CRISIS & CRITIQUE

Volume 12
Issue 1, 2025

The Oeuvre of Slavoj Žižek

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The Oeuvre of Slavoj Žižek
Volume 12/Issue 1, 2025

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ISSN 2311–5475

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Introduction: The Oeuvre of Slavoj Žižek

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

Slavoj Žižek is alive and he lives to think. This is why his is an oeuvre, an oeuvre of thought. This is the axiom of this issue of *Crisis and Critique*. We affirmatively start from the assumption that whatever Žižek and his work might appear to be, it is and needs therefore to be conceived of as thought. And it is in the domain of thought that Žižek has shown us a mastery of a rare and also of a peculiar kind. Without doubt, the maybe most prominent philosopher there ever was, Žižek, the thinker, makes his thought manifest in different forms (quite short and very long) and different media (from podcasts through books to films and public conversation). He has disproved the intuitive assumption that thinking and more specifically philosophical thought can never have mass appeal or relevance for the so-called real world. Žižek is the living proof that one should better not trust one's intuition. Žižek produces – and always has produced – new legibilities, new intelligibilities – for potentially everyone. He looks awry at the world, the universe and more and certainly at also much much less, and the world, etc. looks not simply back, but it shows itself in a new and different light. It creates a new form of immanence and the present issues attempts to construct and participate in the immanence that is the thought of Žižek. It seeks to explore and exploit some of its extension, expansion and ever-surprising richness.

...

Žižek, renowned for his productivity, suffers from the peculiar fate of having possibly as many texts, books and articles published on his work as he himself has written - if not more. Whenever one hears the name Žižek, one associates it with all sorts of monikers and sometimes even accusations: he is variously called a charlatan of theory, the Elvis of cultural theory, the giant of Ljubljana, or capitalism's court-jester, a covert Nazi, and an anti-Semite. This collection of non-praises is highly selective but if one seeks to detect a conceptual aspect in these critiques, it lies in the critique of contradiction Žižek appears to embody, rehearse, and practice. Those contradictions do not only matter on the level of his writing, but for his thinking *tout court*. If one looks at the critiques with this lens, what comes into view is his actual philosophical endeavour, notably his attempt to reinvent "dialectical materialism." Despite its association with the names of Engels, Lenin and Stalin, Žižek seeks to develop a dialectical materialism that clearly 'deviates' from its Soviet instantiations.

Žižek vehemently rejects the position Lenin takes in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and this is one background against which one can read his engagement with quantum physics. But his philosophical anti-Leninism is in radical contrast with his politics, where he remains thoroughly Leninist. There can thus seem to be a contradiction between philosophy and politics inbuilt in Žižek's approach; concepts do not always live up to their conceptual actuality (without this saying that this

is what concepts generally do). This is why, contradictions in thought, be theyperformative or not, are not indicators of a mishap or of a flaw, They are rather constitutive of thinking itself. Performing performative contradiction is not a weakness, but the enduring principle of a form of thought. Žižek is also often accused of being a pop-philosopher. But, as we know from an early text by Hegel (on scepticism), to be popular is not necessarily bad. It is only bad if we start with popularizing. That is to say, popularizing philosophy is good if the fundamentals are worked out properly. The symptom of our age is therefore not – only – the prominence of Žižek, but probably also what Hegel has addressed as *Unphilosophy*, which can today be recognized in the attempts to philosophize on blogs, in Twitter-tweets, podcasts, or tik-toks. This cannot but raise the question: what is the system that allows Žižek to popularize? It is what one can see from *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, until his latest publication to date, that is *Christian Atheism*. He followed a systematic line of thinking in philosophy, psychoanalysis, political thinking that even sometimes forced him - out of principle - to change his position. Are all of his texts part of the system? All in the same manner? Is it just all one book and he just cuts off a stream of thought now and then (as some sources tell us)? We are proud to present to you an issue on Žižek's thought that seeks to answer some of these questions and provide answers to questions not yet raised.

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza
Dundee / Prishtina

Are All Things Contradictory? Žižek and Brandom on the Materialist Legacy of Hegel's Metaphysics

Dominik Finkelde

Abstract: This paper explores the philosophical debate between Slavoj Žižek and Robert Brandom over Hegel's metaphysics, focusing on their opposing views on reconciliation and negativity. Brandom, through an inferentialist lens, interprets Hegel as advancing a process of normative reconciliation, where conceptual idealism and pragmatic semantics align to resolve contradictions. Žižek, by contrast, argues that Hegel's ontology is one of fundamental antagonism, where contradiction is not merely a step toward resolution but an essential feature of reality itself. This disagreement raises broader issues concerning historical progress, ideology, and the limits of conceptual determination.

Keywords: Inferentialism, determinate negation, antagonism, recollective forgiveness, absolute knowing, parallax

Robert Brandom, the founder of inferentialism—a philosophical approach rooted in pragmatism, analytic philosophy, and German Idealism—ranks alongside Robert Pippin among those Hegelians with whom Žižek has extensively engaged. For the Slovenian philosopher, the very legacy of Hegel's philosophy appears to be at stake, judging by the emphasis he places on interpretative differences throughout numerous publications.[1] The same urgency is not mirrored by Brandom, who has taken up the challenge posed by the left-Hegelian Žižek so far only once.[2]

The debate that emerges in this context is highly interesting, as it reveals a different Hegel within the framework of mutually exclusive intellectual traditions. Žižek, drawing on the influences of Alexandre Kojève, Jacques Lacan, Jean Hyppolite, Gérard Lebrun, and others, primarily situates his reception of Hegel within the tradition of dialectical materialism. Brandom, on the other hand, views Hegel as anticipating insights from a particular school of analytic philosophy. In addition to Wilfrid Sellars and Ludwig Wittgenstein, he particularly emphasizes Gottlob Frege as an important reference. The author of the *Begriffsschrift* and co-founder of predicate logic is known for his analyses of the semantic roles of words and proper names, the logical structure of sentences, and his so-called Platonic conceptual idealism. According to this view, true thoughts reside in a "third realm," situated between subjective opinions and objective facts. It is this realm that guarantees historically contingent beings, such as humans, the ability to anchor their judgments in eternally valid truths about an objectively existing reality.

This aspect of Frege's thought interests Brandom, as it helps him interpret Hegel as a proponent of a pragmatic theory of semantics. In doing so, he challenges Bertrand Russell's infamous judgment that Hegel was a pre-Kantian metaphysician[3]—and he does so using the conceptual tools of certain traditions within analytic philosophy. These traditions not

only link Brandom's semantic pragmatism to previously mentioned figures like Frege, Wittgenstein, and Sellars but also to thinkers such as Donald Davidson and John McDowell. "On this broadly functionalist picture, meaning is understood in terms of use."[4]

Thus, two philosophical frameworks are introduced—dialectical materialism and semantic pragmatism—that could hardly be more different. On one side, we have Brandom's Hegel, who, drawing on the aforementioned thinkers, but especially on Frege, articulates a "conceptual idealism." This Hegel is both engaged in theoretical and practical philosophy. On the other side, Žižek presents us with a Hegel who, alongside Marx, advances an ontology of antagonism. In this perspective, Hegel does not appear as a Fregean conceptual idealist, who gradually reconciles mind and world within a "semantics with an edifying intent,"[5] ultimately culminating in a kind of common-sense realism. Instead, Hegel emerges here as a thinker of radical dialectics and negativity. In this framework, knowledge and truth circulate conflictually within structures of objective relations, in which "no member is not inebriated."[6]

For Žižek, the progression of Spirit does not represent, as Brandom suggests, a teleological reconciliation between mind and world (a point to be elaborated upon later). Rather, it unfolds through conflicts, often waged from positions already lost, challenging the very possibility of reconciliation between mind and world as presented by Brandom. This Marx-inflected Hegel emphasizes the non-identity of things and the inherent antagonisms within them. Thus, a Hegel of reason-guided madness (Žižek speaks of "Hegel's madness") stands opposed to a Hegel who, guided purely by reason, seeks to dispel madness entirely.

The following sections focus on key moments of disagreement between Brandom and Žižek, which concern the concept of "determinate negation," the understanding of "recollective forgiveness," and the notion of "trust."

Inferentialism as Positivism?

Brandom has gained international acclaim for his inferentialism, systematically articulated across several monographs.[7] In these works, he advances a semantic-pragmatic holism rooted in the traditions of analytic philosophy and German Idealism, particularly drawing on Kant and Hegel. A central thesis of this inferentialism—aptly termed "inferential positivism" by Robert Pippin[8]—focuses on the semantic role of concepts. Concepts, in this view, are not mere vehicles for sensory input designed to express facts and truths; rather, they compel their users to acknowledge the inferential chains of meaning within the normative semantic frameworks to which these concepts inherently belong. Accordingly, a speaker who recognizes that the city of Pittsburgh is *west* of Princeton is thereby

committed to the reverse inference: that Princeton is *east* of Pittsburgh.[9] Brandom speaks of deontic-normative commitments, i.e., obligatory liabilities of speakers, which are linked to alethic-modal relations of facts that govern the relationship between language and the world. Human beings, he argues, are creatures who differ from the merely natural "by our subjection to norms"—that is, "by the fact that we can bind ourselves by (make ourselves responsible to) norms, by applying concepts, whose contents settle *what* we have made ourselves responsible for and to."[10]

This holds true even when an individual speaker is unaware of the normative potential inherent in the concepts they use. They may later have to assume responsibility for something they neither consciously chose nor understood at the time. This notion closely aligns with arguments concerning the semantic function of signifiers—the fundamental building blocks of concepts—articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, and numerous theorists associated with the linguistic turn, spanning from the Prague School to Jean Piaget and Julia Kristeva. Within this tradition, a distinct understanding of "education" emerges: education involves embedding consciousness within the normative structure of signifiers, such that the inferential, rule-governed chains of signification become second nature to human consciousness.

It is called "second nature" precisely because its origins do not lie in "first nature." Instead, individuals must endure this second nature externally, internalizing it through habitual practice. This explains, as Freud and Lacan have demonstrated, why meaning-processing involves deeper, intrapsychic layers. The unconscious, in this view, occupies a space that, in Brandom's terminology, lies beyond the deontic-normative and alethic-modal processes of subjectivation.

Brandom's inferentialism explicitly refrains from engaging with the dimension of the unconscious. What interests him in Hegel are the semantic roles of concepts that unite mind and world within a theory of "recognition and recollection"[11] in such a way that—in Žižek's critical words— a "commonsense realist universe" emerges.[12]

A parrot can be trained to squawk "this is red" when presented with a color chart. Yet, unless the animal also recognizes that the use of "red" commits the speaker to the concept of "color," and that red is necessarily and alethically-modally incompatible with yellow, it has not genuinely understood the meaning of "red."[13]

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Brandom argues, this insight is foundational. Humans are permeated by deontic-normative attitudes and relate to alethic-modal properties of objective facts. Both aspects of mind and world (deontic-normative and alethic-modal) are "different *forms* that one identical conceptual *content* can take. The contents are thinkables and judgeables, and they can be facts."[14] This means that for Hegel, both human thought and the world of facts to which thought refers are conceptually articulated. In other words, the normative relations

that define the nature of conceptual thinking are identical to the kinds of relations that define the nature of things. Brandom's reception of Frege shapes this conviction. Since relations of meaning to facts can always be revised by errors corrected through better understanding, an objective reality must necessarily be presupposed as the source of such corrections. The objects of reference, in Fregean terms, are the bearers of meaning for our words. They remain so even when the meanings of our words shift through the development of new experiences. Brandom illustrates this with the example of a wooden stick immersed in water.[15] If it first appears bent, our experience is corrected when we pull it out of the water and see that it is straight. "That sort of attitude-dependence is presupposed by their functioning as a normative standard for assessment of appearances, a standard that what things are for the subject may or may not satisfy."[16]

Determinate Negation

Hegel's concept of "determinate negation" plays a crucial role in this context and simultaneously marks a point of divergence from Žižek. According to Brandom, something can only be "conceptually contentful" if it "stands in relation of what he [Hegel] calls relations of 'determinate negation' and 'mediation' to other such things."[17] Brandom interprets Hegel's determinate negation as referring to "relations of exclusion, such as those between 'rectangular' and 'circular' [...] or between the metals 'copper' and 'aluminum'."[18] Kant, according to Brandom, confines determinate negation to the sphere of understanding—that is, to the epistemological level of factual knowledge. Whether knowledge growth through the accumulation and falsification of facts can be understood teleologically remains speculative and, in Kantian terms, exceeds the proper limits of reason. Hegel (and Brandom with him), however, engages in this speculation without restraint. He does not merely reveal reality through a rational process of making its fundamental structures increasingly conceptual (which is what primarily interests Brandom); he also asserts that *Absolute Knowledge* represents the ultimate endpoint of this development.

Hegel characterizes this process through a series of intimately related designations: the "coming-to-itself" of spirit, of the concept, or of the Idea. And just as Hegel deemed Kant dogmatic for his denial of the possibility of knowing things-in-themselves, so Brandom regards Frege as dogmatic for presupposing that our cognitive access to semantic reference operates independently of human sociality and the historical situatedness of conceptual practices.[19] Nonetheless, Brandom aligns himself with Frege in key respects—particularly in his insistence that alethic-modal relations among facts are "nonpsychological": that is, they entail "no essential reference to psychological acts of grasping or conceiving items that are conceptually articulated."[20]

What is at stake for Brandom is not the subjective mediation of conceptual content but rather the material articulation of the world itself—that is, the truth-value determination of facts as they pertain to being. These facts may be modally contingent, possible, or necessary, but—contra Žižek—they can in no case be internally inconsistent or contradictory. It is precisely at this point that Žižek's dialectical reading of Hegel breaks with Brandom's analytic realism, positing instead that "inconsistency is [...] the very core of any entity," be it conceptual or material.[21] For Žižek, this constitutes a radicalization of dialectical ontology; for Brandom, by contrast, such a claim performatively undermines the very objectivity that one seeks to capture through truth-apt conceptual articulation.

Within this theoretical tension, Brandom articulates a position that is simultaneously an anti-metaphysical and a metaphysical realism: anti-metaphysical in that it presents itself as a holistic, inferentialist-pragmatist account of semantic content, resistant to essentialist or representationalist ontologies; metaphysical in that it affirms the rational legitimacy of concepts such as "trust" or "redemptive recollection" even when they exceed the boundaries of discursively articulable understanding.

Brandom's emphasis on Hegel's determinate negation particularly provokes Žižek's critique. The latter argues that Hegel's concept of negative determination is more fundamental.[22] This concept expresses the insight that an entity must not only distinguish itself negatively from others, but that negativity constitutes the very being of the entity itself. An entity can be internally affected by negation.

This form of negativity connects closely with the notion of differentiality articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida—namely, that difference precedes identity and constitutes its very condition of possibility. Beyond the straightforward impossibility of a wooden chair simultaneously being a metal table, no entity can be entirely reduced to the mere sum of its properties. This issue has roots in the modern philosophical debate initiated, among others, by John Locke's "substratum"-theory. It continues today, notably in critiques of bundle theories that conceive of objects purely as aggregates of properties. If, however, properties alone do not exhaust what an object is, something beyond mere bundles of properties must necessarily be assumed.[23] Thus, negation is embedded within the self-referentiality of any entity. It points to an indeterminate differentiality, a "je ne sais quoi"—a "something" that remains unknowable in itself. "[An entity] excludes also its own properties in the sense that it 'is' none of them but achieves its self-identity by way of what Hegel calls negative self-relationship [...] the very absence of property can count as a property."[24]

In the 20th century, Claude Lévi-Strauss paved, roughly speaking, one of the pathways toward this insight in his discussion of the concept

of "mana".[25] Discovered by Marcel Mauss among indigenous Polynesian populations, this term is considered magical, overdetermined, and meaningful precisely because, in its overdetermination, it marks a zero point of meaning within conceptual meaning formations. From this, a conclusion can be drawn regarding Žižek: For Žižek, concepts and states of affairs are "excessive" in such a way that they evade any ordering format. No perspective on an object can translate it into complete transparency. Žižek writes: "[M]atter is that which 'disappears' when we try to squeeze it into a definite conceptual frame." For Hegel, "[m]aterial reality [...] is Idea itself in its externality, in its reality."[26]

For Žižek, this undermines any conceptual idealism or commonsense realism. Any ontology, however conceived, must account for the problem of meaning-generating zero points of meaning. From Žižek's perspective, Brandom cannot provide such an answer.[27]

Retrospective Transubstantiation

But does this truly undermine Brandom's philosophical stance and his interpretation of idealism? After all, Brandom himself acknowledges that individuals can become subjected to the normative contents inherent within their concepts, thus prompting the critical question of whether humans genuinely remain the 'masters and mistresses' of their own inferential networks. "It is up to us, as knowers and agents, what norms we bring into force. For it is up to us what concepts we apply. But, it is *not* then up to us what the content of those norms is—the details of *what* we have committed ourselves to by applying the concepts we did, rather than some others."[28]

As an example of retrospective inscription into a concept's potential for obligation, Brandom mentions in *Making It Explicit* an old custom of recruiting sailors for the British Royal Navy. Representatives of the Navy would encourage young men to drink heavily in harbor taverns until, intoxicated and out of money, they agreed to accept the "Queen's shilling" as payment for their outstanding bills.[29] Acceptance of this shilling marked the completion of their enlistment. Thus, we can become bound by normative commitments even without being fully conscious of their implications at the time.

The realm of the "giving and taking of reasons" is necessarily larger than the sum of all our known intentions. Just like the aforementioned press-ganged sailors, we can find ourselves in an obligation we never agreed to. The symbolic domain reveals itself as a spectral, ghostly realm of—using Daniel Dennett's phrase—"free floating rationals."[30] At first glance, this seems counterintuitive. Generally, we consider individuals as the instances that determine the meanings of concepts in judgments and practices. And yet they are not entirely so: In Jacques Lacan's words, a big Other always precedes them. The big Other is not to be identified as an

autonomous individual but is more comparable to the representative site of an unpredictable swarm intelligence. As such, it wields more power than the sum of the individuals it comprises and can thus dominate not only individuals like the aforementioned sailors but entire political communities. Consequently, these communities must take responsibility for things they are, in many cases, only retrospectively held accountable for. This closely aligns with Žižek's reference to the autonomy of the symbolic, "a differential structure which 'hangs in the air'".[31] Following Lacan, the symbolic rests on no sufficient ground—not even on the teleology of Spirit (*Geist*). Where this Spirit originates from and what it achieves remains open to perpetual reinterpretation. "[T]his lack of roots in any substantial positive reality, is what subjectivizes the symbolic structure."[32]

Like his colleague John McDowell, Brandom cannot accept the idea of a conceptual or normative structure simply "hanging in the air." For him, there must be friction between concepts and facts, a thesis he grounds explicitly in Hegel.

Nevertheless, Brandom recognizes that subjects may be driven by the implicit normative force of their concepts to reconsider—and sometimes revise—the very facts they previously accepted, occasionally even against their own convictions. Žižek, in contrast, insists that it is precisely the symbolic order which opens up a radical gap between facts and values. This gap enables symbolic beings, such as humans, to retroactively transform their understanding of the past. Something that once appeared as an arbitrary imposition (such as gender equality) can thus retroactively become recognized as ethically necessary. This transformative process—what Žižek refers to as "retroactive transubstantiation"—reveals how historical developments, in hindsight labeled as "progress," entail an implicit judgment against the past. "What we encounter here is the key feature of the Symbolic: it renders the fundamental 'openness' the Symbolic introduces into reality. Once we enter the Symbolic, things never simply are, they all 'will have been,' they as it were borrow (part of) their being from the future. This decentering introduces an irreducible contingency: there is no deeper teleology at work here, no secret power that guarantees the happy outcome."[33]

Brandom is well aware of this structure, recognizing that a series of contingent historical facts may "retrospectively [be] necessary."[34] Nevertheless, this insight does not alter his commitment to the concept of reconciliation.

Žižek, however, considers Brandom's transition from acknowledging the retrospective transformation of values into facts toward a metaphysics of reconciliation to be inconsistent. He states: "I find this jump to the future, this 'trust' into progress, totally unwarranted and at odds with Hegel's basic metaphysical stance."[35] In Brandom's approach, Žižek identifies an instance of infinite conceptual structure ("spurious infinity,"[36]), a concept criticized by Hegel as "bad infinity." But what exactly

constitutes this infinite structure in Brandom's thinking? According to Žižek, it emerges from an endless "recognitive cycle of confession, trust, and recollective forgiveness,"[37] in which one form of "recollective forgiveness"[38] continually gives way to another on a higher level.

A similar critique can be found in Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where he challenges the optimistic teleology of the Social Democracy of his time. According to this optimistic vision, past injustices would be redeemed by a brighter future—an ideal for which, according to Benjamin, the German Social Democrats had fought. Unable to accept such teleological certainty regarding historical salvation, Benjamin developed his own messianic conception of history. Brandom, by contrast, invokes a "cycle of recognition," which simultaneously arises from the "confession of the inadequacy of that forgiveness and trust in the subsequent forgiveness of that failure."[39]

Are, however, the deontic and alethic determinations of various facts within their contexts always as clear and unambiguous as Brandom suggests? Numerous everyday concepts—much like the judgments in which they appear—are embedded in chains of justification that are often overdetermined. Certainly, there is little difficulty in determining relationships of exclusion when dealing with natural kinds, such as aluminum and copper. No wars have been fought over the meaning of these terms, at most only over the resources they represent. But does this exhaust the full scope of conceptual analysis? Consider a trivial but contrasting example: when exactly does a stone in a dried-up riverbed cease to be a boulder and become a pebble? Here, it appears, boundaries become blurred—not just in terms of meaning, but also in terms of objects of reference themselves.

Or consider the relative sizes of countries, such as Switzerland and Argentina. Are these genuinely modally exclusive as facts in their sheer materiality? In Ferdinand von Schirach's novel *Tabu*, one of the protagonists provocatively claims otherwise, suggesting that if one were to roll out the Swiss Alps like pastry dough, Switzerland's surface area could rival Argentina's. Admittedly, these are intellectual games; however, if we apply such reasoning to social facts, the seriousness of the matter intensifies. Our theoretical constructions aim to epistemically individuate objects until they correspond precisely to their ontic conditions of individuation. Yet regarding various social facts, it remains contentious who is ultimately entitled to determine the truth values of judgments, for instance in political matters.

And are all rational beings equally convinced by an impartial distribution of "commitments" and "entitlements"—central terms in Brandom's vocabulary—as results of teleological processes of progress in "spirit"? Or are such processes, following Marx, always potentially subverted by questions related to class struggle, or, following Ernesto Laclau, by social antagonisms? Likewise, progress in Benjamin's sense

could always represent the progress of "the victors of history,"[40] which would commit us to a fundamental mistrust toward the idea of normative advancement itself.

Trust, Distrust, Negation, and Reconciliation

The examples above demonstrate that negativity is already at work, even in apparently simple facts. According to Žižek, the true legacy of Hegel's philosophy lies not primarily in "determinate negation," as Brandom suggests, but in a broader understanding of negativity—as antagonism or inconsistency—which is an inherent characteristic of objects and states of affairs. According to Žižek's interpretation of Hegel, such connections exist precisely because an inherent antagonism is inscribed within them. In everyday life, we continuously experience ambivalences, encountering justice as well as injustice, truth and lies, appearance and reality. Following Žižek, we must presuppose such ambiguities even—and especially—in the objects surrounding us. "Inconsistency" concerns "the real of the object—inconsistency is not something to be overcome or left behind but the very core of any entity."[41] This has implications for the concept of reconciliation, which guides Brandom's reading of Hegel. Žižek points out that reconciliation in Hegel's sense should not, as Brandom suggests, be interpreted primarily as an act of decision-making by responsible concept users. For Hegel, reconciliation often involves coming to terms with new conditions through resigned acceptance. It includes an element of simply accepting things as they are ("just-take-it"). In contrast, Brandom regards reconciliation as akin to a performative speech act—a decision through which people actively intervene in reality and establish facts, exemplified by declarations such as "This session is closed!" According to Žižek, however, what Hegel means by reconciliation does not primarily conform to this pattern. Instead, as mentioned earlier, it corresponds more closely to experiences of resigned acceptance. Reconciliation highlights the fact that the new epoch, whose arrival one may have fought against, is already "here." The widely lamented economization of daily life serves as an example: a new analysis might reveal that behind evil capital there need not necessarily be evil capitalists, but simply individuals forced to invest their capital somewhere. "[R]eality [...is] not just what there is, but also its ideological supplements, symbolic fictions that structure reality, false hopes and fears."[42]

Social conditions don't change only because of our deliberate actions—they also evolve due to broader forces at play in the background. These include complex social dynamics, historical processes, and shared cultural ideas that shape the world around us, often without individuals even realizing it. In many cases, people are not just active participants in these processes but also shaped by them, much like objects that interact with other objects in a larger networks.

Hegel argued that both objects and actions become meaningful within specific practices—structured ways of doing things in a society.[43] But these practices don't exist in isolation; they are influenced by other, larger systems. Some practices operate at a more immediate, everyday level (let's call them first-order practices), while others function at a higher level, shaping entire societies over time. These different levels don't always align, meaning that what makes sense in one context might not fit neatly into another. Philosopher Timothy Morton uses the term "hyperobjects"[44] to describe such large-scale, complex structures. They can't be separated from the smaller systems they influence, and they sometimes include conflicting ideas or beliefs.

Because of this, the systems we rely on—our social norms, our shared ideas—can change without those directly involved even noticing. People responsible for upholding certain rules (those with "entitlements" in Brandom's terms) might not realize that the meaning of those rules has already shifted.

This presents a challenge. Suppose the "game of giving and asking for reasons" is heavily influenced by complex background forces. Can we ever truly feel in control of them? Brandom suggests that we can, but examples like the "Queen's shilling" show how people can be committed to obligations without fully understanding what they agreed to. Compared to this, Brandom's other examples—like the logical difference between a rectangle and a circle or the scientific distinction between aluminum and copper—seem almost too simple. Real-world social facts exist in much more complicated networks, making it challenging to apply Brandom's inferentialist approach.

Žižek doesn't frame the issue in exactly the same way, but his ideas help clarify the challenge. He argues that, for Hegel, every object and idea contains a fundamental contradiction ("inconsistency is... the very core of any entity"[45]). This perspective adds another layer to the debate: Brandom believes in a process of "recollective forgiveness," where history allows for reconciliation and understanding. But can such reconciliation be meaningfully placed within the larger unfolding of history? Or does the very structure of reality—filled with contradictions and unexpected shifts—make it impossible to determine exactly when and how true reconciliation can occur?

Reconciliation Through the Inconsistency of Objects

Žižek argues that accepting certain facts—even reluctantly—can still count as a form of reconciliation. A good example is the idea of the American Dream: the belief that capitalism offers prosperity and happiness for all.

> "If we subtract this false opening, if we realize that this false opening (what, in the US, they call 'the American dream') is part of reality

> itself, condemned to remain just a dream, reality is no longer what it was—this subtraction works like a 'mute' button, which allows us to see what we see in all its ridiculous misery, deprived of the false depth of its vocal supplement. And once we do this, once reality is exposed in all its misery, it opens itself up to an actual change."[46]

In this sense, reconciliation involves a surprising realization: seeing things differently, sometimes in ways that challenge our expectations. According to Žižek, this realization comes from the fact that objects and ideas themselves contain inconsistencies. He believes Brandom fails to recognize a key difference between everyday thinking and Hegel's approach, which is why he calls the philosopher from Pittsburgh a "not-yet-there Hegelian"[47]:

> "[I]n the common-sense approach, when inconsistence ('contradiction') arises it signals that we missed the object we wanted to grasp—object in itself is by definition consistent, this is the definition of reality. For Hegel, on the contrary, an insurmountable inconsistency signals that we touched the real of the object—inconsistency is not something to be overcome [...] but the very core of any entity."[48]

Brandom's understanding of reconciliation departs from this insight. He sees "free subjectivity"—the idea of individuals being able to think and act freely—as something that emerges from the combination of traditional ethical values and modern experiences of alienation. He illustrates this with three historical "epochs of Geist,"[49] which he sees as key stages in the development of human freedom. The first stage is the world of ancient ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), where people share a strong sense of community and moral values. However, this comes at the cost of individual freedom.[50] The second stage is the modern era of Enlightenment. While people gain more personal freedom, this also leads to alienation—they become disconnected from society, and individuals and communities start to see each other as opposing forces. The third stage is the "postmodern phase of the development."[51] Here, ethical values and individual freedom are finally reconciled. Through ongoing self-reflection, democratic institutions develop, allowing people to recognize one another as equals. This mutual recognition creates a new form of reconciliation. In short, while Žižek sees contradiction and inconsistency as unavoidable parts of reality, Brandom presents reconciliation as a historical process where individuals and society gradually learn to coexist in balance.

> "Hegel's account of the nature of the expressively progressive development he can envisage, by which the modern alienated structure of self-conscious subjectivity and social substance can

> give rise to a new, better structure, which overcomes alienation, and so reachieves *Sittlichkeit*, while retaining the advance in self-conscious subjectivity characteristic of modernity accordingly encompasses a nonreductive account of how we should understand the place of norms in the natural world. The aim of the rest of this book is tell that story."[52]

This thesis has significant consequences for Hegel's discussion of Absolute Knowing, a key concept with which Hegel concludes the long experiential journey of Spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology*. For Brandom, Absolute Knowing represents an ideal state postulated by Hegel—one that awaits us at the end of our journey through errors and learning. Brandom rejects the criticism that his emphasis on a "*retrospective, forgiving, recollective phase of experience*" is merely an idiosyncratic projection of Hegel. He argues that Hegel himself highlights this aspect: "After all, he [Hegel] closes the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, triumphantly titled 'Absolute Knowing,' by highlighting just this feature of this ultimate, finally expressively adequate form of self-consciousness. It lines up with his ringing pronouncement that 'The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind'."[53]

In contrast, Žižek interprets Hegel's discussion of Absolute Knowing and the notion of healed wounds as a particular form of ignorance. For Žižek, the wounds of history are not truly healed by what Brandom identifies as recollective reconciliation in Hegel.[54] Rather, at the level of Absolute Knowing, these wounds are simply forgotten. In Žižek's view, Hegel's Spirit suffers from a kind of amnesia: "[the wound] disappears, when we reach the standpoint of Absolute Knowing." This leads to a crucial consequence: upon reaching Absolute Knowing, we inevitably fall back into the journey toward it: "we fall back on repeating the path to truth since we realize that truth is nothing but the path to truth."[55] Thus, the supposed final goal of the *Phenomenology* actually marks a return to its beginning—but now with an awareness of its own self-reflexive limitation. This is closely connected to Žižek's broader claim that reality only fully becomes itself when it is revealed as a battleground of falsifiable ideologies.

The mediation between concept and reality, according to Žižek, does not represent a postmodern conceptual relativism, as argued by thinkers from Donald Davidson to Sebastian Rödl and Andrea Kern, where reality can simply be interpreted in different ways. The widely criticized idea of a *gap* between *mind* and *world* is not Žižek's position. Instead, he argues that the world is, in itself, inconsistent. What exists *in itself* is not unified within itself. The issue is not that our concepts fail to grasp reality and thus lead to unexpected catastrophes; rather, reality itself fails—so to speak—due to an inherent lack of being. Žižek repeatedly identifies this lack with Hegel's claim that *the True must not only be conceived*

as Substance but equally as Subject.[56] Substance contains within itself a moment in which it encounters itself in the spectral, ghostly form of its own non-coincidence. So, Absolute Knowing, in Hegel's philosophy, involves recognizing a fundamental lack or inconsistency in reality. Žižek explains this by arguing that reality itself can be "wrong" if it follows a mistaken concept. He states: "If reality follows (or refers to) a wrong concept, this reality can be wrong in itself, so it's not just that concepts more or less faithfully 'mirror' reality—reality itself is 'mediated' by concepts."[57] In other words, our understanding of reality does not just reflect what is real—reality itself is shaped by our concepts. This leads Žižek to an important conclusion: "[T]here are realities that can only exist insofar as they incorporate / actualize a wrong notion." "'[M]istakes' (ideological misconceptions) do not (wrongly) 'reflect' social reality: they are inscribed into social reality itself, they sustain social practices and institutions."[58] This idea is particularly relevant to major historical events. For example, Žižek argues that fascism is based on a false idea—the belief in the "organic unity" of a nation, which hides the real conflicts within society. Yet, despite being false, this belief can still shape reality, leading to large political movements: "[T]he fascist notion of organic unity of a nation is false, it obfuscates immanent antagonism, but this falsity can get embodied in a large political movement, which is part of social reality. Or, liberal individualism is 'wrong' as a theory of what society is, but this 'mistake' can be realized in liberal societies."[59]

Rocío Zambrana offers a similar way to think about Hegel's Absolute Knowing—she compares it to a gallery of images. Hegel himself describes this as "a gallery of images, each of which is equipped with the full richness of Spirit."[60] This metaphor suggests that history does not follow a simple, step-by-step progression, where each stage builds directly upon the previous one like rungs on a ladder. Instead, history is more like an art gallery, where different periods of time exist side by side, without a single universal way to judge them. As Zambrana explains: "The work of recollection cannot secure the fate of the finite beyond all destruction and loss. Normative authority is never final and fully authorized. It is precarious and ambivalent."[61] This means that there is no ultimate standard for judging historical events—not even through reconciliation, which Brandom sees as a balance between the ethical life of the past (*Sittlichkeit*) and modern ideas of individual freedom. Because of this, Žižek criticizes Brandom's interpretation of Hegel as too optimistic—just as Robert Pippin has critiqued Brandom's inferentialism for being too positivistic. Žižek argues that the recognition of actual change in history is not always something that people freely embrace. Instead, reconciliation often comes from a feeling of resignation, only becoming clear when it is too late. As he puts it: "[O]ne has to accept that *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, that the Good arises only through egotist evil, that there is no way of bypassing this. This is why historical reality is a space of resignation."[62] Brandom

does acknowledge that Hegel saw history as a mix of contingency (randomness) and necessity (inevitability). However, in Brandom's reading, this process is framed in a more positive way, as a movement toward progress, rather than as a struggle marked by antagonism.

Kammerdiener vs. Hero

Brandom briefly mentions Žižek in a 2020 article but does not reference him at all in his book on Hegel. However, when he critiques the so-called *three masters of suspicion*—"Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud"[63]—his argument indirectly applies to Žižek as well.

Brandom draws on a passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where Hegel describes the perspective of a *valet* (*Kammerdiener*).[64] The valet serves his master, a historically significant figure, but he only sees his master's personal flaws and everyday habits. He does not recognize his master's larger historical role. As such, the valet remains, according to Brandom, trapped in a limited way of thinking, unable to grasp the deeper rational perspective that Hegel calls *reason* (*Vernunft*), as opposed to mere *understanding* (*Verstand*). Similarly, Brandom suggests that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—like the valet—fail to appreciate the deeper normative structure of human culture and its achievements. Instead, they focus only on underlying power struggles, desires, or economic forces, framing everything with suspicion. This kind of criticism has also been directed at Žižek. Some argue that his focus on negativity and contradiction ultimately undermines the very idea that any belief can be justified as true—pulling the ground out from under our feet, so to speak.[65] For the valet, values are merely "useful[...] to private purposes". A value such a duty, cannot be "*unconditionally* obligatory."[66] In other words, the valet sees values as subjective judgments rather than part of a shared moral framework. Because the valet operates with mere *understanding* (*Verstand*) rather than true *reason* (*Vernunft*), values seem temporary and instrumental, without lasting significance. As Brandom explains, "as Nietzsche and the British utilitarians would say", values are simply tools used in struggles for power and survival.[67] They have no inherent worth in terms of recognition or moral obligation. The valet's problem is that he is too close to his master's everyday life—his flaws, his habits, his imperfections. This prevents him from recognizing his master's true historical impact. Because of this, the valet—like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—becomes what Brandom calls a "reductive naturalist."[68]

Brandom sees a similar pattern in how these philosophers explain human life: Nietzsche reduces humans to the will to power—the drive to dominate and control. Marx reduces economics to a natural, mechanical process that disregards ethical norms. Freud sees humans as driven by unconscious forces that overpower rational self-awareness and agency. In each case, human thought and action are stripped of their deeper

normative dimension—the role of reason, ethics, and shared recognition. For Brandom, this is the key mistake of the valet's perspective. The valet sees the hero of duty—a person acting out of moral commitment—"merely [as a] *natural* being,"[69] reducing him to mere instincts or external influences. In the same way, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud treat people as shaped by power, economics, or unconscious drives, rather than as rational, self-conscious agents. Thus, Brandom describes the base "meta-*attitude*" of the valet "as a pure form of *alienation* because it makes unintelligible the very acculturating, conceptual norms subjection to which makes even the *Kammerdiener* a discursive, *geistig* being: a knower, agent, and self."[70] The valet's way of thinking is a form of self-imposed blindness. He does not understand the very norms that allow him to think and act as a rational subject. As Brandom puts it: The valet "cannot make sense of normative *force*."[71] The same problem applies, from a Pittsburghian perspective, not only to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud but to Žižek as well.

Brandom embarks on his discussion of the masters of suspicion to present Hegel as a thinker of normative orders—one whose philosophy cannot be reduced to naturalistic causal processes. This distinguishes Hegel as a thinker of reason (*Vernunft*), as opposed to the lower faculty of mere understanding (*Verstand*). In Hegel's recollective semantics of representation, things as they "are in themselves (what we are really talking and thinking about)" serve as a "normative standard of correctness for how things are for knowers and agents (what we say and think about those things) as aspects of the process of experience: the social-practical activity of adopting, assessing, and revising possibly materially incompatible commitments."[72] The valet and his intellectual descendants, however, are incapable of adopting this perspective.

Brandom's conclusions leave little room for alternative interpretations. His Frege-inspired reading of Hegel insists on the determinacy of meanings and their referents. In this framework, memories must necessarily be progressive acts that transform contingency into necessity. However, this raises an unresolved issue—one already touched upon earlier: Who holds the authority to determine and define values? The social-semantic antagonism Brandom describes does not, by virtue of the triumph of the better argument, determine who qualifies as part of the community of authorized (*entitled*) speakers. This question has been at the center of works by thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière, to name just a few, for more than three decades. Yet, within the intellectual environment of the Pittsburgh School, these figures are largely absent from the discussion. In overlooking them, the representatives of this school miss out on a crucial theoretical dimension.

Brandom's philosophy remains silent on fundamental questions of power, domination, and violence—issues that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud placed at the forefront of their thought. By assigning these thinkers the

role of the *valet*, Brandom avoids engaging with the limitations of reason in relation to his theory of holistic semantics. Yet, in a certain sense, these three thinkers are precisely the ones capable of addressing those limits. As Žižek reveals, Marx does not view capitalism as a naturalistic causal process but rather as a narrative that undermines its own conditions of existence due to the repression of internal contradictions. Similarly, Freud's concept of the unconscious as the source of symptoms does not reduce human beings to mere puppets. On the contrary, the unconscious is conceived as an instance of rationality that operates beyond conscious awareness. This is precisely the foundation of Freud's definition of a symptom: "it can articulate (give expression to) an unconscious norm [...] of which the subject is not even aware."[73] For this reason, Žižek argues that Freud's and Lacan's notion of the return of the repressed does not imply an eliminative reduction of psychic life. Rather, it points to the "*immanent inconsistency of our reasoning*". "[U]nconscious causes are reasons, which are disavowed but continue to haunt us."[74]

Gray on Gray

Žižek refers to Hegel's famous quote from the preface of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel describes his view on the nature of philosophy and its relation to history as being confined to a landscape of "gray on gray". It underlines his insight that philosophy can only fully understand an era after the latter has already ended. In other words, philosophy is not capable of predicting the future. This idea challenges Brandom's interpretation of trust and reconciliation as central themes in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The fundamental problem is that we do not have access to the point from which such judgments about reconciliation and progress could be made.

For instance, Brandom describes reconciliation as a process between a "confessor" and a self-reflective "judge."[75] But what if this reconciliation is not what we typically think of as genuine forgiveness? What if it instead becomes a distorted version of it from our historical perspective? Brandom argues that forgiveness takes place within an act of recollection,[76] but should we trust this process? Or should we be suspicious of it? Is, for example, Germany's reconciliation with Israel over the horrors of the Holocaust truly genuine if it comes at the cost of Palestinian suffering? Is "trust" and "forgiveness" granted here or still in the making? And how do we interpret conflicting memory narratives? Concepts like forgiveness, remembrance, and penitence risk becoming cynical justifications for new injustices. Put simply, philosophy cannot give a definite answer to what confession, forgiveness, and recollection really mean or under what conditions they truly apply. Žižek comments on this by saying: "Brandom talks here like Marx: Absolute Knowing is for him (as Marx put it about the revolutionary thought) like the singing of a Gallic

cock in the new dawn, it 'ushers' in a new social age when new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life."[77]

Brandom holds a strong belief in historical progress and maintains that there is no real alternative to the postmodern era. For him, postmodernity has resolved the problem of alienation by "reachiev[ing] *Sittlichkeit*, while retaining the advance in self-conscious subjectivity characteristic of modernity."[78] But this raises a critical question: Why should we assume that spirit—as Hegel conceived it—must develop in the way Brandom envisions? What if history doesn't move toward reconciliation at all? What if the evolution of Spirit takes a radically different path?

Consider a possible future in which human subjectivity is no longer characterized by freedom but is instead shaped by a new form of totalitarianism. Imagine that this shift is still perceived as a form of progress by those living through it. In that case, has progress truly occurred—or has it become a parody of itself?

Žižek offers a provocative example of such a future: "digitalized authoritarianism."[79] He refers to a society in which digitalization pervades work and daily life, ultimately reinforcing authoritarian power structures. Could this not represent "a properly Hegelian insight into a dialectics of modernity"? In such a world, humanity would not experience reconciliation, but rather the erosion of precisely those social categories Brandom sees as essential to ethical life. What initially looks like regression may, from another perspective, be seen as an advance. And that's precisely the point: whether something is labeled progress or decline depends on how future societies interpret it.

Žižek draws a historical parallel to this logic: "Did Stalinism not promise to implement the synthesis between a strong communal spirit and free individuality... and was the result not the loss of freedom itself in conditions of total alienation?"[80] History has shown that leaders who claimed to realize reconciliation sometimes delivered the opposite: systems of near-total control. What might seem like reconciliation today may, in hindsight, appear as a form of domination.

Žižek's critique of Brandom also applies to Judith Butler's reading of Hegel. Butler believes that Hegel shows how structures of injustice can be dismantled when we recognize that individuals exist within a shared social space. This interpretation is similar to Brandom's idea that history moves toward greater mutual recognition. Butler writes: "He [Hegel] leads us to the realization that I cannot do away with this other [which I dominate] without also doing away with myself, that I cannot dominate another without losing track of the social equality that ideally defines us both."[81] Žižek, however, argues that for Hegel, emancipation can only happen through a process that includes domination. This directly challenges Butler's and Brandom's assumption that history moves toward

a more ethical way of living. According to Žižek, there is no direct path to an ethical society, not even in postmodernity. Instead, any attempt to create such a society would only lead to what he calls a "*regression to pre-modern organic society*."[82] Hegel saw the revolutionary violence of the French Revolution as both an abstract and ultimately destructive idea of universalism. However, at the same time, it was also necessary for the creation of the modern rational state. Žižek explains this paradox as follows: "Hegel's point is [...] the enigma of why, in spite of the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern state."[83] According to Žižek, this idea—that we cannot bypass difficult or even violent historical developments—is the necessary condition for any true form of reconciliation.[84] He expresses it in the following way: "So, if Evil is particularity as opposed to the Universal, absolute Evil is the universal Good itself as exclusive of particularity, of its particular content—therein resides for Hegel the lesson of the French revolutionary terror. The same can be said for the October Revolution."[85] In other words, Žižek challenges Brandom's optimistic belief in historical progress. If history truly moves according to dialectical logic, then the process of reconciliation might not lead to an ideal society. Instead, it could result in a situation that—while appearing as progress from within its own time—could actually represent a major loss from another perspective.

Parallax

According to Žižek, only the concept of *parallax*, rather than the notion of recollective forgiveness, adequately accounts for the developments that may arise from social catastrophes.[86] Parallax allows us to conceive of positive developments without balancing them against catastrophes on a higher plane of reconciliation. "[T]he fact that holocaust helped to establish the state of Israel doesn't justify it, the fact that the British colonization of India brought it on the path to modernity in no way justifies its horrors. More precisely, what is impossible to occupy is a neutral place, which would allow us to 'objectively judge' a historical period and provide a balanced view of it."[87] For this reason, Žižek rejects Brandom's belief in a higher synthesis. "In short, there is no higher 'synthesis' between the objective view of history and ethical judgment—here also, the parallax is irreducible. So, we should contest Brandom's claim that Hegel's ultimate goal is to elaborate the transition from modernity to a form of normativity structured by self-consciousness with the form of Absolute Knowing. Absolute Knowing is not 'a form of normativity,' it is a position of 'absolute rest' arrived at through accepting the gap (between facts and norms) as irreducible and constitutive."[88] In other words, Brandom's insight into the progress of Spirit remains conceivable only on a purely formal level. It disregards the empirical content of history. What becomes *more explicit*

is not necessarily rational, for the very standard of reason itself is subject to change. Žižek, by contrast, seeks to preserve the unsettling challenge that Hegel's work presents, resisting the temptation to combine a formal ontology with an entirely opaque concept of progress. The standpoint of trust, which Brandom invokes, cannot be adopted by any empirical subject. Consequently, Brandom's philosophy remains confined to the vocabulary of a *metastructure*, a *meta-consciousness*—a perspective that empirical subjects, such as we are, cannot inhabit.

1 Žižek 2008, 2016, 2020, 2022.
2 Brandom 2020.
3 Russell 2004, pp.780-796.
4 Brandom 2019, p.3.
5 Ibid., p.636.
6 Hegel 1986, p.46; trans. D. F.
7 Brandom 1994, 2001.
8 Pippin 2005, p.392.
9 Brandom 2015 p.208.
10 Brandom 2019, p.556.
11 Ibid., pp.636-758.
12 Žižek 2016, p.91.
13 Brandom 2015, pp.114-115.
14 Brandom 2019, p.3.
15 Ibid., pp.76-79.
16 Ibid., p.434.
17 Ibid., p.2.
18 Brandom 2021, p.14.
19 Brandom 2019, pp.422-431.
20 Ibid., p.2.
21 Žižek 2022, p.25.
22 Žižek 2016, p.91.
23 Amstrong 1978; Bennett 1987.
24 Žižek 2016, pp.91-92.
25 Lévi-Strauss 1987.
26 Žižek 2022, p.48.
27 See on this topic also Cutrofello 2020.
28 Brandom 2019, p.559.
29 Brandom 1994, pp. 162-164.
30 Dennett 1998, pp.283-284.
31 Žižek 2016, p.92.
32 Ibid.
33 Žižek 2022, p.39.
34 Brandom 2019, p.631.
35 Žižek 2022, p.39.
36 Ibid.
37 Brandom 2019, p.634.
38 Ibid., p.616.
39 Brandom 2021, p.634.
40 Benjamin 1980, p.695.
41 Žižek 2022, p.25.
42 Ibid.
43 Pippin 2008.
44 Morton 2013.
45 Žižek 2022, p.25.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p.22.
48 Ibid., p.25.
49 Brandom 2019, pp.469-476.
50 Ibid., p.472.
51 Ibid. p.538.
52 Ibid., p.499.
53 Brandom 2020, p.36.
54 See Brandom 2019, chapter 16.
55 Žižek 2016, p.26.
56 Hegel 1986, p.23, trans. D. F.
57 Žižek 2016, p.71.
58 Ibid., p.72.
59 Ibid.
60 Hegel 1986, p.590, trans. D. F.; see Zambrana 2015, p.46.
61 Zambrana 2015, p.46.
62 Žižek 2016, p.26.

63 Brandom 2019, p.564.
64 See Hegel 1986, p.489.
65 See Bou Ali 2023; Finkelde 2023.
66 Brandom 2019, pp.545-555.
67 Ibid., p.555.
68 Ibid., p.572.
69 Ibid., p.556.
70 Ibid., p.555.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., p.557.
73 Žižek 2016, p.61.
74 Ibid., p.60.
75 Brandom 2019, p.601.
76 Ibid., p.600.
77 Žižek 2022, p.28.
78 Brandom 2019, p.499.
79 Žižek 2022, p.28.
80 Ibid.
81 Žižek 2022, p.23.
82 Ibid., p.24.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., p.25.
85 Ibid., p.32.
86 See Žižek 2009 and Finkelde, Menke, Žižek 2022.
87 Žižek 2022, p.35.
88 Ibid., p.36.

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CONCRETE EUROCENTRISM: Universality and the National Question in the Politics and Philosophy of Slavoj Žižek

Matthew Flisfeder

Abstract: This article explores Slavoj Žižek's defense of Europe through his concept of *concrete universality*, proposing it as a framework for rethinking the national question in relation to Zionism and the idea of Palestine. Žižek's commitment to the emancipatory legacy of European modernity is rooted in his experience of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav politics, where the collapse of communism gave rise to nationalist chauvinism. This context shaped Žižek's turn from radical democracy to communism, and his critique of historicism and populism. The article argues that true universality arises from internal contradictions within national identities and must include the subject's engaged, partisan position. Applying this method to Israel-Palestine, it challenges both chauvinist nationalism and decolonial essentialism, advocating instead for political self-determination as the terrain of class struggle. Only by retrieving the modernist and internationalist dimensions of each national project can a renewed politics of universality and emancipation emerge.

Keywords: Concrete Universality; Europe; Historicism; Nationalism; Palestine; Populism; Zionism

Concrete Universality and Partiality

Žižek's continued commitment to the project of European modernity and the Enlightenment stands out, particularly at a time when, as Vivek Chibber puts it, "colonialism now appears not as the consequence of developments particular to a certain era but as an expression of a deeper ontological divide between East and West," and as "a symptom of the cultural orientation of Europe's inhabitants."[1] Žižek's defence of Europe, however, is no mere anomaly for a philosopher committed to the project of *universal* emancipation. It may seem odd to simultaneously maintain a commitment to universality while also clinging to the particularity of Europe. Žižek's defence of Europe, however, as I argue here, demonstrates his commitment to the *concreteness* of projects for universal emancipation. To grasp this, we must first distinguish, as he does, the difference between abstract and concrete universality. How, in other words, according to Žižek, can universality emerge from a *partial* position – that is, from a position embedded in the particular?

As he puts it,

> Every interpretation is partial, 'embedded' in an interpreter's ultimately contingent subjective position; however, far from blocking access to the universal truth of the interpreted text, full acceptance of this contingency and of the need to work through it is the only way the interpreter can access the universality of the content of the text. The interpreter's contingent subjective position provides the *impetus, the urge or urgency*, which sustains an authentic

> interpretation. If we want to attain the universality of the interpreted text directly, as it is 'in itself', bypassing, erasing, or abstracting from the engaged position of the interpreter, then we either have to admit defeat and accept historicist relativism, or elevate into a fixed universal In-itself what is effectively a particular and arbitrary reading of the text.[2]

A universal position, in other words, according to Žižek, does not *evade* the subjective position of the observer. Rather, it is the very *inclusion of the subject* within the analytical framework that creates the possibility for perceiving the concreteness of a material situation.

Subjectivity is a part of reality and must always be included in every depiction of it. Excluding the subject in the interest of maintaining some kind of neutral matrix of observation can only result in a vision of universality that remains abstract and relativist. Concrete universality demands an *engaged* subjective position, which is no less universal, but which grounds itself by taking a side. In the political realm, this means taking a side, not simply in the class struggle, but in the struggle for universal emancipation. It is only from an *engaged* subjective position that the totality of the situation becomes visible. Or, as Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda put it, "Absolute knowing is... the acknowledgement of the partisanship inherent in thought as such." The "conceit of 'all-sidedness'," they write, "is a phantasm that obscures the real antagonism of historical existence." "Thinking involves a decision."[3]

Concrete universality, therefore, as opposed to an abstract universality that *excludes* the contingency of the particular, must *include* "*the subjective position of its reader-interpreter as the particular and contingent point from which the universality is perceived*."[4] To avoid confusion, it is necessary to point out that concrete universality, however, "does not concern the relationship of a particular to the wider Whole, the way it relates to others and to its context, but rather *the way it relates to itself*, the way its very particular identity is split from within."[5] Universality, according to Žižek, arises only at the site of a "*thwarted particularity*" – that is, from the internal division of the particular that gives a signal to the universal.[6] Universal subjectivity, therefore, arises where a *disparity* exists between oneself and one's particular identity. Concrete universality is, thus, not merely the choice of a subjective, partial position. It is one that involves taking the side of a particular position only to then discover the antagonism – the negativity – *internal to it*; and, through this disparity with itself, to arrive at the truth.

Politics, however, requires breaking out of this initial self-division – that is, it needs to be broken out of "the abyss of radical self-relating negativity."[7] This, according to Žižek, means entering the "practical domain of will and decision: the subject qua pure Notion has to freely determine itself, to posit some particular content which will count as

'its own'."[8] That is, the movement from for-itself to in-itself. Such an (arbitrary) act of decision is, however, tied to truth insofar as it is only by a subjective act of choice — of positing the presuppositions — a choice that *engages* the subject – that the path of reasoning can begin (again). It is a bit like reaching the first down in a(n American) football game, or when Bastian gives the Empress a new name at the end of *The NeverEnding Story* (1984).

Starting from the framework of the concrete universal, in the following, I want to engage Žižek's writing in a partial way. By that, I mean that my aim is, in the end, to address a concrete problem that engages me, but which I approach through a reading of the concrete analysis in Žižek's work. The problem I want to address is the struggle, not merely between Israel and Palestine, but more specifically, between Zionism and what Edward Said called the idea of Palestine.[9] Rather than address Žižek's own writing on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, I would like, instead, to examine the latter via his writing on the concreteness of Europe. Not only Europe, but via the movements that have occurred in Žižek's political philosophy, beginning with his writing on post-Yugoslav nationalism and antisemitism, and the movement from radical democracy to communism, moving then through the Yugoslav context of his youth, and the early developments and introductions of Althusser and Lacan into his thinking. In his conception of Hegelian concrete universality connected to his theorization of Europe, I hope to provide a valence through which we might go further to interpret the concreteness of the situation with Zionism and the idea of Palestine.

Ideology, as Todd McGowan has put it, "transforms contradictions into oppositions in order to give us an enemy on which to direct the aggression stemming from our own failure. Contradictions," he writes, "undermine positions from within and reveal how they fail to attain self-identity through their own logic. Oppositions provide the subject with the image of a stable self-identity that obscures this failure."[10] Likewise, I show that such a displacement of internal contradiction onto a false opposition occurs in the relation between the idea of Europe and particular nationalist impulses, as well as between Israel and Palestine, today. Starting with Žižek's particular defence of Europe, the point I want to stress in what follows is that the same form of concrete universality must be applied, as well, to the national question, thus, not to oppose Israel to Palestine and vice versa, but to evince the concrete universality – the disparity – internal to each.

Žižek's Defence of Europe

Žižek, in my view, has always had a talent for reading the historical conjuncture; and, this is precisely because his has been one of an engaged subjective position in political struggle. This is something that

many of his critics fail to see – largely because they occupy the position of an abstract universality, or the position of Hegel's law of the heart, where the heart-driven individual substitutes or imposes personal-subjective morality – akin to abstract universality – in the place of concrete universal law. What often appear to be contradictions in the positions Žižek takes in his political writing over time are, in fact, merely responses to transformations taking place in the historical situation; and, as historical materialism must do with every new historical contingency (what Sartre referred to as the *situation*), there is a need, *out of necessity*, to read the situation in its concreteness and to avoid utopian thinking. Utopian thinking tends to avoid the particularity of historical contingency via a commitment to timeless historical solutions. Žižek's political writing is different since, with his focus on historical concreteness, he separates himself from much of what passes for materialism, today – by this I mean, on the Left, forms of abstraction and utopianism that have the potential to obscure the particularity of the historical situation.

Likely one of his most controversial positions, Žižek has remained steadfast in his strategic commitment to Eurocentrism. This, to be sure, in a period when anti-Eurocentrism and anti-Western positions occupy the moral premise of today's Left, Žižek's stance is one that has brought offence. However, I argue that it is precisely Žižek's commitment to Eurocentrism that demonstrates that he is a thinker of the concrete, in opposition to much of the abstract universalism and utopianism that goes on in today's Left.

The heart of Žižek's defence of Europe centres on the question of whether, in the wake of the collapse of communism, it is possible to appropriate the European political tradition for universalist emancipatory projects.[11] He believes that this *is* still possible, but only if we "identify as the core of this tradition the unique gesture of democratic political subjectivization."[12] The problem, however, remains that the "disintegration of communism opened up space for the emergence of nationalist obsessions, provincialism, anti-Semitism [sic], xenophobia, ideologies about national security, anti-feminism, a post-socialist Moral Majority inclusive of the pro-life movement — in short, enjoyment in its entire 'irrationality'."[13] Nevertheless, Žižek's choice of Europe is also strategic. Caught between "American-style civilization" and "the emerging Chinese authoritarian-capitalist form," the only other alternative, according to Žižek, is Europe.[14]

Europe's predicament today is that of being caught between the pincers of the United States on one side and China on the other. Metaphysically, Žižek argues, the two can be equated in the same way that Heidegger examined the threats of capitalism and communism. However, the way to perceive this in the case of Europe, today, is vastly different than the way Heidegger theorized this pincer in 1930s Germany – and goes beyond the *Volkishness* of the latter's regard for German.

Thus, according to Žižek, to save the emancipatory core of the European idea, it is necessary to break certain taboos in critical theory. The first, and most obvious, of these is the all too facile equation of Eurocentrism with cultural imperialism and racism.[15] Whereas many on the Left tend to equate "European values" with some ideological notion of cultural conservatism and colonialism, Žižek's aim, instead, has been to preserve the emancipatory core of European ideas of freedom, democracy, and universality – ideas that, to be sure, are also at the centre of contemporary anti-colonial movements, themselves. Thus, to dismiss these ideas as ultimately Eurocentric is to abandon their very emancipatory thrust. The time, then, has come, according to Žižek, to "drop the Leftist mantra according to which our main task is the critique of Eurocentrism."[16]

Part of the problem with today's anti-Eurocentrism, as Žižek puts it, is the irony that much of the contemporary anti-colonial critique arrives at a moment when "global capitalism no longer needs Western cultural values in order to function smoothly... critics of Eurocentrism," he writes, "are rejecting Western cultural values at the very moment when, critically interpreted, many of them – egalitarianism, fundamental human rights, the welfare state, to name a few – can serve as a weapon *against* capitalist globalization."[17] Many Left critics even forget that the idea of communism, at least as it is articulated in the dialectical vision of Marx and Engels, as opposed to its more utopian varieties, was grounded in the very Eurocentrism now being rejected.

Still, another taboo that must be broken, according to Žižek, is the one that says that attempts to preserve one's specific way of life is inherently proto-fascist and racist. It is fundamentally important to address the concerns that ordinary people have about *threats* to their everyday way of life, not coming from refugees and immigrants, for instance, but from the tumultuous transformations taking place because of the dynamics of global capitalism.[18]

Today, however, Europe is split, according to Žižek, between the Anglo-Saxon model of modernization toward the new global order, and the French-German model to protect the older welfare state model as much as possible.[19] The two, however, according to him, are two sides of the same coin and we should avoid the drive to choose either one. Instead, the crisis of Europe opens the opportunity to rethink *the foundations* of Europe. What is required, according to Žižek, is a kind of "retrieval-through-repetition."[20] That is, a confrontation with the European tradition requires asking: what even is Europe?

According to Žižek, the crisis of Europe is typically framed as a struggle between Christian and traditional hardliners and liberal multiculturalists. The latter, according to him, is typically framed in terms of cultural-national openness. That is, the liberal multiculturalist framework is presented as one that is welcoming of other nations and

cultures. What if, he posits, the solution is, however, the opposite: of *narrowing* the field of who or what is considered European? In other words, what if the solution is, rather, the *exclusion* of Christian populist fundamentalism from the project of Europe?[21]

The problem, as we are continuing to witness it, is that, with the collapse of communism and the dissolution of Leftist utopian projects, fundamentalist populism is coming to fill the void.[22] In a sense, Žižek's proposal, in other words, is that, in order to preserve the universalist and emancipatory dimensions of the European legacy against populist fundamentalists there is a need to engage in a completely sectarian split "by cutting ourselves off from the decaying corpse of old Europe." This, according to Žižek, is the only way to keep a "renewed European legacy alive."[23]

Žižek's application of a partial view to the concrete situation of Europe is, thus, evident in his approach. Far from advancing a Eurocentrism bent on advocating the legacies of colonialism, racism, and populist fundamentalism, Žižek's Eurocentrism remains committed to the emancipatory core of the European project. His centring of Europe is also part of a concrete geo-political strategy of challenging the hegemonies of the United States, China, and Russia. Furthermore, as he sees it, the European political legacies of democracy, universality, welfare statism, and even up to socialism and communism, offer emancipatory possibilities when today's capitalism is much *less* "Western" and far more "multicultural." One would be very hard pressed, in other words, to propose that capitalism is today driven merely by the West, when there exists a fully functioning and competitive capitalism in China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and so on. Global capitalism is very much a multicultural phenomenon, and not simply the product of Western capitalist hegemony.

Moving on, though, considering his defence of Europe, in the next section, I want to focus on Žižek's critique of nationalism. While I agree largely with his criticism of nationalisms and national chauvinisms and populisms – a critique that I argue comes from his own engaged experience with the breakup of Yugoslavia – nationalism, still, I argue, remains a blind spot for the kind of concrete universality Žižek advances with regards to his approach to Europe. As I argue, despite the view popularized in the 1990s and for much of the 2000s, that the nation-state is dead, today the space of the nation-state is increasingly politicized beyond the conditions of "Empire."[24] Nationalism, therefore, needs to be grasped in the very terms of concrete universality that Žižek advocates.

Nationalism, Populism, and Antisemitism

As the late Israeli scholar of Marx and Hegel, Shlomo Avineri, once put it, dialectically, "every *Volkgeist* is... only a moment in the ever-unfolding

Weltgeist, itself an expression of Absolute Spirit."[25] In this sense, I posit that there are two ways to approach the nationalist particularity. There is, on the one hand, a commitment to the particular that remains within the confines of particularity itself. That is, a view of the national community that is, itself, particularist and limited, avoiding, dismissing, and disavowing the kind of disparity that Žižek grasps as part of the self-relating negativity of every identity. The latter, on the other hand, signifies the presence of the universal *internal* to the disparity *within* every particular national identity. There is, thus, I propose below, an emancipatory dimension to a nationalism that is engaged similarly to the concrete universal that Žižek presents in the cause of Europe, and which sows the seeds of a broader *internationalism*. In other words, as Avineri puts it, "True internationalism leads through nationalism, not by overlooking it."[26]

The critique of nationalism, though, that Žižek produces is not, however, divorced from his own engagement in the post-Yugoslav context, which, in the wake of the collapse of communism, developed into a whole litany of narrow-minded provincialisms, xenophobia, and antisemitism. I would even argue that it is his experience with rising nationalist chauvinisms in former Yugoslav countries that impacted the theoretical-political shift that Žižek made from defending Laclau and Mouffe's "radical democracy" to, by the end of the 1990s, a more focused turn towards Leninism and the communist idea.[27] This is most pronounced in Žižek's later criticism of Laclau's vision of Left populism.[28]

In his book, *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau defends a notion of Left populism by which various Left social movements – from feminist and queer political movements, to environmentalism, and even the politics of labour movements – may come together as a unified body. They may do this, according to Laclau, by articulating a series of demands to a shared figure of an *enemy*. As Žižek rightly points out, however, such a form cannot but evoke the image of national chauvinism, even leading up to a form of fascism. The fascist ideology, after all, is articulated as a displacement of a real, material contradiction – i.e., class struggle – onto a figure of a false enemy, such as the antisemitic representation of Jews.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the version of Left populism Laclau advances is ultimately too Foucauldian in the sense of existing merely at the level of the micropolitical, never ready to occupy the political power of the state.[29] Such a position cannot but simply prop up the power that appears to be opposed in the populist struggle, and therefore falls into a kind of perverse form of rebellious enjoyment. The only result, truly, is the rhetorical figuration of the 'other' as an enemy. It is in his experience of witnessing of the rise of nationalist chauvinisms in ex-Yugoslavia – especially as the positions of some of the leaders of these movements earlier intersected with Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy – I argue, that provided part of the impetus for Žižek's critique of nationalism.[30]

My claim here is that what Žižek saw in the nationalist-populist turn in post-Communist Slovenia has had an impact for him, both politically *and* philosophically, and that this has influenced the way that he has criticized nationalism while defending a strategic Eurocentrism.

We can see in Žižek's description of nationalism elements of what Laclau describes in his version of populism, which depends on the externalization of some empirical enemy. Žižek has, for instance, described as part of the core of nationalism a conception of the racialized other as one who "steals" national enjoyment. As he puts it in *Tarrying with the Negative*, a book that was published amidst rising national-ethnic tensions in ex-Communist countries, nations can be understood in terms of how an ethnic community organizes a shared relation to enjoyment.[31] The national community "imputes to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment" – that is, the 'other' "wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life)." But also, the 'other' is imputed with having "access to some secret, perverse enjoyment."[32] However, Žižek argues that what this view of the 'other' conceals is the very traumatic fact that the members of the national community never possessed this allegedly stolen enjoyment in the first place.[33] The enjoyment around which the national-ethnic community is organized is one that is *constitutively* stolen and, therefore, constitutively lacking.

Of course, the model for this conception of nationalist chauvinism is that of the Lacanian conception of perversion, where a lack of enjoyment – a lack that is nevertheless constitutive of subjectivity and society – is displaced onto the figure of the other that the community, on the one hand, props up as an enemy or master, but on the other hand feels the need to transgress. It is in this way that the apparent "theft" of enjoyment helps to procure a form of perverse surplus-enjoyment that comes from the communal attacks on the racialized other. It is also this that gives impetus to the nationalist displacement of the true antagonism of the class struggle onto a false antagonism with the racialized 'other'. As Žižek puts it, the nationalist logic of the "theft of enjoyment" is set in motion, not by "immediate social reality – the reality of different ethnic communities living together closely – but the *inner antagonism inherent in these communities*."[34] I will return to the question of the lack of transparency regarding the true antagonism of the class struggle below.

Suffice it to say, though, that, as Žižek, again, has put it, in the wake of the demise of European communism, "the recourse to nationalism itself emerged in order to protect us from the traumatic disorientation, from the loss of the ground under our feet caused by the disintegration of the social order, of the Lacanian 'big Other' epitomized by Really Existing Socialism."[35] A similar turn to the particularism of nationalist chauvinism is occurring today in the context, not merely of the failures of global capitalism, but also the failure of Leftist projects of emancipation that, too, have moved away from universalist projects and towards what Todd

McGowan has referred to as the "superegoic turn of the Left" – that is, towards the particularity of populist-moralist frameworks, as opposed to projects grounded in concrete and universal emancipation.[36]

Returning to Žižek's critique of nationalism, it is clear that his experience with nationalist chauvinism has also been at the core of his critique of antisemitism; and, in fact, I would argue that he has, consequently, been one of the most consistent and honest critics of antisemitism on the Left – a point that receives far too little acknowledgement. As far back as *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek has written about antisemitism as racist ideology in its purest form. Antisemitism in his view is driven less by the character of empirical Jews and more by the way the Jew figures in the nationalist fantasy – i.e., the theft of enjoyment. In this way, Žižek's critique of antisemitism resembles that of François Regnault – who has claimed that the Jew represents the *objet a* of the West – as well as Sartre's writing on antisemitism.[37] The nationalist-populist, and even fascist fantasy is structured around the figure of the Jew onto whom the loss of enjoyment is displaced. It is even in the case of the fascist ideology that the social totality appears reconciled via the displacement of the class contradiction onto the antisemitic representation of Jews – i.e., the view of the fascist nationalist is that of the inverse of Laclau and Mouffe's thesis regarding the impossibility of society. From the perspective of the nationalist-populist, society *is* possible and all that remains is the elimination of the obstacle preventing this closure. In the antisemitic fantasy-ideology, this figure of the obstacle is, of course, that of the Jew.

On the opposite side, however, Žižek is also relentless towards what he sees as the moralistic humanism of Leftist-liberal critics of nationalism. He notes, for instance, a strange kind of enjoyment procured by Leftists fascinated by nationalist movements. Liberal intellectuals, he writes, refuse and mock nationalist populism. However, at the same time, they revel in their own impotence in the face of this. As he puts it, "the intellectual pleasure procured by the denunciation of nationalism is uncannily close to the satisfaction of successfully explaining one's own impotence and failure (which was always the speciality of Western Marxism)."[38] Western liberal-leftist intellectuals, he writes, are often still caught in this trap. As he puts it, "the affirmation of their own autochthonous tradition is for [Western leftists] a red-neck horror, a site of populist protofascism... whereas such intellectuals are at once ready to hail the autochthonous ethical communities *of the other*... Enjoyment is good, on condition that it not be too close to us, on condition that it remains the *other*'s enjoyment."[39] Western Leftists, in this sense, operate on the obverse side of the nationalist populist. Whereas the latter imputes to the 'other' the *theft* of enjoyment, Western leftists engage in moralistic acts of self-flagellation that, in fact, mask their own narcissistic claims to authority, close in some sense to unconscious forms of neo-

colonialism, elitism, and white supremacy. The fantasy, here, is one of fully substantializing the racialized or indigenous 'other' – of "aboriginal people living in peace with their surroundings," as McGowan puts it.[40] McGowan argues, in fact, and I agree with him, that such a substantialization "is the foundation of an oppressive relation."[41] It is a practice that ends up fetishizing the 'other', treating the 'other' as a *thing* that needs to be "saved," in the same way that *philo*semitism towards oppressed Jews in the Holocaust turned into antisemitism (as Moishe Postone points out) once it appeared that Jews were no longer oppressed.[42] The same occurs, today, with the fetishization of the Palestinian 'other' in much of the Western pro-Palestine movement, as well as in other contexts, such as in the various decolonial movements. It is, however, as McGowan puts it, only "by recognizing that the other is not a solution that one envisions a world of equality."[43] As a form of abstract universalism, it is the very failure of such Leftists to acknowledge their own subjective position – caught, especially, within the concrete and material relations of production – that continues to plague Western (and largely petit bourgeois) critics of nationalism.

The problem with this criticism, however, is that, besides remaining at the level of an abstract universality, it maintains a historicist bent in the sense of failing to historicize the very position of enunciation from which the criticism is articulated. It is a position that fails to include its own subjective position of articulation; and, this is perhaps why many of these critics imagine themselves to be acting (as unconsciously Stalinist) on the "right side of history." But, as Lenin and Hegel have pointed out, historical inevitability is only knowable in its *afterwardness*. To better articulate this position in Žižek's concrete universality, I want to next take a brief detour to explain the way that the Yugoslav context of his youth has had an impact on the way that he develops this position philosophically through his engagement with Althusser and Lacan, and how his Hegelianism advances in a way that departs from the idealisms of (so-called) Hegelian (i.e., humanist) Marxism.[44]

Historicism and the Yugoslav Context

Žižek has noted that the philosophical orientations that dominated in Yugoslavia and Slovenia during his youth in the 1960s and 1970s were by and large versions of Heideggerianism and Frankfurt School-oriented Marxism. These were the predominant versions of Marxism in "official" party circles. These orientations also paralleled the Praxis School humanist approach of central committee ideologues, especially insofar as the ideology of worker self-management and full transparency became the mantra of the leading orthodoxy.[45] It was Althusser, however, who, according to Žižek, became a kind of "symptomatic point, a name apropos of which all the 'official' adversaries, Heideggerians

and Frankfurt-Marxists in Slovenia, Praxis-philosophers and Central Committee ideologues in Zagreb and Belgrade, *suddenly started to speak the same language*, pronouncing the same accusations."[46] According to Žižek, it was the very name of Althusser that triggered an uneasiness that the Slovene Lacanians tapped into. In fact, it was the ideology of full transparency, disalienation, and self-management that inspired the Slovene Lacanians to develop their own distinct framework.[47]

In the guise of full transparency, the Yugoslav system, according to Žižek produced a completely non-transparent political reality:

> In Yugoslavia, it was an extreme form of alienation, a totally non-transparent system that nobody, including those in the power structure, could comprehend. There were almost two million laws in operation. No one could master it. This was the paradox: this is what you get when you want total disalienation or pure transparency.[48]

Thus, according to him, it was Althusserians, structuralists, and Lacanians who maintained a commitment to the fight for democracy.[49] Althusserianism, according to Žižek – often defamed as proto-Stalinist – served as a theoretical tool for undermining totalitarianism. This critique of self-transparency is key to the theory of ideology that Žižek developed in his earliest books, including *Le plus sublime des hystériques* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and it is a framework that continues to this day in his work, especially when it comes to the way he examines the concreteness of the European situation.

Žižek's Althusserianism, despite the way he has developed a strong critique of the latter's theory of ideological interpellation and subjectivity – not to mention Althusser's anti-Hegelianism – comes through most forcefully via the critique of historicism. There are two ways to view this. On the one hand, historicism is expressed in the loss of subjectivity found in abstract universalist and idealist positions that forget their own subjectivity. Even Althusser may be guilty of this insofar as he views historical materialism as an objective science, unplagued by ideology and subjectivity. On the other hand, however, as Althusser explains it, historicism can be seen in the way that the Marxist humanists imagine the form of the dialectical category of the negation of the negation. In fact, it is with this aspect that there exists a coincidence between the so-called Hegelian Marxism of the humanists, and Heideggerianism. Just as the Heideggerians critique Western modernity for its forgetting of Being and its becoming "rootless," so too do the Marxist humanists conceive the negation of the negation as some form of reconciliation between humanity and nature, and with humanity's "species being." It is this latter framework that Althusser referred to as historicist, and, on this front, he was also disparaging of the category of the negation of the negation, praising Stalin for his excising of this category from the laws of the dialectic

as outlined by Engels.[50] However, this also follows the Maoist line in Althusser's writing, not merely in "Contradiction and Overdetermination," but also insofar as Mao, too, rejected the category of the negation of the negation.[51]

Thus, in Žižek's own philosophy, his efforts have turned, on the one hand, to resuscitating subjectivity, avoiding both its idealist-humanist framing as well as that of Althusser, where subject is but a mere effect of ideology; and, on the other hand, via his Lacanian interpretation of Hegel, he has helped to resuscitate the category of the negation of the negation, especially as this category pertains to a form of subjectivity that accepts the intractability of contradiction, rather than one of its reconciliation. Or, put differently, in Žižek's hands, negation of the negation has become a category that reconciles *with* the intractability of contradiction, rather than one that seeks its elimination. The benefit of this conception is that it avoids the idealist historicist conception of a reconciled society that is fully transparent, unlike the predominant ideological framework of self-management in ex-Yugoslav Marxism. It furthermore avoids the historicism of what Althusser called the "Stalinian deviation" insofar as it grasps history only in its *afterwardness*, avoiding the ideological claim of acting on the "right side of history." But we should recognize, instead, that history is completely open, subject to the contingencies developed in the course of class struggle as the motor of history.

Negation of the negation, furthermore, applies to Žižek's conception of concrete universality: of the inclusion of the partial position of the subject in the frame of analysis. As Žižek explains, "[t]he shift from negation to the negation of negation is thus a shift from the objective to the subjective dimension: in direct negation, the subject observes a change in the object (its disintegration, its passage into its opposite), while in the negation of negation, the subject includes itself in the process, taking into account how the process it is observing affects its own position."[52] To paraphrase Alenka Zupančič, without the presence of the subject in this way, one forgets completely the very cause underlying the pursuit of universalist and egalitarian political projects.[53]

The point I want to get across, then, is that it is precisely within his own context of engaging with the predominant Marxist trends in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s that Žižek developed the very Althusserian, Lacanian, and Hegelian contours of his approach to concrete universality present in both his defence of Europe and his critique of nationalist-populism.[54] However, as I will argue in the next and final section of this article, I believe that a blind spot remains in Žižek's approach to the national question from the perspective of the concrete universality he advocates. This, I believe, is expressed in the opposition between Zionism and the idea of Palestine.

Israel, Palestine, and Concrete Contradiction

To go further, then, two more taboos must be broken. The first is the one that sees nationalist movements as purely a form of nationalist populist chauvinism. Instead, the national context must be seen concretely via the internal contradiction of the class struggle particular to every nation. Beginning with Lenin, it is necessary to see the nation-state as the concrete grounds, both for the political self-determination of nations, and as the terrain upon which class struggle can be fought in the direction of an *inter*nationalist project. As Lenin famously put it, "'self-determination of nations' in the program of the Marxists *cannot*, from a historical-economic point of view, have any other meaning than political self-determination, political independence, the formation of a national state."[55]

In today's anti-colonialist politics, a tendency remains whereby class struggle is sidelined in favour of a more abstract framework of colonizer vs. colonized, oppressor vs. the oppressed. In some cases, the latter is erroneously grafted *onto* class struggle, displacing the materiality of the latter. This, however, conflates an oppositional framework with one centred on the concreteness of the political contradiction, even as secondary contradictions, in the Maoist sense, present themselves in non-class oriented terms. In this way, the oppositional framework that McGowan criticizes – as I've noted above – comes back to reinforce a particularist and anti-universalist ideology with potential to side with one nation over another (a particularist position if ever there was one), rather than aligning with universalist and internationalist projects *internal* to every national context. When nation is pitted against nation, the internal contradiction (i.e., class struggle) of each nation gets obscured. So, let's not beat around the bush: of course, I am thinking here specifically of the case of Israel and Palestine.

To avoid the criticism that I am here ignoring or dismissing the Palestinian struggle for liberation, let me just say that the position I defend does not avoid evaluating the concrete situation in the war between Israel and Hamas, nor does it sideline the forced and violent displacement of both Gazan and West Bank Palestinians by the government of Israel, and ultimately its further annexation of West Bank territory. It is necessary and justified to criticize the immoral actions of the Netanyahu government, forced starvation of Gazan Palestinians, and the implicit support given by the government of Israel to religious extremist Jewish settlers leading pogroms against West Bank Palestinians. Nor must we ignore the violent and exterminist rhetoric deployed by reactionary right wing extremist politicians in Israel, such as Itmar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. However, neither must we ignore the violence of Hamas towards Gazan Palestinians.

Many Gazan Palestinians blame Hamas for getting them into a war they could not possibly win, and for putting them in harm's way unnecessarily after the October 7th, 2023, attack on Israeli civilians.

Despite what some in the Western pro-Palestine movement claim, Hamas is far from an emancipatory political party. It is, rather, a right-wing reactionary extremist party. In fact, I would go so far as to say that there is more in common between Hamas and the Netanyahu government than there is between most empirical Israelis and Palestinians. Given the limited space that I have here, however, I do not aim to go further in speaking to either the histories or present realities of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and instead I would like to develop what I see as a connection between Žižek's concrete Eurocentrism and the concrete universality that inheres, nevertheless, in both Zionism and the idea of Palestine. To do this, a second taboo will have to be broken. It is necessary to abandon the political conception of "decolonization" as it has been framed by contemporary theories of settler colonialism, including in the work of contemporary decolonial critics of Zionism.[56]

Much of what drives the anti-colonialist politics of today's left is a very limited conception of settler colonialism and a resulting politics of "decolonization." To cut to the chase, what I find to be problematic about these frameworks is the way that they apply an essentializing and historicist, and even Heideggerian approach to identity and "rootedness." As Richard Wolin notes, the mission of phenomenology for Heidegger was one of "restoring things to their *Bodenständigkeit* [rootedness]. Only by returning to *Bodenständigkeit*, claimed Heidegger, could philosophy reinstate the lost dimension of '*Ursprünglichkeit*', or 'primordiality'. On these 'grounds', Heidegger," according to Wolin, "reformulated phenomenology as '*bodenständig abweisend forschen'*: 'investigations that disclose the *bodenständig* [rooted-in-soil] character of things."[57]

According to Wolin, Heidegger's discourse of rootedness-in-soil "was profoundly 'anti-Enlightenment' and 'anti-Western';" and, over time, this position "hardened into a worldview that was intolerant vis-à-vis 'otherness': especially in the case of ethnic groups such as Poles and Jews, who, purportedly, incarnated threats to *volkish* unity. On these grounds, such groups were denigrated as (racial) 'enemies' of the *Volk*."[58] It shouldn't be lost on us that, today, such a view of rootedness permeates the decolonial narrative of settler colonialism, often deployed in anti-colonial criticisms of Zionism. Giorgio Agamben expresses this perspective quite clearly.

Zionism, according to Agamben, "constitutes a double negation of the historical reality of Judaism."[59] This, for him, is so due to the fact that, on the one hand, Zionism transfers to Jews the nation-state of the Christians, but also, on the other hand, because it represents the "culmination" of the process of assimilation of Jews into the non-Jewish world that began in the 18th century, which, according to Agamben, cancels Jewish identity. At the heart of Zionist consciousness, Agamben claims, lies another negation: the negation of the Galut – the Jewish diaspora – that is, the Jew of exile, of which has constituted the common

principle of identity for all historical Judaism. Jewish identity, in other words, according to Agamben, is constituted by exile. As he puts it, "Exile is the very form of Jewish existence on Earth, and the entire Jewish tradition... was conceived and lived from the perspective of exile."[60]

In what *appears*, then, to be a sympathetic grasping of the Jewish identity, Agamben claims that the "superiority of Jews" over other religions and identities lies in its unconditional acceptance of exile and its rejection of all forms of statehood. Thus, Agamben comes to the patronizing conclusion that by denying exile in favour of the nation-state Zionism betrays the very essence of Judaism. The essence of the Jew, therefore, according to Agamben, is permanent exile – to forever be an outsider. Although some may scoff at Agamben's obviously egregious view of the Jew as the eternal exile I want to claim, instead, that Agamben's view is in fact one that very much expresses a contemporary version of progressive and anti-Zionist antisemitism – an antisemitism that is sometimes presented in the guise of philosemitism, and which seemingly inverts Heidegger's antisemitism, while nevertheless maintaining Heidegger's premise: that the Jew is a rootless being. Rather than being disparaged for their rootlessness, Agamben attacks Zionism precisely for rooting Jews.

Thus, similarly, I claim, from the perspective of settler colonial theory, the Jew is the eternal exile – the eternal outsider – without a rootedness from which to engage in its own politics of decolonization. But to see clearly the erroneousness of the settler colonial and decolonial positions, it is necessary to view them from the perspective of the Israeli right, which sees all of the land of Judea and Samaria as the historical land of the Jews. For the extremist reactionary right wing in Israel, annexation of the West Bank is framed as its own politics of decolonization – it is the right-wing Israeli version of *Bodenständigkeit*, which coincides with the Left version of the critique of settler colonialism and the politics of decolonization. When it comes, however, to the question of *returning to rootedness*, here I agree with Žižek: it is necessary to move beyond such a politics that seeks to resuscitate some mythical pre-modern natural balance. As he puts it, "to accord with his milieu, the only thing man can do is accept fully this cleft, this fissure, this structural *rooting-out*, and to try as far as possible to patch things up afterwards; all other solutions – the illusion of a possible return to nature [i.e., rootedness], the idea of a total socialization of nature – are a direct path to totalitarianism."[61]

So, what if, then, we apply to *every* nation what has been imputed to the Jewish nation: eternal rootlessness? What if the truth is that we are all, in fact, *universally*, rootless, and that the only way to recognize and to come to terms with this fact is by reaching it via the concreteness of the *negative* in the particularity of *every* contingent national state. Knowledge of rootlessness is, perhaps, the "gift" of the Jewish "*volkgeist*" to *world* spirit. But it can only be grasped through an initial movement and

externalization in the form of the nation-state before its internal divisions can come to be articulated in the universality of world spirit – world spirit, that is, not as an end but as continuity – via a determinate negation where we learn that contradiction and internal division are not merely the product of a contingent alienation, but "an internal condition of every identity."[62]

Of course, we must continue to be harsh critics of forced displacement of nations of people, whether through violence or other forms of coercion. The Jewish story in both Europe and in Middle Eastern countries, such as Yemen, Iraq, and Tunisia, like the story of Palestinian Arabs since the Nakba, is replete with histories of forced displacement and removal. But perhaps the solution is not simply decolonization, but – along with the project of European modernity and the Enlightenment – one of *political* self-determination in the nation-state? And, by this, I do not mean to suggest that the nation-state is an end, but it does provide the concrete space upon which internationalist class struggle can be fought (and won).

Thus, to echo Žižek's defence of Europe, what if the time has come to drop the Leftist mantra according to which our *main* task is the critique of Zionism and settler colonialism? This, of course, does *not* mean dropping our criticism of the government of Israel and the extremism of the hardline Kahanist government. But it does mean re-orienting the way that we perceive the situation. Like Europe, the collapse of communism and the disparaging of socialism throughout the world has led to the rise of populist fundamentalism in place of the emancipatory core of the universalist and internationalist project, of which Zionism was initially engaged. Israel, today, like Europe, is split between racist, populist-fundamentalists and extremists in the Israeli government, and a democratic movement of Israeli citizens pushing back against the corruption of the government and the disgraceful path it is treading. For Israeli populist-fundamentalists, the figure of the Palestinian 'other' has taken the place of the Jew, as the latter is inscribed in the antisemitic fantasies and brutalities everywhere else in the world.

What if, then, just as Žižek argues about Europe, what is needed is a narrowing of the field, of what is considered "Zionist" in the Jewish struggle for political self-determination on an international scale? Just as Žižek defends the notion of a retrieval-through-repetition for the project of Europe, can we not say the same for the project of Zionism, which was, itself, grounded in the tradition of European Enlightenment and modernity? Put more directly, what if the solution is the *exclusion* of the Kahanist fundamentalists and messianics from the Zionist project – theirs, after all, is a project deeply rooted in anti-Enlightenment and anti-Western values, not unlike the *Bodenständig* politics of Heidegger and the decolonization movement. Instead, there is a need to hold onto the modern project of Jewish political self-determination (namely, Zionism) in

a world where antisemitism everywhere continues to prevail, but in a way that completely rejects the kind of rootedness we see in the essentialist particularism of decolonial movements on both the Left and the Right.[63]

The same, then, must be said about the idea of Palestine and the building of Palestinian national political self-determination and the forming of a State of Palestine. The modernist core of this project, as even outlined by Said in his early defence of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Yaser Arafat, requires retrieval. In fact, reading Said's writing about the formation of Fatah and the P.L.O. resembles so much of what early Marxist Zionist-internationalists, like Nachman Syrkin and Ber Borochov, wrote about the building of the Poale Zion party (the early Marxist-oriented Labour Zionist party). This is what the retrieval-through-repetition of the Zionist and Palestinian projects must mean. It is only by taking sides in the *internal* struggle of each nation – the Jewish-Israeli struggle against the populist fundamentalism of the Netanyahu regime, and the Palestinian-Arab struggle against the terrorism of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even terrorist parties that travel under the monicker of Marxism, like the PFLP. This, I claim, is the way to remain committed to concrete universality in the case of Israel and Palestine, without abandoning the political self-determination of either of the two affected groups.

Rather than pitting nation against nation, a true concrete universality can only emerge by taking sides with the projects of national political self-determination of each – including the recognition of Palestinian statehood – but also with the forces of internationalism and universality on each side, as opposed to those who base their politics on the pure particularity of *Bodenständig*.

Conclusion

The concrete universality that I have in mind in the case of Zionism and Palestine develops out of Žižek's own defence of concrete Eurocentrism. As opposed to the abstract and historicist universalism (and even particularism) of much of today's left – especially as it is presented in decolonial politics – Žižek's concrete universality is one grounded in an engaged subjective stance in a political antagonism. However, such a stance must not be perceived from the perspective of a false opposition. It must, rather be viewed in terms of the internal contradictions that plague every particular identity. This, for instance, is how we may get at the heart of the class struggle, as the primary material contradiction in every national-political situation, even as it appears in the guise of secondary contradictions, such as those that pit one nation against another.

By drawing on the concrete historical contexts of Žižek's critiques of nationalism and historicism, both with regards to the real material histories of communist Yugoslavia and its post-communist breakup, resulting in the rise of new nationalist-chauvinist orientations, my aim

has been to show that his concreteness has been oriented towards the philosophical positions he has staked. It was his critique of the historicist ideology of Yugoslav Marxism that drew him in his earliest work to Althusser. Likewise, it was the rise of nationalist-chauvinism that led him to abandon the radical democracy and populist perspectives of Laclau and Mouffe.

Similar to his concrete defence of Europe, my position has been to demonstrate that the opposition between Zionism and the Palestinian idea is erroneous and must be replaced with a concrete and engaged subjective position that takes sides, not in the struggle of one nation against the other, but of the side of universality *internal* to each national context. This perspective, I claim, moves beyond the simple liberal version of the two-state solution, as well as the more utopian one of a single bi-national state.[64] Siding further with Žižek's concrete Eurocentrism, it is my view that only with the building of Palestinian *political* self-determination in the form of a State of Palestine, alongside Jewish political self-determination and the State of Israel, that the further struggle for internationalism can proceed.

Hegel puts it best when he writes:

> Since states are related to one another as independent entities and so as *particular* wills on which the very validity of treaties depends, and since the particular will of the whole, as regards its content, is a will for its own *welfare* as such, it follows that welfare is the highest law governing the relation of one state to another. This is all the more the case since the Idea of the state is precisely the supersession of the opposition between right as abstract freedom and welfare as the particular content which fills it, and it is when states become *concrete* wholes that they first attain recognition.[65]

*Inter*nationalism doesn't mean the withering away of states; it means their co-operation.

Outside the state form, however, it remains difficult to grasp the *internal* tension of each side in the class struggle; or, perhaps more appropriately, the struggle between, not merely universality and particularity, but between abstract and concrete universality, since the particularist position is, after all, one of *abstract* universality.[66] In the way I have described, abstract universality is particularist, relativist, historicist, and utopian insofar as it resists – via the perverse erection of external obstacles in the guise of a vilified 'other' – a concrete path towards liberation.

This is the perspective from which we should see how the European emancipatory legacy, and Žižek's concrete Eurocentrism, intersect with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Taking the side of concrete universality in the disparity internal to the particularity of each nation demands a ruthless

criticism of the chauvinisms and reactionary populist fundamentalisms – whether as right or left versions of abstraction – that present themselves in *every* national context. It is in *this* way that the concrete struggle for Palestinian liberation coincides with the concrete struggle against global antisemitism.

1 Chibber 2021
2 Žižek 2012, p. 359. Emphasis added.
3 Comay and Ruda 2018, pp. 7-8.
4 Žižek 2012, p. 359
5 Ibid, pp. 361-362
6 Ibid, p. 362
7 Ibid, p. 367
8 Ibid
9 Said 1979, p. 164
10 McGowan 2019, p. 12
11 Žižek 1999, p. 207
12 Ibid
13 Žižek 2006, pp. 18-19
14 Žižek 2010, p. 176
15 Žižek 2016, p. 18
16 Ibid
17 Ibid, p. 19
18 Ibid
19 Žižek 2008, p. 274
20 Ibid, p. 275
21 Ibid
22 Ibid
23 Ibid p. 276
24 Hardt and Negri 2000
25 Avineri 2017, p. 15
26 Ibid, p. 158
27 Laclau and Mouffe 2000; Žižek 2002
28 Žižek 2008; Laclau 2005
29 Laclau's pupil, Simon Critchley (2007), makes a very similar argument in his book, *Infinitely Demanding*, where he defends a political ethics of bombarding the state or authority with a constant stream of demands, without ever, itself, taking state power.
30 The former Prime Minister of Slovenia, Janez Janša, for instance, began, in the 1980s, as a political dissident, a democratic reformer, and a civil society activist and defender of free speech, aligned in some ways with the radical pluralism of Laclau and Mouffe's positions, but later developed into a nationalist-populist leader compared to Hungary's Victor Orbán.
31 Žižek's theory of nationalism, in fact, appeared a few years earlier, at the very moment of the collapse of Yugoslav communism, in his 1990 article in the *New Left Review*, "Eastern Europe's Republics of *Gilead*."
32 Žižek 1993, pp. 202-203
33 Ibid, p. 203
34 Ibid, p. 205
35 Žižek 2006, p. 30
36 McGowan 2022, p. 123
37 Regnault 2003; Sartre 1995
38 Žižek 2006, p. 19
39 Žižek 1993, p. 212
40 McGowan 2019, p. 199
41 Ibid, p. 198
42 Postone 1980, pp. 103-104
43 McGowan 2019, p. 199
44 In my forthcoming book, *The Hysterical Sublime*, I defend a renewed conception of dialectical humanism that contrasts with and parts ways with the idealism of Marxist humanism. Whereas the latter grasps emancipation as a process of disalienation, I argue instead that dialectical humanism requires reconciling with an alienation that is constitutive of human subjectivity.
45 Žižek 1993, pp. 228-229
46 Ibid, p. 229
47 For a fuller description of this period in Žižek's work, see Dolar 2025; see also Sorenson 2020a and 2020b.
48 Žižek and Salecl 1991, p. 26
49 Žižek 1993, p. 229
50 Althusser 2007, pp. 180-185
51 Zedong 2017, p. 181

52 Žižek 2012, p. 299
53 Zupančič 2017, p. 122
54 It may be worth pointing out that the Heideggerian and the Marxist humanist positions coincide in their historicism and in their desire for full transparency (and perhaps that's even why Object-Oriented theorists, like Graham Harman and Levi R. Bryant, side with Heidegger: they believe they can bypass representation and mediation and go straight toward immediacy), whereas the Frankfurt school, via Adorno's negative dialectics, for instance, always stops short of choosing a side. But we can then see why, according to Žižek (2008) Heidegger made the right choice in 1933, although in the wrong direction. Foucault, too, made the same mistake in choosing the side of the Khomeini Revolution. Unlike negative dialectics they chose a side, but they chose the side of particularity instead of that of universality, very similar to today's pro-Hamas self-styled "communists" in the Western Left, such as Jodi Dean and Andreas Malm.
55 Lenin 2004, p. 14
56 On this point, see, for instance, Veracini 2024. Zahi Zalloua (2023) succumbs to this way of examining Zionism, so much so that, for him, the form of Zionism that I here defend might amount to what is referred to as "liberal Zionism." However, it is noteworthy that the critique of liberalism he develops is, on my view, much closer to Heidegger's critique of Western modernity, particularly in the way that I present it here, even though he couches this view in Indigenous Studies, Critical Black Studies, and Afropessimism.
57 Wolin 2022, p. 255
58 Ibid, p. 252
59 Agamben 2024
60 Ibid
61 Žižek 1989, p. 5
62 Ibid, p. 6
63 I'm even tempted to say that the internal contradiction immanent to the Zionist project at a philosophical level is one that is best rendered along the lines of Jabotinsky versus the couple Syrkin-Borochov, the former representing the line that leads towards particularist fundamentalism while the latter represents the line leading towards universalist-internationalism.
64 I, however, am in favour of the movement for a confederation of Israel and Palestine, where the two sovereign nations share natural resources and defence, and where transfer payments may help in the development of Palestinian infrastructure.
65 Hegel 2008, pp. 313-314 § 336
66 But, as Terry Eagleton (2003, p. 15) once put it, most abstract universalists reject abstract universality, regardless.

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On Žižek's Authority

Yuval Kremnitzer

Abstarct: In this essay I explore Zizek's notion of authority. I argue that Žižek's theoretical framework is indispenisble for addresing a pressing philosophical-historical enigma: how does authority—seemingly an artifact of the past—persist in a world increasingly consumed by a frenzy of transgressive and anti-authoritarian conduct? How do we comprehend the modern and post-modern revivals of authority? These considerations of authority lead naturally into account of contenmporary new authoriterianism and the ways in which it authorizes its violence. New Authoriterianism, as well as contemprary war manifest as infinitizing pursuits of limits.

Keywords: Žižek, Arendt, Authority, War, Genocide, unwritten law.

As it happens, I am the father of two boys: one shares a birthday with Slavoj Žižek, the other with Donald Trump. This coincidence struck me as I was finishing my book, *The Emperor's New Nudity*,[1] which delves into the form of authoritarianism epitomized by Trump. Žižek's political ontology has been pivotal not only for this analysis but also for my broader intellectual development. In what follows, I argue that Žižek's theoretical framework allows us to explore a crucial philosophical-historical enigma: how does authority—seemingly an artifact of the past—persist in a world increasingly consumed by a frenzy of transgressive and anti-authoritarian conduct? How do we comprehend the modern and post-modern revivals of authority?

While Trump has become a focal point for me—a gateway to broader subjects like the intersection of authority and technology—I have never directly addressed Žižek before. There's a good reason for that. Walter Benjamin once wrote of his relationship to theology: "My thinking is related to theology as the blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it." I feel similarly about Žižek's intellectual authority. When I mention my children's birthdate curiosity, people often respond "Of course, Žižek is the Trump of theory," or something similar. What makes such a statement conceivable, and worth mentioning, while no doubt it must be rejected? Both Trump and Žižek derive part of their allure from their capacity to flout unwritten rules, to say things no one else can. With Trump, this trait is central to his authority. Both figures are polarizing—an enigmatic core of new authoritarianism. Apart from the essential, if obvious, issue of power—the ability to determine people's fates—the clearest distinction lies in the examples they set. Exemplary figures cannot be imitated, which is precisely why they inspire mimetic efforts. Part of the suffocating impact of transgressive authority figures stems from their exceptionalism—the ability to break rules that others cannot. While Žižek is undoubtedly inimitable, his work, with its unmatched insight, provokes thought in the most literal sense. Ultimately, in his Žižek's intellectual activity, Žižek proves it is possible to derive non-perverse intellectual joy from confronting even the most dreadful contradictions that plague our reality.

Yet, Žižek's authority extends beyond the intellectual to the political. It carries weight within what remains of the left, a group to which I belong. As a member of the waning Israeli left, grappling with the painful atrocities committed by my state in my name—where declaring "not in my name" fails to cleanse one's hands of collective crimes—I find it impossible to produce a standard academic paper. Therefore, in writing on Žižek's notion of authority, I do not presume to definitively establish it within his work. Instead, I aim to open some space between the lines, so that new insights might emerge. It is on Žižek's authority, so to speak, that I take the liberty to go beyond a discussion of his thoughts and follow his lead in tackling the paradoxes of our reality. Perhaps this is a fitting measure of intellectual authority: a thinker's power lies not in fully encompassing reality within their conceptual framework, but in fostering spaces for thinking to emerge in others.

Father Knows Worst: The advent of The Rule of The Worst

The phrase "father knows best" encapsulates and simplifies an old, fading and highly discredited notion of paternal authority: father – or any other authority figure unfortunate enough to assume this place of privilege – is privy to knowledge that makes him fit to rule. This knowledge is assumed, implicit in the rule of authority. Put your trust in me, is the message of authority. I know what I'm doing. Of course, we are by now long accustomed to see this position as fake, and father figures as imposters. Indeed, a major strain of the enlightenment project was intended precisely to relieve us from the unthinking reliance on figures of authority, to dare to think for ourselves, as Kant famously put it.[2] This was the core of enlightenment's emancipatory promise: think for yourself, authorize yourself to think, and external authority just might wither away.

How are we to understand the movement from "dad to worse" (*père au pire*), the steady slide of liberal democracies, grounded in the promise of enlightenment, into what can be called the rule of the worst (kakistocracy)? Two and half decades into the 21st century, we witness all around us the rise of authority figures and political parties that seem to garner more legitimacy the more they demonstrate just how unfit to rule they are. Reasonable as we are, we pull our hair in despair.

But are they truly the worst? Can we not easily imagine, right around the corner, something even worse? Behind the vain vengefulness of a re-elected Trump, promising to act as a dictator against his political enemies, doesn't there lie something worse still, the crystallizing ideology, say, of Christian Nationalism? Is what we are witnessing a step in the direction of something worse, familiar to us from the 20th century, namely full-blown fascism and totalitarianism? Or perhaps, this comparison itself is a dangerous distraction, specters of past historical events leading us astray from coming to terms with how deeply boring and disappointing

our postmodern dystopia truly is, denying us even of the apocalyptic, final dramatic clash between good and evil?

The spontaneous suspicion towards figures of authority also informs political theory, here, as a suspicion towards the very significance of authority and its figures, a worry that focusing on the political drama of elections, the battle for positions of power is merely a distraction from the deep structure or the mechanics of power. We are, as Foucault famously put it, to cut off the head of the king in political theory,[3] presumably a more difficult feat than the beheading of real-life, historical monarchs.

Yet even headless – perhaps especially so – authority figures seem to come back from the dead to haunt us. From the gallows of history, an archaic figure of authority is making an inglorious comeback. What is coming to assume the position of old fathers, those supposed to know best, are new iterations of the worst kind of father: fathers who know worst. Leaders who come to assume positions of power not because they best know how to rule, but because they seem relieved from the basic duty to rule themselves. Leaders who garner support and legitimacy not despite, but directly due to their display of an unencumbered, mindless, will.

In Search of a Missing Concept: Authority and Tradition – A Hermeneutical Circle

In Žižek's extensive oeuvre, abundant with references and analysis of figures and structures of authority, there is no explicit formulation of the concept of authority. And so, a first step in a commentary on Žižek's notion of authority has to be somewhat reconstructive. Relying on Arendt's classical treatment of the topic, my first move will be to situate Žižek's prominent contribution to the notion of authority, i.e, his development of the notion of unwritten law, as a crucial element in thinking on authority. Arendt's treatment of the topic is crucial for raising the core challenge the notion of authority put in front of us, namely, the question of its persistence.

In her well-known essay "What is Authority?", Arendt approaches the object of her essay, Authority, obliquely, making clear right from the beginning that authority is no longer known to us, a thing of the past, felt by us only through the symptoms of its – probably fatal – crisis:

> In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was – and not what is – authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experience common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion. Little about its nature appears self-evident or even comprehensible to everybody, except that the political scientist may still remember that this concept was once fundamental to political

> theory, or that most will agree that a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century.[4]

So, authority is a thing of the past. This brief formula captures both what is perhaps the most essential feature of authority, and the reason for its epistemological unavailability. This unavailability or opacity of authority is a constant, and yet also what underwrites its profound transformation in modernity. Authority and tradition, I argue, form a hermeneutical circle, which, in one way, is precisely what had made authority such an elusive concept, and, in another way, all there is to know about both terms. Let us begin with the modern, epistemological barrier: definitions of authority rely on a concept of tradition, whereas definitions of tradition rely on a concept of authority. We understand tradition to be that form of life in which authority is, or was, in full sway, and authority, as a mode of power that relies on tradition for its legitimacy. This is why "traditional" societies are the original object of anthropology, what fascinated moderns about them – authority at its purest is the authority of a life form, of the unwritten rules of society, without recourse to grand mechanisms of control and enforcement such as the law and state bureaucracy. What, in the absence of modern mechanisms of power, holds such societies in order?[5]

The famous, fraught coupling of power and authority should be situated here: whatever else we might understand by authority, it is both inherently linked, and yet distinguished appositionally, from the coercive use of power. Can we conceive of an efficacy that is different in kind from the compulsory action of one body on another? This is indeed the problem raised by Arendt. Authority is eclipsed, for us, because we find it next to impossible to think of such a modality of power, a power which is not measured by its actualization. Its effectiveness is increased in direct proportion to its remaining virtuality. What makes authority difficult to grasp is precisely its strange, indirect presence. Since authority is unapproachable, inaccessible, we might get a better understanding of Arendt's interpretation of it if we follow her strategy, and approach it through its very disappearance, by means of that which eclipses it. Significantly, Arendt views the rise of the functional view of society as the other side of the decline of authority.[6]

For Arendt, the fact that we can speak of a function of authority already means that it is utterly lost to us. Although Arendt doesn't quite spell it out, we may offer several different ways in which authority as it emerges from her essay is the obverse of the functional:

1. If authority is lost once we can speak of it as a function, this is because authority "functions" to the extent that it is taken for granted, presupposed, operative in so far as it forms the very background of our reality. "The groundwork" of the world, as Arendt puts it.[7] It is to be taken on trust,

implicitly. To view it as a function is the first sign of its malfunctioning, so to speak, its loss of immediacy and transparency. If authority cannot be taken for granted, it cannot be taken at all. In this sense, authority is necessarily veiled, we are not to see behind its curtain. Recall the famous quote attributed to Bismarck, according to which laws and sausages are two things the public should not be made aware of their process of production. The function of authority is mysterious, indeed, the mystery as to its functioning is the essential ingredient of its unique functionality. This is one way of understanding the importance of ceremony, or what Walter Benjamin called "Cult Value" for traditional authority.[8] And hence the appearance of authority via the medium of crisis – it only comes to view when things are not quite right, where there is a significant enough disturbance to the "smooth running" of things. As Agamben notes, the authority of the senate was invoked, in Roman law, in the "interregnum", in the time between one established, or posited order, and the next, in the vacuum of power.[9]

2. Authority does not perform a function. It is profoundly anti-instrumental and cannot be viewed as a means to an end. We know this, although we hardly understand it – authority is not something to be executed, realized, but a virtual presence that accompanies power, giving it symbolic support, or withholding it. It ceremoniously augments acts and institutions by sanctioning them, permitting them a symbolic entrance into the space of possibility.[10] Authority is not something to be enforced, it does not hinge on its realized effects, it is – "more than advice, less than command" as the famous quote from Mommsen describes it. Authority is superfluous, signatorial, and yet, as such – essential.

3. Authority is substantial, it attaches itself to concrete individuals – a person, a tradition. It is never, as Arendt emphasizes, "authority in general". It is rooted or seeks to be so, by no means something transferrable and translatable the way a function is. Put in problematic functional terms, it is precisely what endows a person, an institution or an activity with substance, a dimension of depth, gravity, the density of a substance.

4. Authority belongs to a substantial We, a pre-individual sense of community, of commitment to our way of life. To view it as a function is to view things from outside, as it were, from a sociological, scientific point of view, which can only conceive of society as a functional construct. Authority, we have already hinted, is directly linked to the mysterious way in which I am inscribed into a given community. It is a view from within a medium of tradition. Hence, Arendt's turn to the particular history she sees herself an heir to, the history of western political thought. This is also why, on her account, when authority is intact, it brings together freedom and hierarchy. Properly authorized, things are in their right place, so to speak. There is an accepted hierarchy, a sacred order. Hierarchy and freedom

coincide, in so far as I can see my concrete freedom as inseparable from the totality to which I belong. It is, say, as a father that I realize myself, as a son and a citizen of my country, as opposed to a liberal, formal-legal abstraction. It is an order in which differences, between the young and the old, between men and women, between nobles and serfs, have to be accepted and reinforced.

5. Authority is paradigmatic. It belongs to an order in which the singular is not poised as the opposite of the general rule, but as its expression or manifestation. The link between Authority and Charisma has to do with this feature.[11] Authority is not an office, a role – a function – that can be fulfilled. Terms like a position of authority, or "the authorities", betray the extent to which we can only understand authority in functional terms. The mystery raised by Lorraine Daston as to the now lost meaning of paradigm as rule, and not as its opposition,[12] is not merely analogous to the eclipse of authority, but belongs to one and the same constellation. As emerges from Daston's study of rules, the capacities associated with learning from example (discretion) are inseparable from structures of authority, such as monasteries.[13] To learn the lessons of the paradigmatic exemplar is the other side of the coin, that could also be described as learning to respect authorities. Both aspects belong to, depend on, and reinforce a medium of tradition.

6. Finally, authority is grounded in the law in so far as it is both given and transcendent, a medium in which society is constituted rather than a constituted, man-made order. This is what distinguishes it from tyranny, according to Arendt:

> "...even the most draconic authoritarian government is bound by laws. Its acts are tested by a code which was made either not by man at all, as in the case of the law of nature or God's commandments or the platonic ideas, or at least not by those actually in power. The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which authorities derive their "authority", that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked."[14]

The law is operative in an authoritarian structure, in so far as it is precisely not a function anyone can master, that is, precisely in so far as the law has no human author, and no human can place himself in the position of its author.

Arendt seems to share a widespread narrative regarding the historical process: as technical rationality becomes more and more prevalent, authority slides out of sight. Power, and indeed violence, come to the front. In this, Arendt is representative of a much more prevalent set of

assumptions regarding the modernization of power, in which otherwise very different theorists and thinkers, such as Marx, Adorno, Heidegger, Foucault and Agamben all partake, namely the assumption that modernization speaks to the withering significance of authority. What takes the role of authority are abstract structures and dynamics of power. Žižek's theoretical framework allows us to take into account the ways in which modernization doesn't simply leave authority behind, but rather, maintains it precisely as something left behind, as a remainder, a dirty little secret.

Unwritten Rules: Authority, Ideology, Transgression

As a rule, the unwritten law makes its appearance in the philosophical canon fleetingly, in critical, illuminating points of the philosophical text, never to be explicitly defined. Alongside Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche and Benjamin, Žižek's development of the topic has proven indispensable. Žižek's crucial development of the topic lies in his account of the obscene support of "normal" social life. Authority, at its most innocent, is already transgressive. He writes:

> When does one belong to a community? The difference concerns the netherworld of unwritten obscene rules which regulate the "inherent transgression" of the community, the way we are allowed/expected to violate its explicit rules. This is why the subject who closely follows the explicit rules of the community will never be accepted by its members as "one of us": he or she does not participate in the transgressive rituals which actually keep this community together, and society, as opposed to community, is a collective which can dispense with this set of unwritten rules – since this is impossible, there is no society without community.[15]

As in the constitution of the individual mind, relying on his famed joint reading of Lacan and Hegel, the constitution of reality according to Žižek relies on a primordially lost bit of the real, so in social reality, what Hegel would call ethical substance, and others form of life, at the level of the groundwork of the world, as Arendt put is, the set of implicit rules that govern everyday reality in a given social group, relies, on Žižek's account, on a unique kind of meta-rule, governing which rules are respected and obeyed and which are transgressed. In this, the unwritten rules of a given society symbolize the constitutive crime upon which order is formed, the stain of illegitimacy that casts its shadow on legitimate rule. The "big" secret of the illegitimacy of legitimate rule is, or perhaps, simply, its constructed, artificial nature, is, in Žižek's account, an open secret, something directly enjoyed by members of a given community, indeed, it is what creates a sense of naturalization, so to speak, why, as he puts it, there is no society without community.

In the classical modality of authority, the figure of authority, say the king, gives body (figure) to the unwritten law that authorizes him; he is not its source. In his *Seminar II*, Lacan gives this dimension of the "the law in so far as it is not understood" (in his words) a psychoanalytic name: censorship.

> By definition, no one is taken to be ignorant of the law, but it is never understood, for no one can grasp it in its entirety. The primitive who is caught up in the laws of kinship, of alliance, of the exchange of women, never has, even if he is very learned, a complete vision of what it is in this totality of the law that has a hold over him... That is censorship. It is the law in so far it is not understood.[16]

Lacan's point about censorship is subtle and can be easily missed. Censorship turns an impossibility into a prohibition. The law has an unknowable, unwritten dimension. In order to become full subjects of the law, censorship forbids us from admitting something everybody knows all too well. In this way, censorship "symbolizes," by means of prohibition, what is structurally impossible in the law. What is untotalizable about the law, its unsayable, unknowable dimension—our very immersion in it, the way we are inscribed in it—is totalized by isolating special well-known things and making them forbidden to discourse. This is one way in which to understand the strange feature of "taboo," noted by Freud, its reference to both the prohibited, terrifying thing and the prohibition itself.[17] By making something "taboo," we isolate areas of discourse which we are to circumvent, so as not to encounter head on what, in discourse, is for us thinglike, nondiscursive in its effect—sheer opacity.

Lacan makes his point by means of a rather humoristic—and strangely current—example, in which the law forbids us from saying that the king of England is an idiot under penalty of death by beheading.

> If it is forbidden to say that the king of England is an idiot, under pain of having one's head cut off, one will not say it, and in consequence of this sole fact, one will be led into not saying a great many other things—that is to say, everything which reveals the glaring reality that the king of England is an idiot. ... The subject of the king of England has many reasons for wanting to express things which have a most direct relation with the fact that the king of England is an idiot. Let us say it passes into his dreams ... the subject dreams that he has his head cut off.[18]

Censorship forbids us, that is, from making explicit what everybody knows but can only be alluded to, hinted at, expressed indirectly, a driver of subtle subversion – that, underneath the crown, there is a human being just like us, more or less an idiot. He is merely fulfilling a function. To make the mechanics of authority explicit is tantamount to sacrilege – it points

out the constructed, arbitrary structure of rule. To admit this is taboo. Making public what everybody knows involves a strange "reflective" twist. It transforms what "everybody knows" into something which "everybody knows that everybody knows." It discloses an open secret. From this point on, you may go on ignoring it, but you are, as it were, explicitly implicated in the act of censorship. The subject of such open secrets is a figure of the "big other" dubbed by Slavoj Žižek the other supposed to believe, the subject whose innocence must be protected. To bypass censorship is to make the "innocent" other aware of what everybody else already knows.

So where are we now? Everyone is allowed, indeed incited, to say that the king of England is an idiot. It even seems to be inscribed into the ceremony of coronation—in a video that went viral, we all had to watch Charles III, during a signing ceremony, get annoyed at a pen, like him failing to fulfill its one and only function—to produce a signature![19] We are ceremoniously anticeremonial. Furthermore, we now have kings, authority figures, that ceaselessly display their idiocy, making themselves utterly immune from such ridicule. Not only immune—the more they are mocked, the stronger they seem to get. Has censorship been lifted? Are we no longer under the influence of the unwritten law, the law insofar as it is not understood? Does it no longer have a hold on us?

What interests Lacan in censorship is its productive function. The forbidden statement incites much psychic activity in the subjects of this king of England, and censorship appears by means of their dreams: being unable to say that the king is an idiot, the subject dreams that he has his head cut off. Censorship is productive of fantasies in which we may not directly fulfill the wish of lifting the censorship, say by dreaming that we are dancing and cursing on the king's grave, but rather in which we are punished for having thus transgressively wished. The transgressive wish itself, mind you, appears only indirectly, implicit in our punishment. Today we can mock the king, the king makes a mockery of himself, but we still dream—now more than ever—that our heads have been cut off. Our fantasy of being seized by blind mechanisms of power, being headless subjects, is the clearest sign that censorship is more powerful than ever at the very moment it seems to have disappeared. It is within this dream that we need to search for what could be called the censorship of censorship.

There is a crucial lesson here as to the nature and history of the unwritten law. As Žižek notes, in twentieth-century totalitarianism we witness an extra twist in this scheme: more than any forbidden content, what must never be avowed is the prohibition itself.[20] In this sense, censorship is always "self-censorship," it must always conceal its own act. However, if this is indeed a structural feature of the unwritten law – ingrained in the very fact of its being unwritten – can we speak of significant historical changes? Paradoxical as this must sound, we might detect a general trajectory, in which the unwritten law becomes increasingly more unwritten, becoming, as it were, more and more itself, more and more fully transparent,

and more and more present in its very transparency, the more everything is made explicit and comes into the open. Coming back to Žižek's basic insight regarding the inherent transgression of a community, how are to account for what seems like increasingly more pathological structures? If such transgressiveness is the norm, how are we then to account for more acutely "pathological" societal structures, such as "totalitarianism"?

Commenting on Hitler's many allusions, throughout his *Mein Kampf* to the manipulation of the masses, Žižek issues a warning from drawing the conclusion that we should view Hitler as a "cynical" manipulator.

> [N]otwithstanding his awareness of manipulation, Hitler basically believed in its results. For example, he knows that the image of the Jew as enemy who takes "all the threads in his hands" is only a means by which to channel the aggressive energy of the masses, to frustrate its radicalization in the direction of the class struggle, and so on, yet, at the same time, he "really believes" that the Jews are the primordial enemy. The uncanny dimension of this split, of this simultaneous coexistence of the ultimate cynicism and ultimate fanaticism, is what we avoid as soon as we interpret it as the cynicism of manipulation – as soon as we see the moment of truth only in the manipulation (the popular concept of the Nazis as heedless cynical authority who manipulate everything); this avoidance enables us to reduce the Nazi subject to the traditional utilitarian-egotistic bourgeois subject.[21]

Challenging the simple opposition between cynicism and fanaticism is necessary not only as an empirical analysis of past iterations of totalitarianism, but also on more theoretical grounds. What arises out of Žižek's account is the way in which the position of disillusioned knowledge not only does not amount to simple, level-headed sobriety, nor to render authority simply superfluous, but indeed underpins the most ferocious ideological fervor. The stance of objective knowledge can, and has been enlisted for complex dynamics of self-delusion and mass exploitation, even annihilation.

In a few highly condensed pages that follow, Žižek goes on to offer a typology of modalities of authority, based on his reading of Octavo Manoni's formulations of disavowal, laying emphasis on its variations. On Manoni's account, while disavowal speaks to the unique character of the perverse relation to symbolic castration, we have an everyday experience of it, in the common expression "I know full well, but nonetheless".[22] The basic attitude towards authority is situated according to Žižek in the gap, afforded by disavowal, between (real) knowledge and (symbolic) belief. That is, the traumatic truth is not repressed, or denied, but rather recognized, explicitly, yet disavowed, isn't allowed to impact the belief.

Žižek distinguishes between traditional disavowal, which establishes the "mystique of the institution", endowing the very symbolic mask with efficacy, manipulative authority, and totalitarian authority:

> Traditional authority is based on what we could call the Mystique of the institution. Authority bases its charismatic power on symbolic ritual, on the form of the institution as such. The king, the judge, the president, and so on, can be personally dishonest, rotten, but when they adopt the insignia of authority, they experience a kind of mystic transubstantiation...the second mode corresponds to what might be called manipulative authority: authority which is no longer based on the mystique of the institution – on the performative power of symbolic ritual – but directly on the manipulation of its subjects. ... the basic attitude of manipulative authority is consequently cynical... the cynic, from the fact that "the other does not exist" that the other (the symbolic order) is only a fiction, erroneously concludes that the other does not function, is not effectual...The third mode, fetishism strictu sense, would be the matrix of totalitarian authority: the point is no longer that the other (ordinary people) would be deceived manipulatively but that we are ourselves those who – although we know very well" that we are people like others at the same time consider ourselves to be "people of a special mold, made of special stuff" – as individual we participate in the fetish of the object-party, direct embodiment of the will of history.[23]

Symbolic fictions do not lose their effective hold on us once we perceive them for what they are, "mere' fictions." On the contrary, we are rendered more powerless in the face of them. In the first modality, ritual utilizes a traumatic encounter with deceit and cruelty, in order to force an internalization, a way in which the very encounter with the real is codified into the necessity to keep the way of life, maintain the sanctity of the mask. We might not believe in the fiction, but precisely because of that, we come to see ourselves as responsible to pass it on, it augments it, as it were, just as Arendt understood authority's strange functioning. In the second modality, which Žižek expands on in reference to Manoni's interpretation of Casanova falling into his own circle of deceit, a fiction, now only to be understood as a manipulative lie, is experienced directly as traumatic when realized, with no possible sublimation. Knowledge here functions on another level, recording, and thereby disregarding, the very structure of disavowal.[24] With Totalitarianism, the "nonetheless" is transformed into a "just because". It is no longer despite evidence to the contrary, but directly because of it, that the ultimate truth is afforded even more urgency.

> The breach between cynicism and totalitarian logic can be well illustrated by the different attitude to the experience that "the emperor has no clothes" a variation on this theme is typical cynical wisdom: phrases about values honor, honesty, are all empty words, they serve only to deceive the suckers, what counts is only the Real" (money, power, influence) the cynic overlooks here that we are

> naked only beneath our clothes: a cynical kind of demystification is itself still all too naïve in that it fails to notice how the "naked real" is sustained in the symbolic fiction. The totalitarian, too, does not believe in the symbolic fiction, in his version of the emperor's clothes. He knows very well that the emperor is naked(in the case of the communist totalitarian, that the system is actually corrupt, that talk about socialist democracy is just empty verbiage, and so on). Yet in contrast to traditional authority, what he adds is not "but nevertheless" but "just because": just because the emperor is naked we must hold together the more, work for the good, our cause is all the more necessary.[25]

Why and how is the cynical avowal of reality transformed, in totalitarian ideology, into fanatic zeal? Because in classical totalitarian logic, truth has a unique performative dimension, having to do with the fetishist role. It is because fetishism *strictu sensu* knows that the other is lacking, that he can serve as its instrument.

There is a surprising kinship on this point between Žižek's analysis and Arendt's classical study of totalitarianism. As Arendt closes her book, she notes that we should expect the new form of government she labels totalitarianism, like the old ones, to remain with us. Furthermore, the logical space in which Arendt situated totalitarianism was the same logical space left vacant, so to speak, by the decline of traditional authority. For Arendt, totalitarianism was neither tyranny—"the rule of one against all"—nor democracy, the rule of the many, but a strange mixture of both. For her, the lack of rational goals in totalitarian regimes, their unique, shocking brand of "madness," is ultimately explained by ideology.

> Instead of saying that totalitarian government is unprecedented, we could also say that it has exploded the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of governments have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power. It defies, it is true, all positive laws. ... But it operates neither without the guidance of law nor is it arbitrary, for it claims to strictly obey those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring. It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being "lawless," it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to those suprahuman forces than any government ever was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature.[26]

Let us quickly contrast this description to the manner in which, in her essay on authority, Arendt describes the transcendence of the source of legitimacy. In traditional authoritarian rule, the source of authority always lies somewhere beyond the power of rulers. Let us just note how central this analysis is to Arendt's overall description of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Many of the peculiarities of totalitarianism as she describes them find their rationale in this account of the merger of lawlessness and lawfulness which lies at the heart of totalitarian ideology, including its strange relation with the truth. Since the ultimate truth served by totalitarians is an ironclad logic of *movement*, its "truth" is profoundly performative. To cite the example used by Arendt, the claim made by the Soviet regime in the 1930s that only Moscow has an underground train—on its face, patently absurd and easily disproved—is true from the perspective of the fulfilled History, in which Moscow has conquered, defeated, and destroyed all the infrastructure of its enemies. Call it an eventual truth. It is in serving as instruments of the "big other" of history (communist totalitarianism) or nature (racism, National Socialism) that a different, more metaphysical terrain of truth is being served, a truth to be realized by the political movement. In such an ideological constellation, the unwritten law in which positive law is grounded becomes itself the object of special, higher knowledge, a higher terrain of truth above mundane factuality. What is mobilized are the laws governing movement, the laws of becoming, and so the knowledge in question is "secularized" apocalyptic knowledge, the knowledge of things to come. Such knowledge is performative in a special, millenarian sense—knowing what is to come, we are charged with the task of bringing it about. It is the notion of such a servile position in regard to a higher task that seems to stand in the strongest contrast with contemporary authoritarian figures, who seem to be brazen, shamelessly self-interested, indulging in hedonistic pleasures. Their capacity to transgress the unwritten rules that apply to other politicians (and ordinary citizens) is one of their most striking features.

In Search of a Limit: New Authoritarianism and Substanceless Transgression

Let us now briefly examine the singularity of the new model of authority in relation to the classic concept of charisma, honing in on its relation to the unwritten law. Max Weber writes about the hostile attitude of the charismatic leader toward the legal system:

> Genuine charismatic domination, therefore, knows of no abstract legal codes and statutes and of no "formal" way of adjudication. Its "objective" law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero. Charismatic domination means a rejection of all ties to any external

> order in favor of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero. Hence, its attitude is revolutionary and transvalues everything; it makes a sovereign break with all traditional or rational norms: "It is written, but I say unto you."[27]

The final phrase of this excerpt is highly significant for our investigation of the uniqueness of new authoritarianism. "It is written, but I say onto you" is the basic formula Jesus uses to confer authority upon himself in the Sermon on the Mount as the bearer of the new word of God that overrules established law. This is not the place to discuss the influence of Christian political theology on Weber's thought, but it is important to note this allusion at a moment when present political reality forces us to revise and update social theory. Weber develops his notion of charismatic power by drawing on the work of Sohm on the power of the church, as distinguished from the enforceable power of the state. This is what we know, from our discussion of Arendt, as authority. In any case, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings to its culmination a critical process with a rich history: censuring existing law in the name of the unwritten law that underpins it and allows for its critique. In the case of Jesus, the unwritten law in question is divine law, but what matters to us is that historically speaking, very disparate categories of unwritten law, such as custom or tradition, natural law, and divine law can all be used for the same purpose—a grounded and thorough critique of the existing order. Jesus wishes to replace the letter of the law with the spirit of the law, which he is uniquely qualified to put into words. By identifying himself directly with the unwritten law, Jesus establishes a radical model of revolutionary-charismatic criticism. We might also note that Arendt sees twentieth-century totalitarianism as an apex of this tradition: totalitarian movements transcend lawfulness and lawlessness as they see themselves as servants of the unwritten law of movement, a law of becoming underlying the stability of all positive law.

Despite the frequent use by Trump and his ilk of the accusatory slogan "fake news" to mean "don't believe them, I am the only one you should believe," it is hard to attribute anything close to Jesus's sense of mission to the charismatic leaders of the new right. Their goal is not to give expression to the essence of the law hidden behind the language of the law, but to reveal the essence of the unwritten as such. Their message, when all is said and done, is not "so it is written, but I say unto you," but "this is the unwritten; here, let me show it to you." The violation of unwritten rules is an act of exposure. The new political power's recourse to obscene behavior as a means of mobilizing support should direct our attention, therefore, in the first instance to the importance of the unwritten—or tacit—nature of social ethical rules. For what captivates those watching the rise of this political power, whether in horror or admiration, is how politicians of the new breed bring the tacit dimension of social life,

the rules we normally obey without being able to formulate them, to light by violating those same rules. Contrary to written law, the unwritten nature of these rules imbues them with an inherent mystery. It would seem that these rules become tangible only when they are violated, and it is this newfound tangibility that surrounds politicians of the new breed with a unique aura, as proof of their mysterious social clout.

What is it then that transgressive authority figures are figures, or symptoms of? Transgression here is no longer the support of authority, but also directly the message. Just consider how in the extremely consequential 2024 election for US presidency, we witnessed a strange imbalance: whereas for Biden, the issue of his mental competence to rule at his advanced age seems crucial, his gaffs and lapses highly detrimental for his chances of reelection, the same doesn't seem to apply for Trump, only 4 years his junior, and no less prone to gaffs and lapses. While this is certainly unfair, it is not devoid of rationale. Indeed, part of what makes this election so dramatic and consequential is the way in which in it, two standards of rule come to a clash. Both candidates are truly held to different standards: Biden is measured by his ability to maintain the figure of the competent "dad" who knows best, that is, someone who approximates, to the best of his abilities, an ideal of better knowledge, whereas Trump answers to a much more elusive standard, the standard of "the worst", measured by his capacity to display that he knows something of the worst, his capacity, as it were, to put us in touch with the limit. Indeed, the imbalance in question has to do with a unique feature of the limit: limits cannot be reached, but they can be crossed. Crossing a limit by being "the worst", transgressing all norms, can give us a sense of being in touch with something the mere approximation of a standard cannot.

While in their transgressivity new authoritarian leaders recall Freud's myth of the primal father, they should not be taken as direct reincarnations of what is oldest. That is not how the repressed returns. After all, the primal father is a myth, expressing the primordiality of authority as we know it, as a set of unwritten rules which normally go unquestioned, rules inscribed in our very inhibitions and taboos. It expresses an unrest which belongs to our "second nature", an uneasiness towards the human condition. As a myth, the tale of the primal, uncastrated father expresses a condition, a limit which determines our field of possibility, by allowing within the frame of our imagination for a figuration of what exceeds it, the possibility excluded from our condition, or the impossible. The possibility of a life unbound by rules. What Freud expressed in the form of a myth, a story of brothers whose promiscuous father of the hoard, sexually in possession of all the females, evokes such resentment and jealousy in them that they conspire to unite in rebellion against him, murder him, and then proceed to impose on themselves the sexual prohibitions from which the dead father is now the only one exempted, can be expressed by the pithy Lacanian formula "father... or worse" (père ou pire). The myth and the

formula alike express the understanding that in becoming speaking beings, it is *as if* we have opted for the discontent entailed with being subject to rules from which a stain of arbitrariness cannot be entirely removed (we cannot, as it were, give grounds to that which grounds us, hence the nagging notion of our ground or condition as resulting from some primal, mythical choice), but have thereby overcome something worse, one image of which is the violent rule of the arbitrary.

The primal father is a figurative mode of appearance of the worst, the threat lurking behind the impossible alternative for symbolic castration, the psychoanalytic name for the drama of limits. Far from being mythical figures of libidinal freedom from rules and inhibitions, offering us perhaps a liberating path towards the same, fathers who know worst are rather a distorted outlet for us to collectively experience primal, symbolic castration. What we lack all knowledge of, what we can only represent in mythical or formulaic form, is granted a strange new positivity in them. In tarrying with the worst they seemingly allow us access to something constitutive of our subjectivity. They bring about in a forceful manner the primal experience of limits by routinely transgressing them. What we can only construe as a forced choice constitutive of subjectivity, that is, a choice the result of which we are, not one we have taken, a choice detectable in what determines us, is dramatically put forward through such figures as a real choice that lies ahead of us, yet to be determined. As those who "know worst", they allow us a strangely positive experience of the worst averted by castration. Through them, we can experience "the worst" - a notion of limit, something we never can experientially reach - as an object of possible knowledge. The "worst" assumes the shape of an option, something which may or may not be opted for. Limits seem to lose the transparency of the frame and enter into the picture.

In this sense, the rule of the worst speaks to something broader than an emerging form of government. It speaks to a prevailing mood of our time. If ours is the "darkest timeline", as the popular internet meme goes, referring to the multi-verse theory as imagined by comic books and movies, it is so in a very precise, if paradoxical sense: It is the worst possible world precisely in that it could be worse. Indeed, it is getting worse. Bad as things get, we can trust one thing: there is worse still to come. If the climate crisis is the process in which our natural environment, the earth, is gradually turning into a hellscape, degree after degree, the rule of the worst is the political form in which we gradually transform our societies into a hellscape. In both cases, the very fact that things can, and in all likelihood will, get worse, strangely helps maintain us in the grip of what ought to be averted at all costs. Like the proverbial boiling frog, we can continue saying, "it's not so bad, could be worse", until we can't. Where's the limit, the absolute worst? Under the rule of the worst, we do not receive a clear answer to that question, but we are making the question itself omnipresent, coloring the entire horizon. What will he do next?

Will that be the end of it? What natural disasters still await us, and which will be the "big one", after which everything changes forever? Where, in short, is the limit?

And yet, while more than merely analogous, the comparison between the climate crisis and the political one does not yield an identity. For in the political field, we are directly engaged and active, many of us enthralled, eagerly anticipating the increase in chaos, others terrified by it. It is in the political field that a new sense of "realism" is emerging most distinctly, and a new modality of the "passion for the real" along with it.

Maddening: War on the Limits

The same dreadful experimentation with limits, sheds light on some of the perplexities pertaining to war in our time. There is a peculiar apocalyptic streak to the current war, and not just in the terrifying, immediate sense of the prospect of a war that will effectively end all wars—and with them the entire race. By an apocalyptic element, what I have in mind is rather the following: war, which is a negative entity to begin with – war, in short, is the realization of contradiction, it is where we experience the unthinkable – becomes through history 'conscious of itself', meaning that its negative, contradictory nature gradually emerges onto the surface.[28] The contradictions inherent in war are being subsumed by the war-discourse, and duplicated in it.

The current global struggle for hegemony is a seething crucible of adversities, whose potential overheating effectively means mass annihilation. It is a battle fought in constant equivocation between the perpetual war on terrorism – a 20th century legacy, of an endless war, and the global or world war - another legacy of the 20th century, this time of spatially boundless war - in an ever more rapid approach towards the ultimate terminus: the absolute, final war, the final legacy of the 20th century, a war unlimited in scope of destruction. We are dreaded by the prospect of a third world war, which many of us declare to already be taking place. I take this very ambiguity—whether we are in the midst or on the brink of world war—to be the crucial point. It is a war on the precipice. A war that escalates piecemeal, all but imperceptibly, as if in search of a boiling point, a point where water finally evaporates. Our war ridden epoch is, in that sense, an epoch of overt, self-conscious contradiction: we are fighting, both explicitly and directly, for the cause of preventing or containing a graver war—the very one we seem to be getting closer to with each day of fighting. If war in general, as I argued, is a limit condition, the war taking shape in front of our eyes is a war on limits, continuously, and self-consciously raising the question: what, if any, are the limits of war?

Let me and try and make this point a little more concrete. We hear much talk today of proxy wars. This can become useful if we take it that the proxy is not only a war fought by proxies, keeping bigger powers from

directly engaging in warfare and playing a supportive role, but if we also understand in proxy war something like quasi war, or war by approximation, a very real war that is, at the same time, "merely" an approximation of a bigger war. These are wars that are already taking place, wreaking havoc, but they are conceived as a way to avoid a bigger, even more consequential confrontation. A proxy war then would need to be understood as both relying on and eroding the distinction between an actual war and a potential one. Alluding to the infamous name given to the above-mentioned incorporation of Kant's outlook on war[29] into the rationale of the Cold War, MAD, the acronym for mutually assured destruction, we can speak today of a maddening war, in the dual sense that it drives those of us trying to make sense of it crazy, but also that it does so precisely by making mutually assured destruction, the condition to be avoided at all costs, into a verb, into something we keep approximating in the name of avoiding it.[30]

In this constellation, it is not only the geographical distinction between local, regional, and global conflict, the geographical limits of war that are endangered. For we are dealing with wars that threaten to spill over, and seem more and more difficult to contain spatially, but even more fundamentally, we witness a war on the precipice, on the edge, a war that is continuously pushing towards a wider, even less containable conflict. Spilling over doesn't only mean involving more parties in direct conflict, but also, expanding the levels of violence and destruction, pushing ever more closely towards complete mass destruction. So we have the spatial limits, and the scope of war being expanded, pushed to the brink. We also have wars with no end in sight, pushing against the "normal" passage into some kind of new political arrangement.

Further, in war today, an "irrational" willingness to sacrifice life, is becoming integrated into the logic of deterrence, supposedly grounded in the safeguarding of life. We witness a strange blending of the two rivaling sides in Hegel's mythical struggle to the death: clinging to prestige, showing oneself willing to sacrifice life for some higher freedom, is presented as an essential ingredient of deterrence. The other side must know that we are, to some extent, crazy and unpredictable, untethered to our interests of survival and prosperity. That is the only way for us to win, namely, to survive and one day perhaps to prosper. And so clinging to honor and clinging to life become interlocked.

When I say that the negativity of war is being integrated into the very practice and discourse of contemporary war, so as not to say logic, I can think of no more horrifying example than my own country. In a new book, Bob Woodward quotes president Biden scolding prime minister Netanyahu, yelling at him" you have no strategy." I cannot avoid the terrifying thought that in this age of the "self-conscious", or maddening war, having no strategy functions effectively as a sort of strategy. Certainly, Netanyahu's infamous avoidance of any settlement, his final non-solution so to

speak, has turned Bartleby's famous "I prefer not to" into a new kind of state power. By avoiding an end to the war, Netanyahu is getting closer and closer to shaping the war he wants: A civilizational struggle against the enemies of "the west", and a sidestepping of the very local, and traumatic conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, which has reached genocidal proportions.

In postponing an end to the war, Netanyahu has also found a new and surprising way to remain in power, which goes well beyond the Hobbesian Paradigm, and even its much more archaic roots, which we can find in Aeschylus's Eumenides. We have a deep-rooted conception according to which civilian unity under the rule of law is the perquisite for war against foreign enemies. Famously for Hobbes, failing to provide security against foreign enemies is the one clear case of the violation of the pact between the populace and the sovereign, rendering the legitimacy of sovereignty, null and void. In today's maddening reality, prolonging war indefinitely has become a strategy to avoid the consequences of such dramatic, absolute failures of the sovereign pact, and war is waged indefinitely, not in order to keep the populace united under a shared goal, but impotent, torn between the necessity to fight foreign threats and the sense of utter powerlessness to remove a failed government. In today's constellation, where civil society is often in direct clash with state power, revisiting Hegel's insight about the complicated triangulation in modernity of family, civil society, and state becomes an urgent task. If contemporary war is indeed a war on limits, perhaps ending a war entails the ability to draw a line, to find the way to establish a limit from within, so as to free ourselves, at least, from the torturing question: where is the limit? The limit is not out there to be discovered, but right here, namely, wherever we manage to draw it.

From War to Worst: What in War is More than War itself

Why is it then, that it seems harder than ever to draw limits? In Israel today, war, a horrid reality in and of itself, has come to serve as a mask for something worse. What can be worse than war? It is the inherent perversion of war, which has come to be known by the name genocide. Genocide, let me be clear, is very much a reality. And yet, it is poorly conceived. It seems criminal to offer some initial remarks on this heaviest of topics, but also an inescapable duty. For the conceptual issue here is not a mere theoretical nicety. It is not only that talking about war, is a way not to talk about genocide. Prolonging the reality of war has become a way to make the most recorded and reported crime against humanity in contemporary history practically invisible to some of its perpetrators.

In Israel today, genocidal violence against Gazans, and more and more, West Bank Palestinians, is normalized under the guise of war. "There are no innocents in Gaza", is, according to a recent poll, a state-

ment 64 percent of Israelis identify with. Since all Gazans are Hamas, and Hamas has proven its determination to exterminate all Jews in Israel (and beyond), so goes the reasoning, a war of annihilation has become inescapable, it's either us or them. It is striking that in this atmosphere, where politicians have publicly made genocidal statements, making what is usually the difficult legal exercise, the establishment of intent, a foregone conclusion, genocide must be denied. The attitude many Israelis have adopted towards the Gaza genocide is something like this: 1. Palestinians deserve to be annihilated (there are no innocents in Gaza). 2. Anybody else would be, and has been in similar situations, even more recklessly violent towards them and 3. there is no genocide. In this, Israelis repeat the oddity of neo-Nazi holocaust denial.[31] Why, if annihilation is legitimate, desirable even, would you deny its reality?

We see here yet another testament that, while taboos might have lost their efficiency in preventing the horrible act, that does not amount to them being simply irrelevant or impotent. We see today in Israel that genocide can be advocated, debated against in social media, but not admitted. No one can first-personally stand behind this explicit intent.

What than is genocide? What is the political ontology that singles it out as a violent phenomenon? We could say that genocide is murder in the plural: it is composed of a myriad of acts, some horrid on their own, some in of small consequence (stopping one truck from supplying food, for instance). It is directed to the many, a group, but more significantly, it is carried out by a collective of a special kind. It is a "we" with no "I," no one to assume responsibility first-personally. Genocide is what is in war more than itself. If war can be understood as a communication by means of power, the imposition of my will on the other, as advocated in the realistic approach heralded by von Klausvoic, it can only achieve its end, find resolution, when annihilation, the destruction of the enemy is foreclosed. When it remains a threat, an unrealized potential.

Genocide is a horrible totality that doesn't coalesce, that has the structure and dynamics of a bad infinity, the infinitization of violence. It is not only the destruction of what is genetic, productive, namely, lives and the conditions of life, but it is the becoming genetic, assuming the shape of production, of destruction itself. In every image of the destruction of Gaza, we can see this surplus of destruction, its need for infinite production. Genocide opens up a black hole, which must swallow everything. We can imagine what would the Nazis do had they managed to get all the Jews? Certainly, they would have had to expand the category, so they could continue with the extermination. Here too, we find the problematic effect of déjà vu, the immediate identification of contemporary horrors with past ones. Of course, we should compare, but comparing means learning both from what is similar, and what is different. War serves as a mask, covering up genocide, in the very (constrained and contained) chaos it generates. The trains that transported the masses condemned to the

extermination factories were a symbol of efficiency and precision, standardization, the core technology of the industrial age. We have discovered that all of these—tools that led to the liberation of productive forces—can be harnessed for the industrial production of death. Artificial intelligence, the symbol of too late capitalism, does something else, perhaps even more radical. It errs on our behalf, for us.

The Body Heap Paradox

The infinitization of violence also explains how the fundamental bond of complicity, which, we learn from Žižek, is what forges a community out of a collective, is weaponized in a collective crime. The continuous violation of norms and boundaries — each violation more extreme than the last — not only undermines the grip on sanity, the anchorage in a stable reality, but also weakens the capacity to act according to principle. Where and when do we set boundaries with full force and at any cost? We find ourselves in a trap of accomplices: we have already given a hand to this wrongdoing, turned a blind eye to that, so now stop? Was one Gazan baby not enough for you? 30, 400? Having failed to stop everything, drawn a limit, has already made you one of us, a partner in crime. You're in it with us. In this way, no one can escape the collective stain of the crime. The small segment of the population that feels suffocatingly impotent to prevent it, those who feel unbearable guilt, effectively serve to deny the very reality of the horrible violence. A right wing commentator on social media made the incisors, but nonetheless, pointed remark in response to a recent publication on the atrocities in Gazan, the hunger campaign. "You do not really believe this is genocide. If you would, you wouldn't be posting about it on social media". There is a kernel of truth in his critique - there is an unbearable, performative paradox in protesting against genocide. It is, by its very nature, a crime that has to be stopped by all means, not argued about or protested against. And so, the "slow boil" massacre, and its unprecedented visual exposure, serve to render the crime strangely invisible. Can a democracy enact a genocide, while debating it? Isn't this in itself a clear sign that we have passed out of anything resembling liberal democracy?

Populism of the Wish

This allows us perhaps to wager an answer as to the unique popularity of the supposed populism. In general, populism is an inept term to describe new authoritarianism. Not only does it fail to address precisely why such modes of power are popular, the very word reeks of elitism, as if what people want can only be base and unworthy of serious consideration.

What does the people want? Everything, nothing. There is no such thing as a collective will, and it's not even clear that there is such a thing as a private will. But we have constructed different mechanisms to ex-

press such a general desire: elections, surveys. These mechanisms do not reveal what the majority wants, and certainly not the entire collectivity in the first-person plural; rather, they reveal a non-personal desire—a desire that cannot belong to anyone in the first person. (No one 64%, wants anything.) This is not a false desire, but something much more disturbing. A monstrous desire, a jumble of limbs that does not coalesce into a single body, no body in particular, but—somehow—seems right for everyone in general. It is precisely because one cannot identify with it directly that it takes on an objective dimension. An independent existence.

In other words—and this is important—what is at stake in polling is not just empty fantasy. These mechanisms reveal something troubling about us, precisely because they cannot be identified with directly. They appear as the will we refuse to admit exists, and therefore suspect, it is a deeper, more systemic than each individual's explicit desire. Private, personal desire is hesitant and contradictory, and then coalesces into a resolve, but it never does truly shed its doubts. Surveys provide a numerical expression of the collective mood, of the tendency. The virtual vector of the impulse.

As such, they seem dangerously similar to a wish we lack the courage to express. It's not my desire, not my wish. It's a general wish— a sense of where the wind is blowing, its tendency. And where do I stand in relation to the wind? The left (despite the shameful 30 percent) and the Arabs together are what remains of the collective unconscious. Conscience spoils the mood.

But what is a wish? Among other things, a wish is distinguished from desire by the fact that we do not want to realize it. Not necessarily that we don't want it to be fulfilled; not all wishes are Oedipal in a direct sense, but we certainly do not want to be the ones bringing it into realization. This is the fundamental meaning of a wish: not merely something we would like or request for ourselves, without truly understanding what we are asking for, but something that can only be fulfilled effortlessly and without direct intervention on our part. Even expressing a wish is a risk—a step too far, which endangers its fulfillment. Hence, the silence that surrounds the wish, as well as the well-known warning: "Be careful with your wishes." A wish invites an alien agent, a fairy or a god, to fulfill something that we cannot even imagine the world of its fulfillment.

This is the demonic aspect of the new right. The transgressive right—those who break accepted norms and ignore the will of the majority, as reflected in surveys—does so partly in the name of impulse and wish, which also find expression in surveys. The wish to live in a space where there is no longer a need to confront the gaze, language, or wishes of others.

Perhaps we are acting against your superficial desire to put an end to the war—that is the transgressive "populist" message —but we do so in the name of your concealed wish, increasingly rising out of concealment as it is already. We go against the explicit will in the name of a wish that is no longer entirely denied. The disconnect between the Israeli majority's

opposition to war and the decline in support for a political solution to the conflict, along with the disturbing rise in support for transfer, and genocidal statements (no innocents in Gaza) is positioned here.

Here, it is necessary to remember, time and again: we are not merely the sum of our wishes and impulses. We are those who learn to live alongside them. I am no more myself when seized by the impulse to kill the one who cut me off on the road than I am the adult who successfully—again!—overcomes that impulse. I am no more the child who expressed a wish than the grown-up who witnessed its ironic fulfillment.

So, be careful—not only with your wishes, but especially with those who seek to realize them for you.

1 Kremnitzer, 2024.
2 Kant, 1991, pp. 54-60.
3 Foucault, 1979, pp. 131-137.
4 Arendt, 1961, p. 91.
5 See Maine, 1914, pp. 359-383; Mamdani, 2012, pp. 21-23.
6 Ibid, 102.
7 Ibid, 95.
8 Benjamin, 1969, p. 7.
9 Agamben, 2005, p. 79.
10 This is perhaps the key to its fraught distinction and relation to power, as we commonly understand that term, a relation "at once antagonistic and supplementary" (Agamben, 2005, p. 80).
11 Agamben, 2005, p. 83-84.
12 Daston, 2022, p. 8
13 Daston, 2022, p. 41-44.
14 Arendt, 1961, p. 97.
15 Žižek, 1991, lxi.
16 Lacan, 1991, p. 127.
17 Freud, 1950, p. 21.
18 Lacan, 1991, p.128
19 Benjamin, 1996, p, 249.
20 Žižek, 1997, pp. 37-38.
21 Žižek, 1991, pp. 244-245.
22 More recently, Alenka Zupančič has taken up a detailed reading of Manoni in her book *Disavowal*. She notes how the very saying differs from both the standard neurotic case, in which the symptoms do the declaring, and from properly fetishist solutions, in which the fetish holds the belief, relieves the believer from the burden of containing contradictory statements. See Zupančič, 2024.
23 Žižek, 1991, p. 249.
24 Zupančič, 2024.
25 Žižek, 1991, p. 252.
26 Arendt, 1958, p. 461.
27 Weber, 1968, pp. 23-4.
28 Kremnitzer, Forthcoming.
29 Attay Kremer has recently explicated in two papers, some of the stakes of the Kant-Hegel debate regarding war, in both its ethical-ontological aspect, and its relation to the nature-history distinction. See Kremer, forthcoming, Kremer forthcoming.
30 Dupuy, 2023.
31 I owe this comparison to Attay Kremer.

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Intellectuals and the Liberated Marx: Žižek and Karatani

Nadir Lahiji

Abstract: For more than three decades the *ghost* of the '*liberated* Marx' has been haunting the intellectuals of the world. At a certain point, Marx was *liberated* from Marxism. In this essay I argue that on the contemporary intellectual scene, Slavoj Žižek and Kōjin Karatani, whom I endeavor to pair, are the two prominent thinkers who more than anybody else paved the way for an understanding of this *liberated* Marx. In this sense, they themselves are the exemplars of '*the* liberated intellectuals'. By the term 'intellectual' I mean a specific thing against its conventional understanding. I go to Kant for an exposition of the term that will be elaborated in this essay. Žižek and Karatani are the *genuine* readers of Marx. Each, in his singular way, has released Marx from the misorientation of the century-old *Marxism*. Moreover, what is important in their readings is that Marx is recognized as a *philosopher*. This is important. Marx must be properly returned to the philosophical lineage of German Idealism to which he belongs. For this essay I have an exclusive objective. I confine myself to discussing '*the* Unconscious' as the 'Returned of the Repressed' of 'Communism' in Marx, as elucidated by both of our prodigious thinkers.

Keywords: Communism, Unconscious, Intellectual, Marxism, Derrida, Marx, Engels, Kant

I

> Men of intellectual ability and breadth of mind! I venerate your talents and cherish your human feelings. But have you also fully considered what you are doing, and what your attacks on reason are likely to lead to? You doubtless wish that *freedom of thought* should remain inviolate; for without it, even the free flights of your genius would soon come to an end.
>
> —Kant, 'What is Orientation in Thinking?'[1]

Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* wrote: 'The responsibility, once again, would here be that of an heir. Whether they wish it or know it or not, all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism'[2]. Except that Derrida forgot to mention that, among these 'men and women, all over the earth', the *genuine* heirs of Marx are *freed* from Marxism—freed from the *canonized* Marx. Marx is not continuous with Marxism. Marx has been *recovered* from Marxism. The latter had for long obfuscated the former.

Translating 'spirits' into 'ghosts', Derrida said that Marx was accompanied by many 'ghosts' in his life. Here we should note that Hegel's *Geist* is etymologically related to 'ghost'.[3] In this regard, we can say that the ghost of a *certain* Marx, that is, the *liberated* Marx, has been

haunting the intellectuals of the world. The intellectuals who are haunted by this specter are themselves the *liberated* intellectuals—liberated from a century long *Marxism*. Unliberated Marxists and, for that matter, *servile* non-Marxist intellectuals, are in a 'holly alliance' to conjure away specters of the liberated Marx.

Exactly at what moment did the *liberated* Marx arrive on the scene? In his introduction to the Penguin 'deluxe edition' of *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 2011, Marshall Berman wrote the following:

> After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this system came apart very fast. All over Eastern Europe, Marx statues were torn down. Pictures of people doing this were page one material for a while. Readers who love Marx can only be thrilled at his loss of sanctity. His canonization after 1917 was a disaster. A thinker needs beatification like a hole in the head![4]

What actually did happen in 1989? If we follow Berman, the answer is that after the crash of 1989, as Boris Buden has put it, 'even Karl Marx went through a double liberation: *a life freed from Marx has recovered Marx freed for the intellectuals of the world*'[5] [emphasis mine]. As David Leopard in his *The Young Marx* has noted, the actual Soviet communism undoubtedly distorted our knowledge of Marx's work. Leopard properly surmises that 'its subsequent collapse might provide an unexpected opportunity, not to bury Marx, but better to understand him'.[6] We are, ever since, in this period of understanding Marx 'better'.

On the contemporary intellectual scene, Slavoj Žižek and Kōjin Karatani are the two distinct thinkers among 'the intellectuals of the world' who have understood Marx 'better'. They are *liberated* intellectuals, each in his own unique way, as I will examine later. Each must be identified as a *genuine* reader of Marx releasing him from Marxism. In their respective readings, a place is secured for Marx as *philosopher*, returning him to the proper lineage to which he belongs: German Idealism. I will submit the terms 'intellectual' and 'Marxism' to a close examination in my attempt to bring out the two interrelated elements in Žižek's and Karatani's singular readings of Marx, namely, the notions of '*the* Unconscious' and 'Communism'.

I begin by first posing this question: What kind of *intellectual* was Marx himself? In a letter to the novelist Berthold Auerbach, dated September 2, 1841, Moses Hess described the young Marx who had just earned his doctoral degree:

> the greatest, perhaps, the only real philosopher living today ... Dr. Marx ... is still a very young man and going to give the death blow to medieval religion and politics. He combines the sharpest wit with the most profound philosophical gravity; imagine Rousseau, Voltaire,

> Holbach, Lessing, Heine and Hegel united in one person—and I mean united, not thrown together—there you have Dr Marx.[7]

This 'Dr Marx', we should note, is the intellectual who later in his lifetime liberated himself twice, first from 'German philosophy' and second from the intellectual circle of young Hegelians. Therefore the year 1989 should really be marked as the *third* stage in Marx's liberation, a *posthumous* liberation. In relation to the young Marx's characterization by Hess in 1841, we come to the year 1848 when *The Communist Manifesto* was drafted. Berman writes that 'one group whose identities as workers was crucial for Marx was his own class: intellectuals'.[8] He quotes from *The Manifesto*: 'The Bourgeoisie has stripped of his halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers'. Berman goes on to say that 'This does not mean that these activities lose meaning or value. If anything, they become more urgently meaningful. But the only way people can get the freedom to do what they can do is by working for capital. Marx himself had to live this way.'[9]

As is well-known, at one point in time, Marx separated himself from Marxism. In a letter that Friedrich Engels wrote to Eduard Bernstein in 1882 he famously quoted Marx writing to his son-in-law, Paul Lafargue in French: '*Ce qu'il y a de certain c'est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste*.' ['If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist.'][10] Žižek in his short *The Relevance of the Communist Manifesto*, published in 2019, cites this statement to say that in Soviet translation it was rendered as: 'If this is Marxism then I am not a Marxist'.[11] Žižek perspicuously takes this mistranslation as an indication that in Soviet Marxism 'even Marx was a Marxist and participated in the same universal knowledge that composes Marxism; the fact that he created the teaching later known by this label made no difference. So his denial above does not refer just to a specific, wrong version that falsely proclaimed itself to be "Marxism"'.[12] Žižek goes on to say that Marx meant something 'more radical' in the fact that 'a gap separates him, the creator who has a substantive relationship with his teaching, from the "Marxists" who follow his teaching'.[13] Žižek concludes with a typically witty citation of a joke by the Marx Brothers. It goes like this: 'You Look like Emmanuel Ravelli.—But I am Emmanuel Ravelli.—So no wonder you look like him.' In Žižek's paraphrasing: 'The guy who is Ravelli does not look like Ravelli, he simply is Ravelli. In the same way, Marx himself is not a Marxist—one among others; he is the point of reference exempted from the series, because it is by reference to him that others are Marxists. And the only way to remain faithful to Marx today is to stop being a Marxist and to repeat instead Marx's grounding gesture in a new way'.[14]

Our two prodigious thinkers, Žižek and Karatani, are an intellectual pair who have carried this Marx's 'grounding gesture in a new way'; I will return to this when I take up the problem of 'Marxism' in more detail later.

Here we first need to examine who exactly we call an 'intellectual'. For its definition I can only go to Immanuel Kant. But first some preliminary remarks are in order. Yesteryear may be remembered as the time of an 'intellectual laziness' named 'Marxism'. That intellectual laziness failed to bring out and distinguish the two elements in Marx, namely, the literary 'metaphorical' *style,* in contrast to his scientific theory, which results in confusion of the two and therefore an injustice to his real theoretical-scientific work. This is what Ludovico Silva in his groundbreaking *Literary Style of Marx* has told us.[15] The outcome of this intellectual laziness is the missing of 'Marx, the intellectual', Silva says. Nowadays we are fortunate in having been able to overcome that intellectual laziness. Žižek and Karatani, in my view, stand out today as two thinkers and *intellectuals* who have begun to read Marx independent of *Marxism*. Here I use 'Marxism' in a pejorative sense as a term for 'anti-intellectual' in specific sense of the term. I should also point out that the very term 'Marxism', as we are told by Karatani, was coined immediately after Marx's death by none other than his intellectual friend Friedrich Engels. I will come back to this point after examining the meaning of term 'intellectual'.

II

Who is an 'intellectual'? Or, more properly, who is a *liberated* intellectual? Let me put it first in this way: This privileged figure named 'the intellectual' is the one who is *affected by* the *liberated Marx who in turn was affected by Kant through Hegel.* This intellectual is *philosophically* grounded in *political theory* in Kantian terms. Kant had possessed a set of distinct political theory that has only recently been brought to our attention.[16] The figure of the intellectual is first and foremost that of an *enlightened man*. Karatani and Žižek have both drawn our attention to the distinction between the notion of *private use* of reason as opposed to *public use* of reason, against our own received understanding of public and private, a distinction that Kant himself had brought out in his essay 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"'. Kant's essay was written in September of 1784 and was published in December of the same year. It is proper to read Kant's 'answer' in conjunction with other short essays he wrote after the publication of the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, namely, 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' (November 1784), 'What is Orientation in Thinking' (1786), 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' (1795), and 'The Metaphysical Elements of Right' (1797). These essays finally culminated in the last book Kant wrote that was entitled *The Conflict of the Faculties*, published in 1798.

Kant famously begins by saying that '*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity*', telling us that '*Immaturity* is the inability to use one's own understanding without guidance of another'.[17] He wrote: 'It is so convenient to be immature!'[18] And further,

'If it is now asked whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*'.[19] Elsewhere he wrote: '*To think for oneself* means to look within oneself (i.e., in one's own reason) for the supreme touchstone of truth; and the maxim of thinking for oneself at all times is enlightenment'.[20] For enlightenment, Kant said, all that is needed is *freedom*: 'And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all—freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters'. Everywhere, he continues, we hear: 'Don't argue!'. The tax officer says do not argue and pay your taxes. The clergyman says do not argue and believe! Kant here mentions the King of Prussia, Frederick II (the Great), as the 'only ruler in the world' who said: '*Argue* as much as you like and about whatever you like, *but obey*!'.[21] If this means 'restriction on freedom everywhere', then what kind of restriction would prevent enlightenment? Kant's answer to his own question goes as follows: 'The *public* use of man's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; *the private use* of reason may quite often be very narrowly restricted, however, without undue hinderance to the progress of enlightenment'.[22] The same tax officer and the same clergymen cannot act in freedom because they are under the command from outside. But, 'Conversely, as a scholar addressing the real public (i.e., the world at large) through his writings, the clergyman making *public use* of his reason enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person. For to maintain that the guardians of the people in spiritual matters should themselves be immature, is an absurdity which amounts to making absurdities permanent'.[23] This is the crux of the matter. The *intellectual* lives in the age of the *enlightenment*, which is not yet an *enlightened* age. The intellectual work is incomplete and its task is interminable. Moreover, in a larger context of Kant's political theory as related to moral law, nature and freedom, an intellectual is the one who makes 'A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of mankind', which 'must be regarded as possible and even as capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself'.[24]

If we choose Kant's definition we must then conclude that the much recycled term 'public intellectual' is essentially a contradiction in term.

In the annals of history, Socrates must be seen as the *first* intellectual. He was exemplary, and still to be emulated today, precisely based on the tenets of the Kantian notion of 'cosmopolitan', and his political theory. In his ground-breaking *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, Karatani reflects on 'The Riddle of Socrates', bringing up Kant and Marx to shed light on the aforementioned distinction between *private* and *public* reason in the case of the *historical* Socrates. Karatani begins by saying that the riddle of Socrates lies in the instances of his 'fighting for truth and justice, not from a public but from a private [position]. This was a contradiction, because to be in the private sphere was to be apolitical.

Socrates lived this paradox, and it rendered both his life and his death enigmatic'.[25] The *historical* Socrates is not the fictional *character* Plato tried to portray him as in his *Dialogues*, according to Karatani. 'What Socrates brought about', Karatani writes, 'was an inversion of the value associated with public and private capacity. This was first of all to place the private in a position of superiority to the public, hence [making it] political'.[26] Contrary to Plato, who tried to attribute his own idealism and his notion of philosopher-king to Socrates, we must not forget that, as Karatani notes, Socrates refused to become a public figure. Nevertheless, 'he neither would rest content merely with the private. He did remain a private figure within the polis; however, never did he neglect to continue to truly fight for the right. Plato sought the true form of polity rooted in this Socrates'.[27] But, nevertheless, Karatani writes, Socrates's position is nowhere close to that of Diogenes or Plato. Rather, Socrates's position is this: 'act publicly while remaining in your private station, which is to say, while remaining within the polis, be cosmopolitan. From this perspective, Socrates seems more political than the Cynics, while being cosmopolitan in comparison to Plato'.[28] It is at this point that Karatani makes his point clear by referring to Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?'. Karatani reiterates Kant's notion of *public* and *private* in succinct terms yet adds an illuminating point to its original meaning: 'For Kant, to act in accord with the position of the state is the private, while the universal standpoint (of the citizen of the world) is the public. To truly be public, one must take up a private station that transcends the state. Of course, such a cosmopolis transcending the state as such does not exist. What Kant is saying is that while existing as an individual within the state, one should make judgments and act as a citizen of the world. That is to say, Kant's inversion of value between public and private is neither Plato's nor Diogenes's, but rather Socrates's position.'[29] To make his point even clearer, Karatani masterfully brings up Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.* Reminding us that Hegel had placed state above civil society, Karatani states that here civil society is conceived as 'system of desire, while the state transcends this at the rational level', which means that 'in civil society people function in a private capacity, while in the state they become public citizens; That is to say, they assume their true form. Marx inverted the position. If people exhibit their real form in private capacity, there is no need to assume a public sphere. To put it in Marx's terms, if people exhibit their "species-being" in civil society, there is no longer any need for the political state above that. That is to say, if one can dissolve the class antagonisms within civil society, the state as a political entity will be superseded.'[30] We will come back to Socrates later when discussing the *unconscious* agency in Marx brought out by Žižek and Karatani both.

Žižek takes up Kant's inversion of *public* and *private*, offering his own interpretation in the context of his discussion on Communism.

In the second part of his *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, entitled the 'The Communist Hypothesis', in the Section '*Public Use of Reason*', Žižek first puts forward an 'elementary definition' of communism: 'in contrast to socialism, communism refers to singular universality, to the direct link between the singular and the universal, bypassing particular determinations'.[31] Citing Paul who said that from the Christian standpoint 'there are no men and women, no Jews or Greeks', thereby claiming that, in Žižek's words, 'ethnic roots, national identities, etc., are *not a category of truth.* To put it in Kantian terms: when we reflect upon our ethnic roots, we engage in a *private use of reason*, constrained by contingent dogmatic presuppositions; that is, we act as "immature" individuals, not as free humans who dwell in the dimension of the universality of reason'.[32] Here Žižek takes issue with Richard Rorty's misconception of difference between public and private 'space' to say that, on the contrary, for Kant 'the public space of the "world-civil-society" exemplifies the paradox of universal singularity, of a singular subject who, in a kind of short-circuit, bypassing the mediation of the particular, directly participates in the Universal'.[33] Quoting a passage from Kant's 'What is Enlightenment', Žižek says the following: 'The paradox of Kant's formula "Think freely, but obey!" (which, of course, poses a series of problems of its own, since it also relies on the distinction between the "performative" level of social authority and the level of free thinking where performativity is suspended) is thus that one participates in the universal dimension of the "public" sphere precisely as a singular individual extracted from, or even opposed to, one's substantial communal identification—one is truly universal only when radically singular, in the interstices of communal identities'.[34]

III

I now come to the problem of Marxism in relation to the figure of the 'intellectual'. Boris Buden takes issue with the famous passage in *The Communist Manifesto* that Berman had cited. It is a well-known passage:

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and options are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face ... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.[35]

'This vision has been proved wrong', Buden asserts. He remarks that 'In fact, individuals in capitalism can never face the reality in which they live and social relations in which they are involved, in their immediacy. It is the fetishistic character of commodity production that prevents this from happening, or, more precisely, makes these individuals experience their

mutual relations as relation between things'.[36] Buden wants to affirm that 'As far as capitalism puts both intellectuals and workers into the same wage-relation, they also share a common class and historical position', and therefore, 'This is why Berman can see in today's intellectuals of the world the rightful heirs to the emancipatory legacy of the historical workers' movements, those proletarians who once had nothing to lose but their chains'.[37] However, in Buden's view, 'intellectuals of the world' still have something to lose: 'the freedom that Berman has implicitly ascribed to their social role and that makes it possible for them to detach themselves from historical praxis and encounter "directly" the authentic world of Marx's ideas'.[38] He properly finds this 'freedom' of the intellectuals in the 'public use of reason' by invoking Kant. As was said above, this would mean that, as citizens of the world and 'scholars' addressing the general public, intellectuals can argue freely in using their reason publicly. This might explain, in Buden's words, why 'Berman and all genuine readers of Karl Marx have welcomed "a life without Marx" brought about by the crash of 1989'.[39] Buden keenly makes the following observations:

> In Kant's sense, it liberated Marx's writings from their private use—by, for instance, those apparatchiks of an official Marxism, also known as Marxologues, who were not able to read Marx and discuss his ideas freely because they had to obey their totalitarian masters, the Party and the state. In other words, the post-1989 liberation of Marx's writing might be understood as a sort of reappropriation by public reason. It has liberated Marx as author, who is now finally free—to address, as a scholar (*Gelehrte*), 'the intellectuals of the world', or, in Kant's parlance, the society of world citizens (*Weltbürgergesellschaft*).[40]

At this point we might yet ask: What did actually happen in 1989? If we follow Berman the answer is that after the crash of 1989, and, as I have already mentioned above, this is the crux of matter so it is worth reiterating here, 'even Karl Marx went through a double liberation: a life freed from Marx has recovered Marx freed for the intellectuals of the world'.[41] Among its consequences, Buden notes, is the fact that, as a result of the 'democratic revolutions' in the aftermath of 1989, everybody talked about 'transition to democracy' but not the restoration of capitalism. This relates to the notion of the 'abstract figure of the so-called free and equal individual'. We should remember that this 'abstract figure' originally belonged to the bourgeois capitalist society, yet in the former system of 'actually existing socialism' the same figure 'was banned from the political life of the state. Nevertheless, it reappeared in a place where it essentially does not belong as such, in the sphere of civil society'.[42] Thus Buden remarks:

> Recalling the young Marx's critique of the limits of bourgeois political emancipation, inspired by Hegel and epitomized in the concept of the bourgeois *Homo duplex*, one might say that in the struggle for freedom under the conditions of the one-party system the abstract political figure of *citoyen* moved over to the realm of its non-political doppelgänger, the *bourgeois.* Here, on the stage of civil society, behind the backs of the party-state, the abstract political figure of *citoyen* performed a sort of monodrama, disguised in the costume of a living flesh-and-blood person. It was best personified in the image of an anti-communist dissident heroically fighting for human rights.[43]

And further:

> The left critics of historical communism were never anti-communists. Rather, they remained at all times within the horizon opened up by the emancipatory promise of Marx's critique of capitalism, sharing its highlights, shortcomings and contradictions, and taking active part in the theoretical disputes and dramatic political conflicts that accompanied the communist movement from its very beginning—for which they often paid dearly.[44]

This bring us back to the central point that is the notion of the '*liberated* Marx': *Recovering* Marx from Marxism, linked to Marx's relation to his life-long friend Friedrich Engels. Here I must reiterate that the hallmark of this 'liberated Marx' concerns, first and foremost, the recovery of Marx as a *philosopher* and not as a 'political economist', and this must prompt the tracing of his philosophical roots to post-Kantian German Idealism, in particular to Hegel. Here I want to point out that, as Tom Rockmore has incisively argued, in our attempt to 'recover' Marx, it is important that we free him from Engels as the 'first Marxist'. There is a 'grain of truth' in what Rockmore says: 'Marxism is the series of misunderstandings of Marx's theories'.[45] This concerns the alleged expressions of the categorical difference between 'materialism' and 'idealism', between 'science' and 'philosophy', which goes back to Russian Marxist philosopher, Georgii Plekhanov, Lenin's teacher, and all the way up to Louis Althusser.[46] In a broader context, the distinction between Marx and Marxism leads to the more clear understanding of Marx's appropriation and critique of Hegel, but also his critique of political economy and modern industrial society which derive from a 'single unitary conceptual vision'. As Rockmore points out, 'if the aim is to understand Marx, then it is crucial to go beyond politically motivated Marxist claims for distinctions in kind between Marx and Hegel, or again between Marx and philosophy, or even between philosophy and science; for it is only in this way that one can see that in the final analysis Marx is not only a philosopher, or a

German philosopher, but a German Hegelian, hence a German idealist philosopher'.[47] This lineage should prompt us to bring out the notion of *Spirit* in Marx.

Derrida in *Specters of Marx* says that Marx was accompanied by many 'ghosts', as mentioned above, and goes on to invoke Paul Valéry, who in his landmark 'Crisis of the Spirit' of 1919 wrote about Hamlet's specters:

> But he is an intellectual Hamlet. He mediates on the life and death of truths. His ghosts are all the objects of our controversies, his remorse is all the titles of our glory.... If he seizes a skull, it is an illustrious skull—"Whose was it?"—This one was *Lionardo*.... And this other skull is that of *Leibniz* who dreamed of universal peace. And this one was *Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit*.... Hamlet does not know what to do with all these skulls. But if he abandons them! ... Will he cease to be himself?' [48]

To put Valéry's 'And this one was *Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit*...', in the context of the historical situation that has emerged since 1990 must prompt a reconsideration of the classical German philosophy, Kant and Hegel, with Marx as its heir. In this respect, we have to abandon the view, as Karatani puts it, which 'believes that Kant was superseded by Hegel, and Hegel in turn by Marx'.[49] To rethink these figures is at the same time to touch the moment of the '*intellectual* break', the moment, to repeat, 'when *Marxism died so that Marx might be liberated*'. To put it in Berman's terms again, this is the moment that '*has recovered Marx freed for the intellectuals of the world*'. In this respect, it is proper to reflect on the relation between Marx and his life-long friend Engels.

'Marxism' is the invention of Friedrich Engels, the friend, political colleague, financial supporter and editor of the works of Marx published after his death in 1883. Marx had a solid education in philosophy, with a Ph.D. awarded to him in 1841. Engels did not have any formal training in philosophy. He only attended Schelling's lectures in 1841; he was a talented autodidact, an amateur in philosophy, who would often give simplistic and weak accounts of Kant, Hegel, and German Idealism, according to Rockmore. Engels aligned Marxism with science, having a tendency closer to what is now called scientism.[50] After Marx's death, Engels wrote a series of articles for *Die Neue Zeit* which were later collected in a slim volume and published in 1888 entitled *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy.*[51] Engels begins the short 'Foreword' to the book by citing Marx's Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, writing that 'Karl Marx relates how the two of us in Brussels in the year 1845 set about working in common "the opposition of our view"—the materialist conception of history which was worked out especially by Marx—"to the ideological view of German philosophy, in fact to settle

accounts with our previous philosophical conscience"'.[52] He further states that the intent of his book is 'a short, connected account of our relation to the Hegelian philosophy, of our point of departure as well as of our separation from it, [which] appeared to me to be required more and more', adding that it is 'Equally a full acknowledgement of the influence which Feuerbach, more than any other post-Hegelian philosopher had upon us during our period of storm and stress.'[53] Taking issue with Engels' claim, Rockmore comments that the latter's suggestion that 'Marx and he share a single non-ideological view of philosophy as ideology implies that there is in fact a shared view, that it is not ideological, and that there is in fact a break with Hegel and philosophy'.[54] This is not true, as Rockmore emphatically asserts. Marx, contrary to Engels, never broke with Hegel or philosophy. It was Marxism that was ideological. Marx was not ideological. And more importantly, Marx's position is not 'extra-philosophical, but rather, belongs to German idealism'.[55]

Engels in his *Ludwig Feuerbach* cites Hegel's famous statement from *Philosophy of Right* that 'All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real'.[56] He goes on to offer his rather unsophisticated interpretation of this in portraying Hegel as an unconditional political supporter of the contemporary monarchy and its repression.[57] Rockmore remarks that 'Feuerbach's revolutionary importance lies in the transition from idealism to materialism, which refutes philosophy in establishing nature as independent and simply destroying the (Hegelian) "system"'.[58] According to Engels 'if Philosophy culminates in Hegel, and if Hegel is refuted by Feuerbach, then philosophy is over'.[59] 'Yet to sustain this argument', Rockmore points out, 'it would need to be shown that Feuerbach has successfully criticized Hegel'.[60] Engels reads Feuerbach as a reformulation of 'Hegelian idealism in a materialist manner'.[61] In this respect, Engels argues for the distinction between idealism and materialism, and the opposition between philosophy and science. Engels wrote:

> While materialism conceives nature as the sole reality, nature in the Hegelian system represents merely "alienation" of the absolute idea, so to say, a degradation of the idea. In all circumstances thinking and its thought-product, the idea, is here the primary, nature the derived element, which only exists at all by the condescension of the idea. And in this contradiction they floundered as well or as ill as they could.[62]

In the section 'Idealism and Materialism' of *Ludwig Feuerbach* Engels says that the 'paramount' question of philosophy is the 'relation of thing to being, the relation of spirit to nature'.[63] As Rockmore notes, Engels 'who is interested in cognition, is concerned with whether thought can know being. He sees philosophy as divided on the question of knowledge'.[64] Engels wrote: 'But the question of relation of thinking and being has yet

another side: in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world? Is our thinking capable of the cognition of the real world? Are we able in our ideas and notions of the real world to produce a correct reflection of reality? In philosophical language this question is called the question of the "identity of thinking and being," and the overwhelming majority of philosophers give an affirmative answer to this question'.[65] Engels cites Kant and carelessly lumps him in with Hume as a 'skeptic', as Rockmore notes. This is what Engels said:

> In addition there is yet another set of different philosophers—those who question the possibility of any cognition (or at least of an exhaustive cognition) of the world. To them, among the moderns, belong Hume and Kant, and they have played a very important role in philosophical development. What is decisive in the refutation of this view has already been said by Hegel—in so far as this was possible from an idealist standpoint. The materialistic additions made by Feuerbach are more ingenious than profound. The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical fancies is practice, *viz*, experiment and industry.[66]

He continues to remark that 'If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its condition and using it for our own purpose into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible "thing-in-itself"'.[67] This 'crude' passage, as Rockmore puts it, reveals Engels' 'misunderstanding of Kant'.[68] At the end, in response to or in refutation of Engels' argument in *Ludwig Feuerbach*, we must acknowledge that Marx, 'overcomes Hegel by overcoming Hegel's view of dialectic, which is an "ideological perversion" [Engels' term], in favor of concepts as "images of real things"'.[69] And, 'In putting forward the idea that knowledge mirrors an independent reality, Engels clearly parts company with Hegel, and with anything Marx ever says, in restating a reflection theory of knowledge familiar in forms of empiricism. This theory was later adopted and made canonical for Marxism'.[70] Toward the end of *Ludwig Feuerbach*, in the section 'Dialectical Materialism', Engels remarks that 'Out of the dissolution of the Hegelian school, however, there developed still another tendency, the only one which has borne real fruit. And this tendency is essentially connected with the name of Marx.'[71] He then, in humility, goes on to say the following in the footnote:

> Here I may be permitted to make a personal explanation. Lately repeated reference has been made on my share in this theory, and so I can hardly avoid saying a few words here to settle this particular point. I cannot deny that both before and during my forty years' collaboration with Marx I had a certain independent share in laying

> the foundations, and more particularly in elaborating the theory. But the greater part of its leading basic principles, particularly the realm of economics and history, and, above all its final, clear formulation, belong to Marx. What I contributed—at any rate with the exception of a few studies—Marx could very well have done without me. What Marx accomplished I would not have achieved. Marx stood higher, saw further, and took a wider and quicker view than the rest of us. Marx was a genius; we others were at best talented. Without him the theory would not be what it is today. It therefore rightly bears his name.[72]

As said above, Engels is nevertheless responsible for the invention of Marxism after Marx's death. A long time ago, before recent discussions on this point, it was the French writer Michel Henry who, already in 1976 in his *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, intervened with regard to the 'divorce' between Marx and Marxism. He wrote: 'it is the extraordinary fact that *Marxism was constituted and defined in the absence of any reference to Marx's philosophical thought and in total ignorance of it*'.[73] He points out that Plekhanov, Lenin, Stalin, and so many others, had neither knowledge of the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, nor of *The German Ideology*—which was published only in 1932—'at a time when "dialectical materialism" had already been presented as a finished doctrine'.[74] He goes further, saying that 'Engels, who signed, we might say, *The German Ideology* with Marx, remains in fact totally unrelated to the fundamental philosophical content which unfolds in this explosive text', and adding that 'one has only to compare the original with the summary Engels gives of it after Marx's death in his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: the two texts have nothing in common'.[75] Significantly, Henry is an earlier critics of Louis Althusser, holding him to be responsible for 'The elimination of Marx's philosophical thought in favor of dogmatic theses of dialectical materialism' which in his words 'had been constituted and defined over almost half of a century'.[76] He quotes Althusser who in his *For Marx* said the following: 'we cannot say absolutely that "*Marx's youth is part of Marxism*" unless we mean by this that, like all historical phenomena, the evolution of this young bourgeois intellectual can be illuminated by the application of the principles of historical materialism'.[77] Taking Althusser to task, Henry writes: 'Not only are the philosophical writings nothing but the writing of "youth," those of a young German bourgeois, but the possibility that they could provide an explanation for the later work and constitute the genesis of this work is categorically excluded'.[78]

IV

I now come to my central point, on what I stated above about the relation of '*the* unconscious' in psychoanalytical terms to Communism in both Karatani and Žižek. To bring out this relation is in confirmation of my point that our two thinkers are the *genuine* readers of Marx. We find in both the argument, made in different ways, that Marx had anticipated Freud. Karatani cites a well-known passage from Marx' s *Capital* in his *Marx: Towards the Center of Possibility*. Marx wrote:

> Hence, when we bring the products of our labour into relation with each other as values, it is not because we see in these articles the material receptacles of homogeneous human labour. *Quite the contrary*: whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. *We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it*. Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. *Later on*, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as *language*. The recent scientific discovery, that the products of labour, so far as they are values, are but material expressions of the human labour spent in their production, marks, indeed, an epoch in the history of the development of the human race, but, by no means, dissipates the mist through which the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves.[79]

Karatani's remarks on this passage go as follows:

> When he says that 'we are not aware of this, nevertheless, we do it', Marx is speaking of the unconscious in downright Freudian terms. Lacan emphasized that the unconscious is structured like a language. In the same way, the value-form, under erasure within the form of money, is precisely what Marx referred to here as a 'hieroglyph'. It is invisible within our unconscious; only its results are reflected. As Freud argued, to be conscious of something is to phonetically lingualize it. What we consciously cognize merely takes the form of money as phonetic script. Political economy begins from this 'consciousness'. In other words, to say this is also to emphasize that political economy has always tacitly presupposed money. Insofar as every reflection or analysis, no matter how rigorous, is located within this always-already formalized 'consciousness', its results are always mistaken for its causes.[80]

Turning to Žižek on the same notion that Karatani touched upon above, it is useful to remember that it was originally in the first chapter of the book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* entitled 'How Marx Invented the Symptom' that Žižek brought up 'The Unconscious of the Commodity Form', a statement that directly refers to Lacan who had said it was Marx who first 'invented the notion of symptom'. Žižek initially cites Alfred Sohn-Rethel's reflection on the historical *abstract* mode of thinking as related to *commodity* in the critique of political economy, only to relate it to the Kantian 'transcendental subject'. It must be mentioned in passing here that according to Karatani, this Kantian 'transcendental' notion is fundamentally an 'unconscious structure' which is the condition of the possibility of experience. In this respect, Žižek writes that in the 'structure of the commodity-form it is possible to find the transcendental subject: the commodity-form articulates in advance the anatomy, the skeleton of the Kantian transcendental subject—that is, the network of transcendental categories which constitute the a priori frame of "objective" scientific knowledge'.[81] Žižek continues by saying that:

> Before thought could arrive at pure *abstraction*, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market. The exchange of commodities implies a double abstraction: the abstraction from the changeable character of the commodity during the act of exchange and the abstraction from the concrete, empirical, sensual, particular character of the commodity (in the act of exchange, the distinct, particular qualitative determination of a commodity is not taken into account; a commodity is reduced to an abstract entity which—irrespective of its particular nature, of its "use-value"—possesses the "same value" as another commodity for which it is being exchanged).[82]

Žižek follows up his remark above by crucially bringing the Freudian unconscious into his argument:

> In this way, the transcendental subject, the support of the net of a priori categories, is confronted with the disquieting fact that it depends, in its very formal genesis, on some inner-worldly, 'pathological' process—a scandal, a nonsensical impossibility from the transcendental point of view, in so far as the formal-transcendental a priori is by definition independent of all positive content: a scandal corresponding perfectly to the 'scandalous' character of the Freudian unconscious, which is also unbearable from the transcendental-philosophical perspective. That is to say, if we look closely at the ontological status of what Sohn-Rethel calls the 'real abstraction' [*das reale Abstraction*] (that is, the act of abstraction at work in the very *effective* process of the exchange

> of commodity), the homology between its status and that of the unconscious, this signifying chain which persists on 'another Scene' is striking: *the 'real abstraction' is the unconscious of the transcendental subject*, the support of objective-universal scientific knowledge.[83]

In the space allowed for this essay I cannot go into the vast question of the 'unconscious' in relation to Marx and, for that matter, to 'communism', in Karatani and Žižek. I must in conclusion reiterate my point that Karatani and Žižek, coming differently from the tradition of Kantian Marxism and Hegelian Marxism, respectively have in fact effectively inaugurated a *break* with Marxism by returning to Marx and his *Capital*—more substantially in the case of Karatani in his groundbreaking *The Structure of the World History*. Each, I stress, in his own singular way, took up Marx grounded in philosophical *and* psychoanalytical theories. And, at the same time, they both *correct* the misconception of Marxists on the notion of *ideology*, coming to it by different routes of criticism.

A common insight can be discerned in the work of our two exemplary thinkers, which amounts to a tremendous foresight as to how Marx must be read in order to *recover* him from Marxism, that is, to free him for the *liberated* intellectuals. It would be appropriate to end here by invoking Derrida once again who made some decisive remarks in his *Specters of Marx.* After stating succinctly that 'It will be always a fault not to reread and discuss Marx', Derrida goes on to bring up the notion of *responsibility* in reading Marx and points out the fact that there is indeed more than one *spirit* of Marx. He incisively says the following:

> When the dogma machine and the "Marxist" ideological apparatuses (States, parties, cell, unions, and other places of doctrinal production) are in the process of disappearing, we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for running away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits. For this will be our hypothesis or rather our bias: *there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them.*[84]

It is noteworthy that Karatani and Žižek, each with his own unique sensibilities, have taken up this notion of *spirit* to bring up the *unconscious* agency in connection to Hegel's *Geist.* It was first Hegel who, very much aware of the *unconscious* agency, coined the term '*unconscious* Spirit' in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel anticipates the psychoanalytical concept of the *unconscious*.[85] Here we come back to Socrates, to a passage from Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* in which Hegel brings out the 'unconscious impulse' in Socrates. This passage is

cited by Karatani in his *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy* where he discusses the notion of Daimon in Socrates. Hegel wrote:

> Since everyone here has his personal mind which appears to him to be his mind, we see how in connection with this, we have what is known under the name of Genius [*daimonion*] of Socrates; for it implies that now man decides in accordance with his perception and by himself. But in this Genius of Socrates—notorious as a much discussed *bizarrerie* of his imagination—we are neither to imagine the existence of protective spirit, angel, and such-like, nor even of conscience. For conscience is the idea of universal individuality, of the mind certain of itself, which is at the same time universal truth. But the Genius of Socrates is rather all the other and necessary sides of his universality, that is, the individuality of mind which came to consciousness in him equally with the former. His pure consciousness stands over both sides. The deficiency in the universal, which lies in its indeterminateness, is unsatisfactorily supplied in an individual way, because Socrates' judgment, as coming from himself, was characterized by the form of an unconscious impulse. The genius of Socrates is not Socrates himself, not his opinions and convictions, but an oracle which, however, is not external, but is subjective, his oracle. It bore the form of knowledge which was directly associated with a condition of unconsciousness; it was a knowledge which may also appear under other conditions as a magnetic state. It may happen that at death, in illness and catalepsy, men know about circumstances future or present, which in the understood relations of things, are altogether unknown. These are facts which are usually rudely denied. That in Socrates we should discover what we expect comes to pass through conscious reflections in the form of the unconscious [makes it seem exceptional].[86]

Karatani, who continues the tradition of Kantian Marxism, pays his respect to Hegel at the same time by employing his term '*unconscious* Spirit' by expanding on it and bringing out its relevance to Marx, who famously once declared himself as the 'pupil' of that 'mighty thinker'. In this sense, we must be speaking of Marx's *Geist*. Karatani's attempt may be considered to be partially in line with that of Žižek's invocation of Hegel's 'tarrying with negative'. Here I take the opportunity to reiterate that, in the footsteps of our two prodigious intellectuals, we must not let ourselves, in Derrida's words, be at *fault by* not reading and rereading Marx. We must not fail in *recovering* Marx '*freed for the intellectuals of the world*'.

And finally, I take the liberty to intervene into Valéry's famous statement cited by Derrida only to transgressively add to it two more names. It will go like this:

This one was *Lionardo*.... And this other skull is that of *Leibniz* who dreamed of universal peace. And this one was *Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit Karatani et Žižek* ...

Note: This essay is related to a larger book project I am undertaking, tentatively entitled 'Marx's Unconscious: On Karatani and Žižek'. I would like to use this occasion to make some autobiographical remarks. I owe my specific understandings of Marx, also Kant and Hegel, in large part to Žižek's and Karatani's work. I first came across Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* shortly after its publication in 1989 while I was browsing a bookstore in Atlanta at the time that I was teaching at Georgia Tech School of Architecture. Not knowing the author at all and not being able to pronounce his name, I pulled the book off the shelf and began to page through it. I noticed the name of Jacques Lacan—I had to buy it, mainly because of the fact that while I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania I had read Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in which I had come across the name of Jacques Lacan—mainly in the 'Translator's Preface'—but also because of the fact that as a critic of architecture I had taken interest in Derrida's intervention in the discourse of architecture at the time. This was the beginning of my reading of Žižek. As for Karatani, I came across his *Architecture as Metaphor* after its publication in 1995. The book had been sitting on my desk for more than ten years during which time I read it over and over again struggling to understand the complex argument laid out in it. While I was keeping up with Karatani's later books, I felt that I have finally managed to understand his philosophical argument in *Architecture as Metaphor.* As a non-philosopher reader of modern German philosophy and the work of Marx, I ventured to write a book about Karatani's early book that I published in 2024 entitled *Kōjin Karatani's Philosophy of Architecture.* I have since kept my interest in both thinkers which, in part, led to my second book on Karatani entitled *The Unconscious Spirit of Communism: Karatani's Reconstruction of Marx*, which is forthcoming by Brill. Here, by paraphrasing Hegel, I can only say that Žižek and Karatani in my mind may be considered to be *identical* thinker in *difference* in their respective philosophical work on Marx.

1 Kant, 1991, p. 247.
2 Derrida, 1994, p. 91.
3 Inwood, 1992, in 'Spirit'.
4 Berman, 2011, p. 1.
5 Buden, 2019, P.151.
6 See Leopard, 2007, p. 8.
7 Quoted in Rockmore, 1976, p. 21,
8 Berman, 2011, 11.
9 Berman, 2011, pp. 11-12.
10 In MECW, 1975, volume 46, p. 353.
11 Žižek, 2019, p. 58.
12 Žižek, 2019, p. 58.
13 Žižek, 2019, p. 58.
14 Žižek, 2019, pp. 58–59.
15 For the term 'intellectual laziness' and the distinction between metaphor and scientific theory in Marx I am following Ludovico Silva in his groundbreaking *Marx's Literary Style*, 2023. I will come back to this work later.
16 In this respect see the excellent remarks by Reiss in his 'Introduction' to *Kant,* 1979, 1991*,* See also Saner, 1973.
17 Kant, 1991, p. 54
18 Kant, 1991, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment"', p. 54.
19 Kant, 1991, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment"', p. 58. Kant further noted: 'As things are at present, we still have a long way to go before men as a whole can be in a position (or can even be put into a position) of using their own understanding and well in religious matters, without outside guidance. But we do have distinct indication that the way is now being cleared for them to work freely in this direction, and that the obstacle to universal enlightenment, to man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity, are gradually becoming fewer. In this respect our age is the age of enlightenment, the century of *Frederick*', p. 58.
20 Kant, 1991, 'What is Orientation in Thinking', p. 249.
21 Kant, 1991, 55.

22 Kant, 1991, p. 55.
23 Kant, 1991, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment"', p. 57.
24 Kant 1991, 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', p. 51.
25 Karatani, 2017, pp. 114–115.
26 Karatani, 2017, p. 115.
27 Karatani, 2017, p. 116.
28 Karatani, 2017, p. 116.
29 Karatani, 2017, p. 116.
30 Karatani, 2017, p. 117. In this respect, Karatani in the footnote refers to what Marx wrote in *On the Jewish Question*. There Marx wrote: 'Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power', p. 151, n. 12.
31 Žižek, 2009, p. 104.
32 Žižek, 2009, p. 104. In this relation, Žižek brings up 'the opposition between Kant and Rorty' regarding the dimension of public and private that he says is rarely noted. He writes: 'Both sharply distinguish between the two domains, but in opposite ways. For Rorty, the great contemporary liberal *par excellence*, the private is the space of our idiosyncrasies where creativity and wild imagination rule and moral considerations are (almost) suspended; the public, on the contrary, is the space of social interaction where we are obliged to obey the rules in order not to hurt others. In Rorty's own terms, the private is the space of irony, while the public is the space of solidarity', p.104.
33 Žižek, 2009, p. 104.

34 Žižek, 2009, p. 105. Žižek further remarks that 'It is Kant who should be read here as critique of Rorty. In his vision of public space characterized by the unconstrained exercise of Reason, he invokes a dimension of emancipatory universality *outside* the confines of one's social identity, of one's position within the order of (social) being—precisely the dimension so crucially missing in Rorty', p. 105.

35 Quoted in Buden, 'It Is Getting Darker Around the Central Sun of Freedom', p. 158. Buden explains that he took the quote from Berman's book and that 'translation is more accurate, since Berman himself slightly altered the standard translation made by Samuel Moore in 1888', 158, n. 35. The translation in the Penguin deluxe edition is slightly different and goes as follows: 'All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept way, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind', in Marx and Engels, 2011, p. 68.
36 Buden, 2019, p. 158.
37 Buden, 2019, pp. 137–138.
38 Buden, 2019, p. 138.
39 Buden, 2019, p. 138.
40 Buden, 2019, , pp. 138–139. Buden further adds that 'it is not difficult to recognize in Berman's notion of "the intellectuals of the world" an older intellectual figure, which, in fact, still echoes in Kant's notion *Weltbürgergesellschaft*—the so-called "republic of letters": an international community of scholars of which Kant, for instance, was a typical member. It emerged at the time of the Renaissance, and as a new historical form of intellectual exchange it prepared and finally made possible the Age of Enlightenment', p. 139.
41 Buden, 2019, p. 151.
42 Buden, 2019, p. 153.
43 Buden, 2019, p. 153.
44 Buden, 2019, p. 154.
45 See Rockmore, 2002, p. 1. For my reflection on the issue of the relation of Marx to Marxism I follow Rockmore's convincing argument.
46 For more on this see Rockmore, 2002, chapter 1.
47 Rockmore, 2002, p.161.
48 Valéry wrote this passage in his 'La Crise de l'esprit.' Quoted by Derrida 1994, p. 5.
49 Here I am following Karatani in his groundbreaking *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, 2014. P. 302.
50 I am following Rockmore, 2006.
51 See Engels, 2018, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 2018). As Rockmore points out, in its simplicity this book became an influential source for generations of Marxists who were 'unable or unwilling to read Marx's own often

difficult but infinitely more rewarding texts'; see Rockmore, 2006, p. 55.
52 Engels, 2018, p. 7.
53 Engels, 2018, pp. 7–8.
54 See Rockmore, 2006, pp. 55–56. Also see Rockmore, 2002.
55 Rockmore, 2006, p. 56.
56 Engels, 2018, p.10. The more correct translation of Hegel's statement is: 'What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational'; see Hegel, 1991, p. 20.
57 Engels writes: 'That was tangibly a sanctification of things that be, a philosophical benediction bestowed upon despotism, police-government, Star Chamber proceedings and censorship. That is how Frederick William III and his subjects understood it. But according to Hegel everything that exists is certainly not also *real*, without further qualification. For Hegel the attribute of reality belongs only to that which at the same time is necessary: "The reality proves itself to be necessary in the course of its development." A particular governmental act—Hegel himself cites the example of "a certain tax regulation"—is therefore for him by no means real without qualification. That which is necessary, however, proves itself in the last resort to be also rational; and, applied to the Prussian state of that time, the Hegelian proposition therefore merely means: this state is rational, it corresponds to reason in so far as it is necessary; and if it nevertheless appears to us to be evil, but, still, in spite of its evil character, it continues to exist, then the evil character of the government is explained and justified by the corresponding evil character of the subjects', 2018, p. 10.
58 Rockmore, 2006, p. 57.
59 Rockmore, 2006, p.57.
60 Rockmore, 2006, p. 57.
61 Rockmore, 2006, p. 57.
62 Engels, 2018, pp. 17–18.
63 Engels, 2018, p. 21.
64 Rockmore, 2006, p. 57.
65 Engels, 2018, p. 21. Engels adds: 'But the question of relation of thinking and being has yet another side: in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world? Is our thinking capable of the cognition of the real world? Are we able in our ideas and notions of the world to produce a correct reflection of reality? In philosophical language this question is called the question of the "Identity of thinking and being," and an overwhelming majority of philosophers give an affirmative answer to this question. With Hegel, for example, its affirmation is self-evident; for what we perceive in the real world is precisely its thought content—that which makes the world a gradual realization of the absolute idea, which absolute idea has existed somewhere from eternity, independent of the world and before the world. [...] But that in no way prevents Hegel from drawing the further conclusion from his proof of the identity of thinking and being that his philosophy, because it is correct for his own thinking, is therefore the only correct one, and that the identity of thinking and being must prove its validity by mankind immediately translating his philosophy from theory into practice and transforming the whole world according to Hegelian principles. This is an illusion which he shares with well-nigh all philosophers', pp. 21–22.
66 Engels, 2018, p. 22.
67 Engels, p. 23.
68 Rockmore, 2006, p. 57.
69 Rockmore, 2006, p. 58.
70 Rockmore, 2006, p. 58.
71 Engels, 2018, p. 42.
72 Engels, 2918, pp. 42–43.
73 See Henry, 1983, p. 3.
74 Henry, 1983, p. 3.
75 Henry,1983, p. 3. Henry expands by saying: 'On the one hand, Engels' summary includes extremely serious historical errors, since he reverses the order of Feuerbach's and Stirner's influence on Marx, which alone is sufficient to render unintelligible the internal development of Marx's thought during these critical years. Further, we see how in place of the brilliant and decisive intuitions of *The German Philosophy*, which overturn the concept of being as it has dominated Western thought since ancient Greece and unsettle the philosophical horizon within which this thought has always moved, Engels substitutes an exasperated dull, banal discourse, which at the very most, marks a return to the immediate and superficial past, to the materialism of Feuerbach and to that of the eighteenth century. And yet, even this materialism, just as the idealism which is näively opposed to it, is presented in such an external form that any possible philosophical sense is lost', p. 3.
76 Henry, 1983, p. 8.
77 Quoted in Henry, 1983, p. 9. See also Althusser, 2005pp. 83–84.
78 Henry, 1983, p. 9. Henry goes on to say that 'Rejected on the level of the given and considered as

an ideology, the philosophical work is no longer a source of enlightenment but a dead letter, opaque, capable of receiving its light only from elsewhere. Between what enlightens and what is enlightened the break is radical indeed and such that, on the one side we find only ideological concepts and, on the other, the set of scientific concepts which constitute the "theory". The ideological concepts are unusable; their only possible use consists in providing an object for the application of Marxist theory', p. 9.
79 Quoted in Karatani, 2020, pp. 24–25.
80 Karatani, 2020, p. 25.
81 See Žižek, 1989, p.16.
82 Žižek, 1989, p. 17.
83 Žižek, 1989, p. 17.
84 Derrida, 1994, p. 13.
85 See Mills, 2002.
86 Quoted in Karatani, 2017, p. 120.

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What is Orientation in Thinking, Today?: A Response to Žižek

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Abstract: In 1786, intervening in the controversy on Spinoza's philosophy involving Mendelssohn, Jacobi and Lessing, Kant argued in "Was Heisst: Sich im Denken Orientieren?" for the *practical necessity,* arising from reason's own intrinsic needs, of a *subjective* orientation of thinking within the *properly logical general space* of its (otherwise speculative) activity. In this essay, I consider what can helpfully be meant by the idea of a critical "orientation of thought" today, in the sense of a practical possibility of directedness of thought relevant to critical engagement with the largest current problems of planetary life. I argue that such an orientation, today, must take account of the formal implications of the necessarily symbolic structure of any comprehensive thought about the senses of beings and lives in general; and that, viewed in the framework of what I called, in *Politics of Logic,* the "paradoxico-critical" orientation, these implications also motivate a deep-seated critique of the ideological privilege traditionally accorded to the human as the distinctive possessor of (what is imagined as) a unitary rational power of judgment. In the final section of the paper, I respond critically to Žižek's recent discussion of the paradoxico-critical position in relation to his own (partially similar) "Hegelian" one.

Keywords: Kant, Žižek, Critique, Orientation, Paradoxico-criticism, Thinking, Being

The concern of this paper is not metaphysical or ontological, but rather, in a certain way, ethical. The way in which it is ethical can be indicated by reference to Lacan's suggestion, near the beginning of Seminar VII ("The Ethics of Psychoanalysis"), that the questions of ethics, after the insights of Freud, be articulated "from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the real."[1] Although there are certainly other leading references than simply that of the life of "man" (and in particular of "human" subjectivity) that must, today, set the terms for thought's response to the largest problems of contemporary global life, Lacan's formulation nevertheless appropriately points to the project of an articulation of these problems in thought and language that has, fundamentally, nothing to do with the conditions of individual action, the systematization of pre-theoretical "intuitions," or the calculative (pseudo-)problems of the management and distribution of collective goods. Instead, the concern of an ethics of the psychoanalytic real in this sense would – again, following Freud as Lacan interprets him -- locate the concern of ethics within a critical and reflective consideration of the *structure of language* in relation to the real contemporary conditions of life.[2] Such a project of articulation, I will argue, besides being in its development of the specific structure of the symbolic as an "ethics of the real" in Lacan's determined sense of that term, could also, I think, amount in its critical engagement with this

structure, to a "*real* ethics": that is, an ethics actually able to *meet* the real of the determinative forms of contemporary global life with a critical elaboration of the problematic and paradoxical *symbolic* and *imaginary* conditions of their actual and effective ideological support.[3]

In this paper, I will consider the question or problem of such an ethical approach of linguistically structured thought to life under the specific heading of what can be called, drawing on Kant, an *orientation* of thought. The idea of such an "orientation" is, as I seek to appeal to it here, in part that of a practical possibility of directedness of thought relevant to collective practice with respect to, and critical engagement with, the problems and sources of suffering most broadly characteristic of the global situation of planetary life today. Among these problems is that of the pervasive violence marked in, and enabled by, the privilege of the being that conceives itself as the possessor and master of *language* and hence of the power of the generality, and the mastery of beings in general, whose possibility this possession brings. One part of the question of a contemporary approach of thought to the broadest problems of global life today is thus to find appropriate terms in which to formulate a critique of what can be called *anthropogenic violence*: namely, the systematic violence that pervades global life today in diverse forms such as (anthropogenic) climate change, factory farming and the global destruction of lives, species and environments by the power of capitalism. This includes especially the conversion of the forms of these lives, species and environments into a unitary form of commodification, monetization and exchange for the purpose of the extraction of surplus value; or of the extraction of their sense and meaning in the presumptively unitary medium of a (presumptively human) form of accessibility to their neutral "intelligibility" to (a presumptively human) thought and activity.[4]

In considering the possible forms of a (helpful) orientation of thought toward these problems and others like them today, I will argue that such a consideration can take the initial form of a repetition -- albeit with a kind of essential displacement -- of Kant's appeal to the figure of "orientation in thinking" which is, for him, already a way of thinking about the possible opening of the theoretical register of critical philosophy onto the practical and the ethical. The determinate repetition, under contemporary conditions, of this appeal can still serve, I will argue, as an essential figure of the possible orientation of thinking toward the problems implicit in the (real as well as ideological) constitution of the *generality or totality* of the thinkable senses and lives. But contemporary conditions of thought and practice nevertheless require, here, an essential displacement of Kant's own thought about the forms and implications of this possible orientation of thought to the real. One aspect of this displacement is that, by contrast with Kant's thinking of orientation in terms of the relationship of what are for him the distinct subjective "faculties" of sensible intuition and discursive thinking (or understanding), it will be (for us) a characteristic

outcome of a philosophical awareness of the constitutive role of *language*, or of the *symbolic*, in thought's real and imaginary structure. It follows from this displacement that we can make no use of the Kantian framework of faculties or of Kant's characteristic appeal to a distinctively subjective *power* of judgment or understanding as the primary locus of the generality of conceptual thought. Instead, we must today consider the problem of the orientation of thought, rather, as one about the possible articulations of the (plural) forms in which we can think critically about the relationship of the (imaginary) totality of language, or of the symbolic, to the real of shared planetary life.

Within the ambit of this consideration, I argue, the Kantian critical problem of the capacities of thought in relation to the possibilities of empirical knowledge is rather transformed into one about, in part, the structure and limits of linguistic and non-linguistic sense, and the problem of orientation in thinking accordingly becomes the formal problem of our reflexive linguistic orientation toward or in relation to just these limits. Their critical articulation will then be, on the one hand, a way of critically considering the real and ideological forms of the contemporary *global* determination of the senses of lives and events, and on the other, a way of locating the specific points at which the determinacy of this constitution evinces in principle a more general and structurally characteristic undeterminability or undecidability. Here, it becomes relevant especially to consider in formal terms the problem of the *constitution of unity* and most especially of those unities whose existence, assumed or presupposed within the historical thinking of metaphysics and maintained in the imaginary register on the most ordinary level of everyday linguistic presupposition, most define the privilege of what the "human" understanding is considered to be uniquely capable. These are, in particular, the presumed or imagined unities of subject, of substance, and of the world as such and as a whole, with respect to which Kant already makes a decisive move, in the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the first *Critique*, by interrogating their unity as given *only* problematically through their hypostatization as transcendental ideas, and thus as a proper subject for critique of transcendental illusion. As I shall argue here, a contemporary repetition of the Kantian critical project in linguistic terms can evince the contemporary challenge it offers to the coherence of the forms of unity whose presumed coherence and availability to thought has most often defined the privilege of the human in its presumed power of rational thinking, a presumption that has articulated its claim to dominate the beings of the world in general. A genuine contemporary critical orientation of thought is then, in these terms, an orientation that, discerning the formal structure of this claim, also allows for a fundamental critique of its basis, and thereby makes room for a consideration of global life no longer subject to it. In the last section of the paper, I consider the sense and possible directedness of such a contemporary project of

critical orientation in relation to the determinatively "Hegelian" terms and motivation of a project that – whatever its relationship to Kantian critique -- must undoubtedly be considered one of the most forceful and puissant movements of radical thought today: namely Slavoj Žižek's project of historical-materialist ideology critique and emancipatory politics.

I

In 1786, intervening in the famous controversy on the interpretation and significance of Spinoza's philosophy involving Mendelssohn, Jacobi and Lessing, Kant argued in the essay "Was Heisst: Sich im Denken Orientieren?*"* for the *practical necessity,* arising from reason's own intrinsic needs, of a *subjective* orientation of thinking within the *properly logical space* of its (otherwise speculative) activity. In arguing for the possibility of what he here calls "orienting oneself in thinking," Kant is, most directly, impressed by an analogy between physical or spatial orientation within the sensible world and the concept or practice of a *logical* orientation that allows us to make use of a coherent directedness, this time toward or in relation not to any sensory object perceivable by touch or sight, but toward something which is itself "super-sensory." Just as, Kant argues, I may use a *felt difference* within my own subject – in particular, that between the right and left hands, as I feel them to differ internally and without exterior sensory input – to to orient myself in *any* "given" space which is not open, as a whole, to my visual oversight (for example, in a dark but familiar room), so I must be capable, in the spontaneous and free directedness of thought, of orienting myself toward a supersensible object *by means of the use of a* subjective sense innate (Kant thinks) to our rational nature itself:

> Finally, I can extend this concept [viz., of subjective orientation - PL] even further if I equate it with the ability to orientate oneself not just in space, i.e. mathematically, but also in *thought*, i.e. *logically.* It is easy to guess by analogy that this will be the means whereby pure reason regulates its use when, taking leave of known objects (of experience), it seeks to extend its sphere beyond the frontiers of experience and no longer encounters any objects of intuition whatsoever, but merely a space for the latter to operate in. It will then no longer be in a position, in determining its own faculty of judgement, to subsume its judgments under a specific maxim with the help of objective criteria of knowledge, but only with the help of a subjective distinction.[5]

Such an orientation will be, more specifically, a *directedness* of the power or faculty of judgment – that power which Kant specifies, in the *Critique or Pure Reason,* as the capacity of "**subsuming** under rules,

i.e. of determining whether something stands under a given rule (*casus datae legis*) or not." (A 132/B171).[6] Just as spatial orientation is practically necessary if we are actively to find our way among objects and situations in space, it will be possible, or at any rate conceivable, to find orientation with respect to our activity in judgment, even when the case of judgment is one that exceeds the givenness of empirical knowledge, and thus even in cases where one's knowledge is, as a whole, insufficient to provide any sufficient grounds for judgment at all. In such cases, Kant suggests, the (self-imposed) need of reason to render judgment must nevertheless take the form of a determination of a maxim under which it can act. However, because of the necessary impossibility, here, of this determination's being provided by anything that can appear in an intuition as an object of actual knowledge, we must be capable of determining such a maxim in the absence of any possible knowledge. Accordingly, reason's activity must be limited to determining two essentially formal aspects of the concepts with which we operate : first, the freedom of these concepts, in themselves, from contradiction; and second, the conceptual form of the *relationship* of the (supposed or presupposed) super-sensory object of this activity to the objects of ordinary, sensory experience.[7]

In this way, Kant seeks to broaden the subjective phenomenon of the orientation by means of which we navigate spaces from our own position within them, in abeyance of any objectively ascertainable or knowable object, is broadened to a relevant sense of the possibility of orienting ourselves and navigating within the "immeasurable" space of the thinkable, even beyond the bounds of any possible experience. Such a use is, avowedly and markedly, merely *regulative* (in the terminology of the first *Critique*): it does demonstrate the existence, or even give us grounds to think the real possibility of, any actually supersensible unity or thing. But this does not prevent the form of unity which is involved in reason's practical interest from proposing itself to us as the unitary form of our possible orientation, as the substantively empty form of our subjective orientation of thinking and action itself. And in fact, if we credit the metaphor and the analogy, orientation is not just a way of directing action, but bears a necessity that is practically unavoidable in our activity if we are to determine that activity freely by means of reasons at all.

In the context of a broader reflection on the forms of rational thought and their formal relationship to the possible directions and determinations of life and lived practice, this argument for the practical necessity of orientation in thought is notable for at least two distinct reasons. First, because the argument represents one of the most direct places where Kant argues for, and attempts to effect, the passage from the theoretical use of reason to its practical employment in general -- thereby both echoing and summarizing those other places where he gives an antinomic derivation of the necessity of a postulation of reason's practical and law-giving ambition relative to necessary limitations of its

knowledge. And second – more broadly -- because its guiding metaphor of orientation stages the passage of thought from the ordinary activity of the understanding with respect to intuitively given objects in space and time to the space that is rather supposed as proper to thinking: "logical space", or the general space of the constitution of generality itself, drawing out the implications of what he sees as the forms and limits of our possible relationship to this space for what he argues is the necessarily rational determination of practice. The argument is thus relevant to the critical problem, or question, of the constitution and basis of the instituting or law-giving *power* of reason itself, and hence to the problem of the distinctive kind of power possessed by the kind of being that is capable of it. In the Kantian framework, this is none other than the power of that which is able to propose the law to itself and thereby understand itself as bound by it. Distinctively and decisively, this is the power of that which is in definitive possession of a *power of judgment* in general: of a power of the use of reason as the giving of law, and the determination of the individual case, in general, in its form. It is just such a being – and only such a being – that stands under the requirement of orientation, in each particular case of its practice, toward or in relation to the unity of the law it must give itself.

We can gain further insight into the logical form of this requirement of orientation, as well as the form of legality (hence of practice) that it structures, by way of a bit of reflection on the arguments by which Kant most directly derives, elsewhere, the possibility of freedom as autonomy itself. The first of these is, of course, the third antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which opposes the thesis of a possible determination of causality through freedom with the antithesis of a complete natural determinism without any possibility of free action. The second is the antinomy of pure practical reason in the determination of the will in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, published two years after the appearance of the "Orientation" essay. Here, the antinomy is a version of the more general antinomy, running through Kant's ethical thought, between the necessity for truly moral action to be determined by the moral law rather than through any pathological motivation, and the impossibility of our ever being able to conclusively verify, by any empirical marks or features, that our action is indeed so determined. As in the speculative antinomies of the first *Critique,* the dilemma is to be resolved by adopting transcendental idealism, and in particular by the possibility it allows for considering the order of efficient causes *uniformly* to be conditioned by a superior and atemporal *noumenal* determining cause in the rational subject, a cause which is to be located, once again, in the intellectual space wherein it can be responsible for the determination of action in accordance with the moral law.[8]

In each of these cases of the antinomy of causality and freedom, the specifically suggested resolution of the antinomic conflict depends

not only on the general solution of transcendental idealism, but more specifically on the possibility that the unitary noumenal conditioning of the phenomena of the world provides for resolving the dispute *in favor* of freedom. In both cases, it is reason's *own* interest that tips the balance in favor of freedom or in favor of the actual possibility of the determination of action by means of the law which reason gives itself. This is the same interest or need as is determinative in Kant's argument, in the "Orientation" essay, for the possibility of reason's orientation toward, and within, the supersensible in general. It is, broadly speaking, reason's specific interest in *unity*, and in particular in the form of unity that is the form of the distinctive activity of the faculty of judgment in determining, of a new case, whether it falls under a *given* law. But where the faculty of judgment has no object, and hence no way of determining any particular law as given, this interest is just the interest in the pure *form* of law itself. This is, formally speaking, no different from an interest in unity as consistency, in the merely consistent form of a possible determination of the will by means of reason's own power to give law to itself.

So, bringing this all together, we can say, summarily: first, that the invocation of the practical as founded in reason's need for unity is Kant's distinctive way of resolving the antinomic and contradictory form which the problems of the determination of the conditions of action in general are presented; and second that they nevertheless constitute this need, and the orientation it yields, as the orientation of, or toward, *consistency* itself. Both the possibility and indeed the necessity of this orientation, moreover, are produced or seen as demanded by reflection on the distinctive logical form of judgment itself, which requires or already implies the form of the rule in general: that is, the unity evident in the consistency of the self-given law by contrast with its various empirically determined instances. Kant's idea of orientation in thought, in which his whole idea of the interest of reason is subsumed, is thus in an exemplary way an outcome of a certain kind of privileging of the One: namely, a privileging of the *formal claim of unity as consistency* that is the *necessary form of subjective activity as subject to rational law*, or is the *actuality of the subject's reason itself as the (empty) form of consistent legality*.

We will have reason, below, to challenge this privilege of consistency, within the scope of what will there appear as a broader space of the determination of the space of practice or of relationship within which beings and lives encounter one another in the generality and diversity of their interests, without outside boundary or exception, and without prejudice to the form of law or to the force of its institution. However, it will nevertheless be positively relevant to this consideration of the generality of interests to consider just as deeply the Kantian critique of the distinctive forms in which reason characteristically imagines or hallucinates a substantive One on the "subjective" basis of a hyperbolic application of its own constitutive principles of unity. This is, in other

words, the critique of the transcendental *dialectic*, which begins by implicating in the problem of reason's demand for unity beyond the sphere in which it can actually attain it the whole struggle of our lives with the forms of illusion to which it is distinctively prone. This dialectic is, of course, the logical setting, not only of the antinomies which problematize the concept of the world as the real totality of conditions for a given "now" taken as real in themselves, but also of the characteristically metaphysical assumptions or presuppositions of the possibility of a rational psychology grounded in a phenomenally given being of the soul, and of a rational theology grounded in a phenomenally given first creator.

In fact, according to Kant's suggestion in opening the "Dialectic" of the first *Critique*, all three of these are generated visibly by the distinctive forms of reason's possible operation in inference. Kant here supposes, assuming the Aristotelian syllogistic form as the general form of inference, that every inference from one judgment to another depends upon the subsumption of a "cognition" under a general rule by means of the power of judgment; once this is done, it is possible to determine the specific cognition according to the predicate involved in the general rule.[9] Further, Kant supposes that there are exactly *three* forms of possible syllogism, what he terms the categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive ones, and which can be distinguished according to the logical forms of the general rule – the "major" premise – in each case. In each case of the syllogistic inference, therefore, the successful drawing of the inference amounts to the success of the power of judgment in achieving a form of explanatory unity and applying this to the particular case at hand.[10]

This function of the power of judgment in the syllogisms inevitably gives rise, however, to a kind of hyperbolic employment or presumption of possible employment, founded in reason's desire to simplify under the *least* number of possible principles overall. According at the three types of syllogistic inference are distinguished, there are also, then, three distinctive sources of illusion, the three that give rise, exactly, to the dialectical illusions of the actual givenness of soul, world, and God.[11] All three are forms of the derivation or assumption of an absolute unity, where this assumption is not justified by anything on the side of the actually known or even knowable phenomena, but by "sophistical" inferences which result only from reason's insistence on the necessity reality or actual existence of a distinctive form of unity as a dialectical opposite to a form of disunity. Thus the three transcendental ideas are given *only* as problems for reason to address itself to in its continual activities of synthesis, rather than as substantial realities somehow given in themselves.[12]

What is most important, in the present perspective, about this "derivation" of transcendental illusion from the forms of reason's own distinctive activity is not the specific way these forms are arrived at, but the larger suggestion of a fundamental source of illusion in reason's own

structure, and in the constitutive connection of this with the *ideology* that is thus recognizable as the outcome of this inherent tendency of reason to recognize unities and identities in general. These unities are recognizable, for Kant, as resulting from a *hyperbolic* application of reason's attempt to discover unities, outside the empirical domain in which that attempt could alone yield genuine knowledge. Our tendency, indeed, to suppose a possible intuitive support for each of these ideas is indeed, for Kant, the tendency that is most directly responsible for the liability of our intellects to *fanaticism*, a disorder Kant finds not only in his contemporaries but thinks is characteristic of Spinoza's One as well.[13] The terms of critique we find here will be important – most of all to diagnosing the deeper sources of some of the ambivalence that is evident, in view of the uncertain combination of the appeal to orientation and the dialectical critique of the Ideas, in Kant's appeals to formal unity and unification. Yet for all this, despite his doubts about the possibility of every having an intuition of the objects of the ideas, Kant never officially doubts the internal *consistency* of the unities that the Ideas are, themselves. Criticizing the unities that these would be if they were actual intuitions or objects of intuition, he nevertheless does not criticize the form of consistency in which reason tries, necessarily fruitlessly, to determine them; and as we have seen above, he indeed requires just this form of consistency, even without any possible content, to determine the direction in which thought as well as rational action are, for him, *necessarily* directed, whatever empirical direction they actually take.

If we combine the two "halves" of Kant's approach to the One as formal unity, then, we may say that the approach points to the basic demand for unity implicit in the idea of a general rational capacity of judgment -- in the standing form of the presupposition or assumption of a power of thought with respect to the logical space of the totality of *thinkable* contents – *and also* gestures toward the possible reflexive use of reason in developing a deep-seated internal critique of just this demand. In this way, Kant points to (without, however, grasping in its more basic logical or metalogical form) the basic ambiguity in the idea of general rational capacity of judgment itself: namely, that of its essential directedness toward a *totality* of possible contents of thought which it must *simultaneously* think or assume to be *consistent* (and self-consistent) overall. These two commitments – to totality and consistency – are combined in Kant's appeal to the directedness of judgment, and together provide the essential structure by which he can also appeal to also appeal to the problematic givenness of the ideas of reason in their antinomical and transcendental-illusory forms. But the two commtiments are in irreducible tension with each other, and the idea of unity that underlies that of a unitary faculty of judgment oriented to (even a possible) form of consistency in the law does not survive the attainment of a clear metalogical understanding of this tension. And it is here that the linguistic

setting of the problem which we may rather associate with the twentieth century suffices to displace the critical problematic, evince the deeper logical form of the underlying ambiguity, and thus displace the problem of the form or forms of possible orientation of life that it produces onto a different and transformed plane.

II

As we have seen, Kant's critical conception of orientation in thinking produces, from its guiding conception of the rational faculty of judgment as a power of determining the relationship of the particular case to the rule, a conception of the relationship of thought to unity and contradiction that is in a certain sense ambiguous. In its inherent drive to determine the causes of things or to move toward their more unitary conditions, reason would be threatened with antinomy if this drive were able to proceed to the point of the absoluteness it demands, and it is for this reason that the critical project of reflexive reason must, in its limitative or criteriological modality, move to limit reason's pretentions to that which can be provided with a sensible intuition. But at the same time, both the speculative and, especially, the practical interest of reason permits the *orientation* of thought in the general space of the generality of the intelligible. In fact, this orientation is even demanded, as we have seen, by what Kant understands as the empty form of any possible reasoning about specifics, as well as any possible conception of freedom: that is, by the empty reflexive form of the (consistent) law itself.

In this section, I pose the question how this conception of critical orientation, and accordingly of the project of rational thought in relation to life and practice, is transformed in the context of an understanding of structural reason for which the necessarily *linguistic form* of reasoning is fully recognizable and brought to bear on these problems. This will be a way of asking what sense can be made of the Kantian idea of orientation "of thought" under the condition of a clear-sighted appreciation of the essential materiality of language: of the facts, for example, that language is learned, understood and spoken by essentially finite animals; that it is the necessarily public medium of intersubjective communication and hence of any collective institution or continuity of practice; that in its completeness it neither benefits from, nor essentially allows, any coherent position of a meaningful "outside" from which it would be possible to comment on its forms or structures without already standing within the very field of semantic meaningfulness it defines. Such an understanding is one which we may reasonably see, I would suggest, contemporary philosophy as inheriting from the twentieth century, where it is centrally marked in such diverse projects as those of analytic philosophy, structuralism, and psychoanalysis.[14] Accordingly, I will take it in the following (without further argument) that any contemporary understanding of thought or the human

power of it, in its relation to life, that would inherit these discoveries must be articulated in the form of the understanding that this insight into the materiality of language that we are today provided.

We can begin to gain a sense of what kind of difference this makes for the problem of the critical orientation of thought by considering how the project of Kantian critique is both inherited and structurally transformed in the practice of the transformative "critique of language" proposed by Wittgenstein in the opening pages of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.[15]

> This book treats philosophical problems and shows – I believe – that the posing of these problems rests on misunderstanding the logic of our language. One can sum up the whole sense of the book somewhat in these words: What allows itself to be said at all, allows itself to be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, one must keep silent.
>
> Therefore the book will draw a limit to thinking – or rather, not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to draw a limit to thinking we would have to able to think both sides of this limit (and thus we would have to be able to think what does not allow itself to be thought).
>
> The limit will therefore only be able to be drawn in language, and what lies beyond the limit will be simply nonsense.[16]

Like Kant's, Wittgenstein's project is essentially a critical one: it is a project of the drawing of a boundary and of the critical judgment of the sources and problems of our nearly ubiquitous inclinations and most pervasive institutions, marked in the most everyday projects and standing assumptions of our lives, to substitute illusion for clarity, or to engage and live the fantasy of the hyperbolic power and meaning of a transcendence that would go beyond the structures and relations of a shared life itself. Unlike Kant's project, however, Wittgenstein's is explicitly and centrally grounded in formal reflection on the forms of linguistic significance itself – the general and constitutive forms of the very possibilities of linguistic meaning. From the perspective of this methodology, thought itself is essentially understood as bearing linguistic structure (a "thought" [Gedanke] is a logical picture of facts (3); a sentence is that in which a thought finds an expression that is perceived by the senses (3.1); this perceptible sign is the projection of a possible situation, and the way it is projected is to think of the proposition's *sense* (3.11)). These claims express, at the same time, the sufficient condition under which *logic* can appear, not as a power of thought or of the representational thinking of a subject, but as the universal form of the world which must be shared by language, if language as the general medium of the expression of possibilities should itself be so much as possible.

This already makes a decisive difference in the form of the critical project itself, insofar as it is understandable as a project of limit-drawing at all. Here, the immanent form of reflection on linguistic sense is already sufficient to distinguish the critical project from any reflection on the possibilities of *knowledge*: here, it cannot be the claims of knowledge that are limited or delimited with respect to some further domain of content, thinkable in itself but not available to positive knowledge. As expressed in the preface, the delimitative project thus does *not* operate as a way of "ruling in" certain kinds of contents, and ruling out others: rather, the project is to delimit *from within* the space of possible propositions by clarifying their form, and what lies "on the other side" will *not* be thoughts that go beyond the possibility of our knowledge or empirical verification, but rather *no* thought at all. Here, then, the critical problem of delimitation is, instead of being primarily one for our knowledge of objects or of unities, rather about (in Strawson's memorable phrase) the bounds of sense. We should note, and appreciate methodologically, the difference that this makes. The delimitative project here is not - decisively not - a matter of demonstrating that "as soon as thought draws a limit, it is already beyond it". Rather, what Wittgenstein says (and bears out in the analysis itself) is that there is *no* way for "thought" to be beyond the relevant boundary, because there is just nothing "there" to think. The form of critique does not, then, witness a "boundlessness" of thought with respect to its possible objects, but rather an *internal* boundedness of thought that – like the "boundedness" of our visual fields (as in Wittgenstein's own example) would not define a boundary that is itself visible, either from "within" or from "without".[17]

So the *first* decisive difference that is made by the entry of language into the critical problematic is that the problematic of reflection on the boundaries of knowledge is transformed into a reflectively logico-linguistic problematic of the constitution and limits of sense. This means that the question, or problem, of thought's access to a "beyond" – for example in the Kantian form of the problem of thought's access to something or anything "beyond the sensory" – is rendered in a certain way empty; or at any rate that *that* question – i.e., the question of the supersensible -- provides *no help* for any possible question of the orientation or directedness of thought in relation to the things and circumstances of the world.

Similarly, and *secondly*, the critical problematic is thereby shifted away from the problem of the relationship of what Kant supposes to be the distinct subjective *faculties* of the sensibility and the understanding under the overarching heading of reason, and toward the critical investigation of the *unitary* form of logic that underlies language and the world itself. As a result, the relevant critical problematic of the orientation of thought is no longer a problem about the *subject's* activity or comportment in thinking, and the whole problematic is shifted decisively

away from that of (what Kant supposes to be) the (putatively necessary) imposition of "merely subjective" conditions or forms of unity onto the field of its possible scope. Thus we can no longer understand the critical problematic as one fundamentally about some putative deficiency in our nature or powers of knowledge or essentially finitude residing in the constraints of our sensible, "animal" condition and marked by the passivity of sensory reception we share with non-human animals, as against (as it is supposed), a different and more "spontaneous" power of thought belonging only to us.[18]

But if the critical problematic can then no longer be put in terms of any kind of finite limitation supposed to inhere in the conflict in our powers of knowledge, as potentially conflicted between our animal and rational natures, then it is *also* no longer coherent to think this problematic in the form of any kind of problem situated *between* the "perspectives" supposed to be situated by each of them, or to situate it in the place of (what is supposed to be) a "parallax" gap or mismatch between them. Instead, the form of the critical problematic is now evidently that of a problem internal to the constitution of the totality of the thinkable as the totality of what can be expressed by language itself, and it is now possible to pose the main critical problem as that about the *forms in which* reflexive thought proposes to think to itself this totality under determinate forms of unity.

In fact, this problem of unity is a general issue, not limited to Kant. It traces back to the underlying ambiguities and (more importantly) ultimate incoherences of the idea of a *dunamis meta logou*, which underlies thinking in the Western tradition, in various forms, about the soul or subject and its capacities for rationally structured thought, from Aristotle on.[19] Instead, it will be necessary and unavoidable, I believe, to understand the actual capacities of any real subject or agent of rational thinking in the terms provided by a constitutive and internal reflection on the logical and metalogical formal structure of deductive and inductive inference, including the constitutive problems and paradoxes which a mature formalism evinces from its own internal reflection. It is of course implied in this as well that the relevant structure is not to be determined by self-consciousness in the medium of its own languageless reflection, but only by means of a symbolic reflection of symbolic structures back into themselves, of a form characteristic of what is called "metalogical" or "metaformal" reflection.

But if not in the medium of self-consciousness or the form of a "subject's" unproblematic access to its own constitutive form of unity in apperception, or if not thought as a matter of the subject's given capacities to reason in accord with the structure of a *logos* already granted from outside, how are we to think the structural and logical form and limits of the field of linguistic articulation and expression itself? Here, I think, the appreciation of the materiality of language points to a *third* and

perhaps most decisive consequence, marked in any possible reflexive thinking of the constitutive structure of language in its actual institution and practice. This third consequence follows, most directly, from the recognition, already central in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and marked in his later work as well, that *there is no outside* to language, no metalanguage position from which it would be meaningfully possible to "get outside" language to bear witness on or pass judgment on its limits or possibilities, and hence that any conception of the act or moment of the constitution or institution of language, as well as any systematic reflection on its structure, must be conceived as "taking place" within the field of linguistic meaning and meaningfulness itself. For a conception at home with the material character of language, there is thus no "linguistic subject" that is not itself, insofar as it is master of language or its possibilities, also deeply and wholly subject to those possibilities. And similarly, there is no institution or constitution of language that is not already involved in a "fundamental" paradox of origin at the point of its being "taken up" into language itself. But this problem of origin or uptake is, at the same time and at by means of the same structure, the problem of the identification or definition of the essential form of (what is supposed by the tradition to be) the "rational animal" – the animal possessed, as a matter of the nature of its soul, mind, or consciousness, of the power of language and its accordant power and privilege; and of the purported delimitation of this animal from all that is without reason, "concepts," or language in general.

All of this is to say, in Lacan's terms, that it is to the character of the *signifier* in relation to what we imagine as the totality of its field that we must trace whatever origin and structure of unity we find to characterize the activity or comportment of thinking in relation to life.[20] And at the same time, and just as essentially, that the structure of this comportment is thinkable only as an outcome of a formal/structural reflection on this character of the signifier, as it appears and manifests within the structural (quasi-)totality of language, that separates it completely from the phenomena of its signifying or meaning effects, and considers it purely in the ("material") form of the structural dynamics and properly formal structures of paradox and impasse that it introduces there. It is from the position of such a recognition that, indeed, Lacan writes in seminar XX, in close connection with the axiom that "there is no metalanguage," that "the real can be inscribed only on the basis of an impasse of formalization," alluding there to the irreducibility of the signification of the psychoanalytic object-small-a by means of the mathematical formalization of the letter: a formalization that will be useful to analysis, he says, by way of "centering the symbolic" in order to retain a "contiguous truth."[21]

Such a recognition of the essentiality of the structure of the signifier is, for Lacan, just another expression of the insight of Freud in his discovery of the unconscious and of the consequences of its being structured like a language; and it is subsequently, for psychoanalysis,

unavoidable that any analysis of (what is called) thinking or its powers be situated within this structure.[22] This does not mean, of course, that Lacan does not discuss thinking subjects or their subjectivity, but rather that any possible analytic treatment or investigation of a "subject"'s knowledge and self-understanding must be conducted from the standpoint, not of what are supposed to be its own powers or faculties, but its positional *location* within the symbolic field of language itself. Here, it is in particular the symbolic and structural position of any possible articulation of oneself in relation to the totality of structure – what Lacan calls the "position of enunciation" – that situates in a decisive way any positive account we can give of the activity or power of thinking in relation to the real that it encounters as symbolic impasse. The "constitutive" paradox that must then henceforth accompany any reasonable discussion of the structure, overall unity, or orientation of thought, is, then, the positional paradox of a position from which the totality of language or of the symbolic as such is available, but which is itself located, as a matter of its definition or self-definition, within the field of meaningful language itself. It is here that the "constitutive" demand of reason for unity, or for the unification of the conditions of its own existence under a synthetic form of its rational (self-)understanding, must today be addressed. However, rather than implying the necessity of orientation *toward* the imagined unity of a first condition of beings, a subjective form of synthetic unification in the soul, a unitary world in general, or indeed *any form of unity posited or imagined as consistent*, this demand today takes the shape of a need to orient ourselves toward the undecidability of sense at its limits that is witnessed in the formally demonstrable *incapacity* of thought to determine being consistently as a whole.

III

In *The Politics of Logic* in 2012, drawing on Badiou's use of the terminology and general framework in *Being and Event* and *Briefings on Existence*, I proposed what I there called the "paradoxico-critical" orientation of thought as one among four positions which were intended, differentially, as expressing positional and substantive commitments characteristic of representative thinkers of historical and contemporary philosophy, especially with respect to problems of totality, limits, and the infinite. The positions that define the orientations in general were understood as differential positions about the relationship of *thinking* and *being*, and in particular of the possibility of thinking to capture being in its totality, and the two contemporary positions that I called "post-Cantorian" were seen as, decisively, drawing out the implications for the question of this possibility of the series of paradoxes and 'limitative' results that can be seen as historically coming to light through Cantor's development of set theory and its related developments of the formalization of language,

which prescribe the rigorous formalization of mathematical logic as the appropriate medium for figuring them. The paradoxico-critical orientation, in particular, drew on and developed the consequences of what can be taken as a formally demonstrable *dissymmetry* or mutual *non-adequacy* of thinking and being, once the problems of rational thinking in relation to totality and consistency are understood, as above, thoroughly and exclusively in the medium of formalizable symbolism. The most basic reason for this dissymmetry, from a paradoxico-critical perspective, is that the position from which any articulation or expression of thinking (and hence any approach of thinking to the real) is possible is, itself – necessarily and constitutively – situated *within* the field of signifiers toward which it thereby relates, and thereby necessarily encounters, and must traverse, the interconnected paradoxes of incompleteness and undecidability that formally characterize this field in its own reflexive totality.

Now, in the context of the problem of critical orientation and Kant's development of the problem of orientation as the problem of the consequences for the *practical* of the rational structure of thought, what does the paradoxico-critical orientation have to offer by way of distinctive implications for the critical approach of contemporary thought to the problems of collective life? As is probably already clear, the paradoxico-critical orientation witnesses, in its relationship to the totality of what can be said or thought, a basic structure of formal paradox that echoes the structure of the Kantian antinomies. As in the antinomies, we witness here a formally demonstrable structure of contradiction which depends on the extension of particular relations of conditioning to the consideration of the *totality* of conditions for a given conditioned, and it is at the (imagined or projected point) of this totality that the contradiction results. However, by contrast with the *setting and resolution* of the antinomies, in the original Kantian context, by means of transcendental idealism about the constitution of the "merely regulative" employment of the transcendental ideas of unity, paradoxico-criticism instead comprehends the underlying structure of contradiction as *general* and, as such, characteristic of the structural real of language and thought itself. Nevertheless, at the same time and for this very structural reason, the paradoxico-critical orientation inherits from the Kantian project its rigorous and radical critique of the imaginary forms of unity that constitute our ordinary sense of the univocal "meaning" of our lives and practices and also are understandable, as for Kant, on the level of the ideological and imaginary productions that they represent. From this position, we can comprehend the production of these unities as indeed the ideological productions that they are, up to and including the production of *any* overall consistency in general as an organizing principle or higher value of life, meaning, or presumed truth.[23]

In terms suggested by the *Politics of Logic*, already, this means that thinking and being are not the same: that there is no position from

which thinking can purport to determine without contradiction the totality of beings, or that one can any longer see the power of human thinking in relation to an (assumed or imagined) totality of all that is thinkable, or its historical development or progress as the progress toward such an (actually imagined or fantasized) totality. It is in this way that the paradoxico-critical orientation (along with (what I called) the "generic" orientation characteristic of the project of Badiou and the mathematical ontologies of Lautman and Gödel) comprehends the implications of the irreducible tension introduced to linguistic-symbolic thought by its twentieth-century formalization, and in particular the incompatibility or duality between *totality* and *consistency* that is thereby introduced into the question of thought's orientation toward the real of being in itself.[24] In so comprehending the overall incompatibility of totality with consistency, these two orientations differ from (what I treated there as) the two "pre-Cantorian" orientations (of ontotheology or of criteriology/constructivism) in recognizing that it is impossible today to think that thinking and being are the same in the sense that that thinking can have access to everything – all that is the case as well as all that is not, but could be – without running into *fundamental* contradictions or aporias about its own position in doing that.

Thus, the divide between the pre-Cantorian and post-Cantorian positions also draws the distinction between positions that maintain on a fundamental level the sameness of thinking and being (including those from Parmenides and Aristotle and then up through the early moderns and Spinoza), and those that reject it on formally motivated grounds. From this perspective, Kant is also certainly someone who thinks that thought in itself – i.e. reason – has to be both total and consistent with respect to the totality of the thinkable, and this is why his own orientation – the "criteriological" one – remains pre-Cantorian. But as we have seen, the Kantian critical problematic nevertheless introduces a kind of gap or caesura here by letting us think that there is a problem about the completeness of our knowledge, given the finitude of our condition, and also showing how we can see certain kinds of figures of complete knowledge (in particular the transcendental ideas of God, world, and soul) as ideological illusions in those terms. The paradoxico-critical orientation then, distinctively, inherits and develops this sense of ideology critique in the displaced context which is produced by a thoroughgoing understanding of the linguistic form of thought, and in this way produces a critical and decisive displacement of the "metaphysical" subject of thought with its assumed power of self-conscious judgment. Alongside that, we also seem to have the formal basis for a critique of the power of the self-determining agent of freedom, or indeed of "ethics" in the sense in which it imagines such an agent or subject to be the center of relevant ethical questions. It gives us the critical position from which we can see the construction of such an imagined subject or subject position

as basically ideological, and even (as with Althusser) how the ideology of subjectivity is determined out of a positional misrecognition on the level of the symbolic which creates a certain kind of fantasy of one's relation to the (fantasized) totality of relations of production.

At the same time, the various phenomena of undecidability that emerge from the formal consideration of the positional paradox of language already thereby begin to evince the formal determinants of a life that is no longer committed to the privilege of the possessor of what is traditionally imagined as the power of thought, and no longer thereby capable of submitting the totality of beings to the assumption of this comprehensive power. In this way, paradoxico-criticism (as I already pointed out in *The Politics of Logic,* and further developed along the lines of some of its temporal and aletheiological implications in *The Logic of* Being) witnesses to the "possibility" of a contemporary reflective awareness of the undecidability of the senses of lives and, accordingly, to the ultimate *incapacity* of thought to master beings in the totality of their becoming by means of its (consistent) comprehension of this totality. As is borne out by the formal and metaformal results, and witnessed in the paradoxico-critical orientation, there is no position from which and no procedure according to which the totality of senses could be rendered consistently decidable, even with respect to the non-contradictory extensional decision of the truth-values of sentences themselves. Even first-order logical consequence is, according to a decisive and radically important result reached near-simultaneously by Church and Turing and closely related to Godel's "incompleteness" results, demonstrably undecidable. Accordingly, it is here that there comes into view the possibility of a life that is no longer determined out of the presumed or assumed privilege of the possession of such a univocal power of decision.

Such a life, no longer determined by the power of the possession of reason, the power of judgment in general or as such, or the guardianship of the law or principle of noncontradiction, is no longer a life that is in any *logically* important way determined or determinable as "human" at all. In this way, the paradoxico-critical orientation already amounts to a deeply seated and lived critique, on the level of the direction and constitution of the activities and interests of a life, of the attempt to draw a constitutive distinction between the "human" and the "non-human", and hence of the distinctive violence of the human against the totality of non-human beings and lives, which today pervades the world. It is in this way, I think, that the paradoxico-critical orientation can operate today – perhaps uniquely – to formulate terms and practical schemas for a radical critique of anthropogenic violence, and so to begin to determine an appropriate response of critical thinking to this violence today.

This invites the question, however, of the relationship of paradoxico-criticism to other contemporary projects of thought about ideology and its foundations, most of all where they intersect with and offer terms for

the understanding of the largest determinants of ideologically guided practice and habitual forms of life today. For decades, one of the most prominent and forceful of these projects has been the Lacanian-Hegelian one of Slavoj Žižek, and so I wish to consider, briefly and in closing, the relationship of the paradoxico-critical orientation of thought to that project and to the terms of application of reflective thought about totality, consistency, and ideology that it offers. Here it is also perhaps relevant to say something more general, at least briefly, about the relationship of paradoxico-criticism to at least some of the forms of Hegelianism or purported application of Hegel's thought to the prevailing forms and problems of contemporary social organization and politics. My aim here is not to contribute to the "Kant to Hegel" genre of historiography, and I will not engage in detail with an interpretation of Hegel or with the true significance of the dialectic. But it will perhaps be possible nevertheless to discern here some aspects of the kind of difference that is made to the problem of the orientation of critical thought today by the specific formal consequences that, I have argued, follow from the thoroughgoing recognition of the essentially structuring role played by language and the symbolic in anything recognizable in contemporary terms as the real process of thought itself.

In the introductory chapter of his 2020 *Hegel in a Wired Brain*, Slavoj Žižek discusses paradoxico-criticism, as presented in *The Politics of Logic*, and responds to some claims I made there about the form of its applicability to contemporary geopolitical problems and relationship to other contemporary positions. The heading of the discussion overall asks whether it is *possible* to be a Hegelian today, and one of Žižek's overall aims is to defend this possibility over against (what he supposes to be) the paradoxico-critic's rejection of it. For Žižek in particular, as is made clear in the book, the necessary stake of a defense of Hegelianism today is the possibility of seeing Hegel's thought as standing for "a radical opening toward the future": we should see, in particular in the way that Hegel teaches us to understand the constitutive structure of inconsistency and its relationship to the constitution of any One, the radical possibility of comprehending our own, twenty-first century situation in thought, and thus comprehending within it the real possibilities or promises of a future to be realized. In this respect, Žižek holds that "Hegel's outline of an inconsistent totality is the ultimate stand of thinking, and we should also not be afraid to apply to it Hegel's [own] claim that philosophy can only paint "grey on grey," that it can only grasp the notional truth of an epoch when this epoch is approaching its end."[25]

From the beginning of his discussion, Žižek expresses on behalf of the Hegelian position he sets out to defend a high degree of agreement, on method and detail, with the organizing principles of paradoxico-criticism. As paradoxico-criticism recognizes clearly, we necessarily today live and orient our lives, Žižek says, within the "Cantor-Goedel universe," where the

recognition of the unavoidability of paradox and constitutive undecidability which compels us on wholly rational grounds (Žižek says) forever to leave behind the "notion of a consistent view of (all of) reality."[26] Žižek appears to endorse, as well, the relative advantages of paradoxico-criticism over what I called, in *Politics of Logic,* the "generic" orientation, as exemplified most of all by the project of Alain Badiou. By contrast with Badiou's theorization of the order of Being in itself as essentially characterized by an overall consistency, to be interrupted only by the "miraculous intrusion" of the Event, paradoxico-criticism gives us the logical resources to think, along with Hegel, that the "order of Being" is "constitutively pulverized and disturbed from within," "branded by a basic impossibility," or subject to an internal "disruptive force of non-being" at its heart, a force that Žižek further compares to Freud's death drive.[27]

So much, so good for the paradoxico-critic's fundamental agreement with (and even apparently endorsement of) the Hegelian position, according to Žižek. However, it is at this point that, according to Žižek, Hegel takes a "step further" from the paradoxico-critical position.[28] For the rigorous Hegelian, not only is being overall inconsistent or rent with fundamental paradox, but fundamental inconsistency and antagonism basically and fundamentally affects the (self-)identity of any (identifiable) thing at all.[29] In this sense, for Hegel: "identity, the unity of the One, is a form of self-differentiation. Identity is difference brought to the extreme of self-relating."[30] For Žižek, this way in which differentiation or even antagonism is "already" involved in the identity of any individual thing also requires that the Hegelian position, by contrast with the paradoxico-critical one, is already such as to include within the positivity of its own assertions about the constitution and identity of things the disruptive undertow that contests these claims from within: in this sense, for Hegel, "power is its own transgression, grounded in violations of its own founding principles."[31] It follows from this, according to Žižek, that "Hegel is *not* a critical thinker;" by contrast with the conception of the paradoxico-critic, the "Hegelian totality is paradoxical, inconsistent, but not 'critical' in the sense of resisting the power center; it is not caught in the eternal struggle to undermine or displace the power center, in search of cracks and 'undecidable' excesses that disturb and deconstruct the power edifice."[32] Instead of any such spirit or practice of critical pursuit of the undecidable, according to Žižek, Hegel's stance is (paradoxically or ironically) that of an ambivalent or indeed actually recurrently tragic "reconciliation" that is not the realization of a teleological goal of history but rather the repeatedly *realized* "fact" which "confronts us with the unexpected bitter truth of the actualized ideal."[33] According to Žižek, it is in this sense, for instance, that "every large human project goes wrong and only in this way attests to its truth:" in this sense, for example, "The French Revolution wanted universal freedom and climaxed in terror," and "Communism wanted global emancipation and gave birth to Stalinist terror…" (p. 10). The same

lesson is the one we should draw, Žižek suggests, for the contemporary situation of global politics, and the prospects today for a genuine "optimism" and a real possibility of finding "truth" in the "way things" repeatedly "go wrong":

> The Hegelian lesson with regard to the attempt to change the world is thus desperately optimistic: such attempts never reach their goal, but through their repeated failure a new form of being can arise. Yes, Chavismo failed in Venezuela, Syriza failed in Greece, Chinese Communism cannot be our ideal, but all these processes do contribute to the subterranean weaving of the Spirit which might give birth to unpredictable new visions ... or horrors.[34]

In this way, Žižek finds in the introduction of the logical structure of essential paradox, and especially in what he supposes to be its implication for the Hegelian account of (self)-identity, the ground for a somewhat ambiguous (and avowedly *uncritical*) rhetoric of the contemporary possibilities of historical development and transformation. Such possibilities as these are for contemporary thought and practice are further, whatever the extent or scale of the failures and disasters relevantly evident in their actual realization or in the perception of their actual "truth," to be attributed ultimately (in classical Hegelian fashion) to the hidden and "subterranean" historical process of the Absolute in the progressively realized "new forms of being" that it alone is ultimately responsible for bringing about.

To develop the rhetoric of this realization, as Žižek does, as applicable to the largest and most pressing problems posed by the events and circumstances of contemporary sociopolitical life is to place confidence (as I believe Žižek also does) in the power of a unitary thinking of being to make sense of these events and circumstances. I will not comment on the actual logical rigor of this argumentation in relation to the metaphysical or logical problem of the constitution or nature of identity itself, but it is nevertheless possible, I think, to comment briefly from the paradoxico-critical position that have developed here on the logical form and thus the practical and really determining commitment of the "Hegelian" position on the relationship of this constitution and the power of thought that is thereby maintained. Put broadly and in a summary formulation, I believe this commitment might be described as a kind of contemporary insistence on the power of abstract, self-conscious thought to determine comprehensively the true sense of identities and possibilities, up to and including the very sense of what is here the "total" (even if never actually "totalized") process of historical development itself.

From the perspective of the (post-linguistic turn) concerns that, I have argued here, by contrast essentially articulate the relevance of any actually available critical position on the large-scale global

determinants of collective thought and action with relation to the being and lives of the earth today, the varieties of the Hegelian position on offer in contemporary philosophical discussion are largely perceptible as themselves continued demands for the extraction of sense from these circumstances and lives in the unitary form of a presumed neutral "intelligibility". This is, of course, the "intelligibility" that, for the longstanding tradition, uniquely characterizes *human* thought (as distinct from the activities or lives of non-humans) and we can, in fact, witness the common form of this demand in several of the recent prominent projects of the overall interpretation of Hegel's thought: it is evident, for instance, in the forms and projects that interpret Hegel's project as that of the (internal) "satisfactions" of self-conscious thought in its progressive self-realization;[35] in the interpretation of Hegel's logic as the project of a broad and comprehensive theorization of the historically conditioned norms underlying the situated achievement of mutual intelligibility;[36] or in the reading of the *Phenomenology* as developing the necessarily social form of a "spirit of trust" whose possibility is grounded in the reciprocal capacities for recognition thought to be possessed alone by beings capable of "sapience" rather than mere "sentience."[37]

From this perspective and recognizing the plausibility of all of these recent interpretations of Hegel, it is hardly surprising to learn that the project of a philosopher who, perhaps more than any other in the tradition, commits himself to the relentless process of the domination and destruction of the "natural" by means of the power and resources of human thought in the assumed medium of a unitary constitutive (even if historically developing and socially collective) subjectivity and understanding does not provide grounds for a genuinely and helpfully *critical* response to the global projects of the extraction of intelligibility from life or provide helpful terms for beginning to think about a form of life no longer subject to this extraction.[38] But reflection on the global form and overall logical determinants of this process nevertheless gives, at least, a sharpened sense of the space of the problems here, and points to other ways for them to be addressed.

What, then, about the idea of inconsistent totality, which Žižek sees as common to the ultimate consequences of Hegel's position and the framework of paradoxico-criticism, and which he also positions as "the ultimate stand of thinking" today? Of course, any contemporary invocation or treatment of Hegel or his project will inevitably accord a prominent place to (what Hegel calls) contradiction in its development of the dialectic as both the intrinsic form of progressive thinking and the real logic of historical development. But it is to be asked, from the perspective we have developed here, whether the kinds of "contradiction" that Hegel countenances and interprets in his descriptions of the historical development of thinking are really the same as that which (as I have argued) witnesses the ultimate dissymmetry or non-identity of thinking

and being for the paradoxico-critic. As we saw above, this mutual dissymmetry results, in the context of the post-Cantorian orientations of thought, ultimately from the formal dynamics of the symbolic and from the formally positional paradox of the placement of any possible position of enunciation within the specific effects of the signifier and the (imaginary or virtual) totality of the symbolic itself, something of which (whatever the extent of his development of ideas of totality as expressive, "organic" wholeness), Hegel himself has barely any idea. [39] To whatever degree Hegel develops a logic of inconsistency at the level of various constituted totalities, his logic nevertheless does not suffice to evince the basic disjunction or duality of totality and consistency which renders unavoidable what is (in terms of the framework of the four orientations) the pre-Cantorian standing assumption of the sameness of thinking and being. In fact this is (again) unsurprising for the philosopher who programmatically announces this sameness in multiple characteristic formulas: for example, with his declaration of the identity of the real/actual with the rational and, indeed, with his development of the dialectic of their identity as the project of "thinking the Absolute not only as substance but also as subject".

In the actually practical matter of the concrete "handling of contradiction" to which this leads, moreover, the actual recommendations of paradoxico-criticism and of Žižek's Hegelian position are again starkly different. Where, as we have seen, the implications of the kind of necessary inconsistency of the (ideological) totality that the paradoxico-critical orientation witness go all the way to the *necessarily* and formal undecidable of the senses of lives, the Hegelian contradiction is (notoriously) always one that is to be overcome, sublated, or periodized in the sense of a progressively reconciling appreciation of a larger or broader context of thought's progressive and reflexive consideration of itself. Even if this reconciliation does not ever finally attain a "higher" or more inclusive reality wholly purged of contradiction, it is nevertheless the index of the progress of thought in relation to the contingency of situations and events, and thus gives, in a Hegelian context, the thinkable dialectic its specifically historical-progressivist sense. For the paradoxico-critic, by contrast, the forms or actualizations of an actually non-contradictory unity of thought and being are not to be found or hoped for; what is recommended on the level of the actual conduct of life is rather a lived practice of the undecidability of lives and beings in their becoming. This recommendation is the actual core of the accusation standardly lodged against the paradoxico-critic (in his discussion, Žižek, in particular, makes it against Derrida) that paradoxico-cirticism must always "defer", that it cannot move to a real solution, that the thought of the undecidable simply postpones decision, and is thereby (fatally) ineffective. But in a context where the very terms and idea of what may with justice be called the traditional logic of the effectivity of thought are themselves radically

under critical question, the accusation of "ineffectivity" is not exactly (or rather, exactly not) to the point.[40]

Within this logic and project, indeed, I believe we may thus understand the recurrent capacity of thought successively to understand or comprehend the 'truth' of events as that which, in other words, allows history and its presumed temporality recurrently to dominate the "non-historical" in general. This domination is what goes by the name of effectivity, or actualization, in the tradition that Hegel represents and that Žižek replicates; and putting it in these terms at least may help to bring out the possibility of an alternative set of projects for critical thinking today. So in closing, I would like to note just one aspect of the way in which the position that Žižek finds recommended through this (purportedly Hegelian) development of the implications of paradox "beyond" that of the paradoxico-critical position does markedly differ from the position of orientation with respect to the contemporary problems of the global organization of life that, on behalf of paradoxico-criticism, I have tried to sketch here. To see this difference, it is sufficient to notice that, whatever disasters the Hegelian (Žižekian) position finds or purports to find in its analysis of historical causality and the repeated meaning of a realized but failed reconciliation, the Hegelian in Žižek's sense *nevertheless* evidently retains *one* central commitment: namely, to "learn" from these disasters some kind of lesson, or even to extract from them some revealing and helpful kind of "truth" relevant to our contemporary situation and the possibilities of anticipating or "producing" the radically "new".

What this commitment evidences is, I think, more than anything else a basic and somewhat unargued (and certainly, by Žižek's own admission, basically uncritical) commitment to an underlying *historicism*; in other words, to the pervasively Hegelian value or construction of (presumably Western) history as (whatever else it is) the necessary medium for any human development or radical global change. However, it would be easy to show that "history" thus understood as the history of society, culture or the economic or political forms of human organization and commerce, is itself obviously predicated on the ongoing suppression – as indeed is indicated by a fundamental movement of Hegel's thought – of all that is conceived as "natural" in opposition to the avowedly human development in thought of a distinctively historical self-consciousness of humanity itself. The Hegelian sense of history (as well as Žižek's gloss on it) is thus inseparable from a humanism whose other side can be seen, in critical terms, as nothing other than the pervasiveness throughout it of anthropogenic violence itself. This is, among other things, also the history of violence that we may rather read as produced, not from the abstracted self-conception of the human power of thought, but from the real relations of exploitation and domination among human beings and between human beings and non-human beings, communities, and lives.

I have tried to show, in the above, that the paradoxico-critical

position offers relevant terms with which, exactly, not only to criticize radically and structurally the constitution of this position of anthropogenic violence that is, in these terms, the very meaning of "history", but even, beyond this, to at least begin to imagine the fragile possibility of a global life that is purged of it. By contrast with the Hegelian/Žižekian position, then, for the real paradoxico-critic the tragedy of history is not a series of lessons to be learned from but – as for Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* – a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken. The prospect of this awakening or enlightenment is, similarly, not the reorganization or progressive or discontinuous dynamic of the rationalization or disaster of human relations of power and domination over each other or over the non-human world, but the radical claim of the emancipation of all sentient beings from the suffering to which the contemporary conditions of life consign them.

1 Lacan 1992, p. 11.
2 "That the unconscious is structured as a function of the symbolic ... that that which one seeks and finds again is the trace rather than the trail – one has to appreciate the great importance of all this in Freud's thought, if one is to understand the function of reality." (Lacan 1992, pp. 12-13). And on Bentham: "Bentham's effort is located in the dialectic of the relationship of language to the real so as to situate the good – pleasure in this case, which, as we will see, he articulates in a manner that is very different from Aristotle – on the side of the real." (Lacan 1992, p. 12)
3 For a trenchant consideration of an "ethics of the real" that brings Lacan into dialogue with Kant, see Zupančič 2000.
4 For a trenchant critique of this project of the extraction of intelligibility as a main project of Western metaphysics culminating in today's developments of AI, see Bensusan (2021), especially chapter 3.
5 Kant 1970, pp. 239-40.
6 Kant 1998 (A 132/B171). The sense of this capacity, and hence of the idea of orientation implied in its directedness toward the sensible, is of course subsequently complicated by the introduction, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, of the idea of "reflective" judgment, which (rather than placing particulars under general concepts taken as given) is held to be capable of supplying concepts *for* given particulars on reflective grounds. However, I do not think the complication introduces anything essentially new relative to the argument of "What is Orientation?," since this argument is already committed to the essential idea of a directedness of the faculty of judgment with respect to the (self-constituted) logical space of (all) *possible* grounds for judgment itself.
7 Kant 1970, p. 240.
8 Kant 1996, 5:114-5.115.
9 Kant (1998), A304/B360-61.
10 Kant (1998), A 304-5/B361.
11 Kant (1998), A 338-40/B396-98.
12 Kant (1998), A 327-328/B384-85.
13 As Allison usefully points out in Allsion (1980), p. 208, Kant in fact sees Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Spinozism as "three connected stages in the history of 'philosophical fanaticism'." See also Kant's late essay "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy" and *Reflexionen* 6050, "On Philosophical Exaltation."
14 If, as Alain Badiou argues in *The Century,* the twentieth century was about the projects of uncompromising formalization predicated on the passion of the real; we can say, in these terms, that for all of these projects, the necessary medium and material of this formalization is the materiality of language.
15 Cf. TLP 4.0031: "All philosophy is a 'critique of language'..."
16 TLP, preface (translation modified).
17 For "the boundlessness of thought", cf. McDowell (1992), chapter 1. On the form of the visual field as analogous to the form of linguistic sense, see TLP 5.633-5.6331.
18 As I have developed elsewhere, there is still, for the new critical problematic that Wittgenstein's concern with logical form and the syntax of language represents, a relevant form of essential finitude: but this is, instead of the finitude implicit in (what is supposed to be in the tradition developing from Aristotle) the constraints and spatiotemporal locatedness characteristic of our *sensory* "faculties", rather the finitude of *signification* already expressed by the young Wittgenstein in the 1914 *Notebooks* in connection with the question of the mathematical infinite: "Remember that the 'propositions about infinite numbers' are all represented by means of finite signs!" (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 10). See (Livingston 2010) for some development of this theme.
19 For the classical and inaugural theorization of the *dunamis meta logou*, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* book 9 (Θ), 1046a36ff.
20 Compare Lacan in Seminar XX: "We know of no other basis by which the One may have been introduced into the world if not by the signifier as such, that is, the signifier insofar as we learn to separate it from its meaning effects." (Lacan 1998, p. 50)
21 Lacan (1998), p. 93
22 "But biological metaphors cannot reassure us here – they reassure us here still less than elsewhere. If the unconscious is truly what I say it is, being structured like a language, it is at the level of language (langue) that we must investigate this One." (Lacan 1998, p. 67).
23 The paradoxico-critical orientation is, first and foremost, a *critical* orientation, and therefore *not* a metaphysical (or ontological) one. In particular, because its sole aim is to interrogate the constitution of consistency, in this sense, including the "ideological" construction or constitution of the (supposed) *consistent unity* of the "thinking subject," it is no part or aim of it to posit or positively *theorize* the One of totality (either as the totality of all that exists, or can exist, or all that is thinkable, etc.), even as a "paradoxical" one or one "rent by fundamental contradictions." And as it is not a metaphysics, it is also *(a fortiori*, and for the same reasons) not a *dialetheist* metaphysics either.

24 The relevant overall duality was first suggested to me, in these terms, by John Bova.
25 Žižek 2020, p. 11.
26 Žižek 2020, p. 3.
27 Žižek 2020, p. 7.
28 Žižek 2020, p. 9.
29 "For Hegel, the One of self-identity is not just always inconsistent, fractured, antagonistic, etc. – identity itself is the assertion of radical (self-)difference: to say that something is identical with itself means that is distinct from all its particular properties, that it cannot be reduced to them."
30 Žižek 2020, pp. 9-10.
31 Žižek 2020, p. 10.
32 Žižek 2020, p. 11.
33 Žižek 20201, p. 10.
34 Žižek 2020, p. 11.
35 Pippin (1989).
36 Zambrana (2015).
37 Brandom (2019).
38 "The 'I' is as it were the crucible and the fire which consumes the loose plurality of sense and reduces it to unity...The tendency of all man's endeavors is to understand the world, to appropriate and subdue it to himself: and to this end the positive reality of the world must be as it were crushed and pounded [*zerquetscht*], in other words, subdued." (*Encyclopedia Logic*, 69; quoted in Pippin (1989), p. 34.) (There are, of course, many other passages in Hegel that could equally well illustrate this theme).
39 Compare, again, Lacan from seminar XX: "And yet, compared to a philosophy that culminates in Hegel's discourse – a plenitude of contrasts dialecticized in the idea of an historical progression, which, it must be said, nothing substantiates for us – can't the formalization of mathematical logic, which is based only on writing (l'ecrit), serve us in the analytic process, in that what invisibly holds (retient) bodies is designated therein?" (Lacan 1998, p. 93)
40 There is a somewhat symptomatic point in Žižek's treatment of paradoxico-criticism in *Hegel in a Wired Brain* that illustrates this issue, as between the Hegelian and the paradoxico-critic, when Žižek writes that: "Although the paradoxico-critical approach brings out the inconsistencies that are constitutive of our identities, its critical stance commits it to the goal of overcoming these inconsistencies." In fact this is false: while, on the one hand, paradoxico-criticism, in its adumbration of the consequences of the metalogical duality between totality and consistency, is *not* committed to the radically distributive (and logically unmotivated) claim that "every identity" is somehow constitutively "inconsistent", it is also no part of the commitments of paradoxico-criticism to imagine or propose that the real contradictions involved in the constitution of (what are for it) the primarily *ideological* totalities of worlds and "communities" can, must, or even should be "overcome".

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Žižek, Lenin, and Colonialism

Vincent Loyd

Abstract: At first, Slavoj Žižek's provocative responses to the 2001 World Trade Center attack and the 2023 al-Aqsa Flood seem to parallel each other. Yet they were received quite differently. A closer examination reveals differences in Žižek's approach to these two political events, and these differences point to deeper conceptual and political questions. Does Žižek's thought have the resources to speak to questions of national self-determination? Turning to Lenin and Žižek's engagement with Lenin, as well as to Žižek's reflections on Ukraine and his earlier writings on Palestine, I suggest that Žižek is often dismissed too quickly from conversations about anti-colonial movements – yet Žižek has not taken up the full potential of his thought to address these issues.

Keywords: Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, nationalism, self-determination, Slavoj Žižek, Vladimir Lenin

Writing in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Slavoj Žižek diagnosed a "double blackmail" that follows from such events: "If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it, we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved."[1] But these two positions do not offer a true choice, Žižek asserts. They both are products of the same underlying logic, a moral logic, one which divides individuals into the innocent and the guilty. Such a moral logic relies on empty abstractions that do not point to the world but rather essentially confirm an ideological frame. After an event like the September 11 attacks, public discourse is pulled taut by that ideological frame. *You are with us or you are against us*, and whichever you choose, you will be fitted into and so reinforce that frame.

Having diagnosed the state of public discourse, Žižek's prescription, characteristically, was to attempt a short circuit. Instead of acceding to the choice between condemning and contextualizing the attacks, he suggests that doing both, condemning and contextualizing at once, will cause such a short circuit. Then, there will be an opening to rework the terms of public discourse in a way that stretches beyond the ideological frame. Specifically, Žižek proposes that we "accept the necessity of the fight against terrorism," but we toy with the meaning of "terrorism" "so that it will also include (some) American and other Western powers' acts."[2] If this move is successful, the fight against terrorism no longer refers to a fight against bin Laden but rather to a fight against those powerful figures around the world who exploit the powerless – in other words, the fight against terrorism becomes the fight against *both* bin Laden *and* Bush.

More than twenty years later, Žižek's response to the October 7, 2023 al-Aqsa Flood took precisely the same form. On October 13, 2023, Žižek began an article on the Hamas-led operation by writing

> The barbarism that Hamas has unleashed on Israel should be condemned unconditionally, with no 'ifs' or 'buts'. The massacres, rapes, and abductions of civilians from villages, kibbutzim, and a music festival was a pogrom, confirming that Hamas's true goal is to destroy the state of Israel and all Israelis. That said, the situation demands historical context – not as any kind of justification, but for the sake of clarity about the way forward.[3]

In other words, writing at another moment when public discourse was taut with the force of an ideological frame, Žižek refuses the choice to either condemn or contextualize. He does both. In familiar fashion, he goes on to assert, "Hamas and Israeli hardliners are two sides of the same coin."[4]

Much changed, politically and technologically, between 2001 and 2023. A quarter-century ago, Žižek's reflections were lapped up by young scholars and activists frustrated with the limits of public discourse, particularly the earnestness with which the "opposition" to the War on Terror presented itself. So-called progressives and left-liberals seemed like a loyal opposition, agreeing to the terms of debate set by the hegemon, unwilling to think the universal or the utopian. At the same time, insurgent social movements proclaimed "Another World Is Possible" as they mobilized against international financial institutions. Those protests ground to a near halt after the September 11 attacks, but the instincts that inspired them primed a generation to be receptive to novel discourses on the left such as that offered by Žižek. There was a strong desire to cleave left from liberal, there was a recognition that supposedly radical thinkers such as Jacques Derrida were ultimately liberals, there was enough historical distance from Communism to stoke renewed interest in it – just the right moment for the Slovenian philosopher to step onto the stage as a global public intellectual.[5]

In contrast, Žižek's writings and talks on Palestine in 2023 were quickly condemned by both liberals and leftists. In the intervening years, a cleavage between leftists and liberals had finally taken hold in the West, at least at the level of political identity (the question of political thought and practice is more ambiguous). At the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Žižek spoke less than two weeks after al-Aqsa Flood, the liberal audience heckled him for contextualizing (after condemning) – heckles which he used to illustrate the limits of liberal commitment to diversity and inclusion.[6] In opinion pieces and social media posts, leftists (many of whom had already soured on Žižek for other reasons) pounced on Žižek for his condemnation of Hamas's "barbarism" and allegedly genocidal intent.[7] The choose-both strategy that Žižek had employed effectively

previously now seemed to fail, with the contours and speed of public discourse altered.

But there is another story to tell about the difference between Žižek's interventions in 2001 and 2023. In the former, Žižek's attempt at a short circuit was immediately followed by an experimental reconfiguration of discourse, redefining "terrorist" in order to shift our attention to the struggle between the powerful and the powerless. In contrast, the option that Žižek describes as "utopian" in his reflections on al-Aqsa Flood, the alternative to the choice between Palestinian and Israeli "fundamentalists," is "peaceful co-existence."[8] Žižek's idea, it seems, is that the masses on both sides, and around the world, can unite in the "utopian" dream of "peaceful co-existence" and turn against the "fundamentalist" leaders on both sides. But is this really redefining the terms of the discourse? Is it not the case that the discourse (internationally and within Palestine/Israel) is configured around an opposition between nationalists and those who seek peaceful coexistence, in other words, between those who condemn and those who contextualize? This is one way of reading the reaction to Žižek's remarks at the Frankfurt Book Fair: it was transparent to the audience that he was on the side of those who contextualize, even as he tried to position himself as breaking open new discursive possibilities.

What is most interesting, in exploring Žižek's successful and failed interventions, is that the difference points to a deeper conceptual and political issue. The 2001 intervention had to do with empire and global capital; the 2023 intervention had to do with colonialism and self-determination. Do the same theoretical maneuvers that successfully address the former fail when confronting the latter?

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One of Žižek's political heroes, Vladimir Lenin, offered a remarkably subtle response to the question of national self-determination.[9] In the late nineteenth and twentieth century context in which Lenin was formed, this question was unavoidable, and it occasioned rigorous debates between leading figures in Marxism. (One of Lenin's key texts resulted from a debate with Rosa Luxemburg; Stalin would contribute to these debates as well. Of course, Fanon and others would pick up and reimagine them.) The geography and demographics of Europe and Russia both pressed Marxist theorists to reflect on self-determination – as did the existence of non-European colonies.

Lenin's reflections grow out of a struggle to define orthodoxy: to draw on authoritative texts, not only of Marx and Engels but of Party congresses, to apply their concepts to the empirical realities of the contemporary world, and to iteratively refine a political position through debate with others who hold similar commitments. Out of this process, Lenin presented a bedrock principle: every nation has the right to self-

determination. The subtlety comes in how this principle applies to the world, for Lenin concludes that just because a right exists, it need not be exercised, and it need not be a political priority. When a claim to self-determination is made, Marxists must carefully analyze the local history, economy, society, and politics to decide whether it warrants political support. Lenin makes the analogy: there is a right to free association, but that does not mean Marxists must support every association, and it may mean that they actively oppose some associations.

Beyond empirical analysis, what determines whether Marxists ought to support and prioritize a certain claim to self-determination? Marxists side with the working class, the proletariat. In many contexts where a nation is making a claim to self-determination, it is really the middle class, the bourgeoisie, that is leading – or using – the claim to further its self-interest at the expense of the working class. The Marxists' goal, famously, is to unite the workers of the world, that is, to unite the working class in each national context in order to overthrow the power of capital. It may be useful, in pursuing that goal, to support claims to national self-determination; in other cases, it may be more useful to ignore or oppose claims to national self-determination. This is where the empirical analysis comes in: the Marxist must understand the local landscape in which a claim to national self-determination arises in order to discern whether it will further or hinder the project of international proletarian revolution, the only sort of proletarian revolution that has a chance of success.

Lenin points out that, in approaching these questions, we must think about them not in the abstract, but through the eyes of a worker. Is it the case that, in the factory, working alongside colleagues from another national group, worker solidarity is growing – for example, in some areas of Russia? Might that worker solidarity diminish if the nations were separated into different political entities, with worker interests and affections redirected to their own nation-state, which may really mean, those interests and affections being captured by the bourgeoisie of their nation-state? Or, might it be the case – for example, in many non-European colonies – that the anti-colonial struggle is closely aligned with the anti-capitalist struggle, with colonial overlords representing, and in some cases precisely instantiating, the interests of capital?[10]

Here is the other subtle aspect of Lenin's account of national self-determination: Marxists must oppose ill-treatment of anyone because of their nationality, but Marxists must be wary of affirming any national culture. As Lenin writes, "Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight *for* any kind of national development, *for* 'national culture' in general? Of course not." In other words, Marxists should, say, call out the British worker for belittling their Irish brethren, but the Marxist should not prioritize celebrations of Irish culture. If the Marxist is successful at preventing ill-treatment of the Irish worker, the Irish worker's felt need for national self-determination will diminish, and their sense of solidarity with their British

brethren will increase. The Marxist, recall, continues to support the right of self-determination, but ultimately pursues worker unity; if worker unity can develop without exercising the right of self-determination, all the better. Celebrating Irish culture, say, could distort this process, blocking intuitions toward worker solidarity. Again, these determinations are complex and require careful attention to context: "The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within *definite* historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country ... that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch."

Beyond the right to self-determination and the imperative to worker solidarity, for Lenin most everything else is pragmatic, that is, matters of political judgment and practical wisdom rather than principle. The result is that Marxists may find themselves working side-by-side with liberals in pursuing national self-determination, for example, in colonial contexts. When that happens, Marxists must retain their own distinctive identity – Communist parties – within broader liberation movements. Further, Marxists must be particularly warry of alternative ideologies that seek to guide national liberation movements in the name of broader ideals while really concealing the interests of the wealthy and powerful: Lenin calls out "Pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc." (We could, of course, suggest that there are more complex ways of articulating Pan-Islamism with Marxism, as demonstrated by the Parti des Indigènes de la République in France.[11])

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In recent writings reflecting on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Žižek has embraced Lenin's ideas about national self-determination. In theory and, in the early years of the Soviet Union, in practice, Lenin held fast to the right to self-determination – in stark contrast to Tsarist Russian policy beforehand and Stalinist Soviet policy after. Indeed, in power, Lenin did more than oppose ill-treatment based on national origin. On Žižek's telling, Lenin "encouraged a revival of Ukrainian culture and language" which, coupled with Soviet social welfare programs, led to Ukrainian flourishing.[12] It was only in the 1930s that the tide turned, with Stalin centralizing power, decimating the Ukrainian leadership, and causing massive famine. Effectively, Stalin transformed an alliance of national worker parties into a colonial relationship. In Žižek's telling, Vladimir Putin is now aligning himself with Stalin (and the Tsarists) against the brief, multi-nationalist opening offered by Lenin. This allows Žižek to portray the Russia-Ukraine conflict as one of straightforward colonialism, with Putin denying the Ukrainians' right to self-determination. In the name of

"proletarian internationalism," Žižek asserts that the left should get on board with supporting Ukraine, getting over its qualms about aligning with the NATO military-industrial machine.[13]

Before al-Aqsa Flood, Žižek was comfortable using the framework of colonialism to approach Palestine.[14] For example:

> To really condemn Russia's colonialism, we should consider Ukraine alongside other neocolonial cases, like that of Israel and Palestine. It is true that Israel is not occupying the West Bank as the result of an invasion but after the 1967 war, which the Arab nations lost, and that its regime of military occupation has lasted for over half a century. But the fact that the large majority of West Bank Palestinians were born under occupation, without a clear prospect of gaining some kind of statehood, and forced to helplessly watch as their land gets gradually appropriated by Jewish settlers, makes their resistance more than understandable. But still, while our media are full of praise for Ukraine's 'heroic resistance', solidarity with those West Bank Palestinians who resist the expansion of illegal settlements is rare.[15]

In contrast, after al-Aqsa Flood, Žižek turned away from the colonial frame. Writing in December 2023, Žižek notes the increasing "genocidal rhetoric" of Israeli politicians, and he worries that the Israeli attacks are "giving Palestinians one choice: to accept Hamas as the only voice that is fighting for them." Žižek asserts, "Peace will only emerge when Palestinians are allowed to organise themselves as a strong independent political force, broadly democratic and rejecting all forms of religious fundamentalism."[16] Where before, Žižek presented Palestine and Ukraine in parallel, with qualifications, now is focus is on their dissimilarity. He writes, "In the case of the Palestinians and their Israeli neighbours, a compromise between the two peoples is the only way out, while Ukraine is a victim of brutal aggression and has the full right to persevere until victory."[17] In Lenin's terms, Žižek's claim might be something like: there is a right to Palestinian self-determination just as there is a right to Ukrainian self-determination, but, given the empirical texture of these contexts, Marxists (or leftists) ought to advocate for Ukrainian but not Palestinian self-determination. (This is, in fact, the opposite of Lenin's usual instinct – that in Europe, co-existence is generally the better goal whereas beyond Europe, because of economic and political conditions, national self-determination is more often the better goal.)

But what really seems to be bothering Žižek here is something else. Why? Because it seems unlikely that either the empirical texture of Palestine/Israel changed in a way that would warrant a different framework for analysis over the course of a few months, from just before al-Aqsa Flood to just after. And Žižek gives no indication that the event itself pushed him to revise his previous analysis or notice different facts

about the situation. What seems to have changed, rather, is the role of Palestine in public discourse; specifically, in leftist discourse.

Žižek came to prominence by questioning left-liberal orthodoxies, the political views that accompanied "postmodern" philosophy and were dependent on the ideology of the powerful even as they purported to challenge those orthodoxies. After al-Aqsa Flood, Palestine became a symbol of left-liberal orthodoxy: in certain spaces, "Zionist" became almost synonymous with "fascist," keffiyehs necessarily accompanied covid masks and rainbow flags, and every article started or ended with lines from Darwish. The political terrain had shifted in ways that put pressure on Žižek's rhetorical repertoire. What had once been left-liberal was now explicitly and enthusiastically left-not-liberal, often socialist, or Marxist, or even communist.[18] The effect of Žižek's discursive maneuvering was no longer to cleave left from liberal but to indict the left – even as the aim may have remained constant, for it seems likely that, in Žižek's view, the blossoming left is still infected by liberal tendencies, they just manifest in new ways. Žižek suggests regarding a different set of issues that "woke" is the new multiculturalism and trans rights advocates are not so different from corporate feminists.

In the case of Palestine, Žižek concludes, "In the new world order that is emerging, the Gaza war is a nodal point that condenses all the defining antagonisms of the modern era. It is where everything will be decided. 'Palestine' today is a universal symbol – a stand-in for all European sins."[19] Put another way, discourse about Palestine does not disrupt or short-circuit public discourse. It serves as the loyal opposition to the ideology of the powerful, operating in the horizon set out by that ideology; indeed, naming that horizon. This is what changed after al-Aqsa Flood, it seems: what had once been one issue among many became *the* issue, a symbol of leftist identity in the same way that, a quarter of a century earlier, the World Trade Center had been a symbol of capitalist identity.

With this understanding of the discursive landscape, Žižek makes a characteristically provocative claim. In contrast to the emerging leftist orthodoxy that decolonization ought not be treated as a metaphor, that it should point to actual land return, Žižek asserts that decolonization "often *is* a metaphor for another process."[20] Specifically, he charges that decolonization often stands for the shift from one class of rulers to another, from colonial elites to postcolonial elites – with the latter at times embracing the language of decolonization to bolster their own standing. Put another way, the leftist framing of Palestine as a question of colonialism, as *the* question of colonialism, obscures the class struggle in much the same way that Žižek thinks other contemporary left orthodoxies (e.g., around "woke") obscure the class struggle. Note that this is a point about political discourse rather than political practice: it is not the result of analyzing the empirical conditions in Palestine as they relate to the class struggle in the way Lenin advised.

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This difference, between political discourse and political practice, is what especially bothers some of Žižek's critics. For Žižek himself, true to his Lacanian-Marxist commitments, there is a way in which maneuvering in discourse, including trying to short-circuit it, is all we can do: it just *is* political practice. For his leftist critics, the political discourse in which Žižek intervenes is distinctively Western and elite, or at least middle brow. For them, it is only the bourgeoisie that is trapped in discourse – The Discourse, as social media has thematized itself – while the actually existing working class, and especially the working class in the global South, encounters the friction of the world directly and so has only a surface-level investment in political discourse.

With a rather tiresome earnestness, such critics chronicle Žižek's "Eurocentrism" and his sometimes uncomfortable proximity to the centers of power that his work ostensibly criticizes.[21] Indeed, the contrast in tone is stark and telling. Žižek is famously light and witty, leaping from one corner of discourse to another to demonstrate their connections and underlying logics whereas his postcolonial and sectarian socialist critics are often attached to empirical realities which they ponderously catalog. Both of these tones contrast with that of Lenin. Yes, Lenin was a polemicist, but he was also deeply engaged in explicating a tradition of thought, moving between inherited conceptual tools and complex, changing realities – a movement grounded in and guided by a commitment to that singular phrase, *workers of the world unite*. Žižek celebrates this posture of dynamic orthodoxy, but it is not the posture that he himself adopts. In his view, it would seem, if the world is fully saturated by The Discourse, political intervention must look different than it did a century earlier.

The World Trade Center attacks were a perfect fit for Žižek's analysis. They gained their power by their theatricality, by pressing a pressure point in the cultural imaginary – and George W. Bush offered an equally theatrical response. Violent discourse was inextricably entwined with physical violence, with those killed on September 11 and the many, many victims of US empire before and after. As Žižek so effectively laid out, to respond in a tone of earnestness was to embrace the affective circuitry of the powerful. On the streets, activists who had embraced the radically utopian spirit of the World Social Forum and the global justice movement before September 11 brought some of this creative energy to protest the subsequent US invasions.[22] Like Occupy Wall Street, these were often political performances that resonated with Žižek's thought and produced moments of mutual recognition.

Struggles for national self-determination operate according to a rather different affective circuitry, even as they are, indeed, elevated into symbols that point far beyond themselves. Part of the trouble here, and Žižek's wariness, may have to do with the sense of self embedded in self-

determination.[23] When Marxism is coupled with psychoanalysis, affirming the autonomy of a desiring self begins to sound rather quaint. Žižek's instinct is always to look for splits within the self; in the case of national self-determination, that means attending to the duality of the nascent nation-state, the split between elites (e.g., Hamas) and the powerless (e.g., ordinary Palestinians). Setting aside the empirical question of whether Žižek understands Hamas properly, e.g., whether Hamas, as a national political movement, properly parallels Al Qaeda, a transnational religious movement, the general point indeed holds: the self is split, and this split sets the stage for the powerless to struggle. Lenin recognized this, too, and he warned that the manipulation of national self-determination movements was inevitable.

And yet: Lenin also saw the need for political judgment. That means appreciating complexities and risks, and making a decision – to back or oppose a claim to national self-determination, to draw attention to or away from the split self. Such a decision is taken strategically, carefully. It is a political decision, and it must not be entranced by the mythology that is, always, national culture, even as it fully supports a national cause (*mutatis mutandis*, it must not be entranced by the mythology of the human self, even as it provisionally relies on the self to pursue political projects).[24] The goal is not so different from the Žižekian short circuit. When the ostensibly benevolent, ostensibly liberal colonial overlord is exposed for what it is, for the violence and power that it wields against a national minority or colony, it primes the powerless back at home to question whether the ruling class really has their interests at heart. Then, the Palestine protest slips into a student debt protest, a labor rights protest, a climate change protest – a revolutionary movement.

Struggles for national self-determination, at their best, are opportunities to think the universal, and to taste the universal.[25] At their worst, they are tethered to the earth, to the supposed empirical realities of culture and peoplehood, which necessarily brings management and elite rulership. Žižek is right that Palestine has become a "universal symbol" – but to reach for the universal, as Žižek himself often suggests, is not necessarily a bad thing. Though it can be. In the context of such risky struggles, the properly Žižekian discursive intervention, the intervention that aims at a short circuit, is one that draws attention to those openings to the universal amidst the pull of the particular. This is where left and liberal must be clarified and cleaved today. The Palestinian struggle since al-Aqsa Flood has already made it self-evident that many supposed liberals nothing of the kind; their reactionary, genocidal impulses are exposed for all to see. The hard question, the one that needs intervention by discursive savants like Žižek, is how, in the growing solidarity movement, to direct attention away from the liberal, legalistic, and humanitarian impulses, away from adventurist enthusiasm, away from poems and textile projects, and toward the unimaginable.

1 Žižek 2002, p. 50
2 Žižek 2002, p. 51
3 Žižek 2023a.
4 Žižek 2023a.
5 Some of this context and Žižek's emergence is explored further in Bar-El 2025.
6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YXU9iFzeFI
7 For example, Khader 2023.
8 Žižek 2023a.
9 Lenin's writings on self-determination are collected: https://foreignlanguages.press/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/C40-The-Right-of-Nations-to-Self-Determination-Lenin-1st-Printing-FINAL.pdf. See also Prashad 2020.
10 National movements are a stage in the path from feudalism to capitalism, according to Lenin, but this historical path looks different outside of Europe.
11 Bouteldja 2017; Bouteldja 2024.
12 Žižek 2024b, Chapter 1.
13 See also Žižek 2022.
14 For an assessment of Žižek's earlier writings on Palestine, see Zalloua 2019.
15 Žižek 2024b, Conclusion. Žižek has a curious habit of turning his attention from Gaza to the West Bank, where it seems he has spent time and built relationships, but which presents a quite different political context.
16 Žižek 2023b.
17 Žižek 2023b.
18 While there is certainly more discursive space for unabashedly left politics in the US and Europe than there was a quarter century ago, the stability of this left space remains in question. When it comes to combatting populist-authoritarianism, when it comes to pandemic response, when it comes to elite educational institutions and, more broadly, the institutions that keep the professional-managerial class afloat, the left-liberal distinction fades.
19 Žižek 2024a.
20 Žižek 2023b.
21 For example, Menon 2010; Rockhill 2023.
22 For an account of this background, see Graeber 2009.
23 See, e.g., Žižek 1999.
24 I am obviously abbreviated and sidestepping the complex political philosophical questions here; see, for example, Johnston 2009.
25 See Wilder 2015; Hallward 2002. In other words, anti-colonial movements need not be reduced to a sort of internationalized form of multiculturalism, as Žižek at times seems to do, e.g., in Žižek 2008.

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Society of the Materialist Friends of Plato

Payam Masarrat

Abstract: The paper begins with some brief reflections suggesting that a different light can be shed on Plato's dialogues if they are understood monologically. Introducing the *Parmenides* (the dialogue of the One), the paper then takes an initial detour by providing an account of contemporary Platonism as represented by Alain Badiou; the main focus is then approached, namely Slavoj Žižek's reading of *Parmenides* in the initial chapter of his *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*.

> '. . . the One proves to be what is absolutely incompatible with itself, what repels itself from itself, and being-for-itself with the figurative expression *repulsion*.'[1]
> 'In other words, to say it all, Plato was a Lacanian.'[2]

The Platonic Monologue

As the legacy of Plato's thought an exclusive fidelity to the dialogue form, does it effectively anticipate contemporary theories of "communicative rationality" and its offspring? It indeed appears to be the case if it is taken for granted that this form is "dialogical" in a sense which renders it indifferent to what Kant much later will announce as the antagonistic battleground (*Kampfplatz*) of metaphysics. In the latter's stead, philosophy is placed in an arena where a proliferation of subjective perspectives aim to establish in their constituted collectivity an objective democratic consensus, which would furthermore neatly provide an account of the historical coincidence of the birth of philosophy and political democracy. The Platonic motif *par excellence* is on this view that of rational deliberation: the vocation of philosophy, from Plato onward, can be boldly claimed as the promotion, if not realisation, of intersubjective discursive agreement. [3] It is in this way, no less, that philosophical reason is said to be "dialectical", denoting the recurringly transcendent *process* through which such agreement is reached.

In the so-called Socratic dialogues, Socrates underlying function consists in ensuring thriving discussion between himself and his various interlocutors. Rather than securing new grounds of epistemological insight, however, the vertigo of *aporia* seems to eternally recur. The point of the Socratic dialogues is not to draw attention to the successful production of new knowledge, but to stress that the dialogue *form* constitutes its own *content*. The dialogue is an end in itself. It is crucial that the explicit subject matter of these dialogues exclusively revolve around virtue, dealing with the building blocks of what Hegel will much later call *Sittlichkeit.*[4] The concept of the dialogue form could thus be said to realise itself in the discursive context of ethical intersubjectivity. Questions of piety, courage, temperance, etc., can only be broached dialogically, as they

are the conceptual "material cause" of the communal substance of the *polis*, whose fundamental unit is not the discrete individual (whose ancient placeholder is in any case the family) but the constitutive collective. Does the same hold beyond (or what will rather prove to be *behind the back of*) ethicality, in the sphere of metaphysical forms?

The transition from the early to the middle dialogues is, broadly put, two-fold. First, Socrates is no longer simply someone who facilitates discussion through sessions of question and answer but instead emerges as an independent voice. This is traditionally taken to correspond to a transgression on Plato's behalf of an allegedly faithful rendition of the historical Socrates. In the middle period, Socrates is utilised as Plato's mouthpiece for the espousal of his own ideas.[5] The fictional Socrates' new-found autonomy in the middle dialogues marks the beginning of Platonism proper – an enterprise not in the first hand devoted to questions of ethical virtue but what it takes to be their metaphysical ground. The former are presented in a manner which puts them in a light where they are structurally underpinned by the latter. The theory of forms takes unequivocal precedence. In Platonism, then, ethics is not "first philosophy".

If the formal realisation of Plato's early dialogues *qua* dialogical is mediated by an ethical thematic unity, what is the status of the dialogue form in the middle period's pursuit of metaphysical speculation? Does not a repressed monologicity take increasing space? The theory of forms is not teased out interactively: Socrates does not abide by the discourse of the hysteric but that of the master; he instructs rather than teaches.[6] In the *Symposium*, the structure of the dialogue follows a sequence of self-contained speeches given by a row of notable figures. The speeches could be said to constitute a dialectical progression from which a dialogical structure can be drawn out – if it were not the case that, upon closer inspection, the sequence constitutes a series of *monologues*. Each speech represents a narcissistic totality of its own. The "middle dialogues", despite the superficial appearance of keeping line with the conversational-dialogical structure of the Socratic dialogues, represent a decisive shift to the monologue form, which is itself triggered by a thematic shift of focus from ethics to metaphysics. The metaphysical truths of the Idea are monologically disclosed. The theory of transcendent forms appeal to seemingly self-referentially isolated entities. It is therefore fitting that they are articulated by a singular voice.[7] What, however, does this singularity imply? Is the monological voice which Plato's so-called metaphysical formalism seemingly demands a voice of tyrannical authority, or is it a voice which rather exposes itself as a source of impotence? Is there a point at which the tyranny of the master coincides with the self-doubting hysteric?

In the late dialogues, the voice of Socrates fades away and virtually disappears. Having proved able to play both the parts of dialogical

discussant and monological expositor, Socrates is now silenced. But he is not simply substituted for someone else. Many of the figures of the late dialogues are anonymised: rather than designated with proper names they appear on the scene as this or that "visitor". This marks the further intensification of the monological core of Plato's dialogues. The voice of the speaker is impersonal and performs according to the logic of the *automaton,* to use Aristotle's term from the *Physics.*[8] Or more accurately, the late dialogues should perhaps be placed beyond the paradigm of language and speech, suggestive of an attempt to bypass the signifier as such. What instead comes to the fore, most notably in *Timaeus,* is a Pythagorean formalisation of the cosmos, indifferent to the human subject *qua* speaking being.

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari, an anti-Platonist duo if there ever was one, rally against, in the name of philosophy itself, the very notion of dialogue. Philosophy, in its specific occupation as a discipline of concept-creation, has nothing at all do with dialogue. 'Sometimes', indeed, 'philosophy is turned into the idea of perpetual discussion, as "communicative rationality" or as "universal democratic conversation." Nothing is less exact . . .' As *Nietzschean* anti-Platonists, they go the extent of diagnosing the participators of dialogue as slaves 'inspired by *ressentiment*.'[9] Following what he takes to be Deleuze's lead, Slavoj Žižek, whose relation to Plato and more specifically to the Platonic dialectic is the *telos* of the following pages, does not hesitate to favour Platonic monologicity – 'one should fully endorse and assume it.'[10] Not, however, in a way which affirms the perversion of pedagogical mastery (speaking from the position of the representative of the Other itself), but as a means to promote the end of *encounters* between seemingly radical incompatibilities. For such a cause, dialogue is insufficient: 'An encounter cannot be reduced to symbolic exchange: what resonates in it is the echo of traumatic impact. While dialogues are commonplace, encounters are rare.'[11]

Actually Existing Platonism

But the greatest champion of Plato today is no doubt Alain Badiou, for whom the whole terrain of post-Nietzscheanism can be apprehended as misguided modalities of anti-Platonism. From Heidegger's dismissal of Plato as the origin of ontological amnesia ("the forgetting of the meaning of Being") to the vitalist anti-Platonism of Bergson and Deleuze (adherents of the immanent principles of life and becoming); from analytic philosophy's scepticism of the mathematical metaphysics of the supersensible to Sartrean existentialism's verdict that Plato errs in prioritising essence over existence; and not least politically, from orthodox Marxism's diagnosis of Platonism as the mark of the origin of aristocratic and later bourgeois idealism to the liberal democratic (Popper, Arendt) allergy of the necessarily totalitarianism of Platonic politics.[12]

The questions which immediately emerge, then, concern the nature of Badiou's self-proclaimed Platonism. Why and in what sense does he insist on a "return to Plato"? Was not the underlying philosophical lesson of the twentieth century that speculative metaphysics must be confined to the "dustbin of history", and so not only Plato but also Hegel had to be left behind? For Badiou, Platonism rather signifies the antidote to the horizon this trajectory. More specifically, Platonism is to be mobilised against the hegemonic triumph of the linguistic turn, which Badiou without compromise reductively degrades to the absolutisation of sophistical rhetoric. Indeed, the fundamental Platonic gesture, in opposition to the deceptive cunning of the sophists, consists in struggling against "the rhetoricist temptation".

It is precisely according to this line of thought which the traditional Platonic distinction between rhetoric and dialectic acquire its potency: it is a question of the obscure *contra* rational mobilisation of language. Badiou's avowed fidelity to Plato, however, consists in the affirmation of the primacy of mathematical rather than dialectical reason. Ultimately, Plato's infamous call for the enforced exile of the poets from the public sphere was meant to ensure the hegemonic status of philosophical thought *qua* mathematical clarity. There is in this way a clear transition from the *poem* to the *mathème*. The difference between these two regimes – the two poles of thought as such – is in Badiou's estimation transparent:

> Now, poetry, as generous as its beauty may be*,* is indubitably an authoritarian form of declaration. It draws its authority only from itself, abhors argument, and states what is, in the sensory form of what imposes itself without having to share its imposition. It holds itself at the threshold of the Absolute, but too often regards itself as the self-proclaimed guardian of this threshold. Inversely, mathematics disciplines thought through explicit rules, not through the singular genius of language, and offers to everyone a shared demonstration, whilst never giving up on ultimate clarity – as complicated as its construction may be. It informs the True without conceding anything to the trembling or existential doubt before that whose cruel necessity it unveils.[13]

Poetry is thus not only un- but *anti*-scientific in the sense in which that it is radically self-authorising, strictly speaking authoritarian in its mode of articulation. It does not demonstrate the path to the Absolute (which for Hegel, the arch-philosopher perhaps only second to Plato himself, coincides with the Absolute itself), but it speaks as if its position of enunciation is situated from the very outset at the of end of this path. Poetry, in other words, does not dedicate itself to the bottom-up labour which is the hallmark of mathematics.

In a public conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy (Badiou's dialectical opposite) on the topic of "German philosophy", covering ground from Kant to Adorno – they interestingly find agreement, and only relative agreement at that, when it comes to the question of Marx[14] – Badiou characteristically refers to mathematical reason as the *purest* kind of reason.[15] As the discussion proceeds, Badiou, in the same breath of criticising the famous formulation of Marx' eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, rallies against the sentiment that that the activity of philosophy essentially proceeds hermeneutically, by "interpreting the world". Philosophy, whose basis is to be found in the rationality of the sciences, 'especially mathematics', is a primarily conceptual venture.[16] Unlike Heidegger and his heirs, Badiou seeks to inject new life into the traditional philosophical drive of systematic explication.

Given this shift of emphasis from the hermeneutical to the conceptual and thus what Badiou admirably takes to result in the revivification of classical thought, Nancy questions him on the very point of the origins of philosophy itself. With minimal obscurity, Nancy asks: 'Why did philosophy begin?', which triggers a Beckettian exchange:

BADIOU You're asking me?

NANCY Yes, I'm asking you!

BADIOU You're right to ask me, because I know very well why it began. Philosophy began because mathematics began.

NANCY Why did mathematics begin?[17]

But as for the beginning of mathematics, Badiou pleads what is, to his mind, justified ignorance. He falls back on his notion of Event – the *incalculable* rupture from any ontological "situation" that cannot be accounted for within the horizon of the situation itself. And since '[t]he beginning of mathematics is an event', the *why* of its beginning cannot be historically accounted for, as it is not a matter of 'anthropological speculations'.[18]

Beyond the remarkable coincidence of the historically coincidental births of philosophy and political democracy, the claim that philosophy began *because* mathematics began is of a different nature. The former coincidence points toward a deeply intimate relation between philosophy and politics, that philosophy is always ripe for politicisation, indeed that it should always be on the verge on, if not totally entangled in, the political. This is already part and parcel of the Platonic thrust, but it is not what is distinctive about it. It is the assymetry of the latter coincidence which is crucial to Badiou's Platonism. Mathematics renders necessary philosophy's

ahistorical entrance on the historical stage. What is a stake is a causal sequence: the event of mathematics, *ergo* the (possibility) of philosophy.

But Badiou does not advance a naïve so-called "mathematical Platonism", according to which mathematical structures are objectively existing transcendent abstractions waiting to be discovered "out there". Against the mathematical Platonist, however, the point is not to bring to light that a subject is always-already involved in the transcendental constitution of its object (which would amount to the orthodox Kantian, and with minor tweaks phenomenological, retort). While the definition of an "objective" mathematical truth is subject-independent, orthodox mathematical Platonism nevertheless grossly mischaracterise Plato, as it 'presupposes that the 'Platonist' espouses a distinction between internal and external, knowing subject and known 'object'; a distinction which is utterly foreign to the genuine Platonic framework.'[19] The distinction is an anachronism of modern empiricism before which the dualist *technology* of subject and object did not exist. Plato, however, is a *Parmenidean monist* insofar as he that he upholds the identity of thought and being. A "mathematical Platonism" worthy of its name is not concerned with the subjective mathematician or the objective mathematical structure but with the *intelligibility* of the real.[20] Mathematics is the immediate mediation of the Idea – this is the ground of Badiou's Platonism.

While his charge against empiricist pseudo-Platonism hits the mark, Badiou's mobilisation of Plato does not innocently lack an idiosyncratic agenda.[21] Though Plato is to be affirmed as a peculiar kind of heir to Parmenides, the paradigmatic philosopher of the One, the banner of Badiou's Plato points in the opposite direction – "the Platonism of the multiple". In direct opposition to the romantic insistence on existential finitude (the singular theoretical dominant of the twentieth century), the category of the multiple is in service of infinity, so 'that the infinite must be understood as indifferent multiplicity, as the pure material of being.'[22] Though vehemently anti-Heideggerian, Badiou announces at the outset of *Being and Event*, the work which marks the point of departure of his mature thought, that Heidegger, indeed 'the last universally recognisable philosopher', must nevertheless receive the credit of having rightly refocused the attention of philosophy back to the 'ontological question'.[23] But only with this. The path which Badiou subsequently treads differs even on the level of the formal articulation of the question. It is not "What is the *meaning* of Being?" but "What is Being?" *tout court.*[24] That is, the classical question of *Being qua Being*.[25] And the claim is not simply that mathematics is an ontological science but that mathematics *is* the science of ontology itself. Philosophy is effectively exiled from the domain of the question of Being, which is a direct effect of the 'ontological destiny of mathematics.'[26]

It cannot be emphasised enough that Badiou's claim does not consist in that Being itself is mathematically structured, but that ontology is the essentially mathematical science which *articulates* Being. 'It

is not a thesis about the world but about discourse.'[27] Mathematics, moreover, specifically post-Cantorian set theory, does not signify Being as presence but coincides with its *presentation*. Again, the equation between mathematics and ontology does not collapse being as such into mathematics, but points toward the exclusivity of being's mathematical mediation. Ontology *is* nothing but this mediation. Poetically, it is to say that 'mathematics is the guardian of being qua being'.[28]

Within this paradigm, it is the notion of the multiple which reigns supreme, understood as the minimal element of ontology's scientific enterprise. Its correlate, the One, is not presentationally given but an 'operational result', a retroactive effect.[29] It only emerges when the presentation of pure multiplicity is "counted-as-one", that is, when it is rendered in terms of coherent structure. At the same time, however, the presentation of being can only be grasped as inconsistent multiplicity after the fact of such a count. There is thus a coincidence of the temporality of the "disclosure" of the One and the multiple. It is not that inconsistent multiplicity is first identified and then counted and made consistent; inconsistent multiplicity is *posited* first after the emergence of consistency.

The axiom of pure multiplicity, or rather the axiom which entails pure multiplicity, is therefore not a naïve presupposition. If it were an arbitrary starting point that "there is multiplicity" with reference, for example, to the immediacy of the plural appearance of the phenomenal real (or even without any such reference at all), pure multiplicity is defined from the outset and would not be able to stop itself from being transformed into oneness, 'and being would be lost again, since the presentation would cease to be the presentation of presentation.' There is no *archic* metaphysical principle of "the multiple" on which everything rests. The notion of the multiple does not precede but coincides with its proliferation, as 'every multiple is a multiple of multiple of multiples.'[30] The erection of a substantial foundation is rejected in favour of an absolute beginning rooted not in a notion of intuition but *decision*.

The terms of situational presentation through which Badiou identifies with ontology, the exposition of pure multiplicity, takes deliberate distance from any "ontology of presence". Even architectures of thought which explicitly single out the multiple as a privileged category are at risk of falling into the trap of the latter,[31] and it is precisely through what he understands as his meticulous resistance to the temptation of presence (which is coextensive with primordial oneness) that Badiou proclaims himself a Platonist. His proof is the most enigmatic of all Plato's dialogues. In the *Parmenides*, perhaps the singularly greatest condensation of the underlying questions that has guided the history of metaphysics, the figure of the One is repeatedly prohibited from being affirmed *as one*. The historical Parmenides' identification of Being with the terrain of harmonious unity, oblivious of the power of diversifying negativity, is

critically scrutinised by Plato, which follows from the dialogue's auto-critique of the theory of forms.

Without prefacing his selective reading of the dialogue, Badiou makes a declaration which reveals his cards from the very outset. Unlike the sophists, he has nothing to hide: 'My entire discourse originates in an axiomatic decision; that of the non-being of the one.'[32] What is consequently for him the fundamental gesture of the *Parmenides* is precisely the verdict that the *One is not*. What Plato's (onto-)logical exercise provides for Badiou is the starting point, the "axiomatic decision", from which his own ontology proceeds.

How can Badiou simply *decide* that the One is not, from which it follows that the Many are? Does it not make the question of the beginning of ontology arbitrary? Badiou's beginning would be open to such a criticism if it were the case, which it is not, that his decision is a 'marker of a philosophy of the will.'[33] It would be redundant to at this stage make the point that Schopenhauer (who is significantly Nietzsche's self-proclaimed "educator") is not one of Badiou's *maîtres*. What must be grasped is the specificity of the *axiomatic* nature of the decision. It is a banal commonplace that the mathematical notion of an axiom is an assumption, a given starting point, from which necessary conclusions are derived. What is often bypassed, however, is that an axiom, in its very relation to itself, signifies self-evidence. Axioms, if they rise to the "dignity of their notion", do not need to be proved in order to be taken aboard. As such, 'a choice for an axiom is never decisionistic.'[34] That the One is not is thus for Badiou transparently self-evident. Badiou is therefore not guilty of arbitrary decisionism. This does not, however, automatically absolve him from the more general charge against the dubiousness of the claim that the One's inexistence requires no qualification at all. Is it not, after all, a claim which violates the underlying thrust of Plato's laborious effort in the *Parmenides*?

It is not the guiding axiomatic decision of Badiou's reading of the *Parmenides* itself which is arbitrary but the selectiveness of his reading. The second part of the dialogue is divided into two halves, which depart from a positive and negative premise about the One respectively: a set of hypotheses predicated on the being of the One ("*If the one is* . . ."), followed by another set of hypotheses predicated on its non-being ("*If the one is not* . . ."). Only the latter fit the axiom of Badiou's ontology, which he accordingly handles meticulously. But as for the former, the positive set, there is inexplicable silence.[35]

Badiou's analysis of the negative hypotheses is nevertheless instructive. The first of these paradoxically affirm the ontological status of the One that is not. The non-being of the One is said to *be*. Simply by virtue of the fact that "the One that is not" is articulated at all, oneness latches onto being. The One is not, but this non-being can be delimited from its otherness and therefore *is*. As Parmenides puts it: 'Therefore,

as it seems, the one *is* a not-being; for it is not to *be* a not-being, but is somehow to give up its being in relation to not-being, it will straightway be a being. [...] Then the one, if it is not, appears also to have a being.'[36] What Badiou perspicaciously argues is that both this hypothesis and the one which immediately follows it (the latter contrarily deals with the non-participation of the non-being of the One in being) have in fact less to do with the One itself than it deals with the ambiguous vacuum of non-being in general. The One that *is not* is reduced simply to non-being, 'and nothing is said of the concept of the one . . .' This sets the scene for the others (what is other than one), 'such that the hypothesis 'the one is not' *turns out to be the one which teaches us about the multiple*.'[37] What thus plays out is the self-determination of the concept of otherness, otherness for itself, as what follows the negative hypothesis of the One. This is the specific region of the Platonism of the multiple.

As if Badiou's interest in the *Parmenides* is not already narrow enough with his disregard for both the first part of the dialogue and the first half of the second part, there is a specific hypothesis of the latter which is singularly crucial for him. The penultimate deduction of the exercise posits the others in their radical autonomy from oneness. The others are not other in relation to the One but in relation to others. The others other themselves from others, but they can neither be said to other themselves from *each* other nor from *one* another. The question remains, then, how the others successfully establish themselves *as others*. Seemingly, there must exist a distinction between other and Other, between 'simple' and 'foundational alterity', without the allowing the latter to be subsumed by any notion of the One. The Other as foundational alterity must be grasped as 'the thought of pure difference, of the multiple as heterogenous dissemination, and as simple repetitive diversity.' In fact, all there is amounts to this foundational alterity, a foundation which is not in fact a foundation, since it does not *found* simple otherness. This is the *vortex* of the Platonism of the multiple:

> What Plato is endeavoring to think here, in a magnificent, dense text, is evidently inconsistent multiplicity, which is to say, pure presentation, anterior to any one-effect, or to any structure . . . Since being-one is prohibited for the others, *what* presents itself is immediately, and entirely, infinite multiplicity deprived of any limit to its multiple-deployment. Plato thus formulates an essential ontological truth; that in absence of any being of the one, the multiple in-consists in the presentation of the multiple of multiples without any foundational stopping point.[38]

The foundational Other, from this point onward "inconsistent multiplicity", is again formulated in terms of a paradoxical foundation, a psychotic lack-of-foundation which does not lay any ground at all but is simply the

immanent presentation of the multiple as 'the coming-forth of being'.[39] And yet ontological presentation, although it makes its mark as it stumbles forward in the disarray of inconsistency, is not said to *appear*. How is Badiou's Platonism of the multiple, the presentation of inconsistent multiplicity, to be reconciled with a logic of appearance? What is the relation between presentation and appearance?[40]

As Badiou approaches the ultimate hypothesis, which plays out the negative consequences for the others which are predicated on the assumption of the non-being of the One, he expresses uncharacteristic, but ultimately merely rhetorical, hesitation. The fictional Parmenides brings the deduction to a halt on a nihilistic note: '"Then if we were to say, to sum up, 'if one is not, nothing is,' wouldn't we speak correctly?"'[41] The worry would be that, if sheer nothingness is what gets the final word under the assumption of the non-being of the One, the primordial alterity that is inconsistent multiplicity is precluded from the capacity of thought. But can the proclamation that "nothing is" be interpreted otherwise than, as Plato's line seems to intuitively suggest, the impossible deadlock of being? Are we in fact dealing with a case of nihilism? It would presuppose that the accent of the syntagm "nothing is" is on the first term. But once this accent is reversed, what is at stake is a positively charged *nothing*, 'the pure name of the void',[42] which rather than posing an obstacle to the presentation of inconsistent multiplicity defines its very horizon. For as soon as presentation is named, it has been counted-as-one. To name something is to render it consistent. The minimal name of inconsistency is that which is no proper name in the traditional sense at all, the name of the void – the nothing that *is* in contrast to the positedness of *nothing*.

While Badiou's reading of the *Parmenides* clearly falls on the side of rationalist ontology and so in opposition to neo-Platonic mysticism (the latter seeks to preserve the being of the One as an ineffable transcendent category), the real question of divide concerns the distinctiveness of his rationalist allegiance. The underlying thrust of Badiou's reading of the *Parmenides* ultimately seeks to claim it for the purity of mathematical or ontological presentation as opposed to not only sophistical rhetoric but, more ambitiously, to the antagonisms of dialectical appearance. It is not simply a question of the primacy of mathematics in relation to both its serious and unserious rivals (poetry and sophistry, respectively). More significantly, it is a question of mathematic(s) *contra* dialectic.[43]

The impulse of dialectic, as Badiou conceives of it, consists in the impulse of *defining* the multiple, indeed 'to the extent that it establishes the normative power of the one within language itself.'[44] Badiou admits that dialectic proceeds by way of necessary differentiation, by way of the exposition of the multiple, but its definitional procedure, again, inevitably ties it to 'the ambit of the metaphysical power of the one.'[45] Conversely, the mathematical presentation of the multiple is strictly non-definitional, which is what decisively distinguishes it from dialectic. Badiou's Platonism of the

multiple should in this way be qualified as the Platonism of the mathematical rather than dialectical multiple. Unsurprisingly, the latter, which Badiou perhaps too quickly dismisses as being incommensurable with the former, is the object of the positive hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. What is found there is a sophisticated affirmation of the One without necessarily subjugating the inconsistent dignity of the multiple to definitional subsumption. What, exactly, does it mean to dialectically define?

Parmenides and the Signifier

The logistics which precedes the interpretation proper of the *Parmenides* (a dialogue whose object is arguably "logistics" itself) hinges on the question of how to count the hypotheses that make up the body of the second half of the dialogue. The temptation is to neatly divide the two halves of the exercise equally: four positive hypotheses based on the axiom that "the One is", and four negative hypotheses based on the axiom that "the One is not" (Badiou's axiom). This demands the qualification, however, that there exists an "appendix" between the second and third of the positive hypotheses which is not to be considered as a hypothesis proper. Instead of affirming that there are nine hypotheses in total and thus a structural asymmetry between the two halves, the first half is domesticated by downplaying the autonomy of what is in fact the third hypothesis, by making the case that it is merely an attempt to resolve the deadlock of the conclusions of the first two.[46]

The first hypothesis posits the One *as one*, and by virtue of its self-referential solipsism fails to *be* one. The closed loop of "one as one" prohibits predication *tout court*, which significantly includes the singularity of oneness itself. The second hypothesis, on the contrary, posits the One openly, simply as "one is . . .", which not only anticipates the proliferation of predication but relentlessly demands it. Indeed, the actualisation of the diversity of predication in the second hypothesis is total. But the consequence is again that the One fails to establish itself as one. The third hypothesis, then, the alleged appendix, is meant to resolve the impasses of the previous two. But the structural asymmetry that follows the proper count, which affirms nine hypotheses (five in the first half, four in the second) is crucial for the internal logic of the exercise.[47]

The third hypothesis plays a distinctively autonomous role. It is described in terms of a transitional "instant" in which the One neither is nor is not – a moment of pure suspension that is 'in no time at all' (*Prm* 156e). The instant is situated on the threshold which separates being from non-being. But rather than paradoxically signifying a heterogeneity of preconceptual transcendence (given its resistance to the grasp of intelligible comprehension), the instant must be grasped as the inscription of a logical impasse that does not, simply by virtue of being an impasse, suggest the necessity of an "elsewhere".[48] The impasse of the instant

concludes the consequences for the one which follow from the axiom that "one is", and the temptation which accompanies it, the affirmation of the mark of a purely heterogeneous transcendence – a transcendence of non-presence which *exceeds* presence – must be resisted. The fourth hypothesis accordingly introduces the consequences of the same axiom but now for the others (again, that which is other than one).

It should be recalled at this point that the underlying status of the One throughout the logical exercise is that of the privileged exemplification of *eidos* as such. In this instance, that which is other than one is thus immediately posited as that which is not grasped by *eidos*, by form. This thought is not, however, taken to its true limit, as Parmenides makes sure to emphasise that 'the others are not absolutely deprived of the one, but somehow partake of it.'[49] In other words, that which is other from one, indeed the plurality of others, is not fully autonomous but still relies, to whatever extent, on its logic. Why? Because the possession of parts which define the others *as others* are parts precisely by virtue of their structural belonging to a unified whole. What is in focus is explicitly that which is other-than-one, but there is a subsistence of the thrust of the positivity of oneness, precisely its effect as the '*principle of structure* for the entities it combines.'[50] The others find themselves on the threshold of breaking free from the grip of the One, but the latter refuses to let go.[51] The step into formlessness without compromise, perhaps the most significant step of the *Parmenides* as a whole (if the dialogue can indeed be said to constitute a "whole" at all), is saved for the ultimate hypothesis of the positive axiom.

What is a more radical consequence of the axiom which posits the being of the One than a generation of an otherness which does not partake in it? The others of the fifth hypothesis are strictly the product of the One itself, yet they cannot be defined at all in terms of oneness. But they are not therefore a multiplicity of others (many) that follow the non-being of the One (the inconsistent multiplicity of the eighth hypothesis), since the axiom indeed posits the One's being. The others are neither one nor many, nor can they be predicated in any other way. This figure of otherness which resists formalisation was hinted at already in the first part of the dialogue, when Parmenides pushed Socrates on the question whether there is in fact a form for every kind of entity, even the lowest of entities: "And what about these, Socrates? Things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else totally undignified and worthless? Are you doubtful whether you should say that a form is separate for each of these, too, which in turn is anything other than we touch with our hands?"[52] It is a question from which Socrates dismissively retreats. But here, in the fifth hypothesis of the logical exercise, Parmenides puts it on the table again.

The theory of forms has been pushed to the very edge of its periphery, toward a space which seemingly eludes *eidos*. However, if

the status of this blind alley is, following the hint of Dolar, given 'a little push in the Lacanian direction', the paradoxical situation which Plato has presented can be productively accounted for in terms of designating 'an object not covered by the signifier, a being not represented by the signifier.'[53] Plato's theory of forms clearly constitutes a theory of ontological signification, but what becomes particularly clear in the *Parmenides* is that it contains the seeds of a specifically Lacanian theoretical matrix *avant la lettre*: it accounts not only for signification itself but emphasises more forcefully its immanent points of failure and subsequently *accounts for these point*s. The failure of formal intelligibility of the fifth hypothesis provides the precise contours of the Lacanian theory of the object, the *objet petit a*. Indeed, the obstinacy of otherness which refuses the forms 'does not simply coincide with materiality, sensuality and objectivity. What else can that be but precisely what Lacan calls the *objet a*?'[54]

This is not an arbitrary homology limited to a passing moment in the *Parmenides*. There is a structural symmetry between the fifth and first hypotheses, and it must be recalled that the outcome of the latter, too, was a reckoning with the impasse of the impossibility of predication. Just as much as the others which do not partake in oneness, the autonomy of the One resists the signifier. But rather than representing otherness, the heterogeneous objectivity which is *unseizable*, what the tautology of the first hypothesis' failure of articulation represents is a *void* – the pure non-relational lack of nothingness itself. This is not the excess of the signifier but its transcendental absence. The latter coincides precisely with the Lacanian definition of the subject, the empty place from which signification springs forth.[55]

This is one half of the signifier's composition: the originary lack of subjectivity, which is speculatively coincident with its excessive correlate. Its necessary complement is then conveniently provided by Plato in the immediately following hypothesis, which turns the page from the impossibility of predication to the immediacy of its "desire" for totalisation. The open-endedness of the One's *being* generates the question of the extent to which being is countable, since 'if one is, there must also be number.' And consequently that of plurality, since 'if there is number, there would be many, and an unlimited multitude of beings.'[56] The fluidity of the One of the second hypothesis morphs into the many. The being of One *is* many. Not only are there "an unlimited multitude of beings", but 'the one itself is unlimited in multitude since it has an unlimited number of parts.'[57] How does this relate to the signifier? The One in question, of the second hypothesis, seems to unfold according to the logic of what Lacan, via Freud's essay on group psychology, refers to as the "unary trait", or more famously as the master signifier: the pure signifier without a signified on which a system of signification bases itself.[58] It is precisely by virtue of its status as a "pure" signifier without a signified – a pure

form – that it can be filled with any content, corresponding exactly to the unlimited multitude which Plato describes.

The affirmation of the One does thus not result in a "metaphysics of presence" but rather demonstrates that any notion of oneness that directly pertains to the enabling of signification is inherently many. However, for the many to be apprehend as such (as many), the semblance of the One *qua* master signifier is inescapable. This allows for a first step toward the clarification of what is a stake in *dialectical* analysis in terms of the logic of the signifier: the dialectical regime of the One alludes to a oneness of illusory semblance which masks the preponderance of the multiple. But it is for that reason not a One which can be recklessly dispended with. The master signifier is a dialectical category not in that it coincides with the pulsating negativity of dialectical rhythm itself, but rather in that it anchors this rhythm in the sense of bestowing upon it substance. This, if anything, is the value of the first part of Plato's logical exercise, and it must be carefully waded through before approaching the elegance of the self-referential otherness – where Badiou *begins* – of the second part. It is a defence of the One as an inherently paradoxical category, and it is on such a paradox, the paradox of the signifier, that dialectic relies.

From *Traite Unaire* to *Sinthome*

The particular direction of reading the *Parmenides* in terms of the logic of the signifier is determined by how one interprets the notion of oneness developed by the late Lacan, the Lacan for whom the absence of the sexual relationship stands as the fundamental pillar of psychoanalysis as such. More specifically, in the nineteenth instalment of his yearly seminar, . . . *or Worse* (1972-73), Lacan advances the axiom *Il Y a de l'Un* ("there is One"), which is famously contracted into *Yad'lun*. The articulation of the being of the One is boiled down into one unit. Lacan dwells at length on the implications of *Yad'lun*, and his point of departure is explicitly in relation to the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* – the hypothesis which he significantly stays with and does not move on from.

If, in this case, Lacan is to be followed to the letter, it is then questionable to draw a parallel, like Dolar does, between not the first but the second hypothesis of *Parmenides* and *Yad'lun*.[59] This is indeed Dolar's initial move before asserting his conclusion that the second hypothesis is homologous to the master signifier, the unary trait. For Dolar, then, the unary trait coincides with *Yad'lun*. While the former point (the link between the second hypothesis and the unary trait) is fruitful, the latter is a misstep. Žižek, who in his reading of the *Parmenides* otherwise largely presupposes the legitimacy of Dolar's position, goes precisely in this direction. The One of the second hypothesis does not coincide with *Yad'lun* given the extent to which it is a one which necessarily implies the

totality of predication, while *Yad'lun* implies the oneness as *discrete*:

> The paradox is here a very elegant Hegelian one: although Plato is *the* philosopher of the One, what is unable to think (as opposed to just "represent") is precisely the One as a concept. To do this, one needs not only a self-relating reflexive predication (the One is a "one One", an x which partakes of the Idea of One with regard to Oneness itself) – which Plato possesses – but also the positive concept of zero (which Plato does not possess): to get a pure concept of the One, not just the notion of one thing, the x which "partakes of the idea of One with regard to Oneness itself" has to be zero, a void, devoid of all content. Or, to put it in a more descriptive way: being-a-One adds nothing to the content of an object; its only content is the form of self-identity with itself.[60]

This applies to but also extends beyond the second hypothesis. Lacking the "positive concept of zero", pure oneness evades Plato's horizon. But if he does at the very least *approach* the pure One, the candidate for such an attempt must necessarily be the first hypothesis, for the simple reason that it posits the being of One tautologically ("one is one").

What is at stake from this point onward is the specific way in which the One of the first hypothesis is accounted for in relation to Lacan's *Yad'lun*. Žižek first contrasts Dolar against the thesis that there is an inherent link between the first hypothesis and *Yad'lun*; the former rather elucidates the latter as the 'formula for the pure *jouissance*-One, that is, a *jouissance* not yet mediated by the Other, the symbolic order, not yet "departmentalised," accountable.'[61] In other words, it refers to a *jouissance* which precedes the emergence of the signifier, the mystic enjoyment that reigns before the beginning of the Word. It is thus an interpretation of the *Parmenides*' first hypothesis which links it to Lacan via a certain flavour of Neoplatonism, compensating for the non-being of the One, its lack of existence, by promoting its ex-sistence; an affirmation of its presence not within being but beyond it.

The *jouissance*-One is the One of negative theology which is 'opposed to a jouissance developed *partes extra partes* that is consequentially accountable and numerable according to the measurements of the signifier.'[62] The push toward the Neoplatonic negative theological One, however, is a push away from the Lacanian direction. Lacan explicitly opposes other-worldly transcendence in the name of the One, deriding it as 'the Plotinian confusion'.[63] There are indeed limits of the reach of the signifier, but such limits cannot be inscribed on the basis of pre-ontological transcendence, which in fact would be to not *inscribe* them at all. How, then, is the first hypothesis to be understood in terms of *Yad'lun*? Though Žižek opposes the actuality of the link as one which precedes ontology, he nevertheless insists that the

signifier of pure oneness precedes the emergence of the master signifier. Nor is it for him the One which renders possible counting, which would, like the master signifier, presuppose that the dialectical dynamism of signification is already active. Žižek's solution to the paradox of the first hypothesis instead frames it in terms of the *fixation* that is characteristic of the incessance of the concept of drive (*Trieb*, *pulsion*). It is a flash of the One in its most discrete form, the hint of a *pure* drive that is not drive *qua* desire bent back onto itself. From this follows the crux of his position: 'As such, this One is a *"sinthome*", a kind of "atom of enjoyment", the minimal synthesis of language and enjoyment, a unit of signs permeated with enjoyment (like a tic we compulsively repeat). Are such Ones not *quanta of enjoyment*, its smallest most elementary packages?'[64]

The One of the first hypothesis thus coincides for Žižek with *sinthome*, a speculative innovation of a the late Lacan in question. *Sinthome* marks the culmination of a gradual tarrying with the notion of *symptom*, from having been initially conceived in terms of something that needs to be linguistically deciphered in order to reveal its subterranean meaning to the realisation that it is a signifier recalcitrant to interpretation as such (hermeneutic or otherwise).[65] The *sinthome* is not simply that which symbolically resists analysis – resistances can always be sublated – but that which confronts analysis as *real impossibility*. Advanced within the frame of his last obsession, topological knot theory, Lacan famously reads the writing of James Joyce as its emblematic paradigm. Via Joyce, it is demonstrated that the impossibility of *sinthome* (the "atom of enjoyment") essentially functions as not an inhibition but a support: Joyce avoids the descent into psychosis – the undoing of, indeed, the knot of his psychic consistency – by resorting to the *sinthome* of his writing.[66]

Elsewhere, Žižek elaborates on the symptom-*sinthome* relation on the provoking basis that symptom is the Lacanian answer ('Lacan's final answer') 'to the eternal philosophical question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'' The minimal positivity of *something* which *is* is posited by Žižek as symptom.[67] Again, Lacan's initial idea of symptom was developed within the parameters of the symbolic "formations of the unconscious", and the point of analysis was to dissolve the symptom in and through the labour of interpretation. The coming to the fore of the *meaning* of the symptom is within this paradigm supposed to coincide with the success of analysis, with the psychoanalytic cure. But as Freud himself was already perplexed by, the lifting of the repression which gives rise to the symptom does not necessarily do away with it.[68] The repression of a traumatic memory may be dealt with by means of its mnemonic recovery, but its symptom may still subsist. The initial theoretical paradigm of the symptom therefore had to be rethought, and Žižek clarifies the Lacanian step of this rethinking by stressing the subject's *jouissance.* The paradigm-shifting thesis that the symptom does not dissolve itself consists in the insight that the suffering subject finds in

it a paradoxical satisfaction.[69]

The relation to the symptom is therefore always fantasmatically mediated. Indeed, the symptom must be understood in terms of the "logic of fantasy", which is structured by the subject's relation to its object-cause of desire (object *a*); analysis must gear itself toward not necessarily interpreting fantasy, but conjuring methods of coming out on the other side of it, or, what amounts to the same, reconfigure the relation to the symptom within it. In other words, the goal is to *desire differently*, so that the symptom is no longer a source of libidinal satisfaction and is allowed to dissipate. But even after such a fundamental reconfiguration, the symptom may *still* persist. The question then is: 'What do we do with a symptom, with this pathological formation which persists not only beyond its interpretation but even beyond fantasy?'[70] This is precisely when *sinthome* enters the scene, not in terms of another attempt to get rid of the symptom but as a reckoning with the symptom as an irreducible formation, one that must be granted transcendental status. The perspective must be structurally reversed: away from the teleology which eternally strives toward a point of getting rid of the symptom's discomfort and toward a reconciliation with its obstinacy, a position which affirms that the symptom constitutes 'the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject.'[71] It is when the symptom is understood in terms of this "support" that it can be spoken of as *sinthome*.

Notwithstanding the pertinence of the mobilisation of the notion of *sinthome* in the context of ideological analysis (Žižek's purpose in the *Sublime Object of Ideology*) – what does ideology concern if not libidinal fixation? – issues arise when it is superimposed onto philosophical ontology, which is the sphere of the *Parmenides*. As a development of the logic of the signifier, *sinthome* may indeed be formulated as an underlying mechanism of dialectical analysis. It clarifies that the relentlessness of dialectical negativity rests on minimally irreducible positive "One" that cannot be dissolved in the dialectical process, whose intransigence in fact triggers the process as such. But here the traditional Marxist two-level distinction between science and ideology must be recalled: s*inthome* is an indispensable resource for the dialectical critique of ideology, but precisely because it is essentially tied to the libidinal fixation that is at the core of *jouissance* it is erroneous to deploy it within the scientific framework of the "ontological question". This is consequently where Žižek goes awry and what is, moreover, symptomatic of his mature thought as a whole – the presupposition that the same conceptual artillery of *Ideologiekritik* can be deployed concerning the question of Being itself.

Materialism of the Void

It remains, however, that the *Parmenides* is the 'first exercise in dialectics proper'.[72] What also remains is the question of *Yad'lun* and the One of the first hypothesis, the answer to which provides the key to the nature of dialectical thought in strictly ontological terms. The One of the first hypothesis cannot be a *sinthome*. It is neither a One of *jouissance* nor, in domesticated form, *joui-sense* (the coincidence of enjoyment and sense). It is telling why, in his reading of *Parmenides*, once the axiom *Yad'lun* has been introduced, Lacan pursues a different path, one which Žižek either ignores or avoids.

The fact of the matter is that, for Lacan, rather than a *sinthome*, the pure One of Plato's first hypothesis is a *mathème*. Žižek himself lucidly provides the contours of the clear discrepancy between the two neologisms. In a footnote hidden away in the depths of *Less Than Nothing* amid a discussion concerning the distinction between meaning and sense, he writes:

> The *sinthome* should be opposed to the *matheme*: although they both belong to the enigmatic space "between nature and culture," between senseless data and meaning – they are both pre-semantic, outside the domain of meaning, and yet nonetheless are signifiers and as such irreducible to the meaningless texture of positive data . . . A *sinthome* is a formula which condenses the excess of *jouissance*, and this dimension is clearly missing in the *matheme*, whose exemplary cases are mathematically formalized scientific statements – *mathemes* do not imply any libidinal investment, they are neutral, desubjectivized.[73]

The *Parmenides* is indeed the decisive point at which the question of the One first arises as a *problem* in the history of metaphysics (as opposed to its dogmatic postulation by the Eleatics), whose purest articulation is the initial hypothesis posited by Plato. What is for Lacan no less decisive, however, is that this particular problematic, encapsulated by *Yad'lun*, is captured by the modern innovations of Cantorian set theory. 'There is the *Parmenides* and, then, set theory.'[74] Indeed, in direct reference to the latter, 'we first had to wait until rather late in the day, the end of the last century, not even a hundred years ago, before there was an attempt to account for the function of the One.'[75] The seed which renders possible the connection between the two, between Plato and Cantor, consists in the former's discovery that the outcome of the hypothesis "One is One" results in radical lack (in unequivocally non-libidinal terms), which the subsequent history of metaphysics – until German idealism and especially Hegel – can be viewed as having attempted to suture with different theories of non-lacking substantiality. The One, then, which is radically lacking *as One*, is not accounted for until the formulation of the

set-theoretical axiom of the *void set*, the empty set which contains no elements but which nevertheless counts as a set. With the *Parmenides* as a necessary backdrop, what set theory clarifies is that the void set constitutes 'the gate that has to be gone through in order to constitute the birth of the One.'[76]

It is important to stress that the present domain of mathematical formalization still operates within the horizon of the signifier.[77] The *mathème* remains a signifier insofar that it accounts for a particular direction of its logic. And it is precisely on the basis that the signifier "One" in Plato's first hypothesis faces an impossibility to articulate itself by means of linguistic predication that it has to be accounted for in terms of signifier qua *mathème*. It is in this sense that the One of the first hypothesis, because it is a One that fails to be One – a One which precedes numericity as well as conceptual totality (which are in any case interdependent) – is 'something that is posited as lying at the origin of the empty set.'[78] Nothing belongs to the One, not even itself, and it has be written "*mathème*-atically" precisely in that it transmits the impasse of the emergence of the One.

At the dawn of dialectical thought, then, coincident with the very first step of the exemplary exercise that sets out to demonstrate its logic, there is an impasse that cannot be accounted for by the mechanism of *progression*. There is no contradiction, neither simple nor overdetermined, which pushes thought forward and inaugurates its movement. This One therefore constitutes not the relational difference which the latter produces, but its complete absence of elements entails the 'element of pure difference'. Or in a more precise formulation, 'the sameness of this difference.'[79] This is the consequence that follows the establishment of the link between Plato's first attempt to formulate the One and the void set. On such a basis, Fredric Jameson's thesis that when dialectical thinking, 'if pursued far enough, turns into historical thinking'[80] needs to be complemented by the contention that dialectical thinking, if pursued far enough, turns into set-theoretical thinking, where it is forced to confront its ahistorical ontological ground.

Žižek, however, evidently goes neither in the direction of radical historicity nor that of set-theoretical formalisation. In the second step of his reading of the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*, the latter is counter-intuitively extricated from the henology of Eleatic idealism (of which the historical Parmenides is of course the paternal figure) and is instead directed toward Democritus' materialist atomism. That is, the shift of focus concerns a transition from a libidinal "atom of enjoyment" to the ground of the teaching of the atom itself. The latter (in fact originally developed by Leuccipus and not Democritus) was effectively a reaction against the Eleatic paradigm, provoked by a fundamental disagreement concerning the status of what *is not.* As is well-known Parmenides' poem unequivocally prohibits non-being. The atomists, in turn, famously

reject what they take to be the dogmatism of this postulate: what is not, indeed the void, deserves the same ontological status as being itself. This certainly places atomism on the very same terrain as the *Parmenides*, whose underlying impetus consists in Parmenides' (Plato's fictional character's) declaration that what is and what is not must be considered on equal terms.[81] A preliminary question can thus be posed: does the *Parmenides* present an opening for conceiving of Platonism in materialist terms? Or as Žižek campaigns: 'In the early 1920's, Lenin proposed that Marxist philosophers should form a "society of the materialist friends of Hegel – today, perhaps, the time has come for radical philosophers to form a "society of the materialist friends of Plato."'[82]

The elementary coordinates of Democritean atomism deserves a further contextualising gloss. Indeed, the fundamental thesis consists in the claim that the atom is the most minimal unit of the composition of being, as the Greek *atomos* refers to that which cannot be cut, the uncuttable (abstracting from *témnō*, to cut). However, it is crucial to immediately note that 'Democritus is not making the banal claim that there are some things that are too hard to be crushed, or too small to be cut by any edge which we can manufacture. *Limitations of that kind are merely technological.* Rather, his argument is that if our picture of the world is not to collapse into incoherence, *we must suppose that physical division has a theoretical limit.*'[83] While this concerns the nature of the atom as an entity itself, it no less implies that the "theoretical limit" of phenomenal divisibility, embodied by the atom, posits the void as its necessary correlate. The void appears here for the first time in ancient Greek thought, as a means to simultaneously account for both the motion and discreteness of phenomenal multiplicity.[84] The void, however, cannot simply be accounted for in terms of the absence of phenomenal positivity, a naïve temptation which, significantly, Žižek recklessly succumbs to.[85] The referent of such absence must indeed be 'that of a gap in space' rather just empty space itself (which is in fact more in tune with the underlying thesis announced at the outset of *Less Than Nothing*, namely 'that of a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive.'[86]) If "void" coincided with latter, 'it would then need to be explained why the atomists spoke of atoms and the void, rather of atoms and space.'[87] The void has to be accounted for otherwise.

Žižek's recourse to Democritus does not directly mobilise the theoretical complexity of the notion of the atom itself. It rather appeals to Democritus' closely related neologism *den*, a notion which signifies neither the being of the atom nor the nothingness of the void. No more does *den* refer to some state in-between being and nothingness. What is in this context pertinent is the etymological, but not less conceptual, thread that can be traced from hen-ology to *den*: *hen* (one), is negated as either *mêden* or *ouden* (two words for "nothing"), and *den* is the result of a further negative operation.[88] The latter is not, however, another

negation: *den* is less than one, but it does not coincide with nothing. It is, in Žižek's formulation 'the *less than nothing*.'[89] *Den* does not negate nothing but *decapitates* it: 'a subtraction from non-being, as negativity effacing itself.'[90] As such, not no-thing but literally *othing*. It is therefore an innovatively justified move to frame *den* – not something, not nothing, but this *othing* – in terms of, once again, the Lacanian object *a*: 'The rise of *den* is thus strictly homologous to that of *objet a* . . . *den* is the "indivisible remainder" of the signifying process of double negation', which accordingly coincides with the malfunctioning of the dynamism of dialectical movement.[91] Is *den* the first notion in the history of metaphysics which genuinely resists the subsuming drive of dialectic?

Problematic territory is broached, however, when Žižek takes a further step than he should. He initiates unwarranted speculation in the simultaneously posited tripartite claim that (1) '*den* evokes density and thus points towards the primordial contraction', on the basis of which (2) '*den* is, arguably, the first name for Lacan's *Y a d'l'Un*' and thus (3) 'there are ones, minimal points of contraction, of *ens* which is not yet the ontologically constituted One.'[92] First, as a notional offspring of the Democritean (and not Lucretian) atom, it points toward an essential weightlessness;[93] in what way, then, can *den* be said to "evoke density"? However, reading the assertion generously, it can be granted that conceptual density does not necessarily imply physical weight, which is presumably the empirical quality Democritus dissociates from the atom. To connect *den* to Lacan's *Yad'lun*, however, which is the second point, is completely untenable. Indeed, *den* qua object *a* can only be "derived" on the basis of the positive hypotheses that "the One is . . .", but *den* does not correspond to the attempt of getting at the pure One, which is implied by *Yad'lun* – that is, the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*. Mapped onto the grid of the latter, *den* qua object *a* rather coincides with the fifth hypothesis: the non-relational otherness of the positive One which eludes the grasp of *eidos*. *Den* is not the form of the One which fails to establish its oneness, but the otherness which the One attempts (but fails) to seize. Lastly, given that *den* already constitutes subtraction from negation, the proper site of an unsurpassable *limit*, what sense does it make to invoke yet another subtraction? The Hegelian logic of the negation of negation cannot be superimposed onto subtraction. Here, what would stop the results of the subtraction from *den* to *en* and from *en* to... *n*? And from *n* – to what? Again, the problem stems from the insertion of an odd presupposition which manifestly contradicts the immediately preceding connection made between *den* and object *a*; all of a sudden, the pre-ontological "ens" are measured up against *den* as an "ontologically constituted One", which is as far away as possible from what the notion of *den* has been established to consist in *by Žižek himself.*

What is rather needed than this mistaken step forward is a calculated step back to the question of the Democritean void and its resonance to

the *Parmenides*. If *den* ultimately resists the structural ground of dialectic, the underlying and logically preceding notion of the atom must still be conceived in terms of the latter's most sophisticated articulation, precisely because of the postulation of the void. How, ultimately, must the void be accounted for? In this instance, Dolar's account of the void is far superior to Žižek's, if only momentary, lapse into thoughtless empiricism. Decidedly, the void does not refer to empty space, but rather to the immanent self-disparity of the atom with itself. The void is that which *splits* the atom *qua* One from within, that which introduces 'a crack into being' and indeed 'splits it into infinity and makes it non-totalizable.'[94] The void extricates the One from Being, the signifier from the real.

To shed additional light on this, Dolar gestures forward at Hegel's affirmation of Parmenidean monism (the unity of thought and being) as mediated precisely by his understanding of Democritean atomism. Hegel's notion of the *dialectical* "unity of opposites" is not immediate simple unity (nor, for that matter, the superficial unity of complex meditation) but crucially 'a unity split into itself and a void'. This is consequently indicative of a destabilisation of the traditional understanding of atomistic materialism, since what is taken to be the substantial materiality of atoms, their immunity to being *cut*, is idealised, which refers precisely to the idealisation of the materiality of the split in question.[95] A genuine materialism that successfully bypasses vulgarity needs to account for this split induced by the void; 'otherwise matter becomes just another name for traditional substantiality', which is always-already an *ideal* category.[96] Put differently, *there is no materialism of substance*. What is instead originally espoused is a Hegelian materialism of the void, which is clearly latently recognised already by Plato. What is the One of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*' if not the Democritean split of the void? Plato is the first dialectical materialist, and he must be treated as such.

The Sensuality of the Instant

The very opening of Parmenides' logical exercise thus provides the minimal coordinates – the coordinates of the void – of a decidedly materialist ontology. When Democritus' *den* is subsequently presented as the void's necessary byproduct, the even *less than minimal* coordinates are laid bare. These are the respective outcomes of the crucial first and fifth hypotheses, which signify both the condition of possibility of dialectic and, perhaps more significantly, its limit. From the horizon of this purported materialist outlook, the third hypothesis, the transitional instant, must necessarily be re-accounted for. As that which is included in neither spatio-temporality nor falls on either side of the split between being and non-being, is the instant not the mark of idealist transcendence *par excellence*? For Žižek, the situation of the instant, the paradoxical place in which it fails to find itself, points toward a structurally Gramscian

crisis: the pure contradiction in which neither the Old can die nor the New can be born.[97] Plato therefore has to recourse to a moment of a literally instant transition from one moment to the next, one which *transcends* the former and steps into the latter, because of a stuck-ness that is impossible to surmount immanently. The internal necessity of dialectical forward-movement is again nowhere to be found.

In order to resolve this deadlock, Žižek appeals to Deleuze and his notion of the sense-event, which alleges to account for Plato's instant in immanent terms. But it is not so much a question of a "reading" of Deleuze as an uncritical appropriation of his position. In the *Logic of Sense*, which introduces the notion of sense as a 'non-existing entity' that 'maintains very special relations with nonsense',[98] Deleuze explicitly conceives of the instant of the third hypothesis in *Parmenides* through the temporal logic *Aion*. Contrasted against *Chronos*, the corporeality of the present Now, *Aion* is characterised by its autonomy from the latter in its simultaneous predominance of the past and future. Indeed, Deleuze describes the distinction between these two modes of temporality as 'almost the second and third hypotheses of *Parmenides* – that of the "now and that of the "instant."' As the attempt to seize the present and future, 'Aion stretches out in a straight line, limitless in either direction. Always already passed and eternally yet to come, Aion is the eternal truth of time: *pure empty form of time*, which has freed itself of its present corporeal content and has thereby unwound its own circle, stretching itself out in a straight line.'[99] Rather than affirming the instant as a flash of lightning (as something which presents itself and withdraws in the same "instant") and therefore cannot be made sense of, the instant is for Deleuze, on the contrary, *pure sense.* Not that which is outside of time, but that which realises its truth.[100]

If the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* can only be grasped in light of the conceptual tools of atomism, then this subsequent turn to Deleuze notion of sense as the immateriality of "pure becoming" coincides with the latter's *Stoic* reading of Plato. Against the traditional notion of the Platonic Idea as the site of a transcendent beyond on which corporeal beings are subsequently modelled upon, ideality is rendered immanent to corporeality and conceived as the *effects* of bodily causes.[101] And though these effects are incorporeal, they do not transcend the *corpo*-real. At this juncture, Deleuze – usually thought of as an "anti-dialectician" – explicitly describes dialectic in terms of the logic of evental surface-events: '*Dialectics* is precisely this science of incorporeal events as they are expressed in propositions, and of the connections between events as they are expressed in relation between propositions.'[102] It is precisely Deleuze-the-dialectician who appeals to Žižek. The Stoic Deleuze of the surface-event conceives of dialectic as a science of surface rather than depth. Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* is accordingly no less Lacanian: perhaps the most distinctive feature of the specifity of Lacan's development of

psychoanalysis is that the unconscious is to be found strictly on the surface. The topological figure of the möbius strip, the paradigmatic *exemplar*, is invoked to illustrate that the spatial configuration of the unconscious appears to be multi-dimensional, but is in truth comprised by the singularity of a continuous surface – indeed, a "plane of immanence".

It is in this *sense* that the Stoic dualism set up by Deleuze, between corporeal-bodily cause and incorporeal-ideational effect, marks the materialism of that Platonic dualism between ideas and their phenomenal copies – 'and it is against this background that one should envisage a return to Plato.'[103] Plato himself failed to recognise this dimension and instead succumbed to the 'ontologization of Ideas', that is, the positing of Ideas as an extra-phenomenal substantial Real.[104] What Deleuze's reading of Plato clarifies is the (immanent) immateriality of the ideal. As such, in relation to the signifier, what is at stake in instant of the third hypothesis of the *Parmenides* is a particular face of the Lacanian Real: 'the Real of pure virtual surface', or better, 'the Real of pure appearance which is the truth of the Platonic Idea.'[105]

Žižek's wager consists in the thesis that there is a Platonic materialism of the immaterial to be developed via Deleuze's notion of the sense-event. But to what extent does Žižek's self-proclaimed orthodox Lacanian commitments – essentially rationalist – conflict with the empiricism of the corporeal base of the pure becoming of Deleuzian sense?[106] Žižek's relation to Deleuze dates further back than the instrumental appeal in *Less Than Nothing*. In *Organs Without Bodies*, which indeed provides at least the contours of a *reading*, the notion of transcendental empiricism is lauded as the 'genius of Deleuze', as Deleuze's empiricist notion of the transcendental, rather than designating the 'formal conceptual network that structures the rich flow of reality' (orthodox Kantianism) stands for 'the infinite potential field of virtualities out of which reality is actualised.'[107] The underlying categories which regulate Žižek's reading of Deleuze are thus the actual and the virtual. And matters become increasingly transparent if it is made clear that that the materialism of Deleuze belongs to the lineage inaugurated by Schelling – the "middle period" Schelling of the *Freiheitsschrift* and more significantly the *Weltalter* drafts.

Schelling is the thinker who provides the opposition between actuality and virtuality: 'the space of the actual (real acts in the present, experienced reality, and persons as formed individuals), accompanied by its virtual shadow (the field of proto-reality, of multiple singularities, impersonal elements later synthesized in our experience of reality).'[108] More digestibly, Deleuze – notably, for Žižek, the earlier Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* (who later messianically returns in the *Cinema* books), and not the later "Guattarized" Deleuze of *Capitalism of Schizophrenia*[109] – is a "Schellingian" in the sense that he is a thinker of *real genesis*. In contrast to the idealism of formal (or transcendental idealist) genesis, in which pure becoming precedes

the emergence of corporeality, the alleged materialism of real genesis accounts for the crystallisation of the sense-event out of the corporeal.[110] This is precisely the position of the middle-period Schelling, for whom there is a primordiality of positive Being in 'the abyss of the preontological Real in God, the blind rotary movement of "irrational" passions', indeed 'a shadowy realm of obscene ghosts that return again and again as "living dead" because they *failed* to actualize themselves in full reality.'[111] Žižek proves here to share with Deleuze the seeds of an empiricist vitalism. Platonic ideality can be described in terms of an immaterial surface-events, but is the Platonic idea truly grounded by pre-ontological corporeality? This would amount to a reification of the Lacanian notion of Real, a *positive* theory of which seems to coincide with the "irrationality of passions". Ironically, Žižek's enthusiasm apropos of the notion of real genesis seems to place him on the ground of *Anti-Oedipus*, which he otherwise dismisses as 'Deleuze's worst book'.[112]

It should be emphasised that while *Anti-Oedipus* is explicitly against mainstream psychoanalysis, it is not explicitly anti-Lacan. On the contrary, 'Deleuze and Guattari explicitly characterize *Anti-Oedipus* as being, from start to finish, a theory of the Real.'[113] The Lacanian Real is appropriated by Deleuze and Guattari and conceived in terms of the famous figures of intensities, partial objects, etc. It is once again Žižek himself, however, who gives an indication that he is not to be buried in the grave he has inadvertently dug for himself. In opposition to the positive notion of the "Deleuzian-Schellingian" Real – a vitalist force – the point of the Lacanian Real is that it is 'the name for the gap of a radical "negativity," it stands for a paradoxical (non)entity that has no ontological consistency in itself but can only be discerned retroactively, from its effects, as their absent Cause.'[114] This is indeed symptomatic of the fundamental tension of Žižek's thinking in general: a hysterical oscillation between the Real as a concept of positive production (which allows for the fantasy of thinking drive without desire) and as a concept which designates the absolute purity of dialectical self-relating negativity. Indeed, any serious materialism must grant ideal surface-events a certain degree of autonomy from their material ground, which Žižek finds a sophisticated elaboration of in Deleuze; but the immediately following question concerns how this material ground itself is accounted for, and here the Deleuzian direction, which Žižek shares on the basis of his ambiguous allegiance to Schelling, is not to be followed. Ultimately, the materiality of materialism cannot be grounded by the life-force of the corporeal, which is an abstractly ideal category.

As for the specificity of the Deleuzean interpretation of Plato, the pressing question concerns whether the surface-event of the Idea, which is on exemplary display in the third hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, can be retained without the presupposition of an underlying corporeality *while at the same time avoiding a relapse into idealism.* Instead of spending all his resources lauding the notion of the sense-event – the event of the *ideal*

positivity of the material-corporeal ground of sense – Žižek's Lacanian-*Hegelianism* would find more fruit to reap in the ingenuity of Deleuze's "reversal" of Platonism. At this juncture, should it not be brought to attention that the category of reversal is integral to dialectical thinking, which occurs at the extreme points of the nodes of contradiction? But perhaps this is the *differentia specifica* of Hegelian dialectic; as Deleuze points out in "Plato and the Simulacrum", initially published separately from the *Logic of Sense* but later added to it as an appendix, 'Platonism is neither a dialectic of contradiction nor of contrariety, but a dialectic of rivalry (*amphibetesis*), a dialectic of rivals and suitors.' There are not simply forms and copies, but true copies must be distinguished from false ones. Phenomenal entities which do in fact participate in the order of forms or ideas must be delimited from those that do not. Platonic dialectic entails 'to screen the claims (pretensions) and to distinguish the true pretender from the false one.'[115]

Deleuze subsequently introduces the notion of the simulacrum, the Platonic false copy whose dignity he defends. Indeed, this is the negativity of the true "positive" copy. 'Copies are secondary possessors. They are well-founded pretenders, guaranteed by resemblance; simulacra are like false pretenders, built upon dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion or a deviation.'[116] Platonism, then, is the exorcism of the simulacrum at the behest of the idealisation of the copy (which coincides with the notion of the copy *tout court*), and the subsequent reversal of this order comes out in valiant defense of the simulacrum. The repressed tension which Deleuze identifies in the Platonic theory of ideality is that between the copy and the simulacrum. The simulacrum is the spectral other half of the copy *qua* participant. Crucially, in the same way that the Democritean void is posited as the necessary but insubstantial other half of the atom, so too the simulacrum clings on to the copy. There is thus something quintessentially materialist about the concept of the simulacrum in the way that it posits the truth about the Platonic dialectic of rivalry.

But it is apparently the *Sophist*, rather than *Parmenides*, which 'contains the most extraordinary adventure of Platonism'. The most remarkable moment of the *Sophist* is the point at which Socrates, the *iconic* copy of the philosopher-model, appears to be indistinguishable from the sophist, his otherwise non-dialectical opposite. A speculative identity between philosophy and sophistry is posited, placing the latter at the very heart of the former. This traumatic presence is that of the simulacrum. In relation to the philosopher, the sophist is the embodiment of the simulacrum, the spectral phantasm which haunts the purity of the icon. This is the great fear of orthodox Platonism: that the distinction between philosophy and sophistry, between iconic copies and phantasmatic simulacra, is not at all clear-cut, And so it is all the more remarkable that, in the *Sophist,* Plato directly confronts this fear. Thus Deleuze asks: 'Was it not Plato himself who pointed out the direction for the reversal of Platonism?'[117]

In singling out privileged ontic entities and naming them copies, the Platonic dialectical process relies, in Deleuze's judgement, on a notion of external difference. The stability of internal identity is presupposed – is this not, however, precisely the presupposition which the *Parmenides* puts into question? – and difference arises in the external relation of such identities. The thrust of the reversal of Platonism, the affirmative step toward the world of simulacra rather than copies, internalises difference. Difference must be thought of as a cut from within. It is a question of a 'constitutive disparity'.[118] The Platonic illusion of identity, which is rendered illusory by Plato himself in *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, is thus "decentred", and the name of the resultant *absence* of the self-identical centre is Difference as such. As profound as this insight may be – indeed, it is only *this* Deleuze, reconcilable with Lacanian rationalism as it does not fall back on the mysticism of vitalist corporeality, that Žižek should follow – Deleuze nevertheless proceeds into regrettable territory. Not content with the conclusion that the "simulacrum-phantasm" marks the negativity of the immanent disparity of positively appearing being, it is affirmatively mobilised as a *substantial* "power of the false". As an intimation of what is to come in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the simulacrum (though later substituted for the concept of assemblage)[119] 'establishes the world of nomadic distributions and crowned anarchies.'[120] The simulacrum thus becomes the literally powerful basis on which to think a new positive order.

In other words, the affirmation of the simulacra lets go of the concept of truth. As a dialectical notion, whether it be Platonic or Hegelian, the simulacra would bring to the fore that truth is immanently cut by the false, but all the same without giving up on truth itself. It would demonstrate that Socrates, the philosophical figure of the big Other, the guarantor of truthful speech, is himself "barred" and inconsistent; Socrates can and should serve as a figure of authority, but it must be emphasised that he, too, precisely *as a figure of authority,* is lacking. As soon the as the simulacrum is substantialised, however, Plato has been both reversed and left behind. In such a universe, there can be no shade of authority at all, no structure from which a figure like Socrates may arise. It constitutes the affirmation of an order based on the fetishization of the positive Real which has freed itself from the anchoring tyranny of the signifier. If anything, having with this move mounted an irrevocable opposition between himself and the Freudo-Lacanian lineage, Deleuze (and later together with Guattari) is a *Jungian*: 'Remember that for Jung also, the Freudian unconscious was not yet the deeper "real" unconscious, the impersonal domain of collective archetypes; it remained caught in the superficial social and familial web. No wonder, then, that an admiration of Jung is Deleuze's corpse in the closet: the fact that Deleuze borrowed a key term (rhizome) from Jung is not a mere insignificant accident – rather, it points toward a deeper link.'[121]

Appearance as Appearance

What Žižek ultimately appropriates from Deleuze is the notion that the Platonic Idea "exists" only virtually. Ideas are strictly virtual entities that 'do not have ontological reality of their own'. The consequence of this is not that the real is the virtual, but on the contrary that the virtual is the real: 'Virtual Reality in itself is a rather miserable idea: that of imitating reality, of reproducing experience in an artificial medium. The reality of the Virtual, on the other hand, stands for the reality of the Virtual as such, for its real effects and consequences.'[122]

The problem of vitalist corporeality that emerges from the opposition between bodily causation and ideational effectivity arises *structurally* from the commitment to the empiricism of sense as such. The "pure appearance" of ideality, therefore, is affirmed as *pure* while at the same time stressing that its underlying cause is bodily-corporeal. And so an alleged materialism of the immaterial is ensured. But in this very move the bodily-corporeal ground is idealised, as a primordial "source of life". Žižek should rather whole-heartedly commit to the second line of thought which he, unbeknownst to himself, develops in conflictual parallel (and not continuous with) the Deleuzian logic of sense. This is the reading of Plato which Žižek advances in terms of the Hegelian logic of appearance, which does not contrast ideational appearance with bodily essence, but affirms the self-reference of appearance as its own *insubstantial* ground.

In a passage of the notorious section on "Force and Understanding" from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which Žižek aptly refers to, Hegel discusses the other-worldly beyond as the emanating mediation of appearance. Appearance is posited as the essence of the supersensible. If the merely sensible is made sense of in terms of appearance, the supersensible is not therefore an extra-worldly essence, but this essence is simply '*appearance as appearance*.'[123] The fleeting appearance of sensuous reality is redoubled instead of provided a firm ground to stand on. This is a *materialist* point because it dispends with the illusion of the latter and instead courageously commits to an essence without recourse to a foundational idealised Ground. Žižek draws further attention to Lacan who remarkably makes a homologous point as he tells the ancient anecdote of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius which meant to determine the true master of naturalist painting. Zeuxis eagerly presented a depiction of grapes so realistic that it attracted birds who flew down from the sky to peck on it. Parrhasius contribution, on the other hand, appeared to be covered by a veil, and as Zeuxis asks for the veil to be removed, it is made clear that the veil itself is the painting. Parrhasius painting is thus literally "appearance as appearance". In Lacan's words: 'A triumph of the gaze over the eye'. The materialism of the gaze, the idealism of the eye?

Platonism does not to need to be dramatically reversed from the terrain of copies to that of simulacra, but rather pushed in a direction where copies are nothing but copies of copies. Žižek's Hegelian claim that

‘the distinction between appearance and essence has to be inscribed into appearance itself’[124] means, in Platonic terms, that the difference between the copy and the Idea is immanent to the copy. This is the “constitutive disparity” of which Deleuze speaks. What, then, belies appearance and ensures the avoidance of the pitfall of idealism? The answer is nothingness itself, whose proper name, as Badiou stresses, is the void. It is no accidence that *Parmenides* concludes with the affirmation of nothingness. ‘Is not *Parmenides*, even more than Plato’s *Sophist*, the dialogue on the corrosive all-pervasive force of nothingness?’[125] In other words, it is *Parmenides*, after all, which is “the most extraordinary adventure of Platonism”.

1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part I: The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154.
2 Jacques Lacan, *. . . or Worse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book* XIX (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 113.
3 For an account which argues for the case that Plato's essential breakthrough consists in attributing to philosophy a transcendentally dialogical dimension on these lines, see Frederic Cossutta, "Dialogic Characteristics of Philosophical Discourse: The Case of Plato's Dialogues", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Volume 36, Number 1 (2003): 48-76.
4 In particular, apart from his *Rechtphilosophie*, see the chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 206 where Hegel discusses *Sittlichkeit* in relation to the Greek polis, which culminates in his famous reading of *Antigone*.
5 Cf. Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.)
6 For the theory of discourse to which this refers, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).
7 It should be kept in mind, however, that, strictly speaking, Plato never developed an explicit "theory of forms". Peter Waterfield's formulation in his recent biography of Plato (the first one to be written in English since 1839) is precise: 'We talk of a "theory" of Forms, and there is no doubt that some such theory is central to Plato's thinking, but he nowhere dedicates a dialogue or a stretch of argument to developing or demonstrating any such theory.' (*Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023], 165.)
8 Aristotle, *Physics: Books I and II*, trans. William Charlton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 31-33. It is used here, however, in the sense *automaton* is interpreted along with its complement, *tuché*, by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. For Aristotle, both notions refers to genuine forms of contingency (chance and spontaneity, respectively), while Lacan demonstrates that the *automaton* is in fact determined by the signifier and so is subject to the necessity of symbolic law. Only *tuché* coincides with genuine contingency, whose status in Lacanian parlance is on the level of the impossibility of the Real. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoa*nalysis, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London and New York: Karnac, 2004), 53-67. The status of the voice in Plato's late dialogues is on the level of the *automaton* – completely self-propelling.
9 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 28.
10 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), ix. Deleuze and Guattari would, however, most likely reject such an assumption. In the same stroke of their dismissal of dialogue, they aptly note Socrates' monological communicative drive, which they hold in even lower esteem. The verdict: no form of communication, neither dialogical nor monological, is any business of philosophy. If dialogue is bad, monologue is even worse.
11 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, xi.
12 Badiou provides this enumeration of different kinds of anti-Platonism in his seminar series "Pour aujord'hui: Platon!", given at Collège de France between 2007 and 2010. But for its original formulation, see *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 97-101. See also *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), 229. In the latter, Badiou declares: 'Our whole century [the twentieth] is anti-Platonic.'
13 Alain Badiou, "Plato, Our Dear Plato!", *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 11, no. 3 (2006): 39-41.
14 As Badiou remarks addressing the public: 'Please note, everyone, that it's on Marx that Jean-Luc and I have found some points of agreement. That's a symptom indeed!' (Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, *German Philosophy*, trans. Richard Lambert, ed. Jan Völker (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2018), 40.
15 Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 9.
16 Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 36.
17 Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*,41.
18 Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 41. The continuation of the exchange (and the conversation as a whole) is despite its brevity remarkably instructive, but for present purposes I will not pursue it further here. Nancy's immediate response nonetheless deserves to be noted: he clarifies that his question does not ask for the specific but general "why" as to the emergence of different theoretical and practical domains (philosophy, mathematics, politics, etc.) at a certain ancient historical juncture. His general answer appeals to the fact that a 'a world has changed.' This once again triggers a tragicomedy:

BADIOU Clearly. But since you can't distinguish between the *fact* that a world has changed and the nature of the change in the world, we fall back on the eventual. So I'll ask you why the world changed at that very moment.

NANCY And I'm going to tell you.

BADIOU You're going to tell me...

NANCY Because the gods departed. (Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 42.)

Nancy's diagnosis should not be read as an affirmation of a kind of secular enlightenment of the ancient world which allowed for the breakthrough of philosophy, but rather in a way that frames his position, at least in this particular instance, as differing from Badiou's in the way that its theoretical angle is that of an "inverted theology". There is for him a tangible difference of the life-worlds of the Babylonians, for example, and the Greeks. Philosophy is born because of the death of (the) God(s). Consequently, 'it's not Nietzsche, nor Jean-Paul, nor Luther who invented that: there were already Greeks who said "The Gods have departed."' Philosophy is therefore a reaction to this loss: not a compensation for it, but an effort to 'habituate humanity as a whole to the fact that its creative constitution lies in the element of this loss' (Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 46, 47). For lucid "anthropological speculations" on this theme, see chapter nine ("The Axial Age (800 BC – 600 AD)") in David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn and New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 223-251.

19 Alain Badiou, "Platonism and Mathematical Ontology", in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. and ed. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 49.

20 And furthermore, for present purposes: 'It is not the status of the so-called mathematical 'objects' that Plato is interested in, but the movement of thought*, because in the final analysis mathematics is invoked in order to be contrasted with dialectics*.' (Alain Badiou, "Platonism and Mathematical Ontology", 50. My emphasis.)

21 As Peter Hallward remarks in his landmark study, 'Badiou's own loyalty [to Plato] is partial, and partly strategic or provocative.' (Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5.

22 Alain Badiou, "Philosophy and Mathematics", in *Theoretical Writings*, 27.

23 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005 [1988]), 1-2.

24 Cf. Peter Osborne, "Neo-Classic: Alain Badiou's *Being an Event*", *Radical Philosophy 142* (Mar/Apr 2007), 21.

25 It recalls the opening of Hegel's *Logic*: '*Being, pure being* – without further determination.' (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans and ed. George di Giovanni [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 59.) What unfolds for Hegel, however, *is* a logic of determination.

26 Badiou, "Philosophy and Mathematics", 37.

27 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 8.

28 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 15. Indeed, Badiou's thought oscillates between the matheme and the poem. The underlying critical question is whether something indispensable is lost somewhere in between. The relation between these two poles is fruitful and should be accounted for but exceeds my present purposes here. For the latter, the point is Badiou's Platonism is unambiguously anti-poetic.

29 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 24.

30 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 29.

31 This is Badiou's verdict of Deleuze, whose 'vitalist doctrine of multiplicities', insufficiently rationalist, fails to grasp singularity: '[T]he attempt to subvert the 'vertical' transcendence of the One through the play of the closed and the open, which deploys multiplicity in the mobile interval between a set (inertia) and an effective multiplicity (line of flight), produces a 'horizontal' or virtual transcendence which, instead of grasping singularity, ignores the intrinsic resource of the multiple, presupposes the chaotic power of the One, and analogizes the modes of actualization. When all is said and done, we are left with what could be defined as a natural mysticism.' (Alain Badiou, "One, Multiple, Multiplicities", in *Theoretical Writings*, 75, 80.) For the full critique of Deleuze as a philosopher of the One, see his *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1997]).

32 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 31.

33 Gert-Jan van der Heiden, "Deciding on Plurality? Plato's *Parmenides* between Badiou and Agamben", in *Phenomenological Perspectives on Plurality*, ed. Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 197.

34 van der Heiden, "Deciding on Plurality?", 197.
35 Frank Ruda attempts to rationalise, in the proper Freudian sense of the term, Badiou's neglect of what can axiomatically be taken for granted, as it were, to be a significant portion of Plato's dialogue: 'One can only start with the second part of the dialogue, since it is precisely the relation between the first assumption (the one is) and the second one (the one is not) where the decision is located. This is a decided reading.' (Frank Ruda, "How to Repeat Plato? For a Platonism of a the Non-All", in *Repeating* Žižek, ed. Agon Hamza [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015], 49.) Much can be said about which of the two halves of the *Parmenides*' ontological exercise constitutes its genuine starting point, and while Ruda's analysis is instructive, it simply bypasses the complexity of the issue. Badiou both starts *and finishes* with the second part, left unaddressed by Ruda. Yes, it is clearly a "decided reading", but in relation to the *Parmenides* the decision is not supported by a self-evident axiom, which is unwarranted if the dialogue is to be mobilised as an emblem of Badiou's avowed Platonism.
36 Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. Mary-Louise-Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), 162a-b.
37 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 32. My emphasis.
38 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 33.
39 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 33.
40 Plato turns to the question of appearance in the *Sophist*, arguably the sequel to the Parmenides, and Badiou's reading of the *Sophist* is given in of *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York, 2009 [2006]), which is fittingly the explicit sequel to *Being and Event*.
41 Plato, *Parmenides*, 166c.
42 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 35.
43 'Dialectics is a programme, or initiation, while mathematics is an existing, available procedure. Dialectical conversion is the eventual point at which the Platonic text touches the real. But the only point of external support for the break with doxa – in the form of something that already exists – is constituted by mathematics and mathematics alone.' (Badiou, "Philosophy and Mathematics", 29.)
44 Badiou, "The Question of Being Today", in *Theoretical Writings*, 43.
45 Badiou, "The Question of Being Today", 43.
46 See, for example, Gill's reconstruction on this point: "Introduction", in Plato, *Parmenides*, 55.
47 Cf. Francois Regnault, "Dialectic of Epistemologies", in *Concept and Form, Volume 1*: *Selections from the Cahier pour l'Analyse*, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London and New York: Version, 2012), 119-151.
48 For a case that argues that the *Parmenides* and the third hypothesis in particular point toward the affirmation of a certain notion of transcendence, see Kelsey Wood, *Troubling Play: Meaning and Entity in Plato's Parmenides* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). Wood writes, for example, that what precedes temporal conceptuality 'can only be thought as negativity, as pure transcendence; it is the otherwise or beyond (*epekeina*) of existence itself. The limited intelligibility of participatory being is informed by this heterogeneity.' (25) This "heterogeneity" is taken to be figuratively materialised by the instant of the third hypothesis. But the issue is precisely that that the instant does not materialise anything at all, and to posit that it does amounts to neo-platonic speculation.
49 Plato, *Parmenides*, 157c.
50 Gill, "Introduction", 91.
51 As Mladen Dolar puts it: 'This [the third] hypothesis can easily be seen as standing in symmetrical terms to the previous hypothesis: both of them are placed in a limit, or they embody a limit, but while with the third hypothesis it is the limit between being and nonbeing, with the fourth we have the limit between the one and the others beyond the one. The third hypothesis is ruled by the logic of "neither-nor", but the fourth by "one as well as the other." The former leads to the exclusion of the instant, while the latter leads to the inclusiveness of all properties of the others. The others are placed on the borderline between form and the amorphous, but in such a way that both sides pertain to them; the others live in both worlds.' ("*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", Helios *31*, no. 1-2, 2004, 82.) I rely on Dolar's account in the initial Lacanian "cognitive mapping" of the remaining hypotheses that follow below.
52 Plato, *Parmenides*, 130c.
53 Dolar, "*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", 69.
54 Dolar, "*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*". 85.
55 This point, however, must be qualified: 'This structural place can be isolated in *Parmenides* in its explicit and pure form, yet one should not be quick to draw from it too many conclusions. Plato produces it as a part of his deduction, but the idea never crosses his mind that this could be a place of subjectivity. The structure that he produces is not a structure with a subject; *we will have to wait for Hegel for this*.' (Dolar, "*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", 84-85. My emphasis.)
56 Plato, *Parmenides*, 144a.
57 Gill, "Introduction", 78.

58 Cf. Lorenzo Chiesa, "Count-as-One, Forming-into-One, Unary Trait, S1", *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy, vol 2, no 1-2* (2006): 68-93.
59 'If the first hypothesis, which considers the one in itself, produced a disjunction between the one and being (the one is not, then the second hypothesis starts from their conjunction. It proposes that "one is"; there is, as it were, an existential judgement. And where the first hypothesis proceeded analytically, merely unfolding the consequences of the "one in itself", or rather the impossibility of its consequences, here the second proceeds "synthetically" (to borrow the largely inappropriate diction of Jean Wahl's commentary on this.) It ascribed something to one that is not inherently contained in its concept, namely, being. Lacan's famous dictum "*Y a de l'Un* can be read as a paraphrase of this second hypothesis.' (Dolar, "*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", 75.)
60 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 54-55.
61 This position is ascribed by Žižek to Armand Zaloszyc, whose contribution to the Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis (Rome, 2006) he bases his reading on. Since Zaloszyc's essay seems to not be published (I have not been able to track it down), I rely here on Žižek's own remarks in addition to the two lengthy quotations he provides. For the latter, see Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 56-57.
62 Armand Zaloszyc, "Y a d'l'Un", intervention at the Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis, Rome, July 13-16, 2006. Quoted in Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 57.
63 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 216. Both Žižek and Dolar, respectively, emphasise this statement, but they make the same error of citing the passage simply as "the *Neoplatonic* confusion", which is putting words into Lacan's mouth. See Dolar, "*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", 64; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 50. Cf. Kenji Nobutomo, who brings this point to attention apropos of Žižek's account, in "Žižek and Lacanian Henology – With a "Silent Partner"", *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 12, no 2, 2018, 3.
64 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 58.
65 As an indication of the point of departure of this process, in *Freud's Paper's on Technique*, the very first Seminar, Lacan quite literally says: 'Revelation is the ultimate source of what we are searching for in the analytic experience.' (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*, 1953-54, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988], 49.
66 'After all, why shouldn't Joyce have been mad? All the more so given that this is not a privilege, if it's true that in most people the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real have become intertwined to the point that each forms the continuation of the other, for want of any operation that would set them apart as in the link of the Borromean knot – of what is claimed to be a Borromean knot, because the Borromean knot is not a knot, it's a link. Why not grasp that each of these loops continues in the next in a way that is strictly indistinct? By the same token, being mad is no privilege.
'What I am proposing here is that we consider that Joyce's case corresponds to a way of making up for the knot's coming undone.' (Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXIII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price [Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2016], 71.
67 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New Yorks: Verso, 2008 [1989]), 77.
68 See "Repression", in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, *Volume XIV*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 146-159.
69 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 80.
70 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 81.
71 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 81.
72 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 6.
73 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 698n64.
74 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 176.
75 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 137.
76 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 126.
77 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 128.
78 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 142.
79 Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 144. Cf. Chiesa in-difference.
80 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 346.
81 Plato, *Parmenides*, 135e.
82 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 40.
83 C.C.W. Taylor, ed., *The Atomists: Democritus and Leucippus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999), 165. Emphases mine.
84 Cf. *The Atomists*, 184: 'The atomists seem to have been the earliest thinkers to ascribe a theoretical role to the concept of the void.'
85 '. . . Eleatics argue from the logical impossibility of the void to the impossibility of motion;

Democritean atomists seem to reason in reverse, deducing from the fact that motion exists the necessity that *the void (empty space)* exists.*'* (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 60. My italics.)
86 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 6-7. The full passage reads:
There are four main position which, together, constitute today's ideologico-philosophical field: first the two sides of what Badiou appropriately baptized "democratic materialism" (1) scientific naturalism (brain sciences, Darwinism . . .) and (2) discursive historicism (Foucault, deconstruction ...); then, the two sides of the spiritualist reaction to it: (3) New Age "Western Buddhism" and (4) the thought of transcendental finitude (culminating in Heidegger). These four positions form a kind of Greimisian square along the two axes of ahistorical versus historical thought and of materialism versus spiritualism. The thesis of the present book is double: (1) there is a dimension missed by all four, that of a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive; (2) this dimension designates the very core of modern subjectivity.
See also Robert Pippin, "Slavoj Žižek's Hegel", in *Interanimations: Receiving Modern Philosophy* [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015], 94n3), who at the very least rightly complains, apropos of the relation to the enumeration of positions distinct from Žižek's own, that something like "Western Buddhism" (referring to the corporatist appropriation of Far Eastern spirituality) is too ridiculous to be considered as a serious *theoretical* paradigm.
87 Taylor, *The Atomists*, 185.
88 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 59. Dolar makes the explicit connection between *hen* and *den*, positioning *mêden* and *ouden* as the mediating terms. The connection between the One and *den* is here essential, which is presumably presupposed but not explicitly drawn out by Žižek. See Mladen Dolar, "The Atom and the Void – from Democritus to Lacan", *Filozofski Vestnik*, XXXIV, no 2, 2013, 23; and Mladen Dolar, "Tyche, clinamen, den", *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, 2013, 235. Dolar's two essays that cover the same material, though in slightly different directions and depths. Cf. also the glossary of *Early Greek Philosophy: Volume 1: Introductory and Reference Materials*, eds. and trans. André Laks and Glenn W. Most [Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2016], 228), which provides a clarifying distinction between *mêden* and *den*, explaining that 'while *mêden* is a normal Greek word for 'nothing,' *den* (which results from depriving *mêden* of its negative prefix *mê-*) does not seem to be attested anywhere outside of Democritus except in a (textually problematic) fragment of the Aeolic lyric poet Alcaeus (ea. 600 BC) and is therefore either a coinage by Democritus or else his elevation of a rare word into a technical term.'
89 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 58.
90 Dolar, "The Atom and the Void", 23.
91 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 59. Dolar repeats the affirmation of this homology: 'So what is this entity, *den*? Not something, not nothing, not being, not one, not positively existing, not absent, not countable – is this not precisely the object we are after – the object *a*?' ("The Atom and the Void", 23.).
92 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 60.
93 It is a subject of controversy, however, whether Democritus' atom is in fact weightless: is weight one of the atom's its inherent properties, or is weight is simply a function of its size? See Michael J. Augustin, "Weight in Greek Atomism", *Philosophia 45* (2015): 76-99.
94 Dolar, "The Atom and the Void," 13
95 Dolar, "The Atom and the Void, 13, 14. Dolar's proof for this reading of Hegel resides in the latter's reflections on atomism in the greater *Logic*. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 134-35.
96 It is of utmost significance that the nature of this split is "strictly homologous ", as Žižek himself would put it, to the Lacanian definition of signifier. In his reading of *Parmenides*, Dolar, asserts that '*signifier is the paradoxical entity split into itself and into its own absence as its own part*.' ("*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", 85.) He explicitly relies on Žižek's rightly 'now classic formulation' ("*In* Parmenidem *Parvi Comentarii*", 97n14), which is worth quoting here too directly from its source: 'This paradox is founded in the differential character of the signifier's set: as soon as one is dealing with a differential set, one has to comprise in the network of difference the difference between an element and its own absence. In other words, *one has to consider as a part of the signifier its own absence* – one has to posit the existence of a signifier which positivizes, "represents", "gives body to" to the very lack of the signifier – that is to say, coincides with the place of inscription of the signifier. This difference is in a way "self-reflective": the paradoxical, "impossible" yet necessary point at which the signifier differs not only from another (positive) signifier but *from signifier itself as signifier*.' (Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* [London and New York: Verso, 2008] [1991]), 43.
97 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 61. Gramsci's adage is, of course, from the *Prison Notebooks*: '**[...]**
98 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), xiii.
99 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 165.

100 'The most general operation of sense is this: it brings that which expresses it into existence; and from that point on, as pure inherence, it brings itself to exist within that which expresses it. It rests therefore with the Aion, as the milieu of surface effects or events, to trace a frontier between things and propositions; and the Aion traces it with its entire straight line. Without it, sounds would fall back on bodies, and propositions themselves would not be "possible." Language is rendered possible by the frontier which separates it from things and from bodies (including those which speak). We can thus take up again the account of the surface organization as it is determined by the Aion.' (Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 166.)
101 'The Stoics discovered surface effects.' (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 7.)
102 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 8/9.
103 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 35/36.
104 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 35/36.
105 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 62.
106 'The logic of sense is inspired in its entirety by empiricism. Only empiricism knows how to transcend the experiential dimensions of the visible without falling into Ideas, and how to track down, invoke, and perhaps produce a phantom at the limit of a lengthened or unfolded experience.' (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 20.)
107 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 4.
108 Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 19.
109 This distinction between the "first" (good) and "second" (bad) Deleuze is the underlying thrust of the generality of Žižek's interpretation. Some, however, have seen this too be an overly simplistic periodisation. Clayton Crockett, for example, who in direct opposition to Žižek takes '*Anti-Oedipus* as compatible with *The Logic of Sense*, although there is a shift in perspective.' Indeed, 'Žižek constructs the deadlock that he finds in Deleuze's logic, and then he accuses Deleuze of making the wrong choice, when in fact there is no fundamental opposition between what Žižek calls Deleuze material and formal logic.' See Crockett's *Deleuze Beyond Badiou: Ontology Multiplicity, and Event* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2013), 25.
110 Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 22.
111 Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 23. Žižek exhaustively pursues this interpretation of Schelling, which is symptomatic of his thought as a whole, in *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matter* (London and New York: Verso, 1996.)
112 Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 23.
113 Daniel W. Smith, "The Inverse Side of Structure: Žižek on Deleuze on Lacan," in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 317.
114 Slavoj Žižek, "Notes on a Debate from 'Within the People,'" 661.
115 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 253.
116 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 256.
117 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 256.
118 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 261/62.
119 Cf. Daniel Smith, "The Concept of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Overturning of Platonism", in *Essays On Deleuze*, 26: 'After the publication of *Difference and Repetition* (1968), the concept of the simulacrum more or less disappears from Deleuze's work in favor of the concept of the *agencement* or "assemblage". "It seems to me that I have completely abandoned the notion of the simulacrum," Deleuze noted in 1993. [...] Within Deleuze's own work, the concept of the simulacrum is ultimately replaced by the concept of the assemblage [*agencement*], and the process of simulation is more properly characterized as the process of actualization (or even more precisely, the complex process of "differen t/c iation").
120 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 263.
121 Žižek, "Notes on a Debate 'Within the People'", 662. Cf. also Peter Hallward, "You Can't Have it Both Ways: Deleuze or Lacan", in *Deleuze and Psychoanalysis: Philosophical Essays on Deleuze's Debate with Psychoanalysis*, ed. Leen De Bolle (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 48: 'If there is an analogue within the psychoanalytic tradition to Deleuze's conception of the cosmos-brain it is not Lacan's unconscious, but rather Jung's cosmic consciousness.'
122 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 69. This passage is reproduced verbatim from *Organs Without Bodies*, 3, where it appears originally.
123 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 89.
124 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 37.
125 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 39.

Perversion or Provocation: Slavoj Žižek's Political Style

Todd McGowan

Abstract: Due to his association with *The Pervert's Guide* and his tendency to relate an obscene joke, Slavoj Žižek's political style seems to be one of perverse acting out. This essay argues that Žižek is a figure of provocation rather than perversion. The significance of this distinction resides in the relationship to the big Other that each position has. Whereas the pervert attempts to hide the big Other's castration, the provocateur strives to expose it, making provocation a much more radical political strategy than perversion, which has the effect of transgressing in ways that support the ruling order.

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek, perversion, provocation, big Other, authority

The Provocateur's Guide

Slavoj Žižek is not a pervert. Despite starring in films whose titles openly testify to his perversion – *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Sophie Fiennes, 2006) and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Sophie Fiennes, 2012) – Žižek's method is one of provocation rather than perversion. The distinction between perversion and provocation is difficult to decipher. The pervert often appears as a provocateur and vice versa. When one experiences perverse acting out, the experience seems provocative as it dislodges habitual expectations. This creates a sense that provocation and perversion are perhaps just two different terms for the same phenomenon. But the political importance of the distinction demands that we resolve all possible confusion between the two positions. Perversion has a semblance of radicality that belies its underlying conservative function, while provocation appears politically insignificant in a way that hides its authentic challenge to the ruling ideology. Understanding Žižek as a figure of provocation rather than perversion enables us to grasp not just his own position but also how to differentiate the two in political terms. Properly understanding Žižek's position implies properly understanding why we should take up the position of the provocateur rather than that of the pervert.

Provocation challenges the ruling ideology by pointing out its insubstantiality, its reliance on purported solid foundation that it doesn't really have. Ideologies compel obedience by feigning an authority that doesn't exist, by obfuscating their own lack. As it highlights where the ruling ideology lacks, provocation doesn't engage in a direct confrontation with this ideology, which causes it to seem less than fully radical. Perversion, on the other hand, appears to go all the way and completely take up the position of open defiance against this ideology. As a provocateur rather than a pervert, Žižek often opens himself up to the charge that he is not a true radical, that he is just a dupe of capitalist ideology, and other related charges.[1] But provocation doesn't aim at performing radicality. Its radicality stems from its insistence that there is

no nonlacking authority figure, that there is no guarantee for our political act, and that this absence of a guarantee is the source of our freedom. To provoke is constantly to remind people of their freedom in the face of a big Other that presents itself as fully authoritative and noncastrated but in actuality suffers from a lack that corresponds with that of the subject itself. The provocateur seeks out the point where the figure of social authority, the big Other, contradicts itself and loses its self-consistency. This is a strategy that moves in precisely the opposite direction from that of perverse acting out.

The aim of the pervert is clear. By transgressing the norms of the social order, the pervert hopes trigger outrage from some authority figure. The transgression tries to garner an outraged reaction. This outrage testifies, in the psyche of the pervert, to the existence of the big Other. Perverse acting prompts the big Other's enjoyment in the form of its outrage, which provides the assurance that the big Other is a substantial entity there to underwrite all our actions. Seeking assurance about the substantiality of the big Other drives the pervert's acting out.

Perversion is a rejection of the universality of castration. The pervert doesn't disavow its own castration through acting out but that of the big Other. The existence somewhere of a noncastrated authority is at the heart of the pervert's project and what drives the pervert to its transgressions. The point is to prompt the big Other to respond to the perverse transgression with a response that shows the big Other to be a real authority rather than a failed and lacking one. As Jacques Lacan puts it in *Seminar XVI*, "Perversion is a way of warding off the radical gap in the signifying order that castration represents."[2] The pervert cannot tolerate the gap that undermines every figure of authority and acts out in a way that prompts an authority to respond with a response that seems to indicate the authority's completeness. This gives perversion a conversative political valence despite the fact that perverts typically don't consider themselves conservatives (nor do conservatives typically consider themselves aligned with perversion).

The great danger of perversion is that it appears (both to itself and to those observing it) as a challenge to the ruling symbolic authority. Perversion feels radical, which is why it attracts so many adherents. The way in which the pervert acts out transgresses social rules and often violates the law, as we can see in the case of notable perversions such as bestiality and necrophilia. These activities both violate social mores and the law at the same time. The enjoyment that the transgression produces involves the perverse subject enjoying through the big Other whose norms it violates. When the Other responds with disapprobation after I have sex with a corpse, I enjoy through this outrage. No matter how extreme the perverse transgression, it always occurs with a focus on the big Other that it believes itself to disdain. Perversion involves more respect for the authority of the Other than any other psychic position. This respect

severely limits any potential political value in perversion.

Unlike the pervert, the provocateur doesn't transgress for the sake of proving that the Other exists but to reveal that the Other doesn't exist. The pervert's transgression aims at facilitating the Other's enjoyment, an enjoyment that provides evidence that the Other functions as a support for the pervert's identity. Provocation has no such aim. The provocateur's act strikes directly at the point of contradiction within the big Other's explanation, the point that reveals the Other to be lacking and unable to respond effectively. This is where Žižek aligns himself, despite his prominent appearance in the misnamed *Pervert's Guide*.

It is not only the titles the films starring Žižek that might lead us to see him as a pervert. Although he lives a spartan personal life, he often transgresses the norms of academic speech in his books and his talks. This becomes most evident in his liberal use of obscene jokes to illustrate theoretical points, but it also manifests itself in dismissal of academic attire, titles, and ceremonies that others seek to bestow on him. In Žižek's view, one of the most offensive ways to address him is as "Professor Žižek," rather than just as "Slavoj." When he gives a lecture, he disdains the typical academic introduction that highlights his many accomplishments or enumerates his many publications. The point of his theoretical project is not to establish himself as an authority for followers. All his seemingly personal proclivities—such as his casual manner of dress—merely serve to dislodge him from the position of authority, to illustrate that he cannot function as a figure of the big Other. Instead, he strives to occupy the position of the gap within the social order, a position that reveals the big Other is lacking.

Žižek repeats many of Lacan's aphorisms many times. But the one he returns to more than any other—"the big Other does not exist"—reveals where the emphasis of his philosophy lies. This aphorism appeals to him because it makes clear the absence of any substantial authority that could guide our actions and thereby obviate our freedom. There is no figure of the big Other to provide a foundation for subjectivity, and provocation makes this apparent. In contrast to perverse acting out that produces the illusion that the big Other exists, acts of provocation reveal the gap within every authority. They don't lead to the authority's outrage but to the authority's befuddlement, to its inability to respond adequately. In the face of the provocation, what seems authoritative becomes visible as lacking because the provocation points out where the official explanation breaks down and contradicts itself. There is a hole within every ruling order, and the provocateur occupies the position of this hole to expose its existence.

At the beginning of his early work *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek lays out the path of provocation that he will maintain throughout the entire trajectory of his thought. According to Žižek, the task of the theorist is not one of direct confrontation with the ruling ideology. The theorist exposes the hole within the illusory whole. Žižek claims, "the duty of the

critical intellectual ... is precisely *to occupy all the time*, even when the new order (the 'new harmony') stabilizes itself and again renders invisible the hole as such, *the place of this hole*, i.e., to maintain a distance toward every Master-Signifier."[3] By occupying the position of the hole within the official explanation, the theorist will necessarily say things that seem troubling or disturbing to readers, but this disturbance is the only way to challenge the illusory harmony of the ruling order. Žižek then adds, "This maintaining of a distance with regard to the Master-Signifier characterizes the basic attitude of philosophy."[4] Here, Žižek aligns his own practice of provocation—the insistence on distance from the received wisdom authorized by the master signifier—with that of all philosophy. In this vision of things, philosophy provokes because it asks the ticklish questions, the questions that in their very structure defy what seems to go without saying.

In an age of generalized perversion like ours, provocation becomes increasingly requisite. The task of the provocateur is one of exposing the hidden obedience that resides within all perverse acting out. No one seems to be obeying, and yet almost everyone is. The provocative act reveals the capitulation that lurks within the perverse transgression. It replaces this performance of transgression with an act that exposes the insubstantiality of authority. This gesture runs through Žižek's entire thought and gives that thought its political relevance.

Eyes Wide Open

To grasp the difference between perversion and provocation, it suffices to look at the contrast between the married couple in Stanley Kubrick's late masterpiece *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Although Žižek himself comments on this film at various points in his thinking, he doesn't explore its value for laying out the difference between the position he advocates and perversion, the position wrongly associated with him. Consequently, we must do so on his behalf. The film chronicles Alice (Nicole Kidman) telling her husband Bill (Tom Cruise) a fantasy she had about leaving him and their daughter for a naval officer whom she saw while they were all on vacation at Cape Cod. She details this fantasy in response to Bill's proclamation that women, in contrast to men, are naturally faithful. In his reaction to Alice's description of this fantasy, Bill embarks on a night of sexual exploration that leads him, ultimately, to a masked orgy taking place in a mansion. Kubrick's film depicts Bill's response as a perverse acting out triggered by Alice's provocation. In his theoretical work, Žižek plays the part of Alice, while many of his opponents take up the role of Bill, convinced about the radicality of perverse acting out while missing the significance of the provocation that this acting out allows them to flee.

Alice describes her fantasy to Bill after Bill expresses total confidence in her fidelity to him. This self-assurance rubs Alice the wrong way not because she has been unfaithful or wants to sow doubt

in Bill's mind but because it reduces her to a position of substantiality. From Bill's perspective, she is not a lacking subject herself who might, in a moment of weakness, indulge in an affair or betray her husband in some other fashion. Instead, according to Bill, she is identical to her feminine nature and thus not a subject at odds with herself, not a divided subject. As they talk in their bedroom after a Christmas party, Alice asks Bill to consider the desire of his female patients as he examines their breasts. Bill struggles visibly with his answer before saying, "Women don't ... they basically don't think like that." Here, Bill shows that he envisions Alice (and all femininity) as a nonlacking big Other, a position from which she recoils. This statement prompts Alice to stand up and recount the typically evolutionary explanation of feminine monogamy. After concluding this mockery, she tells him, "If you men only knew." But Bill remains unconvinced and proclaims that he never experiences any jealousy because he knows that Alice, as his wife and the mother of his child, would never be unfaithful. She is, for him, simply a substantial being, not a subject. She reacts with an implicit proclamation of her subjectivity, which Kubrick underlines visually by shooting Alice throughout this entire conversation in nothing but translucent underwear. The film depicts Alice in a way that gives the lie to Bill's claims about her and about women.

After Bill's testament that he sees Alice as a self-identical substance, Alice doubles over laughing at his failure to see her as a desiring subject. She then articulates a fantasy that evinces her self-division and, by so doing, acts as a provocation to Bill. Although Alice doesn't look like Slavoj Žižek in *Eyes Wide Shut*, she nonetheless acts like him. Her provocation undermines the subject's assurance that the big Other is a nonlacking figure, a figure on which the subject can rely with utter certainty. All of a sudden, Bill loses his assurance about the fidelity of his wife

As she relates the fantasy to Bill, Alice recounts how the thought of running away with the naval officer, a man with whom she never even spoke, so overcame her that nothing else mattered in relation to the fantasized relation. She imagined leaving her husband and child behind, abandoning her comfortable home, and giving up her entire life, all for the sake of the fantasized enjoyment that this officer would offer, even if for just one night. Just as she finishes her story, the phone rings, and a patient calls Bill away, which enables her narrative to haunt him without any accompanying explanation. Her provocation so completely undermines Bill's psychic equilibrium that he heads out on an adventure that evening in search of the extreme enjoyment that Alice's fantasy conveys to him. In response to the provocation of the fantasy, Bill opts to act out perversely. Everything he does during the night following Alice's revelation of her provocative fantasy life occurs in an effort to find a new substantial Other to rely on.

When initially thinking about *Eyes Wide Shut* and perversion, perverse acting out seems the province of the rich attendees at the

giant masked orgy, not of Bill Harford, who merely sneaks into the orgy as an uninvited observer. But the film depicts Bill as the pervert in this scene and throughout his night of exploration. Impelled by Alice's fantasy provocation, Bill goes out in search of a transgression that will enable him to access the enjoyment that he associates with Alice. He wrongly believes that the emphasis of her description of the fantasy was its transgressive quality, when in actuality she aimed at provoking him by announcing herself as a desiring subject and not a self-identical substance. He responds to provocation with perversion because he thinks in perverse terms about enjoyment, which makes Bill an exemplary subject in the contemporary universe. It also separates him from Žižek's theoretical project.

Bill's visit to the orgy represents perverse acting out insofar as he seeks the ultimate form of transgression, which he equates with the ultimate form of enjoyment. Despite the evident danger involved for him, Bill heads into the orgy uninvited to discover how the wealthy really enjoy. They enjoy, he assumes, in a manner that far surpasses his own, in a manner that might come close to that of Alice. While at the orgy, however, Bill's behavior leads to his exposure as an interloper, but even this exposure doesn't damper his enthusiasm for exploring the enjoyment on display at the orgy. He follows up this evening with further investigations that stem from his conviction that the big Other has a secret enjoyment that his own acting out can uncover. For Bill in the film after Alice destroys her status as the big Other for him, the wealthy represent the new form of the big Other, and his transgression strives to trigger this Other into revealing itself. Bill makes himself into a vehicle for the enjoyment of the wealthy. One can even imagine the entire orgy, with its ridiculous rituals and chants, being staged by Bill's benefit. He believes that he has accessed a secret perversion that reveals how the wealthy really enjoy themselves, but he is the pervert in this situation. It might be true that the rich attendees at the orgy are themselves perverse, but the concern of *Eyes Wide Shut* is the depiction of Bill's perversion as a pathological response to Alice's provocation. The film forces the spectator to confront the lack in the big Other just as Bill continually attempts to obscure this lack.

According to Žižek's theoretical politics, becoming Bill Harford represents the chief danger today. Žižek takes up the role of Alice and provokes in order to lead us away from the lure of perversion. Alice's description of her fantasy appears tame when contrasted with the night of debauchery that Bill witnesses. But we should not be fooled. The perverse transgression is always a faked radical act. It stages its radicality rather than enacting it. Alice demonstrates that the real threat to the prevailing order—even to conventional ideas about sexuality—derives from provocation, not from perverse acting out.

The Offensive Joke

Žižek's jokes have achieved sufficient notoriety that an editor dedicated an entire book simply to collecting them without the larger context in which he tells them.[5] The jokes don't just illustrate the theoretical points that Žižek is making when he introduces them, but they also serve to seduce readers and listeners who not already inclined toward his philosophical perspective to give him a more ready hearing. Žižek uses the joke as an entry point to his theoretical system for newcomers that might otherwise be resistant to it. The seductive power of the jokes stems from their ability to provoke listeners and readers. Žižek's jokes typically confront people with a contradiction that reveals the lack in the big Other. This is how they challenge the authority of this figure. The big Other's authority over us depends on our inability to recognize its contradictory status and our refusal to see it as lacking. The joke provides an easy-to-digest remedy.

One of Žižek's favorite jokes about authority targets God, the ultimate authority. In this joke, a group of Jews who died in the Holocaust sit on a bench in heaven telling Holocaust jokes and laughing together. Not wanting to be left out on the joke, God comes up to them and asks, "What's so funny?" One of the Jews says to him, "Oh, you wouldn't get it. You had to be there."[6] Although God is omnipresent and omniscient, the Holocaust marks a point in history where God was not there for the Jews. The joke plays on a fundamental contradiction evident in the occurrence of the Holocaust: God permits the chosen people to suffer the worst massacre in human history while nonetheless retaining his position of authority. The fact that the joke transpires in heaven compounds the effect. God does provide salvation and defeat death, but otherwise, his power appears radically limited. He can't stop total mass devastation from occurring.

Žižek uses this joke to reveal the lacking status of all authority. The Holocaust in heaven joke undermines divine authority better than any direct attack on God or on belief. It accepts the wager of faith that God exists but reveals what one must accept if one believes in this existence while at the same time acknowledging the history of the twentieth century. The pervert would drop a crucifix in urine or desecrate the altar, but such acts of transgression do not reveal the contradiction at the heart of the divine in the way that Žižek's joke does. It is a provocative response to authority rather than a perverse one.

In addition to undermining representatives of the big Other in positions of authority, Žižek also targets those revolting against authority. He recognizes that too often theorists substantialize the position of revolt or resistance and fail to see how this revolt might actually play into the hands of the authority it contests. His provocations don't just aim at those in power but also at the hidden capitulation of those who believe that they are wholly resisting oppressive authority.

The joke that focuses on resistance and its failures testifies best to Žižek's position as a provocateur. Even his harshest critics on the Left

laugh along at his jokes about God or other figures of authority. Although the joke about those who suffered in the Holocaust talking with God in heaven might not be in good taste, it nonetheless doesn't offend Žižek's political allies. It's a joke that others on the side of emancipatory politics can get behind.

But when it comes to a joke about resistance, Žižek's would-be allies tend to join his conservative critics in denouncing his bad taste and even his racism or sexism. Žižek targets those who resist figures of authority without enacting a fundamental challenge to the oppressive structure itself. This type of resistance, as he sees it, fortifies the oppressive authority rather than undermining it, which is why it becomes the subject of many of his jokes. Perhaps the most notorious of them involves a warrior raping a peasant woman. As Žižek tells it,

> In the good old days of Really-Existing Socialism, a joke was popular among dissidents, used to illustrate the futility of their protests. In fifteenth-century Russia occupied by Mongols, a farmer and his wife walk along a dusty country road; a Mongol warrior on a horse stops at their side and tells the farmer that he will now rape his wife; he then adds: "But since there is a lot of dust on the ground, you should hold my testicles while I'm raping your wife, so that they will not get dirty!" After the Mongol finishes his job and rides away, the farmer starts to laugh and jump with joy; the surprised wife asks him: "How can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped in your presence?" The farmer answers: "But I got him! His balls are full of dust!" This sad joke tells of the predicament of dissidents: they thought they were dealing serious blows to the party nomenclature, but all they were doing was getting a little bit of dust on the nomenclature's testicles, while the nomenclature went on raping the people... Is today's critical Left not in a similar position?[7]

The farmer in this joke represents the leftist whose critique of oppressive authority fails to do anything to help those who suffer from its abuses. What seems offensive about the joke is its apparent indifference to the rape of the woman, but this indifference on the part of the farmer is precisely what the jokes criticizes—and is the reason why Žižek tells it.

Everyone on the Left is willing to accept that authority is lacking, but few go where Žižek does to identify the lack in those who challenge the ruling authority. This line of comedy is necessary because too often we fail to see that those who revolt remain divided subjects—subjects still invested in what they revolt against, an investment that limits the radicality of their revolt. Žižek's offensiveness as a comedian is thus integral to his incisiveness as a political thinker. He tells jokes, such as the one about the farmer and his wife, that brush up against the boundaries of acceptability, but in doing so, he provokes those on the Left into a position that doesn't

content itself with challenging the ruling authority. Žižek wants to encourage a revolutionary structural change.

Insistence on Incorrectness

One of the reasons that Žižek attacks political correctness with such vehemence stems from his efforts at provocation. He doesn't perversely transgress the rules of political correctness by using offensive language, employing interdicted expressions, or acting inappropriately. Instead, Žižek argues against the political project that inheres in creating social change through a modification of language. The effect of such a program is not what it claims to be. In the guise of respecting the other, political correctness treats the other as a nonlacking figure. It substantializes the other and turns the other into a noncastrated big Other. This is, for Žižek, the danger that it represents. The very people it aims to respect end up deprived of their lacking subjectivity in the gesture of correctness. The problem is not that correctness changes only words and does nothing about material conditions (although this is clearly a deficit as well) but that its manner of changing words eliminates the subjectivity of those it aims at respecting. Correctness inaugurates a fundamentally reactionary critique of the oppressiveness of the ruling order. It responds to oppressiveness by obscuring the subjectivity of those suffering under this oppression, thereby compounding its nefarious effects. Žižek turns to provocation as a corrective to correctness.

His provocations concerning correctness never resort to the use of slurs or denigrating language. This is what Žižek would do if he were responding perversely to correctness. He typically stresses that he shares the basic goals of the project of political correctness—that of eliminating racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. Žižek is not an economic reductionist who believes that if eliminate capitalism all other social ills will miraculously disappear with it. Despite the worthiness of its goals, however, political correctness cannot accomplish these goals because its language tends to substantialize the other that it attempts to respect.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of the term *Native Americans* to describe people who occupied North America prior to the arrival of European colonists, an example to which Žižek repeatedly returns. What is striking about this example is that it doesn't appear as a particularly egregious case of correctness run amok. Most people, even those outside the bastions of political correctness, use this term to describe the people who first settled North America. It seems like an odd choice for Žižek to insist on so incessantly. But its very ubiquity is itself revelatory.

When discussing the use of this term, Žižek usually refers to a conversation that he once had with some Native Americans who themselves disdained the term precisely for the work that it does to erect

them as figures of the big Other. Unlike people of European descent who experience the alienating effects of culture as they become lacking subjects, the *Native American* hasn't lost the connection with the soil. It is a signifier of substantiality that describes someone not subjected to lack. The *Native American* is a substance, not a subject, which is what transforms this term of correctness into not just an offensive one but also a politically retrograde one. According Žižek's interlocutors, at least the older (and surely more incorrect) term *Indian* has the great virtue of testifying to the stupidity of the original European colonizers, who mistakenly believed that they had reached India via a new route.

If other terms in the lexicon of political correctness don't have such theoretically dramatic shortcomings as *Native American*, each such terminological choice reflects a desire to identify the other in a way that eliminates the alienating distance inherent in the signifier itself. Correctness represents a search for the correct signifier, the signifier that really fits. But this is a political misstep. The only path toward respecting the other lies in recognizing that this other is also an alienated subject, partaking in the problem of castration just as much the most cultured European. Žižek's provocations reveal that political correctness, even when its terms successfully hit the mark, fails to speak to the universality of alienated subjectivity. It posits figures of otherness who escape this alienation. In doing so, correctness leads us to a political dead end.

The Perverse Pseudo-Event

Many leftists look to May 1968 as the last time that a genuine revolutionary moment was at hand in the West. This is the position, for instance, of Alain Badiou, who regards May 1968 as a possible political event in the sequence that runs from the French Revolution through the Russian Revolution. Since the 1960s, politics has taken a decidedly conservative turn. The primary challengers to the mainstream capitalist parties around the world are not communist or socialist alternatives. They are right-wing populists, who inaugurate a more authoritarian form of capitalism when they come to power. In the wake of this profound defeat, it seems that all we can do is to try to restore the radicality of the 1960s or hold on to its embers before they become fully extinguished.

This is not Žižek's position. According to Žižek, May 1968 not only failed to disrupt the capitalist system in an emancipatory direction but had the baleful effect of inaugurating an epoch of generalized perversion, which is more conducive to capitalist relations of production than the system of prohibition that the militants of 1968 struggled against. The definitive slogan of May 1968 – "*Jouir sans entraves!*" ["Enjoy without barriers!"] – articulates a challenge to the traditional limits set up on enjoyment within the capitalist social order. In the eyes of the 1968 militants, every prohibition became a fascistic restriction of our infinite

capacity for bodily exploration and spiritual flourishing. But rather than lead to an alternative to capitalist society, the ethos of this period helped to forge a massive expansion of capitalism's logic into every domain of society. The idea of enjoying without barriers is not, it turns out, an antidote to capitalism's repressiveness. It is the secret logic of capitalism itself, which this supposedly revolutionary period ushers in.

May 1968 purports to abolish the big Other, to eliminate all forms of social hierarchy and authority. But the effect of this pseudo-revolution is to install a more oppressive form of authority than existed before, an authority whose oppressiveness derives from association with transgression. According to Žižek, after May 1968 authority itself becomes perverse, so that it begins to perform transgressive actions. Meanwhile, transgression loses all potentiality radicality. In this situation, the perverse response to authority becomes even less politically viable than it ever was historically. The pervert now plays directly into the hands of the ruling perverse authority, an authority that commands subjects to transgress. In the wake of this turn, the distinction between perversion and provocation must be sustained. Žižek is not the theorist who can provide us a pervert's guide to political transgressions. He is the provocateur who impels us to confront the contradictory points at which the big Other fails, a project he sustained constantly from the appearance of the *Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989.

Given Žižek's position on the politics of perverse acting out, one cannot really imagine a more unfortunate title for his explanations of theoretical concepts than that of the *Pervert's Guide*. We might just chalk up this title to a misstep on Žižek's part or the influence of director Sophie Fiennes in order to dismiss its importance. But there is another possibility. Although provocation is distinct from perversion, the provocateur must constantly flirt with perversion and even, at times, take on the appearance of the pervert. In doing so, the provocateur avoids becoming a figure of authority, which would completely undermine the project of provocation. One must always wonder whether the provocateur is not just a pervert and thus not someone on whom we can rely. The existence of the question about whether Žižek is a pervert or a provocateur is essential to his act of provocation. To provoke is to always appear questionable.

1 One can find a litany of such accusations against Žižek in both the secondary literature on his thought and in the numerous podcasts devoted to attacking him politically. For an especially spiteful example, see Gabriel Rockhill.
2 Lacan 2023, p. 253.
3 Žižek 1993, p. 2.
4 Žižek 1993, p. 2.
5 See, if necessary, Žižek 2014.
6 See, for example, Slavoj Žižek 2020, p. 185-186.
7 Žižek 2013, p. 25. Although Žižek recounts this joke only in an obscure article (not in one of his books) and verbally on just a few occasions, it became one of his most well-known jokes, the joke identified with Žižek more than any other. What underlined this connection was the appearance of a 2013 satirical song, "The Perverted Dance (Cut the Balls)," performed by Klemen Slakonja, who impersonates Žižek (very effectively) in the video. The title of this song also furthers the link between Žižek and perversion that I am attempting to sever.

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Christian Socialism Versus Mystical Materialism

John Milbank

Abstract: To an important degree, Slavoj Žižek, the wild Slovenian populariser of already wild French theory, is now a notable voice of sanity. Most commentators are drawn into either liberal or populist excesses, in however nuanced a way. But Žižek stalwartly opposes ultra-liberal wokeism, while insisting that what is best in the western liberal legacy retains universal relevance, for all the mistaken conflicts that have been undertaken in its supposed defence. He not only defends the legacy of emancipation and enlightenment, but rightly insists that this emerged specifically in the West, and not for accidental reasons. To the contrary, as Hegel saw, it was rooted in Christianity. By seeing this, Hegel, as far as Žižek is concerned, at once fulfilled and surpassed enlightenment. But at the same time, he fulfilled and surpassed the merely religious form of Christianity. This paper is an engagement with his Christian Atheism: How to be a Real Materialist.

Keywords: Žižek, Christianity, Christian atheism, mystical materialism

To an important degree, Slavoj Žižek, the wild Slovenian populariser of already wild French theory, is now a notable voice of sanity.

Most commentators are drawn into either liberal or populist excesses, in however nuanced a way. But Žižek stalwartly opposes ultra-liberal wokeism, while insisting that what is best in the western liberal legacy retains universal relevance, for all the mistaken conflicts that have been undertaken in its supposed defence.

He may be an unrepentant Communist, who believes that liberal democracy is ultimately to be surpassed, but for the moment he is still the defender of an older progressivism. That may have something to do with both his age (he's a fellow Boomer) and his Slavic origins, with their direct experience of a totalitarian regime.

Thus, he is clear that denial of biological gender is both illusory and oppressive to women, and that valid concerns with race and sexual oppression cannot be allowed to override an ultimately more pervasive and universally structuring capitalist oppression.

He is equally clear-headed in resisting any left tendencies to celebrate every form of anarchic disorder as legitimate revolutionary protest. The law may serve capitalism, and be ultimately grounded in state crimes and hidden 'obscene' modes of self-preservation, but nevertheless the substitution of police or mafias as vigilantes for coercive force under state control is still a regression, and a further horrendous stage in the evolution of neoliberalism.

The genesis and history of the latter makes it clear that capitalism would prefer to do without democracy and therefore that democracy, even in the limited form that we know it, puts some constraint upon capitalist extremity. Similarly, the liberal valuing of the dignity and freedom

of the individual places some constraint upon a digital capitalism that is evolving in a 'feudal' direction of technocratic control of people as if they were parts of a machine.

At the same time, Žižek does not buy into what is commonly (but dubiously) taken to be a postliberal position concerning a new foreign policy realism. Just because Ukraine is corrupt and American motives there are compromised does not alter the fact that Ukrainians are rebelling against a criminal aggressor and that they mostly seeking a measure of democratic autonomy. In the same way, just because a new mode of political-economic total surveillance is emerging everywhere, does not mean that we should overlook the degree to which the Chinese fusion of Communism and Capitalism is truly a new mode of fascism, whose influence is to be resisted.

His remarks on ecology exhibit a similar, well-weighted sanity: although ecological emergency is deployed to assume evermore emergency powers and as an excuse to impose yet more austerity and regulation upon workers, nonetheless mounting hydra-headed catastrophe is all too real.

Part of that threat is artificial intelligence, but not because it can really match or displace human subjectivity. Rather, because hegemonic human subjective powers will manipulate it to their own advantage, or allow it an excessive ultimate say which they will not be able to control. Žižek is, in his own gloomy and perverse way, a humanist: the reflexive irony that defines subjectivity as such, its (for him) mysterious extra-voidness, cannot in principle be matched by any material thinking-machine. To this degree Zizek is admirably free of the materialist mystifications indulged in by some Anglo-Saxon rationalists.

There is something then, that with the passage of time, has come to seem agreeably old-fashioned about Žižek. He not only defends the legacy of emancipation and enlightenment, but rightly insists that this emerged specifically in the West, and not for accidental reasons. To the contrary, as Hegel saw, it was rooted in Christianity. By seeing this, Hegel, as far as Žižek is concerned, at once fulfilled and surpassed enlightenment. But at the same time, he fulfilled and surpassed the merely religious form of Christianity.

This thesis lies at the heart of Žižek's latest book *Christian Atheism: How to be a Real Materialist.* Despite almost unbelievably bad editing by Bloomsbury which renders it hard to read (misprints or solecisms on almost every page, besides uncorrected howlers like confusing the Virgin Birth with the Immaculate Conception, and stating that Christianity 'presupposed Judaism'), it is perhaps the best available summary of the comprehensive range of Žižek's thought and of its ultimate foundations.

As regards theology, the pivotal point is that, for Žižek, atheism is not a sort of natural cultural residue that has been overlain by superstition, which one then has to account for. To the contrary, the only route to

genuine atheism and to authentic materialism lies through religion and more narrowly through Christianity. If religion is merely denied as false assertion, then other, equally idolatrous, consoling and illusory assertions will take its place: new gods will replace the old.

The implication here, to put things simply, is that the most profoundly mystical aspects of Christianity are what ultimately engenders a more disillusioned atheism whose core is denial and accepted disillusion – or rather, for Žižek's Lacanianism, an acceptance of the inevitability of illusion and yet an attempted detachment from this inevitability.

What are these mystical aspects? Žižek openly names them the 'theosophical', in a predominantly Teutonic tradition that stretches back to Jacob Boehme, the extraordinary cobbler-speculator of the Seventeenth Century, who was also well-known to Jacques Lacan, Žižek's intellectual master.

Whereas many mystics have spoken of a mystical 'dark night', Boehme located this obscurity ultimately in God himself. We experience finite reality as a strange fusion of unconscious nature and conscious mind, and constantly both witness and repeat the birth of the latter from the former. Since God is the source of all of reality, Boehme projected all these things into the godhead, and not merely the daylight of mental clarity alone.

In doing so, he offered much that his often been considered heterodox from the point of view of traditional Christianity. Yet in a way he was obedient to the radical implications of Creation out of nothing: the finite and the material, in their very principles, do not derive from a perennial 'chaotic' source other than God, as often for pagan philosophers. Equally, the 'theosophic' attempt to penetrate internal divine processes was already opened up by the doctrine of the Trinity, which Boehme elaborated in his own manner.

But if the finite has its origin in God, then also, for Boehme, God is elaborated in finite processes which cannot be simply unnecessary, if they are of divine origin. There must rather be some sort of unique perfection in imperfection itself: in immaturity, time, change, vulnerability, the possibility of error. Ultimately, in the Incarnation, God is drawn into full identity with his Creation and renews it by suffering all its limitations and distorted directions.

Hegel read Boehme in a specific way, which Žižek debatably takes to be canonical. In coming to his eternal self-birth God himself passes through a conflict that is the source of finite evil and violence. Moreover, he does not just emerge eternally from a pre-existential 'dark ground' of wanting or 'drive' and does not just express himself partially in finite. Created terms. Instead, God only merges from a primordial nothing *by* creating and only fully becomes God in the Incarnation.

Further demythologised, or indeed psychoanalysed by Žižek, this amounts to 'Christian atheism'. The death of God the Son upon the Cross

is really the death of God the Father in human consciousness. Yet the atheism involved here is not simply the recognition of past illusion. To the contrary, it is the relocation of seriously divine properties in the human community: the site of the Holy Ghost as 'Church' that will eventually become the project of communism.

The mystical which has here been captured by the atheistic is above all the counter-intuitive primacy of negation. Translated into materialist terms, the theosophic implies for Žižek, ontologically, that first there was 'a real nullity' and that being is an inexplicable and meaningless lapse or deviation from this nullity. Subjectivity is the point at which this truth at the core of reality somehow re-surfaces, such that consciousness is inherently the drive and desire to be united with an underlying plenitude which was never there in the first place, and which subjectivity must posit as its own precondition of a constitutive lack that can never be satisfied.

Matter is, as it were, suspended between an ontological and a subjective void, and yet even its solidity is a mysterious a-voidance, that must therefore (one could surmise) always be hollowed out. This explains why the Lacanian 'real', so often invoked by Žižek, is at once the truly solid outside the symbolic order and yet something so entirely elusive that it is itself in a way yet more virtual.

It may seem strange to insist that such mystical atheism is the 'real' atheism, but the point would seem to be that, if matter is entirely penetrable by reason, then this implies that some sort of divine *Logos* is still in charge, or even that matter can think and God himself is material as well as cognitive. (This was true for the Latin Church Father Tertullian.) But if, to the contrary, all was originally nothing and reality is only the negation of this nullity and subjectivity the negation of that negation – reducing everything to the pure residue of empty accident – then reason is no longer sovereign.

This is why Žižek is drawn to the most radical implications of Quantum Physics and rightly resists facile revisions: at the bottom of material reality, nothing really makes sense – though he seems to overlook the fact that indeterminate waves are not 'nothing', and that Quantum phenomena include mysterious remote co-ordinations, besides exhibiting assertoric variations.

There are three ways in which one can call Žižek's overall vision into question.

First, there is the question of its philosophical conservatism. The reading, after Alexander Kojève and Lacan of Hegelian resolution as non-resolution (which may well be correct) permits Žižek to offer an attractive mélange of the modern and the postmodern, which accounts for much of his campus appeal – keep up with the new hip, while hanging onto all your old teenage faves.

As for postmodernism, uncertainty is enthroned, but not in the Bergsonian-Deleuzian manner of a purely creative positivity which tends

to disallow any foundationalism, or any immanent 'grand narratives' based on such foundations. Instead, by rendering negation both foundational and determinative, the grand-narrative of Marx, based on the Proletariat as supposedly finally human because negatively-emptied subjectivity, and of Freud, based upon the supposedly all determining scenario of infancy (including the greater proximity of the male to the cultural), remain in place.

Behind these grand narratives, and anchoring them, persists also a totally conventional and unchallenged Lacanian view of Cartesian dualism as disenchanting nature and so permitting a rationalist science, along with a true subjectivity, forever lost in an alien cosmos. Equally, the Kantian 'transcendental' turn to investigating the conditions of how we know being as appearance rather that directly studying the structures of being in itself, is taken to be pivotal and irrefutable.

Yet in all these cases the most truly critical thinkers of our era have challenged these big stories and genealogies ever since the Nineteen-Sixties. Nothing in the passive position of the oppressed guarantees their positive embracing of justice in history. If anything, capitalism is *inherently* (as is only now becoming fully apparent) the 'feudal' distortion of otherwise not necessarily exploitative productive by usurious finance and *rentier* capital, and therefore 'all the people', producers and small-time owners besides workers, are equally possible, but not certain agents of transformation. Likewise, nothing in our personal biographies guarantees that the earlier dominates the later; instead, the earlier is often retrospectively transformed by later trauma or epiphany.

In the history of modern science non-dualist vitalisms and panpsychisms have always challenged pure mechanism. As to Kant, far from it being the case that the transcendental has been historicised, as Žižek assumes, it is rather true that from Kant's own time onwards the very possibility of separating epistemology from ontology was denied by those who insisted 'metacritically' upon the historical, natural, humanly corporeal and linguistic entanglement of ideal with real processes.

Among those figures were F.W.J. Schelling and Franz von Baader. And this leads me to my second critical remark. Žižek is fully aware that there existed another, more Romantic interpretation of the theosophical legacy, strongest in the case of Schelling and sustained by the Russian Sophiologists, whose most important thinker, Vladmir Soloviev, he discusses in some careful detail.

For this other reading, if there is tension within God, there is nonetheless no evil (perhaps qualifying Boehme) but rather an always already overcome unification of diverse powers. Evil is instead only present in a fallen finitude, through a contingent failure to integrate potentially warring components, especially Paternal authority and Filial succession. This is possible because a continuity rather than rupture is posited between nature and subjectivity. For this vision, which was inherited, as Sean McGrath has emphasised, by the early Jung, the

unconscious is neither void, nor illusion, nor necessarily repression, but rather a positive source of the mysterious emergence of thought as always most fundamentally a groundless intuition. Schelling and other Romantics (including Félix Ravaisson and the real Bergson) now point the way to a 'post-secular postmodern' that refuses even the fated immanent limitations of the creative, as espoused by the Stoic immanentist Deleuze.

Žižek is by contrast again very conventional in regarding Schelling as but a 'vanishing mediator' towards the more rational and properly disillusioned Hegel. But arguably, the latter's mode of mysticism is just as obscure. If no third thing, or 'point of indeterminacy' mediates the real and the ideal, or nature and mind, then they tend simply to displace each other in a dialectical oscillation that ultimately obliterates both. Is this literal nihilism really easier to believe in than orthodox theology?

In reality, Hegel only proclaims the ultimate to be negation by claiming to close the gap between our understanding and the pre-conditions of our understanding, yet in such a way that effectively hypostasises and ontologises this interval as negation. But then just because the gap is absolutized, and claimed to be not just epistemologically but also ontologically unbridgeable (as if there were a real hole in reality) does not mean that a dogmatic and arbitrary move has not been made. Kant's dubious confinement of thought to appearances, reserving a sublimely unknowable margin, is here, with even less justification. read back into reality itself, thereby identifying the sublime both with our own unknowing and the residue of 'the real'.

Instead of all this, Schelling and the Romantics suggested that we sustain a faith in our dynamic participation in an obscure divine linkage that nonetheless allows us to remain with our common-sense affirmation of the reality of the self, of nature and of their occult interaction.

My third point concerns just this issue of common-sense. I began by saying that Žižek exhibits much of it in relation to his reading of our current politics. Yet in the end the limit of his common-sense is his espousal of disillusionment. That may be much preferable to the illusions of our time, but it is not enough.

To say, for example, that sexual difference is neither natural nor cultural, but rather (anti) ontological is not enough if the lurking Freudian naturalism of the inevitable familial generation of this difference goes unchallenged, as it well might be. Then one can only defend the ultimate and humanly-constitutive value of sexual difference through a 'Schellingian' perspective that allows that we are naturally a cultural animal in a teleological way.

It is also not enough to say that working people have been diverted from their true and empty subjectivity by the false identitarian obsessions of the left, as this fails to see that today they feel deprived even of the residual and positive self-organising dignity that remained to them under industrial capitalism. There is a failure here to see that workers genuinely

wish to sustain their humanity as workers in the face of a new and yet more malign bourgeois elite, and not entirely to remove all hierarchy, which is impossible save as a kind of anarchically mystical dream.

Especially and finally, it is not enough to say that, since desire is illusory, human beings can never really come together, and secretly find even their babies to be persecuting annoyances. The upshot of this is that since, as Žižek declares, socialist equality would unleash a terrifyingly uncontrolled degree of envy and resentment, it could only be managed by universal psychoanalysis, supposedly ensuring mass disenchanted resignation on the part of all. Communism would then require an enforced Christian atheism, enforced by a Lacanian priesthood.

But what are the grounds for Žižek's admirable decency (save for his endorsement of socialist rather than liberal terror)? Why would a supposedly 'feminine' sacrifice of everything for nothing in the face of ontological horror (as in Paul Claudel's play *The Hostage*) bend necessarily in an ethical direction? Why should not those alerted to the emptiness of desire commit violence with indifference, after the path of the *Bhagavid Gita?*

Žižek refuses that path, just as he rightly refuses the mainline Buddhist renunciation of desire as obliterating our humanity every bit as effectively as the abolition of sexual difference or submission to AI. But isn't that because he is more substantively Christian even than he thinks?

If we are in solidarity with the other, then this cannot be a solidarity in the abyss which is indifferent to that solidarity. It must instead imply a lure towards ineffable community, to the possible linking through affinity of individuals and groups, and therefore a faith in the teleological lure of matter towards ontological spirit that cannot be just its empty epiphenomenon.

It is more naturally mystical to suppose that what is in excess of reason is not an implausible hypostasisation of logical negation, but rather the unfolding and unpredictable positivity of both nature and history. It was in this sense that Schelling thought that a more plausibly rational allowance for the primacy of the real and of the actual (which we cannot derive *a priori* from logical potential) actually aligns with the religious and specifically Christian idea of 'revelation'

Through the influence of Soloviev (whose politics was actually liberal-constitutional and whose 'free theocracy', contra Žižek was a bit like Anglicanism...) Schelling's legacy informed one strand of Christian socialism in the thought of Sergei Bulgakov (a big influence on Rowan Williams whom Žižek respectfully criticises as too 'Russian') and others.

One should not see this entire legacy as merely 'ethical' in comparison to the Marxist tradition, but also as more metaphysically and historically coherent. Capitalism is not on any immanently fated agenda, but is rather, as the Christian Socialist Karl Polanyi taught, a contingent 'disembedding' of the economic from the social. Any possible

re-embedding, on a more egalitarian basis than 'feudal' pre-modernity, has to involve an inspiring faith that reality bends towards peace rather than towards violence. And that requires a mystically intuitive insight into Schelling's plenitudinous Absolute as uniting obscure prompting with open vision, not Hegel's sophistic celebration of abyssal conflict.

Of course, Žižek is right to say capitalist ideology disguises antagonisms. But much more fundamentally, modern liberal politics is openly committed, ever since Hobbes, to a thesis of 'ontological violence', combined with the lie that this can be formally and consensually mediated. The problem with left-Hegelianism and Marxism is that they tend to sustain exactly this liberalism in an exacerbated form.

Unlike mystical materialism, Christian Socialism, beyond merely negative 'emancipation', has trust in, and works asymptotically and constructively towards, a universal sympathetic reconciliation of human with human, and humanity with nature. It holds a rational faith which can be gradually justified though practical realisation, instead of seeking implausibly to overcome sublime horror through its apparent refusal which is also, and often admittedly, its embrace.

Negative Community. Marx and Žižek on Capitalist Totality

Clara R. San Miguel

Abstract: In Marx's critique of political economy, modern capitalist society occupies an enigmatic position. In a crucial passage from the *Urtext*, this position appears to be defined in negative terms: *neither* a substantial ethical community *nor* an association of free, self-conscious individuals, or communism. Drawing on Žižek's insights, this intervention seeks to clarify the peculiar negative status of capitalist totality.

Keywords: Žižek; Marx; negation; double negation; modern society; community; Hegel; critique of political economy; inversion.

> It is scarcely surprising that economists have overlooked the form-content of the relative value-expression, subjected as they are to the influence of material interests, if professional logicians before Hegel even overlooked the content of form in the paradigms of judgments and conclusions.
>
> Marx, MEGA II.5, n. 20, p. 32.

1. The "Neither...Nor" of Modern Capitalist Society

In the *Urtext* to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx offers one of the most conceptually precise and incisive portraits of capitalist society in his entire body of work. The passage is dense and demanding, but it deserves to be quoted in full:

> The individuals confront each other only as proprietors of exchange values, as such individuals who have given themselves reified being [*gegenständliches Dasein*] for each other through their product, the commodity. Without this objective mediation, they have no relation to each other from the standpoint of the social metabolism under way in circulation. They exist for each other only as things, something that is merely further developed in the money relation, in which their community [*Gemeinwesen*] itself appears as an external and hence a casual thing with respect to all. That the social connection resulting from the collision of independent individuals appears with respect to them simultaneously both as objective necessity and as external bond *in effect* expresses *their independence*; for *which social being, though a necessity, is* no more than a *means*, *and therefore appears to the individuals themselves as something external, and in money, even as a tangible thing*. They produce in and for the society as social individuals, but at the same time this appears merely as a means for objectifying their individuality. Since they are, on the one hand, neither subsumed under any naturally evolved community [*naturwüchsiges Gemeinwesen*] nor, on the other, consciously communal individuals

> [*bewußt Gemeinschaftliche*] subsuming the community under themselves, this community must also exist as an independent, external, casual thing [*ein ... Sachliches*] with respect to them as independent subjects. This is precisely the condition for them to stand as independent private individuals while at the same time as part of a social connection.[1]

This convoluted passage, rich in Hegelian terminology and dialectical turns, and, to my knowledge, rarely discussed in the literature, contains much to discuss. Before delving into its content, we should first attend to its syntax. If we focus on the last part, the text seems to attribute a peculiar *negative* status to modern capitalist society: "neither...nor". In capitalist society, Marx says, the individuals are *neither* subsumed under a "naturally evolved community" *nor* subsume "the community under themselves" as consciously communal individuals. The status of modern society is then a negative one: "neither...nor", *neither* communal *nor* communal.

Why this double impossibility of community? Does Marx mean that modern society is neither communal *anymore* as it used to be, nor communal *yet* as it will, could or should be? He seems to imply indeed that the specific status of modern society is that of neither communal as in pre-capitalist, organic communities nor communal as in post-capitalist, communist societies. A first question then arises: is Marx making a historical claim in this fragment? It could seem so, if we recall his observations in the section "Forms which Precede Capitalist Production" in the *Grundrisse*. On the other hand, everyone knows that "communism" is the name which Marx consistently gives the future, post-capitalist society. However, as we shall see, things are not that simple. We will come back to this later.

Secondly. What seems clear is that this status of modern society is defined by a form of negativity: the absence of community. But Marx goes further. This absence of a directly social bond does not imply the absence of a social bond whatsoever. Marx wants to understand the specific modern form of social bond which is not a directly personal, communal bond. What kind of social totality emerges in the absence of community? Marx's interest is understanding the specific capitalist modality of a "social metabolism" which must always occur. What we find at work here as the specific capitalist form of social metabolism is, in Marx's terms, the "objective mediation". In this specific modality, the individuals do not confront each other by establishing a direct personal social relationship, but only as commodity owners and exchangers. They do not display a direct "social being", but a "reified being", because their social bond is mediated objectively, by the object-commodity. They do not exist as people to each other but only as owners of things; they do not interact, they only exchange. Their bond is established by and through things. Their only social relation is the reified relation of exchange, which occurs solely

with the mediation of things, the exchanged commodities. The exchange relation is an "objective mediation". Without this objective mediation, they bear no relation whatsoever to one another: they are isolated individuals, independent from one another. They see their social context only as a means for obtaining *things*, be it money or other commodities.

In modern society, social metabolism is organized through this "objective mediation": the social does not appear as directly social because it is not directly social. It is social only through the mediation of things. Accordingly, the social retains a negative status. Modern society is what we called a "negative community". As Marx notes, the community is only defined in terms of what it can offer to the individual: society is only "a means for objectifying their individuality". That is why, on the one hand, their "community" appears as something external, non-qualitative and indifferent. We look at the community as the provider of means for developing our individuality, mainly in the forms of consumption of commodities or neoliberal development of self-valorizing micro-subjectivities. Our "community" is the abstract, quantitative realm of exchange value which receives a tangible body in the form of money. And this is why, on the other hand, the individuals are in a social connection precisely, only, and insofar as they are "independent private persons". They take part in a social context, they are "social individuals"; but their being social consists in developing their apparently non-social individuality by commodity exchange and ownership.

Marx' aim is to understand this specific modern form of the social: the capitalist negative community. With the help of Žižek, we will thus tackle several questions in this text. How can we understand this constitution of society in the absence of community, this social bond through the reified relationship, this bond through independence, this social being through private individuality? How should we understand this paradoxical, negative status of modern society? How is this "neither...nor" character related to its past and future —if we are even allowed to make use of these terms, which is perhaps already too bold a supposition from our side?

2. "The Power of Money", or Value as Separation

In which sense is modern society the negation of a "naturally evolved community"? Backhaus and Reichelt understood a crucial point: Marx' value and surplus value theory is not a theory of the quantities of labour, prices or exploitation, but an exposition of the specific modern-capitalist process of constituting a society [*Vergesellschaftung*] through a series of inversions and reifications and under the real abstraction as general form of social mediation.[2] Marx's question is: how is a society constituted under capitalist conditions? Capitalist society is, precisely, following the classical distinction, a society [*Gesellschaft*] relying on separation and atomization, and not a community [*Gemeinschaft*]. Marx's only aim

throughout his life, from his early readings of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* to his later anthropological reflections on Russia, India and Latin America, was to establish the *differentia specifica* of modern capitalist society as a peculiar form of social totality and to isolate its specific difference from other social formations.

What is modern society? It is first defined as the result of a process of dissolution. Marx affirmed in the *Communist Manifesto* the well-known sentence: all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. Modern society has brought an end to the colorful traditional, feudal, religious and patriarchal forms of community, their organic belonging, and their "natural" hierarchical relations. In the *Urtext*, Marx refers to a quotation from the conservative historian Thomas Carlyle: "In feudal time cash payment had not grown to be the sole nexus of man to man. Not as buyer and seller alone, but in many senses still as soldier and captain, as loyal subject and guiding king, etc. was the low related to the high. With the supreme triumph of cash, a changed time has entered."[3] In feudal times, the social bond signifies "the low related to the high" and it marks this relation as hierarchy, family name, qualitative difference and singularity. However, with "the supreme triumph of cash", a new era enters. In modern capitalist society, social metabolism takes place in a market in which money and commodities, including labour power, are exchanged. With money as general equivalent, every qualitative particularity in interpersonal relations dissolves. No longer does the captain confront the soldier, the lord the peasant, the king the loyal subject, the husband the wife, the father the son. Kings, husbands, fathers and lords are also subject to money. What remains are exchange relations: abstract individuals involved in the transaction who, for one another, represent nothing but the embodied form of exchange value. Thus, says Marx, "the idyllic aura that covered up the transaction in its previous form is dispelled." We are now in what Hegel called the "world of prose". Money as the general equivalent has a dissolving power: its abstraction dissolves the mystical content of previous forms of political domination. "Money has now become the sole *nexus rerum* [the link between things] between them, money *sans phrase*." This means: the exchange relations substitute personal relations of domination.[4]

Money wields a sort of ontologically determining power. In chapter III of *Capital*, in a poetic passage full of literary references, Marx writes about "the power of money".[5] Money is "the radical leveller" which makes everything saleable and buyable, erases every distinction and grants exchangeability as general form of everything that exists, even "the bones of the saints". This is the end of differences in kind and the reign of differences in degree: more or less, not this as distinct from the other; the end of untransferable characteristic and the reign of commensurability. A product, a work of art or a natural resource; everything, thing or person, appears as a mere quantity. The alchemy of money transmutes one thing

into its opposite; as Shakespeare put it, it knits and breaks religions and makes black, white; foul, fair; wrong, right; old, young. Buy a soul, break a promise, sell a king: capitalist Modernity is the reign of a nihilist evacuation of contents and at the same time the prospect of a previously unimaginable power. Money is indeed a commodity, an external object, and as such capable of becoming the private property of any individual: "Thus social power becomes the private power of private persons. The ancients therefore denounced money as subversive of the economic and moral order of things."[6] Marx underlines a certain omnipotence in money which makes the human being turn its back on the very gods in a heretic, anti-divine frenzy: quoting Sophokles' *Antigone*, Marx describes how money demolishes cities, twists minds, separates men from their homes and makes them, in Sophokles words, "adept at every kind of outrage, every godless crime".

It is as if Shakespeare, but even Sophokles, had already foreseen the process of secularization and nihilism involved in the modern generalization of the commodity form; the power of money means the dethronement of gods, meaning, and moral values. What Sophokles and Shakespeare denounced as corrosive, disintegrating, dissolving, nihilist power of money has become the general form of social mediation in modern society: "Modern society, which, soon after its birth, pulled Plutus by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of the very principle of its own life."[7]

It was Hegel who gave a conceptual, systematic expression to this nihilistic, negative character of commodity and money as social mediators in his *Philosophy of Right,* which served as Marx's intellectual formation. It is with Hegel that Marx grasps the principle of modern civil society as one of division. Civil society rests on separation and division of the closed, substantial community, of which the family is a muster. For Hegel, civil society means the impossibility of constructing closed, substantial ethical communities. It is with Hegel that Marx conceives modern society as negation: the negation of community. As Hegel makes clear in the crucial §181 of his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which deals with the transition from the family to civil society, civil society belongs to the stage of "difference" and separation, or it is only a "state of Understanding". Civil society appears as a plurality of atomized individuals; the universal is present but only in appearance. Civil society constitutes "the world of appearance [*Erscheinungswelt*] of the ethical": "The ethical is lost in its extremes, and the immediate unity of the family has disintegrated into a plurality. Reality here is externality, [...]"[8].

3. Nexus rerum, or Value as System

However, one should remember Marx's warning in the *Urtext*: circulation of commodities is a mediation between preposited extremes, but it does not "posit" those extremes. Seen as total process, exchange is itself mediation: "Its immediate being is thus pure shine [*Schein*]"[9]. Separation and individuality belong only to the immediate appearance of the social totality; they do not suffice for its conceptual reconstruction.[10] Here lies a core insight. Money as general equivalent does not only dissolve the "naturally evolved community": it also links. Its separation power is at the same time a linking power: it links insofar it separates, it constitutes insofar as it dissolves. Capitalist exchange, in other words, is a way of constructing a social totality at world-scale. Value is the *nexus rerum*, the bind of all things, and insofar a form of (reified) social relation. In Hegel's terms, multilateral dependence of the individuals constitutes a system, the "system of needs".

Even in the prevalence of the particular, the context and totality of relations which produce the individual persist. Reified relations are still a form of social mediation; even the society which produces the very form of "individual" is still prevalently a society and not a mere addition of individuals. In other words, the individual is always a product of a previous set of relations, not a starting point, even it is what appears first: "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another."[11] The individual and isolated producer and owner which serves as starting point for the political economy is an illusion, a "Robinsonade". As we saw in the *Urtext*, in modern bourgeois society the social nexus appears as an external framework and means towards the individual private needs:

> But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is precisely the epoch of the hitherto most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations. Man is a ζῷον πολιτικόν in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society.[12]

Exchange is then a specific way of constituting the social totality in a non-directly social way. It is a negative *Vergesellschaftung*. This is why value is a social form: a social relation is established through the mediation of things. Marx became Marx when he was able to explain value as social form—as we argued elsewhere, the content of his "value theory" is thus the commodity fetish theory. As Isaak Rubin noted, value does not concern the relationship between labour and products, which is a non-specific relation; value concerns the crafting of a social relation between the totality of the productive forces of a society by the mediation of exchange, which is a historically specific form, the modern capitalist society.

Hence, we must understand that capitalist society is not constituted *either* by individuals *or* by relations: it encompasses both. In this vein, Žižek has argued that the mature Marx, as opposed to his younger texts, no longer deploys the rhetorical figure "instead of" to signal the inversion that would be present in the speculative, Hegelian conception as ideological inversion of the actual, "material" life. When Marx uses this figure in his mature texts, he also underscores that both states, the inverted and the "normal" one, belong to the complex effective reality of capitalist totality. The mystified space of the capitalist totality comprises both the "normal" and the inverted moment.[13] In the same way, Marx is not claiming that the individual is a "mere appearance", but a manifestation of actual social relations which entail a moment of division, inversion and mystification. The young Marx blamed Hegel for developing speculative idealizations "instead of" an account of the actual material social relations. The mature Marx understands that Hegelian speculation and inversion dialectics *are* the actual material social relations of the capitalist totality, which appear as a second nature or "social objectivity". As he claims in the quote from the first edition of *Capital* opening this text, both the logicians and the economists were not idealist enough, not Hegelian enough. The economists were not idealist enough to understand value-form, its inversions, and capital's functioning as totality which retroactively posits its own presuppositions. In this sense, as Žižek has argued, a confrontation with Hegel is needed to develop a "materialist" position.

4. Negative Community. Žižek on Double Negation

Modern society is thus essentially negative: what we named in the title of this text a "negative community", or a place defined by the absence of community. Its form is that of division, particularity and reification. As we saw in the *Urtext* text quoted above, Marx underlines this negative character in modern society by the double negation "neither...nor": apparently, we are in this "not communal anymore" but "not communal yet" moment. In modern society, the ethical life of the substantial organic community has been dissolved, but a new collective consciousness does not yet seem possible. This seems intuitive: what we encounter in modern society are isolated atoms confronted with a machine-like State—a foreign and external Leviathan. The mechanism of the 17th and 18th centuries, from Descartes to La Mettrie and Newton, constituted the true modern social contract. Modernity is that moment in which the old ethical life of the substantial community has died, while the immediate conditions for the emergence of a new post-capitalist or communist form of community have not yet come into being. But is it that simple? How should we understand this negative community?

As we have seen, for Marx, even the society which produces the very form of individuality is still a society and not a mere addition of

individuals. For Marx, the epoch which produces the standpoint of the isolated individual is precisely the epoch of the most highly developed general-social relations. The atomized individual is the product, not the origin; but the product of a social process and a structure which vanishes, leaving only the result. The isolated individual is, in a word, the most refined product of the most complex social relations. In the crucial Interlude 1: "Marx as a Reader of Hegel, Hegel as a Reader of Marx" in *Less than Nothing*, Žižek makes several decisive comments on the matter. Hegel's crucial step to maturity, Žižek argues, occurs when he abandons his Romantic fascination with Ancient Greece as beautiful organic community and fully develops the "mediating role of civil society". What does it mean that civil society is a "mediation"? Mediation to what? As we said, civil society occupies the systematic place of "negation" inside the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. The need thus arises for Hegel, Žižek recalls, to "pass" to the true "State of Reason", or State as proper reconciliation of the individual and subjective dispositions with its universal social substance. But the crucial question is: how must we understand this *Übergang* or transit "to" the State? Žižek's at first sight enigmatic thesis is that civil society is *in itself* already the reconciliation between the particular and the universal:

> It is thus not simply that one has to "overcome" the mechanical or external interaction of civil society in a higher organic unity: civil society and its disintegration plays a crucial mediating role, so that the true reconciliation (which does not abolish modern subjective freedom) has to recognize how this disintegration is in itself already its opposite, a force of integration. Reconciliation is thus radically *immanent*: it implies a shift of perspective with regard to what first appeared as disintegration.[14]

In other words, for Žižek it is precisely *insofar* as civil society *is* the sphere of separation and alienation that it should function *as* the sphere of unity. It is precisely the forms of competition, isolation, conflict and reification which make the individuals completely interdependent in capitalist civil society which thus craft the ultimate social link. The "resources for reconciliation", argues Žižek, must be found "in this very sphere", not in the passage to a higher sphere. The State is no "higher" sphere, but the social energies of civil society considered *under* a different perspective. The State "already" exists "in" the civil society. Far from being simply a corrosive force, the market works as "mediating process" which already forms the basis of a true reconciliation between the universal and the singular[15].

How should we understand this? In the *Capital* passage we quoted above, Marx said that modern society greets gold as "the glittering incarnation of the very principle of its own life". Why does Marx say that money is the incarnation of the very principle of modern society's life?

Because the exchange system as a whole entails the principle of life of modern society—only in a peculiar, by definition reified mode, as it is mediated by exchange of commodities. Marx's clearest explanation of this point is found in his famous letter to Kugelmann:

> Every child knows that any nation that stopped working, not for a year, but let us say, just for a few weeks, would perish. And every child knows, too, that the amounts of products corresponding to the differing amounts of needs demand differing and quantitatively determined amounts of society's aggregate labour. It is SELF-EVIDENT that this *necessity* of the *distribution* of social labour in specific proportions is certainly not abolished by the *specific form* of social production; it can only change its *form of manifestation*. Natural laws cannot be abolished at all. The only thing that can change, under historically differing conditions, is the *form* in which those laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour asserts itself in a state of society in which the interconnection of social labour expresses itself as the *private exchange* of the individual products of labour, is precisely the *exchange value* of these products. Where science comes in is to show how the law of value asserts itself.[16]

The general exchange system and the subsumption of labour under capital is a particular form of organizing the distribution of social labour: a way in which the social character of labour *appears* only as property of the individual products of labour as their exchange value. But what concerns us now is the first point: that the market society or general exchange system, the Hegelian "system of needs", is just a particular mode of appearance or manifestation of the distribution and organization of the total labour of society. The question is: how does this very principle of social life attain an adequate *form*? In this sense, as Žižek argued, the universal is "already" present in the civil society. But what is the logical-conceptual status of this "already"? We must reckon, Žižek says, disintegration as "in itself already its opposite, a force of integration".

What is a stake here is of course how to understand the passage from the "in itself" to "for itself", or the negation of negation. Žižek underscores Hegel's negation as determinate negation: the result of negation is not a pure nothing but related to that which is negated. The double negation is for Žižek repetition in its purest form. His at first perhaps shocking reading of the role of civil society is completely coherent with his reading of the double negation in Hegel. To put it this way: if we understand in which sense the negation is "already" a negation of negation, we understand in which sense the atomized modern society is "already" a new form of community. In this sense, Chris Arthur has argued that the famous "negation of the negation" passage in chapter 24

of *Capital* should not be read from the standpoint of a "historic dialectic", as sequence of historical stages, but as a form of "systematic dialectic" which addresses the structural relations and contradictions of a given system—in this case, capital totality[17].

Discussing Dieter Henrich's thesis that Hegelian dialectics must start with negation, Žižek claims that Hegel does not actually start with negation, but with an "apparent positivity" which upon closer inspection reveals to be incomplete, its own opposite or negation: "[...] the movement proper begins when the original form (which "is" its own negation) is negated or replaced by a higher form; and the "negation of negation" occurs when we realize that this higher form which negated the first effectively maintains (and even asserts more strongly) the starting point, [...]."[18] That is, every apparently immediate or positive form "is" already its own negation: is *in itself* negated, although it does not appear as negated insofar as it appears, by definition, as immediate. To realize this negation, that is, to make the first negation *for itself*, is to obtain a "higher form", a "negation of negation". This is why, he adds, Hegel tells us at the end of his *Science of Logic* that the moments of the dialectical process can be counted as three or as four.

Vincenzo Vitiello has brought to our attention this point in Hegel's logic. The second moment, the dialectical or negative-rational moment, is double[19]. The negative moment is not negative because it negates the positive immediacy of the first moment, but because it negates the negative: it negates the implicit, *an sich* negation of the first moment. Consequently, the negative does not negate something positive and immediate, it negates something negative: it is the mediation of something already mediated. But then, the second moment is not the negative of a positive, but the negative of a negative: the second moment is negation of negation. Then, in rigor, we only have two moments: the negative in itself and the negative for itself. The positive is only the negative considered abstractly. The whole premise is of course that everything is mediated; the immediate or the positive is only the negative abstractly considered. In Hegel's terms, the starting point is "being", the apparent positivity as Žižek noted; but "from the vantage point of the speculative idea", what appeared as immediate positivity appears now as "absolute negativity" which posits itself "as the negative of itself".[20] What seemed positive appears now as negative: the positive is only the negative seen in an abstract way. But in the same way, the negative seen as negative is a double negative, or a negative for itself.

If we apply these reflections to our problem, we arrive at the following conclusion: what appears to us as a *positive*, immediate, organically substantial community is only seen as such "now", from the standpoint of its loss or negation. The seemingly closed and unified community was already traversed by antagonism and always already in the process of dissolution, of losing itself[21]. Likewise, what may appear as a purely *negative* and atomized community in present modern society is

also already negated, as it encompasses, albeit a reified one, nonetheless still a social relation. In short: the *in itself* negative community is *for itself* the negation of the negative community. This is why in the text from Marx's letter to Kugelmann, Marx stressed that general exchange, its atomized form notwithstanding, "is" just a particular mode of appearance of the total labour of society. Seen from the standpoint of Marx, modern society is already *an sich* a fully socialized society. The "neither...nor" position of modern society points to the implicit double negation in its constitution. Modern society, claims Marx, is neither communal in the organic sense nor communal in the post-capitalist sense; it is precisely *insofar* as it is not communal that it appears as socialized. It is precisely insofar as it is negated that the negation can be negated. Of course, that modern society "is" a fully socialized society does not appear immediately, but only from the standpoint of critique.

5. Communism and Critique: The Work of the Negative

Seen from the standpoint of Marx, modern society is already *in itself* a fully socialized society. But this is the standpoint of critique. Should we understand the shift of position pertaining to the perspective of critique as a proper shift to negative community "for itself"? In fact, the definition of communism, which only rarely appears in *Capital*, underlines the "conscious" moment. The use of the Hegelian terms *selbstbewußt* and *bewußt* by Marx cannot be an accident here:

> [...] a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is self-consciously [*selbstbewußt*] applied as the combined labour power of the community. [...] production by freely associated men, [...] consciously [*bewußt*] regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.[22]

In communism, human beings are free and self-conscious because they collectively decide how much labour to apply to which needs and how to distribute it. As opposed to capitalist socialization, the relationship between needs and production is not organized by the blind, eternal mechanism of market concurrence under the despotic command of self-valorizing capital, but in a collective and conscious way. The old ideal of Kantian rational autonomy here is applied to the process of material reproduction. We will only be free when we collectively and consciously self-determine not only, as in the modern tradition, our political sovereignty, but also our material reproduction. In this sense, Marx surpasses and completes the modern republican ideal of freedom.

So, how do critique and "negative community" stand? How do we critically assess the "neither communal nor communal" character

of modern society? Critique deals with the folded and complex reality of capitalist totality and its inverted and reified forms of "objective appearance". Marx' critique of political economy can be read as a critique of "objective appearance" in every level, from commodity fetish to the Trinitary Formula in Book III. [23] The vulgar economist, notes Marx in the letter quoted above, cannot separate the immediate appearance from its conditions or actual relations. He lacks the conceptual mediations which enable science to apprehend the real constitution of modern society:

> The essence of bourgeois society consists precisely in this, that *a priori* there is no conscious social regulation of production. The rational and naturally necessary asserts itself only as a blindly working average. And then the vulgar economist thinks he has made a great discovery when, as against the revelation of the inner interconnection, he proudly claims that in appearance things look different. In fact, he boasts that he holds fast to appearance, and takes it for the ultimate. Why, then, have any science at all?[24]

The "inner interconnection" must remain hidden for the vulgar economist, a slave of reified appearance who apologetically justifies the particular organization of the total social labour under capitalist conditions. But then, what should a critique which is also "science" do? Insofar as it is science, it deciphers the "inner connection" or the systematic articulation of the phenomena. In that, it shows that the *lack* of conscious social regulation of production is the essence of modern society. By that, critique deciphers its negative character: modern society it is a *negative community* because the social life remains "lost in its extremes", as Hegel said, in the exchange form, manifesting itself only as a blind average under the command of an external and despotic power, capital as automatic subject. But the crucial point is the following. From the standpoint of critique, we apprehend that "*a priori* there is no conscious social regulation of production": from the standpoint of critique, we apprehend capitalist society as the negative, as absence of conscious social regulation of production. From the standpoint of critique, *the negative can appear as negative*; the negative can be negative "for itself".

This should be the outcome of the critique of political economy: that the negative community that modern society appears as *negative for itself*. First, because the insight on the constitution of the totality enables us to see its contingence; critique deciphers reified appearance not as belonging to the nature of things but as specific, historical mode of appearance of social relations which constitute the capitalist social totality.[25] Second, because this totality appears as a lack: the essence of bourgeois society consists precisely in that *a priori* there is *no* conscious social regulation of production, in Marx's words. The essence of bourgeois society consists in a "no", in a purely negative determination, a "lack of". This negativity

shows the capitalist totality under a new light. As we mentioned, Arthur gives a fruitful hint with his notion of "systematic dialectic": "[...] I suggest that once again we should refer to the structural contradictions identified by Marx in the *present* system to ground the genesis of communism."[26] Those contradictions or forms of negativity in capitalist totality concern, to name a few, the socialization of the productive forces, the development of technology, the relation to natural resources or the position of the individuals regarding their collective power. The "neither communal nor communal" of modern society should then be understand in this critical, systematic sense: as Žižek argued, the -conflicted- universal is "already" -logically- present in the capitalist civil society.

Perhaps that is all we have. Marx does not offer us a positive view of communism as a "return" to archaic forms—though his later ethnological and anthropological research certainly explored that direction.[27] Nor does he provide a positive, humanist definition of a new form of "human nature", but only allusions to the "realm of freedom" as opposed to "the realm of necessity". Marx also never claimed that communism could be comfortably achieved by simply "writing a book" —supposing writing books is a comfortable task. In a sense, we remain "tarrying with the negative".

1 *Urtext* MECW 29, pp. 467-468. I slightly modified the translation following the German original in MEGA II.2, pp. 53-54. Marx's works are generally cited by the MECW edition.
The purpose of this contribution is not only to show how Žižek reads Marx, but how Marx reads Žižek. Like every great thinker in the canon to which he already belongs, Žižek has entered the asynchronous time of the *logos* and rewritten his own philosophical past. We could even say he has rewritten us, his readers; we could even say that not only do we read Žižek, but he, like the classics, reads us. It is my honour to present this small tribute to his legacy.
2 See R. San Miguel 2025 (forthcoming).
3 *Urtext* MECW 29, p. 431.
4 *Urtext* MECW 29, p. 431. Of course, this does not imply that the exchange relations do not entail relations of domination. See Žižek on commodity fetishism, "relation between things" and "relation between men" in 1989, p. 19 ff., and on the link between the genesis of self-consciousness and modern money 2003, p. 28 ff.
5 *Capital* vol. I MECW 35, p. 142 ff. Capitalism is not an "ontic" or "social phenomenon" but also has a "transcendental-ontological status" (Žižek 2024, p. 16).
6 *Capital* vol. I MECW 35, p. 143.
7 *Capital* vol. I MECW 35, p. 143.
8 Hegel 1991, pp. 219-221.
9 *Urtext* MECW 29, p. 479. The vocabulary of Hegel's logic of essence is present in Marx's reconstruction of capitalist totality.
10 See Pulgar 2021, 74 ff.
11 *Grundrisse* MECW 28, p. 195.
12 Introduction 1857, MECW 28, p. 18.
13 "Marx's thesis is not only that this "inversion" characterizes capitalist social reality itself but above all that *both positions - the alienated inversion as well as the presupposed "normal" state of things - belong to the space of ideological mystification*. That is to say, the "normal" character of the state of things [...] is effectively the everyday form of appearance of the alienated society, the «normal» form of appearance of its speculative truth. The desire to fully actualize this «normal» state is therefore ideology at its purest and cannot but end in a catastrophe." Žižek 2023, p. 22.
14 Žižek 2012, p. 242.
15 Accordingly, Kervégan has argued that Hegel presents civil society in the double-sided vocabulary of the essence and the concept (2005). Žižek is in any case profoundly anti-Adornian here: Adorno reads Hegel's §243-245 on the emergence of the *Pöbel* and the "despite an excess of wealth, not wealthy enough to prevent an excess of poverty" dialectic as a sign of the insolvable conflict of capitalist civil society and the occasion for the emergence of the authoritarian fascist state.
16 "Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868" MECW 43, p. 68. See also Marx on his starting point, the commodity, as the simplest social form in which the labour product is presented in 1969, p. 369.
17 Arthur 2004, p. 111 ff. Marx is concerned with the explanation of a self-reproducing totality, and only from that standpoint is he able to tackle the historical genesis of that totality. See Žižek's reading of this passage by Marx in 1969, p. 72-73.
18 Žižek 2012, pp. 293-294.
19 See Vitiello 2018, "Del Giudizio e del Sillogismo", p. 77 ff.
20 "*Being*, which from the vantage point of the beginning as such appears as abstract affirmation, is thus instead the *negation*, *positedness*, being mediated in general and being *pre*-supposed", Hegel 2012, p. 300.
21 Which, of course, does not mean that community "disappears" in modern society. On the contrary, it returns as ghost.
22 *Capital* vol. I, MECW 35, pp. 89-90.
23 My proposal of reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy as an "inverted world" or "system of appearance" with three forms of fetish (commodity, money, capital) and three forms of mystification (wages, profit/interest, land rent) in R. San Miguel [2018] 2025 (forthcoming).
24 "Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868" MECW 43, p. 69.
25 Marx adds in his letter: "Once the interconnection is grasped, all theoretical belief in the permanent necessity of existing conditions collapses before their collapse in practice." Reification fixes the gaze in the crystallized social relations as if they belonged to the nature of things in themselves; critique allows the positive, apparent nature to appear as a mediated second nature.
26 Arthur 2004, p. 128.
27 See Kohan and Musto 2020.

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Žižek and Hegel: the Courage to Hold on to Paradox

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CRISIS & CRITIQUE

Volume 12/Issue 1

Abstract: This article aims to explain how Žižek sheds light on the Hegelian relation between substance and subject as an "impossible loop" in which both poles asymmetrically presuppose one another. In doing so, it seeks to clarify the distinctive features of his interpretation of Hegel, both in contrast to more conventional readings and to recent efforts to revitalize Hegel's philosophy. The article further argues that, for Žižek—rightly—the Hegelian or dialectical form of understanding the relation between opposites is the only one capable of truly moving beyond the transcendental framework. This is because such an understanding anchors the contradictory nature of that relation in reality itself, and ultimately in the non-coincidence of each term with itself. Finally, the article examines the kind of materialism—also, for Žižek, the only true materialism—that emerges from this affirmation of contradiction as the most real dimension of reality, and as the ground of the irreducible paradoxes that Hegel's writing dares to articulate.

Keywords: Hegel, Žižek, Dialectic, Transcendentalism, Materialism, Contradiction, Parallax.

1 The Paradox of Philosophy: Closure and Openness

Arguably the most frequently cited passage in the history of Hegel's reception is the line from the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* where he declares that philosophy 'is *its own time comprehended in thoughts.*'[1] And yet its precise meaning remains a subject of ongoing debate. Traditionally it has been read alongside another one from the same Preface—almost equally renowned—which states that philosophy, like the owl of Minerva, takes flight only at *Dämmerung*, commonly translated as 'dusk,' that is, when a day, or a world, has already run its course. And from this parallel, it has been inferred that for Hegel, philosophical work consists merely in registering what has already taken place, and that therefore philosophy has no other task but bringing the present to a close (by acknowledging its own closure). In line with this interpretation, Hegel's remark in the same context about philosophy 'painting its grey in grey' has been understood as a frank admission of its passive and abstract character, in contrast to the colorful richness of life. The conclusion has therefore been drawn that, for Hegel, philosophy's role is simply to reproduce reality as it is—or, more precisely, as it has ultimately come to be.

However, the 'apprehension in thought' at stake here is what Hegel elsewhere—such as in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—calls an 'elevation to the concept.' Thus, it seems undeniable that taking its own time, by means of thought, into *what it is* presupposes at the same time connecting it to *something that is not (yet or no longer)*, thereby taking up a conflict or a tension that—inasmuch as the concept is the concept *of* the present—must belong constitutively to the present itself.

It follows then that the philosophical apprehension of the present cannot consist in fixing it as a monolithic and static image. And indeed, when we consider Hegel's portrayals of present reality (including what, from its standpoint, has become the past present), we generally encounter the exposition of a leap in which that reality actually renounces itself. If, for example, we approach Hegel's account of the State in the *Philosophy of Right* expecting to find a faithful, detailed, and complete representation of the political reality of Prussia at the time, we are so struck by its distance from that reality that we cannot help but suspect whether the State described in those pages is not, rather than what the present *is,* what it *ought to be*—or even, given that the exposition immediately inverts it into the state of war, that its truth may lie, in fact, in *the other of what it is*, in its collapse or, in any case, in what it (still) is not.

The standard interpretation of Hegel, which has prevailed in various forms for more than one hundred and fifty years, has interpreted that, in presenting his philosophy as 'absolute knowing,' Hegel—in apparent harmony with the image of the owl of Minerva—expressed his claim that it had not merely brought a historical episode to its closure but the entire course of history. Understanding his principle as a subject that is absolute in the sense that, leaving ultimately nothing outside itself, achieves full self-coincidence—as a *sub-jectum* in the proper sense—, these readings have indeed interpreted that Hegel claimed that his philosophy, by referring history back to that principle as both its alpha and omega, had depicted it as a closed circle. Thus, the philosophical elevation to the concept of present reality would consist, in the end, merely in sanctioning reality as the finally adequate expression of spirit—the positive *sub-jectum* that, according to this interpretation, Hegel's philosophy presupposes as both the origin and the *telos* of history—and thus in bringing history as such to a close. And so, in the end, philosophy would not be called upon to project or transform anything.

However, the revival of Hegel's thought over the past forty years has sought, from various angles, to defend his philosophy as a thought of openness, open toward the future and, therefore, unlike the traditional view, still 'relevant,' capable of helping us to project our own future. These more recent readings, paying more attention to Hegel's depictions of the present—which, in truth, do not coincide with any actual present—than to those passages that stress the merely contemplative attitude of the owl of Minerva, have generally understood that the distance Hegel establishes between what merely exists and its concept somehow serves the design of what is to come, of another, 'better' existence; that in Hegel's philosophy, the exposition of the (past) present is complemented by the projection of a future present that will be superior, that will 'sublate' it. They insist, for this very reason, that it is no coincidence that Hegel's term for the philosophical hour in the aforementioned passage is *Dämmerung*, which does not only refer to dusk but also to dawn—the beginning of a

new day. Inclining to read Hegel's principle not as a positive *sub-jectum*, but as negativity itself, these interpretations generally understand the philosophical act of elevating the present to the concept as an unveiling of its distance from what it is not (yet) but ought to be, and thus take Hegel to be already indicating, in a positive way, the direction of rational progress—pointing the way to a more rational future.

Žižek's position—frequently insisting that Hegel's description of the present consists precisely in revealing the rupture or fracture that the present is—is, in this regard, unique.[2] His entire work is, of course, marked by his opposition to the conventional interpretation of Hegel, but for quite some time now, he has also resisted the more recent revivals of Hegel's thought, especially those by Pippin and Brandom. Yet his position should not be mistaken for a middle path, a 'third way' between these two extremes, nor for a standpoint that seeks to encompass or reconcile them from a neutral outside. On the contrary, Žižek opposes both interpretations because he detects in each the same fundamental flaw: the attempt to 'resolve' Hegelian ambivalence. This effort is misguided, because it presupposes that reality—also for Hegel—must coincide with itself, and that, therefore, philosophy, which apprehends it by grasping the unity of its identity, will also exhibit that unity. Accordingly, when philosophical exposition—such as Hegel's sometimes—falls into ambiguity, this is to be treated as a deficiency, often merely provisional or apparent, in its approach—one that, in any case, can eventually be 'resolved.' Against this, Žižek's idea is rather that these very ambiguities in Hegelian thought are the 'indicator' of its truth. Since reality is essentially contradictory, they prove that Hegel's philosophy reflects the deepest truth of reality. Žižek's position, then, is to affirm these ambiguities as irreducible paradoxes by rooting them in reality itself. In fact, for this phenomenon—the coexistence of two irreconcilable standpoints that correspond likewise to two dimensions of reality that cannot be integrated into a single 'ontological edifice'—Žižek has coined the term 'parallax' and defended its irreducibility.[3]

This explains why his own work, far from overcoming the ambiguity we began with, continues to repeat it. Again and again, we encounter in his writings the simultaneous affirmation that philosophy is to merely 'take note' or 'register' what is—that is, the present in which we are already always situated—and that it also demonstrates the necessity of action in the most radical sense, of truly transformative or revolutionary activity. More than this, Žižek asserts that philosophy itself, if it is true philosophy, properly 'acts,' that it transforms its own presuppositions—just as Hegel's philosophy does.[4] But what I wish to emphasize now is that this Žižekian way of viewing (Hegelian) ambiguity—which roots it in reality and leads him to repeat it—is itself Hegelian. That is to say: as Žižek insists, it is Hegel himself who transposes the contradictions of our standpoint into reality itself and thereby affirms the reality of contradiction.[5] And this is precisely

what defines the perspective they share—the one Žižek finds in Hegel and adopts for himself—namely, the properly dialectical one.

Thus, if we understand the precise terms in which Žižek interprets the relationship between the two sides of this (or these) paradox(es), we will also grasp his general interpretation of Hegel's position—the reason why he simultaneously rejects both the 'Hegel of pacifying closure' and the 'Hegel of infinite openness.' We will understand why Žižek's reading, by understanding in truly dialectical terms the relationship between closure and openness produced by philosophy—refusing both to choose between them and to harmonize them—corrects both dominant hermeneutic lines at once.

Žižek's idea is that true philosophy—philosophy that, like Hegel's, regards reality dialectically—does nothing more than describe the present reality and yet, at the same time, transforms it, *because* in doing the former it already does the latter.[6] That philosophy works only in the dark means that it portrays reality only once it is complete—taking it, therefore, as a totality, as the rational order in which we are always already immersed and which constitutes our inescapable point of departure. Unlike other disciplines, philosophy neither concentrates on one of its particular aspects nor considers reality as a mere sum of particulars; instead, it sees it as a whole of mediations or interactions and, in this sense, contemplates it in its universality and its immanent necessity. To describe it in this way is, without doubt, to close it upon itself, to draw it in the form of a circle.

However, if this is done rigorously—'to the end'—one necessarily discovers within it something that resists mediation, something im-mediate, which is therefore always already excluded from the totality of mediations that the order is in itself—something within it that it excludes. The dialectical gaze is precisely that which grasps the necessity of this exclusion—that the order must exclude one of its elements—and which furthermore recognizes in this necessity the order's own need to negate its internal conflict. That is, the perspective that apprehends the order of reality in its totality in order to expose its necessity is precisely the one that perceives in the excluded element its own cleft and, in its exclusion or negation, the very condition of possibility of the order as such—that is, of reality's self-understanding and self-presentation as a whole. It sees how reality—the reality to be portrayed—can only be what it claims to be insofar as it inverts itself into its other, insofar as it leaps into pure immediacy. And thus, it sees in this element *the negative* of that order that expresses its truth: in that immediate, particular, and contingent element, it discerns the totality of mediations—appearing as necessary universality—in its inverted form. Žižek's favorite Hegelian example of this structure, taken from the *Philosophy of Right*, is the monarch. He is the element of the State who, chosen by blood, is 'legitimated' solely by contingent, arbitrary, and im-mediate nature; but precisely because—according to his non-rational legitimation—he performs nothing more than the empty gesture

of signing—because he himself is merely 'the dot on the *i*' within the State—he constitutes the suture that renders the State a closed circle of mediations, the rational totality of a network of necessary connections, and thus proves to be its ultimate pillar.[7]

In short: to describe reality in its full scope, to close it in the form of a circle, necessarily entails also recognizing the element that, by externalizing and inverting its internal fracture, makes its *positive* being possible—that allows it to order itself precisely in the form of a totality. But the paradox lies in the fact that this element must also be recognized as preventing it, at the same time, from being such a consistent and complete circle—as breaking the very circle it closes or the very closure it sustains. As Žižek repeatedly puts it, this element is revealed as both the condition of possibility and of impossibility of reality (as a rational or symbolic order).[8] Accordingly, the dialectical gaze that uncovers it can only complete the circle by opening it; it can only portray the present by pushing it beyond itself—by hollowing it out and transcending it, transforming it into something other. In merely registering what is, it already re-inscribes within it something whose exclusion was its support; it already reveals that the truth of its network of mediations entirely depends on an immediate element—that, in fact, the network itself is nothing other than this marginalized element: 'spirit is a bone.'[9] At that point, philosophy has already redoubled the self-negation enacted by reality itself: it has negated the negation of its rupture. This redoubling is nothing other than the repetition of reality's own self-negation—the way in which, to constitute itself as a positive order, reality must negate itself (negate the fracture that is its non-origin) or leap to what it is not, into the other of what it is. If philosophy remains faithful to reality only by carrying it beyond itself, this is because reality is only what it is by negating itself. This is its contradiction—and philosophy, indeed, merely registers it. Returning to our example: the moment the *Philosophy of Right* recognizes the monarch at the summit of the State in order to register the completeness of its *innere Verfassung* and to 'sanction' it, it simultaneously discloses its internal cleft and delivers it over to war—or rather, reveals it as always already resting on the (possibility of) war.

This is the sense in which the formal, merely constative, gesture of 'taking note' is revealed to be, in itself, performative—indeed, the only gesture capable of enacting a true transformation, one that is inscribed in the innermost structure of reality itself, in its very contradiction.[10] The internalization of the (apparently) external limit effected by this mere 'registration' accomplishes two things: on the one hand, it abolishes the tension between the portrayed reality and the external alterity signaled by that limiting element; on the other, it reinscribes that external distance as the internal antagonism of reality itself—as its non-origin or its 'zero point'; it reclaims the external tension as immanent contradiction. This is the sense in which philosophy only reconciles—or closes the circle of reality—insofar as it destroys its identity or reveals it as a non-totality, and the

sense in which Žižek affirms that reconciliation consists in nothing other than the recognition of the irreducibility of antagonism, of the impossibility of any positive reconciliation.[11] For this reason, when Žižek—provocatively echoing Marxist discourse—says, for example, that it is time to stop transforming the world and instead to interpret it, he is not, in my view, capitulating or renouncing transformation, but rather offering the very key by which it might finally become real.[12]

2 The Paradox of Symbolic Reality: Mediation and Immediacy

Philosophy, in short, opens the future by closing the present, because it finds the present's point of suture precisely in what exceeds it. To clarify the reason for this constitutive excess of reality, we must understand precisely how mediation—what lends reality the appearance of a rational totality—and immediacy—that dimension embodied by the point of suture as its internal limit—are articulated within it.

To that end, let us look more closely at what dialectical thought does and uncovers in the gesture just described—namely, the move of referring mediation back to immediacy.

That philosophy is the apprehension of the present means, as we have already said, that it is always directed toward understanding the 'rational order' to which we belong: the symbolic—linguistic and historical—or, in Hegelian terms, spiritual totality in which we are always already embedded. It is this totality that constitutes the reality of our present—our reality—and, along with it, constitutes us. It grants us an identity by assigning us a place within the network of language and binding us, thereby, to a particular historical time. We call it 'rational' in the sense that it understands itself as a consistent and complete whole of mediations—or, in Hegelian terms, as a reality that is 'for-itself', subjective (in the broad sense) or spiritual—as opposed to what merely is 'in-itself', that is, substantial or merely natural.

Accordingly, what was stated in the previous section implies that the dialectical perspective—the one Žižek finds in Hegel and he himself adopts—ultimately refers both the linguistic and historical dimensions of symbolic reality back to a moment of immediacy. On the one hand, it refers the linguistic network back to one of its elements: a 'signifier' which, by virtue of its immediacy—its non-relation to other signifiers—cannot have acquired any meaning and thus coincides with Lacan's 'empty signifier.' On the other hand, it traces each historical narrative of the present back to its constitutive presupposition of an origin which, insofar as it is 'posited' as given or immediate, likewise escapes the historical fabric, and thus reveals that origin, every origin, as a myth.

Dialectical thought thus recognizes that symbolic reality—mediated, subjective, or negative—rests upon its absolute other: a pure positive immediacy, or a purely substantial moment. In seeking to portray it as it is,

the dialectical perspective uncovers its very condition of impossibility—the element that prevents it from being what it claims to be. Yet insofar as, as we have seen, this element merely expresses (and simultaneously displaces) the gap within the symbolic order itself—that is, within the network of sense of the present—inasmuch as it results solely from the immediate inversion of that non-being into being, it becomes clear that the pure positivity that this element harbors only a void and that it can only emerge from a leap that conceals itself, from a deception. In other words, this immediate element is, in itself, a fetish. Its discovery exposes not only the incompleteness, inconsistency, and contingency of the order it supports—its character as a non-totality—but also its fundamentally deceptive, ideological nature: it disqualifies it as a genuinely rational and total order.

At the same time, however, this immediate element is also revealed as the condition of possibility of the (linguistic and historical) order to which it belongs—and which it simultaneously exceeds. It is the signifier through which all others are mediated and gain meaning (or symbolic identity), and it is the past against which any present is constituted. That it is the condition of possibility of the symbolic order—what enables the order to be what it is—and at the same time that which that order must displace beyond itself—as its outside or its limit—also in order to be what it is, confirms that it merely gives expression to the internal breach that constitutes the order and that the order itself cannot tolerate. For this reason, the dialectical approach alone can discern in this element the ultimate truth of the symbolic order. It sees that this element expresses the void of the order's origin and, simultaneously, the order's original need to negate that origin in order to attain a positive identity—by opposing itself to it and thereby constituting itself as a consistent totality.

This element, precisely insofar as it is the inversion of the totality of mediations, is that totality itself in its truth: it is this totality that, in order to be what it is, must *posit* itself in its inverted form—and at the same time negate this positing (negating what has been posited as merely 'posited', that is, *presupposing* it (as prior to the act of positing)). Or, to put it in a single formula: it is the totality that must pre-suppose itself as the other of itself.[13]

We are thus confronted with a concrete realization of the 'dialectical principle'—central for Žižek—according to which substance—any immediate instance taken as given or 'in-itself'—ultimately expresses nothing other than the subject's non-coincidence with itself (understanding here 'subject' in a broad sense, as the mediating movement that defines the mode of being 'for-itself'). But in claiming that this 'substantial' element is in fact the result of the negation that the 'subjective' order performs upon the breach or inconsistency that originally constitutes it, we are also recognizing that immediacy, as such, always arises from mediation—that it is mediation which 'posits' it (as both its presupposition and its opposite).[14]

From this vantage point, we can understand both the origin and the grain, or better the 'moment' of truth contained in the more conventional readings of Hegel—those that have presented his philosophy as the culmination of modern idealism. These interpretations begin from the uncontested insight that Hegel demonstrated how any entity that appears to be 'in-itself', as immediate or substantial, is in fact 'posited' or produced by a mediating process. But they have used this insight to dismiss Hegel's philosophy as a form of panlogism: a system that, by laying out the mediating movement of the absolute subject, reduces all alterity—all substantial immediacy—to a mere moment within that order of mediations, to a moment *of its own*. On this basis, these readings conclude that Hegel's thought achieves—or claims to have achieved—the final self-coincidence of subjectivity, and of philosophy itself insofar as it merely exposes that subjectivity. The circle that (symbolic) reality—language and history— always already tries to draw would come to its definitive closure, and with it, the circle of philosophy.

This reading applies not only to simplistic and outdated versions, such as the early Charles Taylor, but more broadly to the tradition that stretches from classical Marxism to Habermas's Critical Theory, as well as to the line that runs from Heidegger (especially the early Heidegger) to deconstruction—not necessarily to Derrida's own, but certainly to that of many of his followers (for instance, Gasché).[15] Even a philosopher like Adorno, who recognized the truth and subversive potential of Hegel's unmasking of immediacy as a product of mediation, ultimately viewed this move as forcing Hegel into idealism. Accordingly, Adorno found himself trapped in a dilemma that might well be considered the central impasse of his own philosophy: the difficulty of remaining faithful to Hegel's insight—one he regarded as irrefutable—without abandoning his commitment to materialism, that is, to the affirmation of the 'right of the object'—ultimately of the irreducibility of a certain form of in-mediacy.[16]

What all these interpretations have in common is the claim that the immediacy which constitutes the Other of the order affirmed as a consistent totality—or, equivalently, of the subject that claims full self-identity—is, for Hegel, something merely 'posited', and, certainly, posited by the (mediation of the) subject: ultimately, a property of subjectivity itself. To grasp the implications of this conclusion, the full scope of what this 'other' refers to should be kept in view: it encompasses everything that resists the movement of mediation or subjectivity—be it a given or 'first' nature, a transcendent God, a noumenal 'thing-in-itself', a signifier whose identity does not derive from its relation to others and thus carries no meaning, or a myth that insists on its exteriority with respect to the weave of rational history.

These interpretations, to the extent that they attribute to Hegel a conception of this alterity that guarantees the subject's eventual reappropriation of it, treat the persistence of such alterity in his system as

no more than a provisional remainder—not yet mediated or integrated—and take the central aspiration of the system to be the overcoming of such remnants: the sublation of every residue of opacity in language (not to mention its ideological nature, had such a notion been available in his time) and every mythical shadow in history—every trace of contingency. In short, they interpret Hegel's project as seeking to bring about the definitive closure of language into a fully self-transparent totality and of history into a final, completed narrative. And this also becomes the key to their interpretation of one of the passages from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* cited at the beginning: that philosophy takes flight at the onset of dusk has, for many decades, been taken to mean that his philosophy saw itself as having sanctioned the reality of its own time precisely because it judged reality to have already fulfilled that aspiration—and thus that there remained no space for the new, and *a fortiori*, no space to think it.

As we anticipated, more recent interpretations, paying attention to the fact that, in Hegel's philosophy, immediacy is never fully reduced—that there is always something that resists mediation—, have sought to avoid that conclusion. And, by doing so, these interpretations have highlighted the one-sidedness of the standard reading. In general, they argue that even though Hegel affirms that immediacy always arises from mediation, he also acknowledges that there is no rational, universal, and necessary order that is not haunted and disrupted by a contingent, particular remainder. More specifically, they maintain that for Hegel, history cannot reach a final endpoint, because he recognized that spirit can never fully or definitively reduce (first) nature. If the negating or mediating movement never ceases in his system—if every closure gives way to a new beginning—it must be because Hegel himself understood the irreducibility of its other. The recognition of this irreducibility—generally claimed by contemporary thought in opposition to Hegelian dialectics (as conventionally interpreted) and reflected in the 'bad infinity' that characterizes certain philosophical tendencies (think, for instance, of the open-ended movement of negative dialectics or the ongoing labor of deconstruction)—is precisely what these revivalist interpretations, especially in the Anglosphere, seem to find already in Hegel's philosophy.

However, the risk these readings run is that of 're-Kantianizing' Hegel—reanchoring him in the dualism between subjectivity as mediating force and a substantial remainder as immediacy, or, as Žižek sometimes puts it, between *logos* and reality. Indeed, judging by the criticisms the various versions of this revival direct at one another, one might say that the point they all agree on is that Hegel must not be read as a monist, and that the only way to secure this is by interpreting him as a sophisticated variant of Kantianism. McDowell, for instance, has sought to challenge the image of Hegel as a panlogicist—as the idealist monist depicted in the conventional reading—by emphasizing the persistence of nature in Hegel's work. To do so, however, he has had to insist on the difference

between this nature and the 'thick' modern or Kantian nature, which is wholly external to spirit—that is, on how Hegel redefines nature so that it can persist. But then Pippin, observing that this redefinition risks re-enchanting nature in a way that threatens the specificity of subjectivity, has warned that such a reading may end up attributing to Hegel the 'complementary' form of monism—namely, the materialist one. In response, Pippin reasserts the primacy of the subject (or mediation) in Hegel's philosophy and can only avoid falling back into the conventional view by stressing Hegel's redefinition of subjectivity—emphasizing the opacity and dynamism proper to the Hegelian subject. It is then only this trace of immediacy or naturality within subjectivity, that would save us from the purely idealist monism traditionally ascribed to Hegel. All this makes clear, in my view, that the underlying assumption uniting these interpretations is that Hegel's thought deserves to be redeemed only insofar as it preserves a certain exteriority between the subject and its other—that is, insofar as it remains within a broadly Kantian framework.[17]

Žižek, of course, does not share this position. To begin with, his aim is not to rescue Hegel from the conventional interpretation by arguing that Hegel gave more weight to immediacy, or to the 'right of the object,' than has generally been assumed. His project is more ambitious. It is not simply to show that Hegel—before Adorno or Derrida—recognized that necessary persistence of the other of the subject that denies the subject the possibility of achieving full autonomy or sovereignty, that prevents it from closing in on itself once and for all. Rather, Žižek contends that Hegel went much further—toward the recognition that this other, without being anything positively given, inhabits the subject at its innermost core and denies it its own identity.

We can now anticipate what Žižek has to say to each of the two major 'solutions' to Hegel's ambiguity concerning the relationship between mediation and immediacy. To the first, he insists on the irreducibility of immediacy in Hegel: even if mediation is what 'posits' every immediate instance, this positing is, for mediation itself, inescapable—it is something that is 'given,' stemming from an inconsistency that both belongs to and precedes mediation. To the second, he responds that Hegelian immediacy is not an external limit to mediation, but its most internal other—that it finds its truth precisely at the very heart of mediation, in mediation's constitutive failure.

How, then, shall we further specify the properly dialectical relation between these two moments—between subjectivity and substance? What follows will attempt to present the shape of this relation in positive terms, no longer merely in reaction to other interpretations.

3 The Paradoxical Relation Between Subject and Substance, or the Subversion of Transcendentalism

One might say that neither of the two 'ideal positions' we have sketched in order to organize the main interpretations of Hegel ever truly breaks with the Kantian framework. For Žižek, this is precisely why they 'miss' Hegel, why they fail to recognize 'the new' his philosophy introduces. The first, focusing solely on the claim that 'all immediacy arises from mediation,' understands Hegel as simply pushing to its extreme the transcendental insight that reality is always framed, mediated by conditions of possibility (or by the transcendental subject), and that, by absolutizing the frame (as mediation), he sought to strip the thing-in-itself of its indeterminacy and unknowability—to reduce it as immediacy. The second interpretive line, as we have seen, in affirming the persistence in Hegel's work of a certain positive immediacy (which has 'not yet' been mediated), brings his thought back—although without explicitly acknowledging it—to a more or less softened, fluidified, or blurred version of Kant's dualism. In both cases, then, Hegel is read through Kant in the sense that the interpretive horizon remains bound to the coordinates—and the dilemma—that Kant established and, as a result, these readings cannot seriously consider the possibility that Hegel may have moved beyond them. Thus, in the first case, Hegel would have attempted—according to most interpreters, unsuccessfully—to resolve the Kantian dilemma by choosing one of its horns, while in the second, he would have 'resolved' it merely by repeating it in a more sophisticated and 'digestible' version. In the first, Hegel would be mistaken for going beyond Kant (and thus falling back into pre-critical metaphysics), while in the second, he would be right only insofar as he actually made only minimal—in reality merely apparent—modifications to Kantianism. But the real problem lies in the fact that these very interpreters of Hegel are unable to think—or read—him from any framework that is not the Kantian one.

In various texts, Žižek shows that the Kantian duality between reality and the transcendental horizon is itself the 'transcendental framework' of contemporary thought as a whole—it serves as the organizing axis for all the major philosophical trends of the last two centuries. Its persistence explains that thinkers have either radicalized the transcendental horizon, as Heidegger did; or attempted to reclaim an ontological perspective, as in the case of the natural sciences, by reasserting a discourse about reality 'itself'; or else, like McDowell, reaffirmed the Kantian dualism in updated form, by acknowledging an (immediate) reality that is nevertheless always apprehended within a pre-given horizon—that is, always mediated.[18]

It is no surprise, then, that Žižek attaches such importance to the transition from Kant to Hegel. To truly understand what is at stake in Hegel's shift away from the transcendental framework is not only to understand what makes Hegel genuinely original, but also to

glimpse—through Hegel—a way out of the conceptual straitjacket that constrains contemporary thought. It opens the possibility of a genuinely new philosophical position. It means understanding the paradoxical relationship that, for Hegel, both binds and separates the transcendental horizon and reality, mediation and immediacy, or ultimately, subject and substance. And we shall see that it is from within this paradox that the very ambiguities which, in the manner of 'parallax,' traverse dialectical thought can be explained—above all, how that thought can be described simultaneously as both idealist and materialist, and thus how its work can be presented as at once passive and active, descriptive and performative, reconciliatory and subversive.

For Žižek, the mere fact that Hegelian philosophy affirms—as we have already noted—that we can only think reality from within the 'rational order' in which it is always already framed, and within which we are always already embedded, proves that it has internalized the Kantian turn. Philosophy can only consist in the apprehension of the present—linguistic and historical—because we can never leap beyond it, never place ourselves in an 'outside' position with respect to the symbolic order that this present constitutes. This is why Žižek argues that it is the dialectical approach that leaves no room for any kind of metalanguage or for the projection of a (political) future to be realized. Both of these options rest on the fantasy of escaping the present, of stepping outside our standpoint in order to observe it from some beyond.[19]

At this point, Žižek also acknowledges the impasse of contemporary thought, whose different strands have, on the one hand, often claimed the merit of having finally eradicated the 'outside' that lingered in Kant's transcendentalism—the possibility of a metalanguage—but which, on the other hand, in order to avoid falling into the supposedly circular logic of Hegelian thought, and to preserve, against it, the openness of language and history, have ended up reintroducing that outside through the back door. In this sense, Žižek turns, for example, against Gasché's version of deconstruction, which ultimately positis the exteriority of an infrastructural 'outside' in order to prevent the movement of *différance*—which already always *re-marque*s itself—from closing upon itself.[20] For the same reason, he also rejects contemporary philosophical efforts—Habermas being the paradigmatic case—that aim to maintain the possibility of positively projecting a realizable future. For Žižek, to take seriously the fact that the standpoint we are in belongs to the present entails accepting that the (true) future—the emergence of something that is not (yet)—can only arise from the collapse of our present and its coordinates, of what now is and of what we now are. And, because of this, it is impossible to anticipate its positive content. This is also why Žižek turns against interpretations of Hegel like Brandom's, which, although they avoid accusing Hegel of closing off history, attempt to find in his thought support for thinking the future from within our present—as a progression toward greater

rationality. Žižek sees clearly that insofar as Brandom does not confront the fact that, from the Hegelian perspective, the future can only break in as an 'event', he is implicitly presupposing a metalanguage—the possibility of stepping back to adopt a standpoint above the present from which to define what is rational and desirable.[21]

Let us return, then, to Žižek's interpretation of the shift Hegel makes beyond Kant. What is most interesting about Hegel's radical embrace of the transcendental turn is that it ultimately leads him to 'violate' Kant—to transgress Kant's prohibition on asking about reality (in itself). Žižek repeatedly emphasizes that Hegel dares to do 'metaphysics' by posing the forbidden question of how reality itself must be structured in order for something like subjectivity to appear—that is, the very (transcendental) framework within which reality is already always given to us. From his earliest work on Hegel, Žižek has described this bold move made by Hegel as the crucial gesture that must be repeated: to 'reframe the frame', to reinscribe the subjective horizon back into reality or substance.[22]

Now, this might seem to entail—contrary to what we have just said—a leap outside the framework itself. And this is precisely why it is so important, for Žižek, to insist that this operation can only be carried out from within—by descending into the framework that we are until we 'hit bottom,' until we reach the 'blind spot' of our own standpoint, the point at which our subjectivity 'excesses' itself. It is in the very core of subjectivity that it breaks, that it ceases to be what it is and reveals itself as the other of itself.[23] The question, then, is oriented toward the point where subjectivity confronts both its own lack and its own excess. At no point does it involve stepping into an external territory, nor does it even presuppose the positive existence of such an outside.

What matters here is remaining in the rupture—that is, understanding that the excess of the subject, that carries it toward its Other, coincides with its own lack. It matters because it then becomes clear that this Other—which, as the other of the subject (of being-for-itself or mediation), is necessarily substance (being-in-itself or immediacy)—is nothing but a void. Since subjectivity, broadly conceived, is the movement of mediation that makes up the whole of (symbolic) reality, that which inhabits it as its Other can have no positive content; it can only be (for subjectivity), in fact, a nothingness. And yet, insofar as it is also what lies 'at its bottom,' the nothing on which the totality rests, it appears as its very ground—and thereby reveals the ground of this subjective totality, or of this subject, as a lack of ground. This is important because it shows that the reality which exceeds the subject—the substance Hegel dared to pursue—is indeed the truth of the subject, what lies at its core, and yet it is nothing other than the subject's own fracture. Put differently: the substance we find is purely negative, the breach of substance, or substance as breach.

From his earliest readings of the 'reflection' chapter in the 'Doctrine of Essence,' Žižek has consistently argued—against the

standard interpretation—that substance (which initially appears in 'external reflection' as essence opposed to appearance) is ultimately, in 'determinate reflection,' revealed to be internally broken, and therefore already subjective *in itself*. This is how he reinterprets the fact that, of course, in this final moment, substance becomes subjectivized. The traditional reading, by contrast, holds that this simply means substance is revealed as a mere moment of the subject, and thus interprets this outcome as the confirmation of the absolute character of the subject, in the sense that nothing would remain truly other to the reflexive movement—the activity of mediating, negating, or positing—that subjectivity is. But Žižek has shown that the insight that any (positive) substance is 'posited' by the subject—that, in our terms, all immediacy arises from mediation—emerges already in the moment of 'external reflection,' and that, for this reason, it cannot be taken as the final truth. That final insight, grasped only from the dialectical standpoint (of 'determinate reflection'), tells us something entirely different: that substance is *subjective in itself*, such that the subject's own positing activity—the 'subjective subjectivity' that posits all external and positive substance—must have behind itself this deeper, 'substantial subjectivity,' this fracture inherent to immediacy or this broken immediacy.[24]

For Žižek, then, just as important as affirming the irreducibility of immediacy or substance in Hegel's philosophy is recognizing its strictly negative character. The former affirmation refutes the conventional reading that presents Hegel's absolute as the totality of mediations that annihilates all immediacy and, in doing so, ascribes to his thought the flawed idealism of panlogism. But the latter recognition—that of substance's radical negativity—shows not only that it is a mistake to accuse Hegel of relapsing into pre-critical metaphysics (i.e., affirming a positive foundational substance), but also that it is misguided to 'rescue' him from the conventional interpretation by insisting that he retains some residual, external, and positive immediacy that simply has not yet been subjectivized. More than that: the assertion of the radically negative nature of Hegelian substance allows us to distinguish the properly dialectical stance from others that only reduce substance to a purely formal framework—as it happens, for example, in Heidegger's thought *à propos* of the notion of Being.

The fracture of Hegelian substance, in expressing ultimately absolute or doubled negativity, must curve back upon itself—it must place itself outside itself in order to look at itself. And this is precisely what produces the standpoint of the subject. Unlike Heideggerian Being, then, Hegelian substance makes it possible to understand the emergence of the subject—of how something like subjectivity can arise. As the blind spot at the core of the subject, this (negative) substance is both the origin and ground of being-for-itself—of the reflexivity that subjectivity is. Yet only through the re-flection that the subject performs, through its gaze, can

this substance reflect itself and take on a determinate shape, become a (positive or determinate) substance. That is, it becomes the external, positive substance which—as 'external reflection' already showed—is always posited by the (external) subject.[25]

In the *Encyclopedia*, the transition from Nature to Spirit—ultimately, from substance to subject—leaves no doubt that for Hegel, nature is subjective in itself: it is internally fractured and, for that very reason, withdraws from itself and reflexively turns back upon itself. Specifically, at the beginning of the Philosophy of Spirit, in the Anthropology, the emergence of the (spiritual) 'I' out of the (natural) soul is explained through *habit as* the operation by which the immediate (the soul) breaks with itself, producing a pure void that then turns back to re-appropriate the immediacy it has abandoned. It is only here that the subject is born, and, consequently, it is nothing other than that gap in nature. And yet, in reappropriating nature from the outside, the subject becomes something else entirely: *second* nature.[26] But what I wish to emphasize now is that nature enacts this reflexive movement by itself—it performs the double negation that defines subjectivity as such.[27]

Now, at this point, we must not overlook the consequences this has for our understanding of subjectivity, or for a dialectical conception of the subject. First, as we already anticipated, it now becomes entirely clear that its inscription in substance—this gesture by which (Hegelian-Žižekian) dialectics challenges Kant—does not ground the subject in a positive *in-itself*. It merely reveals that the subject's fracture comes from behind itself—that it is 'grounded' in the fracture of reality itself and is, in this sense, incurable.[28] But above all, what must now be understood—and this is the other side of Žižek's innovation in his reading of 'reflection' in the 'Doctrine of Essence'—is that subjectivity turns out to be in fact redoubled.[29] We have just seen that the subject proper—as opposed to substance, or, in the *Encyclopedia* terms, to nature—emerges only from a prior subjectivity or reflexivity which, belonging to substance, could rightly be called 'substantive subjectivity'. As such, it is other than the subject's own subjectivity, and yet it constitutes the subject's ground—the origin from which it emerges—and in this sense, it is also its innermost core.

In other words, the subject only becomes what it is at the moment it opposes—negates and leaves behind—this substantial subjectivity. And yet, it not only begins from it, but also depends on it for its reality. As Hegel puts it, the subject only overcomes its own abstraction—the mere emptiness it is at first—by re-appropriating the immediacy it has left behind: the substance or nature that, precisely by being left behind, allows it to be what it is: subject.[30]

By this I mean that the redoubling of subjectivity should not be interpreted as its decomposition into two independent strata. Rather, it means that the subject is always already split within itself. In the *Encyclopedia*, the habit arises precisely to calm the madness that results

from the soul's 'self-feeling'. Since the first self—the one that appears in the paragraphs on 'self-feeling'—emerges from the reflexivity of the (natural) soul, in which a particular feeling negates its own content in order to become the formal framework encompassing the others, it is clear that this self exists only as form, only insofar as it negates immediacy. And yet, it can only become real through that very content, through that immediacy which it has left behind. That is, it can only become real by encompassing what its own constitution required it to erase. Before the 'I' that results from habit, and at the very basis of habit itself, we thus find a division within selfhood—between the self as framework or point of view and the content that always escapes it but can never be relinquished: in short, between the I and its unconscious.[31]

Thus, Hegel's boldness in asking, against Kant, the metaphysical question of how reality must be constituted for the subject to emerge leads him along this paradoxical path, where substance and subject, immediacy and mediation, are shown to presuppose each other. To 'go deep' into the subject is to reach its fracture—what negates it, constitutes it, and precedes it—and thus to reach substance as the fracture that negates itself (by reflecting or 'subjectivizing' itself) in the subject, who in turn must negate it (in order to create the external opposition that grants both of them a positive identity). The subject is always preceded by the void of substance (the form of 'being-in-itself'), but substance is likewise preceded by the pure self-negation of subjectivity (the form of 'being-for-itself'). Thus, for Žižek, it is precisely in the affirmation of this paradox—which previous interpreters of Hegel have refused to acknowledge—that Hegel's philosophy truly leaves the transcendental framework behind (without falling back into a pre-critical position).

4 The Truth of Paradox, or the Materialism of the Dialectical Gaze

We can say, then, that we have traversed the Möbius strip that binds and separates substance and subject in both directions—that we have redoubled it. And it is surely this doubled movement, enacted by the dialectical gaze, that enables it to overcome both the externality of the transcendental standpoint and the rigid, external opposition it affirms between the mediation of *logos* and the immediacy of reality—or, in the terms favored by post-Kantian idealism, between substance and subject. By making explicit that this back-and-forth path reveals that each pole contains the other at its core, and that the presupposition between them is therefore reciprocal, I have sought to make clear that this traversal cannot take the form of a circle. That is: the overcoming of the external difference between the opposites this double movement produces does not result in any mutual completion or positive synthesis, nor does it eliminate the internal non-coincidence of each with itself.

The (double) encounter between the two sides of the strip rests on each one's dis-encounter with itself—and, for this reason, it is impossible that the encounter (truly, without 'trickery') erases the dis-encounter.[32] That is why Žižek stresses that the two movements are not two immediate transitions; that we do not pass directly from subject to substance and back again without disruption, without noticing any kind of 'cut.' On the contrary, the movement happens through an anomalous element—something that, in each domain, represents the other, and in doing so, gives form to and renders visible its internal fracture.[33] On the level of subjectivity, there is always a (subjective) element that is at once substantial, and on the level of substance, a (substantial) element that is at once subjective. Beginning from subjectivity, understood as the mediation proper to the rational order, we encountered that signifier (S_1) which—while belonging to the symbolic or subjective reality of language—nonetheless resists mediation and introduces immediacy into it. And beginning from natural immediacy, from substance, we encountered the void of that discarded content which reflexively, or subjectively, negates itself and becomes the (unconscious) motor of the spiritual mediation. For this substantial element, which is nonetheless the very void of the self, its innermost truth, Žižek adopts the Lacanian term *objet petit a*. The fact that this crossing from one side to the other occurs through two different anomalous elements—that the 'anomaly' of substance does not coincide with that of the subject, that each domain is anomalous in a different way—shows that the two paths traversed are not symmetrical.[34] Both subject and substance require an element that exceeds them in order to become what they are. But while subjective mediation must exile S_1 in order to repress its rupture and become a totality, substance needs to produce an empty object, the *objet petit a*, in order to curve back upon itself through it.

This is why the dialectical gaze—which binds the opposites together by grasping in each its other—on the one hand, reinscribes the (substantial) immediacy of the empty signifier into the totality of subjective mediations and, in doing so, reveals it as a non-totality; and on the other, it discovers the (subjective) void as the truth of substance, thereby stripping it of any original positivity. In 'reconciling' the extremes, the dialectical gaze not only dissolves the identity of each but must do it through a double blow that, ultimately, reveals its own lack of coincidence with itself. This is the ultimate reason why it is in itself a deranged gaze—one that dislocates what it sees, but in doing so restores it to its truth.

Let us take a closer look at the passages in the *Encyclopedia* on habit, which, as we have said, function as the hinge between nature and spirit—or between substance and subject—to consider, now as a whole, the double movement we have traced and to recognize its asymmetrical character. We can now confirm that it does not, in the end, form a circle, but instead outlines a broken loop—an impossible figure that shatters the

(unity of the) gaze that seeks to capture it. We already saw that, although on a first reading of the text—as it is nature itself that 'gets habituated' (even already as animal nature, before entering the realm of spirit), and that it accounts for subjectivity from within itself—we might be tempted to read this in Spinozist or naturalist terms, as an expression of a simple or crude materialist monism, this reading is immediately refuted by the text itself. A closer look reveals that nature can only do this insofar as it reflects itself in a double negation, or behaves 'subjectively'—that is, insofar as it is *for-itself*, in the mode of being contrary to substance, the one that negates substance's own mode of being or negates substance (as *in-itself*). In other words, it becomes clear that nature can only appear as 'the principle' (of its other) to the extent that it separates from itself, places itself outside itself, and then turns back upon itself—and, in doing so, it already reveals itself to be more than substance, to exceed itself as substance.

To be precise, then, it seems we would have to concede that the true principle lies rather in the subjectivity that animates nature itself. This would explain why the subject that emerges from the movement of nature can nonetheless erase nature—why it leaves it behind at the very moment it emerges. As we saw, the self that arises from habituated nature emerges precisely as its erasure (as a given principle): it is directly free thought, a universality that determines itself, that gives itself its own conditions and presuppositions.[35] The nature from which it has arisen is now called 'first' (nature) because it *is* only from (or in relation to) the second, because, in this sense, it is born from second nature—or, in the terms we used earlier, because, as a determinate form of immediacy, it proceeds from the (subjective) mediation of spirit.

Even if we acknowledge, as we did earlier, that nature's reflexivity is in some respects distinct from that of the subject that arises from it—and that the clearest sign of this is the fact that there is a purely animal habit already in place before the emergence of the 'I'—one might still counter that it is only in its 'human version' that the general structure of habit becomes realized, and therefore that it is there where the 'animal version' ultimately finds its truth. And would this not mean that the subjectivity of nature finds its truth in that of spirit—in properly subjective spirit—and that, in the end, subjectivity comes first? Shouldn't we then accept that nature (as 'first') is nothing but what is 'posited' by spirit, that a careful reading of the transition from nature to spirit reveals it to be a transition from spirit to nature, and that even the Philosophy of Nature—inasmuch as it is, after all, a discourse—should be read as the myth that spirit writes retroactively? And wouldn't this finally close the circle? In short: shouldn't we ultimately recognize the idealist monism of Hegel, the idealist nature of dialectical thought?

Now, at this point, what really matters is to notice that, in fact, despite everything said, the self that arises from habit does not succeed in leaving natural immediacy behind. It's not only that free thought—or the freedom of thought, the form in which spirit emerges—can arise only

from the automatization of bodily behaviors, or that linguistic creativity only emerges *from* submission to the mechanisms of grammar. It is also that universality itself and the autonomy of *logos* can only become real—can only shed the abstraction with which they originate—in the (given or immediate) materiality of language—and, more generally, that spirit, second nature, as Žižek puts it, not only comes from nature but *is* nature redoubled.[36] This is what explains why it is constitutively contradictory—why it is always already in contradiction with itself.

Indeed, what happens is not simply that spirit tries and fails to leave nature behind (definitively), but more precisely that it can only succeed in leaving nature behind *through* nature—that it needs nature in order to negate it. For this reason, spirit only manages to erase nature insofar as nature persists as what cannot be erased, as an obstacle; and also for that very reason, it never erases it fully or once and for all. Since spirit is, then, nothing but this erasing of nature, and nature itself is the condition of possibility for this activity, nature resides within spirit's own interior and is, at the same time, its radical other. The antagonism that opposes spirit to nature is therefore its internal antagonism.

This also explains why Hegel sees language—the first realization of the 'I' born from habit—as constitutively 'problematic,' and why Žižek, as we have seen, interprets this problematic condition as the fundamental inconsistency of a totality of mediations whose truth lies in an immediate element (that negates it).[37] In this emergence of (universal) language, we clearly see how (the form of) universality always already finds within itself a (content) particularity that, by definition, negates it, and yet is nothing other than itself.[38] And from this we can now understand that the creativity of language—the fact that it cannot cease transforming itself—and, more broadly, the openness of the mediating or spiritual movement of symbolic reality—the fact that it unfolds in the form of 'bad infinity'—does not, for Hegel, point to the stubborn persistence of a positive and fully consistent outside, of an infrastructure that precedes language, or of a normative ideal that transcends the present, but rather to this internal contradiction.

This contradiction is the innermost core of spirit and, at the same time, what exceeds it—what prevents it from coinciding with itself. It is this contradiction that grants spirit its absolute specific difference: the universality and freedom that separate it once and for all from nature, making it an entirely new kind of reality—something no longer natural. But it is also this contradiction that binds it to its other, to nature, in its most originary truth—not to nature as the positive reality that emerges precisely from spirit, but to nature as broken in itself, to the rupture that also lies at nature's core.

Let us recall that the internal contradiction that defines this first 'I' in the Anthropology results only from the domestication—through habit—of a contradiction that was already present in nature. We saw, in fact, that the 'natural self' of 'self-feeling,' which precedes 'habit,' arises because

the natural soul leaves behind its own content to become a hollow framework—one that can only find reality in what it has left behind. And for that very reason, this 'self,' which is not yet properly spirit, is already insane—literally beside itself.

To sum up: spirit emerges in order to 'resolve' a contradiction that belongs to nature itself—to an immediacy that is already derailed—and it resolves it, radically negates it, to the extent that it constitutes itself as a radically new reality. But at the same time, as we have seen, it reproduces that contradiction in its own 'problematic' form, as the inconsistency of its own universality; it repeats it by internalizing it. It is thus this internal contradiction—what allows spirit to part from nature—that also binds it to nature, insofar as nature is already internally contradictory. What is proper and new to spirit is precisely its capacity to innovate, to leap into the new, to symbolize—but this very gesture already refers back to a prior leap into the new, one that is not its own, that comes from behind, that belongs to the nature it leaves behind, and that it merely repeats. Its exit from nature's impasse, its 'resolution' of the contradiction of nature—which, insofar as its specific mode of being consists in resting 'in itself,' had already gone beyond itself—has therefore consisted only in affirming the leap that nature itself already performed as a new mode of being.

This is the sense in which the reinscription of the subject into substance means simply referring its breach back to the breach of the real. Because nature is already beside itself, because it cannot bear itself and contradicts what it is, spirit becomes necessary—that is, the leap into a radically new reality that precisely consists in negating nature. But at the same time, because that (substantial) contradiction is original—because it is the origin itself—the new reality, spirit, can only repeat it in a different way: by (re-)symbolizing it always again. In fact, spirit is nothing but this activity.

Thus, in the end, it has become clear that the truth of the paradoxes we have encountered does not lie simply in the contradictory relation between substance and subject, or nature and spirit, as if between two positive instances, but rather in the contradictory relation between two contradictions—in an internal contradiction whose 'adequate' realization cannot have other form than that of an impossible loop between substance and subject in which there is no (positive) origin because each pole precedes the other. It is for that reason, that if one of those poles is taken for 'what comes first,' it is immediately subverted.[39]

From here, the precise sense in which the dialectical perspective is materialist becomes apparent.

Žižek, of course, rejects reductionist, naturalist readings of Hegel—the crude materialism we have already ruled out above. It is obvious that nature can only appear as a 'principle' from the standpoint of spirit, that substance only exists properly or positively insofar as it is observed (by the subject), named and identified by language, and ultimately 'posited' by spirit. In short: that there is only a 'first nature' from the standpoint of

second nature. This confirms that every positive form of immediacy is indeed born of mediation and necessarily has the form of a myth. This is the truth of Hegel's idealism—or the (true) sense in which one can call his philosophy idealist. But if, with Hegel himself, we notice that this seeing and this saying (these subjective operations) are themselves ontological facts—and can only be explained by recognizing that they arise from the gap within substance itself, or from the derailment of nature—then it becomes evident that the very myth-making activity of spirit, the 'positing' of the subject that constitutes its specific difference, stems from a rupture that precedes it—one that is given, ontological or substantial. And so, we must recognize that this breach *is* in a strict sense, that it is not merely something posited by the subject, but rather *in itself*. And this is the full content of Žižek's materialism—the materialism he attributes to the dialectical gaze. It is, as he puts it, a 'materialism without matter,' one that affirms only the rupture as principle—but a rupture that is real, the truth, indeed, that lies at the basis of all paradoxes and of our need to resolve them—to 'successfully' symbolize the rupture itself.

1 Hegel 1821, p. 21.
2 See, e.g., Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, pp. 15–17.
3 See, e.g., Žižek 2019, p. 17.
4 On the idea that true philosophy introduces a radical rupture in the history of thought, see for example Žižek 2014c, ch. 4; Žižek 2012, pp. 193–194. On how such a rupture can emerge from the mere act of 'taking note,' see Žižek 2014c, ch. 7.
5 Hence Hegel's critique of Kant for treating the antinomies as merely subjective; see, e.g., Hegel 1830a, §48. For Žižek's explanation of how Hegel's internalization of noumenal reality entails the recognition of reality as contradictory, see for example Žižek 1999, pp. 95–98.
6 'In other words, the truly New emerges through the narrative, the apparently purely reproductive retelling of what had happened –it is this retelling that opens up the space (the possibility) of acting in a new way.' (Žižek 2014b, p. 195).
7 See Hegel 1821, §§ 278–80, Žižek 1991, pp. 82–83, and Žižek 2012, p. 425.
8 See Žižek 1991, p. 70.
9 See Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, p. 18. Ultimately, this element gives form to absolute negativity, and it is therefore articulated in Hegel in the form of the so-called 'infinite judgment'; see Žižek 1989, pp. 206–209.
10 Both the gesture of the monarch, the gesture of the 'master signifier' more generally, and that of philosophy itself in recognizing within a symbolic totality the excluded element, are constative acts that nonetheless change everything: see Žižek 2014c, sect. 5.2, and Žižek 2014a, pp. 21–24. The 'zero level' of symbolization—the mere act of naming—also illustrates paradigmatically how a purely tautological gesture can have performative force; see Žižek 1993, pp. 150–153.
11 See Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, pp. 21, 25, 52–53, and Žižek 2019, p. 60. Reconciliation is presented here as the reduction of both sides of the conflict to the 'zero level,' to the nothingness in which they overlap.
12 See, e.g., Žižek 2019, pp. 54–55.
13 Žižek explains this logic in connection with Hegel's 'Doctrine of Essence'—in particular, with regard to 'external reflection' (see Žižek 1989, p. 225), and also to the opposition between 'ground' and 'condition' (see Žižek 1993, pp. 146 ff.).
14 Žižek acknowledges that the truth of Hegel's idealism lies precisely in this: that, in general, external or immediate reality arises from the deadlock of the symbolic (see Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, p. 49), and that for this reason 'every determination of nature in itself is already formulated from our standpoint' (Žižek 2019, pp. 59–60).
15 Žižek himself distinguishes between Derrida's more nuanced reading and that of Gasché; see Žižek 1991, pp. 72–80.
16 Žižek argues that 'negative dialectics,' which undoubtedly was designed to overcome this impasse, ultimately fails to do so; see Žižek 2001, pp. 120–124, and also Žižek 2012, pp. 262–264.
17 On this debate, see Pippin 2002, in which he engages with McDowell's *Mind and World* (McDowell 1994). Pippin's evolving reading of Hegel has, according to Žižek, recently brought him even closer to the standard interpretation and made him more critical of Hegel. Žižek argues that this shift stems from Pippin's attraction to Heidegger and his reading of Hegel, which has led Pippin to conclude that Hegel is further from Kant than he had previously believed (see Žižek 2024).
18 See, for example, Žižek 2019, pp. 27–29. For Žižek, Heidegger represents the pinnacle of transcendentalism—even in his post-*Kehre* thought. The return to Being beyond the *Dasein* of *Being and Time* indeed expresses a recognition of immediacy, but—as Žižek insists in agreement with Pippin—this immediacy is purely negative, a mere transcendental horizon (see again Žižek 2024).
19 It is from this radicalization of Kant's discovery of the framed character of reality that Hegel, in many places, launches his critique of the 'externality' that nevertheless defines the transcendental approach (see, e.g., Hegel 1807, pp. 49 ff.). Žižek often emphasizes this Hegelian rejection of the presupposition of an outside (for instance, as expressed in his depiction of the 'beautiful soul'—see Žižek 2014a, pp. 79–80), and uses it as the basis for reinterpreting Hegel's notion of the 'cunning of reason' (see, e.g., Žižek 2014a, pp. 83–87, and Žižek 1991, pp. 167 ff.).
20 See Žižek 1991, p. 79. Since his doctoral thesis, Žižek has argued that it is in deconstruction and poststructuralism more broadly (and not in Lacan) where a metalanguage persists—albeit covertly (see Žižek 2014a, pp. 202–208, and Žižek 1989, pp. 153–155).
21 See Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, pp. 35–40. Cf. Brandom 2019, p. 608.
22 For the first formulation, see Žižek 2019, p. 32; for the second, Žižek 2014b, pp. 97, 109–116.
23 See, for example, Žižek 2019, pp. 59–60. This also explains the title of the book: since it is in this gap that the opposites (mis)encounter one another, it is the site of the absolute—and, at the same time, the site that reveals that the absolute is nothing but the failure of the encounter, the very failure that constitutes sex.
24 For Žižek's repeated emphasis on how this demonstrates that substance is in itself subjective, see

Žižek 1989, pp. 224–231, especially 228–229, and Žižek 2014b, pp. 129–132.
25 See Žižek 2024, pp. 5–6.
26 See Hegel 1830b, §§409–410. Many Hegel scholars—Žižek among them, but also Malabou and Menke—have studied these passages in detail, identifying in them, indeed, the hinge between nature and spirit. See Malabou 2004 and Menke 2018.
27 In fact, this double negation takes place even before habit—in the soul's 'self-feeling' or 'feeling of self,' in which a particular feeling abstracts itself in order to become the "frame" that retroactively totalizes the rest, and even at the end of the Philosophy of Nature, in connection with the animal organism. One must therefore accept that nature separates itself from itself *in/as* spirit because it is already always divided. Žižek refers to this conclusion of the Philosophy of Nature—specifically, to the point at which the production of the organism is revealed as always already re-production—in order to link it to F. Varela's notion of autopoiesis and to argue that the act of 'positing one's own presuppositions,' which simultaneously transforms both origin and identity—the movement proper to subjectivity—is already present in nature. See Gabriel/Žižek 2009, pp. 104–112.
28 See, e.g., Žižek 2019, p. 56.
29 See Žižek 1989, pp. 214–215. Its reduplication ultimately stems from the fact that 'the Hegelian subject is nothing but a name for the externality of the substance to itself' (Žižek 1993, p. 30).
30 See Hegel 1830b, §410 Remark.
31 See Hegel 1830b, §§407–408. Žižek has explored how this Hegelian transition shows that, for Hegel, madness is the origin of consciousness, in Žižek 2012, pp. 340–358. He shares with Malabou the view that these paragraphs demonstrate that the identity of the subject can never constitute 'the principle'; it always results from a prior and double movement—from a habituation that belongs to no one, and that, for Žižek, ultimately expresses self-relating negativity, and for Malabou, plasticity. See Malabou 2004, pp. 24 ff., 35–36, and 76.
32 See, for example, Žižek 1991, p. 119. This is the conclusion already offered by Žižek's reading of absolute reflection in the *Science of Logic* (see Hegel 1812–16/1832, pp. 345 ff.). The discovery that substance is always already broken and that the subject is always already redoubled results from the fact that both are referred back to the absolute negativity of positing reflection—which, far from unifying them, merely reveals that the rupture which externally opposed them actually constitutes the internal fracture of each.
33 See Žižek 2019, pp. 239–245. This is why, to illustrate the redoubling of the Möbius strip, Žižek proposes the figure of the cross-cap—which, in Hegelian terms, we might say appears as its truth.
34 See Žižek 2019, p. 238.
35 See Hegel 1830b, §410 Remark.
36 Even before addressing the sign, Hegel writes: '*Thinking*, too, though wholly free, and active in the pure element of itself, likewise requires habit and familiarity, this form of *immediacy*, by which it is the unimpeded, pervaded possession of my *individual self*.' (Hegel 1830b, §410 Remark). Žižek explains that spirit is the redoubling of nature and, at the same time, part of nature; see Gabriel/Žižek, pp. 99–100, 117.
37 See Hegel 1830b, §411, and Gabriel/Žižek, pp. 118–119.
38 This idea of the universal runs throughout Žižek's work; see, for example, Žižek 2014a, pp. 40–46, and Žižek 2019, pp. 219–220, 255–256.
39 This is why, ultimately, to refer to the properly dialectical relationship between substance and subject, Žižek chooses the figure of the Klein bottle—the result of folding the Möbius strip back onto itself in an impossible loop: the subject exists only within substance, but substance appears as such only once the subject looks at it (from within). See Žižek 2019, pp. 263–269.

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Glamour and Misery of Dialectics: Žižek's Swerving Opening, and the Closure of Revenant Hegelianism

Robert Pfaller

Abstract: The philosophy of Hegel plays a crucial role in Žižek's theory. Yet Žižek's understanding of Hegel's philosophy differs significantly from the predominant Hegelian tradition in Marxist theory as well as from that of Lacan and his followers. Žižek's "swerve" from the gravity of these traditions can be detected even in the characteristic features of his literary style. To reconstruct this swerve is of importance. Since traditional Hegelianism has done severe damage to Marxist theory – a damage which Louis Althusser has once cured with the help of psychoanalytic concepts (such as "overdetermination"). Ironically today the very same damage recurrs again within Lacanian psychoanalysis, in its critique of the now hegemonic "post-oedipal" ideology. The damage affects the description of the miseries of the contemporary (de-)formation of subjects as well as the notions of "desire", "negativity" and "transgression" that are recommended as remedies against it. To correct the Lacanian critique's misreading of Aristotelian ethics with the help of a few concepts of Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille may allow to see how the problem is actually structured, and what the solution might be. If not, the lucky opening produced by Žižek's swerve might get overlooked – and thus closed again.

Keywords: Hegelianism, Zizek's swerve, Lacanian critique of „post-oedipal" society, Aristotelian ethics, Leiris, Bataille, sacred of everyday life, order to joy, transgression, good life.

Slavoj Žižek is for me, in the first place, the most inspiring philosopher. Whatever I read from his admirably numerous publications immediately sparks a new thought within me; and stimulates the appetite to undertake a little digression into an unexplored field of thought. The playfulness by which he assembles the pieces of his thought incites me to follow his path with similar ease. Imagine an outstanding dancer that can provide you, when dancing together, with the ability to dance as in a dreamlike state. So in my eyes Žižek, besides being undoubtedly one of the most important thinkers of our time, is in his texts also a fantastic teacher in philosophy – for the beginner just as much as for the most advanced disciple.

Yet what I find absolutely admirable and unbelievable in Žižek is his intellectual "wingspan" – the distance he is able to bridge between political topicality and philosophical in-depth-analysis: On the one hand, Žižek immediately reacts to the events of the day, often on the same day: COVID-crisis, Palestine war, US-presidential elections etc. And Žižek's first day analyses are, as a rule, sharper than most of the comments that get uttered in the following weeks. On the other hand, he carefully undertakes deep diggings into the most difficult philosophical grounds, providing us with seminal works like "Less than Nothing" – thick volumes of dense philosophical exploration which will, I bet, take us at least a couple of decades in order to understand and recognize them somewhat appropriately.

"Dirty Details"

If I may add a few biographical remarks – things that Žižek usually labels as "dirty details": Apart from the immense joy and theoretical inspiration that I gain from Žižek's texts, I enjoy a personal friendship with the author which has been lasting now for more than 35 years. Of course, it is the common ground of a good number of shared philosophical and political convictions and a similar sense of humor that build up a solid basis for a philosophical friendship. But at the same time, and from the very beginning, we again and again found ourselves struggling about a recurrent philosophical disagreement. What united us at least as much as our agreement was the way we – or, more correctly: Slavoj – handled this difference. When this difference first occurred, in 1990, due to some criticism formulated by my Viennese Althusserian student group "Generality II"[1] against the notion of a "beyond of interpellation" that Mladen Dolar had developed (a point analogous to Žižek's notion of a "subject before subjectivization"[2]) in an essay published by the Viennese journal "Mesotes", Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar invited the whole student group of ours to Ljubljana University in order to let us explain our point. They treated us as equals despite the fact that we were still students. Similarily, when in the mid-1990s in a letter I criticized one of Žižek's assumptions about negation, he invited me to extend this letter to an article and published it in an edited volume of his.[3] In the early 2000s, I criticized Žižek's defence of Christianity. Coming from a country that had endured 4 years of catholic fascism, I found myself unable to share Žižek's hope that Christianity could be seen as a power of modernism and as an ally against postmodern relativism. At the same time, Žižek invited me for a fellowship to become part of his research group "Antinomies of Postmodern Reason" in Essen, Germany.

The Misery of Western Marxist Hegelianism, and its Slovene Exception

Maybe the difference that has united us over so many years can be described as that between Žižek's Hegelian Lacanianism and the Spinozist Althusserianism to which I feel committed. Yet I have to mention here a specific observation: In my experience, there is a big difference with regard to Hegel that separates Marxists from former socialist countries from those from capitalist countries. In my "Western", capitalist experience, in the political struggles as well as the philosophical debates I took part, Western marxist Hegelians – with a few noble exceptions – have usually been a pain in the ass. These owls of Minerva repeatedly presented themselves as the wise-crackers who always knew better and discovered a historical necessity in the outcome of whatever struggle *after the fact* – a necessity of course which they had not been able to predict before the fact. Every new philosophical effort got criticised

and rejected by them with a priori certainty (see, for example, Sartre's judgment against Foucault's "Les mots et les choses"; or the wide front of German Marxist Hegelians who rejected Althusser's theory in the 1970s).

And even the more sceptical Hegelianism of the Frankfurt school philosophers did not make things any better. Instead, with their insistence on the difference between *understanding* and *reason* ("Verstand" und "Vernunft"), respectively "instrumental" and "critical" reason, the followers of Adorno and Horkheimer created a thorough melancholic disinterest in scientific rationality and a total lack of curiosity on the side of Western Marxists. Therefore, it came as a profound liberation for us when, in the early 1980s my friends and I discovered Althusser's texts. Althusser served for us at this time as a double weapon: against, on the one hand, the relativist delirium of a fashionable postmodern philosophical *jeunesse dorée* that blossomed at the university of the time, and, on the other hand, the boring dogmatism of Western Hegelian Marxism. With regard to the latter, we experienced it as extremely liberating to find in Althusser somebody who dismantled Marx from his "borrowed languages", i. e. the philosophies of Feuerbach and Hegel.[4]

Yet when in the late 1980s we encountered Žižek and Dolar and other philosophers from Ljubljana, it came as a big surprise to us that philosophers dealing with Hegel were able to be curious, witty and enlightening. Still today I regard Žižek and his friends as an anomaly within the history of Hegelianism – probably caused by the fact that for them Hegel had been a rebellious weapon against the type of mechanist Marxism predominant in socialist countries. The more liberal atmosphere of the declining Tito's socialist Yugoslavia, in comparison to other socialist countries, may have contributed to this singular phenomenon.

"Nominalism" in Žižek

At least three remarkable features distinguish Žižek in my view from the tiresome Hegelianism of Western Marxism: first, his admirable curiosity – nothing is too far away or culturally too low for him, from quantum physics to different forms of toilets, or products of popular "cultural industry" (to use Adorno's contemptuous term) such as for example "Batman" movies or "Tom and Jerry" cartoons. Secondly, as a consequence, the role of the example is of specific importance to Žižek's texts. The example never just illustrates a given thought; instead, it marks the constitutive turning point of his thought, opening up a new perspective. The example thus plays the "transcendental" role of a "synthetic a priori": One example gets used to throw a new light on the other example and make something visible that the previous example alone could not provide.[5] In Žižek's thought, the universal never precedes the specific and never dominates over it; instead, it is the specific, like the example, that opens up universality. Taking a certain terminological liberty, I would therefore call Žižek a

philosophical "nominalist". This can be, thirdly, seen in the form of Žižek's texts. Reading texts from the Hegelian tradition (as Hegel's own, or also, for example, Adorno's) one has usually the impression that a homogenous liquid mass of words is more or less boringly streaming from one end to the other; hardly with any internal structuration. Žižek's texts, on the contrary, are extremely structured: sharp cuts run between one thought and the other; radical discontinuities are established between one paragraph and the next; like in jokes or comedy dialogues, "straight lines" are followed by "punch lines"; so it is always absolutely clear where one thought starts and where it ends; and every argument is directed towards a clear target. This leads to a characteristic literary form proper to "nominalist" philosophers, such as Blaise Pascal or Ludwig Wittgenstein: single elements can achieve a "modular" status. They do not have only one role in one demonstration; instead, they prove to be of multiple use, and texts therefore seem to allow for getting assembled or collaged according to different combinatorics (just think of Pascals posthumously discovered different versions of his "Pensées", hidden in his coats, written on perforated cards that were, in different orders, tied together with a cord; or Wittgenstein's remarks that figure in different sequences with different numbers in his late works). It is therefore clear that one example or one joke can serve multiple purposes in Žižek's thought; and ridiculously Žižek once got even accused of "self-plagiarism" due to the fact that he sometimes used the same paragraph of one of his previous books again for some other argument in another book.[6] This possibility of a "modular" form of writing is in my view the charateristic feature of a "nominalist" philosophy. It testifies to the creativity of reviewing the same element in a different light.

Yet if there is one feature that distinguishes Žižek from this "nominalist" tradition, it is his astonishing ability to find identity in apparently most different structures or things. This is a typically Hegelian virtue, and significantly different from how Ludwig Wittgenstein once described his own. Wittgenstein stated: "Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things that look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: 'I'll show you differences.'"[7]

Back to the Misery of Dialectics

Žižek and his friends and fellow-travellers (Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, Gregor Moder, and many others) have thus for a long time clarified obscure elements in Lacan by using Hegel (and vice versa), thus discovering and opening up new perspectives and fields of thought. Yet if I look at contemporary followers in Hegel-Lacanian theory of society, my impression is that this lucky moment of theoretical opening

is over. Hegelian Lacanians today tend to fall back into the same traps that Hegelianism had already provided for Marxists. Thus, ironically, psychoanalytical critics of contemporary society are today making those very mistakes from which Althusser has once, precisely with the help of psychoanalysis, saved a good part of Marxist theory.

A fidelity to Žižek therefore would mean to reconstruct the particular Hegel that Žižek has discovered – a specific Hegel, as Žižek himself points out, a Hegel even different from the one of Lacan's explicit references; the Hegel of a "logic of the signifier".[8] Yet this implies that there must exist (at least) two Hegels; two philosophies that cannot be reconciled, especially not in the mode of a Hegelian "Aufhebung" ("sublation"). There must be an "epistemological break" within Hegelianism itself; a dividing line that separates productive concepts from concepts that must be abandoned.[9] One may discuss where precisely this dividing line runs; or whether some concepts may have achieved a new meaning in Hegels better philosophy; a meaning that again cannot be reconciled with Hegels own earlier understandings of the concept – just in the way that, as Gaston Bachelard has demonstrated,[10] the notion of "mass" in physics cannot be reconciled with its previous understanding by the common sense. For me, for example, the notions of "negativity" and "contradiction" strictly belong to Hegel's part to be abandoned. The latter has exerted its destructive impact on Marxism for more than a century; the former is today spoiling psychoanalytic theory – unfortunately in particular that very part of psychoanalytic theory that heroically endeavours to critically tackle the currently hegemonic ideologies – ideologies proper to contemporary "unleashed" neoliberalism and its tendency towards a worldwide neo-feudalist arbitrary rule of oligarchs.

As a Hegelian, Žižek affirms the Hegelian principle that a philosopher is responsible for all the philosophical and political consequences that other people draw from his ideas.[11] As an Althusserian, I do not agree with this principle. Althusserians insist on the idea that every processing is completely external to its raw material.[12] To put it in Arthur Rimbaud's words: How can one blame the brass for its waking up as a trumpet?[13] Therefore I do not blame Žižek's Hegelian readings of Lacan for the mistakes contemporary Hegelian Lacanians are committing. Yet I am less sure if contemporary Hegelian readings of Lacan are not repeating a certain detrimental Hegelianism already inherent to Lacan's theory – a tradition from whose gravity Žižek and his companions miraculously managed to escape for a brief, lucky moment.

Žižek's Points of Externality

Before I try to explain the problematic points of a revenant Hegelianism in contemporary Lacanian theory, I want to briefly examine what allowed Žižek and some of the Žižekians to break out from the Hegelian path. Žižek

has often emphasized his own adherence to Hegel, and his respective endeavours can be studied in many books. Yet what I want to claim is that Žižek's lucid readings that distinguish him from the vast majority of Hegelians are owed to a few crucial "swerves". It is precisely Žižek's non-Hegelian points that make his own philosophy so inspiring and that allow his readings of Hegel to become so original and productive.

There seem to be some helpful anchors, or points of externality, that Žižek discovered and has been able to use – points which to my knowledge have hitherto remained uncommented. One of these points of externality seems to be the Freudian notion of "retroactivity" ("Nachträglichkeit") of which Žižek makes ample use.[14] Obviously the notion of retroactivity is impossible to reconcile with the Hegelian notion of negativity, or of the immanent development of a contradiction. For either there are negativity and contradiction that drive forward to some dialectical sublation, or there is something in the present that allows to read the past in a new light: *Either negativity shapes the reality of the future, or retroactivity reshapes our understanding of the past.* Walter Benjamin's famous plea for the concept of retroactivity in his essay "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (Benjamin [1940]) is a powerful attempt to shake Hegelian Marxists out of their calm confidence in what the future of capitalism, due to its "contradictions" will necessarily bring about. Facing a rapid "progress" towards fascism, Benjamin claimed to activate the emergency brake on the "train" of history instead of confidently waiting for a future "sublation", guaranteed by the "negativity" of history on its way "forward" (or "upward").

What kind of master-signifier is required by retroactivity?

Lacanian theory sustains that retroactivity consists in a later-added master-signifier (in Lacanian algebra: "S1") that gives new meaning to the known elements and events of history (the "signifiers of knowledge", "S2"). Yet insisting on the notion of retroactivity actually implies a specific understanding of the nature of the master-signifier. The operation of the master-signifier is violent, and external to the elements upon which it exerts its power. Retroactive interpretation is, as Nietzsche has taught, a violent act of mastering: re-interpretation is overpowering.[15] As a consequence, the master-signifier cannot be understood as "empty" (as Žižek, herein probably following Ernesto Laclau, sometimes suggests[16]). To insist on the concept of retroactivity therefore implies to reject the notion of an empty master-signifier.

Since in order for it to be *violent*, the master-signifier must have *power* – i. e. a "content" that consists of a *certain amount* of *force* that acts *in a certain direction*. What the master-signifier does in its violent activity cannot be identified with the Hegelian monarch's powerless "dotting the I's". And historical "interpretation", i. e. active re-writing of

the past, cannot be equated to Hegel's notion of mere "observation" of immanent dialectical movements.[17] Instead, Hegel's "mere observation" has to be criticized as another instance of the old philosophical dream of a "pure viewing" or an "eye" that has no interest, no perspective and no direction.[18]

The concept of the master-signifier also appears in Marx's theory; for instance, when he describes the dominance of a specific production within a given mode of production:[19] It is a particular production that gives rank and influence to all the others. It thus functions as a "general illumination" in which all other colours are immersed and which modifies them in their particularity. Clearly, also in Marx' understanding the master-signifier is not empty; instead, it is the most powerful of the synchronously co-existing productions within one given mode of production. The same notion of a master-signifier endowed with power can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's essay "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" (a text of crucial inspiration for Walter Benjamin's notes "On the Concept of History") where Nietzsche writes: *"Only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present may you interpret the past."*[20] Whatever functions as a Master-signifier here is endowed with "strength"; it may be more or less strength. But a signifier entirely devoid of strength would not be able to allow for a re-writing of the understanding of the past.

If one wants to understand the value of Žižek's "Hegelian" endeavours, I think one has to look for such points of externality (such as the concept of retroactivity) that allowed him to keep at a productive distance from Hegelianism's beaten tracks. Only such a reading will be able to explain why Žižek's Hegel is so much more interesting than the Hegel that we find in most of the Hegelian tradition. And only by pursuing such a course of investigation one may understand why Žižek often has been able to escape the traditional Hegelian traps. Yet, some elements of Hegelian partisanship may still recurrently haunt his endeavour: for instance, a certain preference for the "negative", as it occurs in Žižek's takes on negation as well as in his ontology of the "less than nothing" (Žižek 2012). It is these "negativity issues" which have come to new prominence in contemporary Lacanian theory. Here they appear to form "epistemological obstacles" precisely at the interesting points which this theory makes in its criticism of contemporary society. Hegelian notions such as "negativity" prevent this theory from asking the crucial questions and from producing solid discoveries about the specific (de-)formation of subjectivity under neoliberal conditions.

The Misery of Post-oedipal Society. And the Weaknesses of its Critique

Theorists of contemporary, neoliberal subject-formation have forged the notion of a "post-oedipal society". Since on the clinical level as much as in everyday life, analysts are now increasingly confronted with symptoms that in their systematic connection differ from the classical ones described by Freud. Thus, they betray a fundamental shift in the formation of subjects: depression, lack of desire, feelings of emptiness, apathy, attention deficit and hyperactivity syndromes, anorexia and bulimia, addictions and anxiety etc. appear now increasingly predominant.[21]

The predominance of these new symptomatologies is explained by a number of contemporary psychoanalytic theorists by the emergence of a new social bond that they call "postoedipal". The notion of "postoedipal" means here that today subjects are not anymore confronted with paternal prohibitions. This is in obvious contrast to the education of subjects proper to modern capitalism, as for instance described by Max Weber,[22] where subjects of "protestant spirit" had to learn to renounce to their enjoyment, become disciplined and delay their satisfaction – an education that psychoanalysis traditionally has ascribed to a paternal, prohibiting agency. Today's society instead is not so much characterized by the absence or vanishing of such a prohibiting father, but instead by the injunction of a perverse father: a father that commands subjects to enjoy.

As clear-sighted the analyses of these new phenomena are, as much they sometimes tend to get jeopardized by unquestioned Hegelian assumptions proper to Lacanian theory. In Massimo Recalcati's account for example, the contemporary promise of unproblematic access to enjoyment is labeled under the notion of an ideology of "well-being" ("benessere").[23] Starting from this point, Recalcati opens up a basic dichotomy – a distinction that follows Lacan's problematic assumptions in his interpretation of Antigone. On the one ("bad") side Recalcati locates "well-being", and notions attributed to Aristotle's ethics such as "service to the goods", "homoeostasis", pleasure principle and the symbolic order.

On the other ("good") side Recalcati locates "desire" and the limitlessness ascribed to it, "negativity", the "beyond of the pleasure principle" and "transgression".

This can be schematically summed up as follows:

Recalcati (Lacan):	**Post-oedipal condition:**
	Well-being
Antigone's ethics	Aristotle's ethics
desire	service to the goods
limitless	limited
unsatisfiability	satisfiable

transgression	symbolic order
beyond pleasure principle	pleasure principle
death drive	homoeostasis
negativity (promise of)	unproblematic, incestuous enjoyment

Recalcati's criticism of post-oedipal ideology of "well-being" consists therefore in the objection that this ideology neglects the transgressive nature proper to desire; its dimension beyond the pleasure principle, the impossibility for it to ever find satisfaction; desire's permeation by the death drive.[24] "Well-being" would thus make individuals thoroughly unhappy by misrecognizing the "negativity" proper to their desire, by suggesting to them an actually frustrating "homoeostasis" and by promising them an impossible, incestuous fulfilment.

The fatal heritage of Hegelian "desire"

This may at first sight look plausible. Yet this analysis contains a fundamental conceptual flaw. The reason for that lies in its notion of "desire" which follows Lacan's Hegelian tracks: It is a desire as it appears in Hegel's "Robinsonade" of the struggle between "lord and bondsman";[25] a desire for recognition, not bound to any empirical object and not satisfiable by any of them; a desire that goes beyond any particular possible satisfaction; a desire that must not be betrayed by one's care for some good.[26] Yet this is clearly a fetishization of desire:[27] this notion of desire can ultimately not be separated from jouissance. It is an auto-sadistic enjoyment of frustration – a description that probably only fits to neurotic desire.[28]

Not absence, but presence of painful *jouissance*

As a consequence, this conceptual approach thoroughly misrecognizes the contemporary ideology of "well-being" by describing it as a passion for limited demands, commodities, services, practices etc. Since what one must not overlook here is the fact *that precisely this apparently "optimistic" ideology inevitably leads to limitless passions*: post-oedipal individuals always have to try to be ever more healthy, more fit (to "optimize" themselves ever more), more wealthy (for example, due to risky investments), more cost-efficient in the work-place, more safe, more conformist, more correct, and live ever longer, without end (think of "longevity"; or of the tragically funny efforts of "preppers" in their bunkers). Therefore, dissatisfaction of post-oedipal subjects cannot be explained by the lack of negativity or the absence of desire's alleged limitlessness, or by a silly promise of incestuous jouissance that cannot be held. Instead, this contemporary dissatisfaction stems precisely from the presence of limitless, painful actual jouissance.

Aristotle: the limitless concerns and the Master-signifier of

"good life"

The next mistake of Recalcati's analysis is that it puts on the side of the enemy ideology precisely those Aristotelian ethics that are the only remedy against it. For Aristotle's key concept is not "well-being" but "good life". And "good life" is a stopper; a limiter against the limitlessness of all efforts dedicated to "naked life" (or "well-being"). Since what tends to be limitless by its very nature is the care for naked life, for bare health, for simple wealth etc. If one gives absolute priority to securing one's life, to caring for one's health, to gaining money, there is nothing that could stop one from endlessly continuing to do so.

This endlessness of occupations undertaken in the name of life-preservation has well been predicted by Aristotle. It may sound as if he were speaking about our Western contemporaries when he remarks:

> "The reason for this way of thinking is that they want to live and do not care about a good life. And since this desire has no limits, they also demand unlimited means to be able to satisfy it."[29]

This is the key point in Aristotle: *the subordinate activities, those that Lacanians despise as concerns for mere homoeostatic "wellbeing",*[30] *are precisely those that lead to limitless craving*. Their problematic nature does not stem, as Lacan and Recalcati seem to assume,[31] from their poor, limited, "homoeostatic" nature compared to an allegedly unlimited human desire. On the contrary, their problem is precisely *that they lead to excess*.

This is why Aristotle considers it necessary to care for a *good life*, and not just for *naked life*: Caring for a *good life* is according to Aristotle exactly what limits the endless care for the *naked life*. If one cares for the *good life*, and not for the particular concerns that are just its *necessary*, but not *sufficient* conditions, one constantly has to ask oneself the question, "*for which we bear to live or dare to die*" (to put it into the poetic terms of Alexander Pope). Thus, one accedes to the position of "sovereignty" in the sense of philosopher Georges Bataille. After all, to paraphrase Bataille, one certainly *needs* security, health and money for life. But one does not *live for* security, health or money.[32]

In this sense, Aristotle distinguishes between subordinate activities that only serve to *naked life* on the one hand, and sovereign practices which aim at *good life* on the other. The subordinate activities are here always by necessity limitless, whereas the sovereign practices are able to set them limits. The preservation of mere life is a task without end. The art of healing, for example, aims at "health without limit", Aristotle notes, and in this respect, he compares it with the art of earning money ("chrematistics"), which aims at wealth without end and limit. On the other hand, the task of the art of housekeeping ("economics") has got a limit: it serves the preservation of the household, and not the unlimited acquisition of money. Likewise, there is an art of state and life ("politics" and "ethics"),

which has its limit in the production and preservation of the good life.[33]

Thus, the notion of "good" life serves in Aristotle's ethics as a Master-signifier. It is what allows individuals to become sovereign and fearless – just as (according to Žižek's brilliant explanation[34]) the notion of "fear of God" in Racine's play "Athalie" allows high priest Joad to act fearless with regard to all threats of earthly life. It is the same notion of "good life" that enables Bertolt Brechts Parisian communards to let go of all fear and to say to their enemies: 'Considering that you are now / threatening us with guns and cannons / we have decided / from now on to fear / bad life more than death.'[35] This allows one to understand why in the Aristotelian understanding the notion of "good life" and its subsequent notion of the "middle ground" are not at all homoestatic, but instead by their very nature transgressive.[36]

What is transgression? And where does it lead?

The next consequence of the mistakes made by "post-oedipal analysis" is the misconception of *transgression*. By opposing the alleged transgressivity of desire to "homoeostasis", pleasure principle and the symbolic order, Recalcati's analysis thoroughly misunderstands what transgression actually is. In fact, transgression happens quite sometimes in everyday life. It occurs for example when a few friends pass by at my place, telling me that I have already worked enough today, and that I have to go with them for a beer. In the same way transgression can be observed at the workplace, for instance when somebody, coming up with a bottle of Champagne, orders the colleagues to interrupt their work for the celebration of a colleague's birthday. Not always this commandment for joy is an injunction uttered by a person. It can as well be the atmosphere of a bar with dimmed light and cool jazz by which visitors feel reminded not to order just some green tea.

Required for this procedure is a "problematic" object; something that cannot be done or enjoyed every day. We cannot always interrupt work for celebrating; or drink alcohol all the time; we cannot always invite a huge number of friends or dance as if there were no tomorrow, etc. The entirety of these objects and practices can be called, with the great concept introduced by anthropologist Michel Leiris, the "sacred of everyday life".[37] The sacred, just as Sigmund Freud has noticed with regard to the taboo, is an object that has got two sides, or faces. Whereas the "profane of everyday life" is something that never changes its unproblematic quality and is allowed all the time (for instance, one is allowed to drink mineral water during a business meeting), the "sacred", due to its problematic character, has got two different appearances. In some moments it is threatening; in other moments it is utterly joyful and sublime. This two-facedness is due to different social imperatives. Profane objects are matters of arbitrary personal decision-making. Sacred

objects instead are in some moments prohibited; yet in other moments they are obligatory. One is usually not allowed to interrupt work and drink champagne. Yet when it is a colleague's birthday, then one is obliged to do so. With sacred objects and practices, one has never got a choice.[38]

This delicate structure is the reason why human beings are not spontaneous hedonists. Since whatever (cultural) pleasure it may be, it always goes against the rules of normal daily life: these matters always require an extra expenditure of money, time, sleep, etc.[39] Therefore people normally shy away from them. But under the special conditions of celebration and conviviality, under a command given to them by culture, they become able to transgress these limits proper to normal daily life. This is culture's most noble task: it reconciles individuals with the pleasures from which they, left to their own devices, would shy away.

When people feel culture's command, they become able to transform the problematic objects and practices into matters of utter pleasure. What would normally appear unclean, indecent, disgusting, abnormal, obscene, unhealthy, dangerous, excessively expensive, or abhorrent, causing unease, now becomes not only acceptable, but actually wonderful – a proof that life is worth living. When ordered, the "filthy" sacred things present themselves as wonderful and sublime; they function as markers of a special moment. This transition from the "unclean" status to the sublime one is made via celebration; i. e. due to the command given by culture, the symbolic *order*. This transformation of a forbidden, "filthy" quality of an object into a *sublime* one due to ceremonial obligation is precisely what in psychoanalytic theory deserves honourable title of "*sublimation*".[40]

Yet not the objects and practices alone get transformed here. The cultural injunction lets the subjects, too, become different: it lets them appear more elegant, more generous, more glamourous, more loveable. These are the effects of people becoming, for moments at least, *sovereign*; i. e. masters of their lives, and not just its servants.

One could say that in such moments the celebrating group actually celebrates its own power of transformation; the fact that, as collective (even if it may consist only of two people), it is able to perform this "miraculous" change. Therefore, the success of this transformation is a proof and a reinforcement of the group's solidarity.

The postoedipal and the liberating injunction to enjoy

One most not get fooled by this description. Obviously, what we have to do here strangely resembles the structure of the perverse post-oedipal fatherhood and its superegotic injunction to enjoy – yet actually it does so only at first sight. For the perverse father of the post-oedipal social bond commands incestuous enjoyment that he presents as unproblematic.

But in the case of transgression, everything works differently.

Transgression is a command for sovereignty and generosity. It transgresses the individuals' personal limits of expenditure proper to their ordinary daily life. Yet it is not a transgression that would lead out of the symbolic order. Instead, *it actually leads into it*. Georges Bataille has rightly discovered this point when he explained that the alleged "prohibition of incest" is actually an order for generously giving the possible sexual partners from one's own family or clan away, to other families or clans.[41] Therefore transgression reveals itself as a way out of incestuous constraints. The utter pleasure it brings is, psychoanalytically speaking, a pleasure within symbolic castration; it is not incestuous *jouissance.* Transgression lets individuals overcome their anxious obsession with the preservation of their bare life, and it kicks them out of the incestuous enjoyment of their narcissism. Due to transgression, "motherfuckers", misers, spoilsports, "preppers" and similar characters become generous, socialisable, fearless, sovereign individuals.

Therefore, Recalcati's dichotomy must be corrected as follows:

Post-oedipal condition	**Ethics of transgression**
Bare life	good life
Lack of master-signifier	master-signifier "good life"
Limitless desire	ability to set limits and to decide what is enough
Servitude to bare life	sovereignty
Excess of profanity	profane life, interrupted by the "sacred of everyday life"
Fear	fearlessness
Incestuous narcissism, "homoeostatic" avoidance of generosity	generosity
Presence of painful jouissance	utter pleasure of sovereignty and generosity
Beyond the symbolic order	within the symbolic order
Beyond the pleasure principle	within the pleasure principle
Death drive, isolated	death drive, mingled with eros[42]

Thus, an analysis based on the ethics of Aristotle and Bataille agrees with Recalcati's Hegelian diagnosis only in one point: It is true that post-oedipal individuals are more and more unable to transgress. Yet this inability does not stem from their being stuck in limited passions that testify to the neglect of limitless desire. Instead, what they are stuck in is precisely the limitlessness of concerns for bare life; the narcissistic compulsion to avoid generosity; and a passion for imaginary immortality that makes their actual

lives already resemble death (for example, in their "prepper's" bunkers).[43]

A psychoanalytic analysis mislead by Hegelian preconceptions of desire therefore does not provide an effective criticism of the post-oedipal condition that it has rightly recognised. Instead, it runs the risks of unknowingly contributing to the very ethics it aims to criticise.

To conclude: the example of "non-ism" and the misleading notion of "negativity"

Žižek has been, already in the 1990ies, probably the first theorist to recognise, within postmodern culture, the emergence of the products of so-called "non-ism":[44] beer without alcohol, coffee without caffeine, sex without bodily contact etc. Žižek's first examples were sometimes even more hilarious and extreme – I remember the example of mice deprived of their teeth, for the use as anal sex-toys by postmodern perverts; possibly inspired by Freud's "rat man".

"Non-ism" reappears even more massively in contemporary mass culture, in manifold shapes: sausage without meat, wine without alcohol, art without genius, politics without decisions etc. Thus, the issue of "non-ism" has not escaped the attention of the critics of post-oedipal society. Yet again they seem to fall prey to their Hegelian philosophical attachments. Samo Tomšič for example wittily explains that what is lacking in "non-ist" commodities is "negativity".[45] This may sound plausible at first sight, and convincing even for a common sense unfamiliar with the subtleties of Hegelian scholastics.

Yet this analysis, again, contains a number of flaws. Even remaining within the Hegelian system, one may be tempted to ask whether such a thing might ever be possible. Since for the Hegelian ontology, negativity is everywhere in the world; in every particular thing just as well as in the "Absolute". Therefore, a negativity proper to some things while being absent in others seems not to be a negativity at all.

More importantly, what could be called here the "negative" and its "negation" (or "sublation") would thus remain described in an inadequate, abstract and underdeterminate way. The "negative" here is, in the first place, the problematic object or practice; or its problematic dimension. Yet this problematic dimension, as we have seen, is not by its very nature "negative" or unpleasant. It can also be the indispensable source of utter joy. This depends on the social condition. If there is a cultural command for generosity, the problematic things become accessible and joyful. Yet this transformation, again, cannot be called a "negation" (of something "negative"). Since this is not at all a purely logical operation. Instead, it depends, like all ideology, on a series of material institutions, rituals, practices etc. and on their specific obligating force: there have to exist "holy" times, like anniversaries, for example; problematic objects like champagne or tobacco; expenditure of resources such as money,

time, sleep etc. And, before all, there has to exist a certain culture and conviviality that is able to produce those powerful imperatives that help individuals to outgrow themselves.

If all this gets obscured under the more or less seductive philosophical fog thrower concept of "negativity", then the critique of the post-oedipal condition becomes unable to explain why post-oedipal individuals find themselves more and more unable to transgress, to transform the problematic "filthy" matters into sublime ones and to outgrow themselves. To give a brief explanation for this, one has got to consider to what extent individuals in the wealthier parts of the capitalist world have, in the last decades, been bombarded with the ideological injunction "to be themselves": starting with the efforts of "self-realisation" in the aftermath of 1968, up to identity politics and the recent initiatives for the right to arbitrarily determining one's own gender. This "tyranny of intimacy" (to recall Richard Sennett's brilliant formula) has produced subjects that must experience any encouragement for transgression as a heteronomous injunction; as an attempt to deprive them of their assumed "authenticity". Precisely what could liberate subjects from their ethical narcissism, their fear and their subsequent political servility, gets thus perceived by them as a route towards their heteronomy and their enslavement.

This is one of the reasons why I consider "negativity" a "word without a concept" (to use Althusser's term); a pseudo-concept detrimental to every theory critical of the postmodern, post-oedipal ideological condition. I must remind the reader here that I do not hold Žižek responsible for these recent developments, since he has constantly been attempting to unveil a new Hegel, off the beaten tracks. Yet my impression is that contemporary analysis unwillingly reveals the "truth" at least of some of Lacan's own problematic Hegelian figures of thought. Thus, it uncritically repeats the mistakes of the Lacanian tradition and runs the risk of wasting the theoretical opportunities opened up precisely by Žižek's subtle "serves" from the Hegelian trajectory.

1 At the time, Isolde Charim, Michael Wiesmueller and myself, with Thomas Huebel and Monika Boll as our fellow-travellers.
2 See Žižek 1989, 36ff, 43f.
3 Pfaller 1998.
4 In fact, Althusser (who had a remarkable expertise on Hegel) is far more anti-Hegelian than his terminology may suggest. For example, it seems to be due to his well-known efforts to maintain some kind of orthodox Marxist language that Althusser speaks of the "overdetermination of the contradiction." But actually he replaces the Hegelian notion by a psychoanalytic concept that is of a completely different order: as Lucio Colletti (Colletti 1977) has explained, the notion of contradiction refers to logical relationships, and not to the opposition between physical forces ("Realrepugnanz"). Yet overdetermination belongs to the second order; it is a relationship between forces. "Overdetermination" is therefore one of Althusser's "point of externality" from Hegelianism. Since a contradiction that can be overdetermined is not a contradiction.
5 I have elaborated on this issue in detail in my essay "Interpassivity and Misdemeanors" (Pfaller 2007).
6 Against this silly notion of "self-plagiarism", I would recall Wittgenstein's witty question, 'Why can't my right hand give money to my left?' (Wittgenstein 1980: 148). I suggested to Žižek to defend himself by saying that he had apologized to himself, and that he had been so deeply moved by the sincerity of these apologies that he gave himself permission to from now on take from himself whatever he wanted for free.
7 Remark to M. O'C. Drury, 1948. Reported in Drury, *The Danger of Words & Writings on Wittgenstein* (1996), p. 157.
8 See for this Žižek 1991b: 9; 29ff. In his specific Lacanian reading, avoiding Lacans explicit references to Hegel, Žižek points out the presence of Lacanian notions such as the "not-all", the "Real" and the "lack in the Other" in Hegels philosophy (see Žižek 1991b: 9)
9 See for this procedure for example how Althusser, in his essay on the "ideological apparatuses", has demonstrated which concepts belong to Marx' theory of ideology, and which previous notions got abandoned: Althusser 1976: 109.
10 See Bachelard 1978: 35ff.
11 See for this for example Žižek 2004.
12 See for this Althusser 1986: 191f.
13 See Rimbaud 2004: 371.
14 See Žižek 1991b: 29ff.
15 See Nietzsche 2006: 51.
16 See for example Žižek 2025: 75f. Cf. Laclau 1996: 36–46. To describe the master-signifier as empty is an attempt to reconcile Hegelianism with psychoanalysis; i. e. to find a way to assert that what retroactively becomes visible ("for us") is the same as what has always already been there ("in itself"). Yet even Žižek's most witty example of the last added grain of sand that makes up a pile (Žižek 1991b: 29f.) does not fully accomplish this task. Of course, even if we remove the last added grain, we still see a pile. But this effect does not last forever. If we remove a few more grains we cease to see the pile and find out that it has not always already been there. Seeing some grains of sand as a pile is a matter of certain "transcendental" presuppositions that are external to its object.
17 For Hegel's "spectator's view", see Hegel 1970: 77; 108.
18 For this criticism see Nietzsche's remark: "From now on, my philosophical colleagues, let us be more wary of the dangerous old conceptual fairy-tale which has set up a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge', let us be wary of the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge as such': – here we are asked to think an eye which cannot be thought at all, an eye turned in no direction at all, an eye where the active and interpretative powers are to be suppressed, absent, but through which seeing still becomes a seeing-something, so it is an absurdity and non-concept of eye that is demanded. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing' (...)", Nietzsche 2006: 87
19 See Marx [1857]: 637: "In alle[n] Gesellschaftsformen ist es eine bestimmte Produktion, die allen übrigen und deren Verhältnisse daher auch allen übrigen, Rang und Einfluß anweist. Es ist eine allgemeine Beleuchtung, worin alle übrigen Farben getaucht sind und [die] sie in ihrer Besonderheit modifiziert."
20 Nietzsche 1980: 37.
21 See Recalcati [2010a]: 283f. One should not forget, though, how much the recent "post-oedipal" critique owes to Žižek's works – see for example his analysis of the role of consumer society for contemporary psychopathologies (Žižek 1986).
22 See Weber [1905].
23 See Recalcati [2010]: 333; [2012]: 64.
24 Žižek, at least in his criticism of Buddhist ethics, appears to follow the basic lines of this argument (Žižek 2025: 18f.).

25 See Hegel 1970: 145–155.
26 See Lacan [1959–60]: 319: "I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only dung of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire."; and ibid. 321: "For the ordinary man the betrayal that almost always occurs sends him back to the service of goods..." There is a certain irony to Lacan's treatment of Aristotle: He treats an ethics that is like no other determined by the idea of sovereignty as an ethics of servitude.
27 Cf. for this point Soler 2025: 48, who speaks of the "temptation to idealize or even heroicise desire" (my transl., R. P.)
28 For the discussion of this point I am grateful to Karl Stockreiter, Vienna.
29 Aristotle: *Politics*, book 1, chapter 9, 1257b–1258a (my transl., R.P.).
30 See Recalcati [2010]: 333.
31 See Lacan [1959–60]: 321; Recalcati [2012]: 57; 67; [2010]: 333.
32 Cf. Bataille 1997: 48: "One eats, they say, to live; but one does not live to eat. Finally, I must be able to say for what purpose I live, I must determine the sovereign value in view of which I *am*." (my transl., R.P.)
33 See for this Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, chapter 9.
34 See Žižek 1991a: 30.
35 "In Erwägung, dass ihr uns nun eben/mit Gewehren und Kanonen droht/haben wir beschlossen, von nun an schlechtes Leben/ mehr zu fürchten als den Tod." (Brecht 1984: 653).
36 The fact that the Aristotelian „middle ground" is transgressive is testified by Brecht's poem „Communism is the Middle Ground" (Brecht 1984: 503; for an English translation see https://lyricstranslate.com/en/der-kommunismus-ist-das-mittlere-communism-middle-ground.html-0 ; accessed 2025–05–31)
37 See Leiris [1938].
38 Slavoj Žižek has beautifully explained in what way true freedom coincides with necessity and duty: "True freedom is not the freedom of choice that happens from a safe distance, such as choosing between a strawberry or a chocolate cake: true freedom intersects instead with necessity, because this choice is truly free only when it puts one's existence at risk. Someone acts this way because he or she 'can't help it'. When one's country is under foreign occupation and someone is called upon by a resistance leader to participate in the struggle against the occupiers, the rationale for this call is not 'that every human being has free choice' but: 'Don't you see that this is the only way you can preserve your dignity?'" (Žižek 2007, my transl., R.P.)
39 These goes even for the seemingly most innocent pleasures: going for a walk requires the readiness to waste time; just as philosophizing requires the readiness to waste thoughts.
40 For a more extensive elaboration on this issue see Pfaller 2009.
41 See for this Bataille 1999: 27–49.
42 In my Althusserian understanding, the Freudian "dichotomy" of Eros and Death drive has to be understood in strict analogy to the status of the classes within class struggle (See for this Althusser [1973]: 49f.). Althusser has pointed out that class struggle always precedes the classes: when there exist two different classes, then one class has already won. The same goes with Freud's concepts: as soon as there seem to be two drives, death drive has won. Freud's basic concepts are therefore not Eros and Death drive, but "mixture" and "segregation" of the drives ("Triebmischung" und "Triebentmischung"; see Freud [1923b]: 308f.).
43 To risk a clinical hypothesis based on these premises: In all these contemporary efforts the aim of self-preservation is just a pretext. It serves the narcissistic goal of not undergoing the symbolic castration of transgression. To put it in Freudian terms: In the post-oedipal subjects the drive for self-preservation *inclines* itself upon the stronger narcissistic libidinal drive. One of the key elements of this uncastrated narcissism is the disavowal of death (see for this Freud [1915b]).
44 See Žižek 1992, 2004.
45 See Tomšič 2016: 150; 156. For a good description of the Lacanian "negativity"-argument and the emancipatory aspirations connected to it, see Soiland 2022: 19; 43.

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Sublating Christianity or Christ and “Sex”

Frances Restuccia

Abstract: This essay reads Žižek's *Christian Atheism*, along with Kristeva's *This Incredible Need to Believe*, as sublating Christianity, cancelling it to preserve it, **Žižek's** cardinal point being that Christianity overcomes the gap that severs humans from God by resituating that gap within God. Christianity produces an irreducible "crack" in "the ontological edifice of reality itself," on which true materialism and authentic politics rely. Žižek's as well as Kristeva's Hegelian sense of the crucified Christ as indexing the Void, in "the night of the world," is extended through Lacan, who locates Christ at the site of the gaze, as a means of generating desire. Christ on the Cross bears a relation to "sex" along the lines of Žižek's conception of "sex" as the failed Absolute. In *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, **Žižek** conceptualizes sexuality as an ontologically disturbing force of negativity/failure through which we brush the Absolute, leading him to pop the question, as though it logically follows: "What is the revolution, then, of Christianity?" Žižek's subsequent book, *Christian Atheism*, becomes the full-blown response. Puncturing the big Other, Christ (too) is an ontologically shattering force of negativity, rendering Christianity revolutionary. Abandoned, Christ crosses with "sex" at the juncture of the failed Absolute.

Keywords: Christian Atheism, Crucifixion, Failed Absolute, Holy Spirit, radical negativity, "sex", surplus *jouissance*

> "Hier umbe so bite ich got, daze er mich quit mache gotes."
> "Therefore I pray God that he may quit me of God."
> --Meister Eckhart, Sermon

Psychoanalytic theorists, like contemporary theorists in general, have clustered around the topic of Christianity. It seems to have a gravitational pull, in a way not exercised by the other religions of the Book, or any other religion for that matter. One might claim that, since contemporary theory is, for the most part, a development of Western culture, it is by definition tethered to that Christian world. Perhaps, then, there's no mystery here. Still, the fascinating fact is that contemporary theorists who tend to propose radical forms of social and political change, condemn hierarchy as well as Heaven, and unmistakably identify as atheists cling to Christianity. At the very beginning of *Saint Paul*, Alain Badiou, for example, insists that he draws upon Paul "without devotion," regarding Paul (at least at first) as neither apostle nor saint: "nothing sacred" is involved. Yet Badiou himself seems aware of the curious strangeness of his atheistic infatuation with such a religious figure, one who is, as Badiou notes, "frequently tied to Christianity's least open, most institutional aspects: the Church, moral discipline, social conservatism, suspiciousness

toward Jews." Reflecting his own puzzlement, Badiou explains that he is "irreligious by heredity, and [was] even encouraged in the desire to crush the clerical infamy by [his] four grandparents." The first words of this text's Prologue deem it a "Strange enterprise."[1]

Certain contemporary theorists concentrate on the image of Christ on the Cross, while others (such as Badiou in *Saint Paul*) are drawn to the Resurrection. Slavoj Žižek's preoccupation with an abandoned Christ locates Žižek in the former camp, at the same time as he privileges the Holy Ghost. Like Žižek, whose recent book *Christian Atheism* breathes new, especially political life into his treatment of the intersection of psychoanalysis and Christianity, Julia Kristeva, mainly in *This Incredible Need to Believe*, has probed the psychoanalytic richness of the Crucifixion. Despite their different deployments of psychoanalysis in examining the Passion of Christ, or perhaps I should say because of them, it seemed potentially fruitful to discover what sort of short circuit might be sparked by juxtaposing these two unlikely bedfellows.

Žižek and Kristeva do, however, clearly share atheism, just as several major contemporary theorists who think in relation to Christian theology (e.g., Derrida, Nancy, Badiou, Agamben) identify as atheists—testifying to Lacan's own striking assertion in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Seminar VII*, that "there is a certain atheistic message in Christianity itself." Lacan is in clear support of the crossroads between Christian atheism and psychoanalysis: "we Christians have erased the whole sphere of the gods"; and what "we replaced it with [is] illuminated by psychoanalysis."[2]

I am proposing that such atheistic work at the intersection of theory and Christianity sublates Christianity–cancels it to preserve it, albeit in a radically new form. Lacan himself, again in *Ethics*, reads the Christian drama that literally incarnates the death of God in terms of the German notion of *Aufhebung*.[3] Christianity in Žižek and Kristeva, who also share indebtedness to Hegel, in the end reappears, tenaciously, inextricably wrapped together with psychoanalysis, in a kind of negation of that former negation. Žižek insists that "atheism cannot stand on its own, a detour through religion is necessary . . . specifically Christianity is indispensable," crucially adding that "If we throw away the ladder, we lose the thing itself which we arrived to through this ladder."[4]

This essay focuses on the basic premises of *Christian Atheism* and *This Incredible Need to Believe* to lay out two unique ways of looking awry at Christianity, put them in conversation with one another, and ultimately consider new thought—Christ paired with "sex" (a coupling Žižek himself does not quite bring to fruition)--sparked by the short circuiting.

i.

In *Christian Atheism*, Žižek weaves his primary allegiances intricately together. Chapter Six is entitled "Why Politics is Immanently Theological."

Žižek even takes the following reproach to Marxism as one of its virtues: that, by committing to a "bright future," it secularizes "religious salvation."[5] Political theology, in his view, undergirds radical political emancipatory politics, just as "theology is political" insofar as it poses "the question of social engagement."[6] Radical politics, to Žižek, needs theology and seems to have a special craving for Christianity, mainly since Christianity accommodates psychoanalysis, in particular the psychoanalytic notion, so dear to Žižek, that the big Other is perforated or even does not exist. It is the deprivation of support from the big Other that enables a position of genuine radicality. Žižek invokes Lacan's assertion that "we can do without [God] provided that we use [Him]"[7]; following this piece of advice, Žižek puts Christianity to rigorous political use.

In a nutshell, Žižek's variety of Christianity "overcomes the gap that separates humans from God" as it relocates that gap within God. Referring to the Incarnation, he explains in *Surplus-Enjoyment* that the appearance of God is "an event which deeply affects god's identity. There is no human-divine relationship—but *this non-relationship exists as such, in the figure of Christ*, God who is a human being. In other words, Christ is not a figure of mediation between god and man . . . ; what happens with Christ is that the non-relationship between god and man is transposed into god itself. The gap that separates man from god is asserted as immanent to god," and "[w]hen this happens, God the father is no longer an obscene superego agent, and the abyss of utter despair turns out to be the other face of my radical freedom."[8] It is not just Christ who expires on the Cross: "the god of the beyond itself" dies on the Cross, offering us freedom through its self-erasure, announcing that there is "no transcendent higher power," and subsequently returning in the guise of the Holy Ghost as an "egalitarian community of believers."[9] This hole in "the god of the beyond itself," registering His absence and death, provides a base of negativity for Žižek's conception of the Holy Spirit.

It is this "dimension of radical negativity," carved out by the Crucifixion's cancellation of the God of the Beyond, that "holds open the space for every emancipatory politics which takes itself seriously, i.e., which reaches beyond the continuity of historical progress and introduces a radical cut that changes the very measures of progress."[10] Žižek underscores in *Christian Atheism* that the cut that such a space of negativity introduces is politically necessary. The outcome of Christianity has the potential to be "an irreducible gap, crack, in the ontological edifice of reality itself"[11]--on which both true materialism and authentic politics rely. Whereas for most believers God is a fantasy that closes the gap constitutive of subjectivity, for Žižek, Christ, Son of God, consubstantial with God-the-Father, conversely embodies the fact that there is no big Other protecting us, no "transcendent agent safeguarding our fate," and that "something is terribly out of joint in our world."[12] Atheism, therefore, cannot operate directly but must weave its way through Christianity

to traverse what Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* considers an infantile delusion. This is a rudimentary psychoanalytic move, traversing a fundamental fantasy through arriving at a lacuna: "The Event of Christ stands for a radical gap."[13]

Žižek's paradoxical God is, in typical Lacanian fashion, both lack and excess, mirroring the Lacanian Real (similarly conceived as lack and lack of lack[14]).[15] As Žižek elaborates in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, "The notorious 'lack' co-substantial with the human animal is not simply negative . . . . It is a lack with regard to an excess, to the excessive presence of traumatic enjoyment."[16] The lack/excess relation is parallactic: "Castration and excess are not two different entities, but the front and the back of one and the same entity . . . inscribed onto the two surfaces of a Möbius strip." This proposition crucially means that "the very fact" that an entity cannot achieve its "finite form," that "it cannot be what it is, that it is marked by an irreducible impossibility, thwarted in its core" is what "pushes" an entity "beyond its finite form."[17] Even God exceeds Himself: there is "something in god more than god itself."[18] In other words, "'god' names the fact that man is not wholly man, that there is an inhuman dimension in its core."[19] Perhaps this oxymoronic notion (God as radical negativity and excess) enables us to glimpse what Lacan had in mind in stating that "God is unconscious."[20]

Žižek's "true" materialist approach entails an "immanent self-undermining of a religious edifice." He presents his materialist exposé of God-as-evil (or at least stupid) as destroying "from within the very notion of divinity,"[21] although early in *Christian Atheism*, he resituates "the divine" in the very space or gap that divides the "transcendental from the objective-realist approach"—a "'divine' dimension [that] refers to the experience of radical negativity."[22] Žižek endorses Christianity to reveal the evil/stupidity of its God, as part of his mission to cancel it, given that a simple atheist critique, which straightforwardly posits that God doesn't exist, keeps the possibility of God intact, since disavowal necessarily maintains avowal underground.

To Žižek, the power of religion is predicted on its central secret: that it establishes itself through "a sacred act" that is tantamount to "the supreme crime"—which helps us to comprehend Christ's self-sacrifice as both assuming, and repenting for, the crimes of the Father. Žižek refers to horrific crimes that are transferred to the realm of the sacred, such as "ethnic cleansing" enacted to secure the territory of Israel for the Jews.[23] The fictional, but also criminal, status of God must be exposed *from within*. Which is why Žižek calls to our attention shocking details of an unfinished drawing by Michelangelo of Christ on the Cross, in which Christ's "attitude of angry rebellion—defiance" can be detected. Žižek notes the especially surprising missing nail in Christ's right hand, whose forefinger juts out in "a vulgar gesture." Christ's famous "Why?" in his "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" is here revealed to be

"aggressive, accusatory."[24] To convey his point, Žižek invokes Goethe's "formula *Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*—no one but god himself can stand against god."[25]

In turn, Žižek transfers such doubt in God Himself, His failure as it is articulated *by God*, this gap in/of God to reality itself, a crack in reality that keeps it from being totalizable as well as renders "everything that we project beyond this gap [as] our fantasy formation."[26] In stark opposition to Kant, Žižek rejects the notion of an in-itself beyond the phenomenal realm. The missing piece, the hole, the Void is immanent in reality rather than floats in a Beyond outside the bounds of the Symbolic order. Žižek's Real is "immanent to the symbolic order itself."[27] God has metamorphosed into an ontological crack in reality. Instead of filling the gap, God has turned into it: "an impossibility . . . gapes" in the irreducible godly gap or "heart of reality itself"[28]—the ultimate political consequence of the Christian religion.

Not only does Christ's/God's demise on the Cross provide Žižek's atheism with a Void essential to his radical politics; but also "an atheist gesture is contained already in the Christian notion of the Holy Ghost."[29] To Žižek, the Crucifixion operates in tandem with the emergence of the Holy Spirit: Christ, rendered "by his death as a nothing—an outcast abandoned even by his disciples—grounds a new community of believers." Christ re-emerges "by way of passing through the zero-level of being reduced to an excremental remainder—in what comes after the gesture of 'kurc te gleda' is a new socio-political order."[30] Instead of levitating to Heaven, Christ "returns" through the Holy Spirit, which assumes the form of "the community of believers [that] exists in this earthly abject world"—a community devoid of any sort of transcendent support. The crack in the big Other, obscured in conventional Christianity, is sustained and featured in the coming of the Holy Spirit: it too is conceived as "an event."[31] Žižek rereads Christianity so that it no longer covers over the Void but displays it as the operation of the Holy Spirit in the form of an egalitarian community hurled into the "abyss of freedom."[32] In Žižek's more specific terms, "the creative act grounded in this harsh freedom is the Holy Ghost, the first figure of what, among other names, later was known as the Communist Party.[33] (Would Christ not have been a Communist?)[34] If one thinks of Paul's universalism, this conception of an egalitarian community may not seem far-fetched. Žižek invokes it. To him, despite Badiou's privileging of his four truth procedures (science, politics, art, and love), Badiou's most persuasive account of an Event is "that of Christianity, of Saint Paul's invention of universalism."[35]

The redoubling of the crack that Žižek insists on—the crack in the big Other imbricated with lack in the subject—lies at the heart of Hegel's concept of "Absolute Knowing," an ontologizing of "our epistemological limitation."[36] The breach that Žižek locates in God occupies Hegel's "night of the world."[37] There is absolutely no outside entity on which

we can rely or that controls things: both the "I" (Subject) and its object (Hegel's Substance) are defective. Žižek quotes the Foreword to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to support this interdependent reflection:

> The disparity which exists in consciousness between the I and the Substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the *negative* in general. This can be regarded as the *defect* of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the *void* as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the *negative*, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the I and its object, it is just as much a disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and substance shows itself to be essentially subject[38]

The theoretical challenge here is how this redoubling of "the negative" psychoanalytically maps onto Christ on the Cross. Hegel's assertion that what dies on the Cross is the God of the Beyond invites us to link that death with his night of the world, his absolute negativity (which Žižek correlates with the death drive). At the end of *Christian Atheism*, Žižek states forcefully that the "Christian name for this emptying is the death of God on the Cross which condemns us, humans, to freedom deprived of any guarantee in the big Other,"[39] a voiding/deprivation yielding freedom that is a function of Christ's/God's absolute negativity. And, in turn, this "abyss," in perhaps the biggest of the big Others, God, "opens up the space for the subject to locate its authentic desire." As Žižek explains in general, in a way that pertains directly to this evacuating of God, "The ultimate lesson is not that the subject is 'castrated,' deprived of its agency, but that the big Other itself is castrated."[40] For God's separation from Himself provides the opening that enables lacking/desiring subjectivity.

Christ on the Cross, detached from God, but at the same time God separated from Himself, powerfully instantiates the paradoxical operation of negativity/excess as a means of generating desire. Abandoned on the Cross, Christ indexes the Void, the night of the world, the death of the God of the Beyond; yet the forsaken Christ also shows that God is more than God, a spiritual excess. As the undead, Christ on the Cross (like Antigone) is caught between Lacan's two deaths, a biological death and a Symbolic death, hovering in a space of *surplus-jouissance*. In fact, Žižek conceives the death drive as the drive to repeat *surplus-jouissance*. Christ is negativity/Void even as he exudes, having been begotten by God as excess, *surplus-jouissance*. In the vacated Christ dangling from the Cross, then, we have negativity/Void/Real built into an image of excess/Real.

But perhaps what we have here is an excess of excess, a surplus of *surplus-jouissance*. For, like Polyneices in *Antigone*, Christ seems marked

by vestiges of incest, especially if we think of incest as an "impossibility" covered up through prohibitions by the incest taboo that makes "the impossible symbolically manageable, approachable," as Zupančič widens the definition of incest in *Let Them Rot.*[41] Christ's excess partakes (as well) in his being impossibly born of a Virgin (without a biological father), rendering him uniquely attached to the maternal object, even as he is consubstantial with (more than simply attached to) God-the-Father, as well as married to Mother Church. Therefore, to secure Christ's radical negativity, removing all traces of "incest," *Christ* (like Polyneices) *must be buried*, in the eyes of both the Church and Žižek. To the Church, according to this logic, Christ's burial is imperative due to its negative ontology (He must be buried so that subsequently He can gloriously rise to Heaven, resurrect), while, according to psychoanalysis, burial is imperative especially due to His excessive excess, as a way of entrenching the negativity, turning it into a foundation rather than allowing it to roam.

Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ* 1602–1604, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Permission from Art Resource

Christ's burial (the focal point of a plethora of Renaissance paintings by renowned artists) submerges Christ's incestuous excess as it is imbricated with absolute negativity, even as it grants that negativity as a basis to believers. Hence we arrive, through this psychoanalytically attuned theological narrative, at the threshold of freedom and the emergence of desire.

As for freedom: like the non-reproducible Polyneices in Zupančič's riveting original reading of *Antigone* in *Let Them Rot*, the equally non-reproducible Christ must be interred for the sake of the sustenance of the Symbolic mandate, necessary for Žižek's egalitarian community (just as "without symbolization, there is no real; there is just a flat stupidity"[42]). My sense that, psychoanalytically speaking, Christ must be buried takes its cue as well from Zupančič's argument that *Antigone* reflects the Lacanian injunction not to allow undeadness to wander freely. The surplus Real must be installed underground. Only an "absolute death" can pave the way to new life. Indestructible life that persists beyond literal death needs to be extinguished for reproducibility to ensue. Not to bury the corpse of the irreproducible—e.g., Polyneices, since Antigone can never have another brother; and Christ, whose particular human/Son-of-God status renders him unique—is to halt the ongoingness of life, the perpetuation of the species. In particular, again, it would block the birth and development of the community of believers that Žižek theorizes will come about as the work of the Holy Spirit. In order for the death drive itself to continue to function, incestuous undeadness must be buried, sustaining at the same time the Real of enjoyment. Only upon being interred can Christ fuel an ongoing interplay of cuts and *jouissance* intrinsic to Žižek's coming community. As in *Antigone*, in which Antigone "elevates 'the Oedipal abject' (*Unding*) to the dignity of the Thing,"[43] raising it to a sublime level, here the burial of Christ leads to Christ's being given the dignity of *das Ding*, which is, as we shall see, precisely how Kristeva conceives Christ in the tomb.

As for desire: insofar as *das Ding* is desire's focal point, the burial of Christ has the power to summon desire. Without *das Ding*, desire is at a stand-still. Yet the aim here is not the goal but "the reproduction of its lack,"[44] given that *das Ding* is the "impossible-real ultimate point of reference of desire,"[45] leaving us no choice but to tarry with the negative. Clearly, desire never escapes the "night of the world," for "the night of the world" refers to the very Void on which desiring subjectivity is predicated. As Hegel realized, the self itself, the desiring subject, *is* the negative: "The human being is this night, this empty nothing . . . . This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it . . . . One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful" ("Jenaer Realphilosophie"[46]). Which brings us back to Christ, whose cancellation of God in the Beyond transpires in "the night of the world," producing a gaping negation, a Void, an irreducible excess of negativity, from which

freedom/subjectivity/desire can emerge. In *Christian Atheism*, Žižek expounds on desire by contrasting the Christian production of it with the Buddhist denial. Whereas Buddhism calls for ceding one's desire, Christ effects the conditions that enable it.[47]

Žižek takes this compatibility between Christianity and psychoanalysis further in crediting Foucault with the insight that Christianity generates the very excess it tries to contain—"sex"—a process that began with the early Church via its meticulous descriptions of, if not obsession with, potential "sexual temptations" that "retroactively produced what they fought."[48] Zupančič contributes to this line of reasoning. Her analysis of the Church's fixation on the partial drives, in its own ironic way, fortifies the idea that the Church ended up pointing to the ontological negativity of "sex" *by exerting itself to avoid it*. In *What is Sex?*, Zupančič quotes Lacan to argue that, contrary to the common view that the Church promoted heterosexual intercourse for procreation against perverse drive sexuality, "everything that followed from the effects of Christianity . . . is exhibition of the body evoking *jouissance* . . . without copulation." (Lacan claims he acquired this knowledge from having just visited an "orgy of churches in Italy"[49]). To Zupančič, the Church senses something "profoundly disruptive at stake in 'copulation'"[50]—which is precisely why sex becomes the punishment for original sin as well as the site of its protraction.

Zupančič makes her case that the Church circumvents, and thereby attests to, "sex" through the fixation of canonized saints on Imaginary objects of the drive as they are depicted in Renaissance art. Her prime examples are Lorenzo Lippi's *Saint Agatha*, whose breasts appear on a platter in front of her, and Domenico Beccafumi's *Saint Lucy*, whose eyes look out from an oblong cylinder hovering before her. The Church, to Zupančič, celebrates bodily *jouissance*, partial drives, passion, satisfaction—as they exclude sexual coupling. "Pure enjoyment, 'enjoyment for the sake of enjoyment,'" is not at all banned or repressed. Rather, any "*link to sexuality*"[51] is the problem. The Church dabbles in polymorphously perverse drive satisfaction, separating enjoyment from the sexual, and holds back from "natural sexuality" because of sexuality's "abyssal negativity."[52] It's as if the Church intuits—but disavows—that "human sexuality is the point at which the impossibility (ontological negativity) pertaining to the sexual relation appears as such, 'registers' in reality as its part. . . . in the singular form discovered by Freud as that of the unconscious," the unconscious being "the very form of existence of an ontological negativity pertaining to sexuality ('there is no sexual relation')."[53]

Yet the unconscious inevitably breaks through, again in the story of Adam and Eve—in my view, the Church's myth of the invention of the unconscious.[54] Zupančič entertains the fascinating idea that the knowledge imparted to Adam and Eve upon eating the forbidden fruit was "the '(signifying) structure of knowledge as such,'" as the unconscious is

"constitutive of [that] knowledge." To Zupančič, Adam and Eve's shame was ontological, as it appeared at the site of the "lacking signifier (-1)."[55] Their punishment therefore corresponds to their crime. Having opened up the unconscious, having gained knowledge of the unconscious, unconscious knowledge, Adam and Eve must suffer its pangs, as they enter the tempestuous world of disruptive, unsatisfiable desire. In light of this sense of their downfall, Christ might therefore be conceived (*from the Church's point of view*) as achieving the forgiveness of the—and especially Adam and Eve's—sin of "sex." And the Church's insistence on burying Christ may be regarded as a way to submerge the abandoned Christ, the Christ of abyssal negativity, as it resides in the unconscious—whose failure actually enables identification with what he forgives—in turn raising him up to a sexless heaven. Žižek's revision of Christianity rescues Christ from such a regression.[56]

ii.

Distinct from Žižek's objective to dissolve traditional Christianity (to aid its depletion, from within), Julia Kristeva's engagement with this religion aims to rescue a centuries-old institution due to its revelation of unconscious truths and psychoanalytic efficacy. Kristeva is attuned to the "*psychic reality*" produced in the believing subject by religious events, through their "representations or . . . phantasms."[57] My contention is that (nevertheless) both psychoanalytic theorists sublate Christianity, erase its conventional meanings to raise it to a psychoanalytic level.

Though exceptions exist (such as Mari Ruti and of course myself), most Žižekians tend to bypass Kristeva, and most Kristevans do the same regarding Žižek. Kristeva is no Marxist and only sporadically invokes Lacan.[58] Although Žižek occasionally shows awareness of Kristeva, for the most part, he ignores her, even when working out a lengthy, penetrating analysis of melancholia in Lars von Trier's eponymous film. Yet, major (unrecognized) general points of intersection wed the two: an appreciation of European culture, in particular its Enlightenment values; a condemnation of the victory of the image over the breach in the Symbolic; concern about "subterranean anger" over "the thick network of prejudices[59] and exclusions that determine the daily life" of immigrant youth especially in France[60]; and, obviously, ways that Christianity lends itself to psychoanalytic concepts. Both subscribe to the idea that "God is unconscious."[61] To Kristeva, it is Christianity's distinctive focus on suffering that testifies to "its extraordinary awareness of psychic life."[62] Christianity is the sole religion that not only addresses suffering intimately but also "tames it."[63]

Further coinciding with Zizek, even before publishing *This Incredible Need to Believe* (2009), and three and a half decades prior to *Christian Atheism* (2024), Kristeva concentrated on Christ's "dereliction" upon

being forsaken by the Father as well as on how Christ's abandonment might include and thereby affect us.[64] In 1989, in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, she asks with some incredulity, "how is it possible for God to die?" Kristeva is in awe of Christ's words that foretold "his violent death without referring to salvation."[65] It is in her chapter "Holbein's Dead Christ" that Kristeva reads the rupture of the bond between Christ and his Father *as introducing into the Subject* "a fundamental and psychically necessary discontinuity," a "caesura," a "hiatus" that "provides an image, at the same time a narrative, for many separations that build up the psychic life of individuals."[66] (Žižek insists similarly that "there is something like subject [in the sense of the subject of the signifier and/or the unconscious] only insofar as there is no big Other."[67]) Responding to the challenge posed earlier of mapping the notion of the hole in the big Other as it lines up with the gap in the subject onto Christ, Kristeva connects the chasm that Christianity locates "at the very heart of the absolute Subject—Christ"—to various splittings that psychoanalysis conceives as necessary for subjective autonomy. Moreover, she links such severings—"birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration" that "necessarily structure our individuation"—to Hegel's "'work of the negative,'"[68] to her, the source of Christianity's therapeutic value.

It is especially Kristeva's reaction to Hans Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (which echoes Prince Myshkin's deeply disturbed response in *The Idiot*) that appears to have catalyzed Kristeva's psychoanalytic embrace of Hegelian negativity. This early Holbein masterpiece triggers for Kristeva the questions raised in Dostoevsky's novel of how belief could possibly be maintained that this martyr could rise again and whether Christ himself would have mounted the cross had he realized how ghastly he would look in the tomb. Riveted to an image of the deceased Christ, Kristeva suggests that it is as though Christ in the Holbein painting is "truly dead" and there is no "promise of Resurrection"—"not the slightest suggestion of transcendence."[69]

> Hans Holbein has given up all architectural or compositional fancy. The tombstone weighs down on the upper portion of the painting, which is merely twelve inches high, and intensifies the feeling of permanent death: *this corpse shall never rise again*. The very pall, limited to a minimum of folds, emphasizes, through that economy of motion, the feeling of stiffness and stone-felt cold.[70]

Holbein, *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1522, Basel, Permission from Art Resource

Holbein's "Dead Christ" is "without a beyond," so that "we are led to collapse in the horror of the caesura" of death. And it is that apprehension of final death *without a beyond*, that horror that prompts Kristeva to query if the painting invites us to transform this tomb of absolute death to "a living tomb,"[71] so that our life might become a "danse macabre." Figured by such a "danse," the Lacanian paradox of excess/death in relation to desiring subjectivity emerges here as well: Christ's hair and hand spill out, as though the corpse cannot be contained. In Kristeva's words, "this hair and this hand . . . extend beyond the base as if they might slide over toward us, as if the frame could not hold back the corpse."[72]

The dead Christ, in occupying a space of excessive negativity, provides a site of the gaze. What clinches for me this idea that, through such images, Christianity presages the psychoanalytic concept of the Lacanian gaze—the notion that desiring subjectivity is predicated on engagement with the Real in the form of the subject's constitutive lack—is that Holbein went on to paint his famous *The Ambassadors* (1533), the painterly paradigm of a gaze experience. Looking awry at this later Holbein painting positions the viewer to apprehend, instead of a cuttlebone (the ostensible image), a skull. Does Kristeva's reading of the earlier Holbein work, *Dead Christ* (1522), not expose whose skull we apprehend, or at least whose "skull" provides a prefiguration? It would seem that for Holbein, if not for Lacan, the dead Christ is an early indication of the death/Void/negativity lurking at the foot of the two ambassadors (vainly decked out in all their extravagant garb).

But, whereas the skull in *The Ambassadors* serves as an *objet a* in the field of the visible, inciting the viewer's experience of the gaze that produces a line of sight sparking desire, insofar as it serves as its cause (*objet a* being the object-cause of desire rather than an object of desire), the dead Christ in the earlier painting is, as Kristeva describes it, "a monopolizing Thing."[73] Holbein's *Dead Christ* unveils *das Ding*. This jarring

work of art takes us back to, fully revealing, what needs to stay veiled. In the tomb, Christ is meant to be isolated, unseen, except perhaps by the saints. His dead, entombed body is too much to look at; Christ must be shrunk to the size of the cuttlebone, so as not to be overwhelming (as he is spilling out of the tomb) but to serve as a reference point of lack/desire, that forever elusive impossibility to which desire aspires. The younger Holbein shows the bare Thing lying in the background of the *Ambassadors* painting, "the impossible-real ultimate *point of reference of desire*."[74] Together, Holbein's paintings point to the key phases of the workings of desire, starting with the death of God.

Moving on in the narrative, we might say that *Christ* at this point tarries with the negative, since prior to ascending into Heaven, he slips away from the confines of his tomb for a visit to Hell, adding yet another coat of negativity to his meaning. In *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva concentrates on this harrowing journey (which is especially emphasized in the Eastern Orthodox Church and significantly marked her childhood). Christ's/God's descent into Hell is expressed by the Greek noun *kénose* that "signifies 'not-being,' 'nothing,' 'inanity,' 'nullity.'" Here we have, writes Kristeva, a foreshadowing of "the modern confrontation with the 'death of God.'"[75] In this Gospel story, Kristeva finds a wrestling with the death drive; through Christ's descent into Hell, "the bonds of the drives and of life itself" are undone. For here is "the death of God himself."[76] Similarly, to Žižek, Christ "as a God who is simultaneously a mortal creature (dying on the Cross), definitely belongs to the domain of Hell."[77] Žižek's rationale is that "in order to reach the abyss of the Void," God as "the supreme creature" must be expunged, and the sole place where this can happen is Hell, "where God is by definition absent."[78]

Does Kristeva not once again anticipate Žižek (who regards the "speculative content" of the idea of divine *kenosis* as residing in "the alienation of god from itself"[79]) in proposing that Christianity is the sole religion that verges on exiting the realm of the religious, given that it presents God suffering to the horrific point of death? Not only Christ, then, but again also God Himself (not that they can simply be peeled apart) is annulled through the harrowing of Hell. Christ's suffering and death, both the flagellation-crucifixion and the harrowing of Hell are "nihilistic catastrophe[s]."[80] As Bataille reminds us in *Literature and Evil*: "'God is nothingness,' said Eckhart."[81] Echoing Eckhart, Lacan adds his voice to this chorus: "Now God's power resides in the capacity to advance into emptiness."[82]

But I have perhaps sown confusion in including Žižek's (at least implicit) conflation of Christ's/God's absence and death, His negativity, with castration/lack. Žižek insists that we learn the lesson that the big Other is "castrated"[83] at the same time as he conceives God as one of the most imposing variations on the big Other. "Lack" is a tricky term here, given that it easily equates with negativity but in psychoanalytic theory serves

as a synonym for desire. Christ on the Cross, however, is by no means a lacking/desiring subject. I prefer to reserve the term "lack," then, for the latter meaning (coupling it with desire) especially because I associate Christ (as does Žižek) with negativity/excess, a site *productive of lack/desire*, or in other words at the site of the gaze. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in fact, Lacan in a sense conflates the two Holbein paintings in substantiating this idea of Christ, in bringing to the attention of his seminar members "a polished cylinder that has the function of a mirror." He explains that when viewers stand at an angle in observing this object, they envision in the cylindrical mirror "a beautiful anamorphosis of a painting of the crucifixion copied from Reubens."[84] Rather than *being* castrated, although situated in "the night of the world" at the nadir of subjective destitution, Christ in the anamorphic place of the gaze (of our constitutive lack) has the capacity to *effect* castration. Žižek, however, at times seems to equate the abyssal negativity of God/Christ with lack/castration, even though lack/castration/desire entails pulling away from (a distance Žižek himself insists on) a certain underlying pre-ontological negativity/*das Ding*.

And yet, in some of his most conceptually complex writing, Žižek comes to terms with this apparent inconsistency (one that badly needed sorting out, not just in his work but in general) in the section "The Two Vacuums: From Less than Nothing to Nothing" in *Sexuality and the Failed Absolute*, in describing two variations on Nothing. Žižek designates a "nothing that is 'less than nothing,'" a "void of pure potentiality,"[85] "a weird pre-ontological 'something' which [again] is less than nothing." This pre-ontological nothing, he explains, must be negated for "Something" to emerge.[86] What I find especially helpful here is Žižek's distinction between *den* or "'less than nothing'" and *objet a* or "'more than one, but less than two,' a spectral supplement which haunts the One, preventing its ontological closure," rendering it incomplete.[87] There is an original nothing out of which One emerges; then, through its emergence, there appears a Nothing, preserving a link to that original nothing or less than nothing. The *objet a* serves as "an x that has to be added to a pre-ontological vacuum to make it the Nothing against the background of which actual objects can appear."[88] We start with a "'less than nothing,'" a "pure Real," out of which a *Dasein* arises that "holds open . . . the site of Nothing." Elaborating through Heidegger, Žižek posits that *Dasein* is "the 'operator' of the transformation of the pre-ontological Void into the Void of ontological Nothingness."[89] Arising out of the pure Real, subjectivity in turn gives rise to the Nothing. The Sub/ject (barred) is a "kind of glitch in the pre-ontological field" that "triggers its ontological actualization," an "ontologically constituted reality" that is "never fully actualized," and thus "needs to be sutured by a paradoxical object, *objet a*," the subject's "anamorphic inscription into reality."[90]

Returning now to the Christian narrative: Christ on the Cross, Christ in the tomb, and Christ in Hell may be seen as situated in the pre-

ontological nothing, the pure Real, or the less than nothing whose remnant becomes the Nothing/lack on which the Sub/ject depends. Situated in the "pure Real," Christ (*das Ding*) has the capacity to become the cause of desire (*objet a*) upon being apprehended within that incomprehensible space. In this way, which for the most part dovetails with how Žižek reads this Christian story, Christianity gives the gift of desiring subjectivity. The pre-ontological nothing that Christ inhabits turns into the missing piece or *objet a* that sustains a bit of that pre-ontological nothing/Real. We are approaching here, therefore, the relation of Christ and "sex," insofar as our focus on Christ is a matter of desire.

iii.

Despite Kristeva's privileging of the Imaginary Father who enables both speech and belief in the child, the Law of the Father, and the paternal metaphor, in her reading of the undead/dead Christ/God (on the Cross, in the "open" tomb, and descending into Hades), she leans in (prefigures) Žižek's direction. Her opposition to what she calls "ideality" enhances the kinship. A major emphasis in *This Incredible Need to Believe* is that today's adolescent believes that "the Great Other" will give satisfaction. She asks, what happens when Paradise does not come true? Her answer: self-punishment/destruction, sadomasochism, drug addiction, anorexia, depression, suicide. Kristeva's Great Other is akin to Žižek's big Other (it too does not exist), and both concepts/fictions seem grounded ultimately in the Christian paradigm of radical negativity.

> [T]he adolescent takes pleasure in the syndrome of paradise, which may also become a source of suffering, if absolute ideality takes a turn toward cruel persecution. Since he believes that the *other*, surpassing the parental other, not only exists but that he/she gives him total satisfaction, the adolescent believes that the Great Other exists, which is bliss [*jouissance*] itself. The least disappointment in this syndrome of ideality hurls him into paradise's ruins, in the form of punitive behavior.[91]

Kristeva has in mind, in particular, severely frustrated Muslim adolescents in the suburbs of Paris, youth who are excluded, blocked from integration, and seek recognition and respect. But she also claims that "*All of us are adolescents when we are passionate about the absolute*."[92] The "adolescent" to Kristeva "*believes in the existence of the erotic object* (object of desire and/or love)." "Adolescents" are convinced that it exists. "Faith implies a passion for the object relation: faith is potentially fundamentalist, like the adolescent. Romeo and Juliet are its blazons."[93] And here her thinking overlaps strikingly with Žižek's brilliant thesis that sexuality is the failed absolute.

An image in Kristeva's work on Holbein provides a curious conjoining of the *undead* Christ, as He embodies ontological negativity, and Žižek's conception of sex as a "disturbing excess."[94] In Holbein's small Gothic diptych *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, Kristeva in *Black Sun* observes a "strangely athletic, brawny, and tensed" figure whose right hand appears spasmodically "curled up before the sexual organ"[95]—an encapsulation of "what Lacan called *lamella*" or the "undead/immortal life of non-castrated *jouissance*."[96]

Holbein, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* 1519–1520, Basel

As he wears his crown of thorns, Christ's face aches, and his mouth gapes—expressing "a morbid suffering beyond vague eroticism." Kristeva poignantly asks, "From what passion did such a pain arise? Would the man-God be distressed, that is, haunted by death, *because* he is sexual, prey to sexual passion?"[97] Kristeva drops these fascinating questions. But we can read Holbein's Gothic diptych as evocative of an astonishing

connection: the coalescing of her and Žižek's conceptions of the undead Christ and "sex." In *Christian Atheism*, soon after characterizing Christ as a "monstrous frozen monument to the lack of any transcendent agent safeguarding our fate,"[98] Žižek refers to an "excess of negativity discernible in sex."[99] Both Christ and "sex" reside in the realm of the undead, where they take the form of the psychoanalytic *das Ding* (recall Kristeva's reading of Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*). Žižek designates "sex" as the (failed) Absolute or "the impossible real-Thing" insofar as it is "accessible only as the always-missed point of reference of detours and distortions"[100]; Kristeva exposes the adolescence of those who naively believe in the erotic object. In *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, Holbein captures the double disaster.

Revisiting Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ* (see image above), we can discover this same doubly failed Absolute. Christ's dead body is the only fully exposed body, well-lit, radiant. Unlike the Church, Caravaggio faces "sex." Christ's body gains mass as it is gently laid upon the stone beneath him. Is it a bed? The falling drapery (a sheet?) features his partially exposed buttocks; the foregrounding of Nicodemus (hunched over like a farmer sowing seeds), without the expected presence of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, augments the sexual implications. It does appear that Nicodemus is on the verge of sex with Christ or at least contemplates it, although he will surely, inevitably come up short.

And we can supplement Žižek's sense of the radicality of Michelangelo's unfinished drawing of Christ on the Cross (referred to earlier) with another version of the crucified Christ sculpted when Michelangelo was merely eighteen years old, while living with Augustinian monks at the Basilica of Santo Spirito in Florence. This depiction of Christ on the Cross, now residing at this same Basilica, hardly needs interpretation to bring out its cross between Christ and "sex." For Christ's loincloth is missing or has not yet been added, his sex on display.

The most salient feature here is the tiny size of his genitals, even their resemblance to female genitalia, as the scrotum appears to divide into two vaginal lips, forming a slit, thus broaching the idea of Christ as Lacan's feminine not-all, which certainly enhances the conception of Christ as embodying Other/*feminine jouissance*. Both Christ and "sex" (here conjoined on Michelangelo's cross), we can therefore posit, contain an excess that disturbs. Michelangelo's Christ aligns with the "subject in its feminine mode," which "incompletes reality" and serves as a "'less than nothing'" that, when added to reality, renders that reality inconsistent–fractures, thwarts, destabilizes it, throws it off.[101]

Žižek establishes in *Sexuality and the Failed Absolute* that sexuality is "a force of negativity which disrupts every ontological edifice,"[102] that our contact with the Absolute is sexual experience as "failure," and that such failure enables us to redouble "the crack in the positive order of being" or in other words in the Real.[103] Žižek insists that the gap cannot

be overcome through a joining up with the Absolute (Bataille's misguided approach), but that "the gap" must be transposed "into the Absolute itself."[104] And it is at this point, early in *Sexuality and the Failed Absolute*, that Žižek presents the question, which appears, in this text on "sex," to be out of the blue, "What is the revolution, then, of Christianity?"[105] It seems to me that Žižek's subsequent book, *Christian Atheism*, becomes the full-blown response to such a question posed by his theorizing "sex" in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*.

Christianity is revolutionary in projecting the alienation of man from God onto God. God falls from himself to become a mortal cast out by God, implying that the chasm that divides man from God ends up connecting him with God. Christ on the Cross and "sex" carry the same philosophical weight: Žižek even designates "intense sex" as "our most meta-physical experience, a *transubstantiation*"—an extremely charged term whose use here succinctly reflects the overlap of Christ and "sex."[106] Such a commensurability is clearly true in Žižek but also in Kristeva through her attention to *kenosis* (Christ) and the failure of ideality, specifically in the form of romantic/erotic disappointment ("sex"). Žižek in fact suspects that the Catholic Church downgrades *non*-procreative sex to the level of animality because "it intuits very accurately that sex is its great competitor, the first and most basic . . . properly meta-physical experience."[107] Both sites of radical negativity but also excess, Christ and "sex," in other words, serve as the failed Absolute—which is of course the only Absolute.

What then is the nature of the sublation of Christianity in Žižek's work, to revisit this question one last time? In *Christian Atheism*, Žižek sets out to "deplete" Christianity, for the sake of the Holy Spirit as that Spirit metamorphoses into an egalitarian community. A "community of believers bound by love,"[108] this ideal community would of course still be riddled with antagonisms, predicated on the Void, shot through with immanent negativity, rendering it what I call a "desiring community." Curiously, one can find (albeit vague) support of this idea in Lacan's *Ethics* seminar at the very moment when Lacan refers to the German notion of *Aufhebung*, since here the death of God resurfaces in Lacan's mind as "the only commandment . . . henceforth," one remaining commandment: "'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'"[109] But Žižek leaves his exemplary egalitarian community nebulous, up to our theoretical imagination, while Christ grabs his prolonged attention. In fact, Žižek hints at the need to carry His Cross. By invoking Verdi's *La Traviata* (in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*), where "they sing . . .'*croce e delicia*' cross and joy, i.e., bearing the burden of the cross with joy," Žižek yokes the burden of sexual love (as in *La Traviata*), which inevitably fails, with carrying the Cross of Christ. Just as "carrying the cross [is] part of the joy,"[110] the pain of sexual love inheres in the pleasure or rather *jouissance*.

And here we do well to return to the source, to travel back in time from Žižek, to Kristeva, to Lacan. In his *Ethics* seminar, Lacan locates

Sadean thought at a certain limit held within a "fundamental fantasm" illustrated in images that manifest "human desire." The "fantasm involved here is that of eternal suffering." Suffering, proposes Lacan, is "in itself nothing but the signifier of a limit"—"a stasis which affirms that that which is cannot return to the void from which it emerged." From Sade, Lacan shifts gears to Christianity, at the same time (in my mind) aligning Christ with Antigone—who provides the audience of Sophocles' play with "the line of sight that defines desire."[111] For Christianity has "erected in the place of all the other gods, a limit that takes the form of the exemplary image which attracts to itself all the threads of our desire, the image of the crucifixion." Lacan at this point risks shocking his interlocutors with the proposal that what we have here is what "we might call the apotheosis of sadism." But what that turns out to mean is "the *divinization* . . . of the limit"—which again "attracts to itself all the threads of our desire"—"in which a being remains in a state of suffering."[112] Christ hangs in the place of excruciating pain, a site of the gaze—as a way of generating desire—imaging the idea that Sex is our Cross.

1 Badiou 2003, p. 1.
2 Lacan 1992, p. 260.
3 Lacan 1992, p. 193.
4 Žižek 2024, p. 41.
5 Žižek 2024, p. 199.
6 Žižek 2024, p. 200.
7 Žižek 2024, p. 36.
8 Žižek 2024, p. 251.
9 Žižek 2024, p. 3.
10 Žižek 2024, p. 5.
11 Žižek 2024, p. 24.
12 Žižek 2024, p. 31.
13 Žižek 2021, 187.
14 Lacan writes in the Preface to *The Four Fundamental Concepts*: "The lack of the lack makes the real" (Lacan 1981, p. ix).
15 Binding radical atheistic politics to a psychoanalytically inflected Christianity, Žižek cleverly comprehends the "a" in "atheism" not only as negation but also as the Lacanian *objet a*, generator of *jouissance* (Žižek 2024, p. 41).
16 Žižek 2021, p. 126.
17 Žižek 2021, p. 175.
18 Žižek 2024, p. 41. This notion concerning God echoes Lacan's view that love targets something in the beloved that exceeds the beloved. As Lacan explains in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, when I love you, I "inexplicably . . . love in you something more than you—the objet petit a—[and so] I mutilate you" (Lacan 1981, p. 268). There really is no object of love/desire, only its semblance. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek puts it this way: "the automatism of love is set in motion when some contingent, ultimately indifferent (libidinal) object finds itself occupying a pre-given fantasy place" (Žižek 1997, p. 15).
19 Žižek 2024, p. 86.
20 Lacan 1981, p. 59.
21 Žižek 2024, p. 46.
22 Žižek 2024, p. 5.
23 Žižek 2024, p. 152.
24 Žižek 2023, p. 182.
25 Žižek 2023, pp. 182-83.
26 Žižek 2024, p. 50.
27 Žižek 2024, p. 52.
28 Žižek 2024, p. 50.
29 Žižek 2024, p. 42.
30 Žižek 2023, p. 179.
31 Žižek 2024, p. 43.
32 Žižek 2024, p. 46.
33 Žižek 2024, p. 264. Žižek is, however, quite clear that "any form of Marxist teleology or historicist determinism which deprives the revolutionary process of the dimension of subjectivity proper, of radical cuts of the real into the texture of 'objective reality,'" must be jettisoned. Such a form of Marxism would clash with the French Revolution "whose most radical form of Marxist figures perceived it as an open process lacking any support in a higher Necessity" (Žižek 2024, p. 206).
34 It is well known that Jesus turned over the money-changers' tables in the Temple, condemning them for transforming the House of God into a place of robbery. He was fond of a story of a vineyard owner who doled out the same pay to all his workers despite the amount of work each performed.
35 Žižek 2024, p. 201.
36 Žižek 2024, p. 2.
37 Žižek 2024, p. 5.
38 Qtd in Žižek 2024, pp. 50-51.
39 Žižek 2024, p. 264.
40 Žižek 2021, p. 168.
41 Zupančič 2023, p. 70.
42 Žižek 2024, p. 23.
43 Zupančič 2023, p. 46.
44 Žižek 2021, p. 61.
45 Žižek 2021, p. 62.
46 Qtd in Žižek 2021, p. 350.
47 In his chapter "Why Lacan is not a Buddhist" (in *Christian Atheism*), Žižek points out that in Buddhism desire is the main source of suffering, and so, one must jump off the "wheel of desire"

(Žižek 2024, p. 61), resist attachment to objects of desire, which are illusions anyway, to achieve peace, whereas "Lacan celebrates the subject's very fall into this 'wheel'" (Žižek 2024, p. 65). Buddhism, in Žižek's reading, entails self-sacrifice (what Christ on the Cross puts an end to). Also philosophically inadequate is that Buddhism regards the essence of things as nothing more than their "properties, relations, and conditions" (Žižek 2024, p. 56). There is nothing left over, nothing extra. Valorizing the "flux of positive life," albeit without excess, Buddhism also disappoints in positing affirmation sans negation: it is not "accompanied or conditioned by a negation," to quote D.T. Suzuki (Žižek 2024, p. 58) as Žižek does, whereas Hegel's primary message is to tarry with the negative. Desire, excess, negation, and of course their essential entanglements—all banned.

48 Žižek 2024, p. 86. I have demonstrated this idea in detail in "The Subject of Concupiscence: Psychoanalysis Embedded in Christian Theology as Revealed in Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*," forthcoming in a special issue of *Cultural Critique*, edited by Russell Sbriglia and Chris Breu.

49 *Encore*, qtd in Zupancic 2017, p. 12.

50 Zupančič 2017, p. 13.

51 Zupančič 2017, p. 14.

52 Zupančič 2017, p. 15.

53 Zupančič 2017, p. 16.

54 See my "The Subject of Concupiscence" forthcoming in *Cultural Critique* for further explanation of the idea that the Fall of Adam and Eve produces the unconscious.

55 Zupančič 2017, p. 17.

56 Žižek has his own conception of heaven, explored in his *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* and *Heaven in Disorder*. In *Christian Atheism*, he understands politics to mean that "*heaven itself is in disorder*. Political conflicts are not just conflicts under Heaven, between particular groups, they are struggles about how to conceive Heaven itself, the common Good" (Žižek 2024, p. 163).

57 Kristeva 2009, p. 57.

58 There are at least two key theoretical differences between them. 1) Maternal passion plays a crucial part in Kristeva's work, especially in her theory of melancholia, whereas the mother or mOther seems conspicuously set aside in Žižek's *oeuvre*. In considering ways that religious beliefs and "spiritualities accommodate, encourage, or make use of precise psychic movements" that enable "speaking being," Kristeva "evokes the importance of the law," celebrates "the paternal function, [and] the role of maternal passion in the sensory and prelinguistic support of the child" (Kristeva 2009, p. 24)—ideally followed by symbolic matricide that leads to an interiorization and representation of the mother's absence. 2) As mentioned, Žižek conceives the death drive as the repetitive urge to achieve *surplus-jouissance*. He reminds us that Lacan's *jouissance* is "beyond the pleasure principle," the name for which is, in Freud, "death drive" (Žižek 2021, p. 114). The death drive is a psychic (rather than biological) "stance," a "readiness to go on beyond the limits of life," "a perverted life-force which bears witness to a 'deranged relationship towards life'" as well as toward *jouissance* since it is this excessive enjoyment that leads us to "neglect or even self-sabotage our vital needs and interests" (Žižek 2021, p. 175). Rather than a "morbid thrust towards self-obliteration," to Žižek, the death drive is "almost its opposite, libido as something that insists beyond the cycle of life and death"—itself a "name [too] for immortality, for undeadness" (Žižek 2024, p. 264). To the contrary, Kristeva accepts the more traditional Freudian sense of the death drive as a pull toward literal death as well as aggressivity, which is itself self-destructive and moves in the same deathly direction. Kristeva's emphasis is on the need to convert the drive, as it is tied to the death drive, into a creative act. In fact, I would say that the notion to which she is most devoted is this understanding of sublimation.

59 Kristeva 2009, p. 82.

60 Žižek 2024, p. 256-57.

61 Lacan proposes in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, "The true formula of atheism is not God is dead . . . the true formula of atheism is God is unconscious" (Lacan 1981, p. 59).

62 Kristeva 2009, p. 82.

63 Kristeva 2009, p. 81. Adding literature inspired by Christianity (Proust, Baudelaire) into the mix, Kristeva acknowledges, in *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Christianity's "recognition of the right to pain; the sharing of the suffering of others in compassion, by tactful words and even in social activism; and, at the same time, the revelation of the pleasure . . . that slumbers beneath the veil of malaise—to cite only three possible destinies of suffering" (Kristeva 2009, pp. 81-82). To all this, she adds the contribution of mystics whose "descriptions of unparalleled subtlety" bring out "the origins and transformations of such states" (Kristeva 2009, p. 82).

64 Kristeva 1989, p. 113.

65 Kristeva 1989, p. 130.

66 Kristeva 1989, p. 132.

67 Žižek 2021, p. 167.

68 Kristeva 1989, p. 132.
69 Kristeva 1989, p. 10.
70 Kristeva 1989, p. 110, my emphasis.
71 Kristeva 1989, p. 113.
72 Kristeva 1989, p. 114.
73 Kristeva 1989, p. 129.
74 Žižek 2024, p. 62, my emphasis.
75 Kristeva 1989, p. 94.
76 Kristeva 1989, p. 61.
77 Žižek 2023, p. 253.
78 Žižek 2023, p. 254.
79 Žižek 2021, p. 21.
80 Kristeva 2009, p. 89.
81 Bataille 2001, p. 18.
82 Lacan 1992, p. 196.
83 Žižek 2021, p. 168.
84 Lacan 1992, p. 167.
85 Žižek 2021, p. 292.
86 Žižek 2021, p. 293.
87 Žižek 2021, p. 294.
88 Žižek 2021, p. 299.
89 Žižek 2021, p. 300.
90 Žižek 2021, p. 300.
91 Kristeva 2009, pp. 15-16.
92 Kristeva 2009, p. 14, my emphasis.
93 Kristeva 2009, p. 14.
94 Žižek 2021, p. 157.
95 Kristeva 1989, p. 112.
96 Žižek 2024, p. 197.
97 Kristeva 1989, p. 112.
98 Žižek 2024, p. 31.
99 Žižek 2024, p. 33.
100 Žižek 2024, pp. 121-22.
101 Žižek 2021, p. 146.
102 Žižek 2021, p. 9.
103 Žižek 2021, p. 10. This paradox is, in fact, analogous to that of the Real: "what unites us with the Real 'in itself' is the very gap that we experience as our separation from it" (Žižek 2023, p. 274).
104 Žižek 2021, p. 20.
105 Žižek 2021, p. 21.
106 Žižek 2024, p. 64. Perhaps we can understand this notion that "intense sex" involves transubstantiation in terms of the transformation of the beloved from an ordinary person to a fascinating love "object" for the lover, once the psyche of the lover locates the *objet a* in that other. The "accidents" of the common person become the "substance" of the compelling beloved, as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ.
107 Žižek 2021, p. 115.
108 Žižek 2024, p. 172
109 Lacan 1992, p. 193.
110 Žižek 2021, p. 164.
111 Lacan, 1992, p. 247.
112 Lacan 1992, p. 261, my emphasis.

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From Nature to Spirit in Hegel's Encyclopedia: Sex, Death, and Quantum Physics

Dylan Shaul

Abstract: This article investigates the transition from Nature to Spirit in Hegel's *Encyclopedia*. First, I reconstruct the disagreement on the Nature-Spirit relation between readers of Hegel committed to Analytic neo-pragmatic naturalism and Continental speculative materialism, represented by Robert Pippin and Slavoj Žižek, respectively. Then, I turn to a debate internal to the materialist approach to Hegel, between Žižek and Adrian Johnston, regarding the best way to account for the development of Spirit out of Nature: either quantum physics or neuroscience. Next, I examine Hegel's views on sex and death at the end of the *Philosophy of Nature*, through which the transition is made to Spirit, in conversation with Žižek's critical readings of the same. Finally, I offer a new account of this transition in terms of Hegel's conception of 'decision' (*Entschluss*), whereby the animal organism makes the undecidable decision to break with Nature and become human, i.e. Spirit.

Keywords: Nature, Spirit, G. W. F. Hegel, sex, death, quantum physics

The precise relation between Nature and Spirit in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* system remains a highly controversial issue in contemporary Hegel scholarship, on both sides of the so-called Analytic (Anglo-American) and Continental (French-German) philosophical divide.[1] Indeed, this relation is one of the key issues on which the opposition between Analytic and Continental readers of Hegel today turns, while also serving as an important point of dialogue and debate both between and within the two camps. The purpose of this article is to intervene in these debates by offering a new account of Hegel's Nature-Spirit distinction through an examination of the transition from Nature to Spirit in the *Encyclopedia*, which takes place through the animal organism's experience of the contradiction or deadlock between sex and death.[2]

In §1, I reconstruct the disagreement on the Nature-Spirit relation between readers of Hegel committed to Analytic neo-pragmatic naturalism and Continental speculative materialism (for lack of better descriptors), represented by Robert Pippin and Slavoj Žižek, respectively. Pippin argues for a deflationary naturalist view in which Nature and Spirit are understood in terms of the space of causes and the space of reasons: the distinction between the two is not ontological or metaphysical, but merely a distinction between two incommensurable modalities of explanation. In contrast, Žižek argues for a robustly ontological distinction between Nature and Spirit, whereby Spirit is the realization of the incompleteness or 'non-All' of Nature, paradigmatically revealed by quantum physics. While Pippin directly criticizes Žižek for illicitly ontologizing the human capacity for rationality, I argue that Žižek is more faithful to Hegel's own goal of philosophically accounting for the Nature-Spirit transition.[3]

In §2, I turn to a debate internal to the Continental speculative materialist approach to Hegel, between Žižek and Adrian Johnston, regarding the best way to account for the development of Spirit out of Nature. Žižek maintains that quantum physics is the best proof of a 'gap' in Nature itself, e.g. via the uncertainty principle and quantum superposition, which provides the necessary room for Spirit to materialize. In contrast, Johnston argues that neuroscience provides the best picture of the emergence of Spirit from Nature, in keeping with a notion of 'strong emergentism' in the philosophy of biology. Whereas quantum physics would be placed at the earliest stages of Nature in Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, neuroscience would belong to the most advanced stages, as part of the animal organism. But I argue that neither of these views tracks Hegel's own argument for the transition from Nature to Spirit, which transpires neither through the fundamental structures of matter (e.g. quantum physics) nor through the most complex animal organ (i.e. the brain), but rather through a certain deadlock between sex and death.[4]

In §3, I examine Hegel's views on sex and death in general, in conversation with Žižek's critical readings of the same. In a rare moment of departure from Hegel, Žižek criticizes Hegel's view on sexuality as developed in the *Philosophy of Right*: whereas Hegel seems to argue that sexuality is a merely natural phenomenon which must be sublated into the ethical-spiritual relation of marriage, Žižek argues that psychoanalysis shows sexuality to be a properly 'meta-physical' passion, one which already exceeds Nature. But I argue that Hegel's account of sex at the end of the *Philosophy of Nature* already anticipates this psychoanalytic insight, insofar as Hegel there argues that it is the contradiction between the sex-drive and the death-drive which drives the birth of Spirit from out of Nature. I likewise respond to Žižek critique of Hegel as unable to think the pure repetition of the death-drive in Lacanian psychoanalysis. I argue that it is precisely the 'bad infinite' of this pure repetition, evinced in the contradiction between sex and death, that Hegel takes to be the key to the emergence of subjectivity or Spirit from Nature.[5]

Finally, in §4, on the basis of the above, I examine the *Encyclopedia*'s transition from Nature to Spirit directly, developing a new account of this transition in terms of Hegel's conception of 'decision' (*Entschluss*). Recent work by Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda has foregrounded the role of decision in Hegel (connected to the motif of undecidability in Derrida and Badiou), at both the beginning of Logic and in the transition from Logic to Nature.[6] I argue that the latter can provide a model for understanding the transition from Nature to Spirit. At the end of Hegel's *Logic*, the Absolute Idea remains trapped within its own pure thinking, from which it undergoes a drive (*Trieb*) to escape: the Absolute Idea decides to release itself from pure thinking into the externality of space and time, the first shape of Nature.[7] Analogously, I argue that, at the end of the *Philosophy of Nature*, the animal organism remains trapped

within its own naturalness, from which it undergoes two drives—the sex-drive and the death-drive—to similarly escape: the animal thereby decides to release itself from its animality to become more-than-Nature, i.e. to become Spirit. I compare this account with Žižek's notion of the 'abyssal act', as both the groundless ground of the material world, and as the political creation of a new form of life.[8]

I conclude by considering how this new view of the Nature-Spirit transition can be brought to bear upon the two sets of debates covered in the prior sections. I also briefly consider the possible limits of Hegel's view on the Nature-Spirit relation in relation to contemporary philosophical alternatives, e.g. reductionist physicalism and dualist supernaturalism, as well as its political implications.

1. Naturalism vs. Materialism: The Pippin-Žižek Debate

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the dominant interpretation of Hegel was what would be retroactively described as the 'traditional metaphysical view'. On this view, Hegel's notion of Spirit was thought to refer to an infinite cosmic mind or world-soul, which providentially pulled the strings of the universe, e.g. by directing the course of human history towards its own self-actualization.[9] In the middle to late 20th century, this view came under increasing pressure from scholars of Hegel, who began to question whether it accurately captured Hegel's position. There were good reasons to be suspicious of the traditional metaphysical view: it seemed to attribute to Hegel a regression to pre-Kantian dogmatic rationalism, whereas Hegel is always clear that he takes himself to be genuinely post-Kantian. Today, Hegelians across the Analytic-Continental divide almost uniformly reject the traditional metaphysical view, but they disagree sharply about what is to be put in its place. Above, I alluded to two possible alternatives: neo-pragmatic naturalism and speculative materialism, represented by Pippin and Žižek, respectively. Let us examine these two positions in turn.

For Pippin, the distinction between Nature and Spirit is not an ontological or metaphysical one, but rather a distinction between two modalities of explanation: borrowing from Sellars' terminology, it is a distinction between the space of causes and the space of reasons.[10] To approach the world from the standpoint of the space of causes means tracing effects to their prior physical causal grounds, as per the laws of Nature determined through the empirical natural sciences. All observable phenomena can be investigated in this way, including human behaviour, which obeys causes found within biochemistry, evolutionary biology, etc. But human beliefs and desires can *also* be approached from the standpoint of the space of reasons. Here, we look at that for the sake of which human beings think or act the way they do, i.e. for the *reasons* guiding their thought and action, rather than natural causes.

While it is true that natural causes are also at play, the space of reasons is irreducible to such causes: reasons in this sense are explanatorily independent from Nature, instead forming a domain of their which Hegel comes to call 'Spirit'.[11] This view can and should still be called 'naturalism', however, because it only admits the natural world into its account of 'what there is': humans are just peculiar animals who happened to have developed certain reasoning capacities, which have opened up the space of reasons for us, but which do not require positing any non-natural or super-natural beings. Pippin originally called his view 'non-metaphysical', but he later admitted that it does have a metaphysics after all—a kind of "disenchanted Aristotelian naturalism," to borrow Pinkard's phraseology.[12] (More felicitously, Pippin thinks Hegel rejects special metaphysics, while still having a general metaphysics.) I have further denominated this a 'neo-pragmatic' naturalism, to pick out simultaneously Sellars' pragmatic tendencies, the influence of classical pragmatism (e.g. Dewey) on Analytic Hegelians today, and the role of the Analytic 'return to Hegel' as an effort to respond to certain strains of radical pragmatism, e.g. Rorty (as with Brandom, who was one of Rorty's students).[13] On this reading, Hegel is not a return to pre-Kantian dogmatism because he works to therapeutically 'dissolve' traditional metaphysical questions, diagnosing their abstractness or one-sidedness. So, in Hegel's hands, philosophy is no longer in the business of metaphysical speculation about God, angels, the soul, creation, etc. Instead philosophy becomes an examination of humanity's real historical existence, our social-political forms of life, our pragmatic normative commitments, and so on.

In contrast, for Žižek, there is indeed an ontological or metaphysical distinction between Nature and Spirit. Of course, this is not to say that Spirit denotes some supernatural realm 'beyond' Nature, since this would incur the charge of an abstract dualism that Hegel is always eager to avoid. Rather, Žižek takes up the famous theme of the 'impotence' (*Ohnmacht*) of Nature from Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* to argue that Hegel sees Nature as constitutively incomplete or 'non-All', and that Spirit is to be found precisely in the 'gap' in Nature itself that this constitutive incompleteness opens up.[14] Just what this incompleteness amounts to can be cashed out in a number of complementary ways. In the *Philosophy of Nature* itself, Hegel explains Nature's impotence in terms of its necessarily-incomplete realization of its own Concept. Since Nature is defined as the Idea 'outside of itself' or in its 'externality', it always falls short of complete conceptual determination. Žižek turns to quantum physics for a contemporary illustration and confirmation of this Hegelian point. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle demonstrates that momentum and position cannot both be determined with absolute precision simultaneously: the more precision in determining momentum, the less in position, and vice versa. So, at any given moment, Nature is only incompletely determined with respect to these physical quantities.[15] Likewise, quantum superposition

entails that a given particle can be in multiple contradictory states at one and the same time: Nature is again incompletely determined.[16] Žižek finds a comparable account of incompleteness in Lacanian psychoanalysis, from which he takes the notion of the 'non-All' (*pas-toute*). For Lacan, subjectivity itself is possible precisely because reality itself is non-All, i.e. incomplete.[17] In Hegelian terms, the subject is not something over and above substance, but rather the mark of substance's own internal self-contradiction, by virtue of which it fails to exhaust the real, even if it remains true that there is nothing 'beyond' substance.[18] Žižek argues that the fundamental metaphysical commitment in Hegel is to absolute negativity. In the beginning, there is only this negativity, a 'less than nothing'; this negativity is so negative, so to speak, that it negates itself, thereby generating the natural world of determinate positive entities in which we live. But this negativity continues to haunt the world, ensuring that it is always incomplete, barred, etc. Subjectivity just *is* this 'gap' in Nature itself, the living proof of its incompleteness. Why call this 'materialism'? By 'materialism', Žižek stipulates that he is simply referring to the famous Lacanian slogan: "The big Other does not exist" or "There is no big Other" (*il n'y a pas de grand Autre*).[19] There is no ultimate fixed guarantor of the meaning or direction of the world, e.g. a transcendent God, or even the laws of Nature themselves. As Žižek is keen to emphasize, this is a "materialism without matter," in the sense that the fundamental reality is not the bits of material stuff we interact with on a daily basis, but absolute negativity itself.[20] I further call this a 'speculative' materialism to indicate Žižek's affinity with the broader speculative turn in contemporary Continental philosophy, e.g. Badiou, Meillassoux, etc., whose ontologies of the Void and hyper-chaos, respectively, share numerous affinities with Žižek.[21]

In a review of Žižek's *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, originally titled "Back to Hegel?" and later retitled "Slavoj Žižek's Hegel," Pippin offers a charitable but forceful critique of Žižek's view of Hegel, including his view of Hegel's 'materialist' ontology. Pippin takes issue with Žižek's claim that Hegel can account for subjectivity only by positing 'gaps' or 'holes' in Being, substance, Nature, etc. As Pippin reads him, Hegel follows Kant in taking self-consciousness (i.e. apperception) to be the *sine qua non* of subjectivity. But Pippin argues that self-consciousness is simply the capacity to think and act on the basis of reasons, which cannot be reduced to physical causes, and yet which requires no special ontological conditions either. As Pippin writes:

> Doxastic, cognitive, and intentional states [i.e. self-conscious states] are ... "in the space of reasons" and to ask for, say, neuro-psychological causes for having come to be in that state, is to make a category mistake; to have misunderstood the question; to offer something we cannot use. Such causes are irrelevant to my having

> the reasons I have (the "for-itself" of any such "in-itself" in Hegelian lingo), and your understanding the reasons I have, all of which must be enunciated and "backed" first-personally. No gaps in being need apply; any more than the possibility of people playing bridge, following the norms of bridge, and exploring strategies for winning need commit us to any unusual gappy ontology to account for the possibility of norm-responsive bridge following. Anyone playing the game is not just acting out responses to cues, but is, at the same time as playing and making moves, always "holding open" the possibility of revising their strategy, challenging someone on the rules and so forth. This is what it is to be following rules, not to be instantiating laws. This capacity is possible because it is certainly actual, and that means that materially embodied beings are able to engage in complex, rule-following practices, the explanation of which is not furthered by reference to their neurological properties. ... Of course, it is possible and important that some day researchers will discover why animals with human brains can do these things and animals without human brains cannot, and some combination of astrophysics and evolutionary theory will be able to explain why humans have ended up with the brains they have. But these are not philosophical problems and they do not generate any philosophical problems.[22]

Pippin's point here is easy enough to discern. While human beings are simply a special kind of animal—this is Pippin's naturalism—still our capacity for self-conscious reasoning forms a domain of inquiry all its own (viz. Spirit). But this properly human domain does not need to be explained by any gaps in Being: rather, it can be explained by the much more mundane fact that the human animal happens to have developed the ability to engage in rule-following, normativity, etc.

In his later *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek's responds directly to Pippin's critical review. As Žižek observes: "The underlying ontological premise of Robert Pippin's reading of Hegel (rarely explicitly stated but nonetheless clearly indicated here and there) is that, in the evolution of animal life and of human animals on Earth, the human species somehow (this indeterminacy is crucial!) began to function in the modes of normativity and mutual recognition."[23] Thus Nature and Spirit are not two different kinds of things, but two different sets of criteria for explanations: physical causes and normative reasons, respectively.[24] But Žižek contends that Pippin's willingness to treat human beings as nothing more than special kinds of animals—even going so far as admitting that, one day, we will be able to explain in purely natural-scientific terms why it is that human brains are capable of self-conscious reasoning at all, as in the end of the long quotation from Pippin above—marks the "obscene secret" of the post-metaphysical view of Hegel, as of post-metaphysical philosophizing in general.[25] If such an explanation were possible, Žižek argues, what

room would be left in the natural world for human freedom—in particular, the freedom of thought and action that Hegel takes to be constitutive of human rationality? Kant had already recognized the threat posed to freedom by a thoroughgoing naturalism. If Nature is all there is, with natural laws fully determining everything that happens therein, then we would not be free—e.g. we could not veridically ascribe our beliefs and actions to ourselves, which Pippin takes to be necessary for self-consciousness. Kant took the antinomies of pure reason to signify that Nature is *not* all there is, therefore positing a supersensible world *beyond* Nature, in which transcendental freedom could dwell. In contrast, Žižek reads Hegel as ontologizing the Kantian antinomies: reason's contradictions show that reality itself is *immanently* incomplete, opening up an ontological 'gap' in which freedom, Spirit, subjectivity, etc., can find room to become actual, as we will continue to explore below.[26]

Who is right? Without being able to make a complete definitive case here, I want to suggest that Žižek's view better tracks Hegel's philosophical desideratum of a new metaphysics of Spirit, a new rational psychology on the model of Aristotle's *De Anima*, etc.[27] It seems to me that Hegel would regard it as insufficient to determine Spirit as merely the capacity for rule-following possessed by certain odd animals. Rather, Spirit is an independent ontological reality that must be accounted for on ontological terms. Yet it seems to me that Hegel would also want to reject any simple dualism between causes and reasons, or between Nature and Spirit. Rather, as the *Encyclopedia* system shows, Logic, Nature, and Spirit form a continuous trajectory of the Absolute Idea in its movement from pure Being to Absolute Spirit (a trajectory which is ultimately a circle, of course). Pippin rejects the question of the emergence of Spirit from Nature, or of reasons from causes, as a problem that does not belong to philosophy proper. But it seems to me that Žižek is right to regard this as one of Hegel's great philosophical question, which Hegel himself does indeed try to answer philosophically: How does Spirit arise from Nature? How does subjectivity arise from substance? What must the structure of substance or Nature be, such that subjectivity or Spirit could emerge from it? The question for us now is: What really is Hegel's answer to these questions, and does this answer work?

2. Quantum Physics vs. Neuroscience: The Žižek-Johnston Debate

In the previous section, we traced the debate between Analytic neo-pragmatic naturalism and Continental speculative materialism as two competing views on Hegel. I suggested that the latter has a notable advantage over the former, insofar as it takes upon itself the Hegelian task of giving a philosophical account of Spirit's arising from out of Nature. Now, I want to turn to a second debate internal to the materialist

reading of Hegel, over how precisely this transition between Nature and Spirit is to be accounted for. As we already saw above, Žižek argues that quantum physics is the key to understanding the possibility of Spirit qua subjectivity. Johnston raises a series of objections to Žižek's privileging of quantum physics, touting neuroscience instead as the contemporary scientific modality best suited to explaining the emergence of the subject. Let us again examine these two positions in turn.

Žižek's pairing of Hegel with quantum physics may seem anachronistic, since quantum physics would not be discovered until nearly a century after Hegel's death. Yet Hegel always insisted that the *Philosophy of Nature* must take its cue from the empirical sciences, such that it would always need to be re-written in light of new scientific developments.[28] Hegel would surely have been overjoyed to see just how much quantum physics confirmed the general dialectical-speculative picture of reality. But how, according to Žižek, can quantum physics be deployed to specifically explain the birth of Spirit out of Nature, subjectivity out of substance? Recall Kant's critical resolution to his Third Antinomy: If we suppose that everything in Nature is governed by deterministic mechanical causal natural laws, i.e. Newtonian physics, then there is no room for freedom—since freedom requires an absolutely spontaneous beginning of a new causal series, without determination by prior antecedent causes. But if we restrict Nature to the sensible or phenomenal world, and posit a supersensible or noumenal world *beyond* Nature, where the laws of Nature do not obtain, then freedom can find a home. Of course, Hegel wants to reject this Kantian dualism between phenomena and noumena, and yet still somehow affirm human freedom. (In contrast to Spinoza, who simply accepts that, since All is Nature, determinism or necessitarianism is true.) How can this be done? Žižek argues that quantum physics does the trick, since it shows (at least on the Copenhagen interpretation[29]) that Nature is *not* deterministic, but rather obeys a form of quantum indeterminacy. All quantum events are modelled by the Schrödinger equation, which gives a probability distribution rather than strictly deterministic predictions for quantum systems. So, *pace* Kant, there *is* room for freedom after all, in the 'gaps' left open by Nature's indeterminacy. Indeed, quantum physics seems to show that the collapse of the wave-function from a superposition to a determinate quantum state takes place through the very act of observation itself (the so-called 'observer effect'), as if subjectivity is directly intervening into the natural world.[30] Žižek links all of this with what he takes to be the Hegelian story about the origins of the natural world itself. For Žižek's materialist Hegel, the world arises from the groundless ground of absolute negativity, which negates itself in order to produce the determinate material entities of our everyday experience. This corresponds to the scientific conception of the quantum vacuum, which is inherently 'unstable' such that particles can and do spontaneously erupt from out of the void.[31] Žižek argues that subjectivity just is the incarnation

or embodiment of this fundamental ontological negativity, the 'less than nothing' that underlies our material reality.

In general, Johnston is a notable ally of Žižek's, sharing with him the speculative materialist reading of Hegel, as well as the synthesis of Hegelian philosophy with Lacanian psychoanalysis.[32] Thus Johnston's objections to Žižek's privileging of quantum physics are intended as friendly amendments within the background of a shared approach, while nevertheless striking quite deep at some of Žižek's basic ontological claims. For Johnston, positioning quantum physics as the key to a Hegelian explanation of the possibility of subjectivity cannot be right, since quantum physics—once incorporated into a revised version of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, in light of the latest scientific discoveries—would belong to the earliest or most rudimentary levels of Nature, which are the furthest away from Spirit. Recall the three major divisions of the *Philosophy of Nature*: Mechanics, Physics, and Organics. Mechanics deals with the simplest forms of Nature: space and time, matter and motion, etc. Physics begins to treat more determinate forms: e.g. the four elements, sound and heat, electricity, and chemistry. Finally, Organics turns to plant and animal organisms, the highest forms of Nature, from which the transition is made to Spirit. Now, quantum physics deals with the most basic constituents of matter, the elementary particles that compose the Standard Model of particle physics. Therefore it would have to take its place either as part of the Mechanics section of the *Philosophy of Nature*, or at the most in Physics. It certainly would not belong to Organics, which involves much more complex phenomena than quantum physics. (Elementary quantum particles combine into atoms, and atoms combine into molecules. But even the simplest single-cell organism is made up of millions of molecules, combined in enormously complicated ways.) But Hegel's transition from Nature to Spirit is really a transition from the last stage of Nature to the first stage of Spirit, i.e. from Organics to Subjective Spirit (or even more specifically, from the Animal Organism to Anthropology, i.e. the human being). So quantum physics would be the wrong place to look for an explanation of this transition. Indeed, Johnston avers that Žižek concern with the birth of cosmos out of the quantum void is much more Schellingian than Hegelian.[33] For Hegel, these kinds of concerns belie a pernicious abstraction from concrete life, having famously remarked that even the lowliest organic slime is higher than all the vast expanse of the celestial spheres.[34]

Johnston's own positive view is that the emergence of Spirit from Nature is best addressed through neuroscience, the contemporary scientific discipline which investigates the most sophisticated organ of the human body (viz. the brain), by virtue of which we possess the distinctively human faculties of reasoning, self-consciousness, etc. This would seem to more closely follow the architecture of Hegel's own system, where the transition from Nature to Spirit passes through the human

animal as such. In contemporary philosophical terms, Johnston affirms a 'strong' emergentism to provide a non-reductive materialist account of the possibility of subjectivity within the natural world. Strong emergence explains how it is that higher-order structures can arise from more basic constituent while remaining irreducible to them: e.g. chemical elements emerging from physics, biological organisms emerging from chemistry, and human subjectivity emerging from our biology.[35] Or, put in terms of Kant's Third Antinomy once again, it is Kant himself who admits that biological organisms are irreducible to mechanical causal laws, operating instead under teleological judgments. While Kant treats teleological judgment as a subjective requirement of our finite human faculties, Hegel argues that teleology is objectively constitutive of the life of biological organism themselves.[36] Spirit would then simply be a higher level of this teleology or purposiveness: a self-conscious or self-determining purposiveness that sublates the 'blind' purposiveness of mere animal life. Teleology splits the difference between the Thesis and the Antithesis of the Third Antinomy, since it neither obeys the mechanical laws of Newtonian physics ('No Newton for a blade of grass', as Kant puts it), nor does it reside in some otherworldly noumenal realm.[37] As Johnston argues, the neurobiological pathways and feedback loops of the human brain evince precisely the kinds of self-referential structures that Hegel associates with subjectivity. The brain's 'neuroplasticity' means that it is uniquely capable of shaping and re-shaping itself, as well as standing in a dynamic interrelation with other individuals and with the external world.[38] This dovetails with Johnston's (and Žižek's) commitment to Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis: while Freud's neurological speculations have often been treated with suspicion by those who would prefer to see psychoanalysis merely as a method of cultural or literary criticism, Johnston affirms them as part and parcel of a serious materialist account of the subject.[39] (If psychoanalysis is simply the analysis of the *psyche*, the old Greek word for 'soul', then it finds a natural partner in Hegel's philosophy of Spirit, which he takes to be a speculative post-Kantian revival of Aristotelian rational psychology.[40])

Žižek has had occasion to respond to Johnston's objections, defending his frequent recourse to quantum physics in explaining Hegel's conception of subjectivity.[41] As Žižek first summarizes Johnston's critique, "what Johnston rejects is the notion of negativity as a primordial unanalyzable Void which disturbs the homeostatic cycle of natural reproduction, throwing it off its rails and introducing the dimension of subjectivity," favouring instead an account which foregrounds "the concrete biological (pre)conditions of the rise of negativity ... [the] 'denaturalization' of natural life which opens up the space for symbolic activity as an attempt to supplement the deficiency."[42] In short, subjectivity emerges not through the "glorious abyss of negativity" described by quantum physics, but from "a very precise biological deadlock."[43] Žižek replies to this critique as follows:

> My counter-argument here is that this line of thought should nonetheless be further developed in (at least) two directions. While "rotten nature," the failure and dysfunctionality of animal life, opens up the space for the symbolic, the entry of the symbolic still cannot be causally explained in this way—it does indeed occur as a "miracle," *ex nihilo*. In other words, there is no teleology here, the symbolic only retroactively renders its natural (pre)conditions readable as such, as its (pre)conditions. But how is this "miraculous" entry *ex nihilo* possible? How should the "pre-human Real" be structured so that the symbolic can explode in its midst? A possible answer is indicated by speculations in quantum physics about the virtual Void out of which (particular) reality emerges through the collapse of the wave function: negativity materialized in the symbolic process is not something that magically cuts into positive nature; it rather (re)actualizes at the specific level a negativity immanent to the "pre-human Real" as such. So while it is true that the emergence of (human) negativity can take place only against the background of certain biological (pre)conditions, the pre-human Real itself *does* emerge *ex nihilo*.[44]

As I read him here, Žižek is doubling-down on his commitment to quantum physics and the 'glorious abyss' of negativity as the proper account of the possibility of subjectivity. While he admits that there may be certain biological preconditions of the transition from Nature to Spirit, still this transition itself can only be a radical leap or cut, equivalent to a new creation *ex nihilo.* For Žižek, this leap should be understood as the re-actualization of the absolute negativity latent in the deepest depths of the pre-human world—not at the biological level, but at the deeper quantum level. To try to give a causal explanation for subjectivity by tracing its emergence from organic systems (e.g. the human brain), as Johnston hopes to do, would end up reducing Spirit to Nature. Only a quasi-miraculous leap between Nature and Spirit can respect their genuine distinction from one another.

Again, who is right? It seems to me that there are things to be said in favour of both views. No doubt Johnston is right to emphasize that the transition from Nature to Spirit takes place via Nature's most highly advanced form, viz. the animal organism, and so this must have some role to play in an account of this transition. But Žižek is also right to be wary of any account that would cast Spirit as merely a continuous outgrowth of prior natural biological features of the human animal, e.g. the human brain—which, even if Johnston seeks to avoid it, he may still fall prey to. Yet it also seems that Johnston is right to worry that quantum physics is more of a *deus ex machina* than a genuine philosophical explanation of subjectivity. Still, it remains curious that neither Žižek nor Johnston makes us of the specific details of the transition from Nature to Spirit as

it is presented in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* itself. There, the transition takes place neither through quantum physics nor through neurobiology, but through a certain deadlock between sex and death. How might Hegel's view of this deadlock illuminate the two sets of debates that we have been reconstructing thus far?

3. Hegel on Sex and Death: Natural or Spiritual?

In a sense, the previous two sections have been merely preparatory, setting us up for the problem we now want to address. We have determined that we need a philosophical account of the transition from Nature to Spirit, and that existing treatments of this transition—e.g. via quantum physics or neuroscience—still leave us with unresolved questions. Specifically, they leave open the significance of Hegel's own official explanation of this transition in the *Encyclopedia*, via the animal organism's encounter with sex and death.

There may be an understandable reason for Žižek's avoidance of the *Encyclopedia*'s Nature-Spirit transition, namely Žižek's own dissatisfaction with Hegel's conception of sexuality. In a rare moment of direct criticism, Žižek accuses Hegel of falling short of the psychoanalytic account of the sex-drive as a 'meta-physical' passion:

> Far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain upon which humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is totally foreign to the animal universe. Here, Hegel himself falls short of his own standards: he only describes how, through culture, the natural substance of sexuality is cultivated, sublated, mediated—we humans no longer just make love for procreation, we enter into a complex process of seduction and marriage in which sexuality becomes an expression of the spiritual bond between a man and a woman, and so on. However, what Hegel misses is how, in humans, sexuality is not only transformed or civilized, but, much more radically, *changed in its very substance*: it is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that finds itself thwarted in relation to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical passion.[45]

Notably, Žižek here is taking the locus of Hegel's view of sexuality to be the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel argues that marriage involves the sublation of merely natural-animal sexuality into a spiritual-ethical relationship.[46] Against this view, Žižek maintains that sexuality itself is the means by which the human being 'detaches' themselves from Nature, giving rise to Spirit. (Human sexuality is thus 'meta-physical' in the sense that it is beyond *physis* or Nature, instead already belonging to Spirit.)

But it is not at all clear that the *Philosophy of Right* is the proper place to look for Hegel's considered view of sexuality. Rather, the *Philosophy of Nature* has a much more developed account of sex in its final sections on the animal organism. Now, it might seem that this is precisely to Žižek's point, since Hegel would apparently be classifying sexuality as part of our merely natural animality. Yet Hegel's argument is exactly the opposite: insofar as sexuality comes at the end of the *Philosophy of Nature*, it marks the point at which Nature itself is 'thwarted' from within, the precise point at which the human being 'detaches' from Nature and transitions into Spirit. If this is right, then Hegel does *not* fall short of his own standards, as Žižek supposes, but meets those standards perfectly. For Hegel as for Žižek, sexuality is an infinite metaphysical passion that pushes the animal beyond itself into the properly human.

Of course, the sex-drive is only one half of Hegel's story about the transition from Nature to Spirit. The final section of "The Animal Organism" in the *Philosophy of Nature* is C. The Process of the Genus, which is itself divided into 1. The Sex Relation, 2. Genus and Species, and 3. The Genus and the Individual. The last of these is further sub-divided into a. The Disease of the Individual, b. Therapy, and c. The Self-Induced Destruction of the Individual. By "self-induced destruction," Hegel means that the animal organism necessarily reaches the point of death due to the inadequation between the genus and the individual. This inadequacy means that the animal organism must eventually experience an internal breakdown (a. The Disease of the Individual), which can be staved off through medical treatment for a time (b. Therapy), but will inevitably result in the death of the animal. In short, then, the death-drive is just as important, if not ultimately more important, than the sex-drive for the Nature-Spirit transition. What does Žižek make of Hegel's conception of death?

It is well-known that Žižek understands the central impetus of his own philosophical project to be the synthesis of Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically through an identification of Hegel's absolute negativity with Lacan's death-drive, which together Žižek takes to be the locus of subjectivity.[47] Both absolute negativity and the death-drive provide for the self-relating or self-positing structure of the subject, the 'gap' in natural substance through which freedom, Spirit, etc., can emerge. We might expect, then, that unlike Žižek's critique of Hegel's view of sex, he would have a more positive evaluation of Hegel's view of death. While this may be so to some degree, Žižek nevertheless does again articulate a critique of the Hegelian conception of death, as falling short of the psychoanalytic death-drive. Recall that Freud identifies the death-drive as the repetition-compulsion—e.g. in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the death-drive manifests as the compulsive repetition of the same traumatic dream, re-inflicting the pain of the trauma on the individual again and again.[48] As Žižek writes: "what Freud was aiming at with his notion of the death drive ... is the 'nondialectical' core of Hegelian negativity, the pure

drive to repeat without any movement of idealization."[49] But then this non-dialectical core remains inaccessible to Hegel himself, as Žižek asserts repeatedly in *Less than Nothing*, e.g. "Hegel cannot think pure repetition (a repetition not yet caught in the movement of sublation or idealization)."[50] Another way to put Žižek's critique here would be on analogy to his critique of Hegel on sex: while for Hegel, death is a natural-animal fact which is later sublated into a spiritual-ethical one when the human being comes face-to-face with their own mortality, he misses the dimension of death as already a meta-physical reality, which disrupts the natural cycle and carries the human being beyond Nature.

But is it really true that Hegel cannot think pure repetition, or that he regards death as a merely natural-animal fact? On the latter charge, as with sex above, it would seem that the opposite is the case: Hegel's argument that death marks the point of transition from Nature to Spirit suggests once again that it is only through the encounter with death that the human being detaches themselves from Nature and becomes properly human, i.e. Spirit. More precisely, it is the metaphysical 'passion' of death, what will later be called the death-drive, that drives the human being out of their naturalness. As for the former charge, Hegel explains the contradiction or deadlock between sex and death precisely in terms of the endless repetition of the so-called spurious or 'bad' infinite (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*): "This process of propagation [i.e. sexual reproduction] spends itself in the spurious infinite progress. The genus preserves itself only through the destruction of the individual who, in the process of generation, fulfil their destiny and, in so far as they have no higher destiny, in this process meet their end."[51] For Hegel, sexual reproduction means that we keep reproducing new members of our species generation after generation, where the old generation dies off in order to make room for the new one, *ad infinitum*. Sex and death simultaneously mutually require and mutually contradict one another: they have opposite aims (the creation and destruction of individuals, respectively), and yet without the other they would each collapse under their own weight. This alternating process of birth and death does not go anywhere, but just repeats itself endlessly: one finite generation comes and another finite generation passes away, and so on forever. This is the exact structure of the bad infinite, which Hegel frequently cashes out in terms of "repetition."[52] There is nothing truly or genuinely infinite here, since the sex-death relation is comprised solely of units of finitude strung together in an indefinite sequence.

So, it would seem that the transition from Nature to Spirit would require sublating Nature's bad infinite in Spirit's true infinite (*wahrhafte Unendlichkeit*). Is this not to Žižek's point, namely that Hegel fails to realize that the pure repetition of the death-drive is the genuine root of Spirit or subjectivity, rather than a merely natural condition to be spiritually overcome? Yet, as Žižek himself teaches us so well with respect to the Hegelian distinction between the understanding (*Verstand*) and reason

(*Vernunft*), the true infinite is not something 'other' than the bad infinite, but rather simply a shift of perspective on the bad infinite itself, whereby we cease to posit a 'beyond' of finitude, instead taking up what is already there as genuine infinity.[53] In our present case, this would mean that Spirit does not somehow escape the endless repetition of sex and death, but rather is itself the absolute positing of this repetition *as such*, affirming it as Spirit's own infinite content.[54] Indeed, as I will suggest below, Spirit is constituted above all by its History, where History itself is possible only thanks to the bad infinite of sex-death—the passage of the generations, etc. Spirit's historicity means nothing more than making explicit its own dependence on the dead generations of the past, taking up this past as its own: recollecting it, mourning it, and even breaking from it, when the time is ripe.[55]

But so far this is all by way of surmise and suggestion; we must still see whether it is borne out in the text of the transition from Nature to Spirit at the end of the *Philosophy of Nature.* In the final section, Hegel elaborates the "self-induced destruction of the individual": "The disparity between [the individual animal's] finitude and universality is its *original disease* and the *inborn germ of death*, the removal of this disparity is itself the accomplishment of this destiny. ... [I]t is in this way that the animal brings about its own destruction."[56] Could any better description of the death-drive be imagined? The animal is driven to its death not by any external causes, but by its own inner self-movement towards self-destruction. In the final paragraph, Hegel then finally gives his account of the transition to Spirit:

> But this achieved identity with the universal is the sublation of the *formal opposition* between the *immediate* singularity of the individuality and its *universality*; and this is only one side, and that the abstract side, namely, the *death of the natural being*. But in the Idea of life, subjectivity is the Concept, and it is thus *in itself* the absolute *being-within-itself* of *actuality* and concrete universality. Through the sublation of the *immediacy* of its reality just demonstrated, subjectivity has coalesced with itself; the last *self-externality* of Nature has been sublated and the Concept, which in Nature is present only *in principle*, has become *for itself*. With this, Nature has passed over into its truth, into the subjectivity of the Concept whose *objectivity* is itself the sublated immediacy of singularity, is *concrete universality*; so that the Concept is posited as having for its *determinate being* the reality which corresponds to it, namely, the Concept—and this is *Spirit*.[57]

Obviously this is an extremely compressed and difficult passage, but the general contours of Hegel's line of thinking can nevertheless be discerned. The animal's death achieves a merely abstract identity between individuality and universality. In contrast, subjectivity, the Concept, Spirit,

etc., constitute the *concrete* identity of the same, i.e. the 'concrete universal'. With the death of the animal, it is as if the last vestiges of Nature's mere abstraction, immediacy, externality, objectivity, etc., have died away with it. In its wake, subjectivity is able to 'coalesce' with itself, to move from the in-itself to the for-itself, to posit its own reality. This is all well and good, but it does not quite tell us *how* or *why* this all transpires in the way Hegel is describing it. In the Addition to the final paragraph, Hegel characterizes this transition in even more evocative terms:

> The living being is, it is true, the supreme mode of the Concept's existence in Nature; but here, too, the Concept is present only in principle, because the Idea exists in Nature only as a singular. ... Now since this existence is still inadequate to the universality of the Idea, the Idea must break out of this circle and by shattering this inadequate form make room for itself. ... The goal of Nature is to destroy itself and to break through its husk of immediate, sensuous existence, to consume itself like the phoenix in order to come forth from this externality rejuvenated as Spirit.[58]

Here Hegel fills out some of the crucial details that remain only implied in the written *Encyclopedia* paragraph. What is driving the movement from Nature's abstract externality to the concrete universal of Spirit is the *Idea*: it is because Nature is an inadequate existence of the Idea that the Idea must break out of Nature's circle and become reborn as Spirit. But in order to understand how and why *that* takes place, we will need to ask: Why is Nature inadequate to the Idea, and why is Spirit adequate? How is the Idea able to break out of the circle of Nature, and how is Spirit thereby reborn from out of Nature's dead husk? And furthermore, how might the answers to these questions intervene in the two sets of debates on the Nature-Spirit relation examined in the prior two sections?

4. On the Transition from Nature to Spirit: The Undecidable Decision of the Animal

In the final paragraph of the Introduction to the *Encyclopedia* as a whole, Hegel explains that Logic, Nature, and Spirit are all expressions of the Idea: Logic is "the Idea in and for itself," Nature is "the Idea in its otherness," and Spirit is "the Idea returning back to itself from its otherness."[59] Hegel makes the same point in the final chapter of the *Science of Logic*: Logic, Nature, and Spirit are the three modes or manifestations of the Absolute Idea—Logic is the "universal" mode, while Nature and Spirit are the two particular modes.[60] What are the relations between these three modes? How and why do they each transition into the next?

At the end of the *Logic*, Hegel gives his infamous account of the transition from Logic to Nature. Having traversed the whole science of

Logic from the pure Thought of pure Being to the Absolute Idea as pure self-thinking Thought, we complete the circle of this science when the Absolute Idea rejoins with Being. Yet the Absolute Idea still finds itself to be "shut up" (*eingeschlossen*) in this closed circle of its own pure thinking. As Hegel explains, it thereby undergoes the "drive" (*Trieb*) to escape from this situation: the Absolute Idea makes the "decision" (*Entschluss*) to release or discharge itself (*sich Entlassen*) from its own closed circle into the externality of space and time, the first forms of Nature.[61] This account is infamous because, at this crucial moment in Hegel's system, he seems to raise a whole series of further questions: Is this transition logical, natural, both or neither? Is it really a transition at all? What exactly is so wrong with the Absolute Idea remaining 'shut up' in pure thinking? What is the 'drive' that pushes the Absolute Idea into externality? In what sense is this a 'decision' on the part of the Absolute Idea? Comay and Ruda have recently argued for the centrality of Hegel's conception of decision to a proper understanding of his philosophical project. Indeed, Hegel's *Logic*, and thereby the *Encyclopedia* system as a whole, begins with the "decision" to consider pure thinking as such, i.e. the decision to begin to philosophize—a decision which, as Hegel writes, can even be regarded as "arbitrary."[62] Accordingly, Comay and Ruda develop a reading of Hegelian decision in light of the motif of undecidability from 20th century French philosophy, especially Alain Badiou (who is broadly allied with proponents of the materialist Hegel).[63] Badiou adapts the notion of the 'undecidable' decision from the mathematics of Kurt Gödel, where undecidability designates a situation in which no established sets of rules, norms, etc., can determine the correct decision. It is only then that a true decision worthy of the name can be made, as opposed to a mere algorithmic calculation.[64] Applied to Hegel: While everything within the *Logic* proceeds with intra-logical necessity, the very decision to enter into the science of Logic in the first place—the decision to think—is undecidable. So too the decision that ends the *Logic*: the undecidable decision to cut off pure thinking and take a leap into the unknown or un-thought of Nature.

While much more obviously can and should be said about the Logic-Nature transition, I want to propose the following experiment: What if we tried to understand the transition from Nature to Spirit on analogy to the prior transition from Logic to Nature? The correspondences between the two are too numerous to be merely coincidental.[65] At the end of the *Philosophy of Nature*, the animal organism returns to the beginning of Nature through its own intuition of space and time.[66] But the animal remains 'shut up' within its own animality, or more generally, within the closed circle of its own naturalness. The animal therefore experiences two drives through which it seeks to break out of this circle: the sex-drive and the death-drive. Through the sex-drive, the animal tries to externalize itself into another—but this other is simply another animal once again, and so the same process continues. Through the death-drive, the animal

tries to externalize itself from itself by negating its own life—but this simply destroys the animal altogether, and so no true solution is found. Both the sex-drive and the death-drive are characterized by a 'release' or 'discharge': sexual release (also known as *le petit mort*, the little death), and the sweet release of death ('giving up the ghost', a 'consummation' devoutly to be wished). The deadlock between these two drives compels the animal to remain trapped within Nature. But the animal finally escapes by making a *decision*: the undecidable decision to become human, i.e. to become Spirit. Through this decision, the human being externalizes themselves from their own animality, and thereby becomes more than merely one animal among others. In Hegel's terms, Spirit breaks out of the dead husk of Nature, and is reborn like a phoenix from the ashes. This means that, all indications to the contrary notwithstanding, 'humanity' is not a natural kind: to be human is a decision. So too, the transition from Nature to Spirit is not a natural transition: it is the decision of Spirit to retroactively create itself from out of its animal presupposition—for Spirit just *is* what it makes itself to be.[67] The comparison to Badiou is once again instructive: for Badiou, the subject is always a retroactive result of its own undecidable decision to have fidelity to an event.[68] So too, here it is an undecidable decision which give rise to Spirit's subjectivity from out of Nature's substance.

But what is it that truly distinguishes Logic, Nature, and Spirit from one another? What is it that is driving the leap from Logic to Nature, or from Nature to Spirit? I want to suggest that it is a drive towards novelty, the capacity for the *new* (exactly what Badiou would call the Event). In Logic, everything is eternally self-same, expressing as it does "God as He is in his eternal essence."[69] At the end of Logic, by rejoining the beginning in pure Being, the Absolute Idea comes to realize that nothing new will ever happen in the logical domain of pure thinking. Thus it decides to release itself into the first forms of Nature, space and time, for the sake of something new. Nature in general is a new domain, but space and time are also together the pure forms of novelty as such: they provide the spatiotemporal world in which things can happen, events can take place, etc., as opposed to the eternal self-sameness of Logic. Yet Hegel always insists that nothing genuinely new can happen in Nature alone, since Nature always merely repeats the same natural laws, natural kinds, and so on. Even if things do change in the natural world, these changes do not transform Nature itself, which always only returns to and repeats itself.[70] The highest form of Nature, the animal organism, therefore makes a decision to release itself into Spirit, in order that there may be something genuinely new, true novelty. Specifically, Spirit is capable of novelty by virtue of its History: what is new are the events of History, the self-transformations of Spirit into ever-new shapes. (Badiou draws an equivalent distinction: the Event cannot be found in Nature, but only in History.[71]) As Hegel writes: "Spirit is never at rest but always engaged in

moving forward."[72] So, there can be no end of History: there will always be new events to come, new shapes of Spirit to be created.[73]

But in the last instance, *why* is the Absolute Idea driven towards novelty? I want to suggest a further speculative answer: for the sake of enjoyment—*Genuß*, or to borrow the psychoanalytic terminology, *jouissance*. Consider the final sentence of the *Encyclopedia*: "The eternal Idea, the Idea that is in and for itself, eternally remains active, engenders and enjoys itself as Absolute Spirit."[74] The whole grand journey of the Absolute Idea from Logic to Nature to Spirit culminates in its own enjoyment as Absolute Spirit. Indeed, each of the three culminating moments of the three divisions of the *Encyclopedia* can be seen as a moment of enjoyment: the enjoyment of the Absolute Idea in its release from pure thinking at the end of Logic, the enjoyment of the animal in the sex-drive and the death-drive at the end of Nature, and finally the highest enjoyment of Absolute Spirit itself at the end of Spirit. Žižek remarks on the evident psychoanalytic resonances of the *Encyclopedia*'s final sentence: the trajectory by which the Absolute Idea loses itself in the externality of Nature only to regain itself in Spirit, achieving enjoyment through this circular self-movement, is "uncannily close" to Lacan's account of the *jouissance* found on the circular path of the drive.[75]

How does my proposed account of the Nature-Spirit transition, as achieved through the undecidable decision of the animal, compare to Žižek's view? To be sure, the motif of undecidability is far from foreign to Žižek's own reading of Hegel, though he prefers to use the moniker "abyssal"—whether the "abyssal act," "abyssal ground," "abyssal decision," and so on.[76] To begin with, this dimension of the abyssal is found first of all in the advent of the material world itself: from out of the quantum void, absolute negativity makes a radical, groundless, or abyssal leap from its 'less than nothing' into our determinate positive reality. No doubt this corresponds to the transition from Logic to Nature, the Absolute Idea's undecidable decision to release itself into the spatiotemporal natural world. At the other extreme, Žižek takes the 'abyssal act' to refer to the radical creation of a new world or new form of life, i.e. a new form of social-political organization. The abyssal act is a revolutionary leap which breaks from the old order and inaugurates a new one. In a sense, then, every revolution is a re-enactment of that originary creation *ex nihilo* whereby the world comes to be.[77] As I see it, this political transformation is the ultimate result of Absolute Spirit, marking the transition from Spirit to Logic: just as the Absolute Idea decides to create the world, Absolute Spirit decides to create a new world.[78] But there is still one transition missing: the transition from Nature to Spirit. Would Žižek see this transition too as 'abyssal'? We saw Žižek argue above that, no matter what natural preconditions there may be for the emergence of subjectivity, this emergence itself can only happen all-at-once, in an *ex nihilo* quantum leap or abyssal act. As we already saw,

for very different reasons, both Pippin and Johnston criticize Žižek's view of the abyssal act as too Schellingian, whether in its role as groundless ground of the material world in general, the ontological source of Spirit's subjectivity, or the basis of a political revolution. But if the reading of Hegel's conception of the undecidable decision developed here and elsewhere is right, then Žižek's view would in fact be perfectly Hegelian. Johnston's critique of Žižek recourse to quantum physics, as belonging to the most rudimentary parts of a re-written philosophy of Nature, can thereby also be seen in a new light. If the end of Nature involves a circling back to its beginning (as in Logic, where the Absolute Idea circles back to pure Being), then the animal organism should find itself circling back to empty space and time—the quantum vacuum, perhaps—in order to set the stage for its leap into Spirit. Sex, death, and quantum physics would not be such strange bedfellows, after all.[79]

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to look back at the two debates with which we began, in light of the new account of the Nature-Spirit transition that I then went on to propose. In the Pippin-Žižek debate, Pippin maintains that there is no need for a philosophical account of the move from the space of causes (Nature) to the space of reasons (Spirit), since these are two incommensurable orders of explanation. Žižek argues that there is indeed a need for such an account, i.e. an ontological or metaphysical explanation of the birth of Spirit from out of Nature, subjectivity out of substance. I have argued in favour of Žižek's position here, where it is the decision of the animal through which the human being leaps from Nature into Spirit, which, like the prior decision of the Absolute Idea, takes place at an ontological level (a transformation in the very being of the human). While Pippin does admit that there would be a non-philosophical explanation of the human capacity for reasoning, to be found one day through some future advances in evolutionary biology, Žižek argues that this unspoken naturalist reductionism fails to do justice to the genuine break between Nature and Spirit. I have argued that the transition from Nature to Spirit—from substance to subjectivity, or from what Pippin takes to be the space of causes to the space of reasons—cannot be a merely natural transition. Just as the Absolute Idea's decision is not itself logical but the retroactive immanent overcoming of Logic as such, so too the animal's decision to become human is not natural but the retroactive immanent overcoming of Nature as such.

While Žižek and Johnston broadly agree on the need for a materialist reading of Hegel, in which we must explain how Nature is structured such that something like Spirit or subjectivity can emerge from it, they disagree on the most suitable natural science by which to determine this structure: quantum physics and neurobiology, respectively. On the one

hand, I have argued that there is something right about both views: while the biology of the animal organism is certainly the most advanced form of Nature and so the point at which the transition must be made to Spirit, still Nature must also circle back to its beginning, where quantum physics may also play a role. But on the other hand, neither quantum physics nor neurobiology could be a sufficient explanation for the birth of Spirit without once again reducing Spirit to Nature. Whatever preconditions may be laid by the quantum-physical incompleteness of material reality, or by the self-determining plastic feedback systems of the human brain, they cannot necessitate the decision of the animal without undermining that decision's proper undecidability. (Perhaps this is more in keeping with Žižek's occasional admission that quantum physics may be merely a metaphor or image of the more fundamental metaphysical principle of absolute negativity, which does not properly belong to Nature.[80])

Hegel has the difficulty task of trying to 'square the circle', by simultaneously preserving both the difference and the continuity between Nature and Spirit. This philosophical desideratum is threatened on both sides by more straightforward traditional explanations of the Nature-Spirit relation. On the one hand, Hegel wants to avoid a reductionist physicalism that would collapse Spirit into Nature, turning Spirit into merely one more natural phenomenon among others. Does the decision of the animal avoid this? Someone might object: this decision is itself merely the product of physical causes, and so it does not truly break from Nature into a new domain of Spirit. A Hegelian reply to this objection would have to insist that this decision is not merely an effect of natural causes, but that there is something 'other' at work in Nature, e.g. absolute negativity. But this leads to the other horn of the dilemma, namely Hegel's desire to avoid a dualist supernaturalism, in which the continuity between Nature and Spirit would be lost, instead positing them as two radically distinct domains (e.g. Descartes' body and soul, or Kant's phenomena and noumena). Again, does the decision of the animal avoid this, if it must appeal to a non-natural metaphysical principle, e.g. absolute negativity? Someone might object: this has merely introduced a new dualism between Nature and what is 'other' than Nature—call it negativity, the Void, the 'less than nothing', etc.—which is both prior to Nature (Logic) and posterior to Nature (Spirit or subjectivity). A Hegelian reply would have to insist that there are not two separate realms here, but a single domain with an immanent contradiction. Either: There is only absolute negativity, which by negating itself, also yields a world of determinate positive entities that seems to be opposed to it, but are really its own expression Or: There is only natural substance, but this substance is incomplete or non-All, where the hole or gap thereby introduced in substance just is subjectivity itself. Whether this Hegelian position can ultimately be made philosophically satisfying remains an open question.

What are the political ramifications of these issues, if any? Allow me to only briefly indicate some of the correspondences between different interpretations of Hegel's transition from Nature to Spirit, and different interpretations of Hegel's political philosophy. Just as Pippin argues for the gradual evolution of the human faculty of reason from out of Nature, a process with which philosophy does not need to concern itself, he argues that Hegel endorses the gradual reform of one's own social-political world or form of life in accordance with its own internal normative standards.[81] Just as Pippin is highly critical of Žižek's 'gappy' metaphysics (explaining subjectivity via the incompleteness or 'gap' in natural substance) as un-Hegelian, so too his is highly critical of Žižek's revolutionary leap or abyssal act as un-Hegelian.[82] For his part, Johnston shares Žižek's commitment to a revolutionary political project emerging from the Marxist tradition, as read backwards through Hegel. But just as Johnston criticizes Žižek's recourse to quantum physics as an illicit 'shortcut' to subjectivity that fails to do the hard explanatory work of connecting Nature with Spirit, so too Johnston is critical of Žižek's political strategy of the abyssal act as an implausible 'shortcut' to a new world that fails to do the hard political work of building that new world from within the vestiges of the old. (Johnston offers a similar critique of Badiou's 'decisionism', as dependent on the miracle of an event that can neither be explained, summoned, or justified.) Instead, just as Johnston looks to the emergent biological structures of the brain to ground subjectivity, so too political transformation can emerge through whole networks of interventions—disrupting systems and structures, feedback loops, etc.—that are greater than the sum of their parts.[83] Finally, then, just as Žižek posits a quantum leap from Nature to Spirit, so too he argues that every political revolution requires just such a leap, an abyssal act. Indeed, a revolution first needs the 'de-naturalization' of the old world, which opens us up once again to the radical novelty of a new world. Likewise, on the account I have defended: just as the birth of Spirit out of Nature arises from the undecidable decision of the animal to break with the endless repetition of Nature and create something new (Spirit), so too the birth of a new world would require Spirit to make its own undecidable decision to transform itself into a new shape. After all, it is this drive for novelty that first pushes the Absolute Idea out from its own pure thinking into Nature, and then into Spirit, whose History is defined above all by the power of the new. By creating this new world, the Absolute Idea can come to enjoy itself once more as Absolute Spirit.

1 These categories are used here only for heuristic purposes, to capture the *de facto* divisions between different groups of contemporary professional philosophers. But with Badiou, from a strictly philosophical standpoint, I affirm "the nullity of the opposition between analytic thought and continental thought." (Badiou 2005, xiv).
2 Hegel 1970, §§367-376.
3 For the purposes of this section, I will pay particular attention to what are often considered Žižek's two most systematic and encompassing works, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Žižek 2011) and *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (Žižek 2014), and to Pippin's important review essay of *Less than Nothing* (Pippin 2013; Pippin 2015).
4 For the purposes of this section, I will once again pay particular attention to *Less than Nothing* and *Absolute Recoil* (Žižek 2011; Žižek 2014), and to Johnston's most significant engagements with Žižek: *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Johnston 2008) and *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism* (Johnston 2018). s
5 For Žižek's critique of Hegel's conception of sexuality, see e.g. Žižek 2012, 440-441. For Hegel's account of marriage in the *Philosophy of Right,* see Hegel 2008, §§161-169. For Žižek's critique of Hegel's conception of death, see e.g. Žižek 2012, 455, 493, 500, 503.
6 Comay and Ruda 2018. For the motif of undecidability in Derrida and Badiou, see e.g., Derrida 2005, 218-220; Badiou 2005, 406-409.
7 Hegel 2010a, §244; Hegel 2010b, 752-753/12.253.
8 See e.g. Žižek 2012, 275, 963.
9 For an account of the distinctions between the traditional metaphysical view, non-metaphysical view, and revised metaphysical view of Hegel, see Redding 2020.
10 See e.g. Sellars 1997, 76.
11 Pippin 2013, 12, 16-7; Pippin 2008, 235-236.
12 Pinkard 2012, 17.
13 See e.g. Brandom 2019.
14 Hegel 1970, §250R.
15 Heisenberg 1927.
16 Žižek 2012, 905-962.
17 See e.g. Lacan 1998, 1-13.
18 For example, Žižek writes: "the disparity between subject and substance is simultaneously the disparity of substance with itself. … [S]ubjectivity emerges when substance cannot achieve full identity with itself, when substance is in itself 'barred', traversed by an immanent impossibility or antagonism" (Žižek 2014, 29). See Hegel 2018, §§18-25.
19 Žižek 2012, 2, 112, 127, 233, 262, 774, 863, 963; Žižek 2014, 20-21. See e.g. Lacan 2007, 66.
20 On "materialism without matter," see e.g. Žižek 2020, 6-7. See also Ruda 2015, 9, which is discussed in Žižek 2014, 72-74.
21 See Badiou 2005, 52-60; Meillassoux 2008, 64-69. Among other shared features, Žižek's absolute negativity, Badiou's Void, and Meillassoux's hyper-chaos all affirm the radical contingency of the material world, while at the same time rehabilitating the philosophical notion of the Absolute.
22 Pippin 2013, 12-13.
23 Žižek 2014, 17.
24 As Žižek explains Pippin's view: "the distinction between nature and spirit therefore stems not from the fact that spirit is a thing of a different kind from natural things, but rather has more to do with the different sets of criteria that are required for explaining them: spirit is 'a kind of norm'" (Žižek 2014, 18).
25 As Žižek writes: "Pippin seems to imply that the normative structure of recognition and discursive justification can ultimately be incorporated into a global natural history of humanity as a peculiar feature of one animal species, so that, even if the normative dimension remains irreducible to the empirical reality, it somehow emerged out of it de facto. This emergence is, however, never explicitly developed, since this would amount to a full naturalization of the normative-discursive dimension. Although Pippin is critical of Habermas, it would be easy to prove that Habermas' neo-Kantian avoidance of ontological commitment is necessarily ambiguous in a homologous way: while naturalism functions as the obscene secret not to be revealed in public ('of course man developed from nature, of course Darwin was right…'), this obscure secret is a lie, covering up the idealist *form* of thought" (Žižek 2014, 27).
26 Žižek 2014, 20; see Kant 1998, A445-451/B473-479.
27 "Aristotle 's books *On the Soul* [i.e. *De Anima*], along with his essays on particular aspects and states of the soul, are for this reason still the most admirable, perhaps even the sole, work of speculative interest on this topic. The essential aim of a philosophy of Spirit can only be to introduce the concept again into the knowledge of Spirit, and so also to disclose once more the sense of those Aristotelian books." (Hegel 2007, §378, translation modified; see Aristotle 1984).

28 Hegel 1970, §240R.
29 See e.g. Heisenberg 1955. (Other interpretations of quantum physics may be deterministic, e.g. by positing so-called 'hidden variables' at work in quantum processes.)
30 For Žižek's discussion of various phenomena of quantum physics, including the uncertainty principle, wave-particle duality, quantum indeterminacy, the observer effect, and so on, see e.g. the final chapter of *Less than Nothing*, "The Ontology of Quantum Physics" (Žižek 2012, 905-962). Žižek readily admits that the interpretations of quantum physics that he endorses—e.g. the probabilistic or indeterministic Copenhagen interpretation, a strong interpretation of the role of the observer, etc.—are scientifically controversial.
31 Žižek 2012, 944-950.
32 For some of Johnston's major works on Žižek, see Johnston e.g. Johnston 2008, 2009, 2018. Like Žižek, Johnston has also had a back-and-forth with Pippin, but limitations of space require me to bracket this debate here (see Pippin 2018; Johnston 2019).
33 See e.g. Johnston 2018, 149, 172-175. Notably, Pippin also criticizes Žižek's 'gappy' ontology as closer to Schelling than to Hegel (Pippin 2013, 10, 16-17). See Schelling 1997, for which Žižek contributes a long introductory essay. For Žižek's reading of Schelling, see Žižek 1996.
34 "It has been rumored round the town that I have compared the stars to a rash on an organism where the skin erupts into a countless mass of red spots … In fact I do rate what is concrete higher than what is abstract, and an animality that develops into no more than a slime, higher than the starry host." (Hegel 1970, §341Z).
35 See Johnston 2018, 141-142, 174, 181, 185. For a general account of the distinction between strong and weak emergence, see e.g. Chalmers 2006.
36 For Kant's view of the subjective requirement of teleological judgment with respect to biological organisms, see the Dialectic of Teleological Judgement in the third *Critique* (Kant 2000 257-284/5:385-415). For Hegel's view of the objectivity of teleology and its relation to life, see especially the sections on Teleology and Life in the *Science of Logic* (Hegel 2010b, 651-688/12.154-12.191). For a general account of Hegel's inheritance and transformation of Kant's conception of teleological life, see Ng 2020.
37 Johnston 2018, 177-178.
38 See e.g. Johnston 2018, 166-183, 229-230. See also his collaboration with Catherine Malabou on philosophy, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience (Johnston and Malabou 2013). Malabou's own work on plasticity in relation to both neuroscience and Hegel would deserve its own independent treatment, but limitations of space preclude such a discussion here (see e.g. Malabou 2005; Malabou 2008).
39 Johnston 2018, 210-211.
40 Hegel 2007, §378.
41 Žižek does occasionally make positive reference to neuroscience—e.g. Žižek 2004, 137-138; Žižek 2006, 240-241—but he does not accord it the same foundational role as quantum physics, even going so far as to posit that proto-subjective neurobiological processes are themselves made possible only by prior non-neurobiological ontological conditions (e.g. the 'gap' in Being itself). See the discussion in Johnston 2018, 165-184.
42 Žižek 2014, 225-226.
43 Žižek 2014, 226.
44 Žižek 2014, 226.
45 Žižek 2012, p. 440.
46 Hegel 2008, §§161-169. But even here things are not quite so simple, since Hegel describes marriage as a "decision [*Entscheidung*]" (Hegel 2008, §162R), which Žižek will even elsewhere call the "abyssal decision to marry" (Žižek 2012, 446).
47 "Žižek's fundamental theoretical thesis equating the subject as negativity of German idealism with the death drive … of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis…" (Johnston 2018, xv). "What really interests me is the following insight: if you look at the very core of psychoanalytic theory, of which even Freud was not aware, it's properly read *death drive* … the only way to read this properly is to read it against the background of the notion of subjectivity as self-relating negativity in German idealism." (Žižek 2003)
48 Freud 1959.
49 Žižek 2012, 500.
50 Žižek 2012, 500. See also: "This excess of the drive qua pure repetition is the "decentered" source of value that Hegel could not conceptualize, the libidinal correlate of the labor-power which produces surplus-value." (Žižek 2012, 503). "In this sense, the death drive or the compulsion to repeat is the heart of negativity, Hegel's non-thematized presupposition-inaccessible not only to him, but, perhaps, to philosophy as such." (Žižek 2012, 493). "Hegel misses the excess of purely mechanical repetition." (Žižek 2012, 455).
51 Hegel 1970, §369. Compare also: "the sex-relation: what the genus brings forth is the procreation of

individuals through the death of other individuals of the same genus; the individual, after reproducing itself as another individual, perishes." (Hegel 1970, §367Z); "The opposition of sex separates efficacy and stimulus, distributing them between two organic individuals. But the organic individual is itself both; and this is the possibility of its death, a possibility immanent in it, namely, that the organic individual itself separates itself into these forms." (Hegel 1970, §371Z).
52 For Hegel's explicit linkage between the bad infinite and repetition, see e.g. Hegel 2010b, 192/21.222, 596/12.98, 733/12.235.
53 Žižek 2012, 275-276. Note that Hegel calls the bad infinite the "infinite of the understanding," and the true infinite the "infinite of reason" (Hegel 2010b, 109/21.124).
54 In this regard, consider Hegel's frequent invocations of the Biblical narrative of the Fall of Man (Genesis 1-3), where it is the consumption of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that triggers humanity's recognition of its own sexuality (viz. Adam and Eve's nakedness), resulting in expulsion from the Garden of Eden and thereby the onset of death. Hegel interprets this religious narrative as representing the philosophical truth of the birth of humanity out of animality, or Spirit out of Nature (e.g. Hegel 2010a, §24Z).
55 This makes Hegel into a kind of inverted Platonist. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima describes the temporal cycle of sex and death as rendering humanity a mere image of eternity—changeable Becoming as opposed to unchangeable Being (Plato 1997, 489-491/206c-208b). Whereas for Hegel, the sex-death relation is itself a positive condition of the realization of Absolute Spirit.
56 Hegel 1970, §375.
57 Hegel 1970, §376.
58 Hegel 1970, §376z.
59 Hegel 2010a, §18.
60 Hegel 2010b, 735-736/12.236-237.
61 Hegel 2010a, §244; Hegel 2010b, 752-753/12.253.
62 "There is only present the decision [*Entschluss*], which can also be viewed as arbitrary, of considering *thinking as such*." (Hegel 2010b, 48/21.56, translation modified).
63 "The *Entschluss* can also be read as 'not-syllogism', 'not-inference', or 'un-syllogism', 'un-judgment', and 'un-conclusion. The resolve that drives thinking does not follow deductively; it is not the premise or the conclusion of a syllogistic inference. There can only be an *Entschluss* where inference fails and where thought is therefore impeded from continuing as before. Like the speculative sentence, the *Entschluss* is not a proposition (*Satz*), but rather a 'leap' (*Satz*) or reason. … There is no *Entshluss* without undecidability, because only what is undecidable calls for a decision." (Comay and Ruda 2018, 110).
64 Gödel 1986.
65 The argument here is broadly adapted from Shaul 2023, 138-145.
66 For example: "The organism is thus raised into pure ideality, perfectly transparent universality; it is space and time, and at the same time neither spatial nor temporal: it intuits something which is spatial and temporal." (Hegel 1970, §357Z); "If, therefore, we began in Nature with the ideal asunder-, ness of space and time, which are Two because the Notion is concrete (its moments are there in their completeness but they appear in that abstract sphere thrown apart, the content not yet having been posited in its concreteness); so we have now, on the one hand, the sense of physically determined space, and on the other hand, the sense of a physical time." (Hegel 1970, §358Z).
67 "The history of Spirit is its own act. Spirit is only what it does" (Hegel 2008, §343); "It is the very nature of Spirit to be this absolute liveliness, this process, … to come to itself, and to free itself, it being itself only as it comes to itself as such a product of itself; its actuality being merely that it has made itself into what it is. … [F]or it is only as a result of itself that it has being as Spirit." (Hegel 1978, 7). See also Žižek 2012, 291.
68 Badiou 2005, 391-431.
69 Hegel 2010b, 29/21.34.
70 As Hegel writes: "the difference between the spiritual world and the natural world … consists in the fact that while the latter constantly only returns to itself, a progression [*Fortschreiten*] also takes place in the former." (Hegel 2010a, §234Z). As he explains more fully: "If we compare spiritual changes with those of Nature, we observe that, in the natural world, individual things are subject to change, whereas the species themselves are enduring. Thus a planet, for example, leaves each particular position it occupies, although its orbit as a whole is constant. And the same is true of animal species. For change is a cyclic process, a repetition of identical phases. Thus everything moves in cycles, and it is only within these, in the world of particular things, that change takes place. In Nature, the life which arises from death is itself only another instance of particular life; and if the species is taken as the substantial element behind this change, the destruction of particular things will appear as a relapse on the part of the species into particularity. Consequently, the survival of the species consists purely in a uniform repetition of one and the same mode of existence. But with spiritual forms, it is

otherwise; for in this case, change occurs not just on the surface but within the Concept, and it is the Concept itself which is modified. In the natural world, the species does not progress, but in the world of the Spirit, each change is a form of progress." (Hegel 1975, 128).
71 Badiou 2005, 123-142.
72 Hegel 2018, §11.
73 Of course, this still leaves the final transition from Spirit back to Logic, completing the circle of circles. Angelica Nuzzo suggests that, just as the Absolute Idea completes the circle of Logic *and* externalizes itself into something new (viz. Nature), so too Absolute Spirit must externalize itself into something outside the *Encyclopedia*'s grand circle of circles. But, so she argues, the only thing outside the *Encyclopedia* system is the *future* itself, about which Hegel insists philosophy must always remain silent. (Nuzzo 2018, 375-376). Without being able to develop it here, as I read Hegel, this extra-philosophical futurity just is a new world or new form of life.
74 Hegel 2007, §577.
75 "So, when Hegel concludes his *Encyclopedia* with the claim that "the eternal idea which exists in and for itself, eternally sets itself to work, engenders and enjoys itself as absolute spirit" ('*die ewige an undfur sich seiende Idee sich ewig als absoluter Geist betätigt, erzeugt und genießt*'), does he not describe here a repetitive circular movement of alienating or losing oneself in order to regain oneself again, a movement which strangely recalls Lacan's definition of castration as a movement in which the object is lost in order to be regained on the ladder of desire? Is not the repetitive movement of losing and regaining oneself, of alienation and disalienation, a movement which, as Hegel explicitly claims, brings enjoyment, uncannily close to the circular movement of the drive?" (Žižek 2012, 498).
76 See e.g. Žižek 2012, 446. 503, 963.
77 "What the inexistence of the big Other signals is that every ethical and/or moral edifice has to be grounded in an abyssal act which is, in the most radical sense imaginable, *political.* Politics is the very space in which, without any external guarantee, ethical decisions are made and negotiated." (Žižek 2012, 963). As two scholars of Žižek nicely summarize it: ""In politics, we need courageously to confront our capacity to engender wholly new political orders, completely overthrowing the old regimes. This will involve re-enacting collectively God's abyssal Act of decision, which saw him give birth to the world as his own self-externalization" (Sharpe and Boucher 2010, 122).
78 Consider the end of *The Dash*: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world. For Hegel the point is to *lose* it—to delete it, suspend it, destroy it, dash it to pieces—to refuse the world as we know it and create a new one. The point is to punctuate history—to get the point, to get to the point, to bring things to the point of transformation." (Comay and Ruda 2018, 112).
79 Perhaps the burgeoning field of *quantum biology* could provide the natural scientific buttress for a new Hegelian philosophy of Nature, in which Nature's highest shape (the animal organism) circles back to Nature's beginning (quantum physics). See e.g. Marais et al. 2018.
80 For example, after establishing the parallel between Hegelian ontology and quantum physics: "How far should we go with this parallel? Is it just an approximate metaphor? Does it bear witness to the fact that our entire comprehension of reality is already over determined by the symbolic order, so that even our grasp of natural reality is always already 'structured like a language'? Or should we risk a step further and claim that there is something which strangely recalls (or points towards) symbolic structures already present in 'physical' reality itself?" (Žižek 2012, 921).
81 Pippin 2013, 19-20.
82 "[T]he first sentence of Žižek's conclusion — 'What the inexistence of the big Other signals is that every ethical and/or moral edifice has to be grounded on an abyssal act which is, in the most radical sense imaginable, political' — makes zero Hegelian sense. Something understood by an agent as an 'abyssal' act is a delusion, the pathos of self-inflating and posed heroism, and the gesture belongs in the Hegelian zoo along with The Beautiful Soul, The Knight of Virtue and especially The Frenzy of Self-Conceit. And if the act is 'abyssal,' then 'politics' simply means 'power,' power backed by nothing but resolve and will, likely met with nothing but resolve and will." (Pippin 2013, 16)
83 For Johnston's critique of Badiou and Žižek in this regard, see Johnston 2009.

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Tragedy, Then Farce: Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Populism

Alexander Stagnell

Abstract: Slavoj Žižek is frequently portrayed as the paradigmatic anti-populist thinker. Yet he is also routinely criticized for endorsing populist causes in contemporary politics, not least after his infamous remarks concerning Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This article aims to approach this supposed contradiction by examining Žižek's theory of populism. Rather than reading his debate with Ernesto Laclau as primarily a confrontation between reformist populism and revolutionary communism, the article approaches it as a fundamental disagreement over the relationship between theory and political practice. Through a close reading of Žižek's engagement with Laclau, the analysis reveals how Žižek critiques what he perceives as a fetishistic tendency in Laclau's thought which ultimately produces a deficient account of universalization and results in the domestication of the constitutive negativity marked by the Lacanian *objet a*.

Keywords: Žižek, Laclau, populism, *objet a*, fetish

In the concluding remarks of *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau famously defines Žižek's "Martian politics" as being "grounded in two incompatible ontologies"[1]: a Freudian theory of the unconscious and a Hegelio-Marxist theory of history. As an alternative to this supposedly irreconcilable divide, Laclau offers up his own pairing of Freud (and ultimately Lacan) with Gramsci, claiming it to be superior to Žižek's approach, which strays too far into Hegelian obscurities and thereby undermines the core insights of psychoanalysis. As a result, Laclau argues that anti-capitalist struggle faces a choice between different political practices ultimately grounded in antagonistic ontologies: either it must operate in accordance with populist negativity – where capitalism constitutes the outside of an anti-capitalist struggle, and through this position unites particular demands as a "people" – or through "total immanence", where the emancipatory subject must arrive from some unknown beyond to save us from the all-encompassing system of capitalism. This total immanence, Laclau claims, is also the reason why Žižek is "left without any concrete historical actor for his anti-capitalist struggle", as every subjective position is always-already an effect of the existing system, ultimately driving him into "political nihilism."[2]

Much of their continued debate, as well as the accompanied commentary, came to focus on this opposition in political practice, reducing the quarrel to a question of whether the left should strive for reformist populism or revolutionary communism. However, what is lost in this approach, framing the debate as a battle between two fully-fledged theoretical systems and the respective political practices they support, is a more fundamental rift in how the relationship between ontology and political practice is depicted. To fully grasp this difference, we should begin

at a point that seemingly confirms Laclau's position that Žižek lacks a coherent theory of the emancipatory subject: Žižek's analysis of populism.

Although Žižek is often described as an anti-populist thinker, his position on concrete populist politics appears at times contradictory, shifting between support and dismissal, sometimes within a single text. In 2004, discussing Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With America?* in which the author analyzes a growing populist alliance in the U.S. between blue-collar workers and financial interests opposing the liberal elite, Žižek, for instance, suggested that potential allies for the left might be found "beyond the 'rainbow coalition' of radical liberals and their single-issue struggles, and towards those who they see as their enemy"[3], i.e., the unholy populist alliance. Five years later, Žižek returned to Frank's analysis at a time when a nascent left populist movement had begun protesting the economic policies enacted after the 2008 financial crisis. However, at this point the "conservative populism" Frank had described no longer offered a potential ally. Rather, populism was just another way to "convince the chicken to walk freely into the slaughterhouse" without the need for force or repression.[4] In other words, the recommendation had changed, as Žižek now claimed that "[t]he populist slogan 'Save Main Street, not Wall Street!' is thus totally misleading, a form of ideology at its purest."[5] Populism was even framed of as one of the socialist threats against communism proper, as the former, "in place of the egalitarian collective, offers an organic community"[6].

Over the years, this indecisiveness has continued, as Žižek has oscillated between encouraging and dismissing specific populist strategies. This seemingly fickle approach is perhaps best captured in one of the chapter titles from *In Defense of Lost Causes*: "Populism is (sometimes) good enough in practice, but not in theory". But how should this paradoxical overturning of conventional wisdom regarding theory and practice be read? Should the left "learn from the rise of Rightist populism, because WeToo can play the populist game" or is "[t] he supreme populist moment (referendum victory) immediately reverted into capitulation, into confession of impotence with regard to the capitalist order"?[7] Is this apparent indecisiveness merely a symptom of Laclau's thesis, namely that Žižek lacks a theory of who might be the subject of anti-capitalist struggle? Could it be explained by the fact that, at times, he grows tired of waiting for the Martians, which would help to account for these sudden shifts in his support for, or dismissal of, populist politics? Or might Žižek's analysis of populist politics still be salvaged? Determining this requires a careful examination of his critical engagement with Laclau's theory of populism. However, before turning to Žižek's critique, it is necessary to first outline some of the core questions inherent in Laclau's conception of populism.

The Nature of Populism

As noted, many have interpreted Žižek's critique of Laclau's populist logic as a sign of orthodox Marxist reductionism in which all other political struggles are treated as ephemeral, with class struggle as the sole, authentic terrain of politics. As Biglieri and Cadahia write: "Žižek returns to the traditional elements of the Marxist criticism of populism by once again associating it with fascism, and painting it as a hoax that distances the working class from its own definitive historical objective: to destroy the capitalist system."[8] In other words, Žižek is accused of treating populism as nothing more than an ideology in the guise of false consciousness or smoke screen generated by the ruling class to obscure the true social order, thereby leaving the proletariat unaware of its purpose as the true subject of history. But to assume that Žižek would operate with such an antiquated notion of ideology – one based on a strict distinction between false and true consciousness – is to overlook the part of his work that even Laclau himself, despite his accusations, lauded in the preface to the first edition of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* by calling it a contribution of the "highest order".[9]

It is well known that Laclau, to a significant extent, modeled his own understanding of ideology on Žižek's early work. Nevertheless, Laclau's own conception of the relationship between ideology and populism remains at best vaguely defined. Throughout *On Populist Reason*, he repeatedly distances himself from the idea that populism constitutes an ideology.[10] However, this critique primarily targets the notion of ideology prevalent in mainstream populism studies, which tends to oppose it to either populist *rhetoric* or populist *movements*. Yet, if we return to Laclau's preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* he highlights precisely Žižek's "description and theoretization of the fundamental mechanisms of ideology (identification, the role of the master signifier, ideological fantasy"[11] as the latter's main contribution. Several of the Lacanian notions that Laclau here highlights in Žižek's work became crucial to Laclau's own theorization of the populist logic, including how "the *point de capiton* is conceived as the fundamental ideological operation; [how] 'fantasy' becomes an imaginary scenario concealing the fundamental split or 'antagonism' around which the social field is structured; [and how] 'identification' is seen as the process through which the ideological field is constituted."[12] When Laclau reintroduces *point de capiton* in *On Populist Reason*, he also writes:

> It is clear that, without nodal points, there would be no configuration at all. [...] This is exactly what we have seen in the case of popular identities: without the quilting point of an equivalential identification, democratic equivalences would remain merely virtual.[13]

A few pages later, he adds:

> A final and crucial dimension must, however, be added to our analysis. Our whole approach to populism turns, as we have seen, around the following theses: (1) the emergence of the 'people' requires the passage — via equivalences — from isolated, heterogeneous demands to a 'global' demand which involves the formation of political frontiers and the discursive construction of power as an antagonistic force; (2) since, however, this passage does not follow from a mere analysis of the heterogeneous demands themselves - there is no logical, dialectical or semiotic transition from one level to the other — something qualitatively new has to intervene. This is why 'naming' can have the retroactive effect I have described.[14]

This act of naming, catachrestically supplying an absent fullness with a name and elevating it into a thing, constitutes the ultimate populist act, as it is the gesture that causes a new people to emerge. This attempt at closure is simultaneously necessary and impossible: its absence would leave us trapped in pure difference, while its completion would entail total equivalence, both of which making meaning impossible. As Laclau concludes in his 1996 text on the notion of ideology,

> [t]his [the elimination of either the logic of difference or equivalence] is the dream of the various versions of the 'end of ideology', generally associated with the ideal of pure, no-political, administrative practices. In both cases, closure would not be an illusion but a reality. But both are impossible dreams, ensuring that we will continue living in an ideological universe.[15]

It thus appears as if the populist logic, described as the political logic *par excellence*, must be understood as taking the form of an ideological frame. This logic operates along a spectrum between the two impossible extremes of pure difference and total equivalence, continuously attempting the impossible act of closure through which a temporary hegemonic order is established. This formal description of populism, in turn, is intended to guide political actors in formulating their own populist strategies. Hence, when Laclau describes the populist logic, he often seems to assumes a unity of theory and praxis in the vein of classical Marxism-Leninism, an assumption also frequently echoed in the secondary literature. Moreover, by adopting the notion of 'rhetoricity' and linking it to concepts such as 'articulation' and 'hegemony', Laclau also positions himself within a long lineage of structuralist thought that identifies in the rhetorical tradition a particular understanding of language as an activity through which a life-world is produced or articulated.

This idea, ingrained in the rhetorical tradition, carries with it a danger already noted by Aristotle – for whom rhetoric instead should

rather strive toward describing how the orators tried to convince their different audiences – , namely that rhetorical theory can be easily converted into a heuristic tool for of producing concrete practical effects. Such problematic conceptions of rhetoric's inventive and productive powers parallel critiques of Laclau's work, which accuse it of sometimes reproducing an instrumentalist understanding of praxis.[16] Although Laclau defends his theory against these charges by questioning the validity of the distinction between pure instrumentalism and more complex notions of linguistic practice by pointing out that they build on a naïve idea of cause and effect, his frequent references to rhetoric and the rhetorical tradition suggests an imagined unity of theory and praxis in the form a practical art, a *techhê*. The risk of this position is that it presupposes a unified subject capable of acting upon, or even creating, the world in and through language. Such a view, however, undermines any understanding of the subject as constituted by negativity, as an effect of contradiction.

In "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor", Laclau approaches the relation between rhetorical theory and practice through the ways in which "the metaphor-metonymy continuum can be seen as fully operating in the structuration of political spaces."[17] He beings by warning against two common but misleading conclusions concerning this question : (i) the view that rhetorical theory constitutes a transcendental limit of human experience, where theory can only be studied as through its appearance as categories in the empirical world; or (ii), the treatment of the theoretical and the empirical level as "fully enclosed universes" only haphazardly connected by "purely external homologies".[18] Against these claims, Laclau instead emphasizes that "no level has transcendental priority over the other, so that their very interaction should be seen as an area of displacements blurring the frontiers between the empirical and the transcendental."[19] In *On Populist Reason,* Laclau also offers a depiction of this displacement under the rubric of the 'partiality of the universal'. Any hegemonic system, in his account, is grounded in a radical heterogeneity, appearing as both an excess and a present absence. This heterogeneity, the Lacanian Real, is a radical outside that leaves a trace in the hegemonic order, and since it is at the same time excess and lack it allows for different particulars to (temporarily) fill its space and take on the role of overdetermining element producing a contingent – and ultimately failed – unity.[20] As Laclau writes:

> The particular has transformed its very partiality in the name of a transcendent universality. That is why its ontological function can never be reduced to its ontic content. But because this ontological function can be present *only* when it is attached to an ontic content, the latter becomes the horizon of all there is – the point at which the ontic and the ontological fuse into a contingent but indivisible unity. [...] Since society as fullness has no proper meaning beyond the

> ontic contents that embody it, those contents are, for the subjects attached to them, *all there is*.[21]

Although this unity never fully totalizes the symbolic space, the fusion of the ontic and the ontological "into a contingent but indivisible unity" tends to domesticate the destabilizing force of *objet a*. As populist subjectivity, in this framework, emerges as the effect of this contingent bridging of the gap, whereby one contingently selected ontic element, in its fusing with the ontological level, patches over a primordial field of heterogeneous antagonisms, it also provides the antagonism with a stable, external opposition between the people and the elite. Hence, as the fundamental antagonism is transposed onto the social antagonism, it rendered as external, taking the form of the people and its enemy. The externality should, however, not be understood in a Schmittian sense, but as the mark of "the very possibility of my not being"[22]. This enemy remains external to my own identity, in particular if we follow Laclau's critique of the dialectical approach to understanding antagonism. In other words, the antagonism is internal to a specific symbolic field, but it remains external to the populist identity to which it provides the foundation. It is precisely here that Žižek's critique of Laclau strikes: this externalization makes possible Laclau's unification of theory and praxis. By locating the antagonism outside the subject, Laclau can envision a political logic capable of strategic articulation, but only at the cost of obscuring this subject's relation to its constitutive negativity.

The Fetishism of Rhetoric

The core of Žižek's critique of Laclau's project was already formulated in his reading of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. *In nuce*, Žižek's challenges Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony for taking as its starting point "an antagonistic fight with the external adversary", thereby overlooking a more radical interpretation of antagonism: that the other only appears as the stumbling block of the subject's completion because the subject itself is shot through with inconsistencies. As Žižek argues, the enemy is not simply external, but "an externalization of my own auto-negativity, of my self-hindering."[23] From this standpoint, any attempt to overcome the other in pursuit of a political demand is ultimately self-defeating, as the loss of the other brings about the destruction of the identity that emerges from this demand.

Laclau clearly took this critique to heart, as evidenced by his extended engagement with Lacanian theory as a way to refute Žižek's objections. We also see how this came to affect his understanding of populism, as he, in *On Populist Reason*, for instance wrote: "The 'people' will always be something more than the pure opposite of power. There is a Real of the 'people' which resists symbolic integration."[24] This invocation

of the Lacanian Real as that which escapes symbolization, suggests that every popular identity is by nature incomplete and thus haunted by an antagonism. In a later text, the antagonism of popular identities is further clarified by Laclau:

> Thus, antagonism has a revelatory function. On the one hand, the moment of identitary institution transforms an ontic object into symbol of my possibility of *being*; but, on the other, the presence of the antagonistic force shows the contingent character of that identitary investment.[25]

At first glance, this might appear as Laclau's response to Žižek's early critique, an attempt to theorize an immanent antagonism which reveals itself in the construction of the other (the one who by negation makes me who I am, while also, by virtue of its partiality, reveals the limits to this identity). Yet, the ambiguity remains unresolved. Are we to understand the 'Real of the people' as some kind of noumenal kernel of unsymbolizable hard matter, so that the antagonism of any popular identity stems from the struggle between whatever contingent symbolic attachment with which the subject identifies and an unreachable core of being? Or is the antagonism immanent to the process of universalization by which a particularity is elevated to universality in the process of constructing a popular identity?

The former interpretation risks falling into some kind of transcendental idealism, a pitfall that, according to Laclau, already haunts Žižek's understanding of the Lacanian Real.[26] Although Žižek, on his part, has pointed out similar transcendentalist tendencies in Laclau's thought, his most pertinent critique is nonetheless directed at the second point, namely Laclau's understanding of the process of universalization. To illustrate, consider Zizek's own words concerning the limit of populism as a starting point. He writes:

> As such, populism by definition contains a minimum, an elementary form, of ideological mystification, which is why, although it is effectively a formal frame or matrix of political logic that can be given different political twists (reactionary-nationalist, progressive-nationalist), nonetheless, insofar as, in its very notion, it displaces the immanent social antagonism into the antagonism between the unified people and its external enemy, it harbors in the last instance a long-term protofascist tendency. [27]

A straightforward reading of this passage might evoke the already delineated critique against Žižek: that populism, in its inability to acknowledge the true antagonism of capitalist society always risks straying too close to fascism, the ultimate dream of an organicist-corporatist society purged of all forms of conflict. From this reading, truly

emancipatory politics must, in order to avoid the fascist lure, therefore side with the proletariat as the figure of the immanent antagonism of capitalist society and the only political subject capable of enacting true change. Populism, in contrast, is conceived of as a dead end, always-already tainted by fascist ideological mystification. However, this would entail that Žižek's critique of populism is primarily political, that its ontic content – the constitution of a people – constantly runs the risk of devolving into a fascist conspiracy concerning the Other. In other words, that it is a critique primarily directed at at the "good enough" practices of populist politics. But if we instead are to follow Žižek's formula more rigorously, the shortcomings of populism must rather be located at the level of theory: Populism is inadequate as a notion articulating the process of how meaning is fixated. The issue, as we will see, lies in how Laclau develops a notion of the *rhetoricitiy* of ontology and how it collapses into what is essentially a fetish of rhetoric.

As previously mentioned, Laclau has often depicted Žižek's critique as arising from a problematic attachment to the possibility of a non-reified or non-ideological subjective position. Yet Žižek's concerns are not so easily dismissed. Just a few paragraphs before his critique of populism's fascist tendencies, Žižek further specifies his issue with Laclau's externalization of the antagonism:

> Although Laclau's theory of populism stands out as one of today's great (and, unfortunately for social theory, rare) examples of true conceptual stringency, one should note a couple of problematic features. The first one concerns his very definition of populism. The series of formal conditions he enumerates are not sufficient to justify calling a phenomenon populist; one needs also to consider the way in which populist discourse displaces the antagonism and constructs the enemy. In populism, the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice; symmetrically, our own – the populist political agent's – identity is also perceived as preexisting the enemy's onslaught.[28]

Laclau explicitly dismissed this critique as grounded in Žižek's "crude 'false consciousness' model"[29], supposing that the latter presumes that "any incarnation of the universal in the particular should be conceived as 'reification'"[30]. But the opposition that Žižek is pointing to is not one between a reified (and thus false) externalization and an unmediated, immanent expression of the antagonism. Rather, what he emphasizes is an underlying impossibility that perhaps most clearly reveals itself if we turn to Laclau's appreciation for, an appropriation of, the rhetorical tradition.

The first steps toward what might be called Laclau's ontologization of rhetoric, his claims concerning the rhetoricity of language, are found

in the French structuralist and post-structuralist rediscovery of rhetoric during the middle of the last century. Central to this revival was the notion of *l'écart*: distance, difference, deviation, or gap. One key question within this tradition was whether rhetorical language should be seen as a deviation from a neutral and natural counterpart by establishing a distance to the latter, or whether this gap or deviation, named by rhetoric, is intrinsic to language itself.[31] As the former interpretation of gap reduces rhetoric to linguistic embellishment and flourish, Laclau naturally took up the second position, often returning to this gap, i.e., 'rhetorical/ tropological displacements', as constitutive, as the very ontological foundation that the notion of rhetoricity is intended to capture.[32]

However, even in this more radical framing, the risk remains that rhetoric inadvertently carries with it a notion of a subject capable of opening up the gap or enacting the deviation through the act of naming. This is due to the fact that a conception of rhetoric as intentional or purposeful language runs deep in the rhetorical tradition, perhaps first formulated by Aristotle who, in the introduction to *The Rhetoric*, points to προαίρεσις as the mark of the proper rhetorician.[33] Rhetorical language, in other word, has always been understood from a perspective of (moral) choices and intention, presupposing an acting subject. In modernity, the notion of deviation tied this intentionality in rhetorical language to issues surrounding invention. Regardless of whether the deviation introduced too much of the individual into discourse (Kant famously wanted to confine rhetoric to a form of entertainment), or if its form of deviation hampered true individual creativity (Hugh Blair denounced those who believed that learning rhetorical categories could aid with invention), this rhetorical gap is always understood as an effect of a subject intervening in discourse

This risk of voluntarism seems to bleed over into Laclau's anti-foundationalist theory of articulation, especially as it concerns the act of naming.[34] This is particularly clear in Laclau's reading of Badiou, in which he writes that a "contamination between the evental and the situational is the very fabric of social life", meaning that "[t]he subject is only partially the subject inspired by the event; the naming of the unrepresentable in which the event consists involves reference to an unrepresented within a situation, and can only proceed through the displacement of elements already present in that situation."[35] In other words, while the subject of the event is transformed, it is never completely severed from the situation from which it emerges into a the new political identity. The act of naming requires an investment which is "catachrestical through and through"[36], i.e., it assumes an actor capable of naming the unnamable without being completely obliterated by this event. Or as Žižek puts it, Laclau's project is haunted by a "post-Cartesian mode of subjectivity which cuts its links with ontology and hinges on a contingent act of decision."[37]

Turning to the rhetorical tradition may also help clarify the second major critique that Žižek levels against Laclau's theory of populism:

namely, that "the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity"[38]. Against this charge, Laclau arguest hat reification is an insufficient concept for grasping the logic of hegemony, insofar as it presupposes the ideological model of the fetish sustaining a fantasy of an unmediated or direct access to the world.[39] In this respect, Laclau situates his reproach to Žižek within his larger argument that the entire theory surrounding commodity fetishism constitutes the "blind spot" of the Marxist tradition.[40]

Yet, by distancing himself from Žižek's supposed attachment to the fetish of ideology as false-consciousness, Laclau also opens a new set of theoretical tensions with regards to the problem of naming. Central to these issues is Laclau's often-repeated claim that the empty signifier in language functions homologically to gold or the general equivalent in the economy. By drawing on this structural homology between language and economy, Laclau does not banish the fetish, but rather reintroduces it in equating language as money in the form of the general equivalent, the point at which it becomes *the* commodity *par excellence*. Or, as Marx put it: "[t]he riddle of the money fetish is therefore merely the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes".[41]

However, the issue of the fetish, whether in rhetoric or in economy, cannot be reduced to a false image of the world. In other words, a fetish does not constitute a false consciousness about for instance the popular identity (which, through this mistake, would open the doors to a decent into fascism) or of money as the general equivalent. Rather, the fetish, through a process of reification, allows us to treat abstract relations as if they were material, i.e., the relations between signifiers as if they constitute the relationship between people, and relations of values as if they were the relations between commodities. This does not make these relations false: relations between people, as well as between commodities, truly operate through such abstractions in our daily lives. Instead, the fetish allows for something traumatic to vanish from our perception, meaning it can "play the very constructive role of allowing us to cope with the harsh reality".[42] By perceiving every identity as the effect of transformative rhetorical practices temporarily fixing meaning, the unbearable dimension of structural determination within capitalist society is allowed to disappear from the field of vision. Ideas like these have also been instrumental to the rediscovery of rhetoric since the middle of the last century, wherein linguistic practices are depicted as primarily creating and relating identities. Hence, the problem for Žižek is not that the creation of popular identities constitutes a form of false consciousness (as long as it is not in the form of a proletariat). Rather, it is Laclau's failure to take into account the historical need that this fetish serves in modernity that is the point of contention. Treating an abstract network of relations as part of the material world allows the subject to cope with the crushing weight of determination within the capitalist system. What is lacking in

Laclau's depiction is, in other words, the undermining force of *objet a* as that which holds the place of what is excluded from the structure.

The Domestication of Objet a

In the contemporary political landscape, Marx's old formula 'first as tragedy, then as farce' seems particularly adapt when applied to the trajectory of populism. The hopeful energy of the early 2010s, marked by for instance the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, and the electoral breakthroughs of movements like Syriza and Podemos, soon gave way to tragedy: the rise of right-wing populists like Donald Trump and the repeated failures of left-populist political movements to translate their popularity into durable structural changes. Today, the farcical dimension of populism is not only embodied by the theatrical antics of Trump and other right-wing populist leaders across the globe, but also by in increasingly populist radical center. This centrist establishment, once aligned with progressive causes as a way to combat a more radical left, has begun disavow 'wokeness' and the concern for representation and inclusion of minorities, instead positioning itself as a voice for the poor and the working-class against the alleged overreach of 'woke PMC's' and 'symbolic capitalists'.[43]

This centrist attempt at populism offers an image of a society in need of balancing the relations between classes, a manner of depicting class relations which Žižek associates with fascism and populism. What is assumed within such perspectives is the restoration, or at least the formation, of a harmonious society capable of, at the minimum, limiting the effect of social antagonisms. However, "[f]or a Marxist," as Zizek writes, "the relationship between classes is by definition that of a discord and imbalance, so that the only way to abolish class antagonism is to abolish classes as such."[44] Yet, is it not precisely the same issue that plagues Laclau's populist theory? Consider his own example of the populist logic in action:

> Let me give an example of how isolated demands emerge, and how they start their process of articulation. This example, although it is imaginary, corresponds pretty well to a situation widely experienced in Third World countries. Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shantytowns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise, and the group of people affected by them request some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a *demand* which initially is perhaps only a *request*. If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter; but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. If the situation remains unchanged

> for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a *differential* way (each in isolation from the others), and an *equivalential* relation is established between them.[45]

What this example reveals is that the emergence of a populist subject, the people, is contingent not upon any immanent structural antagonism, but on the failure of the state to meet isolated demands. The political identity that emerges is, at root, a response to administrative inadequacy, not to the irreconcilable logic of class struggle. In this view, populism becomes a reactive movement aimed at restoring balance, an appeal to the authorities to rectify a dysfunctional distribution of resources or attention. A call for populism is, in other words, a call for a rebalancing of the current configuration of society. This is in turn brings us to Žižek's critique of liberal democracy as the ultimate horizon for Laclauian populism. Apropos the relation between antagonism and democracy in Laclau, Žižek writes:

> Democracy it may seem, thus not only can include antagonism; it is the only political form that solicits and presupposes it, that *institutionalizes* it. What other political systems perceive as a threat (the lack of a "natural" pretender to power), democracy elevates into a "normal" positive condition of its functioning. The place of power is empty, there is no natural claimant for it, *polemos* or struggle is irreducible, and every positive government must be fought out, gained through *polemos*.[46]

Against the threat of post-political depoliticization, a return to populism as "the democratic element in contemporary representative systems" appears tempting. However, as this struggle between the existing hegemony and its populist counterpart is inscribed within an existing framework, as a call from the people to the big Other to fulfill its demands, democracy must be assumed as "a basic structural feature"[47] of every populist situation. The issue, once again, lies in theory not in practice. So, when Žižek claims that "[t]he conclusion to be drawn is that populism (the way we supplemented Laclau's definition of it) is not the only mode of existence of the excess of antagonism over the institutional-democratic frame of regulated agonistic struggle"[48], we need to think the excess of populism, the reason that it is sometimes good enough in practice, from a different theoretical perspective. The aim must be to avoid what Zizek describes as Laclau's mistake of inscribing into democracy an antagonistic struggle as the middle ground between two extremes, "on the one side, the celebration of heroic struggle-confrontation that suspends democracy and its rules [....] [and] on the other side, the evacuation of true struggle out of the democratic space so that all that remains is anemic rule regulated competition [...]."[49] Such a perspective only constitutes a domestication of the immanent antagonism.

In *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Žižek clarifies that the issue neglected by Laclau in his understanding of antagonism concerns how the fundamental "antagonism is ultimately the antagonism between the particular element which hegemonizes universality and the element which, within this universality, stands for what is excluded from it."[50] Laclau's theory here gives privilege to the first part of the logic of hegemony, namely the quilting point or the empty signifier. But in doing so, he "does seem to succumb to the temptation of reducing the troubles of today's Left to a 'mere rhetorical' failure".[51] By focusing exclusively on the empty signifier, "the privileged particular element which 'colors' its universality",[52] the main difference between a hegemonic and a counter-hegemonic order is reduced to a contingent choice of, or investment in, a certain element out of an original heterogeneity. On the ontological level, the act itself always remains identical. Laclau even admits this implicitly in his discussion of Žižek's and Badiou's respective ethics, as he claims that "from an ethical point of view, fascism and communism are indistinguishable".[53] The ontological distinction between their respective acts of catachrestic naming is, thereby, rendered impossible, as both constitutes an act investing into a particular in order to raise it to the status of universality. The only difference that remains are their 'colors': the particular manner in which a certain empty signifier temporarily sutures the system. The issue with Laclau's theory is, therefore, the idea that "the logic of hegemony and that of the Lacanian objet a largely overlap",[54] meaning that the rhetorical act of naming this impossible object is part of the same process by which "the ontic and the ontological fuse into a contingent but indivisible unit".[55]

For Žižek, the *objet a* and the empty signifier cannot be collapsed. Rather, he emphasizes the antagonistic relation between the two, wherein the former is that which, "within a structure, holds the place of what is excluded from it, of its externality".[56] This object, which exists in an antagonistic relationship with the ordering principle, makes the totalization of the empty signifier impossible. The failure to take this into account has significant implications for how the subject can be understood. According to Laclau's populist logic, where the *objet a* and the empty signifier are part of the same process of fusing the ontic and ontological level, the establishment of a new empty signifier only affects change at the level of the fetish, without reaching the antagonism that gave birth to it. The subject, in this scenario, only appears as an effect of this process, receiving a new place in the signifying change based on a transformation in the point of suture. Or, as Laclau put it: "Against Žižek, I maintain that the overdetermined nature of all political identities is not established a priori in a transcendental horizon, but is always the result of concrete processes and practices."[57]

Žižek response to such critiques should be read in a two-fold manner. Firstly, that the question is not whether the subject was always-

already present, or that it appears as a product of discourse. Rather, the "*subject itself IS the rip in reality, what tears apart its seamless texture*", meaning that it "not only constitutively relates to some trauma, haunted by some primordial trauma, [the] subject IS the trauma, a traumatic cut in the order of being."[58] As such, subject as the name for the rip in reality stands for the point of excess in a given order. In the current order, this is the excess that has to be presented with its servitude in the guise of freedom in an attempt to domesticate it, i.e., the proletariat. Secondly, "[t]his crack disappears in praxis".[59] With this claim, Žižek turns against the idea of "language as an organic moment of social practice, as an active moment in a life-world."[60] Thus, the political potential of language's rhetoricity is not just "the endless process of successive institutions and subversions of different locations"[61], it is the point where the world rips itself apart, producing a subject which covers over the resulting gap. This is also why the subject is not in control of this rhetoricity, as this structuring potential of language exists in an antagonistic relation to the subject. Hence, populism, to the extent that it works, functions not *because* of the subject it creates, but *despite* it.

Conclusion

What has been shown is how Žižek's contradictory approach to populism – sometimes affirming it in practice while consistently rejecting it in theory – must be read as a performative *mise-en-scène* of the limits of populism as the attempted unification of theory and political praxis. Populism, first as tragedy, then as farce, is therefore not a statement concerning its historical trajectory in recent times, but a reflection of its key theoretical impasse: any leftist populism, regardless of its potential 'successes', will inevitably end in disaster. The ascendancy of right-wing populism over the past decade perfectly illustrates the left's catastrophic failures following the 2008 financial crisis. Thus, the point is not that populism offers a praxis capable of overcoming the antagonisms of capitalism once and for all, nor that it provides a project of spurious infinity, constantly rebalancing the effects of an eternal antagonism embedded in social life. Instead, through Žižek's critical engagement with Laclau's theory, we are able to conceive of a populism that might overcome the antagonisms of today, only to bring about its own catastrophe.

However, outside the theoretical confines of the Žižek-Laclau debate, populism quickly loses this explanatory power. Its conceptual vocabulary, overdetermined by the opposition between the elite and the people, ultimately plunges us in the night in which all cows are black. This is why Žižek argues for the continued relevance of communism, not merely as a name for the capitalist antagonism, but as an idea "which transforms itself in the course of its actualization."[62]

1 Laclau 2005, p. 235
2 Laclau 2005, p. 238
3 Žižek 2004
4 Žižek 2009, p. 34
5 Žižek 2009, p. 14
6 Žižek 2009, p. 95
7 Žižek 2018
8 Biglieri and Cadhia 2021, p. 11
9 Laclau 1989, p. xv
10 Laclau 2005, pp. 10–14, 117
11 Laclau 1989, p. x
12 Laclau 1989, p. xi
13 Laclau 2005, p. 105
14 Laclau 2005, p. 110
15 Laclau 2014, p. 36. A similar argument is also put forth in Laclau 1990, p. 92.
16 Dallmayr 2004, p. 47
17 Laclau 2014, p. 67
18 Laclau 2014, p. 67
19 Laclau 2014, p. 67
20 Laclau 2005, pp. 223–24
21 Laclau 2005, p. 226
22 Laclau 2014, p. 113
23 Žižek 1990, p. 253
24 Laclau 2005, p. 152
25 Laclau 2014, p. 122
26 Laclau 2014, p. 152
27 Žižek 2006a, p. 557
28 Žižek 2006a, p. 555
29 Laclau 2014, p. 144
30 Laclau 2014, p. 143
31 Kuentz 1970; Ricœur 2006
32 Laclau 2014, p. 63
33 Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 1355b
34 Zizek points to this problem in Laclau's thought, Žižek 2006b, p. 197.
35 Laclau 2014, p. 202
36 Laclau 2014, p. 66
37 Žižek 2008, p. 173
38 Žižek 2006a, p. 555
39 Laclau 2014, pp. 142–43
40 Glynos and Stavrakakis 2010, p. 242
41 Marx 1990, p. 187
42 Žižek 2016, p. 175
43 A great illustration of this is the recent popularity of sociologist Musa Al-Gharbi's book *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradiction of a New Elite*, published a month before the election in the United States. The book has become a key reference in the narrative surrounding the Democrats' defeat at the hands of Donald Trump. Towards the end, Al-Gharbi writes: "Growing numbers of poor, working-class, and nonwhite voters are growing alienated from the Democratic Party and have been migrating to the GOP. It is difficult for symbolic capitalists to understand these trends because, again, we believe that we represent the will and interests of the marginalized and disadvantaged, while our opponents serve elite interests (and are driven by racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and ignorance)." al-Gharbi 2024, p. 304.
44 Žižek 2022, p. 158
45 Laclau 2005, p. 73
46 Žižek 2006a, p. 559
47 Žižek 2006a, p. 558
48 Žižek 2006a, p. 560
49 Žižek 2006a, p. 558
50 Žižek 2020, p. 318
51 Žižek 2006a, p. 562
52 Žižek 2020, p. 317
53 Laclau 2014, p. 200
54 Laclau 2014, p. 145

55 Laclau 2005, p. 226
56 Žižek 2020, p. 317
57 Laclau 2005, p. 249
58 Žižek 2020, p. 356
59 Žižek 2020, p. 356
60 Žižek 2020, p. 356
61 Laclau 2014, p. 64
62 Žižek 2016, p. 300

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Anatomy of the Human: Fanon and Žižek

Zahi Zalloua

Abstract: On the first page of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon claims that his book aims for a "New Humanism," but on the next page he also notes that the Black subject is *not* a human being, that the racialized subject of Western modernity dwells in or rather is relegated to what he famously describes as the "zone of nonbeing." In this article, I want to argue that Fanon's vision of a new humanism involves a radical dislocation and a libidinal rewriting of the category of the human itself. A posthuman Fanon, if there is such a thing, emerges through a critical undoing of the ontological divide between the human and the not-quite-human/nonhuman. The question of a posthuman Fanon returns us to the zone of nonbeing, to what Slavoj Žižek would describe as an ontologically destructive zone where the "inhuman core of being-human" is both disclosed and produced, but also holds the promise for more. Not unlike Fanon, Žižek is invested in a philosophy that reckons with the subject, with the subject's monstrous core, the human after its degentrification, its exposure to the Real, after its banishment into to the hellish zone of nonbeing. This article pursues the politics that emerge from Fanon's and Žižek's scrutiny of the human and humanism. Fanon and Žižek come to their similar assessment from two radically different positions. And yet the different steps they take tell us something important about how to combat a humanism that continues to function as an oppressive paradigm, fostering a "cruel optimism" for those wretched beings—Blacks, Palestinians, among numerous others—who think a recognition of their humanity can rescue them from danger and annihilation.

Keywords: human, posthuman, inhuman, humanism, posthumanism, Fanon, Žižek, Palestine, Gaza, genocide, zone of nonbeing; Afropessimism

On the first page of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon claims that his book aims for a "New Humanism," but on the next page he also notes that the Black subject is *not* a human being, that the racialized subject of Western modernity dwells in or rather is relegated to what he famously describes as the "zone of nonbeing." In this article, I want to argue that Fanon's vision of a new humanism involves a radical dislocation and a libidinal rewriting of the category of the human itself. A new humanism must grapple with the racial matrix of the human. This new humanism questions a European humanism that posits the bourgeois, white, male subject as the measure of all things. Or to put it slightly differently, Fanon's new humanism—this humanism *à venir*—radically breaks with a humanist tradition that both disavows the role of race in imagining the human and makes racialized others constitutive of its definition of the *white* human. A posthuman Fanon, if there is such a thing, emerges through a critical undoing of the ontological divide between the human and the not-quite-human/nonhuman. The question of a posthuman Fanon returns us to the

zone of nonbeing, to what Slavoj Žižek would describe as an ontologically destructive zone where the "inhuman core of being-human"[1] is both disclosed and produced, but also holds the promise for more. Not unlike Fanon, Žižek is invested in a philosophy that reckons with the subject, a divided subject, with the subject's monstrous core, the human after its degentrification, its exposure to the Real, after its banishment into to the hellish zone of nonbeing, where a barred subject, a Black ~~being~~ is made to reside. This article pursues the politics that emerge from Fanon's and Žižek's scrutiny of the human and humanism. Fanon and Žižek come to their similar assessment from two radically different positions. And yet the different steps they take tell us something important about how to combat a humanism that continues to function as an oppressive paradigm, fostering a "cruel optimism"[2] for those wretched beings—Blacks, Palestinians, among numerous others—who think a recognition of their humanity can rescue them from danger and annihilation. Humanism and humanity operate as if they were interchangeable. A recognition of the other's humanity becomes the precondition for a civil relation, an end to hostility. We are the same. We can remember one of the signs by Black Lives Matter (BML) activists stating in plain language, "We are human too."

Humanism and Its Liberal Politics

Humanism promotes the human, and by extension human rights. If dehumanization is the problem, humanization is the cure. Humanization purports to return you to humanity, to your given status as human. Fanon and Žižek are not completely hostile to defending the ostracized and demonized by recognizing their humanity when this means their complexity, which in turn means that their being cannot be abstracted or reduced to their countries' actions. Žižek signed his name, for example, to a letter calling for restraint and vigilance in the ways we talk about others/enemies in the context of Israel's genocidal retaliation to Hamas's attack. The signatories describe themselves as "proponents of human rights," as belonging to the "Pro-Human Camp."[3] They reasonably state: "The dehumanization of Israelis and Jews, as well as Palestinians and Muslims, is unacceptable. A person is not merely a representation of a collective identity, history, events, or political orientation. A consistent humanistic approach must address all these unacceptable developments." Fanon equally has no patience with abstraction, be it to demonize or idealize others: "We shall show no pity for the former colonial governors or missionaries. In our view, an individual who loves Blacks is as 'sick' as someone who abhors them. Conversely, the black man who strives to whiten his race is as wretched as the one who preaches hatred of the white man. The black man is no more inherently amiable than the Czech; the truth is that we must unleash the man [*lâcher l'homme*]."[4] "Unleash the human" is arguably Fanon's *cri de guerre*. Žižek puts his own

universalist spin on the feminist slogan, "Women rights are human rights": "The greatness of modern feminism [is] not just we women want more. It's we women want to redefine the very universality of what it means to be human. This is for me this modern notion of political struggle."[5] At the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon evokes the idea of a "new human."[6] And yet both Fanon and Žižek reject identitarian projects, which tame or disavow the most unsettling aspects of being-human, in favor of universalist projects that harness the paradoxes of nonbeing in being, of an inhuman constitutive of the human, *what is in the human more than human*. Some of Fanon's readers may object that I'm focusing too much on the zone of nonbeing, neglecting his humanism, which lies in the ways we ought to treat each other. In Fanon's words: "I find myself one day in the world, and I acknowledge one right for myself: the right to demand human behavior from the other [*exiger de l'autre un comportement humain*]."[7] The right to be treated humanly by the other is Fanon's assertion and defense of his humanity, his insistence that he is not to be instrumentalized, abstracted as an object, or reduced to the function of a tool. Or in Kantian terms, treat me as an end and not merely as a means. A "consistent humanistic approach" is precisely to treat every human as a human being. The scandal of course is that we don't. The letter from the Pro-Human Camp calls on us to do so, but there is a tinge of bothsidesism in the letter. It is as if both sides are demonizing the other in the same way, as if the humanity of Israelis and the humanity of Palestinians are equally in danger. To put it bluntly, the letter removes the Western racial matrix from the equation, ignoring that Palestinians begin from a place of exclusion and negation, that they are always already subjugated to a colonial gaze that not only silences them but casts and frames them as dangerous, violent, and deceitful (they claim that they're anti-Zionists but, in reality, they're anti-Semitic).

Anti-Semitism has wreaked havoc on the Jewish people from its beginnings to contemporary times. The racialization of the Jews reached its most severe form and expression in Auschwitz—the creation of Israel was, in large part, a measure to assuage Western guilt. Israeli Jews became white once the Western world accepted Israel's geopolitical position and its self-description as the "villa in the jungle."[8] A Zionist Israel spoke the racist language of European colonialism, mirroring a familiar image to the West. The redemptive force of Israel's birth (Jews got their humanity back after it was brutally suspended by the Third Reich) covered over Israel's settler-colonial DNA. "Exterminate the brutes,"[9] the colonizer's racist imperative to dispossess and quash unruly Natives (that is, any Native who refuses to surrender or disappear), is as operative in Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza as it was in Israel's founding in 1948 and even in the Zionist colonization of Palestine in the late nineteenth century.[10] In this light, I ask, Can the Pro-Human Camp truly accommodate Palestinian being without wrestling with the West's oppressive racial matrix of the human?

Under a humanistic horizon, the currency of the human is quite high; to be human is to have one's life constitutively matter. But this humanity has been systematically denied to the wretched, or the blackened beings of modernity—whence the cry "Black Lives Matter." Its counter, "All Lives Matters," rings hollow. Why? Its humanistic credential lacks credibility. In principle, all lives do in fact matter, but the problem is that all things are precisely not equal; the historical configuration of power regimes impacts the allocation of value, which some possess, and others don't.[11] Racism is at the heart of the imbalance of justice. The chant names a structural problem, or rather an *ontological* problem that inhibits Black humanity from being acknowledged. We're seeing a similar struggle at play in the genocidal Gaza war. Talks of Palestinian humanity disconcert a large swath of Zionists and pro-Israel supporters. With humanity comes rights. Adi Callai's observation hits the mark: "The most radical position comes directly from the simplest question: are Palestinians human beings? If your answer is emphatically yes, unambiguously and without reservations, then you are a lost cause to Zionism. Because if Palestinians are human beings, then their self-defense is legitimate, and the defense of their continued existence is necessary."[12] Whenever self-defense is evoked when talking about Palestine/Israel it is always Israel's self-defense that is touted as self-evident.[13] For the West, Israeli humanity is indubitable while Palestinian humanity lingers as a problem. But what kind of problem are the Palestinians?[14] Recognition of Palestinian humanity/suffering does not necessarily open to supporting their self-defense, their anti-colonial resistance, that is, their armed struggle. Humanitarian reason, compounded by the liberal fetish of non-violence, blocks and crowds out anti-colonial reason. The liberal subject can have his cake and eat too—he can be "woke" but not threatening to the established order of things. The liberal big Other tolerates his expression as long as it does not make people uncomfortable (and of course it is the pro-Israel crowd who gets to decide the boundaries of the comfortable, to declare pro-Palestinian supporters anti-Semitic). The liberal subject can "support" Palestinians (believing that Palestinian children shouldn't be starved or bombed) while leaving settler realities and their ontological partitions of Palestine/Israel unquestioned.

At one level, this is not a negligible gain, for to consider Palestinians as victims is better than invisibilizing them through indifference or epistemic violence, of the kind effortlessly generated by a post-9/11 Orientalist vision of their being as religiously fundamentalist, irrational, violent, and intrinsically anti-Semitic. If indifference translates as an affective divestment from Palestinian being/humanity, willful misrepresentation condemns Palestinians to social death, to the zone of nonbeing. Zionist discourse about Palestinians is a racist one. And here, following Toni Morrison, we should give that racist discourse its full ontological impact:

> Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.[15]

Morrison's description of oppressive language closely resembles the operations of Zionist discourse. Its objective to actively hinder knowledge of Palestinians (they don't exist, and if they do exist, they're terrorists) stems from an expansionist and eliminationist logic. Since October 7th, after Hamas's attack in Southern Israel, a clear "philosemitic McCarthyism,"[16] underwritten by a Zionist hermeneutic, is enjoying policing activists, students, faculty or any conscientious person (many of them Jews) invested in justice and a desire to understand the plight of the Palestinian people. Zionist discourse, along with the amplification of its message via Western media outlets, has unconscionably generated a consent for genocide, enabled by the systematic dehumanization and animalization of Palestinians. "We are fighting against human animals and will act accordingly," war criminal and former Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant infamously said.[17] In case you're tempted to say that Gallant was talking only about Hamas fighters, consider that nearly 70% of the dead in Gaza are women and children.[18] Israel's war is not a war against Hamas, but primarily a war against the Palestinian people, because for Zionists there is really no difference between the two—they're all terrorists by virtue of their failure to cede their homeland, submit to Zionist reason, and accept their own displacement. The criminality of Zionist discourse is of course matched by Israel's military brutality, its sadistic hunger for collective punishment.

Acknowledging Palestinian victimhood is anathema to Zionist discourse. Victimhood names a suffering of Palestinian humanity. The liberal center of course tries to differentiate its position from that of Ziofascists[19] like Israeli cabinet members Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich who celebrate Palestinian destruction and call for more annexation of Palestinian land (and the goal of prime minister Netanyahu and company has always been to extend the boundaries of Greater Israel). Liberals worry about an empathy deficit when it comes to Palestinians.

They are open to empathizing with the marginalized. They support BLM and the teaching of anti-racism in K-12 public schools, and they worry about the rise of anti-Semitism, so they are careful to cast their support of Palestinians only along the lines of humanitarian needs. Palestinian babies should not die from hypothermia[20], but Hamas must be condemned, cannot be defended; the more "radical" will also say that Netanyahu must go. But if Liberals may consider Palestinians as victims, they are also quick to point the finger at Palestinians (Hamas) for the misery of Gazans. For the more "radical" liberals, who want to separate themselves from the abysmal Biden-Harris administration, both Palestinian and Israeli leadership are to blame—*a curse on both your houses* type of reasoning. Indeed, they are proud of their nuanced and measured reasoning. However, the liberal position, in whatever shade you prefer, disappoints. Recognition of Palestinian being becomes contingent on the likelihood of liberal empathy. This human emotion remains a double-edged sword for Palestinians and their supporters. On the one hand, empathetic Liberals acknowledge Palestinian suffering. The call for empathy—Palestinians saying, "We are human too"—has clearly made headway in public opinion (despite an aggressive anti-Palestinian corporate media); on the other hand, empathy feeds a cruel optimism. Empathy is not and will never be a politics. I believe that it has reached its plateau. People across the world did march in protest of Israel's Gaza genocide, and many of them were moved by empathy. Still, we cannot forget that empathy by itself doesn't open to a confrontation with Israel's settler-colonial apartheid. It acquiesces too quickly to the demands of humanitarian reason. Worse, it depoliticizes the struggle of the Palestinians, failing to grasp the racial antagonism at the heart of Israel's genocidal enterprise. Being horrified by the suffering of Palestinians at the hands of a vicious Israeli military doesn't make you, in and of itself, committed to the Palestinian struggle for liberation. And this is what Palestinians need; this is the only thing capable of altering the coordinates of the debate (I should say that this not a far-fetched ask; the West does it effortlessly in its support of Ukrainian resistance to another bullying nuclear power).

The alternative to both Ziofascists and the liberal center lies in liberating Palestinian humanity from the prison-house of both Zionist reason and humanitarian reason so that "the mutual exchange of ideas" can take place, to recall Toni Morrison's words. So to adapt Freud's formulation, we ask, *What does a Palestinian want?* Elias Sanbar's 1982 interview with Gilles Deleuze, pointedly titled "The Indians of Palestine," is a good place to start. Sanbar, editor of the then new journal *La Revue d'Études Palestiniennes*, expresses the Palestinian dilemma of being determined from without, abstracted by an oppressive Zionist-Western-white gaze that demonizes all forms of Palestinian resistance, and by a debilitating humanitarian gaze that can only detect Palestinian passivity and abjection. The Western script was and continues to be incapable

of translating the plight of Palestinians as a problem of dispossession. Palestinian "humanity" is still only decipherable in the limited and limiting language of refugees. Western powers display a stuborn unwillingness to see Palestinians as "a dispossessed people in need of a political solution."[21] If Palestinians dare to challenge their interpellation as passive victims, and exercise agential control over their situation as would any human being protecting their land from invaders, they are automatically tagged as terrorists, illegitimate interlocutors, subjected to extrajudicial murder. Against the images of refugees or militarists, Sanbar pushes "the image of the Palestinian combatant"[22] who struggles to gain visibility, and who participates in a political project. As he clarifies, "before we imposed the reality of our presence, we were thought of only as refugees. When our resistance movement made clear that our struggle could not be ignored, we were again reduced to a cliched image: we were seen as pure and simple militarists. This image was isolated and reproduced ad infinitum. We were perceived as standing for nothing else. It is to rid ourselves of the militarist image in the strict sense, that we prefer this other image of the combatant."[23] In a psychoanalytic register, George Yancy explains that "the imago of the 'Dirty Arab' or the 'Palestinian terrorist' is what takes visual precedence over the Arab/Palestinian as human, as possessing dignity and infinite value."[24] More a projection than a representation, the imago of the menacing Palestinian, or its debilitated counterpart, infiltrates the white collective psyche. The abject Gazan and the Hamas terrorist, images that tirelessly circulate in our contemporary collective unconscious and libidinal economy, continue to constrain, stifle, and distort our knowledge of Palestinians, obscuring their state and struggle for liberation. *What does a Palestinian want?* Calling for and securing a ceasefire are initial steps. But let's not forget that the liberation of the Palestinian people is the fundamental goal of the resistance. Our long-term struggle is against Israel's apartheid settler-colonial regime and its powerful imperialist enablers. How many liberals will follow Palestinians toward that end? Who will push back against Israel's expansionist logic? Who will demand accountability for Israel's crimes? Not unlike the weaponization of the charge of anti-Semitism, that of terrorism effectively distracts ("Israel cannot negotiate with terrorists" is a familiar refrain; Israeli terrorism—or its management Palestinian bodies—is never uttered in public discourse) and shuts down any critical engagement with the Palestinian question and delegitimizes in advance our defense of the Palestinian cause—turning the cause into a problem to be judged with prejudice.[25]

In the white political imaginary, the two images seemingly exhaust what being Palestinian *is and can be*. For this reason, the countervailing notion of a combatant holds promise for contesting and thinking anew and otherwise the question of Palestinian humanity, or the question of humanity as such, not because Palestinians hold some special place in the order of beings; unlike the Zionist claim to Jewish exceptionality

("we are not a people like any other people"; we are the Chosen People and so on), Palestinians earnestly present themselves as "a people like any other people."[26] I want to linger on the universality of the Palestinian observation, and on the ways this humanity is itself ontologically impacted by settler colonialism. In other words, what does "humanity" look like from the standpoint of the inhabitants of the zone of nonbeing, from the perspective of the wretched? What kind of people are the Palestinians? Read through a Fanonian lens, "a people like any other people" could be rewritten as "a wretched people like any other wretched people." Here a contrast with Emmanuel Levinas might be illustrative. Levinas, too, ties humanity to wretchedness, to the traumatic experience of Jewish enslavement: "The traumatic experience of my slavery in Egypt constitutes my very humanity, a fact that immediately allies me to the workers, the wretched, and the persecuted people of the world."[27] He also couples Jewish exceptionalism to the evils of the Shoah, registered in his dedication of *Otherwise than Being*, "to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism."[28] Anti-Semitism emerges as the master-code, covering all hatred and racist violence. In their rarity and singularity, the Jewish people come to stand for pure human vulnerability: they are (rendered) the timeless Victim. No one can match, let alone exceed, the imago of the Jewish victim. Under this Zionist horizon, everyone else is an imperfect copy of the ontologized form of (Jewish) wretchedness, never having fully experienced the uniqueness of their suffering: "we are *not* a wretched people like any other people." "Never Again" applies exclusively to Jews.

The example of Palestinian wretchedness follows a different logic; it displays what Žižek calls a materialist use of examples, a form of exemplarity that contrasts with an idealist use, which I take Levinas's Jewish example to illustrate. According to the idealist approach, "examples are always imperfect, they never perfectly render what they are supposed to exemplify, so that we should take care not to take them too literally"; in contrast, "for a materialist," however, "there is always more in the example than in what it exemplifies: that is, an example always threatens to undermine what it is supposed to exemplify since it gives body to what the exemplified notion itself represses, is unable to cope with."[29] To return to the relation between humanity, wretchedness, and peoplehood, my reformulation of Sanbar's observation, "a wretched people like any other wretched people," can be reread as exerting pressure on the notion of humanity that it is supposedly meant to exemplify ("we are a people like any other people"); in the process of exemplifying wretched peoplehood it exposes humanity to its other, to what humanists repress or disavow, to what the paradigm of the human is unable or unwilling to confront (that the human needs its constitutive

other to exist). There is thus always more in the exemplarity of Palestinian humanity/peoplehood; their wretchedness unsettles our understanding of the positive, self-contained human.

Wretchedness names the state and condition of the historically damned, subjects expelled from the zone of interest, or subjects that simply never belonged to the zone of being. Their affliction transforms their being (human), deforms their relation to themselves, others, and the world; their dignity turns to humiliation, and their aspirations to dead-ends. An ontological abyss separates the wretched from the human. Here a liberal humanist would work to close the gap dividing the wretched from the human: what the wretched of the world need is more empathy, more humanization. But what if the problem wasn't so much with being wretched as with being human? I want to ask, *What does it take to be or become human? What logic or matrix guarantees and produces the human? And, finally, what are the costs of this human-making to racialized beings, deemed not-quite-human or nonhuman?*

The Human and Its Vicissitudes

When Fanon speaks about Blackness and humanity, he is not meditating on what it means to be a Black human, as if he was merely translating existentialism for an anti-racist struggle, forging a Black existentialism to fight against anti-Blackness. We should keep front and center that for Fanon, the Black human is a barred Black ~~human~~ (barred *because* Black). As per the Afropessimist account of Fanon, the emergence of the "Human" can only be secured at the expense of Black people—"the Human Other is Black."[30] Legally or formally speaking, you might be ontically free, but ontologically you remain a slave. Blackness denotes slaveness. This is the insidious logic underwriting the "afterlife of slavery,"[31] which turns anti-Blackness into the naturalized background of everyday human existence. If you're Black and living in an anti-Black world, it means being forced to adopt a quasi-permanent residence in the zone of nonbeing. Anti-Blackness is part and parcel of America's founding violence. The policing of Black bodies—the law's preserving violence in its everydayness—prolongs America's racist core.

The human and the Black are caught up in a non-dialectical logic. For Blacks to live, the Human must die. That is to say, the reign of the white human must come to an end. But the classical posthumanist move of abandoning the human by recentering the presence of non-human actants affecting our lives and the world will not do. Talks of flat ontology obfuscate rather than elucidate the problem of being Black.[32] And in this respect, I share the Afropessimist reticence or suspicion of posthumanism, though I depart from the Afropessimist reading by de-ontologizing and re-historicizing the zone of nonbeing and making it speak more expansively to Fanon's wretched of the earth—to those

on the receiving end of colonial or supremacist violence and erasure. I want to think through the historico-ontological dimensions of the problem of wretchedness by considering Fanon's notion of the zone of nonbeing alongside the colonized figure of the Palestinian. To echo Achille Mbembe, what we're witnessing today in Palestine is the *becoming wretched of the world*.[33] With the Gaza War, we're witnessing a "return" to colonial cruelty, to the ideology of *might makes right*. The racial matrix of the human gives Israel and other Western nations cover: *we're the humans and they are the brutes*. *And brutes must be exterminated*. With Operation Iron Swords, we're also witnessing an ontological definition and enactment of genocide: the Israeli military is starving, maiming, and massacring Palestinians and driving that collective body into the Fanonian zone of nonbeing. In short, we're dealing with what can be described as Palestinocide.

What facilitates Palestinocide is an ideological logic and narrative that aggressively defaces Palestinians, that removes the face of the Palestinians to clear the path for a full necropolitics. A Levinasian-inspired humanism here would plead for an undoing of the racist relation of comprehension, and a return to the face to the Palestinians (something that Levinas himself avoided in his infamous interview after the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres in West Beirut, Lebanon). Philosophically speaking, the face is what is proper to the human. But for the wretched, facelessness is constitutive of their being. In this vertical partition, they are effectively inferior to the Human. We can map the wretched on the human/nonhuman, or the human/posthuman, divide. One thing is clear. The wretched are cast outside the humanist order of things. They are historical creatures, and yet the wretched's relation to the zone of nonbeing is marked by a quasi-permanence, as Fanon noted:

> There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential, from which a genuine new departure can emerge. In most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell.[34]

In principle, the zone of nonbeing is an ontological reset; it enables as it disables. The destruction of your social ego liberates you by opening up the possibility of a radical refashioning of the symbolic self. The way down is the way up. To this life-affirming existentialist insight, Fanon adds a substantial caveat. There are systemic social forces—the white/settler gaze, a racist symbolic order—holding the wretched back/down. You are a wretched being if you cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell. That is to say, wretchedness gains ontological rigidity when human consciousness stalls after the dissolution of the ego, when transcendence fails to surge. Social death, the zombification of life, characterizes the condition of the wretched. The wretched are

never treated as humans. Their disposability becomes a predicate of their being. The zone of nonbeing all but guarantees their damnation and condemnation. And it is hard to imagine today a starker image of the unlivable zone of nonbeing than the Gaza Strip. Though this is the first livestreamed genocide, Western leaders have systematically failed to put an end to Israel's far-ranging criminality, have failed to treat Palestinians as fellow humans, as possessing livable and grievable lives.

Within the ideological paradigm of humanism, Palestinians are either treated as nonhumans targeted by the Israeli killing machine for early elimination, or envisaged by a segment of the liberal West as not-quite-humans, degraded humans, colonized victims, in desperate need of humanitarian aid. A more critical reframing of Palestinians and the colonial situation reorients us back to the zone of nonbeing and to the ontological upheavals that it is capable and incapable of producing. For Fanon, a metaphysical architecture divides the (neo)colonial world: "Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to."[35] Zionist settlers are one kind of species who dwell comfortably in the zone of *being* whereas the Indigenous Palestinians are another, banished to the zone of *nonbeing*. Zionism's "fascist ontology,"[36] to borrow Nicole Simek's formulation, sets the stage for Palestinocide. It erects a hierarchical order and segregates the humans from the human animals, those who matter from those who don't. Gabriel Winant underscores the ways in which Zionism translates "grief into power."[37] Under a Zionist horizon of law and order, the Jewish Israelis who died are, according to Winant, "pre-grieved," their meaning overdetermined and weaponized, and whose impact becomes inseparable from the justification of Palestinocide: *mourn our dead and exterminate the brutes*.

Zionism rehumanizes and whitens Jews by dehumanizing and blackening Arabs. It uses the Hamas attack to remind Israeli citizens and the world at large of Jewish vulnerability, instantiating its claim of the timeless and irreproachable Victim, and, obscenely, turns the incessant work of mourning into a righteous genocidal campaign. Against the "human animals" next door, Zionists define themselves as full-fledge humans, the gatekeepers of civilization. The political class agrees with Israel's assessment. In keeping with this distorted and distorting Orientalist/racist narrative, Israel's sympathizers describe the Hamas attack of October 7, not as anti-colonial armed resistance to a brutal occupation, but more metaphysically as a "breach of civilization"[38] (this is how Europeans describe the Holocaust, but not chattel slavery or colonialism) greenlighting, as it were, the colonizers' response: genocide as a form of ethico-ontological repair. Israel's "right to self-defense" (and we should keep in mind that the occupier's right to self-defense is not enshrined international law) means a defense of civilization and by extension a defense of humanity and its grammar.

Not unlike Aimé Césaire, Fanon has no truck with such European humanism: "When I look for man in European lifestyles and technology I see a constant denial of man, an avalanche of murders."[39] This passage from Fanon echoes Walter Benjamin's famous observation that "Every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism."[40] But what is Fanon actually after? Where does his critique lead and leave us? In denouncing the fakeness of humanist ideology is Fanon jettisoning the categories of the human and humanism? Answering in the affirmative is premature at best. At worst, it downplays or overlooks Fanon's attachment to the image of a "new human," his desire for "the founding of another humanity," and his laboring for "the flourishing of man and for the enrichment of humanity"[41]—which is perfectly consistent with a *universalist* humanism. A universalist Fanon strikes me as correct—there is no decolonial retreat into particularity nor any nostalgia for a lost harmonious state prior to the dreadful colonial encounter—but the "human" that will be associated with a universalist humanism to come may have more in common with the uncanny figure of the posthuman than the all-too-familiar human of Western civilization. In Fanon's hands, the "human" of colonial humanism undergoes radical dislocation. The "humanism" that follows this invention of the new human will be *unrecognizable* because the currency of the human will no longer be supported by the racial matrix of the human.

To get to this new human, the human after its anti-colonial dislocation, we must pass through the zone of nonbeing, the zero point of subjectivity, and reorient ourselves to the inhuman perspective of objects. In the opening page of Fanon's chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks*, we witness the author's traumatic encounter with the white gaze Fanon's first line "'Sale nègre!' ou simplement: 'Tiens, un nègre!,'" which translates as "Dirty Nigger!" Or simply, "Look, a Black!"[42] sets the scene for the traumatic encounter with the white gaze translated and materialized linguistically by the N-word. The racial slur immobilizes Fanon, arresting his status as a subject of desire. He becomes "an object among other objects," and experiences his ontological degradation as a "suffocating reification" (*objectivité écrasante*).[43] Living in the zone of nonbeing means living the life of an object.

Against the Afropessimists, I argue that this description applies to the occupied Palestinians as well. As objects are disposable without any ramification, Palestinian lives are killable with impunity. The erasure of Palestinian humanity is baked in the settler-colonial logic. But how should we understand the negation of Palestinian humanity? There are two ways to negate the statement "the Palestinian is human." Drawing on Žižek's reading of Immanuel Kant's distinction between negative and infinite judgments, we can say, "the Palestinian is not human" and "the Palestinian is inhuman." As Žižek insists, the two are not the same:

> "He is not human" means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while "he is inhuman" means something thoroughly different, namely that he is neither human nor not human, but marked by a terrifying excess which, although negating what we understand as "humanity," is inherent to being human.[44]

The Palestinian is not an animal, but a "human animal," as Gallant put it. This observation is confusing at multiple levels. Haven't you read your Darwin lately? Of course, we are human *animals*, to be distinguished from the multiplicity of nonhuman animals. Aside from his speciesist arrogance, Gallant manufactures Palestinian difference as an unsettling hybridity, an inhumanity that must disclosed in order to be annihilated. The inhuman Palestinian fits well within the Zionist order of things. While the Israeli Jew enjoys all the privileges that come with cultural and ontological superiority, the Palestinian is a shadowy creature: *Don't be fooled by the humanoid features of the Palestinians, they are not like us*. The figure of the Palestinian is not simply outside humanity's orbit, awaiting her inclusion among liberals of all shades. Palestinians are an uncanny species. Human rights cannot be in practice fully extended to Palestinians as they can be to nonhuman animals. Legally, Palestinians are of course guaranteed rights by international law. But when the world is witnessing a genocide in plain view and Western political leaders do not put stop to the Palestinocide, it should make you wonder if human rights actually apply to them. International law confers rights to Palestinians, but is unable to protect Palestinians from the murderous thug of the region. Anti-Palestinianness is a problem of ontology. There is no humane treatment of the abominable inhuman. The "terrifying excess" of Palestinians is read by Zionists and pro-Israel supporters as evidence of their hatred and cruelty. Evoking a "Clash of Civilizations" framework does not satisfy the needs of situation: revengeful genocide. Vilifying Palestinians even further, Zionists frame the conflict as a clash between civilization and barbarism. In this Manichean world, Israeli Jews stand for humanity and goodness; they are "the children of light" caught up in struggle against the evil and inhuman Palestinians—"the children of darkness."[45] We see here the workings of displacement. Zionists blame Palestinians for their anti-Semitism, fanaticism, and brutal violence—they see only their neighbor's faults or darkness—while being oblivious to their own disproportionate cruelty. The Occupation and the Gaza Wars serve as a tragic reminder that cruelty or inhumanity is constitutive of the human. To say something is constitutive of one's being does not mean endorsing that thing—crudely naturalizing it and immunizing oneself in advance from its potential horrors—but it does mean maintaining vigilance over our worst tendencies. Cruel acts cannot be allowed to endlessly repeat themselves: "Both [colonized and colonizer] have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born."[46] There is no "new

knowledge" of Palestinians, to evoke Morrison's words, without forging a genuine communication between the settler and the Native.

The Neighbor and/as the Inhuman

The posthuman is not to be crudely opposed to being human. Rather, it denotes a shift in perspective, a degentrification of the human. If systematic racism and dispossession work to dissolve the imaginary-symbolic human (a destitution, let's stress, that is imposed on the wretched), the posthuman indexes the Real; the faceless wretched discloses the *real* human. The real human is a posthuman. Contra Levinas and his aspirations for a pure heterology, Žižek turns to Primo Levi's figure of the *Muselmann* as an account of the real human, the faceless neighbor beyond recognition and accommodation, "a human being reduced to inhumanity." The Levinasian face, despite its radical otherness and irreducibility to relations of comprehension, presupposes a minimum amount of gentrification. The *Muselmann* doesn't. This *Muselmann*, the Muslim man, stands for the most abject of Jews; racialized or doubly racialized or de-Judaized, subalternized even further.

The *Muselmann* is a posthuman creature, born of the camps. Having lost his ontological ties to the imaginary-symbolic world, the *Muselmann*'s being or otherness stands for everything that threatens the grammar of the human, starting with nothingness, the desert of the Real. In this context, empathetic identifications miss their target. The *Muselmann* is *not* someone like us, someone who we can readily understand. To be sure, the humanist response would, again, be to try to restore the humanity of the *Muselmann*, to rehumanize or de-posthumanize him, to undo the violence done to him by the crushing reality of Auschwitz. Fanon and Žižek point us in a different direction, bypassing the cruel optimism that plagues humanist/humanizing projects. There is a posthuman ethics that emerges from the zone of nonbeing, that critically responds to the white cruelty that drives blackened others—Blacks, Palestinians, and *Muselmänner*—into this infernal zone, that responds to the unacknowledged inhumanity of the colonizer, settler, and white supremacist that hollows out and reduces others to their inhuman core. It is an ethics, but a paradoxical ethics, a kind of anti-ethics ethics, stemming from an "anti-humanism,"[47] which, as Žižek puts it, "does not only mean an ethics which no longer denies but fearlessly takes into account the latent monstrosity of being-human, the diabolical dimension which exploded in phenomena usually covered by the concept-name 'Auschwitz'. . . . This inhuman dimension is..., at the same time, the ultimate bedrock of ethics."[48] This inhuman dimension of the human is, however, ripe for disavowal. If one can muster enough intellectual courage and acknowledge that Nazism is an immanent possibility for all of us humans—whence the ethical relevance of "Never Again" and its application to Gaza, which is becoming another concept-name as a site where

Ziofascist law-making violence is happening—it is another matter to cast the inhuman core as "the ultimate bedrock of ethics."

This counter-intuitive claim, I would argue, opens to the posthuman, to a being human which avows its own opacity and monstrosity. Žižek's twist here is that he brings his understanding of the neighbor to bear on the subject, on "what is in a human being more than human."[49] The real neighbor does not refer exclusively to the external other; it denotes the uncanny otherness that resides in the subject as well. Seeing yourself as neighbor happens whenever you experience a "gap" between what you are as a determinate being and the inscrutable X in yourself. Your social ego is not-all there is. The inhuman is "absolutely immanent, the very core of subjectivity itself."[50] The subject as neighbor—as a stranger to itself—can only appear as a paradox and scandal from the standpoint of humanism. It deprives the humanist self of all its historical privileges: such as self-transparency, self-mastery, and autonomy. But we must keep in mind that the inhuman core of the human is generative, as it is annihilative. To paraphrase Jacques Derrida on autoimmunity: Without inhumanity, with absolute humanity, the neighbor, reduced to its imaginary-symbolic character, would only be experienced as an extension of my socially sanctioned humanity.[51] Without the inhuman core of the subject, we would be forever caught in ideology and in humanism's insidious and totalizing grammar.

Being human in the zone of nonbeing casts humanity in all its nakedness, un-gentrified, devoid of its contingent and phantasmatic features. The inhumanity of the subject unmasks the pretenses of humanity. As Žižek puts it, "'Humanity' is a notion at the same level as personality, the 'inner wealth' of our soul, etc.—it is ultimately a phenomenal form, a mask, which fills in the void that 'is' subject."[52] What the humanist seeks to excise from being and transfer to nonbeing—Blacks and Palestinians—is in fact constitutive of the human. We might say that cruelty is extimate to the subject. This avowed cruelty demystifies and repoliticizes the human, robs the human of its purported innocence, purity, and most importantly of its scapegoating strategies.

Cruelty and the Irreproachable Victim

I want to dwell on cruelty for a bit, on this concept's phantasmatic and ideological deployment by Western politicians and corporate media outlets. Cruelty and humanity are irremediably interconnected. This truth is repeatedly repressed in Israel's self-image, and anything cruel that Israelis may have committed is blamed on Palestinians for corrupting an original Israeli innocence. Witness the self-congratulatory observation attributed to former Israeli prime minister Golda Meir that forgiveness from the Israeli side will be tested, will reach its limits, not because Palestinians have killed too many Israelis but rather when Israel is asked

to forgive the unforgivable, which, in her narcissistic moral vision, means to forgive the Palestinians "for having forced [Israelis] to kill [Arab] sons."[53] From the self-designated position of moral superiority, Meir muses about what it will take to put an end to the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors: "Peace will come when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us."[54] From the masterful assessment of the situation, the message is clear: Arabs need to reform their savagery and keep in check their innate anti-Semitism. Arabs need to prioritize life over death, love over hate. Israel's humanity is already here. Palestinians and the rest of the Arabs need to catch up. Weaponizing the card of self-defense evacuates, as Jacqueline Rose points out, "all responsibility for Israeli state violence by lodging it inside the hearts and minds of the enemy ('You made me do it')," and it is this, she says, "that I find most chilling."[55] I agree. By discarding any sense of responsibility and immunizing itself from judgment, Israel can undertake a genocide in plain view with the support of a majority of its nationals. The Gaza genocide is ripe for a similar vexatious interpretation of the Palestinian struggle. More than a year into Isreal's criminal operation in Gaza, Nathan Lopes Cardozo, in an op-ed in *The Jerusalem Post*, recycles the same morally repulsive logic:

> One of the great tragedies of the State of Israel is that it must constantly defend itself against ongoing attacks on its citizens. When its enemies claim Israel will be wiped out, "from the river to the sea," there is no option but to defend itself with all its might. Israeli Jews are forced to rely on military power to survive. But this is a reliance that they abhor. It was Golda Meir who said, "Perhaps we will be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons." It is this paradox that makes these wars so intolerable. Those who are forced to fight are those who hate it the most.[56]

Being proud of genocide is a new low. Putting an end to Palestinian desires for unity, equality and freedom (what the chant "From the river to see, Palestine will be free" means) is a cause for national celebration. This is sadism masquerading as righteousness. All of this stems from Israel's irreproachable victim complex.[57] Being Palestinian—struggling for one's liberation—victimized Israel, made Israel less pure, less innocent. Causes and effects are ideologically reversed. Palestinians (not the Occupation, dispossession, ethnic cleansing, or genocide) are responsible for Israeli aggression, for their criminal endeavors. Killing Palestinians is "unnatural" to Israeli humanity, to Israel's "most moral army."[58] Oded Na'aman teases out the implications of a military that sees itself as always reacting to violence, as being defensive since time immemorial: "It is not that the Israel Defense Forces is so named because it is only used defensively; rather, for Israelis, every use of the Israel Defense Forces is by definition

a defensive act."[59] Israel can never occupy the position of the aggressor or victimizer.[60] Israeli hasbara sells the West a simplistic but efficient narrative where Israel is a synecdoche of "humanity" while the Palestinian people are governed by "the law of the jungle."[61] As Palestinian terror is constitutive of Palestinian being, Jewish innocence is constitutive of Jewish being. Each time we utter the word "IDF" (Israeli Defense Forces) we reinforce this Orwellian designation. The Israeli military force is first and foremost an offensive force, an occupation force. "IOF" is a far more honest description of what Israel does to its Palestinian neighbor, but not only to Palestinians; its mayhem has touched many Arab or Muslim-majority countries. Israel appears willing to say anything to maintain the moral higher ground: *you made me do it* logic casts the victim as the instigator, exculpating, in turn, the true aggressor. A Golda Meir for contemporary times: *Palestinians cannot be forgiven for having forced the IOF to kill their mothers and children*.

Israel is not an exception in its practice and disavowal of cruelty. The West, to which Israel faithfully belongs, has a long history of projecting its own colonial cruelties onto distant others. The Orient is a case in point; the Orient after 9/11 crushingly so. Israel willingly inscribes itself in that Western imperialist tradition. Palestinians are barbarians, an innately terrorist people, new Nazis, pure evil or inhumanity incarnated. When cruelty is the problem of/in others, when the West believes in its unquestioned good, the rest of the world suffers.

Fanon's politics of the wretched operates under a different horizon. While Fanon announces a new humanism at the beginning of *Black Skin, White Masks*, his writings index the Herculean effort needed for the violent dislocation, psychic divestment in the predominant image, and reinvention of the human. The zone of nonbeing is itself framed around two key observations about the human and its relation to whiteness and Blackness. The first comes right before the zone of nonbeing passage: "Running the risk of angering my black brothers, I shall say that a Black is not a man [*le Noir n'est pas un homme*]."[62] David Marriott and other Afropessimists elevate the "*n'est pas*" of Fanon, disclosing the abyss that separates the Black from the Human.[63] In the racialized zone of nonbeing all there is is Black (as) nothingness. For Black folks, the dissolution of the ego (social death) fails to inaugurate the formation of a new self—humanist or otherwise. Unlike the Sartrean idyllic version, Fanonian nothingness does not translate into the affirmation of freedom and transformative existence.[64] Libidinal and material constraints lock Blacks in their nonbeing. Cast in this light, the experience of the Real is itself a kind of white/human privilege. To experience the Real as something traumatic is already to assume the reality of a gentrified self capable of being unsettled. Fanon further troubles the existentialist ideal of transcendence by formulating the exit from this hellish zone as difficult and rare.

On the Afropessimist account, Black ~~being~~ is not a human but a position of negation, a kind of anti-human, with ~~Blackness~~ giving coherence to the white human. Fanon thus qualifies his new humanism *à venir* with the crushing actuality of a latent anti-humanism, at least when it comes to the most wretched of beings. If Blackness signifies nothingness, whiteness purports to represent humanity as such. But on the following page, Fanon complicates the relation between whiteness and humanity by disclosing the vicissitudes of fantasy in his uncompromising assessment of Black and white desires: "The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man" [*Le Noir veut être Blanc. Le Blanc s'acharne à réaliser une condition d'homme*]."[65] Black being envies whiteness, but the white self is equally touched or plagued by his phantasm of humanity insofar as he knows that the being of his whiteness does not coincide with humanity. So in a significant way the white self is *not* a man either. Strictly speaking, no one is a "Man." The human is a fetish, always a fleeting phantasm. In an act of bad faith or willful ignorance, whites claim the "human" as theirs, but this is an ideological lie used to enforce and legitimize the status quo, that is, an ontological partition of the world.

Likewise, when we claim the humanity of Blacks and Palestinians, which is again an irresistible claim, inseparable from the claim that their lives do matter, we risk prolonging this lie. In adopting the humanist framework, we, in effect, suspend or postpone a reckoning with the racial matrix of the human. A posthuman horizon enters the discussion the moment we linger on this double bind; when we step back and ponder the paucity of humanism and the anti-Black and anti-Palestinian world that it underpins. A new humanism, if there will be such a thing, will ironically resonate far less with the humanism of old and far more with the challenges of an emergent inhuman posthumanism.

1 Žižek 2022, p. 227.
2 Berlant 2011.
3 The Pro-Human Camp 2023.
4 Fanon 2008, pp. xii–xiii.
5 Žižek 1999.
6 Fanon 2004, p. 239, translation modified.
7 Fanon 2008, p. 204.
8 Benn 2013.
9 Hirschkind 2023.
10 Massad 2000, p. 62. As Rashid Khalidi observes, "the modern history of Palestine can best be understood in these terms: as a colonial war waged against the indigenous population, by a variety of parties [namely British imperialists and Zionists], to force them to relinquish their homeland to another people against their will" (Khalidi 2020, p. 13).
11 Goldberg 2015.
12 Callai 2024.
13 Western media outlets do not dare to point out the inconvenient truth that an occupying force does not have the international right to self-defense. Who has an unquestionable legal right to self-defense are the Palestinian people, though this right is not without conditions; civilians, for instance, cannot be targeted in your resistance to the occupying military force.
14 Zalloua 2024.
15 Morrison 1993.
16 Neiman 2023.
17 Sharma 2024.
18 Moench 2024.
19 Khader 2024.
20 Nader 2024.
21 Erakat 2019, p. 73.
22 Deleuze 2007, pp. 194–95.
23 Deleuze 2007, pp. 194–95.
24 Davids et al, forthcoming.
25 "To invoke the word 'terrorism,' within the conventional bounds of liberal discourse, is to bring the debate to a screeching halt—we can argue back and forth as much as we like over the question of whether this or that military operation was carried out in the right manner, adhering to the proper rules and protocols of legitimate warfare, but when terrorism enters the discussion, there can be no equivocation. There is no spectrum of acceptable opinions, no room for reasonable disagreement when it comes to terrorism. There are only two sides—those who are with the terrorists, and those who are against them" (Somayajula 2023).
26 Deleuze 2007, p. 199
27 Levinas 1990.
28 Levinas 1981.
29 Žižek 2007, p. 234.
30 Wilderson 2020, p. xi.
31 Hartman 2007, p. 6.
32 Zalloua 2021, pp. 143–85.
33 "Now, for the first time in human history, the term 'Black' has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet, is what I call the *Becoming Black of the world*. . . . The systematic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot of, all of subaltern humanity" (Mbembe 2017, p. 6).
34 Fanon 2008, p. xii. Philcox's translation leaves out a crucial comma after "an incline stripped bare of every essential." See Maher 2022, p. 20.
35 Fanon 2004, p. 5.
36 Simek 2024, p. 410.
37 Winant 2023.
38 Berkovits 2024.
39 Fanon 2004, p. 236.
40 Benjamin 1968, p. 262.
41 Fanon 2021, pp. 688, 657.
42 Fanon 2008, p. 89.
43 Fanon 2008, p. 89.
44 Žižek 2012, p. 166.
45 Finn 2023.

46 Fanon 2008, p. 206.
47 Žižek 2008, p. 166.
48 Žižek 2008, p. 166.
49 Žižek 2022, p. 228.
50 Žižek 2013, p. 160.
51 "Autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to *what* and to *who* comes—which means that it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive; we would no longer wait, await, or expect, no longer expect one another, or expect any event" (Derrida 2005, p. 152).
52 Žižek 2022, p. 227.
53 "We will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons" (qtd. in Na'aman 2016).
54 Qtd. in Na'aman 2016.
55 Rose 2023.
56 Cardozo 2024.
57 Zalloua and Nir 2024.
58 Turfah 2024.
59 Na'aman 2016.
60 The logic of self-defense also applies to the illegal settlements—"victory through settlement" posits settlers not as invaders on Palestinian land but as protectors of Israel. See Reiff 2023.
61 Finn 2023.
62 Fanon 2008, p. xii.
63 Marriott 2020.
64 Warren 2018, p. 183n.33.
65 Fanon 2008, p. xiii.

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A Hegelian Reading of the New Science of Consciousness

Slavoj Žižek

My favored plot of crime novels concerns a person (usually a woman) who is in mortal danger: unknown forces try to kill her because she knows something she shouldn't have known; this something is not some big secret or trauma that haunts her - she even doesn't know what this something is... When this formula is brought to extreme, the woman is in danger because she doesn't know something she should have known if the story told by the criminal to maintain his alibi were to be true. (Say: the criminal claims that he couldn't have committed the crime because he was at some place where many people saw him, but the woman was also there and, of course, didn't see him...) The specific experience of a woman in this situation (who knows a dangerous secret but doesn't know what this secret is) renders in a very plastic way what psychoanalysis aims at with notions like divided subject and unconscious knowledge. My premise is that there is no consciousness (no Self aware of itself) without such an unknown knowledge.

Anil Seth: a Cognitivist Account of Consciousness

The topic of (self-)consciousness has a long history in modern philosophy where it reached its peak in Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a detailed exploration of the dialectics of consciousness. At the opposite end of contemporary thought, cognitive sciences are now also focusing on consciousness, on how consciousness arises in a living organism. How can cognitive sciences deal with the unconscious? What cognitive sciences are telling us about consciousness is perhaps best resumed in Anil Seth's *Being You*: *A New Science of Consciousness*, a book written in a clear and modest way, without the falseness and pretention that characterizes a lot of popular scientific writing.[1]

Seth's basic premise is that "everything in conscious experience is a perception of sorts, and every perception is a kind of controlled – or controlling – hallucination": "Experiences of free will are perceptions. The flow of time is a perception. Perhaps even the three-dimensional structure of our experienced world and the sense that the contents of perceptual experience are objectively real – these may be aspects of perception too." (275) Seth goes to the end in this direction, inverting what appears to us the most basic relationship between an emotion and its bodily expression: an emotion doesn't express itself in a bodily gesture (say, I hit you because I am angry at you), it is just a perception of a process going on in my body (I am angry because I perceive myself striking you) – in this sense,

> "emotions are perceptions of 176changes in bodily state. We don't cry because we are sad, we are sad because we perceive our bodily state in the condition of crying. The emotion of fear is constituted by (interoceptive) perception of a whole gamut of bodily responses set off by the organism recognizing danger in its environment. For /William/ James, the perception of bodily changes as they occur

> is the emotion: 'We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful.'"(176)
>
> As we may expect, this counterintuitive view is supplemented by its dialectical opposite: all action (volitional) is self-perception, but perception is in itself action – how, exactly? As Seth's variation of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* – "I predict myself therefore I am" – makes it clear, the key role plays here the notion of prediction as an immanent part of every perception: "conscious contents are not merely shaped by perceptual predictions – they *are* these predictions."(106)

Our mind models the external environment by predicting what kind of perceptual experience is most likely to occur next, given prior experiences, and the result is our familiar subjective world of objects that have three-dimensional shape, size, color, relative position, movement, and so forth. This constructed experience is not a representation of the world "as it actually is," but, rather, a model that is good enough to allow us to navigate the environment and do the things that biological beings must do to survive and reproduce. Such a model is a *controlled hallucination* in that it is an imaginary representation controlled or constrained by reality-as-it-is (prediction failures demand a re-imagining, so the hallucination cannot go wildly in any direction), but also in the sense that hallucination is the basis for our decisions, controlling our behavior.

Seth's next and crucial logical step is to extend the concept of perception of external reality as controlled hallucination to the perception of one's internal reality (our inner sensations and feelings): if perceptions of external reality are controlled hallucinations, conscious perception of our own inner states have to work exactly the same way, and this includes our Self: our sense of selfhood is also just a sensing of our internal state of being, and this internal sensing, like all forms of internal sensing, is an imaginative construction, not a direct perception of some objective reality:

> "It may seem as though the self – your self – is the 'thing' that does the perceiving. But this is not how things are. The self is another perception, another controlled hallucination, though of a very special kind. From the sense of personal identity – like being a scientist, or a son – to experiences of having a body, and of simply 'being' a body, the many and varied elements of selfhood are /.../ designed by evolution to keep you alive."(147)

Seth's simplest example is that of body temperature: an organism strives to remain alive, and since it can stay alive only within the narrow limits of its bodily temperature, its self-perception as a living being that will stay

alive contains a prediction that its body temperature will remain within these limits, i.e., that it be constant over time; so when a body notices a gap between this predicted temperature and its factual temperature (or some external influence which may push temperature outside its limits), it intervenes (by raising the outside temperature of a place in which it finds itself, by going to another place where the external temperature is higher, etc.) so that its bodily temperature will remains within the limits that guarantee survival. Prediction thus works as a self-fulfilling prophecy: through active interference, the prediction makes itself true, the body's temperature remains the same:

> "The experience of the bodily self as being relatively unchanging therefore stems directly from the need to have precise priors – strong predictions – about stable bodily states, for the purposes of physiological regulation."(191)

And when this perception is perturbed, you act to diminish the gap that separates the two:

> "by minimizing prediction error through active inference, living systems will naturally come to be in states they expect – or predict – themselves to be in. /.../ the picture that emerges is of a living system actively modelling its world and its body, so that the set of states that define it as a living system keep being revisited, over and over again – from the beating of my heart every second to commiserating my birthday every year." (201)

This is why "action itself is a form of self-fulfilling perceptual inference": "The perceptual experience of volition is a self-fulfilling perceptual prediction, another distinctive kind of controlled – again perhaps a *controlling* – hallucination."(219) And the same holds for acts of free will: they are a hallucinatory mode of self-perception or, to use another popular expression, a user's illusion: "experiences of volition are forms of self-related perception"(215) Experiences of volition are not just illusions, they are

> "perceptual best guesses, as real as any other kind of conscious perception, whether of the world or of the self. /.../ Whereas color experiences construct features of the world around us, experiences of volition have the metaphysically subversive content that the 'self' has causal influence in the world. /.../ Experiences of volition are not only real, they are indispensable to our survival. They are self-fulfilling perceptual inferences that bring about voluntary actions. Without these experiences, we would not be able to navigate the complex environments in which 224we humans thrive, nor would we

> be able to learn from previous voluntary actions in order to do better the next time." (223-4)

To resume, Seth's theory is grounded in the premise that the primary function of conscious perception does not reside "in representing the world or the body, but in the control and regulation of our physiological condition": "We perceive the world around us, and ourselves within it, *with, through*, and *because of* our living bodies."(273) As a philosopher, my first reaction to this theory concerns the status of Seth's theory itself: is it – and what it claims about reality - also a controlled hallucination? If yes, why should we take it seriously as truth, as the description of the way things "really are"? If not, how can our mind step out of controlled manipulation?

The paradox is that the very distinction between how we perceive/ hallucinate reality and how this reality is in itself is part of our "hallucinatory" thinking (or, as Hegel put it, the distinction between for-us and in-itself is internal to for-us). Isn't the history of science itself the ultimate proof of it? This, of course, doesn't mean that there is no external reality, i.e., that what we perceive as reality external to us is just a reified hallucination. We are dealing here with an irreducible loop: yes, science can show how consciousness emerges out of organic processes, but this basic (pre-conscious) level is always by definition described from the standpoint of a subject aware of itself, producing a scientific account of reality.

From Life to Self

Although Seth opposes what he calls with irony the "quantum soup" explanations of consciousness, I think that a reference to quantum mechanics might be of some help here. Carlo Rovelli's perspectival realism (which I interpret through the notion of holography) implies that the whole is a part of its part, i.e. that a part is composed of all the (other) parts of its whole. Capitalism is not only a part of history, a moment in the global narrative, it is itself the prism through which we see all the steps leading to it. True history is thus not a gradual development of parts but a series of shifts in how its 'whole' itself is structured. We do not have a Whole which comprises its parts: each part comprises multiple universalities between which we will inevitably choose, without necessarily being aware of doing so. This is how I apply to history Rovelli's pluralistic and perspectival view of quantum mechanics:

> "if we want to get a true idea of what a point of space-time is like we should look outward at the universe /.../ The complete notion of a point of space-time in fact consists of the appearance of the entire universe as seen from that point."[2]

This loop described by Rovelli is what is missing in Seth's first general notion of consciousness, the so-called IIT (information integrated theory): "at the core of IIT is a single measure called 'Φ' which measures how much a system is 'more than the sum' of its parts, in terms of information. How can a system be more than the sum of its parts? A flock of birds provides a loose analogy: the flock seems to be more than the sum of the birds that make it up – it seems to have a 'life of its own'. IIT takes this idea and translates it into the domain of information. In IIT, Φ measures the amount of information a system generates 'as a whole', over and above the amount of information generated by its parts independently. /.../ *a system is conscious to the extent that its whole generates more information than its parts*."(61) Information in IIT must therefore be treated as *intrinsic* to a system, not as relative to an external observer; it must be information 'for' the system itself – not for anyone or anything else"(64):

> "You – as the scientist, the external observer – have to know all the different ways a system *could* behave, even if it never actually behaves in all these ways. The distinction is between knowing what a system *actually does* over time (which is easy, at least in principle, and is observer-relative) and knowing what a system *could do* even if it 66never does it (which is usually difficult, if not impossible, but is observer-independent)."(65)

I think that an additional distinction has to be introduced here. A system which is more than a sum of its parts is every living system: its Whole cannot be reduced to a sum of its parts since, if it loses some of its parts, sometimes other parts can take over their function. However, a conscious system (or, rather, a system regulated by a symbolic order) is not only more than a sum of its parts: its Whole itself is one of its parts, or, as Seth puts it, it represents to itself its model, and it survives only through this self-representation.

The notion I propose here is exaptation, introduced by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin.[3] There are two types of exaptations: (1) adaptations that initially arose through natural selection and were subsequently co-opted for another function (co-opted adaptations); (2) features that did not arise as adaptations through natural selection but rather as side effects of adaptive processes and that have been co-opted for a biological function. Gould's favorite example is the human chin, whose presence is an incidental consequence of the differential growth rate of two bones in the lower jaw. The dentary bone which carries the teeth elongates more slowly than the jawbone itself, so the chin juts out. In our ape-like ancestors the jawbone grows more slowly so no chin develops. So it is not only that the whole of an organism is more than a sum of its parts – it is also that parts themselves are never fully subordinated to their living Whole spandrels). Gould's favorite example

is the human chin, whose presence is an incidental consequence of the differential growth rate of two bones in the lower jaw. The dentary bone which carries the teeth elongates more slowly than the jawbone itself, so the chin juts out. In our ape-like ancestors the jawbone grows more slowly so no chin develops. So it is not only that the Whole of a living being is more than the sum of its parts – these parts themselves are freely floating, at a distance from their organism, open to other uses. A further implication of the notion of exaptation is the radical contingency of the emergence of consciousness:

> »Consciousness is a product of our brain, which in turn is a product of evolution. But the features of the human brain are emergent, are the result of a series of random acquisitions /.../ that may have been encouraged by natural selection only *after* the brain was formed.«[4] What this means is that human brain did not develop »in view of« its future uses (because indispensable for some specific biological function); it suddenly exploded in the course of a process in which »a new combination of characteristics randomly produces an entirely unforeseen result.«[5]

There is a more refined dialectical reasoning at work here than it may appear. That is to say, in a first sight, it may seem that there is no big difference between this notion of »ex-aptation« and the standard »hard« Darwinian notion: Dennett himself approvingly refers to Nietzsche's idea of how nature functions as a *bricoleur*, re-using organs which originally evolved for a particular function for another function. The »hard« Darwinians are thus fully aware of how evolutionary adaptation only uses (chooses from) multiple variations which emerge in a contingent aleatory way, with no purpose. However, the difference that separates the »hard« Darwinians from dialecticians proper like Stephen Jay Gould is double. First, the dialectical approach proper is *structural*: the New emerges not as an element, but as a structure. In an aleatory way, all of a sudden, a new Order, new harmony, emerges out of Chaos. Although we can (retroactively) ascertain a long gestation period, one last element triggers the swift shift from chaos to new order - »hard« Darwinists do not talk in the terms of such a structural »totality.« Second difference: this new Order cannot be accounted for in terms of »adaptation« - it is not only that a univocal *ad quem* is missing here (adaptation *to what*?), one also cannot presuppose a univocal agent of it (adaptation *of what*?). A vicious cycle is here irreducible: one cannot explain the very emergence of an organism in the terms of a strategy of adaptation. If an organism is to adapt in order to survive, it must be here in the first place. An organism evolves to survive, but it cannot emerge in order to survive: it is meaningless to say that I live *in order* to adapt myself. In short, a newly emerging Order »creates« (»posits«) its environs - in relating to its other, it relates to itself:

> »Regardless of the moment and the place where it happened, the evolution of consciousness was not a gradual process. Some philosophers, refusing to acknowledge great discontinuities in nature, suggested that consciousness had emerged slowly and by degrees, from 'less' conscious animals to other 'more' conscious ones and so on. /.../ Actually, consciousness couldnot have arisen unless and untill the activity of the retroaction loops had reached the level of reverberating activity, and a property of feedback loops is 'all or nothing': either reverberating activity is supported by a significant life span or it dies at birth. /.../ a threshold was reached beyond which consciousness appeared out of the blue, just like there is a threshold beyond which we go from sleeping to being awake.«[6]

However, we are still dealing here with *life*, so how do we pass from life, from living organism, to a *Self*, to subject? My hypothesis is that, to put it bluntly, subjectivity cannot be accounted for in the terms of sustaining the reproduction of life, as yet another evolutionary instrument for strengthening the chances of survival and reproduction. With the rise of subjectivity, an additional reflective turn happens which doesn't involve the intervention of some higher spiritual agency subordinating organic life to its goals; on the contrary, with subjectivity, what was before just a mediating moment becomes a self-aim, a goal in itself. To explain this, let's begin with psychoanalysis whose basic axiom is that, far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain where humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is foreign to the animal universe. Here, Hegel himself commits a failure with regard to his own standards: he only deploys how, in the process of culture, the natural substance of sexuality is cultivated, sublated, mediated – we, humans, no longer just make love for procreation, we get involved in a complex process of seduction and marriage by means of which sexuality becomes an expression of the spiritual bond between a man and a woman, etc. However, what Hegel misses is how, once we are within the human condition, sexuality is not only transformed/civilized, but, much more radically, *changed in its very substance*: it is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that gets thwarted as to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical, passion.

Why is Christianity opposed to sexuality, accepting it as a necessary evil only if it serves its natural purpose of procreation? Not because in sexuality our lower nature explodes, but precisely because sexuality competes with pure spirituality as the primordial meta-physical activity. The Freudian hypothesis is that the passage from animal instincts (of mating) to sexuality proper (to drives) is the primordial step from physical realm of biological (animal) life to meta-physics, to eternity and immortality, to a level which is heterogeneous with regard to the

biological cycle of generation and corruption. (This is why the Catholic argument that sex without procreation, whose aim is not procreation, is animal is wrong: the exact opposite is true, sex spiritualizes itself only when it abstracts from its natural end and becomes an end-in-itself.) Plato was already aware of this when he wrote about Eros, erotic attachment to a beautiful body, as the first step on the way towards the supreme Good; perspicuous Christians (like Simone Weil) discerned in sexual longing a striving for the Absolute. Human sexuality is characterized by the impossibility to reach its goal, and this constitutive impossibility eternalizes it, as is the case in the myths about great lovers whose love insists beyond life and death. Christianity conceives this properly meta-physical excess of sexuality as a disturbance to be erased, so it is paradoxically Christianity itself (especially Catholicism) which wants to get rid of its competitor by way of reducing sexuality to its animal function of procreation: Christianity wants to "normalize" sexuality, spiritualizing it from without (imposing on it the external envelope of spirituality: sex must be done with love and respect for the partner, in a cultivated way, etc.), and thereby obliterating its immanent spiritual dimension, the dimension of unconditional passion.

Hegel, Marx, Lacan

This reversal is what Hegel calls the development of substance into subject: what was originally a subordinate element of a substantial order of life becomes an autonomous agent subordinating to itself its own external presuppositions out of which it emerged. »Self« is thus not not just a model of an organism immanent to it, a self-model through which an organism regulates its life: »self« emerges when this model autonomizes itself and subordinates its organism to itself. As such, Self is no longer just a prolongation of life, it acquires a life of its own – the emergence of a Self therefore necessarily gives rise to a redoubling of life: since subject emerges at a distance from biological life, it has to cnstruct its own mode of life, its own artificial »substance.«

When Marx describes the circulation of capital in *Capital*, Hegelian references abound: with capitalism, value is not a mere abstract "mute" universality, a substantial link between the multiplicity of commodities; from the passive medium of exchange, it turns into the "active factor" of the entire process. Instead of only passively assuming the two different forms of its actual existence (money – commodity), it appears as the subject "endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own": it differentiates itself from itself, positing its otherness, and then again overcomes this difference - the entire movement is *its own* movement. In this precise sense, "instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters /.../ into private relations with itself": the "truth" of its relating to its otherness is its self-relating, i.e., in its self-

movement, the capital retroactively "sublates" its own material conditions, changing them into subordinate moments of its own "spontaneous expansion" – in pure Hegelese, it posits its own presuppositions.

Marx's metaphor for the capital is that of a vampire, a living dead who suck the blood of the living – in the topsy-turvy world of the capital, the dead rule over the living and are more alive than the living. The implicit premise of this metaphor is that the aim of the revolution is to return to normality in which the living rule over the dead. Lacan, however, teaches us that a certain reversal of the relationship between the living and the dead defines the very being-human: the "barred" subject is a living dead, at a distance from its biological substance, since it is caught into the symbolic big Other which is a kind of parasite living off humans who serve it. Enjoyment itself is something that parasitizes upon human pleasures, perverting them so that a subject can draw a surplus-enjoyment from displeasure itself. What characterizes subjectivity is thus a weird redoubling of life – a subject lives not just between the two deaths, as Lacan put it following Sade, but also between the two lives, the biological/organic self-reproduction and the quasi-autonomous life of what Lacan calls the big Other, the symbolic order.

This basic reversal which defines human subjectivity also implies the Freudian notion of the unconscious for which there is simply no space in Seth's theoretical edifice. Perhaps the best way to describe the status of the unconscious is via a reference to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* where he introduces a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgment: the positive statement 'the soul is mortal' can be negated in two ways. We can either deny a predicate ('the soul is not mortal'), or affirm a non-predicate ('the soul is non-mortal'). The difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between 'he is not dead' and 'he is undead'. The indefinite judgment opens up a third domain which undermines the distinction between dead and non-dead (alive): the 'undead' are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous 'living dead'. And the same goes for the Unconscious: one thing is to say "this content is not conscious" (which simply means that it is an objective neuronal process in our body outside the mental sphere, like blood circulation), another thing is to say "this content is unconscious" (which means it is part of our mental (psychic) life, even if we are not consciously aware of it).

This is also one of the ways of specifying the meaning of Lacan's claim that the subject is always "decentered." His point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms that are decentered with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but, rather, something much more unsettling: I am deprived of even my most intimate subjective experience, the way things "really seem to me," that of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it. According

to the standard view, the dimension that is constitutive of subjectivity is that of phenomenal (self)experience: I am a subject the moment I can say to myself, "No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions, and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I see and feel now." Say, when I am passionately in love, and a biochemist informs me that all my intense sentiments are just the result of biochemical processes in my body, I can answer him by clinging to the appearance: "All that you're saying may be true, but, nonetheless, nothing can take from me the intensity of the passion that I am experiencing now..." Lacan's point, however, is that the psychoanalyst is the one who, precisely, *can* take this from the subject: the analyst's ultimate aim is to deprive the subject of the very fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of his (self) experience. The Freudian subject of the unconscious emerges only when a key aspect of the subject's (self)experience (his fundamental fantasy) becomes inaccessible to him, primordially repressed. At its most radical, the unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanisms that regulates my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of inner life (of a fantasmatic experience that cannot be reduced to external behavior), one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is, rather, the gap that separates the two, namely, the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject – this brings us back to our starting point, the unknown knowledge as constitutive of subjectivity.

We should not identify (what we experience as a free volitional) decision with consciousness: our basic decisions are *unconscious*. In the conceptual space of cognitive sciences there are physical processes and consciousness, with no place for the Freudian unconscious. Recall the case of falling in love: it is never a conscious decision/choice – all of a sudden, I just become aware that I am deeply in love. If we take this into account, we are compelled to cast doubt on Seth's crucial notion of the "ground-state of conscious selfhood":

> "Despite being firmly rooted in physiological regulation, emotions and moods are still mostly experienced at least in part as relating to things and situations beyond the self, outside the body. When I feel fear, I am usually afraid of some *thing*. But the very 190deepest levels of experienced selfhood – the inchoate feeling of 'just being' – seem to lack these external referents altogether. This, for me, is the true ground-state of conscious selfhood: a formless, shapeless, control-oriented perceptual prediction about the present and future physiological condition of the body itself. This is where *being you* begins, and it is here that we find the most profound connections between life and mind, between our beast machine nature and our conscious self." (190)

Here it is not the place to explore how this ground-state of conscious selfhood relates to the zero-level we reach through meditation (in Buddhism and other approaches); suffice it to note that the two are not the same – *not* in the sense that meditation is somehow "deeper". Meditation brings its own dangers – no wonder that the US a "Cheetah House" organization exists whose task is "to provide evidence-based information and support to individuals who have experienced negative effects from meditation; experienced unhealthy meditation or spiritual communities; and suffered religious & spiritual abuse or trauma."[7] What I want to emphasize is just that this objectless "ground state" of the Self (what mystics call the "night of the world" in which external reality disintegrates) cannot be located within "the whole panorama of human experience and mental life /which/ is sculpted by a deep-seated biological drive to stay alive" – why? For the reason articulated by Seth himself when he points out that "what it means for something to exist is that there must be a difference – a boundary – between that thing and everything else. If there were no boundaries there would be no things – there would be nothing":

> "This boundary must also persist over time, because things that exist maintain their identity over time. If you add a drop of ink to a glass of water it will rapidly disperse, coloring the water and losing its identity. If instead you add a drop of oil, although the oil will spread out over the surface, it will remain recognizably separate from the water. The oil drop continues to exist because it has not dispersed itself evenly throughout the water. After a while, though, it too will lose its identity, just as rocks eventually erode into dust. Things like oil drops and rocks undoubtedly exist, because they have an identity that persists for some period of time – a long time, for rocks. But neither oil drops nor rocks *actively* maintain their boundaries, they just get dispersed slowly enough for us to notice them as existing while this happens. / Living systems are different. Unlike the examples above, living systems actively maintain their boundaries over time – through moving, or sometimes even just through growing. They actively contribute to preserving themselves as distinct from their environment, and this is a key feature of what makes them living. /.../ living systems, simply by virtue of existing, must actively resist the dispersion of their internal states. By the time you end up as a puddle of undifferentiated mush on the floor, you are no longer alive."(197)

But is the "most profound" level of objectless Selfhood not precisely the level at which the Self no longer exists as a separate entity exempted from external reality? In other words, is it not the point of *death in life*, the point at which the Self *no longer exists as a separate entity*, the point at which the "drive to stay alive" is momentarily suspended? And - to risk even a

step further – is the passage through this zero-point not necessary for the advent of the *ethical* subject, a subject who is ready to risk its life itself for some higher Cause (like honor)? Recall that many national anthems celebrate not just individual sacrifice for its nation but a collective readiness to risk the survival of the nation itself: "We'll rather all die than to give up our freedom (or land)." Here is the orgasmic finale of the anthem of Argentine: "May the laurels be eternal / that we were able to achieve. / Let's live crowned in glory / or let's swear to die with glory / or let's swear to die with glory!" The final line is repeated – a clear indication that the true object of desire is to achieve glorious death, not victory.

For this reason, the objectless Self can no longer be characterized as a "control-oriented perceptual prediction about the present and future physiological condition of the body itself": if anything, it is a prediction of one's disappearance as a living body, i.e., it is a form of what Heidegger called "being-towards-death." The extreme experience of the objectless Self is thus not the point of closest proximity between body and consciousness, the point at which the conscious Self directly coincides with its body, but, quite the contrary, it is the basic form of the gap that separates them. So it is not simply that "the quest to understand consciousness places us increasingly within nature, not further apart from it" (267): yes, this quest places us within nature, but at a point at which nature breaks with itself, acquires self-distance. And, incidentally, when we descend to this level of objectless Self, do we not also step out of the illusion that we are free agents – which means that this illusion is not necessary.

To justify his stance, Seth evokes the second law of thermodynamics which "tells us that instances of organized matter, like living systems, are intrinsically improbable and unstable, and that – in the long run – we're all doomed. But somehow, unlike rocks or ink drops, living systems temporarily fend off the second law, persisting in a precarious condition of improbability. They exist out of equilibrium with their environment, and this is what it means to 'exist' in the first place. /.../ for a living system to resist the pull of the second law it *must occupy states which it expects to be in*." (198) But, again, when a Self is ready to risk its life for its honor, does it not precisely follow a higher Law on behalf of which it no longer "resists the pull of the second law"? This means that, at its most basic, freedom is not freedom to do something for a rational reason – such a notion of freedom this can be easily reduced to brain determinism. Freedom if I do something for no reason at all, what E.A. Poe called "the imp of the perverse" – here is Poe's own description of such a temptation:

> "We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink away from the danger. Unaccountably we remain... it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of

> what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height... for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it."

Are such acts which go against our very survival not a manifestation of the Freudian death drive? "The Imp of the Perverse" causes people to commit acts against their self-interest, it tempts a person to do things "merely because we feel we should *not*." The refined dialectical conclusion of Poe's story is of special interest: the narrator commits murder to inherit a man's estate; a coroner attributes the death to an act of God, and the narrator benefits from his crime; several years later, the narrator starts obsessing about a possible confession for his crime - he acts on a self-destructive impulse, and confesses his crime in public, leading to his swift trial and execution... in short, the only truly free perverse act is the compulsion to confess, to be punished.

This brings us to Immanuel Kant who gets involved in a deadlock when he distinguishes between »ordinary« evil (the violation of morality on behalf of some »pathological« motivation, such as greed, lust, ambition, etc.), »radical« evil, and »diabolical« evil. It may seem that we are dealing with a simple linear gradation: »normal« evil, more »radical« evil, and, finally, the unthinkable »diabolical« evil. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the three species are not at the same level. In other words, Kant confuses different principles of classification. »Radical« evil does not designate a specific type of evil act, but an a priori propensity of human nature (to act egotistically, to give preference to pathological motivations over universal ethical duty) which opens up the very space for »normal« evil acts, which roots them in human nature. In contrast to it, »diabolical« evil does indeed designate a specific type of evil act: acts which are not motivated by any pathological motivation, but are done »just for the sake of it,« elevating evil itself into an apriori *non-pathological* motivation – something akin to Poe's »imp of the perverse.« While Kant claims that »diabolical evil« cannot actually occur (it is impossible for a human being to elevate evil itself into a universal ethical norm), he nonetheless asserts that one should posit it as an abstract possibility. Interestingly enough, the concrete case he mentions (in Part I of his *Metaphysics of Morals*) is that of judicial regicide, the murder of a king carried out as a punishment pronounced by a court. Kant's claim is that, in contrast to a simple rebellion in which the mob kills only the person of a king, the judicial process which condemns the king to death (qua embodiment of the rule of law) destroys from within the very form of the (rule of) law, turning it into a terrifying travesty – which is why, as Kant put it, such an act is an »indelible crime« which cannot ever be pardoned. However, in a second step, Kant desperately argues that in the two historical cases of such an act (under Cromwell and in 1793 France), we were dealing just with a mob taking revenge.

Why is there this oscillation and classificatory confusion in Kant? Because, if he were to assert the actual possibility of »diabolical evil,« he would be utterly unable to distinguish it from the Good – since both acts would be non-pathologically motivated, the travesty of justice would become indistinguishable from justice itself. And, the shift from Kant to Hegel is simply the shift from this Kantian inconsistency to Hegel's reckless assumption of the identity of "diabolical" evil with the Good itself. Far from involving a clear classification, the distinction between »radical« and »diabolical« evil is thus the distinction between the general irreducible propensity of human nature and a series of particular acts (which, although impossible, are thinkable). Why, then, does Kant need this excess over the »normal« pathological evil? Because, without it, his theory would amount to no more than the traditional notion of the conflict between good and evil as the conflict between two tendencies in human nature: the tendency to act freely and autonomously, and the tendency to act out of pathological, egotistic motivations - from this perspective, the choice between good and evil is not itself a free choice, since we only act in a truly free way when we act autonomously for the sake of duty (when we follow pathological motivations, we are enslaved to our nature). However, this goes against the fundamental thrust of Kantian ethics, according to which *the very choice of evil is an autonomous free decision*.[8] No wonder that Hegel goes here to the end and clearly posits that self-awareness as such (cognition) is in itself evil:

> "Abstractly, being evil means singularizing myself in a way that cuts me off from the universal (which is the rational the laws, the determinations of spirit). But along with this separation there arises being-for-itself and for the first time the universally spiritual, laws – what ought to be. So it is not the case that /rational/ consideration has an external relationship to evil: it is itself what is evil."[9] "It is the consideration or the cognition that *makes* people evil, so that consideration and cognition /themselves/ are what is evil, and that / therefore/ such cognition is what ought not to exist /because it/ is the *source* of evil."[10]

When we do things for reasons, we experience our decision as a free choice (when I feel thirst, I choose between water, beer, fruit juice, coke...); the experience of choice implies a minimal distance towards objects of choice, and – this is the key fact – such an experience of choice opens up a potential space of doing something *just for the sake of it, for no determinate reason at all*. As we have seen from Poe's »the Imp of the Perverse,« this reflexivity of reasons where no-reason itself can function as a reason is the ground of »pure« evil, not an evil done for pathological reasons. This is why the philosophical reproach to Freud according to which »death drive« is already a substantial objectivization and as such

cannot be the zero level of subjectivity misses the point: »death drive« names the very gap that subtracts a subject from reality of reasons.

A Hegelian approach thus enables us to identify four interconnected features that characterize a Self but are ignored by a cognitive approach. First, there is a move from Substance to Subject: a subordinate part of an organic substance (a living body) regains autonomy, takes control over the organism and steers it beyond the goal of its survival and reproduction. Second, we thereby enter a dimension Freud called "death drive." Third, this death drive cannot persist without creating its own form of life, a virtual life beyond organic life (symbolic order). And fourth, because of this redoubling, every Self is divided, its consciousness is supplemented by the dimension of the unconscious - animals may have awareness and instinctual knowledge, but not an unconscious.

Donald D. Hoffman: Consciousness as a Primary Fact

However, these conclusions in no way imply that cognitive approach is by definition, in its very notion, unable to analyze in a more appropriate way the phenomenon of a conscious Self – science is far from saying its last word about a conscious Self. The space for a dialogue with science is opened up by the fact that the negative gesture of distancing oneself from the pursuit of life (what Freud calls "death drive" and what Hegel called "self-relating negativity") does not take place due to the intervention of some higher spiritual force which stands above mere reproduction of life; it happens within life itself, as its self-negation which occurs due to some totally contingent anomaly, through the ex-aptation of what was in itself a misfortune. Our entire spiritual edifice comes second, it is a reaction to this disturbance, an attempt to cope with it. The ultimate irony of »becoming-human af apes« is that the reason was utterly contingent and without any meaning – in all probability some pathological neuronal short-circuit, a meaningless malfunctioning. At the organic level, something went wrong, a living being got caught into a repetitive loop of self-destructive acts, and out of this weird accident all of our ethics and the symbolic order itself arouse. If, then, science will discover how self-awareness emerged, the result will not be perceived as the clarification of a deep mystery, as an act of bringing out a deep secret that, perhaps, should better remain hidden, but as something profoundly disappointing, outrageous in its stupidity.

But which science can play a key role here? My answer is: quantum mechanics. I am not the first to propose this. In contrast to Seth, who – as we have already seen – mockingly mentions "quantum soup," Donald D. Hoffman, in his *The Case Against Reality*[11], grounds his vision of consciousness in quantum mechanics: not only are the cognitive scientists

> "ignoring the progress in fundamental physics, they are often explicit about it. They'll say openly that quantum physics is not relevant to the aspects of brain function that are causally involved in consciousness. They are certain that it's got to be classical properties of neural activity, which exist independent of any observers — spiking rates, connection strengths at synapses, perhaps dynamical properties as well. These are all very classical notions under Newtonian physics, where time is absolute and objects exist absolutely. And then [neuroscientists] are mystified as to why they don't make progress. They don't avail themselves of the incredible insights and breakthroughs that physics has made."[12]

Consequently, in contrast to Seth who remains a materialist, Hoffman rejects materialism and turns around the naturalist approach: instead of trying to explain how consciousness arises out of material reality, we should focus on how (what we experience as) reality arises out of consciousness: "Experiment after experiment has shown — defying common sense — that if we assume that the particles that make up ordinary objects have an objective, observer-independent existence, we get the wrong answers."

Hoffman's next step resides in another reversal. He grounds his position in evolutionary theory: "The classic argument is that those of our ancestors who saw more accurately had a competitive advantage over those who saw less accurately and thus were more likely to pass on their genes that coded for those more accurate perceptions, so after thousands of generations we can be quite confident that we're the offspring of those who saw accurately, and so we see accurately." But this common sense notion "misunderstands the fundamental fact about evolution, which is that it's about fitness function": "According to evolution by natural selection, an organism that sees reality as it is will never be more fit than an organism of equal complexity that sees none of reality but is just tuned to fitness." Why? Hoffman explains this by way of a desktop interface metaphor:

> "Suppose there's a blue rectangular icon on the lower right corner of your computer's desktop — does that mean that the file itself is blue and rectangular and lives in the lower right corner of your computer? Of course not. But those are the only things that can be asserted about anything on the desktop — it has color, position and shape. Those are the only categories available to you, and yet none of them are true about the file itself or anything in the computer. /.../ That blue rectangular icon guides my behavior, and it hides a complex reality that I don't need to know. That's the key idea. Evolution has shaped us with perceptions that allow us to survive. They guide adaptive behaviors. But part of that involves hiding from

> us the stuff we don't need to know. And that's pretty much all of reality, whatever reality might be. If you had to spend all that time figuring it out, the tiger would eat you. /.../ Snakes and trains, like the particles of physics, have no objective, observer-independent features. The snake I see is a description created by my sensory system to inform me of the fitness consequences of my actions."

Now comes the next and final step towards subjective idealism. Hoffman's answer to the question "What is reality?" is: "The quick – and right – answer is I don't know. To understand and see reality, we have to first fully understand consciousness." Hoffman's claim is that it is not necessary to suppose that somehow the world (W) affects my perceptions: "I can pull the *W* out of the model and stick a conscious agent in its place and get a circuit of conscious agents. In fact, you can have whole networks of arbitrary complexity. And that's the world." Hoffman calls this view "conscious realism": "Objective reality is just conscious agents, just points of view. /.../ the idea that objectivity results from the fact that you and I can measure the same object in the exact same situation and get the same results — it's very clear from quantum mechanics that that idea has to go. Physics tells us that there are no public physical objects."

This brings us back to Hoffman's rejection of materialist neuroscientists: "It's not that there's a classical brain that does some quantum magic. It's that there's no brain! Quantum mechanics says that classical objects — including brains — don't exist." Here is then Hoffman's recapitulation of his basic ontological stance: "As a conscious realist, I am postulating conscious experiences as ontological primitives, the most basic ingredients of the world. I'm claiming that experiences are the real coin of the realm. The experiences of everyday life — my real feeling of a headache, my real taste of chocolate — that really is the ultimate nature of reality." The idea is that

> "reality is a vast social network of interacting consciousnesses. Each conscious agent has experience and can make freewill actions. So it's a very vast social network. Think of the Twitterverse. There are millions of users and billions of tweets. Trying to see and understand it all is too much. In big data, we use graphical interfaces that hide all of the chatter and instead give summaries. Evolution did that for us. Spacetime and physical objects are just our visualization tools that help us to interact within this vast social network without even seeing it."

However, there is a dimension ignored here by Hoffman, the already-mentioned dimension of the "big Other," the symbolic order which provides the space for "interacting consciousness." None other than Friedrich Hayek saw this clearly, and that's why Simon Griffiths (see "What

can the Left learn from Friedrich Hayek?"[13]) is right in arguing that Hayek offers the Left three important insights. First, the limits of knowledge:

> "Socialism, which Hayek understood largely as central economic planning, requires planners to make use of information which, because it exists in our heads only fleetingly and is never fully articulated, simply cannot be collected. For Hayek, only the market can make use of this diffused knowledge: state planning is bound to fail. However, for some on the left, Hayek's account of knowledge has very different implications. For example, Hilary Wainwright /.../ argues that Hayek mistakenly treats knowledge as 'an individual attribute, rather than as a social product'. Understood socially, knowledge can be shared by people taking action to overcome the limits of their individual perspectives. Wainwright's work is full of examples of organizations – trade unions, women's groups and co-ops – that have come together to pool knowledge in order to solve collective problems that cannot be solved by the market or by remote bureaucrats. Hayek's argument over the dispersed nature of knowledge can be used to support a form of radical social movement politics, not simply a scepticism about socialist planning."

Second, the idea of the spontaneous order: "some 'orders' emerge 'as a result of human action, but not of human design': language, common law, morality and markets are all examples. To Hayek, the state's role should be largely limited to protecting the spontaneous orders on which civilization is based." Third, markets as a space of freedom: markets allow greater freedom of choice over purchases; when and where to work; and freedom of expression. However,

> "while Hayek was right about the importance of these freedoms, his views are incomplete because he never explained why freedom is valuable to us. This must be because of our desire to act autonomously. In order to do this, we need certain resources – food, shelter, and education, for example. The state is crucial in providing these. Market freedoms are important, but so is the autonomy needed to pursue them. Hayek's argument for freedom can end, not simply with a case for the free market, but with an account of those resources needed to make freedom valuable to us."

Hayek's "spontaneous order" points towards the same as Lacan's "big Other," something that has no "objective" existence in itself but just persists as a presupposition posited by the activity of subjects. Hayek here wisely insists on the irreducibility of alienation: his point is not anarchist individualism but the necessity for the "spontaneous" interaction of

individuals to be perceived as related to a transcendent "objective" order. Seth and Hoffman move in the space of the opposition between self-awareness and neuronal process, they both miss this dimension of the big Other, an order of objective fictions that is not part of external reality and also cannot be reduced to my inner experience.

How does then Hoffman account for the main argument of materialist cognitivists, the correlation between brain activity in its specific regions and specific conscious experiences – say, if I stimulate area V4 of your brain with a magnet, I can make you lose all color experience? "There are hundreds of correlations like this – specific patterns of activity. This is important data, *but it's just data*. It's not a theory. And we don't have one. Why? Because most approaches assume that brain activity causes a conscious experience."[14] This answer is all too quick: if I approach your brain with a magnet without you knowing about it and you lose your color experience, doesn't this indicate some kind of causal link, although the precise nature of this link remains unclear?

But the main problem resides elsewhere: to arrive at his conclusion, Hoffman evokes as a self-evident fact a very problematic interpretation of quantum mechanics advocated by a tiny minority of quantum scientists (there is no reality independent of our conscious observation because our external reality emerges only through observation). First, the whole point of quantum mechanics is that there is another level of being which obeys laws different from our ordinary reality, the real of quantum waves, of quantum superpositions which collapse into our reality; this level is indeterminate, but still deterministic: the probability of a collapse is determined by very precise Schroedinger's equation. At this quantum level, our standard notion of time and space as universal containers of all reality also has to be abandoned. To interpret this quantum domain as the final refutation of materialism and as a proof that reality is spiritual succeeds only if we restrain ourselves to the classic deterministic notion of reality as small material particles jumping around in the all-encompassing space and time. Furthermore, the role of observation is much more complex: it is proven experimentally that a collapse occurs if a quantum process is "observed" by a measuring machine with no awareness whatsoever. Hoffman thus dismisses as a pseudo-problem the most interesting part of quantum mechanics from a philosophical standpoint, namely the exact ontological nature of quantum waves and of their collapse, plus the retroactive causation implied by such a collapse – his reasoning is "we don't know enough about it, so let's pretend it doesn't exist and there is nothing outside consciousness."

Incompleteness or Hyper-Completeness?

This loop of retroactive causation (something emerges which retroactively causes its own causes or, in Hegelese, posits its own presuppositions) is

missed by my severe critic Rafael Holmberg who claims that I misread not only Hegel, Lacan and quantum mechanics but also Deleuze, Nietzsche and Jung:

> ""The Real is not a simple remainder of the process of symbolisation, an abnormal *x* that forever fails to find its place in the Symbolic (which is how Žižek describes it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*). This view of the Real implies that the Symbolic is a consistent totality - yet if Lacan insists on anything, it is that the Symbolic, or language, is irreconcilable with itself. It produces enigmas and contradictions that are only possible *because* language is already there, and inevitably fails to account for its own consequences. /.../ The Real is for Lacan a distortion of the Symbolic that is produced by the Symbolic itself. Much like rules can't be broken if the game itself is thrown away, if the Symbolic is taken away, so is the Real."[15]

The coordinates of this critique are clear: for me, the Real is simply external to the Symbolic which forms a consistent totality, an excessive element for which there is no place in the Symbolic,

> "reality is ontologically incomplete. Yet it is exactly this conclusion which seems to betray Hegel, Lacan, *and* quantum physics. These ontological systems are not incomplete, they are what I would call *hyper-complete*: they are structured by conceptual systems that are in a perpetual overestimation, or non-identity, with themselves, and from this they produce indeterminate excesses that are entirely *superordinate* to the very planes on which they operate. In other words, if Hegel and quantum physics stand for anything, it is not incompleteness, but /.../ an indeterminacy that presupposes a determined, yet self-contradictory, totality."[16]

In his text, Holmberg mentions three other names of thinkers who also outlined a hyper-complete ontology: Nietzsche, Deleuze, and – surprise, surprise! – Jung. Especially the last name bears witness to the fact that Holmberg notion of hyper-complete systems is not Lacanian at all but belongs to the space of the other three thinkers – recall that Deleuze admired not only Nietzsche but also Jung whom he preferred over Freud. So let me begin by pointing out that I repeatedly insist how the Real is a distortion produced by the Symbolic itself – or, as I wrote in my *Sex and the Failed Absolute* apropos the constitutive failure of the subject to represent itself in the Symbolic:

> "There is nothing outside this failure, subject and language are themselves the outcome of this primordial failure. As Lacan put

> it, the real is an impasse of formalization, and this is to be taken literally: not that the real is an external substantial domain that resists formalization (or symbolization, although they are not the same, of course), but that the real is totally immanent to the symbolic – it is nothing but its immanent failure."

So the Symbolic order is inconsistent, and that's why, as Lacan put it, *il n'y a pas de grand Autre* (there is no big Other), and why the Symbolic implies a subject. So where is our difference? Holmberg would probably reject the notion of a basic failure which evokes lack and incompleteness. My reply is that, for a Lacanian, lack and excess are two sides of the same coin, like subject and object. In his Seminar XIV[17], Lacan mentions the "weird correspondence between subject and object" ("l'etrange correspondance entre sujet et objet") – why is this correspondence strange? For two interconnected reasons. First, this correspondence is not what philosophers usually mean by the correlation between subject and object – it is almost its opposite, a kind of negative correlation, since subject is defined precisely by being a non-object. Subject and object are two sides of the same coin, lack and excess; they cannot be "synthesized" so that excess will fill in the lack because they are strictly co-existent, one and the same thing at two different levels – if the lack were to be filled in, there would no longer be a subject, the subject would fall into reality as one of the objects. Second, this correspondence is not properly dialectical but a non-dialectical foundation, a gap which opens up and sustains the very space of dialectics, in some sense even its non-dialectical presupposition. Subject is thus a lack, but a lack that arises in a reaction to the excess in the Other, to an impenetrable object that is another subject – my basic experience of lack is the enigma of "what does the Other see in me, what does it want from me."

This correspondence between lack and surplus, between incompleteness and "hyper," is one of the numerous cases of what I refer to as the parallax structure; another case is that of desire and drive. On the one hand, as Lacan put it, "desire is a defense, a defense against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*"[18]: since desire is always non-satisfied, since it always aims at something beyond every available object which is "never that," desire protects us from the suffocating over-presence of enjoyment. But... but shouldn't we add that *jouissance* is also a defense against desire? Enjoyment, understood as partial satisfaction, is what renders the subject's alienation in the symbolic order livable - one's very own alienation - even though this is not pleasing or fulfilling in any straightforward manner. Enjoyment is an excess that gives bodily form to a symbolic lack.

Enjoyment is thus at the same time a defense against (or an escape from) the void or pure transcendence of desire: if desire is by definition never fully satisfied, enjoyment enacts a reflexive turn by means of which

we get stuck on finite form the repetition by means of which, while still missing the absent Thing, we achieve satisfaction. This duality is at the same time the duality between desire and drive: desire stands for lack, non-satisfaction, while drive's circular movement generates satisfaction. Desire and drive are co-dependent: each of them can be understood as a reaction to the other. Desire is metonymic, always sliding from one to another object, again and again experiencing that "this is not that," and drive resolves this endless movement of desire by way of elevating the endless circulation around a lost object into a source of satisfaction.

Consequently, the difference between Holmberg and me does not reside in the opposition between incompleteness and hyper-completeness: they are for me the two sides of a parallax structure, in contrast to Holmberg (and Deleuze) who rejects the idea that the hyper-dimension of a structure is grounded in its constitutive lack and therefore end in a productivist version of an Absolute in excess with regard to itself.

Hegel: the Loop of Retroactivity

This distinction doesn't concern only abstract theory – it is relevant for the proper understanding of our predicament. Something new will definitely emerge out of our current predicament with its multiple crises which pose a threat to our very survival, but the possible resolutions are themselves multiple, there is no higher destiny that guarantees the outcome. The resolution that will win will have the form of a Hegelian dialectical passage – this sounds strange for those who presume that the Hegelian dialectical progress is a smooth and necessary flow of passage from one form of spirit to another without any unexpected contingent breaks. Hegel himself here and there evokes possible alternative outcomes: the struggle to death between a future master and slave could end with mutual destruction or death of one of the two (if none of them is ready to concede defeat); the struggle which divides an immediate substantial starting point against itself can end up in a resigned return to this starting point, so that we would find ourselves in a cyclic universe - Hegel outlines this option in his *Phenomenology*, in the chapter on absolute freedom and terror:

»Out of this tumult spirit would be, hurled back upon its starting point, the ethical world and the real world of spiritual culture, which would thus have been merely refreshed and rejuvenated by the fear of the lord, that has again entered men's hearts. Spirit would have anew to traverse and continually repeat this cycle of necessity, if only complete interpenetration of self-consciousness and the substance were the final result: an interpenetration in which self-consciousness, which has experienced the force of its universal nature operating negatively upon it, would try to know and find itself not as this particular self-consciousness but only as universal, and hence, too, would be able to endure the objective reality of universal spirit, a reality, excluding self-consciousness *qua* particular.«[19]

In short, revolutionary terror should made it clear to the singular consciousness the destructive consequences of keeping oneself separate from the universal substance, so – to apply here one of Hegel's famous word plays, the ambiguity of the German expression *zugrundegehen*, which means to disintegrate, fall apart, but literally also *zu Grunde gehen*, to reach one's ground – the positive outcome of the terror could be that the subject again reaches its ground, locates itself in the ethical substance, accepts one's unity with it; since, however, substance necessarily gets caught in the divisive process of self-mediation, the same development repeats itself indefinitely... Here, however, enters the inevitable »but,« articulated in a precise line of argumentation:

»But this is not the form the final result assumed. For in absolute freedom there was no reciprocal interaction either between an external world and consciousness, which is absorbed in manifold existence or sets itself determinate purposes and ideas, or between consciousness and an external objective world, be it a world of reality or of thought. What that freedom contained was the world absolutely in the form of consciousness, as a universal will, and, along with that, self-consciousness gathered out of all the dispersion and manifoldness of existence or all the manifold ends and judgments of mind, and concentrated into the bare and simple self. /.../ In the sphere of culture itself it does not get the length of viewing its negation or alienation in this form of pure abstraction; its negation is negation with a filling and a content - either honour and wealth, which it gains in the place of the self that it has alienated from itself; or the language of *esprit* and insight, which the distraught consciousness acquires; or, again, the negation is the heaven of belief or the principle of utility belonging to the stage of enlightenment. All these determinate elements disappear with the disaster and ruin that overtake the self in the state of absolute freedom; its negation is meaningless death, sheer horror of the negative which has nothing positive in it, nothing that gives a filling.

At the same time, however, this negation in its actual manifestation is not something alien and external. It is neither that universal background of necessity in which the moral world is swamped, nor the particular accident of private possession, the whims and humours of the owner, on which the distraught consciousness finds itself dependent; it is universal will, which in this its last abstraction has nothing positive, and hence can give nothing in return for the sacrifice. But just on that account this will is in unmediated oneness with self-consciousness, it is the pure positive because it is the pure negative; and that meaningless death, the unfilled, vacuous negativity of self, in its inner constitutive principle, turns round into absolute positivity.«[20]

In an uncanny act of what Pierre Bayard calls "plagiarizing the future," Hegel seems to quote Lacan here: how can "negation with a filling« not evoke all the Lacanian formulas of filling the lack, of an object which serves as the place-holder of the lack /*le tenant-lieu du manque*/,

etc.? The infamous reversal of the negative into the positive occurs here at a very precise point: at the point when the exchange breaks down. Throughout the whole period of what Hegel calls *Bildung* (culture/education through alienation), the subject is deprived of (a part of) its substantial content, yet he gets something in exchange for this deprivation, »either honour and wealth, which it gains in the place of the self that it has alienated from itself; or the language of *esprit* and insight, which the distraught consciousness acquires; or, again, the negation is the heaven of belief or the principle of utility belonging to the stage of enlightenment.« In revolutionary terror, this exchange breaks down, the subject is exposed to the destructive abstract negativity (embodied in the State) which deprives it even of its biological substance (of life itself), without giving anything in return – death is here utterly meaningless, »the most cold-blooded and meaningless death of all, with no more significance than cleaving a head of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water,« without even surviving as a noble memory in the circle of one's friends of family.

How, then, does this pure negativity/loss »magically« turn into new positivity? What do we get when we get nothing in exchange? There is only one consequent answer: *this nothingness itself*. When there is no filling of the negation, when we are forced to confront the power of negativity in its naked purity and are swallowed by it, the only way to continue is to realize that this negativity is the very core of our being, that subject »is« the void of negativity - the core of my being is not some positive feature, but the very capacity to mediate/negate all fixed determinations; it is not what I am, but the negative way I am able to relate to what(ever) I am. This power is not a merely negative one, but the positive power of negativity itself, the power to generate new forms, to create entities *ex nihilo*.

The (rather obvious) problem here is: how is this power of pure negativity to be located into Hegel's big triad of Logic, Nature and Spirit? The only solution is: it cannot be. It is a power traversing all three (or, more precisely, functioning as a gap that separates them), like what Hegel calls the (pre-ontological) "night of the world," or, in quantum mechanics, the universe of quantum waves as distinct from our reality. At all levels, the infamous Hegelian triad has thus to be supplemented, so that its formula is 3 + 1. Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda[21] elaborated the role of this gap in their path-breaking analysis of the gap that separates objective spirit (social life regulated by a state) and absolute spirit (art, religion, philosophy) in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia.*

The passage from objective to absolute spirit is profoundly ambiguous and sudden, with no proper "deduction" of the latter from the former; why does objective spirit (social life) need absolute spirit to fully actualize itself? Plus why are there three forms of absolute spirit? The answer to the last question is clear: we are gradually moving away from objective social reality. Art still operates with objective reality accessible

through direct sensual intuition, restructuring it in a way that a spiritual dimension directly echoes (a stone becomes a statue, voices become music, etc.). In religion, we move from intuition to representation: a representation of reality is used to evoke a different reality, the divine outside social life. A cathedral as a work of art is just a beautiful object, while a cathedral as religious object evokes another higher domain (of the divine). Finally, philosophy dispenses with the material world and directly focuses on the spiritual dimension as it is in itself.

In early Hegel, his account of objective spirit ends with post-revolutionary deadlock which implies the possibility of a passage to some different higher form of social life; in mature Hegel it ends with a modern rational state which then dissolves into a multiplicity of states overshadowed by a permanent threat of war. Only religion is present in the sphere of objective spirit as an organized social body subordinated to state – Hegel never deals with the objective social reality of art (museums) and of philosophy (universities). The conclusion is nonetheless that objective spirit (social life) cannot bring about full reconciliation, so a move to another higher (absolute) sphere is necessary - but how does this higher sphere at a distance from social reality retroactively affect social life itself? Does it push towards a renovation of social life? Comay and Ruda emphasize the negative role of the forms of absolute spirit: they don't bring about a new order, they undo the existing order, they bring out its failure, its antagonisms, they open up a gap in it.

Although forms of absolute spirit are not in themselves political, the very gap that separates them from the social life opens up a space for politics, i.e., it prompts political acts which cannot fully be grounded in any form of knowledge about the existing social order. Maybe, a difference between philosophy and religion is at work here: philosophy paints grey on grey, it analyses the past, it undoes a given social order, it shows the reasons for its decay, while – as Hegel himself hints at some points – only religion (in its prophetic dimension) can provide some vision of a new future. Revolution (or any radical social change) thus begins with a new religious vision, and when the attempt to actualize this vision in social life necessarily fails (in its first form, at least), philosophy again enters, analyzing the causes of this failure.

The inescapable conclusion is thus not only that a dialectical passage is not a smooth necessary logical flow, i.e., that a deadlock is resolved by way of a contingent invention of something new, but also that (as in the collapse of a wave function in quantum mechanics) this new form *retroactively creates its own necessity*.[22] If techno-feudalism or "soft Fascism" will win, Enlightenment will be rewritten as a modern blind alley; if we will end up in an even more direct barbarism, modernity will be rewritten as a utopia in discord with the violent human nature; etc. So, again, our struggle for the future is simultaneously our struggle for the past.

1 See Anil Seth, Being You: A New Science of Consciousness, London: Dutton 2021. Numbers in brackets refer to pages in this book.
2 Barbour J. (1982), "Relational concepts of space and time", Brit. J. Phil. Sci. 33, p. 265.
3 See Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, »The spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian paradigm: A critique of the adaptationist programme« (1979), reprinted in *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould*, New York: W.W.Norton 2007.
4 Nicholas Humphrey, *A History of the Mind*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1992, p. 171.
5 Ian Taterstall, *Becoming Human*, New York: harvest Press 1998, p. 170.
6 Humphrey, op.cit., p. 268.
7 See Cheetahhouse.org.
8 There is another implication avoided by Kant: if we, mortal humans, cannot be diabolically evil, there is only one candidate that remains: God himself?
9 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen ueber die Philosophie der Religion* II, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1969, p. 206.
10 Op.cit., p. 205.
11 Donald D. Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality*, London: Penguin Books 2019.
12 The Evolutionary Argument Against Reality | Quanta Magazine.
13 What can the left learn from Friedrich Hayek? | British Politics and Policy at LSE.
14 The case against reality | School of Social Sciences | UCI Social Sciences.
15 Žižek is Wrong (Again) - by Rafael Holmberg. (Substack)
16 Op.cit.
17 See S14 LOGIQUE.docx (live.com)
18 Jacques Lacan, Écrits, New York: Norton, 2006, p. 699.
19 G.W.H. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1966, p. 361-362.
20 Op.cit., p. 362.
21 See Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda , "On Gaps. Is There a Politics of Absolute Knowing?", in *Hegel Bulletin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2025.
22 I described this process in detail in the first part of my *Quantum History* (London: Blomsbury 2025).

Symposium on Liberal Fascism

The following texts are the result of an engagement with the manuscript of one of Slavoj Žižek's most recent, yet unpublished books, under the title *Donald Trump: A Fascist Libertarian*. They were presented within the framework of a multi-day seminar at the European Graduate School's new campus in Bergamo where Žižek planned to hold his annual seminar. An illness prevented him from holding the seminar himself and a group of friends were asked to step in and engage with aspects of his most current thought (which he was kind enough to share). In the following pages, the reader will be able to detect how thrilling and demanding this engagement was.

Reading Awry

Joan Copjec

An invitation to respond to a short text from Slavoj Žižek's forthcoming book, presented a quandary. How to go about such a thing? One of the most prolific and influential thinkers of our time, Žižek has produced scores of thick, densely- argued books filled with philosophical reflections on ages-old controversies that became entangled with analyses of political events, evolving social trends, and cinemas old and new. The sheer volume of his output, added to his beguiling grasshopper approach— leaping from one point to another, one level of discourse to another, thinking rapidly on his feet – had together *shielded* him, it suddenly occurred to me, from good old-fashioned close readings of the sort I imagined would be most appropriate for the task. A moment's pause incited a different idea: perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that Žižek's work *exposes* such readings *as* old-fashioned. It was with this in mind that I decided to assume my now self-assigned task.

The practice of close reading, in which many of us were first schooled and then adopted as the gold standard for reading as such, seemed radical at the time it came onto the stage in large part because it positioned itself as a principled rejection of psychological readings of literary texts. It cautioned us to mind the difference between the empirical author -- who was no more an authority on the question of the meaning of what she wrote than any other reader -- and the "implied" narrator of the text. The task of the reader was to permit this implied narrator, this nobody who was nowhere locatable other than in the general, over-all workings of the text, to speak for itself. One of the founders of the close reading doctrine, Cleanth Brooks, summarized the elemental belief propping up the whole enterprise in one pithy phrase: "the poem says what the poem says."[1] If this pronouncement makes the practice of reading seem as if it were taking place in an echo chamber or hall of mirrors, or, better -- as Francis Ferguson perceptively characterized it— as if functioned as a "literary hailing," it is because it does.[2] For, it was generally assumed that close readings would result, at the end of the day, in a consensus among most of readers. The distinguishing trait of close readers resided in their willingness to surrender all personal traits in order to attain the status of an anybody. According to this unexamined logic, readers were less interpreters of the text, than interpellated – or, as Ferguson suggests, "branded" – by the process in which they participated. This is not to say that the close reader was "branded with an identity," but that she allowed herself to become "identified with a brand."[3] The aim of close reading was not merely the elimination of the psychological subject, as has become apparent, but the elimination of the subject *tout court.*

In a bid to disperse the pompous authority of his predecessors, who undoubtedly first taught him how to read, the American literary scholar, D. A. Miller, crafted his own blatantly eccentric reading strategy, which he called "too-close reading," and applied it in analyses of the films of Alfred Hitchcock generally and to the film, of *Rope* at length.[4] The choice

of Hitchcock is not arbitrary. Miller, an avid fan of the director, justifiably accords him the status of Shakespeare. This raises the first question: how can we account for the near unanimity regarding the elevated status of these two authors over decades -- even centuries -- and across disparate cultures? What resources are left to us, once the operation of interpellation deployed (if not by name) by the New Critics has finally been noted and discredited? While Miller delivers a brilliant reading of *Rope* – enviable, even, by close reading standards -- he does not do so from a dispassionate distance. He inserts himself, instead, into the filmic space, rewinding the film, slowing it down, zooming into a close-up in an attempt to catch continuity errors, or determine whether the spot on a chair is a shadow or an accidental stain, wondering at another point if Hitchcock was addressing him personally by giving one of his characters his own surname, "Miller." This is, obviously, the "too close" part of the strategy. But what is the point of it, beyond getting under the skin of the New Critics?

Rather than exclude the subject from the pleasurable task of reading, Miller wants to include her, although the subject he wishes to install is not the psychological subject his predecessors wanted to oust. That literature and film *require* readers for their existence, is an implicit point made by the film, *Rope*: two men want to commit a perfect murder, but once the deed is done, they realize that its perfection is not automatically assured, for it requires an audience capable of appreciating its perfection for it to be so. It is, however, not the case that anybody will do. The murderers, who regard themselves as artists, have no interest in revealing their crime to a general audience, to the gossipy nobodies whom they gather for a party while their victim lies in a caisson in the middle of the room, unseen by them. The murderers are intent on catching the attention of their professor, Rupert, but it is not clear that he is right for the job. He is a codifier of rules and backs away from any involvement with his students on whom he calls the police. What is needed is someone quirkier, someone like D.A. Miller, who does not back away but steps into the picture. He is less interested, however, in the murderous duo than in Hitchcock, the "master of suspense." In order to page homage to his mastery, Miller has to expose the points where it fails What he detects are ellipses, stains, blurs, temporal disparities: errors of language, visual and linguistic. These *errors* are not dismissible as mere mistakes, evidence of the ineptitude of their author. They are bonuses, air bubbles within language that alert us to the fact that not all is able to be said. Masters of language do not try to force words to say merely what they say. They encourage their lack of mastery to reveal itself. To take an author at his word is to fall into the trap of "knowing too much." This is why all the real masters of language are masters of suspense. They delay the closure of the field they open and in doing so, render it more capacious. It is for this reason that they are able to "hail" a wider, more diverse range of readers.

It is useful to note that the "too-close reading" technique Miller invents is inspired by his study of free-indirect discourse, a form of nar-

ration that emerged around the same time as psychoanalysis. Free-indirect discourse marks the point where the general or implied narrator surrenders her distance and intrudes into the narrative not as another, separate character, but as an excess *attached* to one of them. It would be appropriate to mention the unconscious at this point, for the *extimate* relation found in free-indirect speech is as close as the unconscious is to conscious thought. The point is *not* that the free-indirect narrator divulges what a character unconsciously thinks or feels. The point lies elsewhere, in the question of identification, specifically that form of it Freud referred to as "hysterical." His example: girls in a boarding school -- upon witnessing the breakdown of one of them, who has just received a letter from her boyfriend ending their relationship -- all suddenly fall prey to rejected girl's symptoms. Freud, convinced that the narcissistic rivalry among girls at this age renders their identification curious, avoids a lazy explanation of what happens. Rather than surrendering their own narcissistic identity in favor of another's, he reasons that the identification must not have been with any of the rejected girl's actual attributes, but with that point where her identity was placed into question, the point at which she was no longer identifiable.

Explicitly or implicitly, psychoanalysis and free-indirect discourse rebut the assumptions of the close reading doctrine, at least as it concerns "master" texts. If the latter have a wider appeal, if they hail or collect diverse readers, it is not by eliminating the empirical subject in order to generalize it, but by introducing the slit subject of the unconscious. The unconscious collects, not in the way Jung suggested, but as it did in the girls' boarding school. It is nothing to be shared. It is a hole in what surrounds it.

*

My point: close reading is imperative; this much remains true. But it must be performed at a slant. The text does not just say what it says; it also remains mute and this must not be neglected. I have belabored this point not simply to justify my approach to Žižek's very short, three-page, essay, "The Freeze of Eternity," but also because the justification enlightens something about the way Žižek himself reads – I think we can call him a "too-close" reader – and also because many of the points made above resonate with arguments in his essay.

The essay -- if it's long enough to count as such -- concerns a monstrosity of an actual historical event: the holocaust, and very big ideas: Equality and Freedom. The essay's purpose: to critique the latter. The outsized nature of the event and the ideas clashes with the brevity of the critique. Whether or not this is a conscious strategy is not the right question. What matters is the effect it has. It causes the ideas to appear bloated, as if they were too full of themselves. And yet they are dismissed quickly, once air had been let out of them.

A text this brief is not long enough to win over readers with long-held opposing views. Its intent is to disabuse readers of a few liberal ideas to which they might still cling or not yet realize they have. The essay opens with a brief discussion of *The Zone of Interest* (Jonathan Glazer, 2023), which Žižek describes as a film about not wanting to know something. The film centers on Rudolf Hoss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, who lives a quiet, pastoral life with his family on the edge of the concentration camp, apparently oblivious to what is going on the other side of his garden wall. You get the point -- or at least you think you do. While Žižek does not say so outright, this is a bit of a red herring in terms of the argument he will finally make.

Were we to try to correct the problem of the German family's blindness by making a film of what is actually going on outside the frame – that is, in the camps, we would be sorely disappointed. For, it too, would fail to open our eyes to the ultimate truth of the situation. And this is not *simply* because we might catch sight of desperate mothers stealing food from their own children. For, this, too, harbors a red herring.

In both films, the actual one and the one Žižek imagines on the basis of reports he has read about a concentration camp on the island of Rab, the error into which we fall is our spontaneous belief in equality. It is not just that the the characters in both do not themselves cherish this belief, but that the strategy of the counter-shot does not correct the problem of the first. Or so it seems to me.

Žižek then registers his surprise that two of his Marxist colleagues – Étienne Balibar, who coined the term *egaliberte* and Alain Badiou, who stated his preference for equality over freedom -- had recently begun to try to revive the concept of equality. The surprise stems from the fact that Marx had himself fervently dismissed this noxious notion. While he does not mention him here, Žižek most surely had Freud in mind, as well. In *Totem and Taboo,* Freud condemns harshly the brothers who, after killing their priapic father, set down the following rule: "Everyone must be the same and have the same."

In an essay as brief as this, Žižek does not have the luxury of setting out a long theoretical argument. He thus improvises by taking details from a scene found in a witness report about Jews in Buchenwald, reshaping it slightly, and patching it into Glazer's, *Zone of Interest.* The scene he snitches is one in which two young children, stand side-by-side, hands clasped, as they are being eaten by dogs. In other words, Žižek inserts himself as outrageously as D. A. Miller does and and in doing so produces something fabulous, in the best sense of the term. He fabulates. The fact Žižek analyzes a film that he himself makes up must be counted as part of his argument. For, the intent of the essay is to make room for what does not exist.

I began by characterizing the targets of Žižek's essay as *bloated* liberal concepts. The adjective implies that these concepts rely on a saturation of the subject and the world she inhabits. It would be a capital

error were we to remain content with the characterization of the problem with Rudolf Hoss and his self-satisfied family as their blindness to what is happening on the other side of wall.

For Žižek's ultimate point is that they *see too much*. What they remain blind to is the *incompletion* of the world in which they dwell and blind, as well, to the cracks in their self-fortified, egoistic selves. It is this intransigent willingness not to know that permits them to remain content with their world and committed to the idea that the same begets the same. Where does Žižek say this? At the end of the essay when he introduces what he refers to as a "partial object," which is for him the clasped hands of the children. The image of these hands is aberrant, at odds with everything else in the picture. It is for this reason that it throws everything else into question. The "freeze of eternity" interrupts clock time, the relentless process of "one damn thing after another," as someone once characterized inferior nineteenth-century novels.

The best-known partial object is the gaze, fundamental to many film theorists, many of whom miss the point of it. Lacan borrows the gaze from Jean- Paul Sartre, while altering it considerably. Each defines the gaze as inapprehensible, not something one actually sees, but a disturbance whose source is unlocatable. Lacan phrases this in a revelatory way, "the world is all seeing, but it is not exhibitionist."[5] The point is not that the world hides part of itself, but that it does not yet exist. There is therefore a *blot* on every horizon. To ignore this blot – the uncertainty of the future – is to ignore contingency. I risk here a cheap but irresistible witticism: to ignore the blot is to surrender to bloated ideas. The same is not destined to give birth to the same.

Where does this leave the subject? Simply vulnerable to an unpredictable future?

No. Lacan refers to the gaze as the vanishing point of consciousness. We have a peculiar kind of knowledge - unconscious knowledge - of our lack of knowledge.
We have knowledge that we are irreducible to objects (this is where Lacan parted ways with Sartre, who did not believe in the unconscious) object. We have knowledge that we are distinct from our empirical individuality. The subject is for psychoanalysis unsaturated. Ego is intimately linked to the unconscious.

Let us return to the short, wily essay we are trying to unpack. The remaining question is the following: what does this have to do with the specific bloated concept of equality? Why is it the "rotten idea" Žižek -- like Marx and Freud – would have us believe? We left out earlier an important point made by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: the murdering horde of brothers, out of guilt, *elevate* the father, attribute to him powers he never had when he was alive. The condition for the formation of the community is that all its members should be loved in the same way by the same person. That is, the community is held together

by an ideal figure that binds them as a whole. This makes the same point I mentioned earlier – everyone must be the same and have the same – slightly differently. Both forbid, what Lacan calls jouissance, a distinct form of pleasure unique to each subject. Now, we know that Jeremy Bentham is notorious for his conception of distributive justice. He believed that pleasure could be distributed evenly throughout any given group. If this idea is laughable, it is because it assumes that we all desire the same thing. That a multitude can be made happy as long as they receive their piece of the pie, is a "wisdom" that ignores the fac that some people do not like pie; in fact, it makes them sick. Along comes John Rawls, one of liberals Žižek no doubt has in mind, to try to save equality by wrenching it from Betham's hands. Rawls is even smart enough to know that he has to deal not only with Bentham but also with the argument of Freud makes against distributive justice. He understands that people do not all find pleasure in the same things, or in the same way of life. But in the end, he, too, makes a fatal error: he insists that different people – like children of the same parents -- simply want their differences to be acknowledged and appreciated by their parents. Rawls' desperate fiction of incommensurable pleasures submitting themselves to some "Big Other," as we Lacanians are wont to say, is simply absurd. For jouissance flourishes only because there is no final arbiter, No Big Other. This is what makes campaigns for a "shared Jerusalem" the problem it is. There can be no shared Jerusalem.[6]

I want to make only one more point. I believe Žižek would have given Badiou's attempt to salvage some notion of equality more attention and perhaps ceded some points, had he written a longer essay. What Badiou tries to do is distinguish a "program of equality" – how to distribute pleasure or acknowledge differences as equal – from what he calls an "axiom of equality." The latter disengages equality form its "economist connotations" and restores it to its "subjective trenchancy." Liberal theories of equality believe we can reach we can some infinite point.[7] This is the liberal dream in a nutshell. We cannot reach an infinite point in a finite space from which infinity has been subtracted no matter how much time pases. This program of equality must be scrapped, on this point Badiou and Žižek agree completely. What does Badiou mean by "an axiom of equality." He means that we must put infinity back into the world. Let us call this axion the axiom of unbloating. Desaturation.

1 Brooks 1947
2 Ferguson 2015.
3 I owe this distinction to Aaron Schuster 2023, pp.161-250.
4 See especially Miller 2021. See also Miller 2010.
5 Lacan 1977, p.75
6 I borrow here from my longer argument Copjec 2002.
7 Badiou 2008.

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The Farce and the Tragedy: Some Reflections on Žižek's Last Book

Mladen Dolar

Donald Trump: A Fascist Libertarian is the title of Žižek's last book (soon to be published), another collection of his sharp interventions into the actuality, gathering a number of columns and comments he has published during the Trump's second ascent to power and his first few months in office. One cannot but be in awe of Žižek's relentless energy, his courageous stance of constantly intervening, throughout his career, in the messy predicaments of historic circumstances, the task all the more difficult with the mess we are witnessing now, I guess the biggest mess we experienced in the course of our lives. There is Žižek's absolute urge 'to take arms against the sea of troubles', against enormous odds – if not quite being able to 'by opposing end them', then at least to provide an opening, to start a process, to try to afford some conceptual tools, rather conceptual weapons, at the times when we most dearly need them. Even if many will not quite agree with some of his moves – and Žižek has always been an *agent provocateur*, not catering for consensus, but rather taking a counterintuitive standpoint against the grain of the commonly accepted, and particularly against the pieties of the left – even if many will not quite agree one cannot but marvel at his sustained and daring endeavor.

On the one hand, this can be taken as a model role of a public intellectual, if this outmoded designation still has a meaning, a perspicacious political commentator. On the other hand, this is obviously not an adequate designation, his position of enunciation is not that of a political analyst but that of a philosopher, his interventions are to be taken against the backdrop of his monumental oeuvre (spanning dozens of books over the last 35 years, and this is only in English), a philosophical oeuvre centrally concerned with highly speculative philosophical matters, say Hegel and Lacan as the two central tenets, both among the most difficult and challenging theorists in the whole of the western canon. This elevated and abstract preoccupation of the bulk of his work stands against its necessary and impossible counterpart in dealing with the contingent, with the immediacy of historical and political conjunctures, where it transpires that the high theory can only properly thrive and be sustained if it reaches into the messiness of the historical moment, if it can yield a militant stance, persevering at the core of the controversies of turbulent times.[1] Speculation and political intervention, theory and 'militancy', the one with the other, the thought of the absolute (be it the failed absolute, as the title of one of Žižek's books runs)[2] and the contingency of the singular mess we are embroiled in, the one with the other, not in coalescence, not through a division of labor, but in a necessary tension and friction; not a mere transposition of theory into some practical guidance, but sustaining their intractable tension. It is the disparity between the two that forms a necessary connection, the absolute doesn't dwell somewhere aloof from this mess, but can only be maintained by confronting the mess that conditions its life, the life of the absolute measured against what seems to be its utter opposite, the banal and the vulgar.

The first major immediate effect Žižek's stance underlying his different interventions in this book it that of opposing the complacency in our despondency, working against the sense of despair that has collectively seized us during the last years and particularly the last months, with events spiraling in a constant whirlwind, with no end in sight, and particularly to counteract the gravest danger of enjoying our helplessness and indignation, enjoying venting our rage against the bad ways of the world, something like the beautiful souls crouching in the righteousness over against the ugly evil world which practically every day presents us with new depths of disarray. This doesn't amount to giving practical advice nor to the wisdom of teaching the world what it ought to be (to use Hegel's famous line), but the relentless endeavor that works towards an opening.

If there have always been an intractable tension and a disparity between the elevation of philosophical speculation and the contingency of the immediate actuality it has ultimately to account for, this tension and disparity have hardly ever been as dramatic as during the time when high theory has to engage with the most trivial, vulgar and obscene that is now condensed and epitomized in the signifier 'Trump'. – By way of digression, it is rather peculiar that we are dealing with a most evocative signifier, evocative by its sound value apart from its signifying value, by evocation of a trumpeting sound that silences all the others, a megaphone that makes conversation impossible,[3] the sound value being perfectly supplemented by the signification of 'to trump' as ' to override, to get the better of'.[4] One can be reminded of Derrida's *Glas*[5] and its reflections on the limits of the arbitrariness of the signifier and its necessary counterpart, or supplement, in the onomatopoetic effects. So here is a signifier that is almost like onomatopoetic, but onomatopoetic of what 'natural' sound?[6]

'Trump' figures in the title of Žižek's book and the name is strangely resistant to the multiple and sustained assurances (by Žižek and many others) that this is not about 'Trump' (they sound almost like Freud's notorious 'this is not my mother'),[7] that 'Trump' is merely a symptom, a shorthand for a number of processes that started well before and that made it possible for him to emerge in this role, with all the history of liberalism that produced it. That he is merely a fetish that blinds us for the antagonisms that his massive appearance obfuscates (and Žižek gladly reminds us of Freud's notorious scenario of the production of a fetish, the last thing one sees before confronting the void of castration). The name is something that blinds us for the (supposed) real that stands behind the dazzling and repulsive image and the evocative signifier, so let's talk about the real instead of being blinded – but can we? It constantly turns out that we can't address the real without talking about what obfuscates it, and there is hardly an image that obfuscates in such a massive way, itself taking on the traits of the real. Žižek himself admits to this sin, which is the

major predicament of any theory trying to spell out this historic moment, 'to grasp its time in thought', as Hegel's adage goes, namely to the sin of simultaneous fascination and disgust, the impossibility of circumventing something that transfixes so that we cannot avert the gaze and turn our attention to 'real' problems, however much we try. Something that forces and directs our gaze and imposes his agenda on us, producing the effect of paralysis.

Dealing with the high theory of Hegel (among others) and confronting the trivial, the vulgar and the obscene – is there a contradiction between the two? Are the two extremes irreconcilable? But Hegel himself gives us a cue, or an instigation. He says in the *Phenomenology*: "But the worse the conception, the less sometimes does it occur to one wherein its badness specifically lies, and the harder it is to analyze it."[8] So Hegel's line is that there may be something so bad that it seemingly doesn't even need or deserve figuring out where its badness lies, yet this is the toughest problem for thought – why something so obviously and conspicuously bad can function at all, and one wonders at the possibility of its very existence. It's precisely the trivial and the vulgar that demand the highest speculative efforts. – Hegel's quote, by the way, comes from the section on phrenology, on this fake and ridiculous science, a sham, a caricature of a science, but which leads Hegel to one of his most speculative insights, the notorious infinite judgment 'the spirit is a bone' – maybe the whole question is whether there is an infinite judgment that could trump 'Trump'? If phrenology is a caricature of a science, then we have to do here precisely with a caricature, caricature pertains to Trump's figure itself, a caricature of a 'master' which is more insidious than a supposed 'serious' master. This is why it's impossible to make a parody of him, he is already and excessively a parody himself, from the outset on.[9]

So Hegel imposes this task of thought on us not to shy away, but to stop and consider the bad, and even more, to confront the worst. Yet this may also present our point of separation from Hegel, the dividing line, for the quote continues: "For only what is wholly bad [the worst] is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of turning round into its opposite."[10] Here we have Hegel's adamant conviction, the closet (or rather quite patent) optimism of this thoroughly shrewd man, namely that history is ultimately progressing towards the better, despite its taking strange and catastrophic turns; that the worst will necessarily be overturned, that the worst will capsize, as it were, by its inner necessity (immediate necessity? – but this is the apex of mediation); that things have to proceed all the length to the worst, to the bottom, so that they will eventually inevitably yield the good. Ultimately, there is reason in history, or to put it in Lacanian parlance, there is the big Other underlying the vagaries of historical development (shall we say the invisible hand of the Other?), even and especially through the biggest disasters. But the lesson of the time

that separates us from Hegel, and particularly the lesson of the last few decades, is rather: it can always get worse. There can be no counting on an overturn, no 'unmittelbare Notwendigkeit, sich zu verkehren', no easy dialectic – but a dialectic to be reinvented against all odds, enormous odds? A very difficult kind of dialectic with no predictability and no guarantee? If it glaringly appears that there is no reason in history, we are still in the position of having to figure out the reason for this absence of reason (as Frank Ruda has pointed out), thus pushing Hegel to the utmost, perhaps pushing his notions beyond what he was willing to allow or to concede. To put it in a nutshell: not giving up on the Other nor on its lack – the two arguably always hanged together, we are just facing a particularly drastic instance of it.

Žižek makes one of the harshest (and I guess the most heart-breaking) pronouncements on the very first page, in the first paragraph of his new book, namely that 'Trump' is an event.[11] The most depressing declaration comes already as the opening salvo, the emancipatory notion of event that Badiou made such a great case for now appearing in the guise of its starkest opposite, the opening of generic truth procedures taking the shape of their closure, an event to prevent truth procedures, an event to prevent the event – a *prevent*, one is tempted to say, or better a PR-event[12] – but maybe, such is the tacit assumption or hope, by preventing opening up a site for the event? – One cannot but sadly agree with this statement, yet this poses a whole range of questions about the nature of an event. The event, in Žižek's initial simple definition, is something that changes the very parameters of the situation, of our world, globally – but globally, one must hasten to add, is not universally – or is it so that it affects universality itself? Does the global undoing of universality affect the nature of the universal?

It is as if 'Trump' would in a way present the wet dream of the left, single-handedly bringing about the end of neoliberalism, catastrophically so by bringing it to its fascist consequences, the end of this seemingly invincible monster that kept growing since the eighties, hijacking the dream, or rather the fantasy, of a smooth progress of capitalism within democratic confines for the benefit of all, the fantasy of the post-war era, the time after the defeat the fascist excrescence, essentially the fantasy of social democracy. – One should perhaps remind that neoliberalism survived its biggest crisis (2008 ff.) only to become stronger, with the immense losses of big businesses, losses that were the result of deregulation, being socialized, shifted without further ado on the shoulders of tax payers, by the agency of the most massive state intervention in economy in the whole economic history, in the name of the ideology that massively swore by deregulation. This paradox forms a significant background of the subsequent developments – the huge economic disaster whose perpetrators got away with complete impunity. – If 'Trump' is an event, this is by marking the end of a certain era, the

era which nevertheless and with all the caveats still took for granted the validity of laws and regulations defining national and international relations, or at least put up the appearance of abiding by some basic laws and regulations, even if constantly twisting them – but the appearances matter, as Žižek keeps pointing out again and again. And an era, to make it quick, that was still abiding by some allegiance to facts and arguments, again at least putting up the appearance thereof, the pretense that can be laid bare, but the pretense matters.

The name of the event could be, in Lacanian shorthand: the demise of the big Other. Is this yet another demise of the big Other, another one in the line of complaints of the past two centuries? The big Other seems to have always been an endangered species (and particularly with the advent of modernity), at the same time absolutely necessary and constantly haunted by the lack (which is another way of addressing the dilemma of whether there is reason in history). Ultimately, Lacan maintained that the Other lacks, *l'Autre manque*, that it ultimately doesn't exist, so 'Trump' can be seen as a catastrophic practitioner of a basic tenet of the Lacanian theory. One can remember the Jewish joke that Freud was so fond of: you are telling me that the Other doesn't exist when I know full well that the Other doesn't exist, so why are you lying to me?

During Trump's first term Aaron Schuster made an off-handed remark about the relationship of 'Trump' (and other figures of the new authoritarian populism) to the big Other, suggesting that he (they) simultaneously maintains three positions: first, there is no big Other; second, I am just a mouthpiece or an agent of the big Other (one can see this with his constant bragging 'this is the most important shift in history, this is the biggest political event ever, these are the biggest crowds ever' etc., justifying himself in the eyes of the supposed big Other of history, boasting in the face of some allegedly objective authority, and on the other hand with his paranoic fear of appearing weak in the eyes of the Other; hence also the need for the humiliation of the weak); and third, I am the big Other ('nobody knows what I will do' etc.).[13] Most of Trump's pronouncements can perhaps be summarized by these three categories (and one could extend it by a fourth, say 'I have the biggest Other ever', 'my Other is bigger than yours'), which strangely emulate the famous Freud's argument of the broken kettle ('I never borrowed the kettle at all; it was already broken when I borrowed it; I returned it undamaged').[14] This is an argument which blatantly amounts to the admission of guilt, given the contradictory lines of justification (each of which could make sense if pursued separately) – but this argument strangely works the moment when the admission of guilt is taken for granted and ceases to be an issue. 'I (implicitly) admit guilt, so what?', no consequences follow. What counts is the cheek of making the argument nevertheless, the audacity, the boldness, the impertinence, the impudence, the calculation with impunity, which all make the series of lies and constant contradictions a proof of

'authenticity' beyond justification and accountability. Ultimately all Trump's arguments are the broken kettle arguments, and this is their point, not their weakness but their strength. This is why the critique triumphantly pointing out their contradictions misses the mark. The inconsistency functions precisely as the pledge of a higher 'truth' beyond mere accuracy, consistency or non-contradiction.[15] What counts is rather the display of jouissance that doesn't care about justification; jouissance getting away with impunity. The brazen display of jouissance trumps the arguments, and this is precisely what produces the major trait of this type of power, namely its obscenity – not the hidden enjoyment concealed from the Other as a secret, but the ostentatious exhibition of enjoyment. This is the enjoyment in the Other, the Other appears as the figure of enjoyment, as opposed to the Other of rules and justifications. – But ultimately, and this is the key question, is this the demise of the big Other or rather the emergence of another kind of big Other, quite beyond the figure of Trump and his likes? An intractable big Other? The big Other run amok, ultimately collapsing the distance between the symbolic and the real?

There is something telling in the logic of historic repetition, the fact that 'Trump' became an event in this sense only when repeated. The first time round it could still be understood as an aberration, it was inconceivable at the time that a person like this could actually become a president, and thus it was spontaneously taken to be an exception; while the second time is completely in line with Hegel's take on repetition in history in his *Philosophy of History*: "Through repetition, what at the beginning seemed to be merely accidental and possible, becomes actual and established."[16] This is the remark that instigated Marx's famous rejoinder, namely that Hegel forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.[17] But Trump blurs the lines: his first term largely tended to be seen already as a farce – so shall we say first as farce, then as tragedy? Or maybe rather extending Marx's line by 'then as Trump', the unique blend of tragedy and farce, the parody of their quasi-dialectical synthesis. The tragedy in the guise of fake, the caricature, the parody, the clownishness, the buffoonery – as if the caricature of fascism (if this is indeed the proper designation, Žižek espouses it with some essential qualifications and reservations) emerges as more insidious than the original, it is precisely through the fake, the sham and the parody that it touches upon the real.

A while ago I devoted some work to the concept of authority,[18] taking as a starting point Hannah Arendt's famous paper "What is authority" (1953), where she argues that authority cannot be reduced to either coercion or to persuasion and the power of argument. If one is coerced this is not submission to authority, and being persuaded by argument is not enough for the exercise of authority, there is an irreducible surplus over the two. Let's say, in a simplified way, that symbolic authority maintains itself precisely by not displaying violence upon which it is nevertheless grafted, in the form of an implicit threat. The moment it has to display its brutal

force it loses authority, i.e. the symbolic efficacy which sustains social ties. When it has to send tanks on the streets it displays its weakness, this is the moment of crisis of the symbolic authority. But the baffling thing with Trump is that he fundamentally doesn't care about the symbolic authority, he already presupposes its crisis and takes it for granted, he declares its collapse and starts precisely from there, by inverting the terms of the problem. He thrives on displaying the manifest force as the source of authority: this can take a tell-tale caricature form of the display of the military parade on his birthday, but along with it the crudest form of bombing a whole country into submission; and in between, say the ostensive and calculated violence of deportations proudly shown on TV, the dirty work that the power used to do secretly now put on full display; sending the National Guard and the marines to the streets of LA (not to stifle but to incite more riots); blackmailing the foes and the allies alike with the military and the economic force, establishing the politics as the form of blackmail from the position of superior force. Hence dealing only with the powerful, with what appears as the strong men, Putin, Netanyahu, Xi, Orban ..., strong men comparing their muscles, negotiating the division of the zones of interest. The position of authority is in this universe based on the alleged real of the power of coercion – with no attempt at symbolic justification, with no concern for universality (universality is precisely opening the prospect of 'for all', as opposed to 'for us' or 'for some'). These operations ultimately amount to collapsing the symbolic on the (alleged) real – which in the psychoanalytic book technically spells psychosis, the deactivation of symbolic efficacy. Whereas the philosophic intervention ultimately depends on the possibility of reactivating the symbolic efficacy and opening up the prospect of universality. This is what Žižek tries to do with each of his interventions.

Perhaps the most bewildering and debilitating aspect of this 'Trump' phenomenon (with all the caveats 'this is not about Trump' etc.) is that everything happens in full view, in full display, it seems that nothing is hidden beyond the glittering show-offish surface that we are forced to watch day in day out, defeated by its all too obvious and tragically successful attention grabbing. It is as if there is no need to go beyond or behind the manifest – and this was precisely the task of the traditional leftist ideology critique, to lift the veil of the ideological façade and display the hidden forces that underlie the ideological make-believe, to expose the real antagonisms that ideology obfuscates, the real interests that are the hidden spring of its seeming universal appeal.[19] The critique of ideology becomes utterly powerless when it seems that its object willingly displays all the hidden secrets that it was supposed to debunk. This is precisely what forms the overwhelming obscenity of this kind of power, shamelessly displayed.

What is obscene? The notion can be brought into vicinity in line with Freud's articulation of the uncanny: something comes to light that

should have remained hidden, one sees something that shouldn't have been seen.[20] What should have been hidden has come to light – but what is it? Is it a truth that comes to the fore with this exposure of the hidden? Anything but. To be sure, there was always an obscene side to power, its shameful hidden secrets, its blunt self-interest behind the pretense of ideals, its greed, its narcissistic megalomania, its vulgarity, its petty envy, jealousy, its vindicative nature and malice, but what is new is that now they are put in full display. The business of the classical critique of ideology was to debunk the façade, but what if the object of critique willfully and shamelessly displays the reverse part, and finds precisely in this the major resource of its authority? Are we finally seeing its hidden truth, unveiled, without dissimulation? Quite the contrary, what we see is a double lure, a meta-lure, as it were. Obscenity is the way that the very unveiling starts functioning as a veil; the shadowy hidden part does its apparent coming out and starts acting as the biggest boost of delusion. The emperor may take off all his clothes, and people may cry 'emperor is naked', pointing out the obvious, but to no avail. Even more, the emperor may proudly cry out: look, I am naked (not a bad way to summarize Trump's habitus), thus being always in advance of the outraged critics. This is actually the great title of the book by Yuval Kremnitzer, *The Emperor's New Nudity,*[21] the slogan that spells out this constellation in the most economical way, and the book itself presents both the historical lines of force that led us to this point and the urgency imposed by the present conundrum. As I already said, this has like the structure of the Freudian joke (meta-joke?): why are you so massively demonstrating to me that power is obscene, when I know full well that power is obscene – so why are you lying to me? There is the mechanism by which lifting the illusion actually heightens and enhances the illusion; the lifting of the veil turns into the most obdurate veil. Freudianly speaking, what looks like lifting the repression (and Trump looks like the most shamelessly unrepressed person around) is the sign that the repression itself gets repressed. This is maybe the simplest diagnosis qualifying this present moment – the astounding degree to which the repression itself can get repressed.

If Trump is an event, in the most depressing and the most thwarted meaning of the word, and if the name of this event could be the demise of the big Other, then the most pervasive and insidious sign of this is the unprecedented rise of shamelessness, hardly ever experienced, and of shamelessness presented as liberation against the oppressive restrictions of the symbolic. There is on the one hand the reaction of fascination with someone – with a growing number of people in power, some of the richest and the most powerful people in the world – displaying this shamelessness without any scruples or regards, mistaking this for courage; but there is also a growing starkly opposed reaction, increasingly shared around the globe, that of feeling deeply ashamed when faced with the spectacle of shamelessness. It pertains to shame that one can feel a

deep shame on behalf of the other who blatantly doesn't feel ashamed. And I will end with Deleuze and Guattari who in their *What is philosophy?* (1991) at some point, perhaps surprisingly and in another context, speak of the shame of our participation in the spectacle of power and the market ideology, and take this shame, the call for the awareness of shame, as the biggest incentive to philosophy, its driving force in present day, its *Triebfeder* in the Kantian sense (a necessarily pathological spur of the non-pathological, as it were). I take this, in a different spirit from theirs, to be in line with what I called before the effort to reactivate the powers of the symbolic and to hold on to the opening to the universal which permeates Žižek's endeavor.

> Nor is it only in the extreme situations described by Primo Levi that we experience the shame of being human. We also experience it in insignificant conditions, before the meanness and vulgarity of existence that haunts democracies, before the propagation of these modes of existence and of thought-for-the-market, and before the values, ideals, and opinions of our time. The ignominy of the possibilities of life that we are offered appears from within. We do not feel ourselves outside of our time but continue to undergo shameful compromises with it. This feeling of shame is one of philosophy's most powerful motifs.[22]

1 I can add that this has always been so, I have the privilege of having known Slavoj and closely collaborated with him during the seventies in Ljubljana, fifty years ago, at the time when he was completely unknown abroad, confined to the backwaters of a socialist country at the periphery of worldly events. At the time it was his particular and peculiar stance and insistence on Marxism that caused troubles with the state ideology that put Marxism on its banner. It was not his espousal of non-Marxist theories that got him into trouble, but his insistence on a different kind of Marxist engagement. And it was so during the downfall of socialism, with the new independence of Slovenia, the emergence of a new political constellation, when he actually ran for the position of a member of Slovene presidency at the first democratic elections, at the moment that marked the possibility of a new invention of the social (beyond the then socialism) – but the moment was missed. – I cannot dwell on this here, this is the stuff of another kind of discussion.
2 Žižek 2020.
3 Cf. Saunders 2007. Saunders brilliantly anticipated Trump by imagining a cocktail party where "a guy walks in with a megaphone. He's not the smartest person at the party, or the most experienced, or the most articulate. But he's got that megaphone." The effect is not only that the 'normal' conversation can't go on, but also that he manages to make everyone in the room stupider.
4 "Politics trumps business at this year's Cannes festival", runs a recent dictionary example.
5 Derrida 1986.
6 My English friends tell me that in children's parlance in kindergartens allegedly 'to trump' means 'to fart'. Maybe this is the natural sound it's emulating.
7 The first sentence of Žižek's book runs: "This booklet is not about Donald Trump – so why is his name in the title?"
8 Hegel1977, p. 206.
9 Cf. Terry Gilliam, of Monty Python fame: "Not even the Pythons in their 1960s pomp could match the surreal madcap nature of the presidency. [...] The reality is funnier than anything one can do." (https://www.theguardian.com/culture /2018 /mar /17 /donald-trump-is-funnier-than-monty-python-says-terry-gilliam).
10 Ibid. Here is the German original: "Aber je schlechter der Gedanke ist, desto weniger fällt es zuweilen auf, worin bestimmt seine Schlechtigkeit liegt, und desto schwerer ist es, sie auseinanderzulegen. ... Denn erst das ganz Schlechte hat die unmittelbare Notwendigkeit an sich, sich zu verkehren." (TWA 3, p. 257)
11 "The second term of Trump's presidency is an event – not in the noble sense evoked by Alain Badiou but in the catastrophic sense of an occurrence which makes us aware that a world as we knew it has ended."
12 I owe these puns to Frank Ruda.
13 Schuster 2020. "... to pretend as if there were no Other; to make oneself the mouthpiece of the Other; to identify the Other with one's charismatic persona." (p. 190). The entire book by three authors presented one of the most astute reflections on Trump's first term and needs urgently to be reread.
14 Cf. Freud1976a, p. 100. Freud 1976b, p. 197.
15 This could sound like a terrible parody of Hegel's famous line "Contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi" ("Contradiction is the rule of truth, non-contradiction of the false" – this is what Hegel presented as one of the theses to be discussed at his habilitation defense in August 1801; TWA 2, p. 533). Trump has all the makings of a disastrous practicing Hegelian, but undermining the very notion of truth.
16 "Durch die Wiederholung wird das, was im Anfang nur als zufällig und möglich erschien, zu einem Wirklichen und Bastätigten." Hegel gives two examples from the then immediate recent history: "Thus Napoleon was defeated twice, and twice the Bourbons were driven out." (TWA 12, p. 380)
17 Marx 1999 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm
18 Cf. Dolar 2025, pp. 63-79. See also Dolar 2023, pp. 7-13.
19 I wrote about this at more length in Dolar 2020, pp. 671-680, I partly rely on that. But that was written against the backdrop of Trump's first term, now all the mechanisms became harsher and more ostensive by repetition.
20 "Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open." Freud 2003, p. 132.
21 Kremnitzer 2025.
22 Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 107-108.

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Between Friends

Christopher Fynsk

For my remarks, I propose to start from Slavoj's words in the concluding statement of the materials furnished to us, "Welcome to the Civilization of the Liar's Paradox," and will move quickly to a section in which Slavoj takes up the motif of what is commonly diagnosed today as "the death of truth."

> Rumors seem to fit perfectly today's predicament which many people characterize as the "death of truth" – a characterization which is obviously wrong. The implication of those who use this term is that once before (say, till the 1980s), in spite of all manipulations and distortions, truth did somehow prevail, and that the "death of truth" is a relatively recent phenomenon.
>
> Already a quick overview tells us that this was not the case: how many violations of human rights and humanitarian catastrophes remained invisible, from the Vietnam war to the invasion of Iraq. Just remember the times of Reagan, Nixon, Bush.... The difference was not that the past was more "truthful" but that the ideological hegemony was much stronger, so that, instead of today's greater melee of local "truths," one "truth" (or, rather, one Big Lie) basically prevailed. In the West, this was the liberal-democratic Truth (with a Leftist or Rightist twist). What is happening today is that, with the populist wave which unsettled the political establishment, the Truth/Lie which served as ideological foundation of this establishment is also falling apart. And the ultimate reason for this disintegration is not the rise of postmodern relativism but the failure of the ruling establishment which is no longer able to maintain its ideological hegemony. [...]
>
> So when we hear claims that with the ongoing "collapse of the information ecosystem" our society is falling apart, we should be very clear about what this means: not just that fake news abound, but that what is disintegrating is the Big Lie that till now held together our social space – the "death of truth" thus opens up the possibility for a new authentic truth... or for an even worse big Lie. Is this not happening today with the retreat of liberal democracy which is step by step overshadowed by multiple figures of new Fascism, from neo-feudal populism to religious authoritarianism?

In his previous paragraphs, Slavoj addresses some of the psychic and rhetorical mechanisms by which a concrete, or what he will call at the end of the passage from which I have cited, an "authentic truth," is avoided or obscured–mechanisms that serve the legitimacy and hegemony of what Slavoj calls "the Big Lie" that has structured governing Western ideologies.

I don't want to pause to analyse the proposition, which I find, in its immediate impact in this brief statement, provocative and important. I want to share, rather, two reactions to the words I have cited that shape the path I would take in undertaking a broader analysis.

The first reaction took form as I considered a text that reached me on the day I received Slavoj's essay. This is a letter composed by a group of Nobel Laureates that draws from an example of a letter written by Italian intellectuals in 1925 in response to Mussolini's accession to power for a new declaration against fascism.[1] The text moved and cheered me, at first glance. I then paused as I turned to ask myself whether, and to what degree, it might itself be caught in some way in the Big Lie.

The letter moved me spontaneously because I admired such a gesture in this dark moment of newly ascendant fascism, and I certainly embrace some of its guiding assertions. I strive daily to get a handle on the very real threats and challenges facing my colleagues in the academy and beyond. This is, after all, my job–my first responsibility at the EGS, whose primary purpose in such a moment is to preserve and strengthen a place of gathering (and even shelter) for those attempting to think their time and speak concretely in relation to it. The latter words are pitched quite high, but I do believe that we must be ready, in such a time, to state a reason for being.

And we must be wary of abstraction in such statements. From the perspective of Slavoj's words, we can recognize fairly quickly that despite its real strengths, the letter from the Nobel laureates suffers from a tinge of abstraction–something that is all too common in mission statements in academic discourse. (I think, in a related way, of conference presentations or TED talks that seek to offer us solace regarding the propagation and development of AI by telling us that we, the capable and alerted, need only work together to mitigate the growing danger in our creations. Who is this "*we*?"--and can they seriously be trusted to interrupt the political and economic interests at work?). Without any significant analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the modern university and modern research, or of the many mediatized platforms for intellectual exchange, stirring declarations from the academy (be this Nobel or otherwise) easily risk reproducing, even despite themselves, some aspect of the Big Lie.

Questions for statements on behalf of intellectual responsibility like the one that overtook me after reading Slavoj's essay should address all of us who are gathering here; they should be at least latent, I believe, in all of our deliberations. I learned many years ago from activist groups fighting for the role of philosophy in the French educational system that one must always attend to the institutional conditions of one's practice as an intellectual, whatever one's place, be this in the academy or in the media (Slavoj, of course functions as one of our leading public intellectuals while finding welcome harbour as a professor at the EGS). What does it take in a university or in the media (powerfully neutralizing platforms) to serve the cause of enabling the emergence of a new and concrete "authentic truth"?

That is a very big question. My aim in this moment is simply to put it on our table, and with that I turn to my second reaction to Slavoj's essay. That second reaction links to a motif that runs throughout the material

Slavoj has shared with us, namely the terrible realities that confront us with the situation in Gaza, including the fact that even addressing this question or opening it in some sites, and even some countries, can be hazardous for the intellectual.

How do we address the "Big Lie" that has enabled and enveloped that situation? Obviously, there is an ongoing work of critical history to be done that addresses not only Western geo-political and economic interests at work in the Middle East, but even their more unseemly elements, namely racism. I won't pause over these, but I would like to say a couple words about the way in which the governing ideological order in our Western democracies has appropriated and accommodated the post-war response to the fact of the Holocaust. For many, at least in the intellectual world to which I have belonged, the words "never forget" emerged as a kind of watchword that captured a broader consensus. But with the de-constitution of the "Big Lie" to which Slavoj refers, that watchword falters and is exposed to question. For example, it is difficult not to ask, today, "What, precisely, were we not to forget?" The question emerges not because we have forgotten what we are supposedly not to forget (though clearly that has happened to some measure, at least by denegation), but rather because it now appears that there was possibly some misapprehension of the imperative on the part of the liberal West that adopted it, or at least some inability to think what was spoken there. Because manifestly there has been some terrible forgetting, or at least denial, by those prosecuting the conflict or abetting its unfolding. (I believe one might even suggest that the collapse of the holding power of the watchword helps dramatically to foreground the existence of "the Big Lie.") I will not address this question directly at this point, but I will be returning to it at least indirectly as I take up another point with respect to Slavoj's concern with the possibilities for approaching "new authentic truths."

In the texts by Slavoj submitted for our discussion, one finds a returning motif, which is Slavoj's insistence that we must think a more local truth in the face of the spread of a "worldless" capitalism and the dehumanizing technologies that serve (and now accelerate) its insidious propagation.[2] I learned from Gérard Granel some years ago to address this phenomenon as an unholy jointure of *Technik* and Capital, and I feel very sympathetic with Slavoj's concern, particularly as regards the issues we face in the ecological crisis that now faces us.

Slavoj does not expand on what he intends with the term "local." Clearly, it is a term that requires extensive and even imaginative scrutiny in itself. But from his reference to the Basque struggles, one will recognize a leftist motif with which people of my generation will be quite familiar. One important facet of this struggle has concerned language and an effort, undertaken across the globe, to preserve local languages from destruction. Those who have resided in the U.K. will be familiar with this from efforts to preserve Welsh, Celtic, and even Scots; but again, the struggle has

been pursued in many parts of the world. On this matter, I want only to signal a path of reflection that I have pursued with respect to the topic of a "6th extinction," which the exigency of introducing the notion of the "anthropocene" has pressed upon us. I needn't enter the debates, but I would note that if one examines the maps that document the destruction of species, and maps that document the effacement of human languages, and if one overlays them, then one has grounds for a possible skeptical response to the official view that humankind is not one of the species that faces significant danger of extinction (or if not extinction, a quite dramatic and ruinous transformation).[3] My core point is that the question of language belongs to the issue of how we might work with the term "local." And I would specify that I think far more is at stake here than the hegemony of the English language (or others), given that the threat to language usage posed by AI is now a general one of uncanny and devastating force.

You will see from this last remark that it is difficult for me to avoid responding to Slavoj's evocation of locality and "authentic truth" from the grounds of my work on Heidegger. I refer, of course, to Heidegger's thought on the human relation to language, which has been the topic of much of my work. But the notion of locality also cannot fail to evoke, for someone like myself, the motif of dwelling, particularly if our concern is an earthly or even bodily being in the world. I won't take advantage of the absence of my friend and valued colleague to engage a debate on Heidegger that I have sought with him (unsuccessfully!) for quite some time in Saas Fee. I simply want to note that if we approach this question of dwelling with Heidegger's own guide, which is Hölderlin, we can recover a thought of dwelling that can be of use–though I believe we must always recall Hölderlin's personal despair in this matter, and his identification with a fundamentally *exiled* Oedipus, that "poor stranger in Greece" (from "In lieblicher Bläue…"). In Hölderlin's thinking and writing, there was always a shadowing *Unheimlichkeit*. Even the beautiful words about the "philosophical light" outside his window in the homecoming he describes in the second of the famous letters he wrote to his friend Casimir Böhlendorf are accompanied by his expressed desire that he always remember how he got there–which necessarily means remembering his exposure to an inappropriable alterity.

An insistent appeal to the local and efforts to realize some social instantiation of it easily devolve into an appeal to identity that brings with it the problems that have fueled the critique of the metaphysics and the general task of deconstruction. No deployment of local reference and cultural identity that proceeds to seek social control can finally suppress *das Unbehagen in der Kultur*–that "thing" (as Lyotard named it) whose destabilizing presence prompts manifestations of paranoia and various forms of scapegoating and xenophobia. I move too quickly and state the obvious, but this is why critical thought and work like Slavoj's remains an essential and ongoing necessity.

Here, a reference to Heidegger's own grasp of the task of deconstruction evidently cannot suffice–unless we undertake to rethink what he offered furtively in the existential analytic with the notion of *Mitsein* (being-with). The notion has to be rethought thoroughly, which is to say from the ground, or rather the groundless, up. Heidegger cannot take us far with that work (though there are significant hints), and his own steps with the concept were infamous. He turned *Mitsein* into a relationality that allowed for the definition of a national subject. But he left an opening that was exploited by several French writers, principally among them Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot's manner of forcing that opening with his thought of friendship and community is of particular importance for us by reason of his manner of giving this thought an ethico-political meaning that surfaced quite dramatically in the 1960's, first with a notion of refusal (which is echoed by Slavoj in an interesting way in his essay on the "liar's paradox") and then a thought of freedom. That latter thought takes on particular force when we read it against the backdrop of Blanchot's experience with the group that formed around Robert Antelme and honored the witness he bore as a survivor of Nazi camps, including Dachau, where he was finally rescued. Here, as it happens, in Blanchot's meditation on that witness (I use the word loosely here, because there is more than Antelme's extremely important account of his captivity in The Human Race (*L'espèce humaine*)[4]; there is also a very singular form of being with those close to him, something borne in his singular presence), we find something of an answer to what it is not to forget. That answer appears in a text to which I have turned frequently and will cite partially once again for its force and brevity. Less than a page in length, the text, "In the Night that is

Watched Over," recounts Blanchot's experience of a voice that he takes to be Antelme's which comes to him in his sleeplessness. That voice points to the effacement of a memory of the camps.

> "But," I say, speaking, not speaking, "do we forget?"—"Yes, you forget; you forget all the more for remembering. Your memory does not impede you from living, from surviving, nor even from loving me. But one does not love a dead person, because then the meaning escapes you, the impossibility of meaning, the nonbeing and impossibility of nonbeing."
>
> When I reread these lines, I know that I have already lost sight of Robert Antelme, the incomparable friend I knew. He was so simple, and at the same time so rich, with a knowledge that the greatest minds lacked. In the experience of servitude that was his, even if he shared it with others, he kept the human truth from which he knew not to exclude even those who oppressed him.
>
> But he went even further: not recognizing a companion (K.) he had come to see in the infirmary, who was still alive, he understood

> that there is a nothingness in life itself, an unfathomable void against which one has to defend oneself, even while acknowledging its approach. We must learn to live with this void. [5]

As you will see, there are two things Blanchot underscores in what he takes to be an admonition from Antelme–two elements in the knowledge Antelme brought back with him and that Blanchot takes up in something like a work of anamnesis. The first point comes in a swift reference to a new thought of humanism that Antelme articulates in The Human Race, and from the grounds of which Antelme would articulate a quite forbidding form of human responsibility. Here, as Blanchot would say, is "authentic truth." For Antelme, any social structure of the modern capitalist world in which one group conceives itself as somehow superior to any other (or "more properly human") is actually a reflection of what was instituted in the camps in a horrifying form. Never forgetting would mean never condoning such structures and never allowing such horror. I won't dwell on this point now, but I think it is obvious that the contemporary world is suffering a form of forgetting that involves a terrible reversion.

I described Antelme's new humanism above as radical, and I did so not only because his experience and the work that followed led to a singular communist commitment. Its real radicality finds its source in the second point adduced by Blanchot, namely that we assume in human existence a relation to nothingness that is unsublatable–something that introduces the trace of an incommensurable in every human relation. Blanchot, following Antelme faithfully, goes very far with this, and I won't try to unfold what this means on this occasion. But on the way in this course of thought, and this means in the company of Levinas, but also with that of Antelme, Duras, Morin, Mascolo, Vittorini, and others who visited that singular "locality" referred to as "6 rue Saint Benoît," Blanchot came to articulate something that is perhaps close to the Jewish humanism to which Udi Aloni refers to in the statement cited by Slavoj in the essay "Sumud." He thought a humanism without vengeance (or *ressentiment*) that is essentially "exilic" inasmuch as it places a movement of "going out" toward the other–and first of all the human other–into any search for authentic truth.

I want to say in a far too hasty conclusion that I don't believe Blanchot's exilic humanism is necessarily incompatible with a thought of locality, I want to suggest that one can dwell in a locality "exilically" if one assumes one's native strangeness. But this requires a more consequent thought of hospitality and openness than the West has been able to embrace. And therein lies the task.

1 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/13/nobel-laureates-fascism?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-1
2 See “The Global World of Local Traditions,” and “Sumud: Remember this Word..”
3 For this “official view,” I refer to The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List of Threatened Species. My remarks on the death of languages are partly informed by the work of Romaine and Nettle 2000.
4 Antelme 1998.
5 Blanchot 2010, p. 133.

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Fascist Libertarianism. Žižek and the Present

CRISIS & CRITIQUE

Volume 12/Issue 1

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1. Too Late… Now!

The following is an attempt to think with and through a selection of Slavoj Žižek's most recent – that is from 2025 – diagnostic-conjunctural writings.[1] This thinking through his reflections is also a thinking through his account of our contemporary present. The form is that of an exploded commentary. Žižek's conjunctural interventions can easily appear to be nothing but political commentary and sometimes almost journalistic in form and style. But in spirit and methodology, they rather share a feature with the very late Hegel. For it is the latter who in 1831 wrote a text on the "English Reform Bill", a reformation attempt of the law, which granted the right to vote to a broader part of the male population as long as they would be property owners and came into effect in 1832. I do not want to get into too much of the details of neither the bill nor of Hegel's far reaching and critical account of this transformation of the English electoral set-up here – one of his basic lines is that it ultimately undermines the very constitutional principle of what a people is and erodes its inner customs and habits and does so by suggesting that a gradual reform of an internally exclusive and problematic electoral system could be considered an improvement – but he is unconvinced that what needs to be done is establishing "a greater degree of symmetry… [of] numbers, localities, and private interests."[2] The very assumption that a reform could improve a flawed system by means of an expansion of that very system conceptually avoids overcoming the flaws of the system and thereby is rather aimed at its reproduction.

That Hegel wrote – and 1831 is the very year of his death – of a bill that would reform and change the British constitutional system is in itself noteworthy. But it is especially so in relation to how Slavoj Žižek thinks and intervenes into the present world. Since one of Hegel's most famous remarks concerns determining the position of philosophy and therefore the very position of philosophical theory with regard to its time and its place in the world. This is what he called the attitude, stance or "position of thought toward objectivity [*die Stellung des Gedankens zur Objektivität*]."[3] This remark concerns the fact that philosophy always and constitutively comes too late and does not arrive on time. In this very spirit, Hegel said somewhere about spirit, that "the later spirit is that it knows what the earlier was." But how and why does it then say anything about what is happening in its very own historical time and context?

Stressing that philosophy always comes too late means for Hegel that philosophy is never in the business of telling us what to do (next or in the everyday) or of giving us any instructions (how things ought to be, for any such ought is ultimately Kantian). And Žižek, being one of the reasons why there is a renewed interest in Hegelian thought and why there exists a novel possibility to rethink our entire conception of Hegel and Hegelian dialectics, is certainly aware of this. So, how does one square this circle, namely that philosophy conceptually, by definition, as

such always comes too late, Hegel and Žižek are certainly philosophers or understand themselves in such a way, yet they comment on everyday events, or what happens, what is and takes place objectively? The famous Hegelian account of philosophy's constitutive belatedness can, as is well-known, be found in the *Vorrede* or *Vorwort*, in the preface or preamble—Hegel uses both terms—to his *Philosophy of Right*. It can thus be found in the discourse that precedes the beginning of the proper philosophical discourse. If the *Vorrede* is structurally placed before the book that it prefaces, what is said about philosophy in it must be said structurally too early or pre-philosophically. Hegel begins to close the preface of the *Philosophy of Right* by stating: "But it is time to close this preface [*Vorwort*]. After all, as preface, its only business has been to make some external and subjective remarks about the standpoint of the book it introduces"[4]. This is what Hegel states right after he indicates that philosophy begins when "a shape of life has grown old."[5] It seems that as soon as one records that philosophy always comes too late, it is immediately time to close that which precedes philosophy. The time of philosophy is that of the "*now*, it is too late!"

When one states that philosophy always comes too late, it seems the right time to begin with philosophy. If philosophy comes too late, it also seems its very own belatedness can only be addressed from outside of philosophy or: too early. There thus seems to be a paradox here: if philosophy always comes too late, it seems to come too late to say that it comes too late and hence there is no philosophical way to say anything about philosophy's belatedness within philosophy. All philosophical thought therefore seems strangely rushed. Lenin – not necessarily a philosopher though, but someone who returned to Hegel after the historical shock that all social democratic parties with very few exceptions where ready to send their workers into what will turn out to be the cataclysmic hell of the 1st World War – will point out that time is so precious that he was rushed into finishing *State and Revolution*, which is why the whole text bears the stamp of conjunctural urgency, of precipitation, of a peculiar conceptual haste. And Žižek is certainly one of the most prominent thinkers today who also formulated several strong pleas never for a simple return to, but certainly for a repetition of Lenin.[6]

Philosophy comes too late for Hegel, but it can strangely appear as if it sometimes must rush to do so. The haste of belatedness. Coming too late involves a risk. The risk that now it is *really* too late and thus that it is right now the time of and for philosophy – to come too late. And this is what methodologically informs Žižek's approach. The wager that his thought so often exhibits. Philosophy therefore speaks the language of what is at the end of its life, of the life grown old: it is the language of old men—and one should here remember that this was Hegel's nickname from when he was in the Tübingen Stift, in the seminary: the old man. He had learned this language already rather early in his life. We thus are

confronted with a version of the joke cited by Lacan about the fiancé who is never late because the moment she is late, she is no longer my fiancé. Philosophy always comes too late, because the moment it is not too late, it would no longer be philosophy (and turn into, for example, journalism or mere political commentary). The way in which we see Žižek's thought operating always confronts and mobilizes the wager that is indicative of the philosophical act par excellence. Žižek's wager lies in proposing that no phenomenon of the objective world, the world of objectivity as such resists rational comprehension. It is a totalizing wager. For this purpose, as is well-known, Žižek sides with psychoanalysis and its quite far-reaching reconceptualization of the very concept of reason, because he aims to uphold that – to mobilize another famous Hegelian trope, there is reason in history. And maybe this holds paradoxically even when there is none. For how would one know that there is none without this presumption? How to explain the withering of reason – without reason. But as the frame of rationality us such suffered as historical crack, a historical breakdown and seemed abolished, in these moments, has to do what Lenin did in 194, namely face one's despair and "articulate the Truth of the catastrophe."[7]

Even in the worst times Žižek aims at rationally grasping phenomena of the world – and be it the downfall of the rational structure of this very world – in a rational manner. This does not imply that it will all go (down) well, that there is reason (in history) as a big Other that finally has our back. It rather implies that one has to maintain rationalism in the moments of its decay and obvious ungroundedness – without assuming that it is on one's side at all.

One possible definition of philosophy in Hegel is that it is nothing, but its own time apprehended in thought. Žižek clearly also aims at rationally apprehending its own time and is thus philosophy. But apprehending one's own time now means to find the right moment to be too late. Apprehension needs timing and timing is thus – with Hegel and psychoanalysis and – combining both – with Žižek – a defining feature of philosophy. Philosophy must arrive on time, but its time is that of the too late. Only thereby it can apprehend its own time and grasp it in the medium of its rationally articulated concept. Philosophy thereby times and has to time oddly.[8] And if coming too late always implies a wager, this wager has to do with a risky decision that right now the time is ripe to punctuate the world with an intervention, because a shape of spirit has grown old. However, sometimes shapes of spirit can look younger and more alive than they are. And some old shapes might drag on forever, even though their time has already come. This is what Gramsci referred to as the time of monsters.

Ernst Bloch once insinuated that one can compare philosophy's operation to that of a detective, since the latter also always comes after

the crime. But sometimes it is not only the murderer but also the crime that is difficult to detect – like when Sherlock Holmes states that the fact that the dog did *not* bark (when a horse was stolen) is a curious incident. Part of the philosophical act is to determine what exactly the shape of spirit is that we are now trying to comprehend. The wager thus concerns the *shape of the shape*.

Žižek calls the current shape that needs comprehension *fascist libertarianism*. There are a multiplicity of factors contributing to its constitution: including the potential transformations of the economic and political dynamic of present-day capitalism, new forms of authoritarianism, new forms of right-wing populism, new modes of domination, general ideological confusion, developments in the general ethical infrastructure of the world, biomanipulation, ecological crises, international conflicts, and many more forms of socio-political degeneration. Any attempt to apprehend one's own time in thought and concept unavoidably also implies the risk of totalization. It implies an act by means of which one extrapolates certain features and risks the declaration that they are constitutive to understand the very essence of our current moment, of our present time. This amounts to risking an identificatory claim that "this is X (techno feudalism, just capitalism, neo-authoritarianism...), because all these features are what is X."

Coming appropriately too late is risky because one must identify the very shape of spirit in the act of conceiving of it. It implies that it is previously unclear what the name of the shape is that we shape through the name. Already for Bloch – and certainly also for Žižek – philosophy, due to its constitutive belatedness, has always been a rather disastrous crime-preventer. This is why Adorno famously begins his *Negative Dialectics* with a claim addressing philosophy's present temporality. He argued that the only reason why there still is philosophy is because it came so late, it even missed "the moment" to be "realize(d)."[9] After missing an appointment, it really should have attended – after really coming too late –, it began leading a strange afterlife, a *Nachleben*. It is as if it came too late to come too late. Now, it must come to terms with the problems newly created by missing its own realization. Therefore, it must "ruthlessly criticize itself."[10] Philosophy's only task is to offer a critical account of its own failure to fail the right way, whereby philosophy ultimately must stop being philosophy and turn into critical theory.

This was not Hegel's and is certainly also not Žižek's position. Philosophy is neither the criminal doing the deed, nor is it the supposed hero turning out to be a crippled disappointment. Hegel claims that "philosophy in any case always arrives on the scene too late to give it."[11] "It" here being "instructions as to what the world ought to be."[12] Philosophy does not arrive early enough to offer prescriptions of how the world out to be or what to do. But it must draw a line of demarcation, namely between what seems to be and what truly *is*. This means that philosophy's task is to

think being from the perspective of truth or the absolute. And the latter's time is that of constitutive belatedness, of the delay. Philosophy must aim at the "*comprehension [Erfassen] of the present and the actual*."[13] But when it tells people what to do, it takes the present to be "something vacuous [*ein Eitles*] and looks beyond it with the eyes of superior wisdom."[14] When philosophy does not comprehend the present-actual, it begins too early and cannot but help to speak about and aim at a "beyond, supposed to exist."[15] Arriving too early comes with the arrogant temptation and displays the temptations of arrogance that one already has all (the knowledge) one needs – and that knowledge is all one needs.

Philosophy therefore must come too late to avoid voiding its own discourse in advance. It must operate at a distance from the state (of things). This implies that philosophy can easily – and always – fail to be philosophy. Starting to paint the grey in grey implies the wager of declaring that there is reason in the world or that there is reason for the downfall of a shape of spirit. It gets even more risky when one seeks to substantiate that there is a reason for there to be no reason (in a certain period of history).[16] It might always happen that philosophy starts painting too early. If philosophy provides a grasp—*eine Fassung*—of its time in the form of thought, as the adage goes, the wager concerns this very time, namely that it reached an end, that one can get a hold of it. If it captures therefore a shape of spirit that is haunting or terrifying us, the ability to capture and grasp it is good news. Because thereby it is one can conceive of its end (even though there is no easy measurement for how quickly the adequate philosophical grasp will ever translate into the practice of the grasped shape disappearing – this is an intricacy linked to the entire history of Marxist thought of which Žižek in our present day is certainly also one most influential proponents). This obviously is reminiscent of the intricacies of psychoanalytic timing – which is ultimately not only about understanding the meaning of a certain shape of spirit or symptom.

Both are not that different in the end. As both are acts of transforming suffering into ordinary unhappiness, a transformation that Freud famously took as defining feature of analytic practice. Fredric Jameson has once raised the question of how to transition into a form of post-capitalist form of society by suggesting that the forming of a universal army could produce interesting results. But he also suggested that the degree of collectivization that such a move would generate an unavoidable new dimension of unhappiness produced by being together in such novel ways. Could one, against this background, not suggest that *communism* could be defined not as an organization that solves all kinds of social and economic problems but rather as an organization that allows for *collective* (and maybe even *shared*) *ordinary unhappiness*? Finally, an attempt to solve collective problems collectively and to find new means of forming collectivity by experimenting how one fails at solving them?

2. The Highest Stage of Liberalism

What is the name of our today? "Fascism" names our present in an imprecise and therefore inadequate manner for Žižek. For certain signifiers block systematic comprehension as they seem to represent an act of analysis but don't and thereby operate in a disorienting fashion. They fulfil – as signifiers – a defence-mechanistic function. This is especially the case when they suggest that they are able provide orientation. As Hegel famously stated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "What is familiar and well known (*bekannt*) as such is not really known (*erkannt*) for the very reason that it is *familiar and well known*. In the case of cognition, the most common form of self-deception and deception of others is when one presupposes something as well known and then makes one's peace with it."[17] Often, with Hegel and Žižek, the adequate name for a phenomenon needs to be found and nuance is thereby of the essence. The issue is to name it in the right way and at the right moment in time. Concepts are timed. This is why Žižek provocatively asks "Is Trumpian populism really just a new form of fascism?" And he adds that the signifier "fascism" seems just all too familiar and leads to a form of self-deception as well as to the deception of others. One can give greater contour and precision to the signifier "fascist" if one locates its present-day occurrence within the historico-conceptual transformation of and *within liberalism*.[18] The naming of the present is then determined on the basis of a different analysis of the conjuncture.

Žižek's is a historical and dialectical materialist approach. It operates through the parallax between the two.[19] He states: "what we are getting today is not fascism with a liberal mask, but liberalism brought to its (fascist) conclusion, to the actualization of its hidden immanent potentials." We therefore do not move from democratic liberalism to fascism or from liberal democracy to fascist strategies. Rather the movement is a movement within liberalism: fascist liberalism brings out the actual truth of liberalism. This very truth manifests as fascist libertarianism. This is why those who see in the authoritarian forms of today a simple return of fascism or a move to neo-fascism miss a crucial conceptual point. The ground of the (conceptual and historical) genesis of fascist libertarianism is liberalism – or in other nomenclature: capitalism. Liberalism today brings out its own libertarian aspect. Because this side for Žižek has always been in conflict and contradiction with progressive liberalism (which manifests inter alia in the form of political correctness movements or affirmative action protests). It is precisely their antagonism which is constitutive of liberalism.

This is why Žižek states with Horkheimer that whoever does not want to talk about liberalism should remain quiet about fascism. In different terms: a figure like Trump is not adequately understood by only focussing on the authoritarian aspects of his political agenda, but rather

only by identifying him as a sovereign figure that is directly linked to the fascist libertarian side of liberalism. He is authoritarian mainly insofar as his aim is to create an entirely unregulated and, in this sense, harshly destructive form of market liberalism that suspends all ethical limitations and individual protections. This is why here again it is crucial to identify what the signifier "authoritarian" effectively means. Trump, for example, uses the power that his presidency, the house of representatives and the senate gives him. But the problem is not that he seems to assume the role of the master – often modifying and transforming the implicit rules of political conduct – but it is linked to the way in which he does it. All his obscenities, the ordinary perversions that have become predominant with him are a marker of this eroding transformation. It is here that Žižek adds that Trump can be identified as a fascist if in general we understand the fascist project to be one of conservative modernization, so inherently contradictory. Part and parcel of this development is that liberalism implies a defence of the freedoms of the individuals against whatever is seen as their infringement by state regulations. But today the individuals whose freedom needs to be protected are those addressed by Žižek as "neo-feudal masters", who in turns infringe the freedom of all other individuals (and invent entirely new forms of exploitation, especially of those of the vulnerable and poor). This dynamic is part of Žižek's concept of the obscene. It is a form of transforming the ethical substance, the very matter of the social bond that is constitutive of society. The signifiers at its core are now used as means to undo this very substance. Ethical substance in fascist libertarianism is privatized. This brings forth more than just a group of feudal lords. It is rather a series of private kings (private because they are and are not the kings of anyone anymore). We encounter a privatization even of the social functioning of kingdom or monarchy. A desocialization of the social functioning of kingdom.

What Žižek puts forth then is an account of the transformation of the contemporary forms of domination that are linked to the historicizing classification of the economic political order that we are no longer – or no longer only – living in. For capitalism, our current economic-political condition, needs to be rethought in terms of neo or techno-feudalism (an idea championed by a series of contemporary thinkers).[20] This transformation does not only address a new level of centralization of means of production, but rather, for Žižek, a general shift in the ontology of value. Certain forms of exploitation, for example, disappear today. An Uber driver is no longer exploited by Uber as Uber just mediates between someone who needs a ride and someone who offers one, so exploitation disappears. Thereby the predominant form of creating surplus value does no longer take the form of profit but the form of rent. This shift is even worse that it appears to be, because those who own what we rent from them – say our computer operating systems – also control us through the very media we rent from them in ways that are hardly at all fathomable.

This is the predominant form of fascist libertarianism in the West. In Russia, on the other side, Putin applies another type of harsh and brutal modernization in Žižek's account. One that rejects the European enlightenment by mobilizing a form of Eurasian Russian spirituality (that one can already detect something of this in Solzhenitsyn[21]) that is affirmed as something that ultimately will be resisting any appropriation by state power by taking state power. It is a form wherein there is a peculiar coincidence of the resistance to state power with the very seat of state power. Examples of this can be seen in phenomena like the storm of the capitol or, even more clearly, in all the work DOGE has done. This is undoing state agencies from the position of state power. There are thus different modes of conservative modernization that can be called fascist within the liberal framework. What Žižek identifies as fascist characteristics is thus a malleable and highly adaptable mode of operating: it can occur in different shapes and fulfil quite different functions, and thereby is even able to serve as surrogate for a truly emancipatory outlooks. This allows the highest stage of liberalism to perform an undoing of any universal and general political vision and any vision of the world. Capitalism has always proved its ability to remain operative in all kinds of contexts – democratic or otherwise, even paradoxically in those that are still nominally communist, in China there exists a communist capitalism – and it has now entered a stage where it appears to function best in fascist libertarian ways. The only global vision capitalism in its present form puts forth is the global undoing of any universal vision.

A crucial part of contemporary capitalism in its fascist libertarian form consists therefore for Žižek of implementing a novel form of domination, that of the "neo-corporate feudal masters." They exert their power by suspending any possibility for public control and even public awareness. To modify an argument that Žižek made at another occasion, we could say that the difference between the West and China nowadays – when it comes to issues of population control and concrete forms of domination – is that the Chinese at least know that they live in China, while in the West still prevails the assumption that we are free (and are unsurveiled when, for example we surf the internet) or in his words: "the Chinese human rats are at least aware they are controlled, while we are the stupid rats strolling around unaware of how our movements are monitored."[22] The global spread of this invisibilized form of domination of the neo-corporate feudal masters produces the peculiar effect that we are all living under Chinese conditions today, even though only the Chinese know it. Capitalism's detotalizing tendency, its undoing or dissolving tendency, shows itself as a reified and reactionary form of what Freud and Hegel "Ungeschehen machen"[23], of undoing, of making undone, which today reaches a new height.[24] It consequently brings about the disintegration of public order all around the world. Fascist libertarianism

is a category that describes the undoing and unbinding, the dissolving of the social core of sociality as an effect of (almost) having been able to appropriate the very powers of truth, the very powers of the absolute.[25] Undoing, now, as domination.

3. Obscenities of the Present and the Diversification of Unemployment

Fascist libertarianism is not simply authoritarianism but aims at the undoing of the very matter of the social bond. A symptom of this, in Žižek's terms, is the omnipresent forms of obscenity in politics that manifest, inter alia, in being able to say or do things that just a while ago were entirely unthinkable.[26] Two examples (both are mine): A recent *Guardian* headline stated: "strikes on Iran ease pressure on Isreal to end starvation in Gaza"[27] and just a little later Friedrich Merz, the German chancellor, stated that Isreal with its attack on Iran is doing "the dirty work for us."[28] Žižek's approach appears to not let anyone get too used to what is now – the obscene dominating – the objective world. It aims at retaining the shock that results from such obscenity becoming a world-structuring principle. In this sense, one can identify his approach as an attempt to re-induce a form of shame for obscene times of shamelessness.[29] For a world whose structure is obscene – and in this sense fascist libertarianism and obscenity are intrinsically linked – loses the character of being a world, that is a space, which allows for the very possibility of a basic *Mit-Sein* (being-together), in other words, where – conceptually – everyone is provided a symbolic place. Badiou has therefore called capitalism wordless.[30] Žižek's discussion of the Kafue River catastrophe (an acid spill by a Chinese mining company that affected about 60% of Zambia's population) highlights such obscene structure of contemporary worldnessness.

He states: "The lesson is that the developed world is outsourcing even the catastrophes that ruin the environment to the Third World countries where people live in a much more unspoiled 'natural' world. If you want to enjoy unspoiled nature, go to a German or Norwegian forest; if you want to see ecological catastrophes caused by modern technology, go to an unspoiled African country." The obscenity of this situation is only increased by the fact that the worker's protests against the neglect of safety were dealt with by bringing over workers from China, ready to do the same work for less wage. Žižek brings to the fore the impasses that drive and constitute such a conjuncture. Because all this happens under the condition that the same Chinese investments provide thousands of jobs in the region and is thus, despite its destructive and undoing effects, a crucial infrastructural development factor. Such – inherently contradictory – phenomena allow, nevertheless, to grasp the very functioning of capital itself. For what one can see in this successful ruining of the Zambian conjuncture is the advancement of capitalism by means of catastrophe. It also demonstrates how its increase of productivity always

produces in the very same move a series of detrimental consequences. It comes with a depletion of natural resources. But this is not it. It always also generates another increase in unemployment.[31] Capitalism always produced unemployment, but if capitalist liberalism has reached a new historic phase, one can infer that this holds as well for its production of unemployment.

For today, it no longer only fulfils the traditional function(s) of the industrial reserve army (which capital needed so that there is, inter alia, permanent competition among the workers whereby it can uphold its own level of operativity more easily and enslave them more indirectly[32]). Ours is a situation, as Žižek states citing Fredric Jameson, in which "massive populations around the world... have, as it were, 'dropped out of history',... deliberately excluded from the modernizing projects of First World capitalism and written off as hopeless and terminal cases."[33] This is, as it were, the prize one has to pay for the types of modernization that are constitutive for fascist libertarianism.[34] Such radicalized form of permanent exclusory unemployment is thus not simply an accident of history. It is a systemic and constitutive effect which does not only appear in the framework of so-called failed states where infrastructures and basic social life have collapsed. This is why Žižek argues that we should expand the category of the unemployed beyond its immediate remit. We should expand it such that it includes a broader array of undoings and can capture what is an essential part of capitalism's contemporary doing, namely the dissolution that is part of its productivity-raising expansion and intensification.

Žižek's conceptual expansion allows to make visible the dismissed und unbound masses of global populations and the possible stratifications that take place within this very mass of people. Today, there are for Žižek "the temporary unemployed", the "no longer employable and permanently unemployed", the "people living in slums and other types of ghettos (all those often dismissed by Marx himself as "lumpen-proletarians")", then there are "wholes areas, populations or states excluded from the global capitalist process, like the blank spaces on ancient maps", there are "the formerly employed but now unemployable", the "illegally employed" – this is a group that, to my mind, includes those who often work under conditions that come close to that of actual slavery. One can here think of the spam-email-industry, the so-called "cyberscam farms" which often operate by luring people who struggle for their livelihood into situations, where they have to move country and with promises of steady employment and solid pay and then take from then their very means of leaving, i.e. their passports.[35] Then there are those, to which some of contemporary academia belong. They have been "educated with no chance of finding employment: a whole generation of students have almost no chance of finding... employment... and the worst way to resolve the gap is to directly subordinate education to the demands

of the market", because it is exactly the market the renders university education actively irrelevant. One can here think of all those lines from the people around the conservative party in the US which openly defend de-education by stating that avoiding spending money on a degree that is useless in the real world is the best way of attempting to be successful (without what might be called an educational detour).[36]

However, in and with the potentially unemployed university educated – who are unemployed because their skill set is deemed useless in the present conjuncture – is nevertheless identifiable a potential that gives reason as to why Trump and his followers aim to undo and dissolve the useless knowledge production in and by, especially, even if not only, humanities departments. These departments are flagged as and therefore represented as being potentially politically threatening – because, for example, in the campus protests – that are not only humanities endorsed – they appear to uphold a certain degree of decency against or indicate the shamelessness of certain acts.[37] Universities are thus identified by their enemies as potential *institutions of shame*.

Žižek suggests that it is precisely such position of useless knowledge produced, and this especially in the university humanities department, which does today appear to be the locus of potential future emancipatory movements and ideas – one reason as to why the reaction to the campus protests in the US but also, say, in Germany was so harsh. Traditionally, universities have exactly *not* been places of potential radical transformation or resistance but rather proved to be quite problematic institutions as they administered and organized but never really produced any novel knowledge, which is part and parcel of Lacan's account of the discourse of the university (and which is also why, for example, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud worked outside of the university).[38] But the potential that fascist libertarians identify in and with the university, what they perceive as dangerous is the potential that is linked to a break-up of the very framework of the university (as mere knowledge-mediation). Can a university do anything when the situation is so dire? Can it reframe or reinvent itself such that is becomes a place of exile (a university for Nietzsches, Marxes and Freuds)? And can it thereby serve as a mediator of the different strata of unemployment?

4. Unemployed Negativity and the Negativity of the Unemployed

With the diversification of unemployment, one could be reminded of the famous trope of unemployed negativity at the end of history. In the famous letter to Kojève George Bataille noted – with the intention to thereby refute what he saw as Hegel's too synthesizing vision – that: "If action ('doing') is – as Hegel says – negativity, the question arises as to whether the negativity of one who has 'nothing more to do' disappears or remains in a state of

'unemployed negativity'."[39] The question of the diverse types of unemployed therefore can be said to bring back the question of negativity in a novel manner, as negativity of the unemployed. Obviously, negativity is not always the same – how could it ever have been? But novel forms of unemployment allow us to also conceive of novel forms of negation.[40] The point can be grasped by reference to the famous joke from Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* that Žižek has brought to prominence (the joke is – and I am leaving aside the context in which it is told in the movie – about someone ordering a coffee without milk, an order to which the waiter replies that they are out of mild but could bring a coffee without cream). The point of the joke is that distinctions cannot only be articulated in relation to actually existing things, but also in the "without", in what they are lacking. A coffee without milk is thus different from one without cream (even though the coffee might look identical). In view of the diversification of the unemployed, one also must learn to perceive the differences in the "without". I would like to suggest that this distinction cannot but imply a stratification (not an objective one but one that will be (mis)represented as objective): in some of these strata of unemployment there is – depending on the gaze and maybe only for the fascist libertarian eyes – a potential emancipatory potential and in others there is rather none. The diversification of the unemployed allows to more precisely situate the place of this potential potential of emancipatory politics if there is ever any.[41]

At one point in the book Žižek insinuates with regard to the diversification of the class or non-class of the unemployed that its analysis needs to be understood, today, in line with another regressive movement. For, he claims, we moved back from the political actuality of the concept of the proletariat to that of the rabble. Why? And what is the rabble? The rabble, in Hegel, is a subjective figure that emerges when someone employed has lost more than just her place in a given objective social framework (mediated by labour). She has lost more because she has also lost her subjective mindset that enables her to participate in a society's everyday life. She has thus lost the very attitude that would allow her to be a part of the community she belongs to. This is why whoever belongs to the rabble becomes – for Hegel – shameless.[42] But Hegel – and Žižek does not elaborate this specific point in the book – also noted that there are two types of rabble: the poor rabble and the rich rabble. The poor rabble is the contingent effect of a necessary and therefore unavoidable violence of the economic system itself. This is to say, who is going to be part of the rabble is contingent, but because the rabble-attitude forms in the poor and poverty is unavoidably a product of the existing economic system, the possibility of the rabble is structurally and constantly given. If the poor rabble emerges, they become shameless and claim that the existent legal system has no real right to exist, because it demands of everyone to work but structurally makes the fulfilment of this demand impossible and produces outcasts. Therefore, it loses its conceptual legitimacy.

The rich rabble is generated according to a different mechanism: by an individual excluding herself from the general system of social mediation through labour – because they can live and maintain themselves through wealth or inheritance for example. This tempts them to turn themselves into what Hegel describes as "gamblers"[43] before they then – in case they contingently win on the market and thus acquire wealth that was not mediated by any labour process – become rich rabble, a rabble who does not want to pay taxes, becomes shameless and also thinks the existent system has no right to exist because only they themselves have this very right to exist (due to their wealth).[44] This is one way of how to understand the contemporary attack on "empathy", which is so prevalent in the ideological background of Trump. As Žižek rightly points out, it is crucial to be aware of the ideological framework of those who are behind the dark enlightenment orientation – prominently this is Curtis Yarvin,[45] to a lesser extent also Nick Land – and behind so-called dark MAGA, for the whole idea of replacing politics with a technocratic rule for and by the rich is not so different from Hegel's depiction of the rich rabble.[46]

Žižek's point in all this – with the move from the proletariat to the rabble which aligns with a move from a mainly profit-based value production to that a mainly rent-based value production in contemporary capitalism – is that we are clearly not in a situation anymore where emancipation could arise from organizing the proletarian workers in the factories who would be the truly politically relevant but for now politically excluded actor. We are rather in a situation where what Alain Badiou once described with the broad signifier of "the excluded" or Žižek now with Jameson with that of the "unemployed" is what is political more significant and determining.[47] But if the, as Žižek states, "the rabble is back, emerging in the very core of emancipatory struggles", such an insight changes the orientation in the present political conjuncture. Against the background of the potential role of the universities in forthcoming visions of emancipation, this brings to the fore a question that directly relates to a political issue that Žižek was one of the first to make people aware of vis-à-vis one of the last emancipatory attempts that spread around the world and originally came out of the university context, namely the occupy movement, which dissolved in 2016.[48] The political problem that it generated was *not* its lack of demands (this for some time this was rather one of its greatest strengths), but that it ultimately proved unable to expand its organizational form beyond those who were educated in the universities. The question that emerges from the diversified unemployed is then against the background of this historical experience: can the universities create an alliance, a necessarily internationalist one, of the different forms of the unemployed? A kind of exile for the unemployed excluded, a space for collective ordinary unhappiness?

Pierre Bourdieu once suggested in the early 2000s that one will have to conceive of an international of the unemployed. Where does

that even potentially begin? Who would organize it? Could it begin within the universities (one would also have to learn from all the political mistakes made in 68)? Or is this just the political dream of the potentially unemployed students and professors?

I am highlighting these questions, because things within the domain of the excluded get swiftly conceptually quite topsy turvy. On the one hand side, some of the excluded are included into the world market. Žižek's example here is how Congo after the fall of Mobutu – which is today socially a mere conglomerate, a *zonage*, in Badiou's terms, which no longer exists as a proper state, because it is controlled by warlords which mine wealth – the materials that are used for the construction of SIM cards and chips – from the region. This wealth-resource in Congo only exists because it is part of a global capitalist wealth production which benefits of having turned it into a *zonage*, thus into something is no longer in the position of having any political say or voice, as it is not really a state anymore. This led to massive land exploitation, to the dissolution of state structures and to the terrorizing of the local population. All of this is an effect of a mutually productive exchange interaction between high-tech companies and the local warlords, who are in an internal competition with each other, which – even though it is a direct effect of this very extraction process – is predominantly misrepresented as result of ongoing local ethnic warfare. There is even an interest to endorse local hostility as this makes any form of regional solidarity almost impossible. This example makes clearer what for Žižek the expansion of the concept of the unemployed enables to make visible. For it shows the naiveté to assume that warlords in Congo could ever be in solidarity with anyone but themselves, as their whole business-model, so to speak, is to gain from the disintegration of social integration. We here encounter an economy in and of exclusion. The scission that internally divides the unemployed – and makes their solidarity if not equally impossible then at least very difficult – indicates that there is nothing, maybe not even nothing that brings together all those who are unemployed. This is a true political problem and why Žižek highlights that there is a difference between the "strictly proletarian "nothing" of the modern workers generated by capitalism and the "less-than-nothing" of those not integrated into the system, not even as immanent negativity."

For one conceptually and politically must make a distinction between those integrated through their being exploited – and as those producing value – and those who are not even exploited and whose living condition is ruined. We therefore have formally ultimately four strata of the unemployed: there are those integrated by exploitation that can vote and are at least abstractly politically relevant, then there are those who the system relies on but who are not politically part of the system (those who do unpaid work within capitalism), then there are those who are included by being exploited, who politically do not count and whose

living conditions are ruined (the Zambian mineworkers, the Congolese warlords), and then there are those who are not even exploited, do not count politically and whose living conditions are ruined – a kind of bare life produced by capitalism.

The idea that capitalism is productive of bare life and that the latter is a rather historical and not a metaphysical creation – or more precisely: why a specific metaphysics is created by a historical social formation – is one of the claims that was championed by Fredric Jameson in the very book that Žižek affirmatively refers to.[49] Integration by means of exclusion, integration by exclusion and material exclusion (undoing of living conditions), non-integration and exclusory exclusion, and non-integration and undoing even of the living conditions of the excluded. This is exclusory exclusion with no remedies; not only unemployed negativity but a negativity of unemployment that appears to even negate the possibility of restitution. This is how dissolution of the social bond has been reinvented in fascist libertarianism; new ways of dissolving the social bond, that is ultimately as if new ways of splitting the position of the proletariat into two, but repeatedly. Till it vanishes.

5. Against Naturalization

We thus encounter today a form of undoing, a dissolution that even undoes the form of emancipatory undoing and dissolution. It is like Hegel's movement of the absolute reified and put to the worst un-Hegelian realization, whereby it is no longer Hegelian. But how to undo differently? How to mobilize to undo differently? Žižek argues that the issue that one faces here and today – and this is a political one – is that people do not take to the streets when conditions are particularly dire and catastrophic. This is why no revolutionary attempts happen in Congo. But it rather occurs – as he argues – when there is a relative form of stability and people are off well enough, so that they can imagine themselves living even a little bit better. If thus a political organization seeks to avoid people marching the streets and emancipatory mobilization, one should make people live under dreadful conditions. Otherwise, they start to desire more. So, the conditions are worse for political mobilization when the conditions are worse. Part and parcel of establishing worse conditions is the operation of normalization – an operation that one can witness when whatever social, economic, political or even ecological horrors are presented as new normal. How to resist the normalization of catastrophes, downfall? What is crucial is to realize is that normalization is a weapon and Žižek alerts us to how it is operated.

He addresses it in a later part of his new book where he reminds his readers of Trump's 2025 inaugural speech where Trump announced the end to the recognition of any other than two, namely male and female, sexes. Trump framed this not only as return to reason and sanity, but also

as a return to common sense.[50] Key to Žižek's point here is that under Trump and Vance certain signifiers – like "equality" – are turned into operators for enforcing their exact opposite. The reclaiming of common sense ends up being the very opposite of actual common sense, and maybe even worse, the very undoing and dissolving of it. Once acting according to the most uncommon sense principles – actions that only make sense to a marginal number of people who hold all the power – is claimed to be acting in the name of common sense, common sense is appropriated for what makes neither any *common* sense (many of the measures imposed "defy our common sense"[51]) nor any common *sense* (it does not seem meaningful or comprehensible to most and capitalism thereby undoes the very idea of a meaningful life). This is another peak of the detotalization of meaning that is specific to contemporary capitalism or in Žižek's words: "the era of common sense, the era when in our daily lives we could rely on traditional values and customs is over" – and this concerns all kinds of fields of practice, from sexuality to the very definition of what it means to be human (this is the reason for Žižek's repeated insistence on how Musk's *Neuralink* (a supposedly direct link between brain activity and digital space) will affect what it is to be a human being.[52]

This aspect of Žižek's argument is a far reaching and it has to do with what Pier Paolo Pasolini called an anthropological mutation implemented by capitalism; a mutation that for him was more annihilating than old forms of fascism, because subjects are now entirely turned into an object, to such a degree that it no longer recognizes its own subjection. Žižek indicates that the anthropological mutation will not lead to our representation in digital space becoming more nuanced, but rather that it will affect our human expressions negatively, for they will be enframed by the very digital space in which we move, reduced to increasing forms of thumb upping gestures. Some time ago, Giorgio Agamben has made a similar point – in his discussion of the work of Guy Debord –, as he stated that even individual gestures die and become extinct when they are so drastically normalized standardized. Then it becomes imaginable that the human species suffers a dispossession of the very means of expression in contemporary capitalism. But this is not only a matter of bodily expression or expressiveness rather it might affect, Žižek warns, the very elements constitutive of our actions: it might become unclear if we are controlled or not, since, it has already become quite difficult to perceive what the signifier "control" does effectively mean today – concretely.[53]

This is why learning to not take anything for granted, as if needing to feel uneasy in one's own body is the only adequate subjective response to Žižek's diagnoses. It is not good to feel awkward and unwell when things are tolerable but it is important to keep feeling awkward and unwell when things are terrible. For already Hegel clearly indicated that we get used to things that are historical products, even products of historical struggles and treat them as if they were just given objective conditions.

Hegel's example for such naturalization were inter alia getting used to the existence of street-lightening and the feeling of safety when one walks the street and assumes that no one attacks one randomly on the street with a fire-arm or knife.[54] There exists thus an important basic form of ignorance that is part of the social bond and its normalization – it becomes our second nature. Hegel, as Žižek has argued many times, saw the productive side of such normalization as well as its negative and problematic side, which is why he argued that, every now and then, there needs to happen a process of denormalization and denaturalization. And this is an insight that Žižek revitalizes. As one terrain in which the problematic effects of normalization has today certainly taken hold of is that of ecology. The problem that he detects is that we "automatically take for granted... certain natural parameters" and even often imagine climate change according to them (as if global warming just means it will constantly and always get warmer and as if one could only climate change within the stable frame of the seasons that will all get a few degrees hotter). But to properly (and politically) be able to relate to the problem of climate change means not only that we have to accept that the earth has no manual or steering wheel, but also that the human species nevertheless transformed nature so profoundly on earth that it threatens its very own survival. One can therefore learn from Žižek – and especially in the monstrous times we live in[55] – that one should remain on the lookout for the spontaneous naturalizations and normalization. For our conjuncture is not normal. Things do not automatically return to any old normal after a while, neither in nature nor in politics. Therefore, one should consistently resist operations of normalization (today) and one thus should resist naturalizing – even nature. Žižek seeks to induce shame – in us – in shameless times and keep the shock alive that we experience under the catastrophic conditions of today. He keeps looking awry at what otherwise disappears in a new normal and teaches us to – in my reformulation of a point famously made by Fredric Jameson – to always denaturalize. For, today, we should never get used to and keep our eyes on the *terror praesentis*.

1 All unaccounted citations are from Žižek's manuscript of his most recent and not-yet published book: *Donald Trump: A Fascist Libertarian.*
2 Hegel 2004, p. 234.
3 Cf. Hegel 2010, p. 67ff.
4 Hegel 2008, p. 16
5 Ibid., p. 16.
6 Most recently: Žižek, 2017.
7 Ibid., p. xv.
8 Here one can detect a similarity with psychoanalysis, for it can only be terminated once we accept it as interminable, for only then we can start questioning the very ontology of analysis. For this cf. Dolar 2023a.
9 Adorno 2007, p. 3.
10 Ibid.
11 Hegel 2008, p. 16.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 13.
14 Ibid., p. 14. This is the line that allows to comprehend Žižek's fundamental rejection of any position that claims wisdom.
15 Ibid., p. 13.
16 Hegel argued that there are periods of history where nothing historically relevant happens. However problematic his own rendering of this argument has been, it seems to be crucial to defend any contemporary materialist rationalism (without unhistorically structuralizing the very concept of history), or what I have elsewhere termed an "Idealism without Idealism."
17 Hegel 2018, p. 20.
18 There is a discussion to be had how Žižek's argument relates to what Alain Badiou has called "generic fascism" and to what I tried describing with Foucault as "grotesque sovereignty" (to which Foucault counted German fascism). For this cf. Alain Badiou 2009, p. 72 and Foucault 2003, p. 11f.
19 For this parallax, cf. also Žižek 2009.
20 For this cf. for example Varoufakis 2024.
21 Cf. Ruda 2025.
22 Cf. Žižek 2014a.
23 On this concept cf. Žižek 2014b, pp. 70-82.
24 This is the reason as to why I have argued on several occasions that capitalism can ultimately be identified with what Badiou has characterized as an obscure subject.
25 This obviously raises the question if there can be a reified form of the very movement of the absolute and of truth (the answer is: no!), but appearances can here be quite deceptive.
26 One approach to the category of the obscene can be found in: Žižek 2020.
27 Graham-Harrison 2025.
28 Connor 2025.
29 For the role of shamelessness and the intricacies of reintroducing shame into the post-68 capitalist dynamics, cf. inter alia: Dolar 2023.
30 For this diagnosis cf. for example Badiou 2016 and cf. Žižek 2011.
31 One can here think of all the discussions surrounding AI and the kinds of labour branches it will not only affect but eradicate.
32 The debate about this concept is complex, as it cannot be properly understood without including the theses concerning the tendency of the rate of profit to fall into it. I leave the details of this debate aside for the present purpose.
33 This citation is from Jameson 2014, p. 149.
34 One can note here that a highly historical formation produces the suspension of historicity for a large number of people affected by it and living within it.
35 Cf. Cockayne 2024.
36 For a glimpse into these obscenities: just search for "the most successful people explain why a college degree is useless."
37 That J.D. Vance argued that universities are the institutions of the left and need to be overtaken, directly speaks to this; he also prominently stated in 2021 that "the universities are the enemy."
38 An instructive reflection on this issue can be found in: Dolar 2015.
39 Bataille 1988, p. 89.
40 Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek have explored these forms for years through different lenses. One inspiration for this lies in Hegel whose system clearly knows more than just one type of negation. Just think of the famous peculiar double negation one encounters at the very beginning of his *Logic*, where Hegel states that being and nothing that both are so indeterminate that they could easily appear identical, also are "not without distinction (*nicht ununterschieden*)."

41 One question is how does this relate to Marx's critique of the Lumpenproletariat (or to the critique of what I have elsewhere called the "Lumpenbourgeoisie")?
42 Cf. Hegel 2008, p. 222. If the rich rabble appears at the very heart of power, the stance against the state is inscribed into the functioning of the state. This is when shamelessness reigns. For this also cf. Mladen Dolar's contribution to the present issue.
43 Hegel 2005, p. 223.
44 For a more detailed account, cf. Ruda 2011, p. 35-57.
45 Žižek describes this as follows: "Yarvin founded the *anti-egalitarian* and *anti-democratic* philosophical movement known as the *Dark Enlightenment*. He "sees *liberalism* as creating a *Matrix*-like *totalitarian* system, and who wants to replace American democracy with a sort of techno-monarchy". His premise is that democracy is obviously failing, and that libertarianism is a doomed project without the inclusion of *authoritarianism*. Actual politics occurred occurs through the actions of elites which effectively control and regulate the apparent democratic or socialist rhetoric of the public discourse. If these elites will not be replaced by new better elites, history will inevitably progress toward left-leaning societies. Adapting a phrase from *The Matrix*, we should swallow a "red pill" to shatter of progressive illusions." And Žižek continues stating that: "For Yarvin, real political power in the US is held by "the Cathedral", an informal amalgam of universities and the mainstream press, which collude to sway public opinion. The progressive ideology of the Cathedral is delivered to and internalized by the general populace much in the same way religious authorities and institutions deliver religious dogma to fanatical worshippers. The Cathedral's commitment to equality and justice erodes social order, which is why an American "monarch" should dissolve elite academic institutions and media outlets within the first few months of their reign."
46 Here, it is crucial, that the rabble appears in the very heart and also at the margins or outside the centres of power. This brings Hegel's analysis surprisingly close to that of Foucault's of the infamous people (at the very margins of power – that is those who have been accidentally touched by power – but who sometimes also appear in its very heart: as grotesque sovereign). A longer elaboration of the potency of Foucault's description, cf. Frank Ruda, *Grotesque Sovereignty. On Obscurantism in Politics* (in preparation).
47 One ought to note here that Žižek and Badiou were not entirely in line with their respective characterization of these excluded – but this is a debate for another occasion – for Žižek has repeatedly problematized, even though not in the book I mainly refer to here, Badiou's conceptualization of the so-called nomadic proletariat.
48 Cf. for example: Žižek 2012.
49 Jameson 2014, p. 125.
50 In one particularly memorable stab, a Trump-propagandist Žižek cites claimed "Kamala is form them, President Trump is for you."
51 The specific choice of the American ambassadors to Isreal by Trump or Trump's engagement with crypto currencies are Žižek's examples for such actions. One could easily add more if one just thinks of the shock that the ICE raids have produced; the idea that one can deploy the army on US soil against US citizens; that there ought to be a Trump I-phone, or that the idea that the new two state solution for Israel implies that the US is taking over Gaza.
52 This has been a trope that Žižek's has been following for some time. An extensive treatment can be found in Žižek 2020a. That the idea of this very digital space will nevertheless be privately owned, does not only make plausible why Žižek speaks of the reign of neo-feudal masters, but also why this privately owned space which is planned to affect the entire human species comes with its own metaphysics – conceived of, owned and regulated by individuals.
53 Is, for example, nudging nudging or controlling? What would it look like when it becomes part of a virtual space interaction that directly affects our cognitive abilities?
54 Cf. Hegel 2008, p. 241.
55 I have argued that it is obscure and Žižek argues that it is obscene. We might call it thus obscure-obscene times.

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A Love-And-Hate Letter to Crisis and Critique

Slavoj Žižek

I wrote this this short text because an unexpected but serious illness made it impossible for me to give an interview to CRISIS AND CRITIQUE apropos of the new issue of the journal dedicated to my work.

When I hear "crisis and critique," my first automatic reaction is anxiety and hatred – why? At my old age, I learned to enjoy peace, but each new issue of C&C brings so many original important texts that reading that it regularly ruins a couple of my days. Even if these texts are not directly critical of me, they all too often compel me to rethink my position, or they at least bring out as aspect that I totally missed when I wrote about a certain topic. With the forthcoming issue dedicated to my work, this situation gets much worse: what I dread is that I will learn unknown things about *myself.*

Recently, I've referred to my favored plot of crime novels: a person (usually a woman) is in mortal danger, unknown forces try to kill her because she knows something she shouldn't have known; this something is not some big secret or trauma that haunts her - she even doesn't know what this something is... When this formula is brought to extreme, the woman is in danger because she doesn't know something she should have known if the story told by the criminal to maintain his alibi were to be true. (Say: the criminal claims that he couldn't have committed the crime because he was at some place where many people saw him, but the woman was also there and, of course, didn't see him...) The specific experience of a woman in this situation (who knows a dangerous secret but doesn't know what this secret is) renders in a plastic way what psychoanalysis aims at with notions like divided subject and unconscious knowledge. And what I am afraid is that the forthcoming issue about me will put *me* in this position, ruthlessly bringing out more than I know I am saying in what I say.

So I have good reasons to dread and hate C&C. It is not simply the best philosophical journal I know, it is in some sense the ONLY journal in its genre, what in logic they call hapax, a universality with just one particular case. According to a legend, they asked Rossini who is the greatest composer of all times, and he answered: "Beethoven." A new question followed: "But what about Mozart?" Rossini snapped back: "He is not the best, he is the ONLY composer there is." This is what C&C is among today's journals. In other words, my dread and hatred simply mean that I am proud to be associated with C&C, and that I am ashamed of my love for it.

Each of the questions C&C planned to ask me in the interview hits the nail straight on its head. They begin with the curious fact that the Russian state ordered the destruction of my book on jokes – why exactly this one, with all my other works critical of Putin's Russia? The easy answer would be: in a recent interview, Peter Sloterdijk kindly praised me for introducing dark humor into philosophy, and I think he was right, with a proviso that I don't consider this my personal idiosyncrasy: we live in an

age when only dark humor enables us to adequately grasp the madness of our social reality... However, as I often demonstrated in my past work, the role of humor in political discourse is very ambiguous. Humor can express a sarcastic critique of the upper classes whose actual corruption belies their high principles. There is also humor which expresses the disdain of those in power for the "primitive" lower classes, plus – crucial today more than ever – jokes at the expense of those in power which serve the safe reproduction of this same power, giving the population vent to release their frustration (instead of openly rebelling). Today, with the growth of the openly cynical self-mocking functioning of power, making fun of those in power is more and more self-defeating: isn't Trump himself already his own caricature? So where do I stand with regard to this? Do I also not often fall into the trap of using problematic jokes which offend Woke sensitivities without really hurting those in power? I'll live this question open here since I continue to think that the Woke sensitivity is part of the problem. My position is here that of Norman Finkelstein who, in his *I'll Burn That Bridge*, shows his willingness to burn bridges not only with the establishment but also with the "left" of today: he considers its main tendency

> "to have degenerated from soaring moral and intellectual heights with Rosa Luxemburg, W. E. B. DuBois, and Paul Robeson into a censorious, narcissistic, morbidly navel-gazing culture preoccupied with subjectivist trivialities like personal pronouns at the expense of solidaristic struggle for a better world. 'Whenever I see he/him or she/her, I think *fuck/you*.' Finkelstein declares: 'If I can't laugh, I don't want your Revolution'".[1]

One often hears that my bad-taste jokes are one of the reasons of my popularity, and C&C touch this aspect with their question: should philosophy be popular? My answer is: it cannot be, but it is. Why? Popularity can be the sign that a philosophy caught its epoch in its conceptual essence; however, such a popularity is unfortunately also always a sign that a philosophy was in its core misunderstood. The most blatant case is here that of Hegel: the predominant image of Hegel as the absolute idealist reducing reality to the self-movement of the Idea that inexorably leads to a global happy ending is a ridiculous falsification of Hegel, THE philosopher of radical contingency and historical openness. One should not be afraid to draw all the consequences of this claim: against the predominant version of Marxism, we should assert that when a philosophy seizes the masses and becomes an actual historical force, it is a sure indication that it was misunderstood and that a catastrophe will ensue. Authentic philosophy enters (or, rather, may enter) after the failure of its direct actualization, to analyze (bring out) the necessity of what may appear a contingent failure.

This brings us to C&C's next question about what cannot but appear as my pessimism: I seem to fully endorse the fact that today the Left lacks any authentic vision of a global alternative to the existing order. The only actual revolutionary force today is capitalism itself which did what the Left tried to do for decades: it left behind its neoliberal global form and is giving birth to something for which we seem to lack a proper term (techno-feudalism, neofascism). The Left is more and more reduced to a new form of survivalism: if we will not radically change our society, the very survival of humanity is as stake... While agreeing with this diagnosis, I try to give it a positive spin: the lack of the new visions of future means that we have to move not only beyond the existing global order but also beyond the utopias which just present a more refined version of this order magically deprived of its constitutive antagonisms (like the social-democratic welfare-state). Survivalism is today a positive category because it is a call for radical change: the choice is not between mere survival and radical change, we will only survive if we change our world substantially.

If we lack the conceptual vision of a new order (like "scientific socialism"), can poetry provide the answer? Last but not least, C&C asks me who is my favored poet – a very sensitive point, as Ruda and Hamza know very well, being fully aware of my deep distrust of poetry. With respect to the horrors we are witnessing today on a daily basis, how can people considered "normal" endure or even enjoy such a spectacle? The answer is: they should be incentivized by some mythic discourse, religion or poetry. Recall how the role of poetry was described by *Ernst Jünger, a reluctant Nazi fellow-traveler who, like the Proud Boys in the US today, celebrated the purifying effect of military struggle: "Any power struggle is preceded by a verification of images and iconoclasm. This is why we need poets - they initiate the overthrow, even that of titans*."[2]

However, there is a different kind of beastiality, the authentically-Leftist one, which does not rely on poetry but on *concepts*. In his "The Intellectual Beast is Dangerous," Bertolt Brecht ascertains: "A beast is something strong, terrible, devastating; the word emits a barbarous sound." Surprisingly, he then writes: "The key question, in fact, is this: how can we become *beasts*, beasts in such a sense that the fascists will fear for their domination?" It is thus clear that, for Brecht, this question designates a positive task, not the usual lament on how Germans, such a highly cultured nation, could have turned into the Nazi beasts: "We have to understand that goodness must also be able to injure – to injure savagely."[3] We are not only fully responsible when we decide to violate the commandment and kill; we are no less responsible when, in such a difficult situation, *we decide to follow the commandment in a false way*, i.e., when we decide *not to kill when killing is needed, no to be violent when violence is needed*. One should quote here Kierkegaard again, his precise characterization of Abraham's ordeal when he is ordered to

slaughter Isaac as "an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation."[4] Indeed, there is no easy way out: sometimes, the ethical injunction not to kill is the very refuge providing the excuse to act as we should. Sometimes, one has to kill IN ORDER TO keep one's hands clean, not as a heroic compromise of dirtying one's hands for the higher goal. This brutality is not covered by poetry, it is justified by the power of concepts which only allow us to draw the correct line of separation.

Here is the place to declare my staunch opposition to the "poetic turn" enacted by Jacques-Alain Miller in the last decades: the combination of poetry with center-right pragmatism in politics. In his 2002–2003 seminar *An Effort of Poetry*, Miller claims that the model a psychoanalytic interpretation should follow today is poetry: poetry implies a detached and ironic posture that the psychoanalyst should adopt inside and outside the clinic. Classic interpretation is prosaic, it aims at therapy, but today when therapy is medicalized, interpretation can only be poetic. So Miller proposes "an effort of poetry" which will become a "creationist effort" of interpretation." Such an interpretation no longer targets the unconscious or meaning, and it must therefore find the use of a style that is close to that of the impenetrable oracles. Such an interpretation "without meaning" (without bringing out the deep meaning of the interpreted phenomena) aims at touching the opaque *jouissance* of the symptom (or, rather, "sinthoms": knots of enjoyment) that hold together the subjectivity of the analysand. Language is here no longer broached as a structure, but as *lalangue* ("language"):

> "The particular language that we have received bears traces of the desire of one's parents, and the unconscious is made of these traces. It consists of *lalangue*, outside-of-meaning, indicating a *singular unsayability* and a *singular mode of jouissance*."

A truly Lacanian interpretation, which can involve a true awakening for the subject, is marked by this "impossible to say" that tickles the body. "This is what *interpretation* aims at: to make *resonate* the *jouissance* that keeps the 'I-don't-want-to-know-anything of the subject' trapped." The aim is no longer to decipher/resolve the symptoms but to indicate their unique (singular) shape of unsayability that sustains the subject's being...[5] Miller's logic is clear here: from traversing the fantasy to identification with the synthom – so in what sense does this shift imply that, as Miller puts it, analysts must choose poetry over politics? Is it that "traversing the fantasy" still echoes a political gesture of leaving behind the fantasy-structure that sustains every collective identity, and that such a revolutionary gesture necessarily gets caught in some new form of identifications?

Is, however, Miller's choice really the one between politics and poetry? One cannot but note that Millers turn to poetry coincides with his

political turn against any full political commitment (new nationalist Right and especially radical Left) towards moderate center-Right liberalism – Miller publicly supported Sarkozy. (Furthermore, this turn to poetry in no way precludes full support of Israel in the ongoing war.) In politics, it also holds that there is no meta-language: politics has no neutral outside, every apolitical stance is immanently political.

We thus have to return to both terms disparaged by Miller: politics and concepts. Is Lacan primarily not a creator of new concepts (or of new versions of old concepts) which circulate all around us? The Real, the big Other, non-All, surplus-enjoyment, fantasy... yes, these concepts are multivalent, as all true concepts are (think just about Hegel's *Aufhebung*). And, to conclude, this brings me back to *Crisis and Critique*: it is for me first of all a journal of concepts, providing the space for their free development in all their productive inconsistency.

1 "The Inspiring Outrage of Norman Finkelstein", available online at https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/the-inspiring-outrage-of-norman-finkelstein
2 The Pox Populi Guide to Creating Dissident, available online at https://poxpopuli.substack.com/p/the-pox-populi-guide-to-creating?r=182myl&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&triedRedirect=true
3 Quoted from Palmier 2006, p.iii
4 Kierkegaard 1983, p.115
5 Interpretation Revisited, available online at https://nlscongress2020.amp-nls.org/new-blog/interpretation-revisited

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