism and cultural studies. According to La Berge, and against Zizek's own calls for a renewed critique of political economy (which he never provides himself), the figures of postmodernism et al. are the sustaining forces of not only Zizek's ego but also his book sales revenues – hence his violent critiques of these positions mask a deep seated disavowal of his own dependence on them.¹²

Jeremy Gilbert's interpretation of Zizek is notable for its heavy emphasis on context and an implicit sociology of philosophical positions. Gilbert presents two 'unquestionable facts' that form the basis of his reading. The first fact is that Zizek, unlike non-celebrity academics, makes knowledge claims that rarely rely on citations or authoritative sources (and that are, furthermore, often incorrect, especially with respect to Zizek's analysis of the New Left).¹³ Gilbert ties this truth to his analysis of Zizek as a commodity-brand whose mass dissemination relies on an uncritical readership that treats celebrity status as authority unto itself (this produces a vicious cycle which accounts for the prolific yet repetitive and clownish nature of Zizek's writings – i.e. mass consumption of the Zizek brand coupled with complicit publishers happy to profit from and

¹¹ La Berge p. 13.

¹² Ibid. 22.

¹³ Gilbert p. 62.

solicit Žižek's works propels him to continue to write in his typical haphazard fashion, further fuelling his celebrity status).¹⁴ The second fact is that "Žižek's main objects of attacks have been on the Left."¹⁵ These attacks often reiterate and ape, according to Gilbert, the discourse of the American Right, which similarly finds in postmodernists and multiculturalists an enemy deserving of destruction.¹⁶ In a game of positions Žižek, who fails to make positive proposals of his own, has no other intellectual coordinates to which he can be assigned than to those of right-wing discourses 'backlashing' against multicultural openness.

Jodi Dean's work on Žižek in *Žižek's Politics* is certainly one of the stronger analyses of Žižek's main contributions to political theory. Taking Žižek's claims for granted, she brackets out his particular truth-claims. Similarly, rather than delve into the question of whether Žižek's reading of certain phenomena and philosophers is correct, Dean treats "these interpretations as aspects of his thought."¹⁷ Likewise, Dean does not attribute a positive project to Žižek's works, claiming that "he does not give us an answer; he does not know what we should do, but his thought provides an external point in relation to which we can organize, consider, and formalize our experiences as ideological subjects."¹⁸ For Dean, the role Žižek plays as analyst is limited to the content of his work. With respect to form, she writes that "becoming preoccupied with Žižek's style is like becoming preoccupied with what one's analyst is wearing."¹⁹ Similarly, she is not convinced that emphasizing Žižek's style or popularity is methodologically valuable; in this respect, she notes that there are more popular public intellectuals than Žižek.²⁰ Dean also limits her conception of style to Žižek's pop culture references, noting that "[t]he emphasis on

¹⁴ Ibid. 80.

¹⁵ Ibid. 62.

¹⁶ Ibid. 77.

¹⁷ Dean p. xx.

¹⁸ Ibid. xx.

¹⁹ Ibid. xix.

²⁰ Ibid. xiv.

style often reflects a prior conception of serious thinking as necessarily detached from popular culture,” and that “[i]f one’s goal is to understand Zizek, then a systematic approach has distinct advantages over the emphasis on style and the emphasis on difficulty.”²¹ This is somewhat tempered by Dean’s stress on what she calls the “deep nonrational and libidinal nugget in even the most rational, formal ways of thinking,”²² which she draws from Zizek’s own psychoanalytical leanings.

Dean’s work is focussed primarily on the content of Zizek, and this accounts for her dismissal of both the stylistic features and the prolific, insistent character of his writing. The novelty of Zizek gets lost in this missing dimension of form, and the specific features of Zizek’s interventions are thus reduced to contingent particularities. Despite the clarity of Dean’s expositions of Zizek’s work, she also neglects Zizek’s relationship to the history of Marxist thought. Coupled with her tendency to ignore or bracket the form which Zizek’s interventions take, Dean takes as novel many theses of Zizek’s that are, in fact, simply renewed and reloaded versions of classic Marxist concepts. A reader of Dean’s work who is well-versed in Marxist political thought would likely be a little underwhelmed by her presentation of Zizek, who, decontextualized from his theoretical lineage, appears as little more than an ‘ordinary’ Marxist with a penchant for Lacanian psychoanalysis. A final feature of Dean’s work is her heavy stress on Zizek’s early notion of ‘the Party,’ a concept that seems to carry relatively little currency (if any; it appears to have been altogether abandoned) in post-2005 publications of Zizek. Dean’s stress on this notion of the Party seems to move the emphasis she had initially placed on Zizek’s somewhat apolitical (or apractical) philosophizing to its inverse: an explicit call for concrete organization along ‘Party’ lines (whatever this may be – in Dean’s work, it is unclear why

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* xvii.

already existing leftist parties fail to constitute a ‘Party,’ and Dean’s engagement with what she labels the ‘practical’ or ‘political’ side of Zizek is virtually entirely limited to the ‘liberal left’, i.e. U.S. Democrats).

The duo of Rex Butler and Scott Stephens make the claim that Zizek’s apparent extremism masks his actual political position, which is in fact substantially equivalent to the ‘third way’ progressive policies of politicians like Tony Blair.²³ Butler/Stephens maintain that while Zizek accepts the content of the liberal third way, he rejects the form in which it takes; by this the authors mean not parliamentary democracy et al., but rather the third way’s concession in advance to the indestructibility of capitalism and its self-description as an ameliorative program that cannot transcend the horizons of capitalo-parliamentarism.²⁴ That is, Butler/Stephens claim that Zizek would be perfectly accepting of the third way if it only nominally kept open the possibility of a world beyond capitalism; they argue that this is the only political position possible for Zizek, who knows full well that there currently exists no tenable alternative to capitalism.²⁵

Research Question

Ultimately, the approaches to Zizek I have reviewed above each in their own way attempt to wrestle with the perplexing opacity of their object. With the exception of Dean, who seems oblivious to the ambiguities and potential contradictions in Zizek’s work, each of the authors presented seeks to inflate or diminish certain aspects of Zizek’s thought in order to be able to make sense of claims and positions that otherwise appear to be contradictory. The results of these approaches vary from flattering to venomous portrayals of Zizek, but all are nonetheless bound by the common attempt to render coherent something in Zizek’s writing that otherwise appears

²³ Butler and Stephens p. 7.

²⁴ Ibid. 5.

²⁵ Ibid. 8.

to be contradictory or incoherent. Of course, this is not problematic in and of itself: while some approaches are certainly less rigorous than others in their readings of Žižek, opacity in political thought is a valid object of study, and these authors are generally applying semi-consistent, albeit undertheorized, methodologies.

Rather, what I establish as problematic with these approaches, and where I find the space to insert my own contribution, is with respect to the lack of attention given to the field (or fields) in which Žižek's works are deployed. So to speak, critics are not focussed on the performative aspect of the text itself, but rather treat the text as something outside, or divorced from, the very field in which it attempts to intervene. Critics read Žižek as either failing to propose a positive project which others can or should take up, or they read him as proposing a project which is fundamentally cryptic, whether it be a nostalgic longing for Soviet-era totalitarianism or a renewed liberal Third Way.

Similarly, Žižek is treated as isolated, floating, and atomistic, divorced from any historical and theoretical roots, and not in dialogue with any authors or groups in particular. Without a notion of theory as partially historically determined and delimited by a field of authors and concepts both past and present, many of Žižek's interventions are treated as novel or overinflated in terms of value, when a glance at history would show that, occasionally, Žižek is not setting forth groundbreaking discoveries. That said, if certain of Žižek's theses are not new, then the problem with the literature is not only that it tends to neglect Žižek's historical predecessors, but that it also fails to recognize the form or style in which these older theses are redeployed, and what the significance of their redeployment is. In lieu of the approaches espoused by the preceding literature review, my research sets itself the task of proposing a new reading methodology that seeks to ask the question '**How do Žižek's works function as an act**

which seeks to modify the field it intervenes in?' In giving the performative aspect of textual interventions primacy of place, I will read the apparent contradictions in Zizek's works as stylistic efforts to push the envelope and provoke *certain responses and reactions from readers*, rather than form a coherent theory of political action in and of themselves.

I read Zizek as playing on themes that straddle Marxism and postmodernism (at least as he defines the terms, particularly the latter) in order to force a transformation in the way leftists think politics and the possibilities for emancipation. Zizek ultimately is not receptive towards contemporary leftist critiques of the global political and economic order, but has no positive project of his own with which to replace these critiques. Instead, Zizek exists as a force of pure negativity, negating and disturbing existing positions while simultaneously, at his most positive, deploying themes and concepts from the past with a 'twist.' While at a nominal level these themes remain tied to certain traditions, Zizek de-sutures them from their roots: the message is that while the old should not *a priori* be excluded, neither is it sufficient in itself to constitute a replacement of the new. While Zizek in part does wish to claim that there is some emancipatory potential even in the authoritarian ideals of certain elements of Marxism's political past, the real significance in dredging up such subjects as Lenin and the dictatorship of the proletariat, or disciplined resistance and the good intentions of Stalin, is to negate postmodern concessions to global capitalism while cheekily revealing that past traditions in and of themselves are insufficient means of escaping our current political situation. Ultimately, traditions are malleable, and Zizek's project is to demonstrate that, inasmuch as we can learn and in part recover valuable lessons from the past, new politico-theoretical coordinates remain necessary and require a radical break with existing positions; so to speak, we need to 'do the impossible' of breaking past the limits placed on thought, and the only way for Zizek to (help us) do this involves more than a

critical negation at the level of words and formal logic, but rather a performance which in part enervates and antagonizes audiences to challenge what he sees as the limitations to escaping constraints on theory.

Chapter 1: Tools of the Trade

Autopsies are never easy, even less so when the subject is still alive, kicking and screaming at the world through the medium of approximately two to three books per annum, with a penchant for general silliness and, in classical continental style, general opacity and obscurity. The most obnoxious stumbling block that confronts the pathologist, however, is composed of two questions: *what* to read and, much more importantly, *how* to read. While the former has been treated in the preceding chapter, it is the latter that must now meet its sorry end here, bringing our attention away from the banal details of literary rates of production and the categorization and genre-fication of texts, to the lofty heights of metatheoretical musing.

In this chapter, I will lay out my literary methodology, beginning with a brief discussion of metatheory and its importance for my work. Similarly, building on the insights of several political philosophers who I position squarely within the metatheoretical field, I will produce an ontology of political theory organized around three central characteristics: *dialogue*, *violence*, and *transmission*. Theory is *dialogical* insofar as each theorist is dependent on an engagement with a predecessor or contemporary in order to be legible; *violent* insofar as each theorist's practice is dependent on a constant mis- or reinterpretation of those thinkers s/he is in dialogue with; and *transmissive* insofar as each theorist participates in a historical lineage of 'conceptual baggage' which constrains and partially determines and delimits his/her thought. I develop these conceptual tools at length in order to clearly situate the more empirical work to follow, which uses these concepts as a guide to reading and analyzing the texts in question of Žižek.

Firstly, what is metatheory? There are two main defining features: its mission, and its conceptual tools. The mission statement of metatheory is relatively simple, at least in the shorthand: effectively, metatheory is a response to the question ‘how do we read political theory?’. It is a response in several respects. Traditionally, political theory has been (and certainly continues to be) the domain of what, for better or worse, I think can be called ‘exegetical herds.’ That is, political theorists flock around a great author, and engage in varied attempts to ‘puzzle out’ the enigma that is this author: What does X mean here? What is X trying to say? Why didn’t X say it like this?, etc. What tend to be left out of many of these analyses are the corollary follow-up questions: if X did mean that, then why? Who is X speaking to? What is X *doing* by writing?

The Why: metatheory seeks to understand a kind of intentionality,²⁶ or an end goal, that authors seek to achieve in writing. This is often a question we in political theory take for granted; generally, we implicitly assume that the ‘why’ behind an author’s writing is simply exposition, e.g. John Rawls writes in order to explain how he thinks justice can best be understood, or Foucault writes in order to explain the birth of madness and the prison, etc. Of course, at an elementary level this is all too true, and part of any author’s project is to successfully convey his or her ideas to an audience. And yet, the why of writing requires nonetheless some further elaboration, for if we write in order to convey our ideas, the next question that must be asked is, ‘what makes it possible to understand such an exposition in the first place?’. A strange question,

²⁶ ‘Intentionality’ in a weak sense. My methodology does not pretend to be able to correlate an author’s thoughts and motives with his/her works. Instead, ‘intentionality’ is understood in a materialist sense; for example, an author is found consistently demanding the need for a renewed critique of political economy, yet year in, year out, never even attempts to provide a such a critique him or herself. Such a demand should lead the analyst to characterize the author in question as either a fraud, hypocrite, or shit disturber. The repetition of such a demand on the author’s part presents itself as a practice which is clearly integral to the author’s project (unless s/he is simply a fraud), and the intentionality is read through the recognition of the device of repetition; what the author in question ‘really’ means by calling for a renewed critique is irrelevant.

but what I am attempting to get at is the idea that no text issues itself forward in a vacuum, and that multiple *points de capiton*²⁷ need be in place already for any sustained reception.

It is these *points* which metatheory seeks to trace in the text in question, recreating a network of relations among authors, positions, and concepts within the text in order to understand the real novelty of the production in question. Such a study differs in several distinct ways from more classical approaches to reading political theory. The most significant difference is with respect to what the end goal of our own reading is to be: for classical undertakings, reading and rereading political theory is done with a particular end goal in mind, namely the ability to identify the important concepts being put forward by an author, their potential impact, and the accuracy or inaccuracy of their respective subject's contributions.

None of these goals is particularly important for metatheory, primarily because it takes as its starting point the assumption that political theory is nothing other than a kind of prose literature, and I mean this in the most classical sense a possible, i.e. as art with its own particular vernacular and structure. A structure and distinctive vernacular: we are still speaking far too broadly of the field in question here, for nothing in the classical mode of doing political theory would imply that this is not the case (indeed, philosophy's unique role in the world is celebrated *ad nauseam*). Rather, when I write that political theory is a kind of literature with its own structure and vernacular, I do so with the intent of actually bringing the field down to earth; that is, by deploying the word 'literature' along similar lines as an English department might. This golden rule is effectively a means of stepping away from the typical lens used to understand

²⁷ *Points de capiton*: a Lacanian term, it refers to stabilizing points in a chain of signifiers. Laclau and Mouffe borrow this notion to present the concept of the nodal point of the hegemonic string of signifiers, and I deploy it here in a similar sense, referring to the anchoring coordinates of a text, i.e. its key interlocutors, heritage, concepts, and the defining problematic it seeks to insert itself into. Similarly, they anchor us as readers, since without their explicit and implicit references the text would not be legible as a clearly positioned and always polemical work, but rather amateurish babble (which has always had difficulty getting published).

philosophy, i.e. as a discipline which pronounces verdicts of truth or falsity on certain phenomena, or which attempts to produce truths, or even which attempts, as Marx and other critical thinkers would have it, to change the world.

In characterizing theory as a literature, I do not imply that it does not also share some of these features (it shares all of them), but only that each of these features presupposes particular theoretical approaches and reading methodologies that I am simply not interested in pursuing, particularly in the case of Žižek's works. In the same vein, this is not to say that approaches working on these levels are not doing relevant work, only that they tell a different story and, more importantly, possess a radically different object of study. When all is said and done, metatheory differs from classical ways of reading political theory in terms of its objects, which are not reducible to just a series of well chosen texts but actually the relations, the *points de capiton*, that sustain them and make them legible. Ultimately, and more than anything else, *metatheory seeks to understand and reveal relations through textual analysis*. This is done through careful, highly qualitative reading, with attention being directed along the lines of several conceptual parameters: *violence*, *dialogue*, and *transmission*. These three categories, which I will elaborate below, effectively act as a set of guidelines when it comes to reading the text under observation.

How It's Made

What got me by during that period was conceiving of the history of philosophy as a kind of ass-fuck, or what amounts to the same thing, an immaculate conception. I imagined myself approaching an author from behind and giving him a child that would indeed be his but would nonetheless be monstrous²⁸
-Gilles Deleuze

Philosophy as the production of an aberration: so Deleuze describes his early work on the canonical figures of philosophy, and so this chapter wishes to describe the mechanisms by which

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari 2004. p. lx.

theory works more generally. This passage can act as a convincing springboard by which *dialogue*, *violence*, and *transmission* may be understood in a general sense as interdependent features. The practice of philosophy as ‘a kind of ass-fuck’ simultaneously draws on a notion of *dialogical* understanding – Deleuze as the one who approaches from behind, the author as the object of his intent –, *violence* – the child is monstrous; that is, it is not quite as it should be naturally –, and *transmission* – monstrous though the child may be, s/he is undeniably that of the author Deleuze is engaging with; that is, creative as Deleuze’s production may be, it remains nonetheless partially delimited by the author in question, rather than a *creatio ex nihilo*.

These features presuppose a certain notion of philosophy which first needs to be fleshed out: because the question of truth becomes bracketed when exploring theoretical genealogies and relationships, theory from the perspective I will lay out becomes treated less as a discourse which pronounces valid or invalid theses than as another kind of prose literature with its own distinctive characteristics. The object of study is the way in which these three features are practiced within given texts, and how their practice produces an identifiable ‘structure’ of relations within theoretical productions. There is nothing natural or fixed about this structure, precisely because it is an effect of practices, rather than a reified model which constrains and determines these practices in advance.

Dialogue

In *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Pierre Bourdieu lays out an important methodological precept vis-à-vis studying philosophy. He writes that, when interpreting philosophical productions, the analyst is faced with two choices: the first is to accept all the rules of the ‘philosophical game,’ and participate as one of its members; the second is to reject these very rules, even at the risk of appearing naive or incompetent, and effectively treat philosophy as

a distinctive literature and network of relations.²⁹ In the former choice, one sees a trace of uncritical textualism: theses are accepted at face value, and the mass of philosophical jargon used to support them are left untreated as something sacrosanct and intrinsic to the text.

The alternative vision to an approach which takes as its basic starting point a notion of the text as self-enclosed and self-identical is one which does the inverse: that is, one which features the text in *dialogue* with others. This notion of textual *dialogue* calls upon Bourdieu's 'field,' particularly his description of the field of philosophy. This field is defined by its own internal history and a series of implicit rules and regulations governing productions which serves to demarcate the professional thinker from the amateur.³⁰ Bourdieu writes that philosophical stances

claim, and are considered, to be philosophical in so far, and only in so far, as they are defined in relation to the field of stances philosophically known and recognized at a given moment in time; in so far as they succeed in being acknowledged as pertinent responses to the *problematic* which is most pressing at any given moment, in terms of the antagonisms which constitute the field.³¹

That is, legitimacy is granted to those authors who are able to insert themselves into the network of thinkers and concepts that act as the anchoring points (or, as I have used earlier, *points de capiton*) of the field. This presupposes a certain knowledge of both the history of the field and the current matrix of available positions, knowledge which can be conscious or unconscious. To earn a legitimate status as a philosopher or political theorist is to be able to identify contemporary problematics and debates in the field, and would-be theorists are groomed from

²⁹ Bourdieu p. 55.

³⁰ "Thus we may contrast the professional philosopher with the 'primitive philosopher' who, like the 'primitive painter' in the realm of art, does not truly understand what he is doing or saying. Because he is ignorant of the specific history of which the philosophical field is the result, and which is incorporated into socially instituted positions as well as built into its specific problematic in terms of a space of possible stances for the holders of different positions, the amateur delivers up crude thought, destined...to become the raw material of the knowing meditations of the true professional, who is able to constitute as such the *problem* which the layman is tackling unwittingly." Ibid. 35.

³¹ Ibid. 42.

the earliest days of their university careers to be able to do this successfully (as Bourdieu would put it, it is an integral part of the legitimate academic's *habitus*).

Understood in this light, theoretical texts need to be grasped as a multiplicity of simultaneously ongoing conversations, rather than as manifestos, creeds, or proposals that issue themselves forth without any regard for competing positions or existing problematics. Indeed, with the notion of *dialogue* in mind, theses issued in a vacuum do not, and cannot, exist, and instead understanding any text in such a manner depends rather on the methodology with which we opt to read it. The reading methodology I propose instead looks at a given text as being supported by a network of relations between authors, and theses are always grasped with a given interlocutor or interlocutors in mind. Considered like this, texts almost take on the quality of a 'staged' conversation, where a single author, responsible for the production in question, implicitly produces an interlocutor who can be identified through the use of key concepts and through dialogue with a central problematic. This interlocutor *can* be a contemporary, but may just as easily be a long dead thinker whose contribution continues to define the field.

The *dialogical* features of an author's thought are also discernible in the relationship each author has with his/her readership, or through an analysis of what defines the reader-consumer of each author's thought. This is simply a question of 'what kind of media does the author publish in?', and similarly involves broadening the scope of analysis beyond the written text to the audio and visual, accessible electronically. This 'contextual' factor allows for an additional metric by which the author's rootedness in a given field may be determined, and gives full weight to the notion of theory as dialogical, dependent not just on a relationship with a canon of thinkers but also with a given readership.

Violence

The *dialogical* nature of theory is never without its casualties, however. Althusser writes that a philosophy

exists only in so far as it occupies a position, and it occupies this position only in so far as it has conquered it in the thick of an already occupied world. It therefore exists only in so far as this conflict has made it something distinct, and this distinctive character can be won and imposed only in an indirect way, by a detour involving ceaseless study of other, existing positions.³²

Thus, philosophy is both *dialogical and confrontational* (or, as I have called it above, *violent*) – in this sense does Althusser, borrowing from Kant, deploy the concept of the *Kampfplatz*, “the battlefield which is philosophy.”³³ A philosophy’s legibility and, indeed, its *acceptance* into the already existing throng of the speakable and respectable, depends then on a relationship with already existing philosophical positions (‘...an already occupied world...’) and problematics, a relationship which is defined by constant demarcations against other positions in order to stake out its own identity.

This notion of *violence* is comprehensible only in tandem with the notion of *dialogue*, and serves to highlight the relational nature of theoretical productions. *Violence* should be understood not only as a theorist taking up a stance *against* another position, but also in the interpretive sense; that is, there is always a violence done to the ‘original sense’ of a predecessor’s or contemporary’s text in the act of taking up a position. This interpretive violence is what allows for creative outbursts in philosophy or for certain schools of thought to develop over time into something that may be unrecognizable to the founding thinkers of a tradition. Without the practice of *violence*, philosophy would quite literally reproduce the same set of theses *ad nauseam*, and there would be no possibility for either innovation or the creation of new positions. In my methodology, *violence* also acts as a placeholder: because there is no space to

³² Althusser. 1990 p. 205.

³³ *Ibid.* 205. See also p. 116, 124, 193, 198, and 255. See also Althusser 2006 p. 221. 257, and 268.

detail in depth the homology (as Bourdieu puts it) between the philosophical and the extratextual political, *violence* acts as an operator which allows for my analysis to remain restricted to the text itself as an object of study, though an object which takes on legibility through the themes and authors engaged within it and the violence done to them, both interpretively and polemically.

It is this polemical side of *violence* which takes on particular significance in my analysis. My approach to interpretation, which sets aside questions of validity and conceptual accuracy, emphasizes instead the role of form and style in textual interventions. An ontology of philosophy that essentially focuses on the *dialogical* nature of theoretical productions implies that philosophical theses are not as transparent as they may appear to be, precisely on account of their dependence on an (absent *or* present) interlocutor to whom these theses are in fact addressed and the constraining entanglements of the history of philosophy. This *dialogical* nature of philosophy implies that, occasionally, authors engage in an active process of ‘bending the stick.’ Citing Lenin, Althusser argues that, in order to straighten a stick bent too far in the wrong direction, one must bend it in the opposite direction with a good deal of force. Althusser writes:

I remembered Machiavelli, whose rule of Method, rarely stated but always practised, was that one must think *in extremes*, which means within a position from which one states borderline theses, or, to make the thought possible, one occupies the place of the impossible.³⁴

This means that a certain ‘extremism’ of thought is necessary in order to contest dominant theories and patterns of thought, if only to carve a path for a new theoretical space, the desired result – yet a result only possible because of the push-pull nature of theoretical ‘warfare’. He goes further:

[E]ven in the apparently abstract domain called philosophy, you cannot content yourself with simply preaching the naked truth, and waiting for its anatomical obviousness to ‘enlighten’ minds....you are forced, since you want to force a change in ideas, to recognize the force which is

³⁴ Althusser 1990 p. 209.

keeping them bent, by applying a counterforce capable of destroying this power and bending the stick in the opposite direction so as to put the ideas right.³⁵

Stylistically, this involves the use of what may be more simply called rhetoric or even exaggeration; ‘extremist’ posturing that sets itself against more common patterns of thought in order to open up a space for something truly novel – in this respect the novelty is not so much the bending of the stick, which may take the form of rehashing theses which appear to be older, antiquated, or distasteful, but rather the space or gap that is opened as a result of such a bending.

This kind of analysis depends on two presuppositions. The first has already been explicated above: networks and relations as the object of study. The second presupposition is this: while I maintain that all theoretical traditions possess their own internal history,³⁶ and while I have already confessed that studying the homology between the theoretical and the political is outside the scope of this venue, theory nevertheless does not operate strictly within one register. That is to say, referring back to the concept of *dialogue*, authors have not only interlocutors but also *audiences*. The distinction I wish to make between the two is that, while the text unfolds itself as a series of staged discussions – between the author and other authors, concepts, fields, etc. –, the audience is defined almost solely by its passive receptivity. By this I mean simply that, while audiences are certainly kept in mind by authors at the stage of producing a work (e.g. at what level of complexity should I write?; who do I suspect will read this?; etc. And if authors themselves are not always particularly conscientious of these questions, their publishers certainly are), they never really appear within the work itself as a legitimate interlocutor, and they are passive and receptive in this sense alone (since the looming spectre of an audience does impact production).

³⁵ Ibid. p. 210.

³⁶ See the subsection entitled “Transmission” below.

The register of the lay audience also depends on a relationship with the author quite different from the professional reader. Bourdieu makes an important distinction between the professional and amateur thinker, and it is worth recalling it here. While the amateur thinker (and this thinker is a part of the lay audience) cannot participate directly in the conversations taking place within a text (i.e. s/he will not be referenced or acknowledged as having a stake in the legitimate discussion.), s/he is a part of the ongoing dialogue insofar as s/he forms part of the mass of readers who ultimately play a part in determining the hegemonic status of an author. While a handful of groupies who are not professionally trained in philosophy can do little to improve their master's status, an army of activists drawing their inspirations from a given corpus can certainly have an impact. This audience thus presents itself as a site of struggle for those theorists who speak in several registers, and if part of theory's significance is the fact that it always carries within itself the potential to be translated into political action (or, at the least, inspire it heavily), then the way in which authors impart their theories to this class of readers is perhaps of greater value than the way in which they communicate with their peers and rivals.

In any case, the fact of an audience, a readership, destroys any possible facade of theory as a strictly internally determined field, with no proper outside. What I wish to bring to attention here is a performative aspect of writing which, in certain respects, requires its own discussion apart from the *violence* which occurs within texts. While I still make no claim to be able to study and measure the homology between theory and the political, authors and audiences, I do wish to claim that it exists, and its explicit recognition adds a slight twist to the notion above of bending the stick in order to create a gap. I have already stated that I do not wish to study political theory as a discipline defined by the production of logical propositions and truth claims, but rather one defined by the production and reproduction of positions. If we understand these positions as

being inherently *violent* and, ultimately, expansionist in nature (all positions seek to become hegemonic), part of these conquests must occasionally be measured by audience consumption, the volume of production of texts, their circulation, etc. More than this, political theory should in many cases³⁷ be grasped as an attempt not only to produce truth claims, but to have them accepted *en masse*. In this sense, certain hallmarks of writings should alert the pathologist to a given author's attempts to politicize and enervate audiences, a kind of action radically distinct from simply attempting to persuade or reveal to them the truth or falsity of a given proposition within a given debate.

This is not to say that politicizing and theorizing are distinct activities; indeed, they often occupy the same space. However, since the object of this study is not to discern the accuracy of theoretical claims or whether an author like Žižek does justice to his intellectual forefathers, registering politicizing gestures within the text can be done by paying careful attention to their distinctive features. Among them I list the following devices: hyperbole, humour, anecdotes, and pop references. I pay attention to these devices for several reasons, foremost among them the fact that, particularly in the case of Žižek, I think, they tend to stand out. I pay attention to them because they tend to stand out: a tautology if there ever was one. To elaborate, it might be better to say that I imbue them with meaning because they tend to stand out, because reviewers of Žižek tend to make a fuss about them (simply read the back of any Žižek book jacket, or any short blurb describing Žižek), and because traditionally these devices have been neither well received within theoretical circles nor well deployed. Far from making a claim that academic audiences are not equipped with the properly human trait of humour, I simply wish to stress how these devices allow for a smoother reception by lay audiences, and that employing these devices

³⁷ I say 'many' and not 'all' simply because I believe that there are authors who ultimately are not overly concerned with their reception by laypeople.

is a purposeful technique used to either develop more difficult concepts or in order to politicize and persuade readers in a way distinct from traditional theoretical means (i.e. the ‘rational persuasive’ model).

Of course, the question always arises: how does one identify certain of these devices? Particularly in the case of rooting out hyperbole, the analyst needs a sure way of discerning the ‘unexaggerated median’ of the author in question, and recognizing what is in fact hyperbole and what, on the other hand, standard fare for the author in question. In the case of Žižek, this device is most commonly identified through the recognition of apparent contradictions within the text. While the relative correctness or truth of an author’s claims are not important for this study, internal cohesion must be recognized as part of the academic *habitus*. So to speak, authors in political theory attempt to build coherent structures and statements and, when this is not the case, the analyst needs to consider whether this is so because the author in question is ignorant or stupid, or because, in fact, what is at stake in such an apparent contradiction is form over content.

If we consider that theses are never deployed in a vacuum, and that occasionally theses take a radical ‘bend’ in order to transform existing theoretical coordinates, we must also allow for a greater role for form in writing. I label the literary devices listed above as indicators of a performative aspect of textual productions precisely for this reason. Because the author depends on not only the strength of his/her arguments but also the traction it carries with particular audiences, a traction that is developed through ‘extrarational’ means, texts employing these devices can be said to be partaking in a ‘doing,’ a performance that is distinct from traditional means of theoretical dissemination. More than this, I read these devices as symptoms of the reality that, at times, political theory operates at several different registers and is produced in such a way as to be legible to distinct audiences simultaneously. Texts should be understood as

performative in this sense in that they are active participants in the realm of the political, as material embodiments of ideas which seek to move, energize, and politicize readers in ways not typically associated with traditional forms of theorizing.

Transmission

The final feature of philosophy I wish to stress is what I call *transmission* – or the way in which the field’s internal history structures present productions. Deleuze puts this very well: “[C]oncepts are and remain signed: Aristotle’s substance, Descartes’s cogito, Leibniz’s monad, Kant’s condition, Schelling’s power, Bergson’s duration.”³⁸ Concepts are not ‘signed’ in a metaphysical sense, but rather are recognized *within the field* as being the ‘possession’ of a certain thinker, thus denoting a distinctive position within the network of available spaces. That is, to call upon the cogito in a philosophical production is to call on Descartes, which in turn serves to identify the author’s position based on his proximity to Descartes and Descartes’ problematic. Bourdieu adds that “[t]he inheritor of a learned tradition always refers to his predecessors or his contemporaries in the very distance which he adopts towards them.”³⁹

Transmission remains a distinct feature from *dialogue* in one important respect. Theory understood as a *dialogical*, relational network of positions presents the field as a monolithic cartography where an author like John Rawls is as likely to encounter Jean Baudrillard as he is Robert Nozick. *Transmission* serves to further define and narrow the way the field of philosophy is understood: if concepts are signed, and call forth certain authors and certain problematics, they are not called forth equally by every philosopher. That is, concepts are defined not only by the author they are affiliated with, but equally by the tradition that the author identifies with or is identified as belonging to, and similarly by the concepts which that author draws upon. In the

³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari 1994 p. 7.

³⁹ Bourdieu p. 41.

most elementary sense, authors can become identified by the concepts they use, the authors they call upon, and thus the ‘school of thought’ or ‘tradition’ they may belong to. This does not presuppose that all authors have a ‘family’; peculiar uses of concepts or thinkers means the author deploying them may be identified as belonging to a position which straddles several subfields, or may necessitate the use of a prefix like neo-, or the hyphenization of two separate traditions, or even the coining of a new term by which the author can be identified (though this does not disconnect him/her from the network of positions, but rather only changes the coordinates).

For the purposes of analysis, this necessitates attention to a certain feature prevalent in all texts: references. Relations between the author and competing positions and concepts are traced precisely through the author’s referencing of them, a purposeful activity that serves to accomplish several things. First, referencing another position acts as an act of anchoring oneself to an existing position, debate, or concept. This is done precisely by creating a point of legibility, or a foil, which the author in question can utilize to set his own theses against. Secondly, understanding the quantitative side of referencing can allow the pathologist to trace the most significant relations within a text based on their frequency of appearance. Such an undertaking is never simply a game of addition, where the most referenced position is necessarily the most important. However, the quantity of repetitions tends, once coupled with a qualitative and more indepth study, to produce a fairly convincing picture of the relative importance a distinct position or concept has to the author being studied.

Similarly, these conversations are not traced strictly through the referencing of proper names. In addition to explicit references, authors occasionally draw on and/or engage with certain schools and authors by way of concepts. In this case, these connections are best identified

through a thematic approach to the texts in question. The distinction between a theme and a concept is incredibly artificial and arbitrary, but this category is essentially a way of grouping concepts based on familial associations, allowing the analysis to be presented and undertaken in a considerably more organized fashion. Like the identification of key interlocutors, a theme's relative importance can usually be discerned based on the quantity and quality with which it is repeated across a text or *oeuvre*. More precisely, actually, a theme can be inferred or produced by the analyst as a shorthand for a series of familial concepts, and by dividing the concepts and interlocutors being studied in this manner give the analysis more richness and precision than it might otherwise have.

In sum, philosophy is a field defined by its history and its networks, by the practices of its members, and by the ceaseless struggle of these members to eke out or subscribe to a niche within this network. These features only require a minimum of commentary in their abstract form, because they are not claims that can be validated in classical philosophical form: rather, they require either a leap of faith, or empirical validation – validation which my work will ultimately provide through a detailed and close analysis of Žižek's textual and audio-visual interventions from 2005 to the present.

Chapter 2: Marxism Strikes Back

The Marxist imaginary is a rich one, spanning over a century's worth of thinkers from across the world. For the creative political theorist, it is fertile soil which is constantly open to transformation and innovation, despite the work of an ever-shrinking cadre of faithful who seek to preserve it in a crystallized, traditional form. Žižek's appearance on this scene initially confronts the reader as something of a paradox, then, an enigma. For, as well known as Žižek is as a provocateur (by his critics) and innovator (by his adoring disciples), his play on the Marxist imaginary appears at first glance to openly flout the conservative work of Marxism's 'old school' while simultaneously drawing on a conceptual apparatus so antiquated even they fear its use.

Despite the possible misgivings that might arise regarding Žižek's fond recollections of the life of Lenin, or his self-admitted obsession with Stalinism, what is a concerned Marxist to do today? While it would be ridiculous to claim, in quintessentially arch-conservative terms, that Marxist theory has historically been held captive by Moscow *apparatchiks* (and why is it only conservatives who still have fun using this amorphous word? What does it even mean?), there remains nonetheless something to be said for the role of authority in the reproduction and safeguarding of theoretical paradigms. In Europe today, for example, there are no longer Soviet sanctified national Parties which attempt to uphold and act as the guardians of Marxist knowledge. In this context, who can truly be said to guard the canon? Similarly, without an acknowledged legion of guardians, how do authors participate in this field? The question is far from a moot one, particularly considering Marxism's history. The example of Althusser is telling in this regard. By his own confession, he was always conscientious of the effects his theoretical

productions would have on the Communist movement, and this generally meant how his work would be received by its political receptacle, the Party.⁴⁰

Althusser's own project in *Reading Capital* of retrieving a philosophy of Marxism from Marx's mature works is a testament to this – indeed, the very act of separating a young from a mature Marx was a devastating blow directed against his theoretical opponents within the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and prominent philosophers employing Marx's thought (particularly Sartre). Althusser not only demarcated an 'ideological' Marx from a 'scientific' Marx, he also set about levelling the theoretical edifices built upon the former's conception of alienation. Without engaging the point in excessive detail, the moral of the story is simply that Althusser undercut his opponents at two distinct levels: not only at a highly philosophical level (alienation is a crypto-religious problematic; humanism is untenable; both are heavily implicated in the philosophy and ideological practices of bourgeois apologists; etc.), but also at a 'historiographical' level (the posthumous publication of many of the manuscripts of the Young Marx – manuscripts he was unwilling to publish during his lifetime; a close textual and at times biographical investigation that hypothesized a break in Marx's thought at the time of *The German Ideology*; a strict separation between the ideological and the scientific; etc.).

Why did he bother to do this? Because, according to Althusser in an interview given in the mid 1980s, nearly two decades after the scandalous publication of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, "now the party could not expel me, because my directly political interventions were grounded in Marx, whom I interpreted in 'critical and revolutionary' fashion. Marx protected me

⁴⁰ It is worth clarifying here that in no ways do I read national Communist Parties as having been the sole source of authority regarding the production of Marxist theory; in some cases, they were hardly relevant at all, and typically functioned as only one among many sources of authority, among which I include printing presses, established and pre-sanctified intellectuals (how better to mark a new author's embrace into the fold than with a Preface?), and historical traditions, theoretical and political.

even in the Party, thanks to his status as the ‘sacrosanct Father of our thought.’⁴¹ Contra Marx’s young, bourgeois, and idealist humanism, Althusser posited anti-humanism, or ahumanism, and though these were radical breaks within Marxist thought at the time, they all the while remained within ‘the Father’s’ gaze. In short, the only way to escape the crypto-religious problematic endemic to the Young Marx, fast gaining popularity among Marxist circles in Althusser’s heyday, was to undercut this specific problematic while remaining within the broader scope of Marxism as such.

The point is precisely that the limits of Marxism, the movement’s and theory’s very contours, were determined *a priori* by the reception with which new ideas were met by, in the case of France at least, the PCF. Far from suggesting that philosophers were slaves to the Soviet Union’s Western European pets, this point only serves to accentuate how Marxist knowledge and its production depended not only on specific source texts (e.g. *Capital*, *The Paris Manuscripts*, etc.), that is, specific *scriptures* and *names*, but also, in many instances, the blessings of institutions who were understood then to be the true specialists (or, in the case of printing presses, disseminators) with a claim to legitimate Marxist knowledge.⁴² Althusser’s rise to prominence thus required that he pay a price, and he recognizes this well in the quote above: that is, that in order to truly speak and be heard, he had to speak the holy words from the holy books, while the authorities were listening. This is not to say, as Althusser well knew, that failure to adhere to these implicit rules would result in the inability to publish⁴³ and find a readership, only

⁴¹ Althusser 2006 p. 256.

⁴² It is worthwhile recalling here Foucault’s highly critical remarks regarding Marxism (and, more covertly, Althusser), rhetorically asking what is at stake in the codification of Marxism as a ‘science.’

⁴³ Although occasionally finding a publisher *could* be difficult; for example, Althusser generally had great difficulty having anything published through the PCF’s publishing house, and his re-telling of his attempt to have his works published in the Soviet Union is enough to have any academic pull his/her own hair out. For Althusser’s own re-telling of one particular instance of this struggle, see Althusser 2003 p. 224.

that his message could most effectively be conveyed by following the codes inscribed in his particular field (read: *transmission*).

For better or for worse, the rules of the game have changed today. It is quite easy to notice that, where there *are* Communist Parties, no one is listening – their role as specialists has been utterly ruined, likely beyond repair. Who and what has taken up the mantle, then, of protector of this field’s history and contours? In certain respects, no one. Zizek himself recognizes this when he describes the Marx which exists today:

On the one hand, in the English-speaking world, we get the cultural-studies Marx, the Marx of the postmodern sophists, of the messianic promise; in continental Europe, where the ‘traditional’ division of intellectual labor remains stronger, we get a sanitized Marx, the ‘classical’ author to whom a (marginal) place can be accorded in the academy. On the other hand, we get the Marx who foretold the dynamic of today’s globalization and is as such evoked even on Wall Street. What all these Marxes have in common is the denial of politics proper...it is essentially post-Marxist.⁴⁴

What Zizek alludes to is the breakdown of paternal authority within Marxism that I have described above. Marx is quite literally used ‘everywhere’ and by ‘everyone,’ appropriated and re-appropriated as just another form of theoretical validation for particular schools of thought and fields. Fields which, at least to Zizek’s chagrin, have nothing to do with Marxism proper (and his use of the prefix ‘post’ accentuates this; the ‘post-Marxist’ Marx literally signals an age ‘after Marx’).

What is left for the would-be defenders of the faith is thus the difficult task of re-appropriating authority and re-establishing the parameters of Marxism proper. This is done by accruing knowledge capital in the field, and the distinction here between knowledge and knowledge *capital* must be made clear. The former can be developed by anyone with the time and patience to acquaint him or herself with a field and develop a mastery over it; so to speak,

⁴⁴ Zizek 2007A p.2. It is, however, worth considering how traditions such as analytical and political Marxism à la Brenner, for example, continue to fall outside the purview of ‘post-Marxism.’ Zizek’s ‘re-constitution’ of Marxism’s borders thus implicitly depends on its shifting emphasis on the prefix ‘post.’

knowledge is the end goal of the amateur, the demi-connoisseur of ideas.⁴⁵ Knowledge *capital*, however, is much more dialogical, requiring external and internal recognition from competing schools and peers, respectively.

This capital is developed and maintained as a *practice*, which is carried out over years through texts, interviews, and public engagements which allow for the practitioner to artfully deploy and cultivate his or her expertise and authority (and be recognized as one). One of the ways in which this is undertaken is through the use of proper names and their deployment. As Alain Badiou puts it, Communism as a movement and ‘Idea’ has been “distinguished all along the way by proper names, which define it historically, which represent it....proper names are involved in the operation of the Idea.”⁴⁶ Knowledge is thus reiterated and recited, the preceding authority figures recalled in order to ground the practitioner – the one who wishes to develop and have acknowledged his or her knowledge capital – in the traditions of the field and in the sources which found a practitioner’s authority. Accruing knowledge capital is an integral part of Zizek’s project, and he does this by calling on the pantheon of great Marxists, skilfully displaying an in depth knowledge of each and setting them forth to buttress his arguments when necessary.⁴⁷

However, as he has already pointed out, Marx is utilized in a number of fields for a number of purposes, many of which Zizek does not share. To ‘simply’ talk about Marx would be to reproduce the same rituals that a number of other fields, by Zizek’s accounts, have already undertaken: that is, acknowledge him as an author who can be assimilated anywhere, as one who belongs to a field where authority has broken down into borderless wilderness, open to anyone

⁴⁵ The graduate student represents a kind of half-way point, desperately seeking (your) approval, but whose work is to be relegated to the digitalized dustbin of the University’s online library (in addition to warming the otherwise empty shelves of the photocopy room).

⁴⁶ Badiou 2010A p. 250.

⁴⁷ Zizek calls on Marxists as disparate as G.A. Cohen and Walter Benjamin with ease, even if at times superficially. When the dust settles, however, it is Stalin who tends to be the winner in this bibliometric war.

with the will to access it. The point is not that these schools are not *actually* faithful to Marx since, as implied, there is never a fixed authority. Rather, authority needs to be constantly founded and re-founded through practices which act to set the perimeters of the field in question; for Marxism in Europe after WWII, this was often done by a combination of the Soviet Union, national Parties in Western Europe, and individual thinkers who tried to navigate a path between the two. So to speak, authority derives from the practices which *reiterate* it rather than from those golden souls who stand alone as the sole beneficiaries of textual knowledge. Far from a Straussianesque notion that there resides within each work inherent truth, and that to know this truth is to establish oneself as an authority, philosophical authorities rather establish themselves by *material* means; i.e. through positions held, works published, their social capital within the field of lecturers and writers, etc. While this authority is still determined, in the last instance, by their expertise on a subject matter (itself a practice which depends in part on the validation of others), the books, pun intended, are never closed.

In this light, ‘misreadings’ or ‘misunderstandings’ of philosophers and concepts become relative, and a locutionary act is always required to establish any production as erroneous; there is no reading that is wrong ‘in itself,’ and even the great textualists have always had to stand up for their own rigid readings of texts against creative spirits (read: authority as a practice). In Žižek’s case, he produces a demarcation within the amorphous field of Marxism (recall: amorphous precisely because authority has been broken down, and Marx exists ‘everywhere’ for ‘everyone’) by saying aloud that *there are*⁴⁸ those who mis-use Marx, and this nomination is a practice that assists in the development of his authority status and knowledge capital. And yet, citing Marx alone is no longer quite sufficient; *that* name alone is not sufficient as a guarantee. It

⁴⁸ According to Alain Badiou, all philosophy depends on acts of nomination, an ‘il y a’ that establishes empirical indices of Ideas (Badiou 2010A p. 229-234).

means very little at this point to rely on a name used by all in order to re-found an authority which seeks to guarantee the proper use of this name! Out of necessity, then, Marx must be buttressed by others, and re-establishing authority within Marxism must be carried out through the resuscitation of other names, other thinkers, and by establishing a natural link between these others and Marx (or, more precisely, what it means to be Marxist).

This chapter will focus on Zizek's engagement with particular concepts and icons of Marxism, most importantly his establishment of Lenin as an instructive case for both theory and practice today; the redeployment of the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the value it *could have* for leftist political projects and horizons; and, lastly, Zizek's consistent reiteration for a need for renewed 'critique of political economy' alongside his assault on classical Marxism and 'nostalgic' communists. Using the tools I have laid down in the preceding chapter, I understand all of these themes within Zizek's works as part of a sustained attempt to produce several effects within the field of Marxism. Firstly, Zizek attempts to re-inaugurate *authority* or, in other words, to control *transmission*. According to Zizek, Marxism currently exists as something fluid, intangible, and ethereal,⁴⁹ and only an authority that monitors the *transmission* of concepts and themes can salvage Marxism's emancipatory potential. I will argue that such an attempt at controlling *transmission* requires sustained *violence*; this is done by deploying particular concepts to displace, disturb, and effectively demotivate those others that have, in Zizek's eyes, parasitically latched onto the Marxist imaginary and polluted the field. This struggle similarly involves (re)creating a field with its own particular interlocutors;

⁴⁹ The following chapter further highlights Zizek's view of Marxism as a corrupted field; those Marxists who are not part of an anachronistic 'orthodoxy,' according to Zizek, tend to have been polluted by 'postmodernist' attempts to re-orient political struggles along more contemporary lines, eschewing notions of class struggle and even, Zizek claims, the possibility of a future after capitalism.

authority must ultimately monitor who is involved in *dialogue*, in addition to what is at stake and what is up for debate.

Hello, Lenin

Every field has its pantheon, sacred names that are called upon to safeguard theses as much as they are to intimidate detractors. Yet titans can be overthrown, and it is never easy to resurrect the fallen. Zizek's priority in this regard has been, for some time, Lenin, whom he nominates as the 'St. Paul' of Marxism.⁵⁰ This glorification of and fascination with Lenin ranges from the academic to the banal. In *Violence*, for example, Lenin is lightheartedly deployed as part of the central joke (and, simultaneously, the central thesis) of the opening chapter, while in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Zizek's engagement with the icon is much more pronounced and in depth. And while Zizek has effectively sponsored a re-publishing of certain of Lenin's works, collected under the title *Revolution at the Gates*, Lenin trivia – sometimes nothing more than 'as Lenin would put it' or 'as Lenin said in 1914...' – is a popular trademark of many of Zizek's own works.

Nonetheless, what defines Zizek's project to resuscitate Lenin is not so much a sustained, scholarly spirit of investigation as it is a move to recalibrate the lacking authority within the field of Marxism, while simultaneously displacing the 'faint of heart' and reconfiguring the field's parameters. 'The faint of heart': is Zizek attempting to recreate a Marxism that is overly paternal and masculinistic, focussed on heroic overcoming and strength? Possibly, though without the space to explore this, I will leave it aside as speculation at the moment. Rather, to understand the 'faint of heart,' one must first recall Zizek's understanding of Marxism today. As cited earlier,

⁵⁰ "In the same way that St. Paul and Lacan reinscribed original teachings into different contexts (St. Paul reinterpreting Christ's crucifixion as his triumph; Lacan reading Freud through mirror-stage Saussure), Lenin violently displaces Marx, tearing his theory out of its original context, placing it in another historical moment, and thus effectively universalizing it." See Zizek 2007A p. 2.

Marx belongs to ‘everyone and no one,’ to the liberal disciplines and business schools alike, and by drawing on a figure who continues to conjure feelings of distaste, Zizek disturbs the existing usage of Marx.

In the introduction to *Lenin Reloaded*, a collection of papers from a 2001 conference on Lenin organized by Zizek and several other like-minded academics, Lenin is presented in the following terms:

Why Lenin, why not simply Marx? Is the proper return not the return to origins proper? [...] For us, ‘Lenin’ is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite the contrary, the Lenin that we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old reference points proved useless, and who was thus compelled to *reinvent* Marxism. The idea is that it is not enough simply to return to Lenin [...] for we must *repeat* or *reload* him; that is, we must retrieve the same impulse in today’s constellation.⁵¹

The answer provided by Zizek to the opening question must be read in context, specifically his depiction of the current condition of the field. In *Violence*, Zizek disparages ‘liberal communists,’ those philanthropists and philanthropically-minded individuals who seek to ameliorate the mayhem caused by capitalism by recourse to charity; that is, by treating the symptoms of the illness that is capitalism rather than the cause itself. In line with his understanding of the breakdown of the field, Zizek depicts these liberal communists’ facile and heretical use of Marx as self-justificatory tools in a typical tongue-in-cheek style:

If they’ve changed now [liberal communists; particularly those inclined towards leftism during their youth], it’s not because they resigned themselves to reality, but because they needed to change in order *really* to change the world, *really* to revolutionise our lives. Hadn’t Marx already asked: what are political upheavals in comparison with the invention of the steam engine? Didn’t this do more than all revolutions to change our lives? And would Marx not have said today: what are all the protests against global capitalism worth in comparison with the invention of the internet?⁵²

⁵¹ Zizek 2007A p.2-3.

⁵² Zizek 2008B p. 19.

Likewise, he mocks post-Marxists' and faux-Marxists' "all-too-slick accommodation to 'new circumstances,'" ⁵³ elsewhere reducing what he describes as 'the crisis of Marxism' ⁵⁴ to "the shift from determinate reflection to reflective determination." ⁵⁵

It is this context which sets the stage for Lenin's 'shocking' reintroduction. Lenin takes on a dual purpose: not only as an icon that elicits a predetermined response, but also as a model of emulation and, perhaps most importantly, a fertile source for creativity. With respect to Lenin's first purpose, consider only the quoted section from *Lenin Reloaded*: the authors literally recount how distasteful it is that they reload Lenin. ⁵⁶ This is effectively an explicit register of Lenin's subversive use, and serves again to highlight how authors' understanding of a field shape the way they seek to interact with and transform it. It is not enough, however, to simply horrify the field into submission; though this in itself is a case of theory as a practice, Leninist would-be 'vanguard parties' and old-school Trotskyists already roam freely over many campuses, ⁵⁷ and are hardly a disturbance for all but the most resentful free-marketeers and conservative fanboys. Rather, horror must be artfully deployed; it must illuminate a point, and the form cannot be completely mistaken for the content.

In this regard, Lenin is utilized as, for better or worse, a role model. To understand how precisely he functions as one, it is necessary to further grasp Zizek's understanding of Marxism

⁵³ Zizek 2008A p. 3.

⁵⁴ The notion of the 'crisis of Marxism' has haunted the field since the 1980s, when European Communist parties suffered devastating electoral defeats they would never recover from (in addition, of course, to the virtual disappearance of the proletariat proper in the developed world). These events were shortly followed by the collapse of Soviet power at the end of the decade. This theme is heavily drawn upon by authors like Badiou and Zizek throughout many of their works, often echoing Althusser's remarks on the subject.

⁵⁵ Zizek 2006 p. 4.

⁵⁶ This sentiment is echoed elsewhere; for example, see Zizek 2007B p. 217.

⁵⁷ They are often comically anachronistic, often relying on the hammer and sickle on Facebook group pages and pamphlets; if there are idiot nostalgics for 20th century communism, they can with certainty be discovered in any group that has the words 'University of' and 'Communists/Marxist-Leninists/Trotskyists', etc. In their namesake.

today.⁵⁸ His conception of the field is heavily organized around the traumatic aspects of its history; that is, not just the idea of the ‘crisis of Marxism’ (though this is extremely relevant), but also what he imagines to be many Marxists’ obsession with discovering once and for all the ‘wrong turn’ that accounts for the theory and practice’s downward spiral into what some would either bemoan or bemuse as irrelevant.

One of the most devious traps which lurk for Marxist theorists is the search for the moment of the Fall, when things took the wrong turning in the history of Marxism...This entire trope [was it Engels? Lenin? Stalin?] has to be rejected: there is no opposition here, the Fall is to be inscribed in the very origins. (To put it even more pointedly, such a search for the intruder who infected the original model and set in motion its degeneration cannot but reproduce the logic of anti-Semitism.)⁵⁹

Further:

The proper task is thus to think the *tragedy* of the October Revolution: to perceive its greatness, its unique emancipatory potential, and, simultaneously, the *historical necessity* of its Stalinist outcome. One should oppose both temptations: the Trotskyist notion that Stalinism was ultimately a contingent deviation, as well as the notion that the Communist project is, in its very core, totalitarian.⁶⁰

What is notable here is that in the same stroke both the worst kind of vulgar Marxism and, simultaneously, the denunciation of Marxism as a totalitarian master-narrative (in the style of the *nouveau philosophes*) are rejected, even through the co-optation of both positions; that is even while the Revolution and its Marxist legacy is praised *and* decried, effectively, as a master-narrative doomed to failure since the beginning.

The way in which Žižek understands the current conjuncture can also be understood through the medium of Alain Badiou, a close friend of Žižek’s and a frequent partner to his speaking engagements. At a talk given at the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York City on October 15 of 2010 (alongside Žižek, of course), Badiou described the first attempt at realizing the ‘communist

⁵⁸ Some select examples: Žižek calls for the return to Lenin in 2006 p. 320 and 2008A p. 184. In *Violence*, he enjoins readers to follow the model of Lenin ‘after the catastrophe of 1914’ – to ‘learn, learn and learn’ (2008B p. 8).

⁵⁹ Žižek 2008A p. 175; this claim is literally echoed in 2006 p. 292.

⁶⁰ Žižek 2007A p. 74.

hypothesis'⁶¹ as having occurred over the course of about 80 years (1792-1871), ending in the crushing defeat of the Paris Commune; he situates the second (and most recent) attempt as lasting from the Russian Revolution (1917) until the Cultural Revolution in China (1966). While the first sequence is better characterized by the struggle among distinct thinkers to produce a hegemonic theory that would lead the charge, so to speak (the *formulation* of the communist hypothesis, in Badiou's words) the second (initiated by Lenin) is characterized instead by the attempted implementation and *realization* of it.⁶² Badiou's conceptualization of the contemporary left with respect to his historical lineage of the communist hypothesis adds another dimension to the site and stakes of the current conjuncture: the left today is, he declares, much closer to the first sequence of 1792-1871 than the second, more recent, sequence.

Though Badiou tends to romanticize elements of the history of 'actually existing socialism,' his declaration must be read not simply as a tragic, nostalgic lament for the ultimate failures of 20th century movements he deemed to have held genuinely emancipatory promise, but rather as an earnest eulogy – why make this distinction? Precisely because these movements, great leaders, revolutionary moments, and ideas (in a word: the manifestations of the eternally recurring 'idea' of communism specific to the 19th and 20th centuries) *are dead* – and Badiou recognizes this. The way in which Marx, Lenin, Mao et al. attempted to reject the existing order and realize a new one must be read as objective failures, yet failures which were (and here is the tragedy) nonetheless the best possible efforts put forth; with this we can make legible both the opening line of Badiou's talk ("Philosophically, the word communism has a purely negative

⁶¹ While there are very nuanced differences between Žižek and Badiou, their enterprises have more and more been undertaken hand in hand. With respect to the 'communist hypothesis' specifically, Žižek's brief remark on the book jacket of Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* highlights rather well these philosophers' relationship. Žižek writes: "Now, more than ever, one should insist on what Badiou calls the 'eternal' Idea of Communism."

⁶² Badiou 2010B.

meaning”)⁶³ and a central thesis of Zizek’s *In Defense of Lost Causes* (which is a recurring theme of his work): “Better a disaster of fidelity to the Event than a non-being of indifference towards the Event. To paraphrase Beckett’s memorable phrase...after one fails, one can go on and fail better.”⁶⁴ This sentiment echoes the words of Althusser: “Lenin’s formulation: revolution, or a historical task, can be on the agenda without the concrete situation being revolutionary.”⁶⁵

Zizek is dedicated to such a thesis. What recurs most amongst his citations of Lenin is the claim that, put simply, leftists must be proactive, rather than reactive. More than this, leftists must learn how to dream again, to ‘do the impossible.’ On hopelessness: “Perhaps this attitude is today more relevant than ever: the situation is ‘completely hopeless,’ with no clear ‘realistic’ revolutionary perspective; but does this not give us a kind of strange freedom, a *freedom to experiment?*”⁶⁶ Recalling Mao and Beckett, Zizek notes that Lenin was

a Beckettian *avant la lettre*; what he basically proposed that the Bolsheviks should do in the desperate situation at the end of the Civil War was not to directly ‘construct socialism,’ but to *fail better* than a ‘normal’ bourgeois state...the point of Lenin’s famous notion of the ‘weakest link in the chain’ is, again, that one should use the ‘anomaly’ as a lever to exacerbate the antagonism so that they render possible a revolutionary explosion.⁶⁷

Ultimately, far from deploying Lenin in a rather Trotskyist manner, counterposing the ‘good’ Lenin to the ‘bad’ Stalin, Zizek’s argument for a return to Lenin hinges precisely on his willingness to take risks and keep revolution (and the revolutionary imaginary) on the agenda even in the face of hopelessness.

Lenin is artfully contrasted with those ‘economistic’ leftists today who, “fascinated by the functioning of today’s global economy...preclude any possibility of a political intervention

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Zizek 2008A p. 7; see also 2009 p. 125.

⁶⁵ Althusser 2000 p. 27.

⁶⁶ Zizek 2008A p. 361.

⁶⁷ Ibid. See also 2009 p. 86.

proper.”⁶⁸ Zizek retorts that “today, more than ever, we should return to Lenin: yes, the economy is the key domain, the battle will be decided there, we have to break the spell of global capitalism – but the intervention should be properly *political*, not economic.”⁶⁹ Who these practitioners of economism are exactly is left to the reader’s imagination, and this is exactly the point in such a polemic. Zizek produces a foil to his model of political struggle, a foil which can be assumed by any position that is not his own – after all, if the renewed myth of Lenin teaches us anything, it is that politics is a question of will and heroism, and our failures thus become failures of will and courage.⁷⁰ The *violence* behind the anonymity of Zizek’s foils is twofold: it not only raises the question of self-doubt, that is, whether we, the readers, are condemned as part of such a group, it also enjoins us, as sympathizers of Zizek, to root out such economism on behalf of Marxism proper. Zizek deploys here an argument that hinges not on the strength of its validity (by citing who these leftists are, for example), but rather on the authority that his assertions must carry (or, at least, the authority he and sympathizers believe they must carry).

Against Nostalgics

Zizek’s use of economism amongst leftism as a foil to Lenin’s strength is not his first and last word on the contemporary left, particularly contemporary Marxists. In *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*, Zizek contrasts ‘new Kravchenkos’ (those disenchanted with communism and postmodernism) with orthodox Marxists. He writes: “They, not those nostalgics for twentieth-century ‘Really Existing Socialism’, are our only hope.”⁷¹ In *The Parallax View*, he compares the works of some proto-Freudian psychoanalysts with orthodox Marxists, arguing that their

⁶⁸ Zizek 2006 p. 320.

⁶⁹ Ibid. See also p. 327.

⁷⁰ On p. 409 of Zizek 2008A, for example, even Hezbollah’s “ambiguous relation to state power” is described as paralleling “something like the old Leninist notion of ‘dual power’ – which was for Lenin also a temporary tactic, laying ground for the later full takeover.

⁷¹ Zizek 2009 p.156

reaction to transformations in the field is “a disavowal similar to that of the few remaining ‘orthodox’ Marxists, it continues to act as if nothing has really changed.”⁷² What is really interesting in these selections and others is the way in which Žižek effectively uses the catch-all ‘orthodox Marxists’ or ‘nostalgics’ as a foil by which he can distance himself from caricatures of Marxism and communism that float around academia and the public sphere, caricatures which are rarely if ever embodied in specific academics. This is a useful and powerful gesture which Žižek reproduces in his interventions in order to draw a dividing line between his own ‘scientificity’ or seriousness and the ridiculous, clownish nature of ‘nostalgics.’

In Žižek’s address at Marxism 2009, under the headline of ‘What does it mean to be a revolutionary today?’, he unsurprisingly says nothing in the way of strategy or tactics. While he begins his talk with a vague reiteration of Badiou’s thesis on the idea of communism and the necessity of reinvention (“As Lenin put it: one should begin from the beginning again”), Žižek directs his weight against “all the nostalgia for 20th century, for state socialism, for social-democratic welfare state, even, I claim, there is a little bit of this, all the nostalgia for councils, direct democracy.”⁷³ In the same speech,⁷⁴ Žižek delivers the following ‘joke’:

In the good old days of Really Existing Socialism, a joke popular among dissidents was used to illustrate the futility of their protests. In the fifteenth century, when Russia was occupied by Mongols, a peasant and his wife were walking along a dusty country road; a Mongol warrior on a horse stopped at their side and told the peasant he would now proceed to rape his wife; he then added: ‘But since there is a lot of dust on the ground, you must hold my testicles while I rape your wife, so that they will not get dirty!’ Once the Mongol had done the deed and ridden away, the peasant started laughing and jumping with joy. His surprised wife asked: ‘How can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped in your presence?’ The farmer answered: ‘But I got him! His balls are covered with dust!’

⁷² Žižek 2006 p. 297.

⁷³ Žižek 2009B; this sentiment is echoed in Žižek 2009A p. 153-4

⁷⁴ And also in Žižek 2009A p. 6-7, where this passage is directly copied for the sake of smoothness. Just as important as direct slings such as these, of course, is the fact that littered throughout Žižek’s works are semi-derogatory allusions to ‘old-fashioned’ Marxism, or occasionally his preface that he is making an ‘authentic’ Marxist claim, etc. Some examples of this can be found in 2006 p. 235, 297; 2007B p. 212; 2008B p. 102, 150, 154; 2009A p. 19, 67, 76. The list is very far from being exhaustive, but should serve as a good example of some of the less pronounced ways in which Žižek relates himself to classical forms of Marxism.

The joke is intended to illustrate how leftists today are content with merely ‘getting dirt on the balls of those in power,’ reading their own impotent acting out as something truly subversive. Zizek ends his address to wild applause by claiming that, contrary to this approach, the point is to cut off the balls of those in power.⁷⁵

What makes disparaging remarks like these all the more interesting is the fact that Zizek himself heavily relies on ‘old-fashioned’ concepts. The case of charity is instructive here. In the animated version of his ‘First As Tragedy, Then As Farce’ talk (which is simply condensed from the original version to be more picture-friendly), Zizek’s call for a return to the lessons of Oscar Wilde against charity and compassion recalls the classic Marxist formula that philanthropy treats the symptoms, not the cause, of poverty: “It is immoral to use private property to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property – I think these lines are more actual than ever.”⁷⁶ He decries the rise of philanthropy (and its increasing collapse into consumerism) as ‘global capitalism with a human face,’ not exactly an original declaration: when one considers what is ‘new’ in Zizek, at least on this point specifically, the answer is ‘nothing’ – it is difficult to distinguish where, conceptually, Zizek would fundamentally differ from orthodox Marxists on the question of charity, or even on the essential declaration behind his rape joke, that revolutions change societies, not revolts or unseen, self-validating practices.

Similar to this is, of course, one of the central claims of *Violence*, that localized, ‘criminal’ violence (subjective violence) needs to be understood as enabled and possible precisely on account of the everyday workings of capitalism (objective violence). Akin to

⁷⁵ In the Q&A period following the address, Zizek is effectively reproached for his tasteless and offensive joke. His response is characteristic of his project: “I thought well in advance, should I use the joke or not? ...My experience from real struggles, friends in Sarajevo, yes that’s what you should [being able to laugh at brutality and suffering]...I spoke with women who were raped, and they told me, the only way to survive is not to say ‘oh I’m now a victim,’ but to turn her predicament into a dirty joke.”

⁷⁶Zizek 2010.

Zizek's declaration that charity does not resolve the real causes of poverty, this thesis reiterates in different words a basic Marxist position vis-a-vis crime and capitalism, simultaneously stressing the need to focus our attention on the much more demanding task of resolving the contradictions of capitalism in order to do away with subjective violence.

Zizek perhaps reaches a peak on this general point in his 'obsessive' fascination with Stalinism. Provocatively claiming that "[o]ne should be careful not to throw out the baby with the dirty water,"⁷⁷ Zizek occasionally attempts to defend "Soviet Communism which, despite the catastrophe it stands for, *did* possess true inner greatness."⁷⁸ Confronting the Glucksmannesque claim that all totalitarianisms share a common logic, Zizek suggests instead that "[i]n the Stalinist ideological imaginary, universal Reason is objectivized in the guise of the inexorable laws of historical progress, and we are all its servants, the leader included."⁷⁹ Part of the support for this argument is simply in the way the leader participates in formal events: "after a Nazi leader delivers a speech and the crowd applauds, he just stands and silently accepts the applause, posing himself as its addressee; while in Stalinism, when the obligatory applause explodes at the end of the leader's speech, the leader stands up and joins the others in applauding."⁸⁰

The point in defending Stalinism has a double significance. Firstly, it needs to be contextualized as neither the first nor the last attempt to defend the heritage of October 1917; Zizek here is simply participating in an apology of the Russian Revolution, and not the excesses of Stalinism *per se* – nowhere does Zizek glorify the breakneck speed at which Stalin set the

⁷⁷ Zizek 2008A p. 7.

⁷⁸ Zizek 2006 p. 285; see also Chapter 5, "Stalin Revisited: Or, How Stalin Saved the Humanity of Man" of Zizek 2008A.

⁷⁹ Zizek 2006 p. 291; see also Zizek 2009B.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Zizek continues to draw out this point, ultimately claiming that as "[c]razy and tasteless as this may sound, this last distinction illustrates the fact that the opposition between Stalinism and Nazism was the opposition between civilization and barbarism: Stalinism did not sever the last thread that linked it to civilization. The lowest Gulag inmate still participated in the universal Reason: he had access to the Truth of History."; see also 2007A p. 83.

people of the Soviet Union during the years of collectivization, though he does describe it as in sync with the Enlightenment goals of Soviet Communism, contra the irrational, Romantic excesses of the Nazis' Holocaust.⁸¹ Generations of Marxists have participated in a similar denunciation of Stalin's excesses without writing off the Revolution's emancipatory potential.

Secondly, there is a significance in the use of deploying the figure of Stalin himself. Like Žižek's use of Lenin, utilizing the figure of Stalin to make a point (that communism, as catastrophic a system as it was, should never be considered synonymous to fascism) is a move which re-appropriates the history of Marxism. As Žižek writes, [o]ur side no longer has to go on apologizing,⁸² and part of this new, 'no regrets' direction that Žižek would like to take 'our side' in involves being able to speak freely even about 'our' historical lapses of judgment.

Originality is not always a hallmark of philosophical thought. What makes Žižek's recollection of relatively well-worn Marxist theses interesting here is, rather, his own recognition from analysts and so-called Žižek scholars as an enigmatic figure who cannot be unanimously categorized as belonging to any one theoretical family; on the one hand, there are those claims, like Laclau's, that Žižek is literally an old-fashioned Marxist-Leninist wearing Lacan as a cover, while on the other hand, Žižek is regarded as a postmodernist *par excellence*. This ambiguity has been routinized through the proliferation of secondary literatures on Žižek and an online academic journal, both media which solicit any and every typologization of Žižek. Žižek is thus registered by one audience (non-Marxists) as producing something genuinely novel, and by Marxist readers as a 'part-time' cheerleader of the field, since many of his claims are heavily reliant on 'old-fashioned' Marxist tropes.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 285.

⁸² Žižek 2009A p. 8.

Whether Zizek is read in multiple ways on account of his ambiguity, or whether he is intentionally ambiguous because he's read in multiple ways, there nonetheless exists multiple registers and lines of *transmission* that allow for distinct *dialogues* to take place: thus Zizek is read by non-Marxists as an innovator and Marxists as a renovator.⁸³ Both readings have a similar effect of developing for Zizek authority in one way or another: for non-Marxists, Zizek is notable for his uniqueness, for his ability to say what no one else is saying and what might be taboo to say, etc., while for Marxists, Zizek's continued deployment of certain Marxist ideas, and his relative popularity, merits applause.

Revenge of the Proletariat

Against the tendency of political struggle to be carried on today along the lines of particularistic identities/subjectivities and their liberation (coordinated in Laclauian fashion by establishing a chain of equivalences), Zizek creatively asserts that it is the task of leftist thinkers to re-deploy Marx's notion of the proletariat, but "well beyond Marx's imagination."⁸⁴ He claims that "Marx distinguishes between the 'working class' and the 'proletariat': the 'working class' effectively is a particular social group, while the 'proletariat' designates a subjective position."⁸⁵ That is, the working class is a pre-existing group, while the proletariat is an 'empty' position, a question of becoming; any particular group can function as the proletariat. He goes

⁸³ This needs to be qualified: what kind of Marxists? Zizek's writings are clearly directed (as the next chapter will detail) at 'post'-Marxists; as an author who unabashedly pokes fun at 'orthodox Marxism' without ever quite qualifying what such a position is, Zizek likely isn't well received by those who take up such a mantle themselves. Instead, Zizek's mockery of these coordinates is a message to Marx-inspired readers: don't find yourselves caught up in 'orthodox Marxism's' anachronisms. The implicit alternative which Zizek suggests: read more Zizek!

⁸⁴ Zizek 2009B.

⁸⁵ Zizek 2007A p. 89. This claim is echoed virtually verbatim on p. 285 of 2008A, and much of the remaining chapter is given over to a defence of this idea (albeit in a roundabout way) while refuting Laclau. See also 2008A p. 238 and 239; see also 2006 p. 30, 269.

further: “What if we take the risk of resuscitating the good old ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as the only way to break with biopolitics?”⁸⁶

Zizek claims that the position of the proletariat is the ‘part of no part’; those whose particular demands cannot be met without transforming the very logic of the system that produces them (i.e. those whose particular demands stand for something universal). The beauty of Zizek’s deployment of the term proletariat and its distinction from the working class goes beyond the fact that Marx himself did not seem to have ever distinguished between the two and, indeed, tended to use them synonymously (in true philosophical fashion, Zizek does not provide textual evidence to the contrary). There is more at stake here, however, than Zizek’s fidelity to Marx’s *oeuvre*. Though Marx most likely did not have this distinction in mind, how the particular demarcation between the ‘working class’ and the ‘proletariat’ functions in Zizek’s argument is fascinating: while remaining within Marxism at the level of *words*, Zizek de-sutures the emancipatory potential from the working class (the privileged revolutionary agent). At his most ‘positive’, he writes: “What we should be looking for are the signs of the new forms of social awareness that will emerge from the slum collectives: they will be the seeds of the future.”⁸⁷

In this regard, Zizek draws broadly on his reinterpretation of the proletariat. He cites G.A. Cohen’s “four features of the classical Marxist notion of the working class” in order to claim that “none...applies to the contemporary working class.”⁸⁸ Elsewhere, along similar lines, he claims that

[i]t is in fact surprising how many features of the slum-dwellers fit the good old Marxist description of the proletarian revolutionary subject: they are ‘free’ in the double meaning of the word even more than the classic proletariat (‘freed’ from all substantial ties;

⁸⁶ Zizek 2008A p. 412.

⁸⁷ Zizek 2006 p. 269.

⁸⁸ Zizek 2008A p. 420

dwelling in a free space, outside state police regulation); they are a large collective, forcibly thrown together, ‘thrown’ into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of any support in traditional ways of life, in inherited religious or ethnic life-forms.⁸⁹

Of course, in this passage there is a kind of slip when Zizek alludes to the ‘classic proletariat,’ running counter to his claim a year later in *Lenin Reloaded* that, in fact, Marx himself made no such distinction between the proletariat and the working class.

Just as significant as Zizek’s recollection of the proletariat is his emphasis on dictatorship. In classical fashion, Zizek derides democracy itself as a kind of dictatorship, calling on the authority of Lenin in this regard: “When Lenin designated liberal democracy as a form of bourgeois dictatorship...he meant that the very *form* of the bourgeois-democratic state, the sovereignty of its power in its ideologico-political presuppositions, embodies a ‘bourgeois’ logic. One should thus use the term ‘dictatorship’ in the precise sense in which democracy is also a form of dictatorship, that is, as a purely *formal* determination.”⁹⁰ And while much of *In Defense of Lost Causes* puts on a kind of ra-ra stunt for ‘totalitarianism,’ Zizek’s remarks on democracy nevertheless are not limited to that text alone: in *The Parallax View*, he deploys Badiou’s explicit anti-liberal democratic ethos as a positive foil against political correctness and the positions of Hardt and Negri alike (though it should be noted that, ultimately, Zizek rejects this position as not quite radical enough).⁹¹

This theme of deploying anti-democratic rhetoric as a foil also works for Zizek in his polemics with Laclau. For example, Zizek claims that “[d]emocracy, it may seem, thus not only can include antagonism, it is the only political form that solicits and presupposes it, that

⁸⁹ Zizek 2006 p. 268.

⁹⁰ Zizek 2008A p. 412.

⁹¹ Zizek 2006 p. 319-325

institutionalizes it."⁹² While, in typical fashion, Žižek never describes what he wishes would replace this less than perfect system, the purpose of his anti-democratic rhetoric serves two purposes. Primarily, it functions by putting a distance between Žižek and a particular interlocutor (Badiou, Hardt and Negri, Laclau, etc.), especially when it allows him to draw on iconic figures such as Lenin to do so. In a more secondary capacity, it serves as a set of provocative fireworks, alarming the reader (at least initially) and producing a sense of intrigue; typically, of course, Žižek elaborates to the point where it becomes relatively clear that claims such as 'we need the dictatorship of the proletariat' or that 'liberal democracy should be our enemy first and foremost' are used to negate competing claims, and ultimately wind up discarded once they have served their polemical purpose.

⁹² Žižek 2007A p. 85.

Chapter 3: Return of the Enlightenment

As depicted in the preceding chapter, the conjuncture which Zizek situates himself within revolves almost entirely around the problematic of Marxism, its reorientation, and its almost messianic role for future political struggle. The set of phenomena Zizek collectively understands as postmodernism is understood, similarly, in relation to both Marxism and the current political and social conjuncture. While Zizek reads Marxism as suffering from an acute loss of authority, the collapse of its borders, and increasing irrelevance, he reads postmodernism as effectively embodying the inverse; that is, total proliferation throughout the interstices of social space, the Western world's 21st century Master-Signifier. Zizek describes contemporaneity as a “‘postmodern’ era,”⁹³ a “post-ideological era”⁹⁴ ruled by a “hegemonic ideology [that] calls on us to enjoy life and to realise our own selves,”⁹⁵ and he has no qualms claiming that “the politically correct multiculturalist liberal stance...*is* today's predominant ideology.”⁹⁶

I operationalize ‘postmodernism’ to refer to a bundle of phenomena Zizek links together, and which he himself frequently qualifies as ‘postmodern’; this includes growing ethical subjectivism, cultural relativism, processes of depoliticization (including the de-emphasis of political economy and, consequently, notions of class) and, ultimately, the tendency of resistance movements to not only emphasize particularistic identities as sites of struggle but also explicitly reject macro-political change and the possibility for radical change at a global level. Postmodernism takes on importance for Zizek not for purely erudite reasons, but rather because

⁹³ Zizek 2008A p.1.

⁹⁴ Zizek 2009A p. 75.

⁹⁵ Zizek 2008B p. 135.

⁹⁶ Zizek 2007B p. 208.

of how it directly affects, in short, the possibilities for revolutionary transformations; more than this, the way it directly affects the reorganization of Marxism.

The threat of the postmodern invader is symptomized by several features, according to Žižek: firstly, there is the tendency towards subjectivism; that there are not truths but, rather, only points of view. This clichéd pseudo-perspectivism is challenged aggressively by Žižek, who retorts that, precisely, ‘truth is partisan.’ This position radically straddles the traditional divisions between Marxism and postmodernism (at least as Žižek understands it), and Žižek delights in turning the relativism that (ostensibly) pervades postmodernism on its head in order to argue that nothing really has changed in the way of political struggle. The second feature identified by Žižek is the move away from notions of class, political economy, and class struggle towards what he decries as depoliticized demands for plurality and inclusivity at the level of identity. These claims are buttressed by him in two ways: firstly, through an analysis of current events; most notably, Žižek reads growing racialized tensions in Europe and North America as denegations of class struggle, and uses this to reveal that this struggle still remains, in the last instance, the manifestation of the primary contradiction of capitalism. Additionally, Žižek engages frequently with authors such as Ernesto Laclau and the duo of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (henceforth H & N), post-Marxists *par excellence* who have, to put it in Chantal Mouffe’s terms, put the stress far more on the ‘post’ than on the ‘Marxism’ in Žižek’s eyes. If the analyst considers the concept of *dialogue*, it is clear that, as much as Žižek characterizes these authors as bearers of the postmodern torch, they remain inextricably rooted, in certain respects, in the tradition of Marxism, and Žižek’s sustained conversation with these authors represents a struggle for ‘purity’ within the borders of Marxism; indeed, his polemics with them is a struggle to re/constitute these borders as such.

In this chapter, I will first detail Zizek's understanding of the postmodern phenomenon. Secondly, using the concepts of *violence* and *dialogue* as guideposts, I will discuss Zizek's engagement with specific authors, paying particular attention to the stakes of these debates and the kind of language Zizek deploys in order to subvert his opponents; what is most interesting here is that Zizek occupies a kind of 'impossible' place, undermining his opponents for their proximity to Marxism while simultaneously responding with what appears, at first glance, to be classical Marxist tropes (focus on class, proletariat as revolutionary subject, etc.). Finally, I will trace two of Zizek's more important counter-themes to postmodern modes of resistance: firstly, that truth is partisan and, secondly, that the form resistance takes is secondary to its content. While the former position is characterized by its frequent reliance on the image and teachings of the Christian St. Paul, the latter position is epitomized by the symbolism of Hitler, the Nazis, and fascism.

Postmodernism Today

Zizek identifies several typical features of the postmodern era we ostensibly live in. There is, perhaps most importantly, a political component: Zizek describes the political situation today in Europe and North America as being quintessentially 'post-political,' with actors focussed far more on management of differences and swift resolution of minor 'kinks' in the system than they are on fundamentally putting into question established practices or seeking to make widespread (if not legitimately radical)⁹⁷ political transformations. Secondly, he identifies a socio-symbolic component: Zizek argues that we live at a time where complexity and contingency are religiously glorified, and that this seemingly 'critical' spirit has been coupled

⁹⁷ The distinction must be made here if only because Zizek identifies rightist populism as 'real politics' in the 21st century, despite its racism and erroneousness.

with capitalism to result in a new spectrum of commodification, particularly the commodification of our very identities and their reduction to mere meaningless idiosyncracies.

Zizek argues that, essentially, ‘depoliticization’ or ‘post-politics’ characterizes (late capitalist) Western democracies; that is, the space of the political is implicitly reduced to technocratic, managerial affairs, with the state merely reacting to objective changes and upheavals in the economy. These reactions transcend party-based divides, as both the left and right increasingly find themselves in more or less identical roles, responding in a piecemeal fashion to economic fallout despite proclaimed allegiance to the welfare state and small government, respectively.⁹⁸ The ‘Zizekian’ component of this argument extends to a critique of left theorists’ lauding of identity-based movements as simply another symptom of depoliticization, since identity politics (or ‘postmodern subtraction from the state’) leave unquestioned and off limits fundamental questions of economy – thus dramatically reducing the emancipatory potential of these movements to ‘mere liberalism’ seeking ‘actualization of existing norms’.

In his contribution to *Lenin Reloaded*, Zizek describes post-politics as “the growing reduction of politics proper to the rational administration of the conflicting interests.”⁹⁹ In *Violence*, he writes that post-politics “is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and instead focus on expert management and administration.”¹⁰⁰ He writes that “in our ‘post-political’ epoch of the culturalization of the political, the only way to formulate one’s

⁹⁸ A note to Zizek’s first contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* can nuance the otherwise flat description I have provided: “Is it not, then, that in today’s opposition between the dominant forms of the political right and Left, what we actually have is what Marco Revelli called ‘the two Rights’: that the opposition is actually the one between the ‘populist’ Right (which calls itself ‘Right’) and the ‘technocratic’ Right (which calls itself the ‘New Left’)? The irony is that today, because of its populism, the Right is much closer to articulating the actual ideological stance of (whatever remains of) the traditional working class.” See Zizek 2000 p. 129.

⁹⁹ Zizek 2007A p. 92.

¹⁰⁰ Zizek 2008B p. 40.

complaint is at the level of cultural and/or ethnic demands: exploited workers become immigrants whose ‘otherness’ is oppressed, and so forth.”¹⁰¹ Post-politics thus takes the form of a kind of Kymlickan management of idiosyncratic differences, which Žizek finds troubling precisely because it reconstitutes the field of the political as such: it is, further, a denegation of the actual inconstancy of politics, an inconstancy disavowed through supposed neutrality and management of difference (just as Žizek similarly reads populist racism as the denegation of the constancy of the class struggle *and* a properly political backlash to liberal neutrality).¹⁰²

This post-political world nonetheless does not remain unchallenged, and Žizek urges us to recognize how “‘populism’ is emerging as the inherent shadowy double of institutionalized post-politics...as the arena in which political demands that do not fit into the institutionalized space can be articulated.”¹⁰³ He notes further that “[t]he ‘clash of civilizations’ is politics at the end of history.”¹⁰⁴ Politics is thus pursued via the radicalization of difference, represented by ‘Islamofascists’ and, indeed, home brewed, good old-fashioned white folk fighting for their survival in a racially polluted world – classic fascists.

This populism, most actively pursued by the political right, is detailed by Žizek as obeying a certain logic: the logic of anti-Semitism. Such a model of ideology is “fundamentally *re*-active, the result of a reaction to a disturbing intruder. In other words, populism remains a version of the politics of fear: it mobilizes the crowd by stoking up fear of the corrupt external agent,” as opposed to radical politics, which “is active, it imposes and enforces its vision.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Žizek 2008A p. 349. In the same text, see also p. 17-22 and p. 102-7; see also chapters 2 and 5 in Žizek 2008B; p. 37-51 and p.94-104 in Žizek 2009A; p. 188-194, 295-298, and 308-328 in Žizek 2006 (generally in relation to *jouissance* and the contemporary superego ‘injunction to enjoy’).

¹⁰² See p. 33, 48, 65-77, 147 in Žizek 2009A; p. 77-8 of Žizek 2007A (right racism in Europe as the contemporary face of workers’ struggles); and p. 266-276 (most explicitly on p. 267) and 289-91 in Žizek 2008A.

¹⁰³ Žizek 2007A p. 92.

¹⁰⁴ Žizek 2008B p. 141.

¹⁰⁵ Žizek 2009A p. 61. See also Žizek 2008A p. 176; see also Žizek 2008B p. 79.

This model effectively mistakes a symptom for a cause; Zizek draws on the history of the Nazis, who he describes as effectively a movement frustrated with what were, in fact, the results of capitalism (devaluation of the Reichsmark, spiralling unemployment, economic depression, etc.). Rather than pinpoint the cause of their ‘misfortune,’ the Nazis painted a picture of the Jew as the disturbing invader who disrupted the normalcy of day to day life; in effect, there was nothing wrong with the system as it was, if it were not for those Jews/socially irresponsible corporations/guys like Bernie Madoff. So to speak, populists are ‘on to something,’ their struggles are the direct results of ‘contradictions,’ to put it in Marxese, but they lack ‘class consciousness.’

On the socio-symbolic side, Zizek characterizes contemporaneity with reference to the collapse in the Master-Signifier:

A basic feature of our postmodern world is that it tries to dispense with this agency of the ordering Master-Signifier: the complexity of the world needs to be asserted unconditionally. Every Master-Signifier meant to impose some order on it must be deconstructed, dispersed: ‘the modern apology for the ‘complexity’ of the world...is really nothing but a generalized desire for atony.’ Badiou’s excellent example of such an ‘atonal’ world is the politically correct vision of sexuality as promoted by gender studies with its obsessive rejection of binary logic: this world is a nuanced world of multiple sexual practices which tolerates no decision, no instance of the Two,¹⁰⁶ no evaluation, in the strong Nietzschean sense of the term.¹⁰⁷

This leads Zizek to similarly note that we have today reached “the dark side of 1960s ‘sexual liberation’: the full commodification of sexuality.”¹⁰⁸ In attempting to dispense with an organizing Master-Signifier, however, postmodernism merely takes its place instead: “‘Postmodernism’ now effectively functioned as a new Master-Signifier introducing a new order of intelligibility into the confused multiplicity of historical experience.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ ‘The Two’ is a Badiouian notion drawn from Mao which, effectively, refers to a conjuncture defined by a clash or, indeed, struggle to the death between two competing and incompatible Ideas or universalities.

¹⁰⁷ Zizek 2008B p. 35; this passage is almost reproduced verbatim in Zizek 2008A p. 30.

¹⁰⁸ Zizek 2008B p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ Zizek 2009A p. 52.

This results in a narcissistic rerouting of typical humanitarian gestures and the articulation of ‘hybridity’ with global capitalism. Zizek is fond of calling upon the humanitarianism of global corporations such as Starbucks (among others), which contributes a portion of its gross income towards saving starving children, leading him to describe this trend as ‘capitalism with a human face.’¹¹⁰ Zizek has similarly twice called on the absurd example of the ‘Masturbate-a-thon’¹¹¹ as a pinnacle of postmodern protest. After suggesting that the Masturbate-a-thon is the archetypal form of sexuality in our atonal world, Zizek adds that “[e]vents such as the masturbate-a-thon signal the end of shame proper. This is what makes it one of the clearest indications of where we stand today, of an ideology which sustains our most intimate self-experience.”¹¹² He adds that, with reference to the event’s sponsor’s list of reasons to masturbate,¹¹³ “[e]verything is here: increased self-awareness, health benefits, struggle against social oppression, the most radical politically correct stance (here, it’s certain that nobody is harassed), and the affirmation of sexual pleasure at its most elementary – ‘each person is their own best lover.’”¹¹⁴ The “solipsistic egotism of their stupid pleasure”¹¹⁵ typifies, to use the term of Badiou that Zizek here readily calls upon, ‘the One’ that is contemporaneity; in this case, the

¹¹⁰ Zizek 2010; see also Zizek 2008B p. 6; see also Zizek 2009A p. 53.

¹¹¹ See also Zizek 2006 p. 309, where the struggle for the rights of necrophiliacs is described as “the perfect illustration of how the PC stance realizes Kierkegaard’s insight into how the only good neighbor is a dead neighbor...a dead body does not enjoy, so the disturbing threat of excess enjoyment for the subject [Zizek here is referring to the ostensible tendency for progressives to over-exaggerate the limits of private space, complaining far too often over what constitutes ‘harassment’] playing with the corpse is also eliminated.”

¹¹² Zizek 2008B p. 31.

¹¹³ “‘Why masturbate?’ Here is the list of reasons proposed by [Dr. Carol] Queen:

- Because sexual pleasure is each person’s birthright.
- Because masturbation is the ultimate safe sex.
- Because masturbation is a joyous expression of self-love.
- Because masturbation offers numerous health benefits...
- Because masturbation is an excellent cardiovascular workout.
- Because each person is their own best lover.
- Because masturbation increases sexual awareness.” See Zizek 2008B p. 32

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 30-32; the Masturbate-a-thon is recalled on p.35 of Zizek 2008A as well.

¹¹⁵ Zizek 2008B p. 31.

One of solitary self-love as opposed to “the encounter of the Two, which ‘transubstantiates’ idiotic masturbatory enjoyment into an event proper.”¹¹⁶

The Masturbate-a-thon, in addition to providing Zizek a platform from which he can expound on the dangers of sexual commodification, etc., serves also to impute a sense of ridiculousness to contemporary notions of sexual liberty, and there is a kind of *violence* (and violence!) here in representing such an absurdity as a real symptom of postmodernity. Zizek’s focus on the Masturbate-a-thon is simultaneously an attempt to present it as the logical conclusion of the co-opted 60s liberation movement. So to speak, sexual liberation has always been compatible with capitalism, and deploying the body and sexuality as sites of struggle are effectively no more useful in the struggle against capitalism than masturbation.

This cooptation is not limited to sexuality. In addition to Starbucks’ and other corporations’ leading roles as alms-givers to the poor, today

capitalism is transformed and legitimized as an egalitarian project: accentuating auto-poetic interaction and spontaneous self-organization, it has even usurped the far Left’s rhetoric of workers’ self-management, turning it from an anti-capitalist slogan into a capitalist one. Insofar as this post-’68 spirit of capitalism forms a specific economic, social and cultural unity, that very unity justifies the name ‘post-modernism.’¹¹⁷

The message here is clear: echoing classical Marxism, Zizek is arguing that nothing short of a radical overhaul of the current mode of production’s base can escape capitalism. Against the tendency of some contemporary critics (and Zizek explicitly identifies authors such as Simon Critchley, H & N, and Ernesto Laclau as among these) to propose a multiplicity of forms of resistance, all of which leave more or less off limits questions of economy, Zizek effectively suggests that virtually everything is cooptable by capitalism; it is infinitely plastic and adaptive. “This is why the ‘anti-essentialist’ Foucauldian apprehension about ‘fixed identities’ – the

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Zizek 2009A p. 52.

incessant urge to practise the ‘care of the Self,’ to continuously re-invent and re-create oneself – finds a strange echo in the dynamics of ‘postmodern’ capitalism” and, citing Adorno, Zizek also notes “how, by no longer simply repressing the lack of a fixed identity, the hegemonic ideology directly mobilizes that lack to sustain the endless process of consumerist ‘self-re-creation.’”¹¹⁸

Polemics

H & N and Laclau all represent rather well positions that Zizek finds symptomatic of post-politics. Zizek’s particular issue with Laclau’s theory of hegemony is that it is representative (alongside ‘postmodern’ theories of contingency and hybridity) of the “standard ‘postmodern’ political solution to turn defeat into as blessing in disguise, i.e., to abandon the horizon of radical change in favor of the prospect of multiple local practices of resistance.”¹¹⁹ H & N mistakenly imagine that the technologically mediated ‘freedom’ of brain workers in contemporary post-industrial economies constitutes a legitimate possibility for ushering in communism. Zizek’s engagement with these authors, particularly H & N and Laclau, is an attempt to bring into focus not only what exactly is wrong with contemporary leftist forms of struggle, but also how these struggles are in fact smoothly integrated into the everyday workings of global capitalism. Ultimately, H & N are depicted as ‘too Marxist,’ and Laclau’s populism is aligned with fascism; these *violent* gestures reproduce these authors as foils to Zizek’s proposed warrior ethos of struggle (detailed in the next section), his authority as a Marxist, and his legitimacy as a provocateur for ‘real’ revolution.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 64.

¹¹⁹ Zizek 2007B p. 203. These claims are echoed in p. 174 and p. 350 (explicitly contrasting contemporary re-workings of Marxism against Critchley) of Zizek 2008A, and less explicitly on p. 54-6, 59-60, 78-9, and 157 of Zizek 2009A.

Zizek's stress on the need for the left to find its way typically results in his understanding of the current political conjuncture as being framed by this issue. He most explicitly recounts the left's scattered position today at the start of chapter 7 in *In Defense of Lost Causes*:

The contemporary Left has reacted in a wide spectrum of modes (which partially overlap) to the full hegemony of global capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy:

1. Full acceptance of this framework: continuing to fight for emancipation *within* its rules (Third Way social democracy);
2. Acceptance of this framework as something that is here to stay, but which one should nonetheless resist, withdrawing from its scope and operating from its 'interstices' (Simon Critchley is an exemplar of this position);
3. Acceptance of the futility of all struggle, since the framework is today all-encompassing, coinciding with its opposite (the logic of concentration camps, the permanent state of emergency), so nothing can really be done, one can only wait for an outburst of 'divine violence' – a revolutionary version of Heidegger's 'only God can still save us' (a perspective embodied today by Giorgio Agamben and in a way, before him, by the late Adorno);
4. Acceptance of the temporary futility of struggle ('in today's triumph of global capitalism, true resistance is not possible, at least not in the metropolis of capitalism, so all we can do till the renewal of the revolutionary spirit in the global working class is to defend what there still is of the welfare state, bombarding those in power with demands we know they cannot fulfill, and otherwise withdraw into cultural studies, where one can silently pursue critical work');
5. Emphasis on the fact that the problem is a more fundamental one, that global capitalism is ultimately an ontic effect of the underlying ontological principles of technology or 'instrumental reason' (Heidegger, but, in a way, again also Adorno);
6. Belief that one can undermine global capitalism and state power, however, not by way of directly attacking them, but by refocusing the field of struggle on everyday practices, where one can 'build a new world' – in this way, the foundations of the power of capital and the state will be gradually undermined, and, at some point, the state will collapse like a cat hovering over the precipice in the cartoons (one thinks here of the Zapatista movement);
7. A 'postmodern' shift of the accent from anti-capitalist struggle to the multiple forms of the politico-ideological struggle for hegemony, conceptualized as a contingent process of discursive rearticulation (Ernesto Laclau);
8. A wager that one can repeat at the postmodern level the classical Marxist gesture and enact the 'determinate negation' of capitalism: with today's rise of 'cognitive work,' the contradiction between social production and capitalist relations has reached an unprecedented height, rendering 'absolutely democracy' possible for the first time (Hardt and Negri).¹²⁰

¹²⁰ For more on this subject, see Zizek 2008A p. 337-338.

The notion of a fragmented left has already been depicted in the previous chapter, and so what is truly novel in this passage is the following: 1. It calls on specific, contemporary authors by name and ascribes to them politico-theoretical coordinates that are clearly frowned upon; and 2. It paints a clear picture of a multitude of less than adequate responses to global capitalism all ultimately sharing the same symptom: they all deny “politics proper;”¹²¹ that is, they prove the rule of leftist depoliticization.

Zizek’s engaged polemic with Laclau, identifiable in many of Zizek’s texts by theme if not by name, is all contained *in nuce* in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. I will not detail again Laclau’s criticisms, since what he has to say is not exactly what is at stake, and appears in the introductory chapter. For the purposes of this section, what is significant is rather how Zizek characterizes Laclau and his position, which is irredeemably populist in Zizek’s eyes. This populism, while leftist, nevertheless “harbors ‘in the last instance’ a long-term proto-Fascist tendency.”¹²² Zizek contrasts this with class struggle: “It is clear now why Laclau prefers populism to class struggle: populism provides a neutral transcendental matrix of an open struggle whose content and stakes are themselves defined by the contingent struggle for hegemony, while ‘class struggle’ presupposes a particular social group (the working class) as a privileged political agent.”¹²³ Citing Laclau’s approval of Chartism as a populism which characterized the ruling classes as parasitic, idle, and speculative, Zizek draws the necessary link between this position and anti-Semitism: “In other words, for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such, but the intruder who corrupted it...the cause is not a fatal flaw inscribed into

¹²¹ Zizek 2008A p. 338; similarly, see p. 264 of Zizek 2006.

¹²² Zizek 2007A p. 83; see also Zizek 2008A p. 276-286, 326.

¹²³ Zizek 2007A p. 79.

the structure as such.”¹²⁴ He damningly adds that “[f]or a Marxist, on the contrary...the pathological...is the symptom of the normal,” and goes on to cite otherwise basic principles of Marx’s political economy,¹²⁵ reversing the terms of the initial dialogue in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, where it is Laclau who patronizingly admonishes Zizek for his inattention to developments in Marxism’s history. Laclau’s distance from Marxism proper is also re-emphasized along historical lines (in addition to Zizek’s characterization as Laclau’s populism as undeniably un-Marxist). Zizek draws a direct parallel between Laclau and Bernstein, the ‘arch-revisionist,’ whose motto was ‘goal is nothing, movement is all.’¹²⁶

There is, more than this, Laclau’s inability to take account of the conditions for the possibility of his own theoretical position. Critiquing “today’s discursive ‘anti-essentialist’ historicism (from Ernesto Laclau to Judith Butler),”¹²⁷ Zizek comments that,

As it was already noted by Fredric Jameson, universalized historicism has a strange ahistorical flavor: once we fully accept and practise the radical contingency of our identities, all authentic historical tension somehow evaporates in the endless performative games of an eternal present. There is a nice self-referential irony at work here: there is history only insofar as there persist remainders of ‘ahistorical’ essentialism. This is why radical anti-essentialists have to deploy all their hermeneutic-deconstructive skills to detect hidden traces of ‘essentialism’ in what appears to be a postmodern ‘risk society’ of contingencies – were they to admit that we already live in an ‘anti-essentialist’ society, they would have to confront the truly difficult question of the historical character of today’s predominant radical historicism itself, i.e., confront the topic of this historicism as the ideological form of ‘postmodern’ global capitalism.¹²⁸

Such a commentary does not, as is alluded to, find its origins in Zizek’s theoretical apparatus.

Rather, it has been the readied response of classical Marxists since postmodernism reared its

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 81; see also Zizek 2008A p. 290-291; “And it is here that the determining instance of the ‘economy’ enters: the economic is the absent cause that accounts for the displacement in representation, for the asymmetry (reversal, in this case) between the two series”; Zizek contrasts this with Laclau’s own (apparently erroneous) analysis; see also Zizek 2006 p. 35-36.

¹²⁵ Zizek 2007A p. 81.

¹²⁶ Zizek 2006 p. 265.

¹²⁷ Zizek 2009A p. 22.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 22.

head, with more critical authors like Jameson providing the particularly nuanced (and infamous) theoretical analyses of postmodernism.

What Žižek performs here is essentially a kind of humiliation of Laclau's position, which is much more closely embodied in actual political practices and movements than Žižek's prescriptions. Žižek levels in effect, then, a two-pronged assault: the first aims to discredit the theory behind populism, and the second the movement itself, which is not the direct product of a class of theoretical masterminds but, rather, the inverse; that is, Laclau's theories are based precisely on the success of disparate groups articulating a 'chain of equivalences' and levelling demands against the state.¹²⁹ The *violence* here is, effectively, the claim that these movements are not only impotent but, rather, reproduce exactly the ideological coordinates of global capitalism (although Žižek is happy to grant that, occasionally, such movements can put a 'human face' on it). As Žižek puts it, "[d]emocracy, it may seem, thus not only can include antagonism, it is the only political form that solicits and presupposes it."¹³⁰

H & N are perhaps more damningly tied to the current political conjuncture or, rather, as unwitting spokesmen for the 'postmodern' organization of capitalist production. "What makes this group [Bill Gates, George Soros, Thomas Friedman; the Davos summit members] interesting is that their ideology has become all but indistinguishable from the new breed of anti-globalist leftist radicals: Toni Negri himself, the guru of the postmodern left, praises digital capitalism as containing *in nuce* all the elements of communism – one has only to drop the capitalism form,

¹²⁹ "[T]he 'people' is the performative result of raising these demands, not a pre-existing group [contra the working class, in Laclau's analysis. However, the term 'demand' involves a whole theatrical scene in which a subject is addressing her demand to an Other presupposed to be able to meet it. Does the proper revolutionary or emancipatory political act not move beyond this horizon of demands? The revolutionary subject no longer operates at the level of demanding something from those in power – she wants to destroy them." See Žižek 2007A; see also Žižek 2008A p. 294, 428.

¹³⁰ Žižek 2007A p. 85.

and the revolutionary goal is achieved.”¹³¹ Negri, specifically (Hardt is only ever treated by Zizek as a kind of silent, idiot Robin to Negri’s Batman), is singled out by Zizek as possessing a “notion of communism [which] comes uncannily close to that of ‘postmodern’ digital capitalism.”¹³² He is cited by Zizek as explicitly dismissing the ‘old-fashioned’ politics of the workers’ movement, claiming that “[f]or Negri, the workers stood for all that is wrong with traditional trade-unionist socialism focused on corporate job security, a socialism mercilessly rendered obsolete by the dynamics of ‘post-modern’ capitalism...According to Negri, instead of reacting to this ‘new spirit of capitalism’ in the traditional social-democratic fashion, seeing it as a threat, one should fully embrace it.”¹³³ Against H & N’s glorification of the literary figure of *Bartleby* as a symbol for contemporary political struggle,¹³⁴ Zizek concludes *The Parallax View* with “Bartleby couldn’t even hurt a fly – that’s what makes his presence so unbearable.”¹³⁵ Similarly, like the linking of Laclau to the ‘rainbow coalition,’ Zizek notes that one of the more interesting features of H & N is the fact that they are almost ‘embedded’ in “an actual global movement of anticapitalist resistance: we can sense, behind the written lines, the smells and sounds of Seattle, Genoa, and the Zapatistas. So their limitation is simultaneously the limitation of the actual movement.”¹³⁶

The characterization of H & N (though, of course, the emphasis is always on the N) in these passages is that of almost traitorous apologists for global capitalism, accompanied by typical ‘postmodern’ glorification of technological possibilities for ‘emancipation.’ Negri mockingly characterizing the striking workers as ridiculous caricatures from a Fellini film

¹³¹ Zizek 2008B p. 16.

¹³² Zizek 2009A p. 56.

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 103.

¹³⁴ Zizek 2006 p. 382.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 385.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 261.

invokes an image of him as elitist and pretentious, and the emphasis on the passive figure of Bartleby is basically emasculated by Žižek as weak, ‘unbearable,’ after several pages of analysis – “if we remain stuck at the Bartleby stage, we end up in a suicidal marginal position with no consequences.”¹³⁷

The polemic with H & N, like the polemic with Laclau, invariably results in Žižek ascribing to them intellectual coordinates in relation to Marxism. Žižek argues that, “[i]f anything, the problem with H & N is therefore that they are *too* Marxist, taking over the underlying Marxist scheme of historical progress: like Marx, they celebrate the ‘deterritorializing’ revolutionary potential of capitalism; like Marx, they locate the contradiction within capitalism.”¹³⁸ Žižek occupies a kind of ‘impossible’ place of critique; in spite of his recurrent use of Marx as an authority in the face of theoretical developments such as Laclau, Žižek now uses this same authority to discredit H & N, since “Marx’s fundamental mistake was to conclude, from these insights, that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible.”¹³⁹ Indeed, a charge Žižek brings forth against Negri is that he is simply “not Leninist enough.”¹⁴⁰

The Truth is Out There – but only we know it

Žižek characterizes postmodernism as positing that the world is constantly in flux, without fixity, and that there are no ‘truths,’ only perspectives. Mocking the old adage that ‘an enemy is someone whose story you haven’t heard,’ he jokes: “Can we imagine inviting a Nazi thug to tell us his story?”¹⁴¹ The point is that, against all the pseudo-perspectivist clamor for subjectivism and the absence of ‘real villains’ (there are no enemies, only storytellers), Žižek wishes us to understand politics as, precisely, a struggle that should not leave room for

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 382; this passage is echoed verbatim in Žižek 2008A p. 353.

¹³⁸ Žižek 2006 p. 266.

¹³⁹ Ibid; this connection between classical Marxist theses is made again in Žižek 2008A p. 204, and also p. 354.

¹⁴⁰ Žižek 2008A p. 360.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 12.

compromise or wait for storytellers. As he writes in *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*: “[o]ur side no longer has to go on apologizing; while the other side had better soon,”¹⁴² following this later with: “[t]here is no ‘objective,’ expert position waiting to be applied here; one just has to take one side or the other, politically.”¹⁴³ Fundamentally, what Žizek proposes is “not a neutral analysis but an engaged and extremely ‘partial’ one – for *truth is partial*, accessible only when one takes sides, and is no less universal for this reason.”¹⁴⁴

This partisanship which is fundamental to every kind of real politics is countered to postmodern politics most clearly in this passage:

Kant’s distinction between the public and private uses of reason can be of great help here: the key problem with forms of so-called ‘identity politics’ is that they focus on ‘private’ identities – the ultimate horizon is that of the tolerance and intermingling of such identities, and every universality, every feature that cuts across the entire field, is rejected as oppressive. Paulinian universality, in contrast, is a struggling form. When Paul says, ‘There are no Greeks or Jews, no men or women...,’ this does not mean that we are all one happy human family, but rather that there is one big divide which cuts across all these particular identities, rendering them ultimately irrelevant: ‘There are no Greeks or Jews, no men or women...*there are only Christians and the enemies of Christianity!*’ Or, as we would have to put it today: there are only those who fight for emancipation and their reactionary opponents: the people and the enemies of the people.¹⁴⁵

The use of St. Paul and the evocation of a militant Christianity are here central to Žizek’s message: universality is not an *a priori*, axiomatic given, a ‘self-evident truth,’ but rather something which must be ceaselessly practised and actualized by those who believe. More than this, there is a kind of missionary logic here that is worth noting: Žizek draws a line between those who ‘partake in the faith’ and those who do not; the lesson here for the faithful is that nothing less than a real struggle is required to translate the idea of universality into a reality.¹⁴⁶

Against the ‘postmodern,’ Baudrillardesque emphasis on the interplay of images and appearances over a founding truth or reality, Žizek, citing Nietzsche, claims that “the ‘truth’ is

¹⁴² Žizek 2009A p. 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 16.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 44; see also Žizek 2009B.

¹⁴⁶ See also Žizek 2008A p. 6 on explicit admission of guilt re: messianism.

not the ‘real’ state of things, that is, the ‘direct’ view of the object without perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism which causes perspectival distortion... the gap (in this case: social antagonism) which makes the two perspectives radically *incommensurable*.”¹⁴⁷ This expansionary, warrior ethos, which will merit further discussion in the final subsection below, is worth noting now for the way in which it contrasts with the ‘impotence’ of ‘tolerance.’ Citing Martin Luther King and John Brown as modern champions of universality, Zizek writes that “although it [the anti-segregation movement in the US in the late 1950s and early 1960s] endeavored to articulate a demand that was not properly met within the existing democratic institutions, it cannot be called populist in any meaningful sense of the term,”¹⁴⁸ and that revolutionary-egalitarian figures from Robespierre to John Brown are – potentially, at least, figures without habits: they refuse to take into account the habits that qualify the functioning of a universal rule. If all men are equal, then all men are equal and are to be effectively treated as such; if blacks are also human, they need immediately to be treated as equals.”¹⁴⁹

A powerful trope Zizek relies on is the Haitian Revolution, which shortly followed (and was directly inspired by) the French Revolution. Zizek draws on the imagery of the ex-slaves, upon being confronted by Napoleon’s soldiers, singing the *Marseillaise*, claiming that “[e]vents such as these enact universality as a political category.”¹⁵⁰ In the same vein, he asserts that “[t]he answer to the standard critical argument that Western multiculturalism is not truly neutral, that it privileges specific values, is that one should shamelessly accept this paradox: universal openness itself is rooted in Western modernity.”¹⁵¹ The strength of this trope and ‘Eurocentric’ claims that explicitly privilege universality’s roots in ‘Western modernity’ is found in the way it contrasts

¹⁴⁷ Zizek 2006 p. 281.

¹⁴⁸ Zizek 2008A p. 284; see also 2007A p. 86.

¹⁴⁹ Zizek 2008B p. 162.

¹⁵⁰ Zizek 2009A p. 112; see also Zizek 2008A p. 208 and 392.

¹⁵¹ Zizek 2008A p. 21.

with the way Žizek has characterized the postmodern opposition: crippled by ‘white man’s guilt,’¹⁵² excessively relativist and multiculturalist. The alternative he proposes is unapologetically founded in aggressive militantism.

Žizek expounds radical leftists to trust in their own strength, to steadfastly insist on the verity of their ethical claims without compromise. He writes that

With regard to ideological struggle then, this means that one should at least view with profound suspicion those Leftists who argue that the Muslim fundamentalist-populist movements, as emancipatory and anti-imperialist, are basically ‘on our side,’ and the fact that they formulate their programs in directly anti-Enlightenment and anti-universalistic terms, sometimes approaching explicit anti-Semitism, is no more than a confusion resulting from their being caught up into the immediacy of struggle...One should unconditionally resist the temptation to ‘understand’ Arab anti-Semitism (where we really encounter it) as a ‘natural’ reaction to the sad plight of the Palestinians.¹⁵³

This statement, among others, calls on those partaking in political struggle to remain ‘unconditionally’ committed to Enlightenment principles, eschewing the help of resistance movements whose principles remain, essentially, ‘backwards.’

Žizek’s stress on universality against the particularistic struggles of groups and identities relies on an ‘old-fashioned’ Marxist trope, that “capitalism, whose ideology liberalism is, effectively *is* universal, no longer rooted in a particular culture or ‘world.’... Capitalism’s umbilical link to Europe has been cut. The critics of Eurocentrism who endeavor to unearth the secret European bias of capitalism fall short here: the problem with capitalism is not its secret Eurocentric bias, but the fact that it *really is universal*, a neutral matrix of social relations.”¹⁵⁴ It is capitalism which lays the historical groundwork for the conditions of possibility for substantive freedom and equality. Similarly, “[a]ctual universality is not the deep feeling that above all differences, different civilisations share the same basic values, etc....In other words, in

¹⁵² Žizek 2009A p. 114.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 69; see also p. 75; see also Žizek 2008B p. 108, where Žizek writes Muslim protest movements off as symptomizing Laclauian populism.

¹⁵⁴ Žizek 2008B p. 156.

the emancipatory struggle, it is not the cultures in their identity which join hands, it is the repressed, the exploited and suffering, the ‘parts of no-part’ of every culture which come together in a shared struggle.”¹⁵⁵ In Žižek’s own words, we should be “absolutely modern.”¹⁵⁶

This insistence on modern, secular, universality results in a ruthless approach towards ethical commitment. Žižek writes: “What if...such a blindness, such a violent exclusionary gesture of refusing to see, such a disavowal of reality, such a fetishist attitude of ‘I know very well that things are horrible in the Soviet Union, but I believe none the less in Soviet socialism’ is the innermost constituent of *every* ethical stance?”¹⁵⁷ he continues by rhetorically posing the question of “what if that which appears as an inconsistency, as the failure to draw all the consequences from one’s ethical attitude, is, on the contrary, its positive condition of possibility?”¹⁵⁸ This heroic shouldering of responsibility for the ‘fallout’ of our ethical commitments is effectively the central thesis of *In Defense of Lost Causes*, which argues explicitly for the need to take a “Leap of Faith”¹⁵⁹ and “courageously accept the full actualization of a Cause, including the inevitable risk of a catastrophic disaster.”¹⁶⁰

Links Zwo Drei Vier

[T]he main task of today’s emancipatory politics, its life-and-death problem, is to find a form of political mobilization that, while (like populism) critical of institutionalized politics, *avoids* the populist temptation¹⁶¹

This passage perfectly symptomizes the purpose of this subsection, which is to summarize and analyze Žižek’s attempt to destroy postmodern clichés regarding the natural marriage of all kinds of ‘totalitarianisms’; more specifically, Žižek wishes to de-link the naturalized link that has been

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 157.

¹⁵⁶ Žižek 2009B; see also Žižek 2008A p. 21.

¹⁵⁷ Žižek 2008B p. 52; see also Žižek 2008A p. 14.

¹⁵⁸ Žižek 2008B p. 54; the same passage alludes directly to the example of St. Paul.

¹⁵⁹ Žižek 2008A p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 7.

¹⁶¹ Žižek 2007A p. 93.

proposed to exist between 20th century fascism and communism.¹⁶² Part of this project necessitates a concomitant de-linking of form and content: in this respect, Žizek seeks to challenge our notions of what exactly constitutes fascism in order to create a new space, free of the constraining prejudices of our ‘postmodern era,’ to reconceptualise or perhaps renew communism. This overarching argument takes two forms: firstly, that class struggle, far from being a dead descriptor of a previous age of politics, continues to live on in denegated form. Secondly, that classic tropes of fascism, such as the emphasis on corporeal discipline, are in fact perfectly compatible with a communist worldview (at least in the view of ruthless authoritarianism, a gimmick that Žizek enjoys toying with in his writing). Both of these arguments simultaneously act to discredit proponents of postmodern, reinforcing Žizek’s position as a ‘strong’ thinker capable of tackling even taboo subjects without fear of reprisal.

Žizek writes that the fact that many political activists no longer coordinate their political efforts along explicitly Marxist or unionist lines does not necessarily imply the death of class struggle. Rather this struggle, as the primary contradiction of capitalism, carries on incessantly in other forms. Žizek writes: “Resistance against immigrants is primarily the spontaneous-defensive reaction of the local working classes who (not wholly unjustifiably) perceive the immigrant worker as a new kind of strike-breaker and, as such, an ally of capital,” and he levels a concluding quip against the defenders of our PC world as well: “In short, it is global capital which is inherently multiculturalist and tolerant.”¹⁶³ He writes that “[o]ne should be attentive here to how even those elements that appear as pure rightist racism are effectively a displaced

¹⁶² Žizek is of course not the first to attempt such a feat. Domenico Losurdo’s critical historical project sets itself the goal of knocking down a central pillar of liberal revisionism. Losurdo describes the object of his critique thusly: «Le triomphe du révisionnisme historique produit désormais une idéologie compacte et peu soucieuse de distinctions, qui met au banc des accusés les seuls jacobinisme et bolchevisme.» See Losurdo p. 25.

¹⁶³ Žizek 2009A p. 119; see also *Ibid.* p. 33; see also Žizek 2008A p. 266, 275.

version of workers' protests,"¹⁶⁴ and that, "ironically, rightist, racist populism is today the best argument that the class struggle, far from being obsolete, goes on."¹⁶⁵

What Žizek recalls in these passages, and what often accompanies them directly before or afterwards, is the stress on the difference between populism (deployed as a Laclauian term) and legitimate, *revolutionary* political practices. As highlighted in the subsection above, **Postmodern Today**, Žizek qualifies populism as relying on an anti-Semitic logic which presupposes a perfectly harmonic system which is suffering from the intrusions of a dangerous invader; *sans* this intrusive invader (the Jew; Madoff; McDonald's; etc.), life could return to its original, pristine state. Of course, the figure of the Jew in the populist's mind is nothing other than a symptom of the normal workings of this very system, which is essentially the purpose behind Žizek's disturbing and oft (over)misquoted claim that "crazy, tasteless even, as it may sound, the problem with Hitler was that *he was not violent enough*, that his violence was not 'essential' enough."¹⁶⁶

So to speak, the content that Žizek is concerned with is this 'essential violence'; if those doing politics are ready and willing to see it through, or if they suffer from anti-Semitic delusions. The form, on the other hand, is typically of less consequence. Against those who are quick to reject anything remotely reminiscent of fascism (even if possessing revolutionary potential), Žizek notes that "[t]his total political blindness, this loss of the very capacity to distinguish Left and Right, betrays a panic at politicization as such. The automatic dismissal of entertaining any thoughts outside the established postpolitical coordinates as 'populist demagoguery' is the hitherto purest proof that we effectively live under a new *Denkverbot*."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Žizek 2007A p. 77.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 78.

¹⁶⁶ Žizek 2008A p. 151.

¹⁶⁷ Žizek 2007A p. 78; see also Žizek 2006 p. 323.

In his attempts to disrupt and dismantle this ‘*Denkverbot*,’ Zizek frequently relies on a series of examples and images to delink the form of fascism from its content. In *The Parallax View*, Zizek spends several pages effectively ‘rewriting’ or, rather, re-envisioning, the new *Star Wars* trilogy. Going beyond the very vulgar and explicit political message of the film that democracy requires vigilance and that the temptations of siding with security over liberty result in totalitarianism, Zizek focuses on the character of Anakin as a tragic hero. Ignoring the poverty of the film’s script, which has Anakin studidly “oscillating between different positions, the ‘bad’ one (fury at Padme) and the ‘good’ one (remorse and love for her),”¹⁶⁸ Zizek declares that “[t]he proper task would have been to show how Anakin’s very excessive love for Padme, his excessive attachment to her, makes him follow the path of Evil.”¹⁶⁹ While every connoisseur of the *Star Wars* universe remains puzzled at the arbitrary ‘advantage’ provided by having ‘the higher ground’ in a battle among Jedi, Zizek “cannot resist the temptation to perceive Anakin’s insistence [against Obi-wan’s appeal to Anakin to turn away from the dark side] as a properly ethical stance...what appears at the level of content to be the choice of Evil is, at the formal level, an act of asserting one’s ethical consistency.”¹⁷⁰

The elegance of his analyses of this narrative is twofold: firstly, Zizek clearly provides a demarcation of form from content, simultaneously re-asserting his position on ethical commitment as being grounded in not only consistency but also a heroic acceptance of risk and failure. Secondly, it deploys Anakin and the imagery of Vader, as a quintessentially good and Christ-like figure:¹⁷¹ “The notion that our very excessive attachment to the Good may lead to

¹⁶⁸ Zizek 2006 p. 102.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 102.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 102.

¹⁷¹ “Already *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace* gives us the crucial hint to orient ourselves in this *melee*: the ‘Christological’ features of the young Anakin (his mother claims that she became pregnant with him in an immaculate conception; the race which he wins clearly echoes the famous chariot race in *Ben Hur*, this ‘tale of

Evil, however, is a commonplace wisdom, a standard warning against the dangers of moralizing fanaticism; what we should do...is to turn this entire constellation around, and present Anakin-Vader as a *good* figure, a figure which stands for the ‘diabolical’ foundation of the Good.”¹⁷² Zizek follows this by proclaiming yet again how all proper ethical commitments require a modicum of excess and violence, and his ‘re-writing’ of Anakin’s progression from innocent child to machine-Sith as built on a consistent love and ethics, his glorification of it, effectively, is a clear stroke against the pomo ethic of relaxed relativity. Drawing additionally on the cool factor of Vader, the ultimate message is very clear: the face of pop culture evil is actually a convincing exemplar for leftists.

While Vader is, from a pre-Zizekian perspective, a clear representation of fascism, the lesson is that, put simply, appearances can be deceiving. Zizek consistently reiterates how it is the content of our ethical commitments (in addition to the form of consistency) that matters: if it looks like a fascist and talks like a fascist, it still might just be a communist. Zizek describes a monument of a woman carrying a flag in Budapest erected by the fascists in 1943 and, after the city’s liberation by the Red Army in 1945, kept aright by the Soviet commander, who “thought it could serve as the monument of liberation.”¹⁷³ He notes elsewhere, with reference to the film *300* about the Battle of Thermopylae, and against the ‘standard’ critical reading of the movie as an ode to Eurocentric values against the barbarian hordes of the Orient, that the Spartans actually mirror much more closely the impoverished countries besieged by US imperialism, comparing the deaths of Leonidas and his men by a hail of arrows as equivalent to the way “techno-soldiers operating sophisticated weapons from a safe distance, like today’s US soldiers who at the push of

Christ’); second, the fact that he is identified as the one who has the potential to ‘restore the balance of the Force.’ Since the ideological universe of *Star Wars* is the New Age pagan universe, it is quite logical that its central figure of Evil should echo Christ – within the pagan horizon, the Event of Christ is the ultimate scandal.” Ibid. p. 101.

¹⁷² Ibid. p. 103.

¹⁷³ Ibid. p. 147.

a button launch rockets from the warships miles away in the Persian Gulf,”¹⁷⁴ flatten hopelessly under-equipped resistance fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan. Recalling Heidegger, he writes that “the tragedy is that he was *almost right*, deploying the structure of a revolutionary act and then distorting it by giving it a fascist twist.”¹⁷⁵ In the same vein, Žizek rejects the dismissal of discipline and organized spectacles as ‘proto-fascist,’ claiming instead that “when, three decades ago, Kung Fu films were popular (Bruce Lee and so forth), was it not obvious that we were dealing with a genuine working-class ideology of youngsters whose only means of success was the disciplined training of their only possession, their bodies?...those who have nothing have only their discipline.”¹⁷⁶

This warrior ethos is most brutally deployed through the medium of Keyser Soeze’s character in *The Usual Suspects*, where Soeze’s act of shooting both his hostage wife and child, in order to remove from his enemies any power they might have over him, is glorified as a heroic transformation of the stakes and sites of struggle.¹⁷⁷ This attitude, reminiscent of Mussolini’s code of *me ne frego*, is part and parcel of Žizek’s attempt to disturb standard reproaches against a genuine warrior code of struggle, loosening the entrenched definitions of what constitutes fascism and what does not to push us to reconsider what options are, at the very least, available to us as recourse.

¹⁷⁴ Žizek 2008A p. 68; see also *ibid.* p. 184-185; see also Žizek’s online NiteBeat interview (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjEtmZZvGZA>) where he expounds the virtue of the ‘authoritarian father’ over the liberal one who indulges his children.

¹⁷⁵ Žizek 2008A p. 139.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.* p. 138.

¹⁷⁷ “[W]hen, in the flashback scene from *The Usual Suspects*, the mysterious Keyser Soeze returns home and finds his wife and small daughter held at gunpoint by the members of a rival mob, he resorts to the radical gesture of shooting his wife and daughter themselves dead – this act enables him mercilessly to pursue members of the rival gang, their families, parents and friends, killing them all...in a situation of forced choice, the subject makes the ‘crazy’, impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself. This act, far from amounting to a case of impotent aggressivity turned against oneself, rather changes the coordinates of the situation in which the subject finds himself” This passage is copied from Žizek’s *The Fragile Absolute*, but is replicated in Žizek 2000 p. 122; see also Žizek 2008A p. 171.

Fascism is represented as growing out of the failed seeds of revolution rather than as a twin spirit of 'leftist totalitarianism.' Citing Walter Benjamin, Zizek insists that every fascism signals a failed revolution,¹⁷⁸ and that even Robespierre should continue to function as a role model for those involved in political struggles (so to speak, Zizek admonishes us for 'being afraid to win,' and being more afraid of following through with our beliefs), the legitimate precursor to the conservative Napoleon, who exported the revolutionary fervor. Indeed, Jacobinism is recalled as having much to teach us vis-a-vis contemporary political resistance, and "perhaps the time has now come to turn this mantra around and admit that a good dose of just that 'Jacobin-Leninist' paradigm is precisely what the Left needs today," that we need "strict *egalitarian justice*, disciplinary *terror*, political *voluntarism*, and *trust in the people*. This matrix is not 'superseded' by any new postmodern or postindustrial or post-whatever-you-want dynamic."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Zizek 2009A p. 73; see also Zizek 2008A p. 386.

¹⁷⁹ Zizek 2009A p. 125.

Chapter 4: The Impossible Gesture

Zizek's reception in the scholarly community is divided: there are accounts like Simon Critchley's and Ernesto Laclau's which see him as a totalitarian Marxist-Leninist and denigrate him for it; accounts, like Rex Butler's and Scott Stephen's, which revel in his supposed hatred of democracy and academia; accounts which have him discovering everything under the sun, paralleled by those which dismiss him as a farce (since Marxism's first time around was so tragic). If readings of Zizek vary so widely, if he can never be unanimously ascribed politico-theoretical coordinates, we have to ask *why*. Is it the difficulty of Zizek's written content?; the limitations of his audience?; or, rather, his own inability to write coherently and consistently? Zizek's writings are not exactly paragons of clarity, but it seems more reasonable to suppose that the wild discrepancy in his readers' accounts of him owes itself more to *their* shortcomings than to his. This is because, if there is one thing his analysts share, it is the all-too sycophantic willingness (whether they are sycophants or not) to want to cling directly to his words, to attach themselves to the text in direct communion.

In this regard, critics of Zizek have produced readings perfectly consistent with their (unspoken, unacknowledged) methodologies: Zizek says something, he *means it*. And this stress on creating an equivalence between the theses Zizek produces and the truth-value of these same claims is precisely what leads to such problematic outcomes. An author like Zizek in particular clearly cannot be fruitfully read using this paradigm: to do so involves ignoring all those statements he makes which contradict the ones we want to read as 'true,' or reading those contradictions themselves as symptoms of insanity (as Critchley does), megalomania (as Gilbert

does), or as part of a hidden agenda (as Laclau does). It might be that one or all of these explanations does account for ‘the real Zizek,’ but rather than produce an analysis which effectively enjoins us to *dismiss* Zizek (Zizek is sick; Zizek is crazy), what about one which tries to go beyond readings which presuppose philosophy as a traditionalist/idealist discourse, a discourse which steps outside of the world in order to pronounce verdicts on it, and instead focus on philosophy as a practice which is inextricably rooted in the conjuncture which it attempts to transform through its written interventions?

What these many critics never stop to ask is thus *what is at stake in theoretical productions?* *Why write?* And this is a question that needs to fall to the reader – as a *reader of theory* – to answer before wrestling with a text. The metatheoretical lens with which I have read Zizek and laid him out presupposes that theory is a practice which is embodied in texts and theses, and which sets as its goal nothing less than a transformation of the conjuncture it intervenes in by first transforming the way we as readers understand this conjuncture and the sites and stakes of struggle. And while reading is invariably too messy an exercise to rigidly be able to catalogue every word and every line under abstract categories such as *violence*, *dialogue*, and *transmission*, *having categories in the first place* to guide readings is a crucial step in grasping not so much *why* authors intervene, since occasionally their own utterances can at least hint at this, but rather *how* they do.

Of course, the categories of *violence*, *dialogue*, and *transmission* cannot – and have not throughout this paper – served as rigid pillars of support for readings. Rather, they act more as principles for a conceptual paradigm that moves the emphasis away from True/False dynamics, and towards reading philosophy as *political* (following Laclau and Mouffe, we need to decide in advance of our readings whether we want to put the stress on *political* or *philosophy* when

analysing political philosophy). Instead of asking if theses are, for example, valid, consistent, and ultimately true, these categories reorient us to ask instead who theses are directed towards and what these theses are doing (or attempting to do). While it is perfectly permissible to read political thought with a mind towards whether or not an author in question is making accurate claims about the world, that kind of study itself depends on a vast epistemological support system in order to do this consistently. So to speak, the categories of *violence*, *dialogue*, and *transmission* act more as a means of shifting the emphasis towards a different kind of reading by tracing practices and polemics in a given text; doing this does not answer the question of whether an author accurately diagnoses the world, or even accurately represents his critics, but instead serves to paint a portrait of the author that inextricably ties him/her to certain politico-theoretical coordinates.

These categories often can be found overlapping, particularly in dynamic and less prosaic texts. In Zizek, for example, it is often difficult to divorce the *violence* from the *dialogue*, and since in hindsight it has proven far too difficult to blandly label every element of my diagnosis in the preceding chapters as falling within the purview of one or another category, I will simply draw the picture I wish the reader to see by briefly summarizing my analyses of Zizek's engagements with Marxism and postmodernism.

As Althusser once put it, philosophy advances by theses and by occupying the positions of its interlocutors. What I have ultimately traced in Zizek can be summarized like so: in Chapters 2 and 3, I trace a *dialogue* between Zizek and, primarily, post-Marxists, who are interpellated *en masse* by Zizek's addresses to H & N and Laclau alike. This *dialogue* is similarly traceable through the themes and concepts of Zizek's works; Zizek's rehashing of old Marxist theses, packaged in slightly more contemporary clothing, functions more as a refresher and reminder for

the new guard than they do as a support and reiteration of what classical Marxists have been doing for years.

This gesture of a return to the past is itself displaced, however, through Žižek's concomitant dismissal of Marxism's old guard; his reference to their status as an 'endangered species'; his mockery of their denial that things have 'really' changed; his express claims that 20th century communism was a failure and that to really seek to imitate any bygone form of political organization is to be lost; these sentiments are scattered lightly throughout Žižek's oeuvre, and function to distance him from his 'classicist' retorts to post-Marxists like H & N and Laclau. This kind of manoeuvre is typical of Žižek's works: traced uncritically, Žižek occupies a kind of impossible space, unhindered by existing politico-theoretical coordinates. Žižek's readers tend as a community to be cognizant of his many contradictions and ambiguities, yet often times these contradictions are not resolved but, rather, taken up as a kind of riddle Žižek poses to the reader. In many cases, one side of Žižek's multifaceted approach is taken as a given that must be upheld; Žižek is never accepted as a contradiction, and instead is assigned intellectual coordinates based on the arbitrary whim of his readers that said coordinates are representative of what he 'really means,' effectively acting as though contrasting stances of his do not exist. Instead, I wish to understand Žižek as being quintessentially defined by his multifaceted nature (in all its contradictory and ambiguous glory) and by his negativity: Žižek enjoins us to 'think and do' the impossible, without providing positive, substantial insights into what this 'impossible' that 'must be done' is. This is the supreme value of Žižek's writings, and it would be a mistake to get mired instead in the erudite and sticky business of sifting out the 'conceptually valid' from the 'invalid,' the 'true' from the 'false.'

Laclau, for example, pointedly asserts that “[t]he difficulty with Zizek’s position...is that he never clearly defines what he understands by the global approach to politics”, and that “Zizek is not precise enough about these matters,”¹⁸⁰ using these claims as a springboard from which he can admonish Zizek for his “reference to an author like the young Lukacs,”¹⁸¹ the theoretical deployment of “entities – class, class struggle, capitalism – which are largely fetishes dispossessed of any precise meaning,”¹⁸² how class “is brought into Zizek’s analysis as a sort of *deus ex machina* to play the role of the good guy against the multicultural devils,”¹⁸³ and finally the charge that without a positive political strategy, Zizek’s “anti-capitalism is mere empty talk.”¹⁸⁴

In a sense, Laclau is actually absolutely correct: Zizek clearly does deploy class as a *deus ex machina*, using it as a foil against his definition of multiculturalism and identity-based struggle. Similarly, is Zizek’s anti-capitalism not defined *precisely* by its lack of positive content? Nowhere does Zizek provide answers to the failures of communist movements, and nowhere does he provide solutions to the crises he sees looming over the horizon. Laclau’s reading borders on brilliance, and he really only errs in his ascription to Zizek of a hidden position; that is, Zizek as a closet Russophile, a Marxist-Leninist in the most old fashioned sense who fails to recognize developments in Marxist thought after Lenin.

While it is abundantly clear that this is not the case (in spite of Zizek’s obsession with Stalin and his attempt to ‘reload’ Lenin, his use of Marxist authors ranges from Benjamin and the Frankfurt School to G.A. Cohen), there is something to be said for his reliance on classicist tropes: his emphasis on class struggle as the ongoing primary contradiction of our time (carried

¹⁸⁰ Laclau p. 198.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 198.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* p. 201.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 205.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 206.

on in denegated form), his plea for a return to the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat (indeed, his very renegotiation of the concept of the proletariat), his deployment of Lenin as, effectively, a role model for the political left; is this not damning evidence as to where Zizek really stands?

Read in its isolation, of course it is, but what happens when we read this theme against its inverse in Zizek's writings? How do we make sense of this position (Zizek as classicist) when it is contrasted with his light-hearted, easy dismissal of traditional Marxism? How are we to grasp Zizek's Marxism-Leninism when we consider his reading of the Russian Revolution as an *inherently* flawed event, even if it was nonetheless a necessary rupture with the established order? Zizek's use of the proletariat, similarly, has nothing of classic Marxism about it, and he clearly acknowledges that the working class no longer possesses the criteria of the 'part of no-part'; indeed, Zizek clearly displaces the working class (as an objectively fixed class in the production process) from its traditionally privileged position as the agent of universal emancipation.

The picture I have so far painted of Zizek's engagements with Marxist history and its postmodern turn is full of contradictions: Zizek is a contradiction. How can it be that, on the one hand, he can claim that the class struggle continues in denegated form while, on the other hand, he tells us that the proletariat is really an empty signifier, one which can be occupied by any particular subjectivity? How can it be that Lenin is a model of political struggle, while orthodox Marxists are simultaneously disparaged and harangued as an archaic and endangered species? Is the point of Zizek to confuse us? The title of Zizek's first contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* is telling: "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!". Zizek elaborates: "In a well-known Marx Brothers joke Groucho answers the standard question 'Tea or

coffee?’ with ‘Yes, please!’ – a refusal of choice.”¹⁸⁵ Confronting and overcoming this false antinomy of choice among the left is precisely what Zizek’s interventions aim to do. This antinomy is *false* because both ‘radical’ routes offer no truly creative, anti-capitalist, and emancipatory alternatives.

Throughout all these texts that stand as testament to this twin refusal, Zizek is ‘doing’ something: through his ‘terrorist acts,’ he pushes those who describe themselves as radicals to question the limitations they have placed on what is possible. Zizek describes leftists as, for the most part, holding to “the idea that we have to live with our imperfect world, since any radical alternative sooner or later would lead to the Gulag.”¹⁸⁶ This goes for most political theorists, but that it applies to leftists today is, for Zizek, tragic. Thus, in a conjuncture where there is hardly even a nominal call for a world beyond capitalism, Zizek needs to ‘bend the stick.’

My aim here is not to qualify or validate Zizek’s political ontology, but rather only to claim that there is a political ontology that underwrites Zizek’s philosophical interventions, and it is traceable not only in the consistency and frequency with which he discusses it but also, perhaps more importantly, the fact that on this issue he *does not* contradict himself; the consistency with which Zizek rails against the popular consensus that capitalism is here to stay is matched only by the frequency with which he claims it, and this depiction of the radical left is rehashed amidst many of his theoretical expositions. Indeed, it is precisely what makes these expositions relevant; class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, Lenin, the fascist aesthetic; all of these themes and concepts are venues for Zizek to be reiterate what is at stake in their very development. The legibility of Zizek’s interventions thus requires that we acknowledge this most elementary political ontology, and consequently recognize to whom Zizek is addressing his theses. They are

¹⁸⁵ Zizek 2000 p. 90.

¹⁸⁶ Zizek 2005. p. 59.

not theses directed against leftists *tout court* – or, more precisely, they are not theses directed against leftists just for being leftists, but rather ‘post’-Marxists who have come to terms with capitalism and are determined only to limit its damaging effects as much as possible.

So while the problem with leftists today is their entanglement within the paradigms of ‘multiculturalism’ or ‘postmodernism,’ the ‘solution’ is a complex one, at least partially owing to the limited role of the philosopher. In Zizek’s eponymous documentary he describes the role of philosophy along very Althusserian lines: “Philosophy does not solve problems. The duty of philosophy is not to solve problems, but to redefine problems, to show how what we experience as a problem is a false problem.”¹⁸⁷ At stake here is the age old Marxist dilemma of the relationship between theory and practice; understanding the conjuncture is the first step towards hypothesizing the political direction that partisans of communism need to take. Zizek’s diagnoses of his fellow (non)radical leftists help establish and reiterate the stakes of the present theoretical conjuncture, while simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of serious dialogue.

Depicting his opponents’ gauge of the revolutionary situation today as obeying a fascist or anti-Semitic logic is a powerful way of doing this (e.g. with respect to Laclau in particular). Similarly, in the case of H & N, Zizek simultaneously distances himself from Marxism and ‘postmodernism’ alike by refuting the duo’s diagnosis as ‘too Marxist,’ as ultimately revering the productive power of capitalism. In the same vein, Zizek’s very use of Lenin, the real strategy behind ‘reloading’ him, is a similar act meant to displace contemporary theories of emancipation. In terms of content, Lenin can *only* stand for the position of unmediated will and heroic overcoming; the message of Lenin, and the way Zizek deploys him, is to claim that revolution is never off the books (that is, Zizek’s message to his contemporaries is: put revolution back on the menu!). Lenin does *not* stand as a role model in a literal sense, i.e. Zizek does not use Lenin as a

¹⁸⁷ Taylor 2005.

segue into defending democratic centralism or authoritarianism, but rather as a model of political shrewdness coupled with revolutionary imagination. This model acts in the abstract: Zizek enjoins us to be *like* Lenin, not *be* him, and it is here where it is worth recounting Zizek's explicit recognition of the Russian Revolution as an objective failure from the very start; there is no room in his analysis for Trotskyist pipe dreams.

Zizek's thesis in *Violence* functions similarly: it is a clear demand for radicals today *not* to behave like 'liberal communists,' *not* to frantically hope to solve each pressing issue as it arises without carefully first diagnosing the real cause (and, in reductionist fashion, for Zizek the 'real cause' is always 'capitalism'). The thesis that these actors betray themselves in their inability to really 'violently' change the situation is itself a kind of *violent* challenge to post-Marxists to reconsider what the real end goal of change must be. Of course, when violence is understood as something that fundamentally transforms or disturbs the existing order (and the existing order is totalizing), anything less necessarily constitutes a form of surrender or 'renunciation.'

Nevertheless, Zizek is 'doing' something here: part of the *violence* of his analysis with respect to the invasion of postmodernism is that there is not a word on the intergenerational struggle between Marxists and 'postmodernists' throughout the late 20th century. There is hardly a mention of the canonical authors of 'postmodernism,'¹⁸⁸ and the concept itself is deployed by Zizek to depict everything from popular attitudes towards politics to the lapse of ethical certainty in radical movements. 'Postmodernism' functions, effectively, as a placeholder used by Zizek to catalogue everything problematic with post-Marxism and resistance today. By implicitly equating Masturbate-a-thons with Foucault and multiculturalism, Zizek attempts to undermine the 'seriousness' of 'postmodernism,' or those who would – perhaps grudgingly, considering how woefully seldom it is that theorists take on the mantle of 'postmodern' for themselves –

¹⁸⁸ Lyotard, Baudrillard, or even Foucault, to name a few.

label themselves as postmodern or as sharing in an identity-based struggle. Unsurprisingly, Žižek has no positive alternative to any of it, and relies on the space of Marxism as a foil which is only discarded when it is not countering postmodernism.

Deploying a metatheoretical toolbox to analyse these positions, it is clear that, far from producing something legitimately novel in terms of content, Žižek is in fact engaging in a polemical practice which seeks to have certain effects: for example, Žižek has no intentions of providing the answers to the ‘total catastrophe’ of 20th century communism, nor does he care to provide the long awaited solution to capitalism himself or the alternative to postmodern practices of resistance. Rather, the role of the philosopher is to nominate problems, point out false problems – we cannot account for Žižek’s reply here from a perspective that implicitly treats the philosopher in a traditional-idealist sense, as outside the conjuncture s/he wishes to intervene in, and as a pronouncer of Truth. Everything depends, rather, on the relation of practice to theory. In Althusser’s words:

Contrary to the whole rationalist tradition, which requires only a straight, true idea in order to correct a bent, false idea, Marxism considers that ideas have historical existence only in so far as they are taken up and incorporated in the materiality of social relations. Behind the relations between simple ideas there thus stand relations of force.¹⁸⁹

And so Žižek does not remain within what he would see as the gated community of academia: the ‘naked truth’ that leftists today are bound within a false antinomy of choice is not enough to set free the potential for emancipatory politics. Rather, Žižek must couple the word and the act – he must go beyond elaborations of new conceptual devices and intervene in the conjuncture he seeks to transform.

The purpose of this detour through particular instances of the negative, impossible gesture in Žižek’s interventions is to simultaneously give an idea of the concomitant, insistent

¹⁸⁹ Althusser 1990 p. 210.

quality of his work. This insistence necessarily accompanies the negative: since philosophy advances by theses (with all their conceptual baggage) and is not a question of Truth, everything depends on practice; that is, Zizek ‘practices’ his philosophy, he insists, he repeats himself *ad nauseam*, his jokes and analogies reach dizzying heights; precisely because the philosopher can do nothing else but insist when s/he exists on the margins of a field s/he wishes to transform. That is, s/he must learn the art of the pen before the art of the sword (though, between Althusser and Deleuze, it is unclear where the line would be drawn between artist and warrior). Indeed, if philosophy is ‘merely’ the nomination of a false problem, then insistence and repetition necessarily become a valuable strategy, for there is little else the philosopher can do once s/he has staked out these problems. Ultimately, Zizek insists in such a characteristic manner because, in the words of Deleuze, “[p]hilosophy has not remained unaffected by the general movement that replaced Critique with sales promotion. The simulacrum, the simulation of a packet of noodles, has become the true concept; and the one who packages the product, commodity, or work of art has become the philosopher, conceptual persona, or artist.”¹⁹⁰

I would add that, specifically with respect to Zizek, the opposite is true as well: the philosopher has become ‘the one who packages the product, commodity, or work of art’; the one who produces simulacra. While I can only stress the insistent, repetitive quality of Zizek’s works through a handful of exemplary themes and a shadowy brigade of endnotes that is far from exhaustive, the metatheory which I have laid out as a paradigm for reading can bring some ‘intelligibility’ to this specific form of Zizek’s interventions. That is, if philosophy is grasped as both a field of struggle and force relations *and* an art form, the content of which is not separate from the materiality of its own interventions, Zizek may be understood as something more than either a crypto-Stalinist or a weird, narcissistic clown.

¹⁹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari 1994 p. 10.

There is no either/or to Zizek's intellectual coordinates: unlike many of his readers, who opt to close their eyes to the many positions he takes up as a foil against postmodernism's 'surrender' to global capitalism, I read Zizek as both occupying these many positions while simultaneously transcending them. If Zizek's role as a philosopher is to nominate a false problem, and it is clear in his insistence that the current conjuncture remains defined by the left's submission and the inability and unwillingness to formulate new alternatives, then Zizek can be seen as the midwife of the new coordinates necessary to 'save us.' This position does not yet exist, and cannot exist amongst the current positions, which are too heavily constrained by the imaginaries of the past to produce creative alternative. Following Badiou's diagnosis that our situation today is much more reminiscent of the era when the Idea was being formulated politically and theoretically (the late 18th century until the days of the Paris Commune), rather than the era when its faithful sought to implement it practically, we should consider that developing a renewed notion of the Communist Idea requires doing away with the old, disentangling ourselves from the past. As the categories of *dialogue* and, more specifically, *transmission*, reveal, political philosophers are always implicated in the doings of their predecessors.

Zizek's project thus takes on a kind of double impossibility: there is the impossibility of the empty space which he occupies or, rather, the fleeting quality of his occupations: Zizek is sometimes required to play the part of the classic Marxist, and at other times the critical postmodern thinker, in order to negate one or the other position. The second impossibility is the impossibility of a real break from the past: if the current politico-theoretical constellation is found as possessing none of the qualities necessary to deal with what Zizek understands to be the single most pressing issue of our time (global capitalism's excesses), then we need a new

position that can. Part of this struggle depends on convincing existing positions that they are inadequate, and by thus reorganizing the problematic that drives them. Considering that capitalism is not exactly ontologized as a monolithic whole by many post-Marxist positions, Zizek's first task is to continue to insist that these positions ultimately remain trapped within capitalism's horizons, to bring back into vogue a more classical notion of capitalism as a totality.

This 'new position' thus remains impossibly entangled in the trappings of old coordinates and traditions, though it might be more apt to claim that Zizek must begin to create new traditions by mutating old ones. All Zizek's many prefaces to his theses, such as 'to put it in Leninist terms,' or 'as an old-fashioned Marxist,' etc., function to produce the contours of this new tradition.¹⁹¹ Considering the category of *transmission*, if we all belong to a theoretical family, we do not need the name of the family elders invoked at every turn, whenever their concepts are recalled – the concept is, as Deleuze put it, already signed. What Zizek accomplishes instead in his invocations of Lenin, Leninism, and Marxism, is a redefinition of the very words: if Zizek prefaces a claim with a nod to Lenin or Leninism, it is because there is no pre-existing, authentic 'vernacular' for the things he is about to say; that is, if Zizek begins a claim by saying that he's 'putting it in Lenin's terms,' it is because it is not self-evident to his audience what 'Lenin's terms' are, the coordinates that Lenin occupies are in such disuse (there is no 'serious' school of 'Leninists'; Lenin scholarship consists predominantly of historiographical work) that Zizek is free to mold them as he wishes. They are, rather, traditions that are in the process of being renewed or recreated; he must 'remind' us that he is speaking a particular vernacular so that we can learn the language too.

There is a remarkably cogent quote from Althusser on this subject:

¹⁹¹ Zizek 2006 p. 341; see also Zizek 2008B p. 102, 150, 154; see also Zizek 2009A p. 19, 67, 76, 99, 100.

In other words, does not the whole of philosophy consist simply in repeating, in the same words, what is already inscribed in reality? Hence in modifying words without producing anything new? Yes, philosophy does act by modifying words and their order. But they are theoretical words, and it is this difference between words that allows something *new* in reality, something that was hidden and covered over, to appear and *be seen*.¹⁹²

These modifications are modifications of the field particular theorists are embroiled in. Zizek's negative project, levelling all those in proximity to him, is part of producing new coordinates; Zizek levels existing coordinates so that there is room for a new space with which to think emancipation. Like his Keyser Soeze analogy, the radical left's only way out of its current impasse is to *first* 'murder its family,' that which constrains and delimits it, *and as a result* acquire the freedom to ruthlessly pursue its enemies. And, following Althusser, the 'naked truth' of this is not enough on its own, and the force Zizek applies to produce the transformations he seeks can be discerned in the form which his interventions take: the taking up of the impossible position which allows him to parry every position's counter-thrust; the insistence and repetition, the frequency with which these same themes crop up in his works; the rhetorical devices nestled in his theses which enjoin readers to re-think emancipation; what counts in Zizek far more than the question of whether he even accurately understands 'postmodernism' is the form of his writings themselves.

But have I allowed this one dimension of Zizek's thought to run rampant over the others? The question is a true philosophical problematic, it contains its own answer: this *one* dimension, i.e. there are others (i.e. Zizek in the light of metatheory is not mutually exclusive with Zizek as clown). What this paper has staked out, however, is perhaps what could be said to be the primacy of this dimension over others, the primacy of form over content (or the content inherent in certain forms). While I set out explicitly to 'diagnose' the symptoms of the Zizek phenomenon in such a way as to displace both the othering effects of many existing readings *and* sycophantic

¹⁹² Althusser 1990. p. 107.

fanboyism, the study of Žižek here functions simultaneously as a ‘case study’ for broader questions of metatheory; not only questions of what political theory or philosophy is, but similarly how a *particular* reading methodology can help the political theorist to understand theoretical interventions and the transformations in thought these interventions can (or hope to) induce.

Conclusion: A Plea for Metatheory

There is a crucial question nestled in Critchley's critique of Žižek that can bring this paper to its last gasp. Drawing a parallel between Žižek and Lenin, Critchley writes:

One of the striking features of Lenin's text is the fact that his critique of liberals, social democrats and the bourgeoisie pails [sic] in comparison to the venom reserved for the true enemy: the anarchists. Everything turns here on the interpretation of the Paris Commune in 1871. The question is: *to whom does the memory and legacy of the Commune belong* [emphasis mine]?¹⁹³

It is a question which, for better or worse, implicitly underwrites much of the history of radical political thought. Rephrased more precisely, it is the question of a correct strategic line – a correct practice – and its dependence on theory. To pose then the question of 'what is new in Žižek,' or 'what does Žižek propose,' is to presume that Žižek's novelty is to be found in some positive, messianic content (as though, in our heart of hearts, we believe Žižek somehow possesses the answers to the catastrophes of 20th century communism); following Badiou, it is to mistakenly presume that the condition of the left today more closely approximates the 20th century (failed) realization of the communist idea, rather than its formulation in the 19th. More than this, it is to ignore the question of the relation of theory and practice and the specificity of the conjuncture, without which no correct practice is possible in the first place.

Rather, Žižek's radical novelty is to be found not only in his militant practice of theory (insofar as philosophy is a practice), but also in his attempt to hegemonize the existing field of theory under the negative rubric of the communist hypothesis or idea, which takes as its point of departure the effective negation of existing solutions and strategies of emancipation. The success of this strategy remains to be seen; the tragedy is that the primacy of form over content and the

¹⁹³ See Critchley, 2009.

taking up of the impossible place in thought, perhaps a necessary tactic for philosophy on the margins of established thought, may simply reproduce the stultifying effects on consumers that mass-marketing has, leaving us with a small legion of Zizophiles who have committed his jokes to memory and impotently decry postmodernists and classic Marxists alike, but who are some ways from ‘doing the impossible.’

Perhaps Zizek himself unwittingly leaves a clear clue to the problematic nature of his interventions. In his commentary on the film *Children of Men*, Zizek praises the boat that appears out of the fog at the end of the movie: “What I like is that the solution is the boat. It doesn’t have roots, it’s rootless, it floats around. This is for me the meaning of this wonderful metaphor – boat. The condition of the renewal means you cut your roots – that’s the solution.”¹⁹⁴ A brief summary of the story to perhaps make his analysis clearer: the film is effectively set in the present, and the social background is marked by the sudden and mysterious infertility of women across the globe. This results in global anxiety: with ‘no one and nothing to live for,’ the world has spiralled into chaos, with the British government remaining as ‘the last bastion of order,’ dependent on martial law and its military apparatus to keep refugees out of the country while simultaneously quelling insurrections across the nation. The protagonist, Theo (Clive Owen), ultimately becomes embroiled in the revolutionary activities of a group seeking to use what could perhaps be the last known fertile woman on earth as part of their attempt to galvanize the British populace into revolting. Theo attempts to make good on a promise to his ex-lover to help the pregnant woman make contact with an enigmatic group known as ‘The Human Project,’ a collective of humanitarian scientists who will ideally be able to ‘re-engineer’ fertility and restore hope for the future.

¹⁹⁴ See the special features section of the DVD version of *Children of Men*. Alternatively, Zizek’s commentary can be found on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbgrwNP_gYE).

Throughout the film, Theo crosses paths with populists, ‘Islamists,’ aged hippies, and even closet Leninists, as if enacting a negation of each successive position, culminating in the two dishevelled eastern Europeans (who, far from being explicitly political, possess only a small item with Lenin’s visage engraved on it, as if nostalgically reminiscing on better days) literally dying to help Theo reach the planned meeting point with the Project. One should firstly consider Zizek’s turn to Lenin and other tropes as properly mirroring the final outcome of the two ‘old school’ eastern Europeans in the film: a small trinket bearing Lenin’s head is the only real symbolization such a farce can possibly receive in a world populated by Islam-inspired guerillas and leftist populists, and such a tradition ultimately has to bear the cross (or, rather, have its roots cut) to allow for something greater. Nevertheless, the tragedy of the boat, in my analysis, is that it is confined to a world outside of where the real field of struggle is taking place, ultimately limited despite its supposed rootlessness.

The double struggle which Zizek undertakes is composed of the struggle to produce a new position and, simultaneously, not inadvertently reproduce an old one. It is fortunate so far that history repeats itself as a farce: those who have latched on most strongly to Zizek’s flare for the authoritarian (particularly Butler/Stephens) remain woefully out of touch with existing political movements, and are content to sneer at the masses from the heights of the ivory tower. However, the proliferation of remarkably short-sighted and uncritical analyses of Zizek stands as a testament to the difficulty of his performance: in many cases, it feels as though form has eclipsed content, and the message of the performance is being lost in the wild movements and excesses of Zizek’s dance.

On the other hand, Zizek can only meet his audiences part way. Part of the problem with Zizek scholarship is certainly not the lack of intelligence of its participants, but rather the way

they treat their object. If political theory – and specifically an author as partial to style and rhetoric as Zizek – continues to be grasped in what might be called traditional or logocentric fashion, then herein lies the problem. Readers of critical theory can simply not indefinitely go on reading theory uncritically, and in the case of Zizek scholarship, there is a clear price being paid. Far from calling on Zizek readers to reorganize their metatheoretical paradigms in order to accommodate Zizek, my project is a more a plea for metatheory in the first place. Knowing what a theorist is saying is obviously really important, but there seems to be a point for any given author where part of knowing what's being said is dependent on how well we can grasp *how* it's being said and *to whom*.

The real thrust of this project is to effectively deploy a reading methodology that can fill a certain lacuna in existing scholarship and, additionally, serve as a useful analytical tool for grappling with any author. Zizek happened to make such a good guinea pig because of the lack of such analyses in the field of Zizek studies and because, clearly, Zizek is trying his damndest to mimetically take over the world (a strong example of the potential for authors, more and more every day, to be able to deploy insistence and repetition, alongside quantity of publications, as part of their interventions in a field). Nonetheless, the risks of Zizek's project, the risk of a misunderstanding, thus seems to depend in part on whether readers can recognize a given piece of his work, whether written or audio-visual, as part of a series of simulacra: if the full materiality of Zizek (nevermind political thought proper) can be grasped as the object of study for readers, a radically different Zizek can come to light than that which has been plastered to book jackets and online Zizekian outlets for fanboyism (the International Journal of Zizek Studies is the real borderline case of this).

Zizek is trying to help us clear a path to be able to find the boat: to cut our roots, and to enjoy the radical freedom which is imparted to theory in times of crisis. The final scenes on land in *Children of Men* are indeed hopeless: 'old,' established forms of political resistance being bombarded and obliterated by the military arm of the state. It is a kind of miracle Theo is able to ensure the newborn child and his mother are able to make it to the water and row out to find the Human Project in the fog, and it stands as a testament to how difficult it is for pre-established positions to cut their roots, cease existing, and fold in order to allow for the creation of something radically new: Zizek himself is unable to make such a profound break from existing constraints on theory. More importantly, his message that such a break is truly necessary continues to flounder in the face of 'landlocked' practices. Until such time as his impossible gesture is recognized, it seems, 'the boat' can rescue as many pregnant women as it likes: we're still stuck in a firefight for our lives on land, and we need a proper lens to read the impossible before we can achieve it.

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