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Remembering, repeating, working through Marx: Badiou, Žižek and the Actualizations of Marxism

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Introduction

> "Quite generally, the familiar, just because it is familiar is not cognitively understood." (Hegel)[1]
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> "…*démocratie*. C'est pour moi le nom phallique de notre présent et ce que j'aimerais faire ici c'est en quelque sorte d'écrire la comédie de la démocratie." (Badiou)[2]
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> "The only way to grasp the true novelty of the New is to analyze the world through the lenses of what is an "eternal" in the old." (Žižek)[3]

Without knowledge of the situation, true action is difficult, even impossible. More precisely: real action only becomes possible when pseudo-actions (actions that only reproduce the given situation and its vectors) and real actions (actions that influence and transform the coordinates of the situations) become themselves distinguishable.[4] To act one firstly needs to draw such a line of demarcation. But lines of demarcation are always results of concrete analysis of concrete situations — even if in the last instance this lead to the fact that one has to bet if an action will have been a true action or not. Or to put it differently: the question how to truly act here and now begins with the question where one does stand today, here and now and what today can be thought of as real action at all. Without a line of demarcation between real and pseudo-action ultimately there is no room for action. Only demarcations create the minimum of orientation that is needed to act in the here and now. The question of what is action and how to act therefore always relates to the historical present of the action and is thus also

1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 18.

2 Alain Badiou, *Séminaires sur L'image du temps présent I (2001-2002)*, on: http://www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/01-02.3.htm.

3 Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, London / New York 2009, S. 6.

4 I am indebted for their comradely and critical comments on first versions of this text to: Lorenzo Chiesa, Sophie Ehrmanntraut, Mark Potocnik, Francesca Raimondi and Jan Völker.

a question of how an action can be up and adapted to its own time. The question of action is therefore always preceded by another one: by the question of the historical present of an action and of its essential coordinates.

An answer to this question of the present of real actions here and now seems to be easy at hand — if the end of history as the most rather unconsciously than consciously believe has now come or not: one lives as individuals in democratic-communal orders and if one does not one should sincerely hope that one is allowed to do so in the nearby future; those who do not share this hope do not really live in the now of now and in the today of today. But here already things start to get more complicated: Because one might ask what does it mean to live in democratic communities or to hope to do so soon? If in search for an answer one solely refers to the Marxist tradition one can find amongst many answers two particularly pointed ones. Firstly, there is the answer of the young Marx who openly synonymizes democracy with communism when he claims "that all states have democracy as their truth…"[5] Democratic in this sense is a form of organization which enables the truth of collective and free self-determination of equals that is always already blocked in any state. Secondly, one finds an strictly opposed answer in Lenin who with it repeats the old diagnose of Plato: democracy is a preferable form of the state but in the last instance it is still a form of the state and as any "state [it, F.R.] is an organ of the rule of a definite class which *cannot* be reconciled with its antipode (the class opposite to it)."[6] And to finally enable collective free self-determination of equals it has to sink in what Eduard Gans called the "ocean of history"[7]. Democracy as such, if only situated within the Marxist tradition, between Marx and Lenin, can be understood as having a peculiar double determination that positions it between not-statist, free-associated and free-associating organization and statist nationalized instrument of dominance. The here and now of action therefore moves within this tension of non-statist and statist organization.

Both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek start their reflections on what could be a true political action today that means the reflection on what it could mean to truly and this also means always to truly and *freely* act today, with a reflection on and with a critique of democracy. Both recognize the tension between non statist organization and form of state that is inherent to the notion of democracy:

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5 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843)*, on: marxists.org. Translation slightly modified.

6 W. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution. The Marxist Teaching on the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*, Peking 1978, p. 6.

7 Eduard Gans, *Naturrecht und Universalgeschichte. Vorlesungen nach G.W.F. Hegel*, Tübingen 2005, p. 204. My translation, F.R.

a tension that repeats itself historically as tension between content and form. Because the form of democracy is conditioned by the capitalist content and the form of capitalism is conditioned by the democratic content. Capitalist content in democratic form presents itself in the dominance of interests, desires and finally in the animal and beastly constitution of man[8] within all contemporary 'political' debates. Democratic content in capitalist form presents itself in the practical interpretation of democratic principles, for example of freedom as a freedom of the worker to sell its own labor.[9] Following Badiou and Žižek one can claim that this mutual and historically specific determination (of the content and the form) of democracy and capitalism has to be thought through to demarcate what real actions here and now can be. Only in this way one escapes the temptation to act in a way that does not know the coordinates of the situation and therefore ends up constantly reproducing them.[10] Reflection on real action here and now demands both: a reflection on democracy *and* a criticism of democracy in the sense of an analysis of the interwovenness of democracy and capitalism — an analysis of the entanglement of content and form. A true action can only be an action that is free from the political premises, coordinates and ideological parameters set in advance by the capitalist economic dynamic and the form that determined it. From this remarks one can formulate a common ground of Badiou and Žižek: only a criticism of capitalism that takes the form of a reflection on *and* of a critique of the contemporary form of democracy produces demarcations of real and pseudo-actions and might generate orientation. Avoiding these forms of analysis of the concrete historical situation is remaining in the "time of disorientation"[11], because without them any form of "subjective cognitive mapping is lacking."[12]

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8 Alain Badiou defines capitalism in a way that it precisely takes the determination of man as animal as principle of its stabilization and development. See: Alain Badiou / Frank Ruda / Jan Völker, *Wir müssen das affirmative Begehren hüten*, in: Alain Badiou, *Dritter Entwurf eines Manifest für den Affirmationismus*, Berlin, 2008, p. 45-46. My translation, F.R.

9 See the analysis of Žižek in: Slavoj Žižek, *The Liberal Utopia*, on: http://www.laçan.com/zizliberal.htm. The name of the interface of democracy and capitalism is "liberalism". It distinguishes itself contemporarily in an economic liberalism whose maxim is "pleasure without boundaries" and in a libertarian liberalism whose maxim is "one can and therefore one must buy pleasure". See for this: Alain Badiou, *Séminaires sur le temps présent*, sur: http://www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/01-02.3.htm.

10 See: Slavoj Žižek, *The Specter of Ideology*, in: Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London / New York, 1994, p. 1-33.

11 Alain Badiou, *Le courage du présent*, on: http://alainbadiou.fr/le_courage_du_present_079.htm. My translation, F.R. See also: Alain Badiou, *The Son's Aleatory Identity*, in*: lacanian ink*, No. 32, p. 72-85.

12 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London / New York, Verso, 2008, p. 240.

Reflection on democracy then means on the one side as young Marx did to question what it can here and now signify to maintain the hypothesis that one can organize oneself democratically, this means communistically and this means under the primacy of equality in a way that a collective practice of equals which *hic et nunc* can be called just is installed. Democracy in this sense would formally and regarding its content have to be separated from the determinations of capitalism — that is of any form of circulation of objects — and would have to be the name of an organization that needs to be reinvented. For Badiou and Žižek this idea is what they call the "communist hypothesis"[13]. *Critique of democracy* then means on the other side that the existing form of democratic organization under present globalized capitalist conditions, the historical situation that Badiou refers to as capital-parliamentarism and Žižek with his claims about "democracy as master signifier"[14], have to be radically put into question to even be able to remain anti-capitalist — and this means to not reproduce with any attempted action the situation and its coordinates. As Žižek rightly diagnosed: "an anticapitalism without problematization of the political form of capitalism (of liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how radical it is."[15] Or as Badiou sharpens: "Today the enemy is not longer empire or capital. It is democracy."[16] The formerly historically effective signifier "anticapitalism" today has lost its subversive core because, to vary the infamous word of Lenin "all the social-chauvinists now"[17] are anticapitalists. Boltanski and Chiapello have remarkably diagnosed that this is a moment that also brings about discursive effects: From the 80s onwards "virtually no one, with the exception of few allegedly archaic Marxists (an 'endangered species'), referred to capitalism any longer. The term was simply struck from the vocabulary of politicians, trade unionists, writers and journalists …"[18] But about that which one seemingly

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13 See: Alain Badiou, *L'hypothèse communiste. Circonstances 5*, Paris 2009 and Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, than as Farce*, op.cit., p. 86-157. That this, due to the linkage of democracy and capitalism on the level of form and content, might lead to the fact that "democracy" might no longer be the name for sustaining such an hypothesis should be clear. See on this also Badiou's remark referring to Rancière: Alain Badiou, *L'hypothèse communiste,* op.cit., p. 196. Consider also Žižeks polemical statement that today "democracy is not to come, but to go…" (Slavoj Žižek, *Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Parody*, in: Slavoj Žižek / John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ. Paradox or Dialectic?*, Cambridge, S. 234-306, here: p. 255

14 Slavoj Žižek, *Die politische Suspension des Ethischen*, Frankfurt am Main 2005, p. 155. My translation, F.R.

15 Slavoj Žižek, *Die Revolution steht bevor. Dreizehn Versuche über Lenin*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 101. My translation, F.R.

16 Alain Badiou, *Prefazione all'edizione italiana*, *Metapolitica*, Neapel 2002, p. 14.

17 W. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 4.

18 Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *Preface to the English Edition*, in: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London / New York 2005, p. IX.

cannot talk anymore is precisely that which one should not remain silent about. And this goes for both capitalism and for democracy.

1. Remembering Marx. Actualizations of Ideology-Critique

> "'the passivizing' core of parliamentary democracy which makes it incompatible with the direct political self-organization of the people." (Žižek)[19]

Capitalist dynamics has become invisible in daily everyday life. This is due to the fact that it has taken a form — the liberal-democratic-parliamentary form — that makes it appear as something "invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something […]."[20] It is precisely the form of capitalism — democracy — and the capitalist ex-adaptation[21] of democratic principles that produces capitalism's invisibility. If one addresses against this background the question what the historical present of a real action today is, one asks about the structures that determine what appears to an agent as a possible action and what appears to him as impossible.[22] Because the regime of the possible is today one that confirms the ‚reality' of the given and it leads in the last instance to the fact that anything possible has to become necessary. The possible is therefore a regime that despite its seemingly endless expansibility[23] only approves the necessity of the given. Today there is a fundamental reversibility of the possible and the necessary.[24] If one enquires about the possible and the impossible of an action here and now, one asks about that which we see and that which we do not see, about that which we cannot see when we establish the parameters — the content and the form — of an action. This means that any action that seems possible is an action which is determined as possible by the coordinates of the situation itself: possible actions are pseudo-actions, real action have to appear impossible. Voilà, la première ligne de démarcation.

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19 Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, op.cit., p. 134.

20 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections*, London 2008, p. 2.

21 I use this notion in the understanding of Stephen Jay Gould. The insight into the reach and significance of Gould's work I owe to Lorenzo Chiesa: Stephen Jay Gould, *A Crucial Tool for Evolutionary Biology*, in: *Journal of Social Issues 47*, p. 43-65.

22 One should here bear in mind that the regime determining what is possible and impossible always is the state. See for this for example: Alain Badiou, *Is the word "Communism" forever doomed?*, auf: http://www.laçan.com/essays/?page_id=323. One therefore, to use the Badiousian terminology, always asks about the state of the situation is if one asks what the situation is.

23 A specific contemporary dilemma lies in what Badiou calls the "disaster of unlimitness". See: Alain Badiou, *Seminaires II (2002-2003)*, op.cit. My translation, F._R.

24 See for this: Ibid.

One thus here and now cannot but place real actions in the historical context of the couple capitalism / anticapitalism. If real actions signify actions that transform the coordinates of the historical situation the question arises what the invisible background is that makes it possible for us to qualify certain actions as possible and certain others as impossible. One thus does not only ask for the (normative and concrete) contents of an action but also for the its (historically specific) form and for the seemingly invisible and historically specific transcendental[25] conditions of this form itself. If — after Hegel — actions can be understood as subjective determinations of a content that afterwards realizes itself in a given historical situation (a subjective coining of a merely apparently objective reality) all this means that the analysis of the form of an action is spanned between two poles: 1. The question of what the present objective possible and impossible forms and contents of the subjective determination of actions are and 2. The question of how to overcome the dominant forms and contents of actions subjectively by referring precisely to that which today seems objectively impossible and unthinkable. Hence, how can one raise the impotence to truly act in the face of what today seems possible to a point of impossibility?[26]

Today an essential dimension of the reflection on real action is therefore a link between the historical-objective possible / impossible content and the historical-subjective possible / impossible form of action. Badiou and Žižek remember in this sense a lesson of Marx. Already the early Marx asks what can be a real action under given conditions of (capitalistically organized) alienation. "Remembering Marx" means: to remember and resume his critique of seemingly possible modes of action. Or to be more precise: critique then does less mean to keep up with a form of Kantian critique but rather to affirm other modes of action that seem impossible. But "remembering Marx" means also: to remember that real action are impossible *inside of capitalism* since the form of action that is determined as being possible always remains within that which it attempts to overcome. "Remembering Marx" therefore means in Badiou and Žižek to actualize the critique of ideology as *modus operandi* of concrete analysis of concrete situations under present conditions. This means to find a seemingly impossible starting point for actions that is absolutely heterogeneous to any form of exchange, any form of circulation of objects; to find a starting point for actions

[25] Concerning the notion of the transcendental see: Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event2*, London / New York 2009, p. 91-1188.

[26] See the taking up of this Lacanian formula in: Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Paris 2007, p. 34. Or as Badiou recently formulated: "Il importe de trouver un point réel sur lequel tenir coûte que coûte, un point "impossible", ininscriptible dans la loi de la situation. Il faut tenir un point réel de ce type et en organiser les conséquences." See: Alain Badiou, *Le courage du présent*, op.cit.

that is not exchangeable or to be more precise: to bet on the idea that there can be a present of actions that is not oriented by the primacy of objects; that there can be a non-objective present against the dominant present of (exchangeable and circulating) objects.

Badious and Žižeks reflections on the linkage of democracy and capitalism can be understood as ideology critique; as actualization, renewal and revision of Marx, that is of a rigidly anticapitalist position. Actualization, renewal and revision have to be understood at the same time as dissociation and critique of that which seems evident and irrefutable. This means it has to start from the naturalizations of contents and forms of action. If today and this is how one can reformulate Badiou and Žižek, 'democracy' names the seemingly sole politically thinkable form then any form of anticapitalism is in the last instance capitalist because it is unable to criticize the form of its own critique. It is itself an effect of naturalization of the historically specific form of capitalist circumstances or furthermore: anticapitalism thus becomes a perfidious — and ultimately fetishist — procedure of naturalization of given conditions. The formula of this impotent anticapitalism is: "Je sais bien (que je ne suis pas anticapitaliste parce que je ne suis pas antidémocrate), mais quand même (je crois que je suis anticapitaliste)." Or: "I know very well (that I am not an anticapitalist because I am not an anti-democrat) but nevertheless (I believe that I am an anticapitalist)."

So, in which relationship does the formal critique of democracy that always retroacts on its content stand to an anticapitalist position? On the one side one can remark that a merely abstract opposition to capitalism — and who today is not, from Hollywood to the most reactionary parliamentarian somehow an anticapitalist — without a critique of its specific political form, i.e. democracy, remains powerless against the capitalist dynamic or even reproduces it. On the other side one also has to remark that a merely abstract opposition to democracy also remains within the realm of the systemic "substanceless substance" of contemporary historical developments, that is within the realm of capital, that unites both, the anti-democrats — who present themselves subjectively as terrorists (with a small "t") or fundamentalists — and the liberal democrats. Abstract anticapitalism and abstract critique of democracy remain immediately prisoners of the form or of the (contentless) content that they attempt to criticize. Neither the abstract negation of capitalism nor the abstract negation of democracy is therefore enough to get to a model of truly free political action and its consequences. Paraphrasing Kant one can say: *Anticapitalism without critique of democracy is impotent* (and becomes parliamentary opposition or anti-globalization-movement, which in the last instance is no different, that either

remains ineffective or reproduces the system); *critique of democracy without anticapitalism is blind* (and leads to nihilist terror or obscurantism[27]).[28] Or to put it in even simpler terms: Badiou's and Žižek's project remembers Marx because both undertake an actualization of ideology critique and the critique of ideology designates the questioning of the form and the content (of apparently possible and seemingly impossible) actions. Both "remember Marx". If this is the case it is decisive to ask which Marx is remembered by whom.

My thesis is that Alain Badiou remember a lesson from the early, Slavoj Žižek remembers a lesson from the late Marx. Badiou attempts, following early Marx, to grasp the present ideology as a regime of that which is humanly possible, as democratic materialism whose founding axiom is either "there are only individuals and communities" or "there are only bodies and languages."[29] To accept the legitimacy of democratic *materialism* Badiou recognizes this axiom. But he also remembers the early Marxian insight that on the one hand side there exist only individuals and communities but that this is on the other hand only valid as long as there is no exception to this existence: Since already early Marx understands the critique of ideology as affirmation of an exception to that which is. The early Marx — close to what Badiou undertakes today — insists upon the fact that there are only exploited and exploiting or alienated individuals and communities as long as there does not exists something else that he names "man as species being"[30]. It names a dimension that consists therein that any historically specific form of seemingly evident determinations of man can be revised and new determinations can be brought up in a process

[27] For the notion of obscurantism see: Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* op.cit., p. 43-78; Alain Badiou, *St. Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford 2003, p.52-54 and: Alain Badiou, *De l'obscurantisme contemporain*, in: Le Monde of 08.05.2010.

[28] This formula can be read in a historical materialist way and then one can follow from it that "it is not enough simply to remain faithful to the communist Idea; one hast to locate within historical reality antagonisms which give the Idea a practical urgency." [Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, op.cit, p. 90]; or it can be read in a rather dialectical materialist way so that the content of the political form, this means that capital itself retroacts in a peculiar way on its own form because "capital is the Real" [Slavoj Žižek / Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge/ Malden / Oxford 2004, p. 150]. Žižeks variant would be a specific mediation between the two of them to whose formal character I will return to this in the following. Since: "yes, once again, the relationship between historical and dialectical materialism is that of a parallax; they are substantially the same, the shift from one to the other is purely a shift of perspective." (Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, op. Cit., p. 5.

[29] For the notion of democratic materialism see: Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds,* op.cit., p. 1-41.

[30] Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,* on: marxists.org.

of "universal production"[31]. For example does the early Marx not blame the Hegelian deduction of the necessity of the existence of the state "for depicting the essence of the modern state as it is but rather for presenting what *is* as the *essence* of the state."[32] One can actualize this phrase in the following form: "The democratic materialist is not to blame for depicting the essence of the present situation as it is but rather for presenting that what *is* as the essence (and this means as the truth) of the situation."Therefore already the early Marx insists: "There are only alienated individuals or communities expect that there is man as species being." Badiou's actualized critique of ideology whose formula knows two variants ("There are only bodies and languages except that there are truths" and "There are only individuals and communities except that there are subjects"[33]) is a critique of ideology as affirmation of the exceptions of this ideology. Now, Žižek as I want to claim rather remember late Marx. If late Marx writes to Lassalle that his *Capital* is a "at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system"[34] then Žižek remembers the same gesture. "Remembering Marx" is thus for Žižek to find a form of exposé (Darstellung in German) that is able to challenge, provoke and criticize the linkage of content and form of democracy and capitalism. To criticize an ideological formation that replaces any antagonism with agonism because it is "plurality on principle"[35] one needs "sideway glances"[36] to avoid any form of spontaneous ideological identification, to avoid that which already determines invisibly the coordinates of any action. One needs for example an exposé (Darstellung) of the emancipatory potentials of the Terror of the French Revolution or an exposé of the impossible ground of all given (for example that in the heart of democracy lies the permanent state of exception[37]). Badiou and Žižek offer two ways of the actualization of Marxian ideology critique: on one side as affirmation of the seemingly impossible exception, one the other side as seemingly impossible representation of the impossible. "Remembering Marx" means critique of ideology and affirmation of the impossible, as early Marx did, or critique of ideology via an exposé

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31 I have undertaken a reading of early Marx from a Badiousian perspective elsewhere, see: Frank Ruda, *Humanism reconsidered or Life living Life*, in: *Filozofski Vestnik*, Volume XXX, Number 2, 2009, p. 175-196. See for this also the friendly, impressive and at the same time critical comments by Lorenzo Chiesa: Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Body of the Structural Dialectic, or, the Partisan and the 'Human Animal'*, unpublished typescript.

32 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, in: op.cit.,

33 Vgl. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, op.cit. p. 1-41.

34 Karl Marx, *Letter to F. Lassalle (1858)*, on: http://www.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/archive/marx/works/1858/letters/58_02_22.htm.

35 Slavoj Žižek, *Die politische Suspension des Ethischen*, op.cit., p. 36. My translation, F.R.

36 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, op.cit. p. 3.

37 Vgl. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy then as Farce*, op.cit., p. 65.

of the impossible, as late Marx did. Actualization of ideology critique is the common enterprise of Badiou and Žižek that leads into the unity of differences of early and late Marx.

2. Repeating Marx, or: How can one be (a) truly post-Hegelian (Hegelian)?

> "This is where Hegel vacillates, namely, in the vicinity of the rock that we Marxists call 'primacy of practice', and Lacan the real." (Badiou)[38]

For the here and now it applies to actualize Marx. But what can this mean concretely? Does actualizing Marx simply mean: Marx once again? Initially to actualize Marx means to "repeat Marx". This means that the projection onto the future and the repetition of the past can coincide in one moment. To think together projection and repetition signifies: to repeat Marx's gesture under new conditions. It is such a repetition that one can identify in Badiou and in Žižek, too. But "repeating Marx" in this way also means that it is necessary to again work on or digest Hegel. This means firstly to show on one side against the present democratic-materialist critics of Hegel who judge Hegel's notion of the absolute to be ridiculous and on the other side against Hegel himself why Hegel is not sufficient anymore to think how to act in the here and now. The Marxian gesture that is to be repeated is thus to show that Hegel was in some aspects not Hegelian — and this means not dialectical — enough and that therefore ultimately he did not unfold dialectics dialectically enough. No alliance with the democratic-materialist ideology that opposes Hegel but an alliance with the materialist dialectics and this means to insist upon the "rational kernel of Hegelian dialectics"[39] even against itself. This is an essential component of the repetition of Marx. "Repeating Marx" implies therefore also to repeat Marx's argument with Hegel — in the last instance his argument with Hegelian dialectics. Out of it one can deduce two possibilities how to perform this repetition. One is paradigmatic for the project of Alain Badiou, the other paradigmatic for the project of Slavoj Žižek.

On the one hand "repeating Marx" can mean to again perform the transition from Hegel to Marx. One then has to get again from late Hegel to early Marx — a further essential question then would be if Feuerbach, the river of fire (Feuer-Bach) that all emancipatory thinkers have to cross, would necessarily be

[38] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, London / New York 2009, p. 19.

[39] This is what the early Badiou looked for in Hegel. See: Alain Badiou / Joel Bellassen / Louis Mosson, *Le noyau rationnel de la dialectique hégélienne*, Paris 1978.

included an essential moment of this transition or not.[40] Then one would have to share the thesis of Badiou that the present here and now in which one asks the question of what a real action could be resembles the 1840s — the time of early Marx.[41] From this perspective one would have to re-write the Marxian thesis' on Feuerbach, the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts and but also the Manifesto.[42] Repeating Marx then would mean: One needs a new early Marx; the communist hypothesis would then also be an hypothesis about it being possible to repeat the theoretical-practical gesture of early Marx in the here and now."Repeating Marx" means in the Badiousian variant also to pose again the question what contemporary sources and components of Marxism actualized in such a way could be. The answer to this question somehow is, for him, today linked with the names of Plato, Hegel and Lacan.

On the other hand "repeating Marx" can mean to repeat and actualize Marx above all as a critic of political economy, as theoretician of capital because the here and now of political action is first and foremost a here and now of capitalism that can still be grasped in the most adequate way with Marx. Capitalist economy precisely necessitates such a critique. "All this means that the most urgent task of economic analysis today is again to repeat Marx' 'critique of political economy'…"[43] If this critique is to be repeated in a new and actualized form then because it is no longer possible to completely anchor any merely abstract form of universality — for example the system of right — in the particularity of class relations that are structured in a bourgeois way. Rather this critique needs to be supplemented with "the properly Hegelian procedure which uncovers the universality of what presents itself as a particular position."[44] Žižek's repetition of Marx is one that counts on thinking "Marx+Hegel" and not as Badiou does to attempt to again repeat the transition from late Hegel to early Marx. Rather it starts from late Marx to return to (late / early, or rather: a timeless) Hegel without abandoning the insights and lessons of the critique of political economy. "Repeating Marx" then means to show how and in what sense one necessarily has to think "Marx+Hegel" because both the classical Marxian critique of political economy and classical interpretation of the Hegelian system cannot do justice

40 In a certain sense one can interpret Badious daignose that we live in a intermediate time in this way. One could claim that today we are all Feuerbachians that means that we are all — against our own will and even against better knowledge — democratic materialists. For this see: Alain Badiou, *Seminaires sur L'image du temps présent (II. 2002-2003)*, op.cit.

41 For this see: Alain Badiou, *l'Hypothèse communiste*, op.cit., p. 203-205.

42 This is already claim by the early Badou. See: Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?*, op.cit. p. 60.

43 Slavoj Žižek, *Die Revolution steht bevor*, op.cit., p. 115. My translation, F.R.

44 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, op.cit., p. 131

to the here and now — both lack dialectics. This is paradigmatically apparent in Žižek's diagnosis that in contemporary capitalism anyone has become a Hegelian monarch but as a "king in a constitutional democracy … a king that decides only formally, whose function is merely to sign off on measures proposed by an exclusive administration"[45] — something not even Hegel had foreseen. "Marx+Hegel" as form of a repetition of Marx then means: one does not only need to constantly add to Marx the Hegelian insight that any true (and this means universal) action can only be performed from a particular, rather: singular position but it also means to supplement the Marxian critique of political economy with Hegelian content and Hegelian form. And the same goes *vice versa*. Only in this way one can show that the present of any action today is a here and now that can only be grasped through and via "Hegel+Marx". Or to put it differently: For Žižek Marx and Hegel taking up alone lack the dialectical core which can only be obtained if they are themselves dialectically thought together

Both Badiou and Žižek thus share that the here and now of true action can be describe via two essential moments: 1. It is imperative to repeat — early or late — Marx. 2. It is imperative to take seriously that this repetition — if it attempts to again overcome Hegel or if it leads back to him — has to take place under radically post-Hegelian conditions. And this can either mean that Hegel is generally not sufficient or that he has not been dialectical enough at some points of his system. One can note here that after Hegel the historical conditions of philosophy have been transformed in a way that it is impossible to simply repeat Hegel. Therefore a repetition of Marx is needed to truly accept that contemporary philosophy stands under post-Hegelian conditions.

"Repeating Marx" can then only mean to include, bind in the historically specific conditions of post-Hegelian philosophy into philosophy or better: to take them as a starting point. As Žižek claims: "what even the most fanatical partisan of Hegel cannot deny is that something changed after Hegel, that a new era of thought began which can no longer be accounted for in Hegelian terms of absolute conceptual mediation."[46] But what precisely happened after Hegel? One can understand the post-Hegelian condition present in many statements of Badiou and Žižek in the following sense: after Hegel there have been theoretical and practical inventions and events that necessarily jolt his systematical framework and come with the exigency to fundamentally transform it. What were those events? One can for example, and all this can be found either in Badiou or

[45] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, op.cit., p. 134.

[46] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity*, in: *The Monstrosity of Christ*, op.cit., p. 26

in Žižek, think of the invention of psychoanalysis and therewith of the invention of a new perspective on love and sexuality; the development of set theory with Cantor and others that demonstrated that god is truly dead by proving that there can be not set of all sets; the invention of new political forms of organization within the Paris Commune, or the Russian or Cultural Revolution that show that forms of collective not statist organizations are thinkable and realizable. Now, what does it mean to repeat Marx under these conditions?

First it means that it becomes necessary to develop a new form of a materialist project, a new materialist thinking. The old struggle which following Louis Althusser determines and will always determine philosophy, the struggle between idealism and materialism, with the impossibility to sustain a classical idealist position enters into a new phase: The scission between materialism and idealism repeats itself within materialism, as a split between democratic materialism and materialist dialectics.[47] Since as soon as idealism disappears as project — but the law that 'one divides into two' continues — materialism itself divides into two. Furthermore and more precisely this means that for this reason one needs a new form of materialist-dialectical thinking. "Repeating Marx" here and now, under post-Hegelian conditions, means to again raise the question what it can mean to develop a dialectical thought that makes real action thinkable and is at the same time adapted to its own time. The question of real action in this sense becomes a materialist question, a question of materialism or to be more precise: it becomes a question of materialist dialectics. Only in this way the question of what today real action is can be a truly materialist question. And only such a question can ultimately receive a truly materialist answer. If this means, as for Badiou, to pose the question how it is possible to be fully post-Hegelian — and therefore to fundamentally and in a new way, as early Marx did, to perform the transition from Hegel to Marx — or if it means, as for Žižek, that one needs a return to Hegel — to perform the transition from Hegel to Marx and back to Hegel — to be truly post-Hegelian, this does not change the fact that "repeating Marx" is a formula which shows the necessity of a new form of materialist thought and this means of a new form of materialist dialectics. "Repeating Marx" implies therefore at the same time the exigency to work here and now through dialectics.

[47] See: Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, op.cit., S. 1-41 and Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, op.cit., p. 2-15.

3. Working Through Marx, or: What is your dialectics?

> " […] la dialectique, ce vieux nom platonicien de la philosophie, a reçu avec Marx une impulsion neuve." (Badiou)[48]

To repeat Marx here and now thus means to work through dialectics. But how to do this? If "repeating Marx" implies that there has to be a working through of dialectics for that there can be a materialist theory and praxis of true action under given historical circumstances, one can also identify another implication of the repetition of Marx. Any working through dialectics has to be a working through of the notion of negativity. After Hegel, and this is a way to read the post-Hegelian condition, the notion of negativity is not the same as it was for Hegel or before. At the same time the notion of negativity is the central concept of any dialectics. How can one grasp this? It helps to relate this diagnosis to one of the most interesting claims concerning contemporary forms of politics that was articulated by a French militant organization formerly known as 'organisation politique' and now called 'Contre le mauvais gouvernement les volontaires pour une politique à la distance de l'état'. It takes the following form: The 21st century has not yet begun. What this claim is addressing is that when it comes to political action we are still thinking in the terms of the 20th century. What were those terms?

It is possible to render the claim mentioned above intelligible if one considers the victorious forms of political action or more adequate of revolution that took place in it. One can for example consider the Leninist model: It was a party based model of organizing collective political action and the central aim of the party was taking state power. So the political framework Lenin was thinking and acting within was one in which the central issue was victory and it was defined in terms of taking power to transform the state from within into a non-state, into the famous dictatorship of the proletariat that would finally lead to the withering away of the state as such. But this victory was only possible if the mode of organization itself was a military one able to confront the dominant forces, the dominant power of imperialism on its own terrain, i.e. the state. The central question that Lenin attempted to answer was therefore: how can we be victorious, how can we win the war? This is why the organization had to be a military one, employing if necessary violent means to counter the system.

[48] Alain Badiou, *L'obscurantisme contemporain*, op.cit.

This question is clearly one that he inherited from the Paris Commune.[49] The underlying logic of the theme of revolution, i.e. of victorious insurrection that takes power was therefore what, in Althusserian or rather Badiousian terms one can call an expressive dialectics.[50] Expressive dialectics means, following the famous scheme Lenin formulated: masses are divided into classes, classes are organized by parties, and parties are lead by leaders. So the avant-garde of the party that is professional revolutionary leader had to express the contradiction immanent to the masses due to their organization into classes. What this whole conception is based upon is a very powerful interpretation of what abstract negation and of what determinate negation is. There is a abstract negation inherent to the social organization of masses into classes, i.e. class struggle; this negation that articulates itself in the form of domination of one class over the other can be overcome if it and what it fundamentally relies upon, i.e. the use of violent force of the military and ideological force of the state apparatuses is itself determinately negated. True political action in the 20th century was only able to be victorious if it was conceived of in terms of determinately negating the present abstract negation of the domination of one class over another. Now, this model of thinking political action in terms of state revolution organized by a centralized party encountered fundamental obstacles that it was unable to overcome. To conceive of emancipatory political action, resistance or revolution within the constellation power-state-party was indeed victorious when it comes to taking power but it was not when it comes to the exercise of it. This can be seen in the fundamental failures of the final outcomes of the October Revolution but also in many respects different but formally comparable in the Cultural Revolution.[51] The centralized party that had taken power came with a tendency to bureaucratization, a tendency that the Trotzkyst, not without a reason, called state terrorism and the Maoists themselves called reformism.

This is why today the word revolution is completely obscure. No one knows what it could mean any longer. The revolutionary idea, as can be seen for example in the adaptation it received under Stalin — although in certain sense one might argue that Stalin already took a reactive and defensive position against the

[49] For this analysis of Lenin's conception of political thought, see: Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, op.cit. See also: Frank Ruda / Jan Völker, *Was heißt es, ein Marxist in der Philosophie zu sein?*, in: Alain Badiou, Ist Politik denkbar?, Berlin 2010, p. 135-165.

[50] For this notion see: Alain Badiou, *Politics: An Expressive Dialectics*, in: Mark Potocnik / Frank Ruda / Jan Völker (Ed.), *Beyond Potentialities? Politics between the Possible and the Impossible*, Berlin 2011.

[51] For a detailed sequence analysis see: Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis,* op.cit. and: Allessandro Russo,

universalist core of Leninist politics[52] — the revolutionary idea was swallowed by what Hegel once called a logic of suspicion that described the general state of things. One can see in Stalin a literally perverse universalism: if the October revolution was supposed to address anyone, under Stalin it is precisely anyone that was suspected of being a counter-revolutionary.[53] All these are moments that indicate that the model of the party with all its implications (victorious resisting insurrection, taking state power, etc) is saturated today. The central point therefore for addressing the question of political action today is a question of how to conceive and invent a non-military discipline and new forms of organization that are detached, better: subtracted from power, the party and first a foremost from the state. This is both a political and a philosophical task. Because the 20th century model of revolution as present in Lenin relied upon a specific expressive dialectics which included an interpretation how determinate negation should be thought and put into practice when it comes to concrete political action. All political action relies upon a specific interpretation of dialectics and its main category: the category of negativity. Working through dialectics, as Marx did, is therefore always working through negativity. Because: With the saturation of the combination of the state-party model necessarily also emerges what Badiou called a "crisis of negation"[54]. If negation is the central category of any Hegelian, but also post-Hegelian, for example Marxian dialectics and today the task is to find new means of political organization and a new popular discipline, precisely to think political action — one can claim that one essential task is to re-think negation, to re-think dialectics. Re-thinking it is needed not remain in the schemes of the 20th century when it comes to conceiving of resistance or more broadly of concrete political action. Re-thinking dialectics is needed to think politics concretely and concretely means to be able to take into account the experiences of the 20th century and the knowledge that the means employed in it are saturated and it means also to start thinking what emancipatory politics can be here and now, what forms of organization and discipline can be invented. Only in this way we might be able to exit the 20th century and let the 21st century finally begin.

Therefore: Repeating Marx means working through negativity. "Working through Marx" then means to think about contemporary adequate forms of a materialist understanding, a materialist theory and practice of the notion of

52 Badiou convincingly points this out in: Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, op cit., p. 74-75.

53 For this see for example: Slavoj Žižek, *Die Revolution steht bevor*, op. cit., p. 42-49.

54 "*We need a new popular discipline": Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative. An Interview with Alain Badiou*, Unpublished Typescript.

negativity. Since as one can complement for Badiou and also for Žižek the name "Marx" stands like no other for a working through of dialectics — to be more precise of Hegelian dialectics: the early Marx thinks a *dialectics of the exception* in his definition of the "real communist action" and the linkage of the substantial proletarian impoverishment[55] and the human species being; the late Marx thinks a *dialectics of critical representation (one is tempted to say: reason)* in his definition of the revolution of productive forces and its relation to proletarian class-consciousness. "Working through Marx" therefore means for Badiou and Žižek in different interpretations to "work though dialectics" and this again means in the last instance in different variants to "work through negativity".

Žižek makes this explicit when he claims that in "the very center of what I am doing generally" is a thinking through of a central category of psychoanalysis — of death drive — and of a central category of German idealism — namely of Hegel's self-relating negativity.[56] Žižeks project remember, repeats and works through Marx to get to a new dialectics and to a new conception of the notion of negativity. Badious whose whole oeuvre can be read as a working through of dialectics[57] also starts with his attempt to establish a new materialist dialectics in dealing with Hegel.[58] Also Badiou remembers, repeats and works through Marx. Here I want to turn to an important article of Badiou that introduces a distinction between three types of negativity that offer a useful tool to follow the question how these to modes of working through dialectics in terms of negativity relate to another and can be differentiated.[59] All this should offer an answer to the question: Mister Badiou, Mister Žižek, what is your dialectics?

The first form of negation that Badiou introduces is the classical one that can be found in Aristotelian *Metaphysics*. Aristotle develops an essential framework for thinking negation as he shows that thinking in general is determined by three principles: 1. The principle of identity that signifies that any proposition is equivalent to itself, i.e. to its truth content. 2. The principle of contradiction that signifies that it is impossible that in the same context the proposition A and the proposition non-A can be true at the same time. 3. The principle of

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55 See: Karl Marx, *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts*, op.cit.,.

56 For example in: Slavoj Žižek /Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, op.cit., p. 61f.

57 This is at least valid from his working through of the two matrixes of Hegelian dialectics. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, Paris 1982, p. 1-51.

58 One can easily think of: Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, op.cit., p. 21-68; Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London / New York 2005, p. 161-172 and: Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, op.cit., p. 141-152.

59 The following argument is oriented by: Alain Badiou, *The Three Negations*, in: *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 29:5, p. 1877-1883.

excluded middle that signifies that for a proposition A holds that it is either true or false — either A is true or non-A is true. The power of negation in this Aristotelian model is structured in a double way: first there is a power of exclusion inherent to negation: the proposition A excludes the validity of the proposition non-A. Secondly there is a power of a forced decision inherent to it: Either A or non-A is valid, there is not third option. For classical negation never holds that "yes" and "no" are valid at the same time and in turn it always holds that either "yes" or "no" is valid. The classical negation is what Badiou calls the "kernel of classical logic"[60]. But as one can easily see there are not only classical forms of negation. Even remaining within the framework of these three principles other logical combinations are deducible that introduce other forms of negation:

Negation is only classical when it follows the principle of contradiction and the principle of excluded middle. One can also think of a form of negation that only follows the principle of contradiction but not the principle of the excluded middle; then one can think of a negation that only follows the principle of the excluded middle but not the principle of contradiction and finally one can think of a negation that follows neither of the two principles. This last form of negation loses all power of negation because it neither prescribes a decision nor does it exclude anything — the fourth form of negation knows negation only as itself negated. The second form of negation, only following the principle of contradiction but not of excluded middle is what Badiou calls the "intuitionist logic of negation"[61], the third, only following the principle of excluded middle but not of contradiction he calls paraconsistent. As he put it: "In fact the potency of negation is weaker and weaker when you go from one to three. […] In intuitionist logic, the negation of P excludes P itself, but not some other possibilities which are in fact somewhere between P and non-P. In paraconsistent logic, the negation of P excludes that sort of space between P and non-P, but not P itself. So P is not suppressed by its negation."[62] It is important to note that for Badiou the classical logic of negation corresponds to the discourse of ontology. For his definition of being qua being — from a his, i.e. from a set theoretical perspective being is discursively presented a multiplicity of multiplicities whose consistency is only guaranteed by the void, the empty set[63] — the principle of extensionality is fundamental: This means that an element of a set belongs to the set or does not belong to it. Either A (the element belongs to the set) is true or false, there is no

60 Ibid., p. 1878.
61 Ibid., p. 1879.
62 Ibid.
63 See: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, op.cit., p. 37-84.

third option. The difference between two multiplicities — or two sets — thus can be followed from the fact — and only from it — that one element of a set is not an element of another one.[64] If one accepts the Badiousian framework for the moment this means that any form of negation that complies with the principle of contradiction and of excluded middle is not only classical but also ontological. But: If classical negation is ontological what is the status of the intuitionist logic of negation? The Badiousian answer to this is: this logic is the logic of appearance. The ontological determination of what is a multiple; a multiplicity can be distinguished from how it appears, with which intensity, in which guise, if it appears in the shadows or in the brightest light. Although one can show the intuitionist logic of negation is grounded in the classical one — because something cannot appear absolutely and with maximal intensity in a world and at the same time not appear in it — it is not true that in the realm of appearances one has to decide between A and non-A. A multiplicity cannot appear and not appear at the same time, cannot exist and not exist at the same time, but it can appear in multiple ways and forms or intensities. There is a multiplicity of third possibilities. A can appear more or less intense than non-A or vice versa. Therefore the principle of contradiction is valid but not the principle of excluded middle — A can appear as B between the absolute appearance A and the absolute non- appearance non-A. A can appear in between the maximum and the minimum of appearance. This form of negation is therefore not only intuitionist but also linked to the discourse of appearance: to phenomenology.

To come to the third form of negation, the paraconsistent one, following the principle of excluded middle but not of contradiction one has to introduce besides ontology and phenomenology to that which Badiou calls an event. An event is logically related as well to being as to appearance. One can therefore ask: 1. what sort of multiplicity does an event name (ontologically)? 2. How does an event appear (phenomenally)? 1. An event is a contradictory multiplicity whose definition is to belong to itself — it has the property that axiomatically is prohibited (following the axiomatization of Zermelo-Fraenkel) for any other multiple (or set).[65] This means on the level of ontology an event is neither classical — because it does not comply with the principle of contradiction — nor intuitionist. From this perspective it can be called paraconsistent. But one has to be more precise here, because an event might be in itself nothing but paraconsistent but the definition it finds in Badiou contains another central point: it is nothing but the ensemble of the consequences it will have produced.

64 See: Ibid., p. 60-62.
65 Ibid., p. 173-200.

An event is measured only by the consequences it is able to generate and can therefore only be thought in the linkage of being and appearances. Because if the event, not to be a miraculous intervention, is itself nothing substantial, one has to claim that the only thing that appears are its consequences. 2. How does an event appear? Here two answers should be given: On the one hand side the event is phenomenally the identity of appearance and disappearance. It is the vanishing mediator that appears paraconsistent but that does not change the fact that one can only decide what it will have been if one considers if it had concrete consequences or not. Therefore it's (ontologically) paraconsistent form necessitates a decision. When it is not clear if something happened or not, a decision is needed that can only take the form of a "yes" or a "no" but never the form of a "yes and no" at the same time. Therefore an event conjures the classical form of negation; it demands the power of exclusion and the power of decision. If an event is nothing but the ensemble of the consequences that it yields one can claim that these are only measured by the fact that one either said "yes" or "no" to the forced choice that it necessitates; and also by what follows from this yes or no, from the acceptance of the choice or the indifference towards it. Therefore an event is in a certain sense diagonal towards the classical, intuitionist and paraconsistent form of negation. But what does that mean?

One can start with stating that an event is a sudden change of the laws that regulate the realm of appearance. Something that seemed impossible now appears in the form of a formerly unthinkable possibility. Therefore it is not directly the creation of "something" new, rather the creation of a new possibility, of a formerly non-existing possibility. If it were only the creation of something new it would mainly be destructive but in this way it also enables the integration of something old in the construction of something new that unfolds the consequences of this new possibility. But the question is precisely how far-reaching the change is that this new possibility produces. The greatest change that an event can inaugurate is the transformation of something that does not appear in a world — for example non-A does not appear in it — into something that appears in a world — into A. Or to put it differently: an event is what is capable of transforming the appearance of the workers that "are nothing" as the *Internationale* has it — i.e. that do not appear at all in the world — in a way that they become "all" — i.e. appear maximally — and it is that which thereby changes the historically specific logic of appearance. This transformation is evental, it is followed by true actions of resistance and follows the classical logic. Because the workers that did not appear, now appear maximally. At the same time the consequences of the event have to be thought through from the perspective

of the two other logics, the intuitionist and the paraconsistent one. Either the consequences of the event are classical — non-A appears instead of A — or intuitionist — non-A appears as B which does not replace the appearance of A by the appearance of non-A; the workers appear but this appearance does not generate a new formation of the laws of appearance but rather enacts a reform or modification of these laws. Or finally the consequences of the event are paraconsistent. In this case the fundamental framework of appearance is respected, the distinction of A and non-A is not touched at all. The paraconsistent form of transformation leads to the fact that it remains unclear if a transformation of the frame and of the laws of appearance happened or not. From the perspective of the world everything remains the same, the event and the non-event are identical and the consequences are null.[66] Evental consequences, as one can resume, can either be classical, intuitionist or paraconsistent.

If any world of appearance is organized intuitionistically then any real political action must follow the classical logic of negation, pseudo-actions clearly follow the paraconsistent logic. But again one needs to be more precise: If my claim is that true political action has to be organized classically and mobilizes the double power of negation — of exclusion and forced decision — then the development of consequences of the exclusive decision takes place in an intuitionist regulated world in which multiple ways and alternatives of their materialization are possible. This is necessary not to think that one single "yes" or one single "no" is sufficient to ground all consequences.[67] In fact they have to be unfolded in many nuances within the realm of appearances. And it has to be remarked that an event — due to the fact that it appears within the phenomenal world in the form of a classical negation — is not shared by everyone. Not everyone affirms that something happened, not everyone answers the forced choice with a "yes" — some remained untouched by the event of the October revolution for example. One needs to think a relation between the three logics because the ontologically paraconsistent event appears as classical negation — something has happened or hasn't happened and there is not third option — within a intuitionist framework in which a multiplicity of consequences are possible and at the same time there

[66] Badiou describes this as logic of parliamentary elections. See: Alain Badiou, *The Three Negations*, op.cit., p. 1883.

[67] To any determinate affirmation with which the process of unfolding of consequences begins there is a need for another supplement: subtraction. For with an event there is no (intuitionist) Hegelian sublation of all contradictions on a higher logical level but rather there is a moment of subtracting all possibilities of differentiating to get to the pure form of a "yes or no". Subtraction then means: to demand the primacy of the principle of contradiction before the non-validity of the principle of excluded middle.

is a paraconsistent opposition to them, because not everyone shares the initial yes as answer to the forced choice. Also, within the procedure of unfolding the consequences — which Badiou calls fidelity[68] — there is always a temptation to transform the "yes or no" into a "yes and no". "Yes" something has happened but "no" I do not have to draw consequences from it. This is the paradigmatic form of the paraconsistent temptation or to put it differently: this is the logic of seduction. Against it one has to constantly perpetuate the power of exclusion and forced decision to not abate the unfolding of consequences. There has to be a continually perpetuated "yes" — this is also why the only imperative of an ethics of truth is "Continue!" — that constantly although taking place inside a world subtracts from all differences — national, local, gender specific ones, etc. — that appear as essential in and for the world. True political action is the concrete articulation within a world taking multiple different shapes of a constantly perpetuated classicism, of the permanence of exclusion and forced decision against paraconsistent temptations.

It is precisely this relation between the three negations, the three logics of negation that presents the matrix of a new dialectical conception. It is dialectical as it is a relation of different types of negations that are its motor and at the same time it is materialist because it considers the concrete consequences produces by the relations of the negations. But this matrix as far as I presented it, if one might put it like that, contains only the objective side of a renewed materialist dialectics. It is also imperative to consider its subjective side.

Addendum: From Objective to Subjective Materialist Dialectics

To resume: The ontologically paraconsistent event appears in the form of classical negation in the realm of the phenomenal that is organized following the intuitionist logic and its consequences although taking multiple different concrete forms are either paraconsistent or classical. Now, the central question is how does the procedure of unfolding the consequences of an event start and how is it perpetuated? I already indicated that it can only start with a "yes", with an affirmation of the forced decision that the event introduces. So the event, firstly subtracts all differences of appearance, or better: condenses them into one point, into the choice between a "yes" something happened and I have to draw consequences from it or a "no" nothing happened. Subtraction then means to insist on the primacy of the principle of contradiction over the principle of excluded middle which is not valid in intuitionism. The event therefore is no

[68] See: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, op.cit., p. 201-264.

event without the subjective affirmation of it that initially inaugurates the procedure of fidelity. The event is the vanishing mediator, the clinamen that marks a breaking in of something that can only gain consistency through a primary "yes" that is then perpetuated and repeated constantly — without knowing an immanent limitation to its continuity. The event is itself nothing objective as such but can only be what it will have been through the subjective intervention that first starts with what I would like to call a *determinate affirmation*, the "yes" to a concretely determined choice. But at the same time one "yes", one determinate affirmation, is never enough. Although it already changes the situation — it makes something appear which did not appear before, for example in love the evental encounter does not itself produce anything but the possibility of a "yes" to the choice that one draws consequences from it and only the consequences produce something that did not appear before, for example a couple. But at the same time the "yes" has to be repeated in the situation that already changed because of the first "yes" — to stay within the example: the appearance of a couple is related to questions of organization in a very concrete manner, where to go for a holiday, how to spend time together, should one move in or not, etc. The subjective determinate affirmation has to be apt to sustain the "yes", to sustain classicism facing the world that changes fundamentally through the consequences that are already unfolded in it — and how that is to be done is not foreseeable or deducible. The "yes" has to be sustained although it is unforeseeable how. Only in this way the contingent emergence of a new possibility can retroactively gain consistency — or to put it differently: only via the consequences that are unfolded step by step, or more precise: point by point, i.e. through the continuity of "yeses", only in this way the event can retroactively be considered as what it will have been or in this sense gain objectivity. The objective side of the renewed materialist dialectics thus fully depends on the subjective determinate affirmation and its continual re-iteration. Objective is only what will have been objective by the retroactive effect of the consequences that are nothing but the sustained classicism of subjective determinate affirmation in a changing world that changes precisely due to the effects of these determinate affirmations. One can also say that the constant upholding of the subjective determinate affirmation of the emergence of the retroactively objective classical negation inside the intuitionist framework and against any paraconsistent temptation is a dialectical development that always — this is precisely what retroactivity means — relies upon something that is not itself dialectically deducible. If the consequences that change the world are engendered by something, the event, which itself is nothing but what it will have generated to

not fall back into the pure intuitionist framework, which also was the framework of Hegel and in a certain sense of expressive dialectics, one has to insist upon the following claim: materialist dialectics to remain materialist has to introduce something that is cannot be deduce dialectically — for the event in any other way would substantialized. Materialist dialectics not to fall back into the historically specific political shortcomings of (Hegelian and Marxist versions of) expressive dialectics has to be understood as a procedure of unfolding consequences, of the attempt to cope with something that due to the logic of retroactivity logically lies before it, is prior to it. Materialist dialectics not to totalize dialectics — and therefore hypostasize only one form of negation, the intuitionist one — has to be a dialectics of dialectics (drawing of consequences) and non-dialectics (the contingent emergence of a new possibility). Materialist dialectics should be thought of in terms of this linkage of what I want to call a dialectics of dialectics and non-dialectics.

True action is the permanence of classicism, the permanence of the power of exclusion and of forced choice that can have consequences appearing in multiple ways and are constantly directed against the paraconsistent temptation. Temptation or seduction is nothing but to say "yes and no" at the same time. If one accepts the delineated coordinates of working through materialist dialectics, what is the matrix of Žižeks dialectics? Taking seriously his project is the combination of the Hegelian notion of negativity and the Freudian notion of death drive. How to conceive of the relation of Hegelian negativity and Freudian death drive? First of all one can clearly see that Hegel's notion of negativity is intuitionist because it follows the principle of contradiction but not the principle of excluded middle: the negation of negation is in Hegel not identical to immediate affirmation. It is rather a concept of first affirmation, of its reflexive existence. If now the Freudian death drive can be thought of in terms of negation, which one would apply to it? With some vulgarization death drive can be understood as a drive that longs for its own non-satisfaction. Couldn't one therefore say that it does follow the principle of excluded middle but it does not obey the principle of contradiction and therefore presents a paraconsistent form of negation? But things are a bit more complicated here because Žižeks materialist dialectics attempts, as I would like to suggest, to introduce a doubling into the paraconsistent form of negation — which at the same time seems to lead him into a different direction than Badiou. Žižek attempts to double paraconsistent negation and to link it to the principle of contradiction that governs intuitionist logic. To elucidate the series of steps involved one can say: we are always already bound to some ideological coordinates — that nowadays take for example the

form of a fetishistic denial: "je sais bien mais quand meme"; I know very well but nevertheless…" as Žižek re-actualizes Marx's infamous definition of commodity fetishism. This ideological formula presents a reactionary paraconsistent logic that profoundly hinders change to happen because it obstructs any access to the contradiction that fundamentally governs the intuitionistically organized world (by relying on a ideological "yes and no" at the same time: yes, I know, but still: no, I will not change anything). So, for Žižek, first one has to get from the paraconsistent reactionary negation to the principle of contradiction to then return again to the paraconsistent logic of negation which then through this movement has changed its quality. But because any dialectic not only consists of three but four terms — Hegel calls this the repetition of the immediate as result, quadruplicity — it is necessary to also repeat this movement twice. It is not sufficient to only move from ideological paraconsistency to intuitionist contradiction and back, one needs another term: 1. From the paraconsistent ideological "yes and no" to the intuitionist contradiction; 2. Back to paraconsistency to inscribe into it the principle of contradiction; 3. Back to the intuitionist logic in a transformed way and 4. The reflection of this movement itself. Firstly we need something that shows, as Žižek puts it "that the real universality is not the neutral domain of the translation of one culture into another", that is the translation of one of the many particular appearing of the non-excluded middle into another "but rather the violent experience that beyond our cultural lines of demarcations are united by the same antagonism"[69] that is by the same principle of contradiction. In difference to the Badiousian conception, in Žižek a change of perspective is necessary that shows that the paraconsistent logic of ideology blocks and invisibilizes the contradiction that determines the phenomenal world that is intuitionistically organized. It shows its principle of organization that is contradiction, antagonism. For example, the predominant difference of democracy and totalitarianism is for Žižek only one and the same side of a choice that hinders the insight into what the real choice is: the distinction of democracy and totalitarianism is only one ideologically naturalized side of the true distinction between democracy and totalitarianism on one side and communism on the other. Therefore the movement from the ideological paraconsistent "yes and no" to the intuitionist "yes or no" is needed. But at the same time this movement is not enough. One needs another, a second shift of perspectives. Why is that? Because, one can deduce that with this change from paraconsistency to what governs intuitionism one only gains the principle of contradiction (yes or no) but not the true principle of excluded middle — one only got rid of the false

[69] Slavoj Žižek, *Die Puppe und der Zwerg*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 156. My translation, F.R.

"yes and no" of ideology. But the principle of excluded middle is also needed to come to a classical logic of negation — or to what Badiou calls an evental rupture of the truth of a situation in the phenomenal world, or to what Žižek calls an act. For this reason it is necessary to move again from intuitionist logic to the paraconsistent one. Only this double shift enables one to get from the wrong "yes and no" of ideology that obstructs the principle of contradiction to the true "yes and no" that is the death drive and that means to obtain the principle of excluded middle again. Or to put it differently: one needs to get to the point where one can only say "yes or no" to the true "yes and no": where there is only the choice of "yes or no" to that which longs for its own non-satisfaction. Both principles: excluded middle and principle of contradiction are needed to have a classical logic (or as one might say with Badiou, an ontology). Therefore one needs to move from the appearing contradiction back to the paraconsistency of the "yes and no" to distinguish between a wrong "yes and no" of ideology and a true "yes and no" of the death drive. But and this is not the last step: one needs to move again from the paraconsistent logic to the intuitionist organized world because only in this way the attained classical logic can be given a phenomenal appearance. Only by again moving from paraconsistency to intuitionism again there can be an inscription of the true "yes and no" into the world that produces a change of coordinates, an act.[70] In the last and fourth step therefore the immediate, that is classical logic, repeats itself in the form of a result because it then becomes retroactively clear that is always will have been present in the paraconsistency of ideology (principle of excluded middle) and intuitionism, that is the phenomenal world (principle of contradiction). One needs these four steps to attain the classical logic in Žižek's materialist dialectics. But all this, in my reading, leads to one question that I want to address in multiple ways. If Žižek situates classical logic precisely in the double shift of paraconsistent and intuitionist logic of negation what precisely is the place of theory, of philosophy if, as one can see from this movement, ontology cannot be a condition of philosophy (as it is for Badiou[71]). Because one only attains the classical logic of ontology through the process of this double shifting movement. To me it seems that this

[70] Think of Žižeks famous interpretation of the scene of Fight Club in which Edward Norton confronting his boss punches himself in the face. If the act introduces the inscription of the "yes and no" of death drive into the intuitionistically governed world of appearances this also comes with the danger of conceiving of it as the inauguration of an automatism in which the subject of the act disappears. Although there is a clear dividing line between them, if this was to be accurate, Žižek might be closer to Deleuze then one might think at first. For Žižek's powerful criticism of Deleuze, see: Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies. Deleuze and Consequences*, London / New York 2003.

[71] See: Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, London / New York 2009.

movement does for Žižek describe the movement of philosophy itself. But if this was to be true, why wouldn't philosophy then be the ultimate sublation of all contradictions in the notion of contradiction itself? Or to put it differently: why wouldn't philosophy as movement from the false "yes and no" of ideology to the "yes or no" of contradiction or antagonism, then to the true "yes and no" of the death drive and then to an affirmation of the true "yes and no" be what Hegel himself calls absolute knowledge; absolute knowledge as knowledge of the necessary inconsistency of that which always already determines reality, the "yes and no" of the death drive? And even if this would not pose a problem for the Žižekian project, it rather would be a genuinely and powerful new interpretation of Hegel's absolute knowledge could one not ask if this conception is truly post-Hegelian? Or if it does not rather present an ultimate sublation of all forms of practices, of all conditions as Badiou has it, into philosophy? Is there not a danger of suturing philosophy to an (retroactive) ontology within the dialectical movement (which again is philosophy and then ontology) and to somehow lose the essential and necessary non-dialectical element of materialist dialectics? To put it in more direct terms: Mister Žižek, are you really post-Hegelian?

"'Naturalism or anti-naturalism? No, thanks — both are worse!': Science, Materialism, and Slavoj Žižek"

Adrian Johnston

Nobody has done more to revive the fortunes of materialism today than Slavoj Žižek. Through innovative, heterodox interweavings of what could be dubbed, in Leninist fashion, the three sources of Žižekianism (i.e., German idealist philosophies, Marxist political theory, and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis),[1] Žižek aims to articulate an account of the irreducible subject compatible with the basis provided by a non-eliminative materialist ontology. To be more precise, his "transcendental materialism" seeks to delineate how the negativity of *Cogito*-like subjectivity (especially in its related Kantian, Schellingian, Hegelian, and Lacanian manifestations) is internally generated out of material being.[2] He insists that this materialism, the one true version, must be founded upon a certain interpretation of Lacan's dictum declaring that "the big Other does not exist" ("*le grand Autre n'existe pas*"), an interpretation according to which the ultimate *Grund* hypothesized at the level of ontology should be envisioned as a lone inconsistent immanence riddled with gaps and deprived of the wholeness provided by such Others as the theological idea of God or the cosmological idea of Nature-with-a-capital-N (i.e., the monistic One-All of a seamless tapestry of entities and events bound together by mechanical relations of efficient causality).[3] The absence of such unity within being, a unity which would be a stifling, subject-squelching closure, is what permits the material genesis of more-than-material subjects; that is to say, this lack of underlying cohesion, as a "barred Real," is a contingent ontological condition of possibility for the

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1 (Adrian Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek," *The Blackwell Companion to Continental Philosophy*, Second Edition [ed. William Schroeder], Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2012 [forthcoming])

2 (Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008, pg. xxiii-xxvi, 16, 74, 77, 81, 208-209, 236, 269-287)
(Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009, pg. 79)
(Adrian Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian Reformation: Giving a Hearing to *The Parallax View*," *Diacritics*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2007, pp. 3-20)

3 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 208)
(François Balmès, *Ce que Lacan dit de l'être (1953-1960)*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999, pg. 106-107)

emergence of trans-ontological subjectivity.[4] As Žižek reiterates recently, "the basic axiom of today's materialism is for me the *ontological incompleteness of reality*."[5] He goes on to propose in the same text that, "a true materialism not only asserts that only material reality 'really exists,' but has to assume all the consequences of what Lacan called the nonexistence of the big Other."[6] All of this is part of his solution to a philosophically significant problem he poses: "What ontology does freedom imply?"[7]

Žižek's parallel ontology and theory of subjectivity (the former being reverse-engineered out of the latter[8]) raise a series of interesting, concatenated questions crucial to the future of materialism in contemporary theory: To begin with, what sort of material is posited by Žižek as the groundless ground of not-whole being? What connection, if any, is there between this material and notions of nature associated with various versions of naturalism? Assuming that there indeed is some manner of relation between Žižekian ontologically-primary "matter" (however ephemerally disappearing[9]) and what is imprecisely referred to as "nature"—in other words, this is to presume that, as Lacan would put it, materialism is "not without" (*pas sans*)[10] its naturalism—what can and should the relationship be between materialist philosophy and the so-called "natural sciences," namely, the empirical and experimental physical sciences? Asked differently, how, if at all, ought philosophical and scientific materialisms to affect each other in terms of both their conceptual contents and methodological procedures? Supposing they rightfully affect each other, what obligations and constraints do theoretical materialism and the sciences place upon one another? Specifically, is a materialist philosophy responsible to and limited by the physical sciences? Even more specifically, is a materialist account of subjects, in whatever might be the

4 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. xxv, 65-66, 77-79, 92-93, 106-116, 168-180)

5 (Slavoj Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* [ed. Creston Davis], Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009, pg. 240)

6 (Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," pg. 287)

7 (Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity," *The Monstrosity of Christ*, pg. 82)

8 (Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek")

9 (Slavoj Žižek, "Interview: Slavoj Žižek and Ben Woodward," *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* [ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman], Melbourne: Re.press, 2011, pg. 406-408)

10 (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VI: Le désir et son interprétation, 1958-1959* [unpublished typescript], session of February 11th, 1959)
(Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX: L'identification, 1961-1962* [unpublished typescript], session of April 4th, 1962)
(Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre X: L'angoisse, 1962-1963* [ed. Jacques-Alain Miller], Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004, pg. 105)

ways, somehow answerable to the life sciences (in particular, evolutionary and neurobiological studies of human beings)?

These queries, orbiting around the significant core matter of the *rapport* between theoretical and empirical materialisms, are at the very heart of a freshly started debate between Žižek and myself, at least as I see it. This debate began with an article of mine (entitled "The Misfeeling of What Happens: Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Damasio, and a Materialist Account of Affects"[11]) in an issue of the journal *Subjectivity* devoted to Žižek's work and his response to this contribution, among others, in the same journal issue.[12] The present article is my reply to his response, a reply guided by the questions enumerated in the preceding paragraph. In the course of directly addressing Žižek's objections, I will refer to several other of his contemporaneous texts in which remarks relevant to this debate surface, including his contributions to the books *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* and *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (given both the need for brevity as well as the fact that I have engaged with his pre-2009 writings in great detail on prior occasions, I won't spend time in what follows on lengthy analyses of his earlier discussions of materialism).

In order properly to frame this reply to Žižek, rapidly sketching its contextual backdrop is necessary. The article "The Misfeeling of What Happens" was extracted from my half of a book manuscript Catherine Malabou and I finished writing together not too long ago, entitled *Self and Emotional Life: Merging Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Neurobiology*[13] (Žižek mentions Malabou in his response to me, and, as will be seen subsequently, her corpus illuminates important facets of the terrain at stake here). This article consisted, in part, of an assessment of Žižek's Lacan-inspired criticisms of Damasio's neuroscientific depictions of affective life laid out in the fourth chapter of his 2006 tome *The Parallax View*. Succinctly stated, the verdict of this assessment was that Damasio is not nearly so guilty of being quite as un-psychoanalytic, so at odds with analytic thinking, as Žižek charges him with being. In establishing this case *contra* Žižek, I attempted to show that discoveries alighted upon in the

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11 (Adrian Johnston, "The Misfeeling of What Happens: Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Damasio, and a Materialist Account of Affects," *Subjectivity*, special issue: "Žižek and Political Subjectivity" [ed. Derek Hook and Calum Neill], vol. 3, no 1, April 2010 pg. 76-100)

12 (Slavoj Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture," *Subjectivity*, special issue: "Žižek and Political Subjectivity" [ed. Derek Hook and Calum Neill], vol. 3, no 1, April 2010 pg. 101-116)

13 (Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Merging Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Neurobiology*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012 [forthcoming])

overlapping fields of affective neuroscience and evolutionary biology offer invaluable components for a materialist account of subjectivity faithful to the essential tenets of Freudian-Lacanian theory. While granting the correctness and perspicacity of many of Žižek's indictments (in which Damasio's fellow brain investigator Joseph LeDoux, and the neurosciences as a whole, come under carefully directed fire), I argued there, as elsewhere, that a truly materialist psychoanalytic metapsychology is obligated to reconcile itself with select findings of the life sciences (of course, this reconciliation should be dialectical, involving mutual modifications between these disciplines, albeit without any formal, dogmatic determination in advance of the delicate calibration of what is likely to be the usually uneven balance between the theoretical and empirical dimensions of this dialectic in the ongoing pursuit of its unfolding).

As a number of his interventions reveal (not only *The Parallax View*, but also such books as *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* [1996] and *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* [2004]), Žižek is hardly averse or unsympathetic to attempts at a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and the sciences. Nonetheless, I alleged in "The Misfeeling of What Happens" that his critical treatments of the life sciences in *The Parallax View* (as well as in 2008's *In Defense of Lost Causes*) rely, at certain moments, on a sharp dichotomy between the natural and the anti-natural that these sciences have undermined empirically over the course of the past several decades[14] and that psychoanalytic metapsychology ought not to invoke theoretically (in other texts, I even try to demonstrate that Lacan himself, contrary to accepted exegetical consensus, doesn't subscribe to any standard type of

[14] (Lesley Rogers, *Sexing the Brain*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pg. 2-3, 5, 20, 23-24, 47-48, 68, 97-98)
(François Ansermet, "*Des neurosciences aux logosciences*," *Qui sont vos psychanalystes?* [ed. Nathalie Georges, Jacques-Alain Miller, and Nathalie Marchaison], Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002, pg. 377-378, 383)
(Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, New York: Penguin Books, 2002, pg. 2-3, 5, 9, 12, 20, 66-67, 91, 296)
(Mark Solms and Oliver Turnbull, *The Brain and the Inner World: An Introduction to the Neuroscience of Subjective Experience*, New York: Other Press, 2002, pg. 218, 220-222)
(Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2003, pg. 162-163, 164, 173-174)
(Jean-Pierre Changeux, *The Physiology of Truth: Neuroscience and Human Knowledge* [trans. M.B. DeBevoise], Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, pg. 32-33, 207-208)
(Benjamin Libet, *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004, pg. 5)
(Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, pg. 1-2, 5-7, 58-60, 62-65, 67, 72-75, 77-78, 109-111, 144-145, 160-161, 166, 176, 189, 191, 193, 204-205, 220-223, 226, 238, 285-286, 319, 344, 372, 378-380)

anti-naturalism predicated upon a clear-cut contrast of nature versus anti-nature [*antiphusis*, *contre-nature*] and dictating unqualified hostility to biology and its branches[15]). Departing from the Žižekian critique of Damasian affective neuroscience, I pled for something I've been struggling to outline preliminarily and programmatically in recent years, that is, an alternate hybrid analytic-scientific vision of human subjectivity as depending upon and arising from a multitude of constitutive temporal-material strata running the full-spectrum gamut from the natural to the non-natural and sandwiched together as a collage of conflicting layers-in-tension.[16] This vision resonates indirectly or directly with a diverse array of references, ranging from, for instance, Althusser's Marxist (and, to a lesser extent, psychoanalytic) picture of a plurality of (historical) times bound up with "relatively autonomous" (social) structures[17] to contemporary neuroscientific characterizations of the evolved brain as a "kludge," a barely-functional hodge-podge jumble of out-of-synch disparate modules.[18] Apropos Althusser, it's worth briefly noting that the materialist perspective informing this inter-

(Eric R. Kandel, "Psychotherapy and the Single Synapse: The Impact of Psychiatric Thought on Neurobiologic Research," *Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and the New Biology of Mind*, Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., 2005, pg. 21)
(Eric R. Kandel, "A New Intellectual Framework for Psychiatry," *Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and the New Biology of Mind*, pg. 41-43, 47)
(Eric R. Kandel, "From Metapsychology to Molecular Biology: Explorations Into the Nature of Anxiety," *Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and the New Biology of Mind*, pg. 150)
(François Ansermet and Pierre Magistretti, *Biology of Freedom: Neural Plasticity, Experience, and the Unconscious* [trans. Susan Fairfield], New York: Other Press, 2007, pg. xvi, 8, 10, 239)

15 (Adrian Johnston, "Ghosts of Substance Past: Schelling, Lacan, and the Denaturalization of Nature," *Lacan: The Silent Partners* [ed. Slavoj Žižek], London: Verso Books, 2006, pg. 34-55)
(Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian Reformation," pg. 14)
(Adrian Johnston, "Conflicted Matter: Jacques Lacan and the Challenge of Secularizing Materialism," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, no. 19, Spring 2008, pg. 166-188)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 270-273)
(Adrian Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Negativity Materialized," *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics and the Dialectic* [ed. Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett and Creston Davis], New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pg. 163-168)
(Adrian Johnston, "Turning the Sciences Inside Out: Revisiting Lacan's 'Science and Truth,'" *Concept and Form, Volume Two: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* [ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden], London: Verso Books, 2012 [forthcoming])
(Adrian Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings: Unconscious Affect Between Psychoanalysis, Neuroscience, and Philosophy," in Johnston and Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life*)

16 (Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005, pg. xxxi-xxxii, 340)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 260-261)
(Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 168-170, 175-176)
(Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings")

17 (Louis Althusser, "The Object of *Capital*," in Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* [trans. Ben Brewster], London: Verso, 2009, pg. 106-108, 110-112, 114-121)

18 (David J. Linden, *The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, pg. 2-3, 5-7, 21-24, 26, 245-246)

vention is closer to that of Mao, as compared with other inheritors of Marx's legacy, in fashions that take a measure of distance from a certain Althusserian "theoreticist" conception of Marxist materialism (in that Althusserians wrongly might accuse the approach to interfacing the philosophical and the scientific adopted here as flirting with what the Althusser of the mid-1960s condemns as empiricist "pragmatism"[19]). Incidentally, it's also worth speculating in passing that historical and dialectical materialist handlings of the infrastructure-superstructure distinction at the level of the macrocosm of societies by such different thinkers as Gramsci, Mao, Sartre, and Althusser might harbor the potential to shed much-needed light on the microcosm of the perennial mind-body problem. But, this is a speculation for another time.

Before presenting and responding to Žižek's replies to me, I feel compelled to highlight an aspect of the place from which I respond here. Already in *Žižek's Ontology*, I detected and problematized instances when Žižek appears to deviate from his own version of materialism, a materialism resting on Lacan's "*le grand Autre n'existe pas*" as a central ontological principle (whether this Other be God, Nature, History, Society, or whatever else along these capitalized lines[20]). Of special relevance to the debate hopefully to be advanced productively by this article are my hesitations with respect to his occasional talk of there being, in addition to the two dimensions of nature and culture, some sort of un-derived third vector (whether labeled the "night of the world," the "death drive," the

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(Gary Marcus, *Kludge: The Haphazard Evolution of the Human Mind*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2008, pg. 6-16, 161-163)
(Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991, pg. 106-107)
(Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1999, pg. 331)
(Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, pg. 105)
(LeDoux, *Synaptic Self*, pg. 31)
(Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pg. 147)
(Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings")

19 (Louis Althusser, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy," in Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, pg. 61-62)
(Louis Althusser, "To My English Readers," *For Marx* [trans. Ben Brewster], London: Verso, 2005, pg. 14-15)
(Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic: On the Unevenness of Origins," *For Marx*, pg. 170-171)
(Louis Althusser, "The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy," *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966-1967)* [ed. François Matheron; trans. G.M. Goshgarian], London: Verso, 2003, pg. 185-186)

20 (Balmès, *Ce que Lacan dit de l'être*, pg. 122-123)

"vanishing mediator," etc.) as the root-source of what comes to be subjectivity proper in and for itself ($).[21] On my view as first expressed in *Žižek's Ontology*, a view to be further clarified and sharpened below, Žižek's periodic summonings of a mysterious neither-natural-nor-cultural force, as an arguably under- or un-explained supplement to his ontology, are both incompatible with an authentically materialist materialism as well as superfluous considering his Lacanian renditions of nature and culture as equally "barred" Others (*qua* inconsistent, conflict-ridden, and so on). In these disagreements, I find my situation to involve being caught between two Žižeks, as it were. However accurate, justifiable, or not, I experience myself as a voice speaking on behalf of a systematic Žižek and against another Žižek who strays from his own best philosophical insights, instead of as a critic intervening from a position purely external to Žižek's body of thought. As a Lacanian, he hopefully won't object in principle to having his subjectivity split.

Žižek launches his rebuttal of my article "The Misfeeling of What Happens" by vehemently asserting that any notion of the unconscious able to be extrapolated from Damasio's reflections would have to exclude key features of the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic unconscious. On the Freudian hand, the Damasian unconscious leaves no room for anything "beyond the pleasure principle," namely, the infamous *Todestrieb* so dear to Žižek's heart. On the Lacanian hand, the non-conscious layers of Damasio's embodied mind allegedly lack, in their theoretical descriptions provided by him, the mediators of the big Other *qua* symbolic order.[22] Žižek also repeats a Lacanian line integral to his critique of Damasio in *The Parallax View* (contained in a section entitled "Emotions Lie, or, Where Damasio Is Wrong"), maintaining that, "for Freud, emotions cheat, with the exception of anxiety"[23] (both the general psychoanalytic issue of unconscious affects and Lacan's specific interpretation of Freud's metapsychology of affective life are reassessed in my half of the book with Malabou,[24] so the comparison of Freudian-Lacanian with Damasian portraits of things affective will be left to the side in this piece). As he notes in fairness, I too acknowledge a number of contrasts between the analytic and neuroscientific unconsciouses.[25] Indeed, although I sought to narrow the rift Žižek sees yawning between, on the one side, Freud and Lacan, and, on the other side, Damasio and LeDoux, I want to underscore that I in no way intended to close it altogether. For instance, I concur

21 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 188-190)
22 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 102)
23 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 102)
24 (Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings")
25 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 102)

that the death drive or an equivalent isn't explicitly integrated into Damasio's picture, although I drew attention to sites within the Damasian apparatus where there are receptive (albeit unexploited) openings for distinctively psychoanalytic concepts, such as the *Todestrieb*, that can and should be inserted at those precise loci.[26] I'm less ready to grant that Damasio's and LeDoux's conceptions of everything other than self-conscious awareness are utterly devoid of acknowledgements of the influences stemming from what Lacan christens the "symbolic order." Both Damasio and LeDoux recognize and discuss the role of linguistic mediation in the phenomena they study[27] (of course, Lacan's and Žižek's multivalent uses of the phrase "big Other" refer to much more than just language, so it must immediately be conceded that certain aspects of this Other don't find expression in affective neuroscience *à la* the two researchers currently under consideration).

Comparing and contrasting Freud, Lacan, Damasio, and LeDoux aside, Žižek adds on the heels of the above that, "I tend to agree with Catherine Malabou that the neuronal unconscious and the Freudian unconscious are not only different, but incompatible."[28] However, Žižek's agreement with Malabou on this topic ends here and goes no further.[29] For him, to affirm the split of incommensurability between the analytic and neuroscientific versions of the unconscious is also to affirm the autonomy of the former *vis-à-vis* the latter, or even the former's right to correct the latter without being reciprocally corrected by the latter in turn (i.e., the status of the analytic unconscious as a theoretical object is more or less independent of the empirical findings of the neurosciences). For her, this same affirmation dictates the opposite, namely, the task of thoroughly transforming (perhaps as far as immanently negating) psychoanalysis under the influence of contemporary neurobiological investigations (i.e., the independence of the analytic unconscious as a theoretical object is emphatically denied).[30] Observing the profound disagreement beneath the façade of consensus between Žižek and

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26 (Johnston, "The Misfeeling of What Happens", pg. 81-82, 89-92)
(Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings")

27 (Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1994, pg. 130, 185, 187-188)
(Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, pg. 218-219, 222)
(Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, pg. 72)
(LeDoux, *Synaptic Self*, pg. 197-198, 203-204)
(Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings")

28 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 102)

29 (Slavoj Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," *Filozofski Vestnik*, "Radical Philosophy?" [ed. Peter Klepec], vol. 29, no. 2, 2008, pg. 9-29)

30 (Catherine Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains*, Paris: Bayard, 2007, pg. 59-60, 85, 338-339)

Malabou provides an opportunity for me to highlight, as intimated earlier, that I take a stance in-between these two poles. From this dialectical perspective, Freudian-Lacanian metapsychology, to varying extents depending on the specific concepts concerned therein, is "relatively autonomous" (to resort once again to a handy but tricky Marxist turn of phrase) in relation to the sciences. And yet, this variable-degree independence is far from exempting psychoanalysis, especially if it's of a sincere materialist bent, from a duty to be "plastic" (in Malabou's precise sense as a combination of firmness and flexibility[31]) in connection with these other disciplines. Additionally, the shape of this plasticity always should be determined concretely in each instance of a potential point of convergence and/or conflict between the analytic and the scientific (i.e., in a non-*apriori* fashion).

Žižek proceeds to claim that, "For Johnston, the 'denaturalization' of the human animal which takes place when the human animal is caught in the network of the symbolic order should not be conceived as a radical break with nature."[32] A lot hinges on how one construes the phrase "radical break." Insofar as Žižek and I share a notion of subjectivity extrapolated from a merging of German idealism and Lacanian theory, we both are against any kind of crude, reductive conflation of the category of the subject with the register of the merely natural and corporeal (as is Malabou also[33]). Nonetheless, I would contend (and, on my reading, so too would the more consistently materialist side of Žižek I appeal to in this debate) that a fully rational and atheistic/secular materialism requires a satisfactory account of how, to put it in Hegelese, subject surfaces out of substance alone.[34] This account would identify what the material possibility

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(Catherine Malabou, *Ontologie de l'accident: Essai sur la plasticité destructrice*, Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2009, pg. 33, 75-77, 83-84)
(Catherine Malabou, "Postface, The Paradoxes of the Principle of Constancy," in Johnston and Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life*)

31 (Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* [trans. Lisabeth During], New York: Routledge, 2005, pg. 8-9, 73-74, 192-193)
(Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* [trans. Sebastian Rand], New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, pg. 5-6, 8, 12, 17, 29-30, 71-72)
(Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* [trans. Carolyn Shread], New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pg. 8-9, 59)

32 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 102)

33 (Catherine Malabou, "*Préface*," *La chambre du milieu: De Hegel aux neurosciences*, Paris: Hermann, 2009, pg. 9-10)
(Catherine Malabou, "*Les enjeux idéologiques de la plasticité neuronale*," *La chambre du milieu*, pg. 213-218, 227-228)
(Catherine Malabou, "*Pour une critique de la raison neurobiologique: À propos de Jean-Pierre Changeux*, Du Vrai, du Beau, du Bien, Une nouvelle approche neuronale," *La chambre du milieu*, pg. 229-231, 233, 235-237)

34 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 165-167, 171-174)
(Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian Reformation," pg. 4-7, 9-12, 16-17)

conditions are within the physical being of "nature" for the internal production out of itself of structures and phenomena (with which subjects are inextricably intertwined) that eventually achieve, through naturally catalyzed processes of denaturalization, a type of transcendence-in-immanence[35] as a self-relating dynamic in which non-natural causalities come to function within natural-material milieus.[36] Hence, for me, the emergence and self-founding of the subject-as-$ indeed marks a "break with nature."

Whether this break is "radical" depends on what Žižek means by this adjective. Given my insistence that the negativity of non-natural subjectivity remains susceptible to being buffeted and perturbed (or, as Malabou's ontology of traumatic accidents has it, disrupted or destroyed) by the natural ground from which it originally arises and with which it ruptures, perhaps my conception of the break of denaturalization isn't radical enough in Žižek's eyes. However, too radical a rendering of this break between the natural and the non-natural, a rendering wherein the subject accomplishes an absolutely total and final subtraction from bio-material being and thereby closes in upon itself at the apex of a perfectly completed movement of denaturalization, would be unacceptable in light of Žižek's commitment to psychoanalysis (so too would be his non-genetic picture of autonomous subjectivity set against the ontogenetic models of subject-formation ineliminable from Freudian-Lacanian metapsychology). This is because he wishes to capture as essential to his picture of subjectivity the sorts of dysfunctionalities so familiar in analysis. Not only is there now ample empirical scientific evidence that many uniquely human dysfunctions, even though their modes of being psychically subjectified are anything but prescribed beforehand by exclusively biological variables, have their sources in the sub-optimal, evolutionarily slapped-together anatomy of the less-than-completely-coordinated central nervous system (i.e., the kludge-like brain)—from the vantage point of strictly theoretical musings, it seems probable that an excessively radical break with nature *qua* corporeal substance(s) would yield a subject much too smoothly functional for Žižekian psychoanalytic sensibilities.[37] An insistence on denaturalization as not-too-radical, as uneven, partial, incomplete, failed, etc., is more likely to be conducive to the construction of a solidly materialist theory of the subject incorporating characteristics of psychical subjectivity at the center of the psychoanalytic depiction of the "human condition."

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35 (Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, pg. 53-54)

36 (Adrian Johnston, "What Matter(s) in Ontology: Alain Badiou, the Hebb-Event, and Materialism Split from Within," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 1, April 2008, pg. 39)

37 (Johnston, "The Misfeeling of What Happens", pg. 96-97)

Žižek's ensuing employments of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* in his criticisms are quite revelatory in relation to the issues presently at stake. As regards Kant, Žižek redeploys his interpretation of a note to §82 (in "Book Three: The Faculty of Desire") of the *Anthropology*, a note wherein infants are said to display an innate "passion" (*Leidenschaft*) for freedom.[38] Diagnosing what is "missing" from what he describes as my "vision of the archaic natural substance which is gradually, but never completely, civilized, 'mediated' by the symbolic order," he proceeds, with reference to the pre-critical Kant, to state:

> We find the first indication of this third dimension—neither nature nor culture—already in Kant, for whom discipline and education do not directly work on our animal nature, forging it into human individuality: as Kant points out, animals cannot be properly educated since their behavior is already predestined by their instincts. What this means is that, paradoxically, in order to be educated into freedom (*qua* moral autonomy and self-responsibility), *I already have to be free* in a much more radical—'noumenal,' monstrous even—sense. The Freudian name for this monstrous freedom, of course, is death drive. It is interesting to note how philosophical narratives of the 'birth of man' are always compelled to presuppose a moment in human (pre)history when (what will become) man is no longer a mere animal and simultaneously not yet a 'being of language,' bound by symbolic Law; a moment of thoroughly 'perverted,' 'denaturalized,' 'derailed' nature which is not yet culture. In his anthropological writings, Kant emphasized that the human animal needs disciplinary pressure in order to tame an uncanny 'unruliness' which seems to be inherent to human nature—a wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one's own will, cost what it may. It is on account of this 'unruliness' that the human animal needs a Master to discipline him: discipline targets this 'unruliness,' not the animal nature in man.[39]

This paragraph appears verbatim in Žižek's contemporaneous essay "Discipline between Two Freedoms—Madness and Habit in German Idealism,"[40] followed by some further specifications regarding Kantian discipline.[41] Subsequently, in his sequel essay in the same volume (a piece entitled "Fichte's

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38 (Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* [trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell], Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978, pg. 176)
(Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso, 1997, pg. 237)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 180-181)

39 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 103)

40 (Slavoj Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms—Madness and Habit in German Idealism," in Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, London: Continuum, 2009, pg. 96-97)

41 (Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," pg. 98)

Laughter"), Žižek speaks of Hegel as having "no need for a third element."[42] And yet, this ardently self-professed Hegelian materialist seems to reach for what he himself, appealing to the authority of Kant-the-idealist, labels a "third dimension" (at this moment, one wonders whether, in the shadows, there might be a very un-Žižekian argument akin to Italian then-Marxist Lucio Colletti's contention that Marxism is led away from its materialism by relying on the dialectics of Hegelian idealism instead of the purportedly materialist "rational kernel" of the non-metaphysical anti-dogmatism in the critical transcendental idealism much maligned by ostensibly misguided Marxists, from Engels onward, preferring Hegel to Kant[43]).

My initial response to the Žižek of the passage quoted immediately above is simple: Put in the form of a naïve question, from where does this enigmatic neither-natural-nor-cultural third stratum come? Even if, sticking with Kant's example of babies, one quite contentiously insists that this untamed excess of impassioned (proto-)autonomy is, at the ontogenetic level of individual subject formation, something intrinsic and hard-wired, that merely pushes the question back to the phylogenetic level without answering it. One is left to wonder what the cause or origin is for this magical kernel of free negativity, this "mysterious flame" (to borrow the title of a book by Colin McGinn advocating a "new mysterianism," deservedly criticized by Žižek,[44] which preaches that the mind-body problem, construed as an entirely epistemic difficulty, is inherently insoluble in that the mental cannot convincingly be derived theoretically from the material due to purportedly unsurpassable limits imposed by an inbuilt human "cognitive closure"[45]). From whence does Žižek's noumenal monstrosity arise if not nature as an inconsistent, Other-less physical universe: God, soul, *res cogitans*, the Absolute self-positing I, the hazy vapors of a ghostly *Geist*…?[46] I'd rather my materialism fall flat than be three-dimensional in this non-materialist manner. This materialism, which is as much that of another Žižek (the Hegelian-materialist philosopher of transcendental materialism) as it is mine, rests solely on the two dimensions of a barred Real (i.e., what I've taken to naming

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42 (Slavoj Žižek, "Fichte's Laughter," in Gabriel and Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter*, pg. 127)

43 (Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* [trans. Lawrence Garner], London: Verso, 1979, pg. 59-60, 90-94, 103, 118-122, 192, 213-216)

44 (Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pg. 134-135)
(Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, pg. 217)

45 (Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, pg. 43-46, 68-76, 101, 104, 197)

46 (Johnston, "Turning the Sciences Inside Out")

a "weak nature,"[47] having nothing whatsoever to do with coincidental post-modern bandyings of this adjective, as internally divided and self-sundering material substance) and an equally barred Symbolic (i.e., the Lacanian-Žižekian inconsistent Others of culture and related structures).[48] Anything more than these two dimensions, any Third, is a derivative, emergent by-product of the natural and/or cultural—and not an inexplicable given always-already there (following the Lacan of the second sentence of the *écrit* on the mirror stage, a Cartesian- or Fichtean-style I is to be eschewed as a non-genetic first principle, although this isn't tantamount to a rejection *tout court* of *Cogito*-like subjectivity[49]).

To put my cards on the table in terms of making explicit my philosophically ground-zero axioms, decisions, and intuitions, I'm enough of a naturalist—mine is a non-reductive naturalism of an auto-denaturalizing nature, hence really neither a strict naturalism nor anti-naturalism—to wager that an avoidance or refusal of an explanation for the natural/material genesis of non-natural/more-than-material beings and happenings (such as Lacan's $-as-*parlêtre* alluded to by Žižek's phrase "being of language") is, as the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* would warn, a dangerous concession cracking open the door to the irrationalities of obscurantist idealisms, spiritualisms, and theisms. In a pre-publication draft version of his debate with the backward-looking theologian John Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek declares that, "the 'theological turn' of postmodernity is one of THE figures of the enemy for me." If so, he should be warier of the ways in which he encourages, however unintentionally, attempts to appropriate his work by fanatical advocates of a terribly traditional religiosity deludedly romanticizing the wretched darkness of medieval pre-modernity (regardless of this profound conservatism being trendily repackaged in the flashy guises of "radical orthodoxy" or any variant of "post-secularism" in Continental philosophical circles, including an oxymoronic "theological materialism").

A few additional remarks warrant formulating before inquiring into the justness and accuracy of Žižek's reading of the Kant of the *Anthropology*. In the wake of mobilizing the Hegel of *The Philosophy of History*, portrayed as agreeing with

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47 (Johnston, "Conflicted Matter," pg. 182-188)
(Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 162-163, 175-176)

48 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 122, 169-171, 180, 208-209, 234, 236, 272, 285-287)
(Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian Reformation," pg. 18-19)

49 (Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* [trans. Bruce Fink], New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006, pg. 75)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 53-54)

the Kantian insistence on freedom as something "in nature more than nature itself" (to paraphrase Lacan[50])—the role of Hegel's philosophy in this discussion will be taken up after an examination of Kant's *Anthropology*—Žižek cites some reflections by Jonathan Lear on sexuality as situated between animal naturalness and human non-naturalness.[51] Elsewhere, he likewise expresses approval of Lear's recasting of the Freudian death drive[52] (with Žižek's recourse to the latter notion clearly being crucial to our exchange). This recasting proposes that the Freudian word "*Todestrieb*," although naming a hypostatization mistakenly performed by Freud himself, is a concept-term not for a positive thing, but for the negativity of the pleasure principle's disruptive malfunctioning, its constitutive inability always and invariably to assert its intra-psychical hegemonic dominance (in *Time Driven*, I similarly suggest that Freud's problem-plagued death drive is best salvaged and reconstructed as designating a discord built into the metapsychological architecture of any and every drive [*Trieb*], more specifically, an antagonistic temporal split between a repetitive "axis of iteration" [the source and pressure of a drive] and a repetition-thwarting "axis of alteration" [the aim and object of a drive][53]). That is to say, according to Lear and the Žižek who sides with him,[54] there is only the dysfunctional pleasure principle, and nothing more; in other words, there isn't a second, deeper counter-principle externally opposing this lone principle. Once again enacting the gesture of playing off one Žižek against another, I am inclined to pit the Žižek who endorses Lear's thesis apropos the death drive against the Žižek who appears precisely to succumb to the temptation of hypostatization for which Lear rebukes Freud, namely, treating the *Todestrieb* as a substantial "third dimension" that's perplexingly neither natural nor cultural. By contrast, for both me and the Žižek who appropriates the Learian death drive, there actually exist nothing more than the two dimensions of nature and culture, plus the insubstantial negativity (i.e., not a positive

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50 (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964* [ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. Alan Sheridan], New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977, pg. 268)

51 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 104)
(Jonathan Lear, *Freud*, New York: Routledge, 2005, pg. 19, 75)

52 (Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, pg. 13-14, 146)
(Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, pg. 80-81, 84-85)
(Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, pg. 70-71)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 186-187)
(Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 159-163)

53 (Johnston, *Time Driven*, pg. 123-154, 175-183, 237, 330-331, 368-369)

54 (Žižek, "Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject," pg. 19)

third thing) of the conflicts within and between, but still immanent to, these two dimensions. What's more, in Schellingian language agreeable to us, I would add that, for a materialism not without its carefully qualified (quasi-)naturalism, the *Urgrund* (as also an *Ungrund*)[55] of a weak nature (exemplified in this context by Lear's sub-optimal pleasure principle minus the Other of a more profound, underlying meta-law such as the hypostatized version of the *Todestrieb*) is the ultimate baseless base of autonomous subjectivity, whether ontogenetically and/or phylogenetically.[56] Lumping together allusions to the eclectic set of Paul Churchland, Douglas Hofstadter, and Badiou, this non-reductive materialism is a self-eliminative one (in the sense of natural materiality as auto-negating *qua* canceling of its own dictates) in which the I is a "strange loop" (or loop-hole[57]) ensconced within a nature from which has been "subtracted" this nature's fantasized strength (i.e., its hallucinated deterministic rule as an inescapable, all-powerful tyrant). Through this approach, the I of autonomous subjectivity isn't added to nature as some sort of supplementary super-nature, but arrived at instead through withdrawing things traditionally misattributed to nature.

What about *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*? The least one can state is that the letter of Kant's text is ambiguous enough to render Žižek's presentation of it in his response to me contestable, although admittedly defensible (a later related Kantian essay, his "Speculative Beginning of Human History" of 1786, recapitulates these same ambiguities[58]). On the one hand, Kant overtly claims that the passions for freedom and sex are innate ("*natürlichen*," rather than "acquired" [*erworbenen*]) to human nature.[59] This detail goes against the grain of Žižek's reading, in that the *Leidenschaft für Freiheit* is counted amongst those features which humans are endowed with by nature, instead of this being bequeathed to them by a neither-natural-nor-cultural (I am tempted uncharitably to employ the adjective "supernatural") "x." On the other hand, two additional details testify in favor of the interpretation upon which Žižek relies: One, in the footnote referring to the example of infants, Kant describes this always-already present sense of autonomy as "a vague idea (or an analogous representation)"

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55 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 109-110, 120-122)

56 (Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 162-163, 175-176)

57 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 112-113, 167-176, 186-187, 195-196, 208, 236)

58 (Immanuel Kant, "Speculative Beginning of Human History," *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* [trans. Ted Humphrey], Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983, pg. 49-51)
(Johnston, *Time Driven*, pg. 333-335, 340-341)

59 (Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften: Band VII*, Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1917, pg. 267-268)
(Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, pg. 175)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 180-181)

("*einer dunkelen Idee (oder dieser analogen Vorstellung)*")[60]—in Kant's philosophical universe, an innate *Idee* or *Vorstellung* suggests something different from a naturally instinctual animal impulse—that "evolves together with the animal nature" ("*sich mit der Tierheit zugleich entwickele*")[61] as developmentally parallel-yet-distinct from this nature; Two, in a move Žižek mirrors in his above-mentioned reference to Lear on sexuality, Kant goes on to stipulate that human passion, including those innate ones for freedom and sex, cannot be conflated with rudimentary animal inclination (*Reigung*).[62] As does Lear regarding sexuality (and Fichte regarding the not-I, for that matter), Kant deploys an argument whose basic structural logic is that whatever is dis-identified with as other than the same or the self (passion as apparently animalistic inclination, or Fichte's non-me and Lear's seemingly natural sexuality) can manifest itself as such only in and through its mediated constitution within the framework of scaffolding established by the same or the self (understanding [*Verstand*] and reason [*Vernunft*], or the Fichtean I and the Learian denaturalized, peculiarly-human psyche). In short, the other-than-human can be what it is not as an *an sich*, but solely thanks to being a correlate of already-there humanity. Without pushing the *Anthropology* itself on the tensions internal to its proclamations, suffice it for now to say that while the facets of it amenable to the Žižek replying to me aren't problematic for an idealist like Kant (or Fichte), they ought to be deeply troubling for a materialist. When Žižek qualifies the death drive as "metaphysical,"[63] maybe he should be taken more literally than he might mean to be.

Curiously, in his subsequent recourse to Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*, Žižek winds up, despite his adamant recurrent self-identifications as a dyed-in-the-wool Hegelian, wielding the earlier-glossed Kantian-Fichtean-Learian logic to counter both Hegel and me (Colletti again comes to mind at this juncture). In the beginning of Žižek's turn to Hegel here, it sounds as though he has this post-Kantian German idealist merely reiterating what he imputes to Kant apropos there allegedly being something more-than-natural inherent and internal to human nature itself (specifically, the zero-level void of a monstrous, perverse excess of enflamed free will operative from the get-go).[64] However, three Hegel

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60 (Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, pg. 269)
(Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, pg. 176)

61 (Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, pg. 269)
(Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, pg. 176)

62 (Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, pg. 269-270)
(Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, pg. 177)

63 (Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words," pg. 92-93)
(Johnston, *Time Driven*, pg. 368-375)

64 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 103-105)

scholars whose work Žižek greatly admires—these three are Gérard Lebrun (his 1972 *La patience du Concept: Essai sur le Discours hégélien* is one of Žižek's favorite books on Hegel), Malabou (with her *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*), and Robert Pippin (his 1989 *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* lends crucial support to Žižek's depiction of the Kant-Hegel relationship[65])—all would take issue with attributing to Hegel a Kantian-style anti-naturalism according to which an un-derived supernatural surplus originally dwells within nature as an inherent potential transcendentally responsible for the effective existence of an utterly non-natural, autonomous subject.[66] What's more, even within the passages from the "Introduction" to *The Philosophy of History* Žižek cites, Hegel is unambiguous in his racist references to African "savages": They are spoken of as "natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" ("*natürlichen Menschen in seiner ganzen Wildheit und Unbändigkeit*"),[67] as hopelessly submerged in the violent stasis of a pre-historical "Natural condition" ("*Naturzustand*").[68] Hence, they aren't depicted by Hegel in quite the same guise as Žižek's Kant of the *Anthropology* characterizes human babies. Moreover, Hegel would be loathe to allow for insinuations risking an equivocation between this sort of "state of nature" and freedom proper.

But, something very interesting comes to light if one provisionally entertains Žižek's reading of Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* in conjunction with particular statements to be found within the pages of this text's "Introduction." Therein, Hegel remarks that, "Spirit is at war with itself" ("*So ist der Geist in ihm selbst sich entgegen*").[69] For the version of psychoanalytically-influenced Žižekian materialism I defend in many other places (and defend on this occasion

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65 (Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pg. 6-7, 16-17, 33-35, 79, 120-121, 132, 225, 248)
(Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, pg. 265-266)
(Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso, 1999, pg. 290)

66 (Gérard Lebrun, *La patience du Concept: Essai sur le Discours hégélien*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, pg. 145-146)
(Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, pg. 26-27, 37-38, 45, 73-74, 192-193)
(Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pg. 14-15, 36-64, 112-113)

67 (G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, *Sämtliche Werke, Band 11* , Stuttgart: Fr. Frommann Verlag, 1961, pg. 137)
(G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* [trans. J. Sibree], New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956, pg. 93)

68 (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, pg. 144)
(Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pg. 98-99)

69 (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, pg. 90)
(Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pg. 55)

against what I perceive as momentary non-materialist deviations on the part of Žižek himself), nature too (i.e., the not-All material universe of physical beings) could be described as "at war with itself." As Alenka Zupančič observes, "a crucial lesson of materialism… refers to the inconsistencies and contradictions of matter itself."[70] Prior to this observation, she notes in her study of comedy that, "comedy's frequent reduction of man to (his) nature makes a further comic point about nature itself: nature is far from being as 'natural' as we might think, but is itself driven by countless contradictions and discrepancies."[71] Her point is pertinent in this setting too, and she elegantly articulates an idea shared by her, me,[72] Žižek, Lear,[73] and, for instance, the cognitivist philosopher of mind Thomas Metzinger.[74] All five of us generally agree that naturalizing human beings entails a reciprocal denaturalization of natural being—and this because the effort to render the strangenesses of subjectivity immanent to nature forces a radical recasting of fundamental, proto-theoretical images and ideas of nature itself (that is, if, as per a not-entirely-anti-naturalist materialism, nature is taken to be both the wellspring and enveloping environs of human subjects, containing such beings, these *parlêtres*, as internal to itself). So, in blending Hegel's ethnocentric comments about the undomesticated volatility of natural-*qua*-ahistorical Africa with Žižek's loose appropriation of Hegelian nature as per *The Philosophy of History*, one arrives at the following synthesis: Nature itself, "red in tooth and claw," is an anarchic battlefield lacking harmony, stability, wholeness, and so on; in other words, it's anything but a cosmic unity of synchronized spheres placidly co-existing with one another. For a dialectical tradition running from Hegel through Marx, Freud, Mao and up to Žižek (himself avowedly influenced by these predecessors), conflictual heterogeneity, instead of peaceful homogeneity, is to be discovered even within the most basic substrates of material being.[75]

Hegel himself voices some fascinatingly suggestive pronouncements about nature in *The Philosophy of History*. In its "Introduction," he asserts, "Mere nature is too weak to keep its genera and species pure, when conflicting with alien elementary influences" ("*Die Ohnmacht der Natur vermag ihre allgemeinen Klassen und Gattungen nicht gegen andere elementarische Momente*

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70 (Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, pg. 47)

71 (Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, pg. 7)

72 (Johnston, "Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian Reformation," pg. 4)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 200-201, 240-241)
(Johnston, "Turning the Sciences Inside Out")

73 (Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, pg. 210-211)

74 (Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, New York: Basic Books, 2009, pg. 40, 215-216)

75 (Johnston, "Conflicted Matter," pg. 172-182)

festzuhalten")[76] (in his compressed outline of the *Encyclopedia* project, Hegel talks similarly about the "weakness of the concept" exhibited by the chaotic proliferating of earthly life bursting forth out of the fecund soil of nature[77]). He later goes on to say, in the paragraph opening the treatment of the "Geographical Basis of History," that:

> Nature should not be rated too high nor too low… awakening consciousness takes its rise surrounded by natural influences alone (*nur in der Natur*), and every development of it is the reflection of Spirit back upon itself in opposition to the immediate, unreflected character of mere nature. Nature is therefore one element in this antithetic abstracting process; Nature is the first standpoint from which man can gain freedom within himself, and this liberation must not be rendered difficult by natural obstructions. Nature, as contrasted with Spirit, is a quantitative mass, whose power must not be so great as to make its single force omnipotent (*allmächtig*).[78]

Without the time to do anything close to exegetical justice to Hegel's philosophy, these lines are quoted here in order to claim Hegel as a precursor of my Žižek-inspired materialism of a weak nature. Likewise, the Žižek with whom I don't disagree can be seen characteristically wearing a Hegelian badge with fierce pride at various moments in his contemporary writings, such as when he states, "*spirit is part of nature*, and can occur/arise only through a monstrous self-affliction (distortion, *derangement*) of nature,"[79] and, "what is 'Spirit' at its most elementary? The 'wound' of nature."[80] As both Pippin (as cited earlier) and Žižek[81] justly maintain, Hegelian Spirit isn't a substantial, noun-like thing akin to the Cartesian *res cogitans* as a positivized being, entity, or object. Rather, *Geist* is a kinetic, verb-like process. Moreover, this non-substantial dynamism of negativity, as a movement of denaturalization giving rise to complex subject-beings whose complexity escapes and disrupts control by the laws and mechanisms of natural materialities, is entirely immanent to nature itself—with the latter thus being envisioned in Hegelian philosophy as an internally self-sundering substance set against itself ("*selbst sich entgegen*").

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76 (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, pg. 103)
(Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pg. 65)

77 (G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline and Critical Writings* [ed. Ernst Behler], New York: Continuum, 1990, #292 [pg. 196])

78 (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, pg. 121)
(Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, pg. 80)

79 (Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," pg. 117)

80 (Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words," pg. 71)

81 (Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words," pg. 71-72)
(Slavoj Žižek, "Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?," *The Speculative Turn*, pg. 202-223)

What Hegel terms the "impotence" or "weakness" of the natural provides, as a contingent material condition of possibility, the cracks and fissures of elbow room for the immanent transcendence of nature by Spirit *qua* more-than-material autonomous subjectivity still embedded in, but not governed by, its physical ground(s). And, even if, measured against the standards of post-Baconian scientific method, Hegel was presciently right for the wrong speculative reasons, he nevertheless was right. To take just one set of cutting-edge scientific subdomains among others, non-reductive versions of evolutionary psychology and meme theory (put forward by such thinkers as Richard Dawkins,[82] Susan Blackmore,[83] Daniel Dennett,[84] and Keith Stanovich[85]) share in common an unconscious Hegelianism in the form of an underlying dialectical thesis to the effect that, to lean on Stanovich's language in particular, humans are nature-created Frankensteins who can and do rebel against their creator, a creator without sufficient power either to forestall this rebellion in advance or quash it after its outburst so as to rein these disobedient offspring back under the yoke of defied old authority. The sciences themselves are beginning to show that such incarnations of the notion of nature as evolution and genes are, as Hegel would put it, too weak, too powerless (*ohnmächtig*), to dictate the course of lives with an unwavering iron fist.[86] Human subjects are living proof that this imagined omnipotent big Other, this idol, of an outdated, bankrupt, and scientifically falsified scientism has, in fact, clay feet.

In the closing sentences of his reply to my piece "The Misfeeling of What Happens," Žižek, after the above-mentioned invocation of Lear on sexuality, corrects both Hegel and me. He contends:

> …from the Freudian standpoint, Hegel has to be immanently criticized here: it is not just that sexuality is the animal substance which is then 'sublated' into civilized modes and rituals, gentrified, disciplined, etc. — the excess itself of sexuality which threatens to explode the 'civilized' constraints, sexuality as unconditional Passion, is the result of Culture… In this way, the civilization/culture retroactively posits/transforms its own natural presuppositions: culture retroactively 'denaturalizes' nature itself, and this is what Freud called the Id,

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82 (Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, pg. 207-208, 213, 215)

83 (Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pg. 79-80, 99-100, 235)

84 (Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, New York: Viking, 2003, pg. 90-91, 93)

85 (Keith E. Stanovich, *The Robot's Rebellion: Finding Meaning in the Age of Darwin*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, pg. xii, 12-13, 15-16, 20-22, 25, 28, 67, 82-84, 142, 247)

86 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 174-176, 181, 203-208)
(Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 169, 175-176)

> libido. So, back to Johnston, this retroactive excess of de-naturalized nature is missing in the image he proposes of a gradual cultural 'mediation' of nature.[87]

I'm not necessarily committed to a gradualist perspective as regards emergent denaturalization (if anything, I'm more inclined in the direction of a "punctuated equilibrium" model *à la* Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould[88] — as LeDoux hints, evolution does not exclude revolution[89]). Anyhow, that aside, with reference to the third session of Lacan's fourth seminar, a session entitled by Jacques-Alain Miller "The Signifier and the Holy Spirit,"[90] Žižek articulates this same line of thought in a separate text:

> …the Holy Ghost stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of 'life' — lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions, or, to put it in Kant's terms, the 'pathological': when we locate ourselves within the Holy Ghost, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one.[91]

Žižek's recourse to blatantly religious language in this specific vein (including Kant's thinly sublimated, barely secularized version of such language) arguably is no accident or coincidence. Another of the intuitions informing my overall position can be conveyed as the thesis that, especially on the terrain of ideology, the Enlightenment tension between the materialism of (or shaped by) science and the idealism of religion (as theology, spiritualism, etc.) continues to face us as a "point" in Badiou's precise sense as per *Logics of Worlds*.[92] That is to say, confronted side-by-side, the *Weltanschauungen* of scientificity and religiosity contain, in however concealed or obfuscated a state, a fundamental and unavoidable either/or choice between mutually-exclusive commitments (this assertion being faithfully in line with Engels, Lenin, and Freud, among others). In my view, the Žižek who conjures up an occult "x" to account for there being free subjects (and, in so doing, who relies upon a still-Christian Kant more than anyone else) is forced to embrace flagrantly theological terminology. By

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87 (Žižek, "Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology, and Communist Culture", pg. 104-105)

88 (Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, "Punctuated Equilibria: The Tempo and Mode of Evolution Reconsidered," *Models in Paleobiology* [ed. Thomas J.M. Schopf], San Francisco: Freeman Cooper and Company, 1972, pg. 82-115)

89 (LeDoux, *Synaptic Self*, pg. 198)

90 (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IV: La relation d'objet, 1956-1957* [ed. Jacques-Alain Miller], Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994, pg. 41-58)
(Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 170-175)

91 (Žižek, "Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?", pg. 217-218)

92 (Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2* [trans. Alberto Toscano], London: Continuum, 2009, pg. 399-401, 403-435, 437-447, 577, 591)
(Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, pg. 62-66, 71-75, 80)

contrast, I insist, in fidelity to another, systematically materialist Žižek, the one portrayed in *Žižek's Ontology*, that no such mysterious Third can and should be posited; this sort of Third is ideologically risky in addition to being theoretically gratuitous. Going a step further, I would even venture to propose that, echoing Churchill's overused one-liner, psychoanalysis and the physical sciences are the worst bases for philosophical materialism and leftist ideology critique except for all those others tried from time to time.

Before concluding this intervention, I have three responses to Žižek's critique of Hegel and me, apart from my answer to his question "Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?" (my answer being that this really is possible for both him and me to a much greater extent than the Žižek of this specific back-and-forth between us seems to admit). First, it's unclear to me whether his non-Hegelian and purportedly Freudian (Freud's engagements with biology render this appeal to authority dubitable[93]) conception of the "cultural 'mediation' of nature" is epistemological, ontological, or both. I suspect that, given his general philosophical leanings as well as recent textual evidence,[94] Žižek intends to claim that the retroactive denaturalization of nature is ontological, namely, an *après-coup* "transubstantiation" that, as it were, goes all the way down, permeating and saturating nature through and through.

If Žižek's intention is indeed to posit a real cultural-symbolic mediation of nature in which the latter, in its material actuality, is thoroughly and exhaustively digested by the former, then this leads into my second response to him. Circumnavigating back to a query asked at the outset of this essay, Žižek's indictments of me within the parameters of a discussion in which the *rapport* between philosophical materialism and the physical sciences (especially the life sciences) is under dispute raise the issue of whether or not the theoretical ought to be constrained methodologically by the empirical. Žižek speaks as though all of the above could be adjudicated without leaving the philosopher's armchair. But, wording my objection to this in a Hegelian style, the history of philosophy, in its development in tandem with other disciplines and practices, bears witness to a dynamic within which the mobile line of division between the empirical and the theoretical is a distinction internal to the empirical itself.

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93 (Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature", pg. 160-162)

94 (Slavoj Žižek, "From *objet a* to Subtraction," *Lacanian Ink*, no. 30, Fall 2007, pg. 138-139)
(Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London: Verso, 2008, pg. 435, 440, 442)
(Slavoj Žižek, "Ecology," *The Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers* [ed. Astra Taylor], New York: The New Press, 2009, pg. 159)
(Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words," pg. 70)
(Žižek, "Discipline between Two Freedoms," pg. 104)

Put differently, problems previously able to be posed only at the level of the philosophical/theoretical often come to be grasped in time as properly posed at the level of the scientific/empirical. As already stated in "The Misfeeling of What Happens,"[95] I am convinced that the question of whether or not denaturalization, so to speak, hits rock bottom without remainder is, for a materialism not without its naturalism, both a genuine question as well as one that can and should admit empirical adjudication as an indispensable ingredient in the process of its attempted resolution.[96]

My third response to Žižek is that the Kantian-Fichtean logic informing his replies to me brings him into proximity with a type of anti-naturalist idealism he himself has been appropriately careful to avoid in other instances.[97] As he stipulates in *Tarrying with the Negative* (one of his very best philosophical works), "simply because the opposition between nature and culture is always-already culturally overdetermined, i.e., that no particular element can be isolated as 'pure nature,' does not mean that 'everything is culture.' 'Nature' qua Real remains the unfathomable X which resists cultural 'gentrification.'"[98] Although I have reservations with respect to the supposed unfathomability of this "x," I enthusiastically endorse the rest of the content of this quotation and want to remind Žižek of it. I would tack on that, as hypothesized in "The Misfeeling of What Happens," it's less problematic and more plausible for the kind of materialist ontology I think is most valid and legitimate to speculate that the real genesis of autonomous subjectivity, of the *parlêtre-qua*-$, splits the material ground of its being into both the first Real of a nature undigested by cultural mediation and the second Real of a nature mediated by culture (this second Real being exemplified by the notions of nature and sexuality Žižek employs as examples against me). Žižek's own subtle and detailed delineations of the Lacanian register of the Real encourage such a move to be made (particularly his valuable distinction between the "Real-as-presupposed" and the "Real-as-posed").[99] In short, I refuse what I see as a false dichotomy, a specious forced choice. As in psychoanalytic interpretation as linked to the crucial analytic concept of overdetermination, when one is faced with the choice between "this or that," the right answer, an answer refusing one of the key premises of the question itself, frequently is "Yes, please!" (i.e., it's not one or the other, but both).

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95 (Johnston, "The Misfeeling of What Happens", pg. 86, 95-97)
96 (Johnston, "Misfelt Feelings")
97 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 16-20, 149-152)
98 (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, pg. 129)
99 (Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 18-19, 145-161)

The Žižek with whom I feel the deepest solidarity is alive and well today. Quite recently, he proclaims:

> …to be an actual naturalist is not to subscribe to necessary fiction, but to really believe in materialism. It is… not enough to insist that Kant and Hegel have to teach us something about the realm of normativity which takes place in the wider domain of the realm of nature. It is, on the contrary, important to re-appropriate German Idealism to a fuller extent. If discourse, representation, mind, or thought in general cannot consistently be opposed to the substantial real which is supposed to be given beforehand, independent of the existence of concept-mongering creatures, then we have to bite the bullet of idealism: *we need a concept of the world or the real which is capable of accounting for the replication of reality within itself*.[100]

Along related lines, he declares in a contemporaneous text that, "we are subjects only through a monstrous bodily distortion."[101] In resonance with these remarks of Žižek's, the transcendental materialism of a weak nature I advocate, itself profoundly marked by his interlinked ontology and theory of the subject, gestures at a vision of nature as itself monstrous, as self-distorting (insofar as explaining the emergence out of nature of humans *qua* deranged monsters rebelling against nature requires a much weirder picture of nature than standard, traditional species of naturalism usually offer). This vision has no need (nor does Žižek, despite his reaction to me) for imagining the presence of a supernatural excess/surplus as a neither-natural-nor-cultural third power miraculously sparking the *ex nihilo* irruption of peculiarly human subjectivities running amok down paths of denaturalization. Self-sundering natural-material substance is auto-disruptive enough to account for these explosions of unrest, of the restlessness of negativity. Where I perhaps go further than Žižek, beyond laboring to revivify German idealism, is in the amount of explanatory jurisdiction I grant to the empirical sciences (particularly biology and its offshoots, given my interests) in the struggle to construct a truly contemporary materialism with both philosophical and political ramifications.

Not only do I wholeheartedly second Žižek's cry to "repeat Lenin"[102]—for theoretical in addition to political materialism, I think the moment is ripe to call

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100 (Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: A Plea for a Return to Post-Kantian Idealism," *Mythology, Madness and Laughter*, pg. 13)

101 (Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," pg. 277)

102 (Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, pg. 115-116)

for repeating Engels[103] (as well as the Mao of "On Contradiction"[104]). *Contra* Lukács' still-prevailing condemnatory verdict on any "dialectics of nature,"[105] one quite convincingly could maintain that the main flaw of Engels' efforts to conquer the territories of the sciences and claim them on behalf of Marxist materialism is that these efforts were ahead of their time, that the sciences of his era weren't yet ready to receive these aggressive overtures. But, starting with such mid-twentieth-century scientific breakthroughs as Donald O. Hebb's research on the psycho-physiological mechanisms of learning,[106] the biological sciences have managed to "weaken" empirically their image of (human) nature (in the precise sense of natural weakness specified previously). Through this self-induced weakening, empirical, experimental studies of the living material foundations of humanity have given us, in forms like neuroplasticity and epigenetics, the wiggle room we need and want for a materialist ontology of freedom (such as that desired by Žižek). These scientists are falling into our hands through the cunning of their own reason.

Colletti identifies the Italian Renaissance thinker Giovanni Pico della Mirandola as an ancestral precursor of Marx in terms of the foundations of the latter's idea of human beings as "generic"[107] (i.e., as nature-less by nature, born faceless and taking on plastic visages via the labor-mediated, historicizing subject-object dialectic). Agamben also refers to Pico della Mirandola,[108] similarly recognizing the radicality of this Renaissance author's humanism (as a humanism of anonymous humanity, akin to what Žižek detects in Descartes'

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103 (Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, Second Edition, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959, pg. 19-22, 35-39)
(Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* [trans. C.P. Dutt], New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1940, pg. 1-34, 279-310)

104 (Mao Tse-Tung, "On Contradiction," *On Practice and Contradiction* [ed. Slavoj Žižek], London: Verso, 2007, pg. 67-102)
(Johnston, "Conflicted Matter," pg. 170-176)

105 (Georg Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," *History and Class Consciousness* [trans. Rodney Livingstone], Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971, pg. 24)

106 (Donald O. Hebb, *The Organization of Behavior: A Neuropsychological Theory*, New York: Wiley, 1949, pg. 63, 70)
(Johnston, "What Matter(s) in Ontology," pg. 41)

107 (Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*, pg. 234, 238-241, 243-246)

108 (Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* [trans. Kevin Attell], Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, pg. 29-30)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 114-116)

Cogito[109]) announced in his 1486 oration "On the Dignity of Man"[110] (in relation to Sartre, Badiou, despite what he owes to Althusser and structuralism, recognizes in a Sartrean humanism[111] resonating with Colletti's Renaissance-indebted Marx a radicalism allowing it to converge with such an opposite as the anti-humanism of Foucault[112]). In the nineteenth century, aspects of German romanticism, Marxism (specifically, Marx's analyses of industrial mechanization), and existentialism herald subsequent critiques of post-Galilean scientificity as limited, nihilistic, and vulgar *vis-à-vis* the multifaceted richness of lived human experience. By the twentieth century, the majority of Continental philosophers, with such odd bedfellows as Husserl, Lukács, Heidegger, Sartre, and Adorno to the fore, become suspicious of, if not utterly hostile to, the empirical, experimental sciences of modernity. Both mathematized science generally and the life sciences specifically come to be viewed as lamentably reductive and objectifying; from this perspective, a perspective shared by a number of figures on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum, these disciplines are seen as incorrigibly complicit with a range of afflictions plaguing modern societies and their inhabitants. In defiance of European philosophy's long-standing, deeply entrenched aversion to the "hard sciences" perceived as diametrically-opposed, inassimilable adversaries, the hour has arrived for philosophical materialism to storm the gates of these sciences. Whether the scientists themselves are aware of it or not, their fields have been primed by them to receive the inscription of a portrait of human subjectivity whose first glimmerings already are to be glimpsed in a fifteenth-century ode inaugurating Renaissance humanism. The life sciences are no longer the enemy of the dignity Pico della Mirandola lyrically and lavishly praises. However wittingly or unwittingly, they have become its ally, the very ground for a scientifically-informed materialism incorporating the radical humanism (maybe even superhumanism) of Sartrean-style atheist existentialism. Both humanists and materialists have every reason to be unshakably confident. The future definitely is ours.

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109 (Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth," *Cogito and the Unconscious* [ed. Slavoj Žižek], Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, pg. 3-4, 6-7)
(Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, pg. 11-12, 21-22, 41-43, 55-58, 80, 166-167, 187, 231, 265)

110 (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "On the Dignity of Man," *On the Dignity of Man* [trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J.W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael], Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998, pg. 4-5)

111 (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* [trans. Philip Mairet], London: Methuen, 1948, pg. 27-28, 42-43)
(Johnston, "What Matter(s) in Ontology," pg. 41-42)

112 (Alain Badiou, *The Century* [trans. Alberto Toscano], Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, pg. 165-178)

On Materialist Theology: Thinking God Beyond the Master Signifier

Adam Kotsko

In 2008, I published a book entitled *Žižek and Theology*.[1] In retrospect, it turned out to be a particularly fortuitous time to write a work on the theme of Žižek's use of theology. On the one hand, over the course of three books on Christianity, Žižek had arrived at a consistent view of the true meaning of Christian theology. On the other hand, he had just completed his self-declared "magnum opus," *The Parallax View*,[2] in which he consolidated his intellectual project in a new way. Accordingly, I chose to focus my work on an account of Žižek's intellectual development that highlighted the importance of his engagement with Christian theology as a kind of "hinge" between his earlier work and the more mature position reached in *The Parallax View*.

My goal in the present essay is to extend and deepen my account of the importance of theology in Žižek's work by responding to two persistent—and, in my view, completely justified—criticisms of *Žižek and Theology*. First, readers have criticized me for focusing too strictly on the interpretation of Žižek's work without applying his theological approach constructively. Second, they have rightly pointed out that my account of Žižek's development of "dialectical materialism" in *The Parallax View* did not seem to be as clearly connected to my previous argument as it could have been. Reflecting on these critiques, I have come to believe that they are closely related. In order to connect *The Parallax View*'s ontology and ethics—themselves interrelated—to theology, it was not sufficient to provide an expository account. Instead, I should have set the concepts to work theologically, or to put it differently, I should have set the concepts loose into theology. That is what I propose to do here, focusing on the relationship between dialectical materialism and the "death of God."

1 Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2008).
2 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

I.

In *The Parallax View*, Žižek speaks of his project as a rehabilitation of "dialectical materialism," a goal that he associates both with the revival of Marxist movements and with the retrieval of the German Idealist attempt to develop the "System of Liberty."[3] Continually and variously applying his core concepts of the parallax gap and the death drive, he develops this project along several different axes, arguably the most innovative of which is his intervention into the field of cognitive science. Yet this self-proclaimed "magnum opus" also recapitulates and extends developments from earlier in his intellectual trajectory, including his focus on subjectivity as negativity, his insistence that a truly emancipatory politics must "tarry with the negative," and—perhaps distressingly for some readers—his engagement with Christian theology.

On the latter front, he devotes the entire second chapter to assembling "building-blocks for a materialist theology." There he follows a pattern that had already appeared in what I regard as the most fully realized of his three books on Christianity, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*,[4] and is later repeated in his most recent engagement with theology, his contributions to *The Monstrosity of Christ*.[5] He begins with a kind of internal critique of a Christian thinker, in this case Kierkegaard. Although he finds a great deal to like about the thinker, Žižek is ultimately using him as a foil, showing how he falls short of the true radical core of the Christian message, namely Hegel's particular vision of the "death of God," which opens up the door to the only authentic atheism. Žižek then draws various ontological conclusions from this position, along with more or less explicit ethical consequences. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, the primary Christian interlocutor is G. K. Chesterton, and in *The Monstrosity of Christ* he continues to discuss Chesterton while adding Meister Eckhart. Though the details obviously change, the overall pattern is the same: the point of engaging with representatives of "actual existing" Christianity (even more or less marginal ones) is to set in relief Christianity's revelation of the "death of God," which itself is ultimately important not as a matter of religion or dogmatics but as a way of getting at the shape of the world we live in and the ethics that best responds to it.

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3 Žižek, *Parallax View*, 4-5.

4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

5 Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity" and "Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

The ontology toward which Žižek is pointing in all of these writings is, of course, his version of dialectical materialism. Yet this brand of materialism is also a theological one in some sense, or is at least developed out of a "materialist theology." In order to clarify what is going on here, I will not proceed by textual exegesis, but will instead take the risk of systematizing his work and bring together various principles that I have seen to be at work in my reading of Žižek, using a dialectical form of argument to arrive at dialectical materialism.

Let us begin with the ontology that is broadly characteristic of traditional Christianity. The two key components are God and creation, and they are related in two main ways. On the one hand, they are related negatively, as opposites: God is eternal while creation is temporal, God is infinite while creation is finite, etc. In short, we can derive the characteristics of God by taking what we know about creation and simply reversing it. On the other hand, God founds and sustains creation, even going so far as to develop an economy of salvation when it falls into sin. The logic here is identical to that of the "master signifier" or "constitutive exception"—God founds creation while being exempt from all the limitations of creation. What's more, God reflects the tautologous character of the "master signifier," insofar as God is the point where the quest for explanation ends. The fact that we generally think of God in this way whether we believe in God or not can be seen in the debate over creationism. While creationists are forever claiming that the complexity of the world requires some transcendent explanation, it is relatively seldom that one hears the obvious retort that such a maneuver only exacerbates the problem: if the complexity of the universe requires explanation, surely the existence of a being who could create it is in need of *even more* explanation. The creationist's logic, which prevents this question from even arising, is ultimately tautologous. God doesn't exist because of some outside cause, God exists *because God exists*. Similarly, in the last resort, the answer to the question of why we should care what God thinks is *"because he's God."* In sum, in the traditional Christian ontology, God is the constitutive exception to the created order, the one who negates it on every level and yet declares it "very good."

Materialism, in its most common or "vulgar" form, dispenses with God, leaving only the "very good" world. Yet for Žižek, the function of the master signifier remains very much in place, finding ever-new forms—ranging from the unalterable laws of Newtonian physics to the "historical necessity" that justified the crimes of Stalin. Particularly in the realm of evolutionary theory, the narrative of scientific progress is often thought to be one of overcoming theological prejudices, but from a Žižekian perspective, the conflict between

Genesis and Darwin is a superficial one that masks a deeper complicity. Vulgar materialism wants to have a well-defined, self-consistent world, and for Žižek, the only way to achieve that is through some kind of constitutive exception, meaning that this particular form of atheism nonetheless remains traditionally theological in form. And indeed, it is possible that the perceived conflict between faith and modern science may never have arisen if not for a certain stubbornness on the part of church officials, whose betrayal of the heritage of allegorical interpretation set up a fatal collision between the findings of empirical research and a flat-footed and unimaginative reading of Scripture. Healing that breach is in fact a major goal both of Pope Benedict XVI and of his Anglo-Catholic allies, the theologians of the Radical Orthodoxy school. Both argue that faith in God is necessary to found reason, and both miss the fact that modern scientific reason, at least as popularly understood, already has the "God" it needs in the form of a master signifier, whether that be the law of nature or even the notion of "the world" as such.

In a sense, then, vulgar materialism is always also theological materialism, even if its master signifier or "God" goes under different names. This is not simply a matter of "leftover" theological influences that must be purged—even if Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens succeeded in convincing literally everyone on earth to abandon Christianity and indeed every historical religion, and even if all memory of the existence of the historical religions could somehow be erased, the essentially theological structure of vulgar materialism would remain.

The way forward is not to continue to negate "faith" in favor of "reason," but to take a step back and negate the very frame that allows us to distinguish between "faith" and "reason." Žižek believes that he has found that negation in Hegel's understanding of the significance of Christ's death on the cross. Where the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity attempted to ensure that there was some aspect of divinity that was not caught up in the Incarnation, Hegel claims that the Father's self-emptying of his divinity into Christ the Son is both complete and irreversible. On the cross, then, divinity empties out into the world in the form of the Holy Spirit, which is the bond of the Christian community. Žižek does place considerable importance on the notion of the Holy Spirit as a new form of social bond that would escape the ideological structure founded on the master signifier, but for my present purposes, it is more important to focus on the incarnation itself. I have pointed out that for traditional Christianity, God is the negation of the world, and if Christ really is fully divine, that means that he represents the entry of that negativity *into* the world. His death on the cross

as "death of God" obviously marks the definitive end of God as foundation of the world. As a consequence, the very negation that God had cordoned off into a transcendent realm flows out into the world, shaking it to the core and opening up a wound that will never heal. This could sound like a mytho-poetic elaboration, but it is important not to lose sight of the logical consequence of the "death of God"—it is not just that there is no longer a God, but there is also no more *world*.

When God dies, that means that the master signifier that gave the world its coherence is gone. Instead of the familiar picture of a solid world governed by inalienable laws, one is left with a shattered, inconsistent, internally conflictual world. As Žižek says, drawing on the Lacanian *pas-tout*, meaning non-all or non-whole: "for the materialist, the 'openness' goes all the way down, that is, necessity is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances—it is the 'All' itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by an irreducible contingency."[6] Pushing Kierkegaard in a materialist direction, he goes on to claim that "Kierkegaard's God is strictly correlative to the ontological openness of reality, to our relating to reality as unfinished, 'in becoming.' 'God' is the name for the Absolute Other against which we can measure the thorough contingency of reality—as such, it cannot be conceived as any kind of Substance, as the Supreme Thing (that would again make him part of Reality, its true Ground)."[7] In other words, within the truly materialist frame, God is not the constraining figure we had to banish in order to get the world. Instead, God names the very contingency and inconsistency of the world as such.

At this point, an obvious objection arises: once we've reached this point, why do we need to maintain the reference to theology? The answer is that the temptation to reinstall some kind of "big Other" is remarkably persistent even among those who are consciously trying to escape it, as the example of vulgar materialism makes clear. Preserving the reference to Christianity, or at least Hegel's version of it, is valuable insofar as we will always need to be reminded of the "death of God." Particular master signifiers "die" all the time, always to be replaced by something else, but Christianity gives us something unique: a master signifier that disavows itself. As Chesterton tells us and as Žižek never tires of repeating, the gospels presents us with a God who himself becomes an atheist, a God who cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Within the frame of orthodox theology, it's difficult not to conclude that God the Father really *has* forsaken Christ, remaining transcendently uninvolved

6 Žižek, *Parallax View*, 79.
7 Žižek, *Parallax View*, 79.

as he suffers and dies—even if the Father sweeps in on the third day to raise him to glory, the abandonment of the cross and the grave is all too real. Many contemporary theologians, most prominently Jürgen Moltmann, would claim that we need to think of the Father as suffering with Christ in order to avoid this monstrosity, but in the Hegelian frame, the solution is actually to make things worse. As Žižek says, "When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in 'Father, why hast thou forsaken me?': the hope that there *is* a father who has abandoned me."[8] That hope is among the most durable features of human experience, and Žižek's retelling of the Christian mythos provides a way to crush it ever afresh.

II.

The picture so far seems rather grim, and so I expect some of my readers may be asking themselves why we should accept Žižek's vision of dialectical materialism. The answer, most fundamentally, is that it is the only way to gain access to truth—albeit by first noting that we have no access to "truth" in the way we are accustomed to think of it, because there is no such thing. While all of this sounds very abstract, Žižek believes that in principle it matches up with the picture of the world that is emerging at the frontiers of quantum physics and that he believes is suggested by research into cognitive science. In fact, Žižek is generally very optimistic about science, believing that it does give us some kind of account of the Real. This is possible not because he embraces a naïve notion of scientific objectivity or disinterestedness, but because he believes that the pursuit of knowledge can be an end in itself, enjoyed for its own sake. This enjoyment gives the scientist access to a truth unmediated by any master signifier, and so dialectical materialism is the unconscious practice of science at its best, even if the odds of practicing scientists embracing Žižek's philosophy seem slim.

I have already written elsewhere about my interest in the ethics that grows out of Žižek's dialectical materialism, which was in fact what first drew me to his work in a serious way.[9] In the remainder of this essay, I would like to turn to the question that I left largely unanswered in *Žižek and Theology*: what does Žižek's use of theology in his project mean for theology? I have tried to show what Žižek's version of a Hegelian "death of God" theology is doing for his

[8] Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 171.

[9] See Adam Kotsko, "The Christian Experience Continues: On Žižek's Work Since *The Parallax View*," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4.4 (2010): 1-9.

own project, but what further use could be made of it? Žižek's own critique of orthodoxy in *The Monstrosity of Christ* points in an interesting direction, one that I would like to expand on here: namely, it points toward a way of thinking God outside of the framework of the "constitutive exception."

As I have already noted above, traditional Christian theology has tended to think of God in terms of the "constitutive exception," and as Žižek points out, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity was motivated in part by a desire to reconcile belief in the full divinity of Christ with the conviction that God must be impassible or unchangeable, that is, to preserve "God-Father" as the one who "continues to pull the strings [and] is not really caught in the process" of divine kenosis.[10] My purpose here is not to critique the doctrine of the Trinity as such, whose development was of course overdetermined and whose "final" version has many features that continue to be productive of thought. Rather, I wish to suggest that the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity was so hard-won counts as prima facie evidence that the Hellenistic notion of an eternal impassible God (i.e., a God who acts as "constitutive exception" to the creative order) and the Christian narrative of God's kenosis in Christ do not obviously go together. Some theologians might claim that such a contradiction is unavoidable as we finite humans seek to know the infinite God, etc., but I agree with Žižek's rejection of the notion of paradox, believing that, like its close cousin "mystery," it too often serves to indicate where a theologian gave up—and indeed, the notion of paradox often serves to shore up a concept of God as "constitutive exception," as when conservative theologians would have us believe that God disrupts our expectations sheerly for the sake of doing so. The counterintuitive has its place in theology as in all disciplines, but it must *lead somewhere*, or else it devolves into simple intellectual laziness.

In discussing the possibility of a thinking of God that escapes the logic of the "constitutive exception"—in other words, the possibility of a non-all or non-whole God—I would like to turn to two of the most influential texts of the Christian tradition: Augustine's *Confessions* and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Divine Names*.[11] My reason for taking this approach is a reflection of my own theological method—I prefer to be able to find some ground in the tradition if at all possible, both out of a fear of indulging in sheer speculation

[10] Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity*, 29.

[11] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961); Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, ed. Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist, 1987). Further citations from these works will be provided in-text, following standard textual divisions.

and out of a conviction that the Christian tradition is, if we read closely enough, consistently stranger than we expect it to be.

Augustine's *Confessions* provide a prime example of this strangeness. In his concluding commentary on the first creation account in Genesis, he devotes two full books to the first two verses, spending much of Book XI on a discussion of the nature of time and turning in Book XII to the possible referents of the "heaven and earth" of Genesis 1:1. While acknowledging that the common sense reading that refers them to the familiar sky and ground is plausible and has its own truth and utility, Augustine believes that it is more fitting to assume that the "heaven" of Genesis 1:1 refers to the "heaven of heavens," a purely intellectual realm characterized by closeness to God, and the "earth" refers to "formless matter entirely without feature" (XII.3). Augustine is deeply perplexed by this formless matter:

> …reason told me that if I wished to conceive of something that was formless in the true sense of the word, I should have to picture something deprived of any trace of form whatsoever, and this I was unable to do. For I could sooner believe that what had no form at all simply did not exist than imagine matter in an intermediate stage between form and non-existence, some formless thing that was next to being nothing at all (XII.6).

As Catherine Keller points out in *Face of the Deep*,[12] Augustine's attempt to pin down this formless matter leads him into interesting contradictions, which she mobilizes in her attempt to disprove the doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo*. Perhaps the most interesting for my purposes is the path that he must follow in order to understand formless matter:

> So I gave up trying to find a solution in my imagination, which produced a whole series of pictures of ready-made shapes, shuffling them and rearranging them at will. Instead I turned my attention to material things and looked more closely in to the question of their mutability, that is, the means by which they cease to be what they have been and begin to be what they have not been (XII.6).

This retreat from images exactly echoes his struggle, detailed at great length throughout the *Confessions*, to understand God as something other than a body, but in this case it leads him not to the perfect changelessness of God, but to changeability as such. This is a strange overlap, but the fundamental differ-

[12] Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003). See especially 75-77.

ence between God and formless matter is clear: God is *above* form, while the primordial matter is *below* it.

A similar logic is at work in Pseudo-Dionysius's account of evil as deprivation of good. The language that this mysterious author uses to describe evil can in many cases overlap with the language he uses to describe the God who is beyond being, as when he claims that evil "has a greater nonexistence and otherness from the Good than nonbeing has" (IV.19)—like God, evil is beyond affirmation and negation. But again, the difference between the two is clear: God is above being, while evil is below it. Indeed, the Areopagite is unsparing in his denigration of evil: "It is a defect, a deficiency, a weakness, a disproportion, a sin. It is purposeless, ugly, lifeless, mindless, unreasonable, imperfect, unfounded, uncaused, indeterminate, unborn, inert, powerless, disordered" (IV.32).

This insistence is interesting in itself: could anyone fail to recognize that evil is, in fact, evil? Pseudo-Dionysius does refer to the metaphysical dualism that, in the form of the various Gnostic sects, would be a perpetual adversary to Christianity (IV.21), but I would suggest that he is here reacting to the logic of his own text, which leads to a kind of overlap between his purely negative account of evil and his negative theology. That is not the only problem he faces with regard to evil, however—he must deal with the problem that haunts all hierarchical ontologies: if evil is deprivation of being, then it becomes difficult to resist the temptation to declare beings that fall lower on the scale to be somehow inherently evil. Pseudo-Dionysius is much more consistent than Augustine in resisting this temptation, absolutely affirming the participation of even inert matter in the Good and declaring unequivocally that "the evil in souls does not owe its origin to matter but comes from disorder and error" (IV.28). Even seemingly inherently evil beings such as demons are good insofar as they exist, but "are evil insofar as they have fallen away from the virtues proper to them" (IV.34).

Evil beings are evil, then, not because they lack being—every particular being is lacking in the superabundance of God's being. Rather, they are evil because they have fallen from what they should be, which seems to mean their place in the ontological hierarchy that gives the created world its order and stability. Differences in degree within the hierarchy are appointed by God for the benefit of the world as a whole, whereas the differences caused by evil fall outside of God's plan and threaten the stability of the world.

Bringing together Augustine's reflections on formless matter and Pseudo-Dionysius's account of evil, we might say that evil is a change in form that goes against God's order, while good or divine action is a change in form that reinforces it. Both necessarily involve the moment of formlessness that

Augustine detects in the transition between forms, and both can lead to good results—as Pseudo-Dionysius says, God's providence can make use of evil (IV.33), a statement with which Augustine would surely agree. More broadly, it seems impossible to conceive of God as acting otherwise than by means of change, given that creation is inherently subject to change insofar as it is not divine. Even assuming that God's creation had remained in its initial state, as Augustine believes the "heaven of heavens" to have done, the very fact of being created would be a change, a fact that Augustine expresses mytho-poetically in the (non)image of formless matter.

The only difference between evil change and good change, then, seems to be the initial reference to God as the guarantor of the world's order, that is, to God insofar as he serves as the constitutive exception of the world. Taking a step beyond Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius's explicit intentions, if we remove God as master-signifier, we are left with changeability as such as simultaneously the foundation and the perpetual unfounding of the world—that is, essentially the same result that Žižek, following Hegel, claims for the incarnation and death of Christ. My point here is not simply to replicate Žižek's results from within the tradition, but instead to demonstrate a potential approach to the tradition for a materialist theology. Here I am extending Žižek's strategy of reading (normally marginal) figures in the history of theology as pushing toward dialectical materialism but falling short. By pushing this approach into even the most central figures of the tradition, I am claiming that we need to take seriously the possibility that when great minds such as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius attempt to think through the implications of Christianity with real rigor, they will, despite their cultural prejudices and philosophical leanings, necessarily end up at least laying the groundwork for an understanding of God as non-All.

A research agenda starting from that hypothesis would, for example, make the vast literature on evil as deprivation available in a new way—not as a direct presentation of "correct" views, of course, but as tools to think with. More broadly, it would force us to reconceive what theology is and does. A materialist theology that rejected the authority of God as master signifier would necessarily be deprived of the institutional standing that currently founds the distinction between Christian theology and philosophy, a development that from my perspective would be all to the good. Instead of posing as the transmitters of the unchanging truths of God, either for or in opposition to a changing world, theologians would essentially be philosophers working from within a particular tradition, just as other philosophers work from within phenomenology or psychoanalysis. Standing in that tradition would no more predetermine their

conclusions than Žižek's use of Lacan and Hegel predetermines his, as he reveals with particular candor in *The Indivisible Remainder*.[13] Instead of reflection on a body of doctrine, then, materialist theology would be an intellectual tradition that avows the double meaning of *tradere* as "to hand on" and "to betray"—a loyalty that finds its best expression in a rigorous infidelity.

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[13] See Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996), particularly chapter 2.

The Terror of Žižek

GLYN DALY

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

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

At one level, Rasputin acted as a catalyst for de-stabilizing the political edifice in forcing the issue of autocratic versus popular sovereignty. Against all attempts at Royal suppression, the parliament insisted on the right of the Russian press to publish articles detailing Rasputin's 'mystical debauchery' among the female aristocracy and thereby driving a wedge between the Duma and the Romanovs from which the latter would never recover. In Lacanian terms, these articles had the effect of disclosing the lack in the Other (Tsarist authority) and of undermining the proper Kantian distanciation between public duty and private

enjoyment. Rasputin came to symbolise a certain obscene excess, a basic corruption, at the heart of the State. And it was as a result of the increasingly desperate attempts by the Romanovs to, as it were, digest their own excess — to restore the distance between public image and private *jouissance* — that Rasputin was to meet his gruesome end. Yet arguably Rasputin remained a popular figure precisely *because* of the excess he embodied and in such a way as to fuel a new kind of imagination: 'if a mere peasant can rise to the exalted levels of imperial status (and even sleep with royalty) then surely anything is possible'. Rasputin was living proof that the chain of fate could be broken and in this regard demonstrated Hegel's aphorism that the spirit is always a bone. From peasant to prophet, Rasputin had the capacity to be both and neither. Even his name bears witness to a strange re-doubling. Depending on the choice of name-root, Rasputin can mean either Spring or rascal.

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

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

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

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

According to Žižek, the crises of capitalism are beginning to reach apocalyptic proportions. The old 'solutions' of capitalism — colonization, domination of world markets, outsourcing of economic violence, exportation of poverty and so on — are becoming less and less effective. We are increasingly confronted with the excess of the excesses of capitalism. This is especially the case with the rise of international terrorism as a symptom of economic terror. Nor is this

simply a matter of reflexivity along the lines of the risk society thesis. Rather it draws into focus the very logic of capitalist reflexivity itself: the ways in which capitalism paradigmatically addresses and engages with its own problems. What the present conjuncture is tending to bring about is a far more direct encounter with the drive-dynamics (or Hegelian spirit) of capitalism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way in which today's politics connects with the international economy. The global reach of capitalism and its attendant crises (*viz* the over-production of credit precipitating 'toxic debt' on a hitherto unknown scale) means that markets require increasing levels of political intervention in order to preserve their viability. Against the regulationist notions that the economy can, and should, be submitted to direct political manipulation, what we are witnessing today is precisely the opposite: the reduction of politics to a practice of global economic sustainability. Notwithstanding the diversity of antagonisms and all the sites of resistance, it is more and more the Saint Simonian nightmare of governance limited to the administration of things (market mechanisms) that is prevailing.

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

But is this distinction so clear cut? Badiou, for example, argues convincingly that what is called the political cannot be universalised or resolved philosophically in a once-and-for-all manner (Badiou, 2006). The political, in this regard, is always bound by *a* politics (Badiou, 2006: 16-25). Moreover Lefort's characterisation of politics (*la politique*) as essentially a formal-spatial realm is

arguably too simplistic. As was familiar to Hegel, the state does not exist in its own positive terms but is always accompanied by an inherent Otherness and negativity with which it seeks to engage in order to (re-)produce itself. Politics, in this sense, strives to recognise and mediate its own failures and forms of subversion. The distinction Lefort makes between politics and the political becomes consequently more blurred. There exists rather an ongoing interweaving of the two moments (of politics and the political), in characteristic fashion, within the terms of a broader configuration which we might call the historical mode of politics.

In this context, the logics of subversion are essentially ambiguous. What appears, on the surface, as contestation and challenge against a social totality may in reality become caught up in the latter and actually serve to reinforce and stabilise it: e.g. democratic subversion as an outlet for protest and good conscience but which implicitly accepts, and legitimises, the rules/grammar of political encounter. In order to reach the dimension of politics proper, the question is whether more radical forms of subversion can be developed that are capable of subverting the very logics of existing subversion. This paper addresses this question through an engagement with Žižek's recent thought and, in particular, with the arguments and formulations articulated in *In Defense*. In this context, it focuses on Žižek's critique of contemporary (postmodern) democratic culture — up to, and including, radical democratic culture — and explores his attempt to create a new kind of philosophico-theoretical space for a political imagination that audaciously draws upon the dimension of terror.

Totalitarian Democracy

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

Yet for Žižek it is more or less the opposite that pertains: the ascendance of the hegemonic form of politics is one in which the materialist force of the political is itself becoming more and more displaced and domesticated. A key reference

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

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

It is against this background that we should reintroduce the notion of totality. From an Hegelian perspective, a totality functions less as a straightforward

closure and more as a characteristic form of movement-processing that gives rise to a specific mode of engagement with Otherness. Totalities emerge (retroactively) precisely when their own subversions come to be naturalised and when there is implicit acceptance as to the ways in which the gaps and inconsistencies should be addressed and resolved. A totality draws its strength not so much from the positive articulation of its elements but rather from its capacity to harness and direct its own failures. In this way, subversion itself becomes drawn into a totality's dynamic and starts to function as a (disavowed) technique in its economy of 'necessity'. Following Hegel, the question of necessity is not so much *whether* it exists but rather *how* is it produced in concrete terms? Yet here it could be argued that Hegel's thought reaches a certain limit. That is to say, what is overlooked is the way in which the production of necessity (world spirit) ceases to be a means to an end but becomes an end in itself: an economy of avoiding full disclosure in order to sustain the economy as such. The name which psychoanalysis gives to this economy is, of course, drive in which the pulsional energies circulate, and result from, a central void in the order of being. The (by-) product here is the elusive, and constantly recycled, *jouissance*. In drive what is enjoyed is the void-as-object (*objet a*). In other words, the object of drive — its true *aim* (as opposed to contingent goals: the realisation of particular ambitions etc.) — is the continuation of itself. The transcendental (Real) character of drive-jouissance renders it indifferent to all finitude, and lays at the base of the endemic human capacity for counter-rationalist activity up to, and including, self-destruction — in all drive there is the promise of a new beginning.

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

The distinction between the object and the object-cause of desire can be illustrated in the context of today's charity-driven approach to global ethics. The object of desire is essentially the liberal model of Society (e.g. Rorty's 'liberal utopia') where suffering is alleviated and individual opportunity maximized. The object-cause of desire, however, operates more at the level of an organicist conception of Civilization: i.e. the elevated, and inaccessible, sense of a Western

'us' that would give a global society its paradigmatic, libidinally invested, form. This fantasmatic economy is sutured at the level of gaze. A basic scheme in many charities is that of 'adoption' (adopt a child/orphan/granny etc.). In return for donations, regular feedback is provided from the beneficiaries — progress reports, photographs, letters… Effectively what we have is a reification of how the Other perceives 'us' (the donators) as elevated benefactors. The suture is effected in this way of staging the gaze of the Other in such a way that our own gaze is returned to us. As one charity puts it, 'you get to see and feel the difference your support makes, through the eyes of your sponsored child and their regular letters and photographs' (www. worldvision.org). Thus what is suturing is the very fantasy about the Other's fantasy. It is here that our special stuff (*a*) — the x (or, extra) factor that is projected into the gaze of the Other — is found and made palpable.

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

Democracy and Ideology

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

> 'Ironically, organizations like Earth First!, Rainforest Action Network, and Greenpeace have now become the real capitalists. By addressing such issues as greenhouse gases, chemical contamination, and the loss of fisheries, wild-

> life corridors, and primary forests, they are doing more to preserve a viable business future than are all the chambers of commerce put together.' (Hawken, 1997: 15)

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

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

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

At play here is a kind of makeover discourse. As an agent of the big Other, this 'unnamed movement' acts not only as the custodian of humanity but as a conveyor of ancient and practical wisdom/know-how whose expertise needs to be properly sourced and applied in order to achieve a harmonious reconciliation between our socio-economic and ecological systems. In other words, it is a movement that acts on behalf of the dominant paradigm and seeks critically to reinforce it. This is where the Hegelian form of the liberal-capitalist totality is reached proper: i.e. through an engagement with its own subversion and negativity. A totality is not defined simply in relation to what it excludes as threat-negativity but rather through symbolizing, and making sense of, this very division within itself — it succeeds through the constitutive recognition of its failures and through providing a certain grammar for its transformation. Put differently, a totality is at its strongest when it is able to circumscribe the very

terms of its own subversion. It becomes an anonymous horizon that defines the possible and the necessary.

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

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

This represents something of an inversion of Laclau's schema. Thus the ideological operation consists not so much in attributing (impossible) closure to a particular content, but rather in making a particular content appear impossible as a way of avoiding any direct encounter with it. In this way it seeks to sustain fantasmatically what is disavowed at the level of actualisation. It is through such regulated non-closure that the ideological reproduces itself. The distinction between ideology, as extra-discursive closure, and the political, as the moment of openness/contingency, is not clear-cut. While ideology produces

and conjures with its own non-closure, the logic of the political is not innocent of its generative conditions and can function to bring about *de facto* closure. This is one of the problems with contemporary democratic discourse. That is to say, what is overlooked is the way in which the very emphasis on the 'empty place', contingency and reactivating the political can become its most insidious ideological aspect. Along the lines of a smoker who boasts that s/he could give up any time they want, democratic ideology is one that reproduces the fantasy that it can submit everything (including global economic activity) to conscious political control and that we could change if we *really* wanted to.

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

Democracy as De-politicized Radicalism What's class got to do with it?

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

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

In Defense can be seen as a full-blooded attempt to transcend, or perhaps break out of, this impasse. In this undertaking, Žižek addresses the ways in which the contemporary left imaginary is increasingly combined with the themes of multi-culturalism and radical democracy. The issue of liberal democracy is

central. For radical democrats, the main priority is to deepen and sharpen the principles of the liberal-democratic imagination as a way of taking on not only capitalist repression but anti-democratic power structures in general. Žižek takes the opposite view, arguing that we should resist such an imagination precisely on the grounds that it tends to reproduce a neutralist, or *de facto*, end of history with infinite potential; a kind of last conceptual revolution for the last (democratic) men and women. The problem is that in seeking to inscribe historicity, the radicalisation of liberal-democracy becomes forgetful of its own position within the historical conjuncture.

From a Žižekian viewpoint, one of the problems with radical democracy is that it does not provide a systematic account of today's symptoms: i.e. of those who are in a position to hold up the mirror to cosmopolitan capitalism. In arguing for equivalences to be established between all disaffected groups within the terms of the democratic imaginary, the propensity exists for radical democracy to become removed from the more basic and constitutive forms of exclusion and to become increasingly entangled in endless cycles of socio-political networking. On that basis political subjectivity would become prone to hyper-activity — endlessly fascinated by its own positions, continually refining itself and so forth — but incapable of *acting* as such. So the danger exists that radical democracy could devolve into a rather empty proceduralism: regulating the provisional character of all political engagement, repeatedly marking the empty place of the universal, always reinforcing its own prohibition concerning the privileging of one democratic struggle over another and so on. In addition, the reticence over prioritising certain political struggles and identifying concrete objectives — other than a general flourishing of democratic culture — arguably renders this perspective aloof and somewhat 'beautiful soul' in outlook. The radical democratic process of articulating chains of equivalence could become an end-in-itself — a process of enchainment with little real (or Real) political momentum. As in Coleridge's famous characterisation of Hamlet, there is a problem of continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve.

This hyperactive inactivity is increasingly a feature of our culture. The website *Facebook*, for example, operates a kind of self-driving centrifuge. People sign up to it because others are already signed up; it thereby becomes a medium for communication, self-expression, flirtation, competition and so on. More than a mere cyber diary, *Facebook* becomes the means for playing out one's life in the collective eye — accumulating more and more friends, joining more and more (often eccentric) groups, recording thoughts and observations in real time and so on. Facebook provides a space for expressing life's rich tapestry

of differences *in the same way*. This certainly does not mean that we should reject cyber-space as a potential site of resistance — indeed it is through the sharing of music, information, technology, supplies of every kind in cyber-space that a new sense of 'the commons' might be reinvented. The point is rather that we should be alive to the ways in which participation can be manipulated towards particular outcomes. With *Facebook* there has been a rapid increase in commercialisation and there are plans to introduce fees. Moreover, if the level of participation for person x is not deemed to be satisfactory then *Facebook* informs their contacts that 'x is only 42% active' and advise the contacts that they should write something on x's wall, suggest friends for them, write them an email and so on. This implicit injunction to participate in an inconsequential manner is inscribed further in today's 'ethical' forms of consumption. Not only should we buy appropriate Green/Fair Trade goods, but increasingly there is the expectation that the act of purchasing should simultaneously involve charity (online donations, supermarket tokens to express your preferred charitable organisation etc.). In this way consumption and ethical participation become symbiotic aspects of today's collective conscience.

This also applies to democracy and its central showpiece, elections. With increasing levels of apathy and non-voting, there is a real risk that elections will become reduced to the status of an irrelevant sham and, more importantly, that the mythical hold of democracy will start to disintegrate. It is in this context that we can understand the growing authoritarian tendency in democracies, across the globe, to embrace various forms of compulsory voting. On the one hand, this can be seen as a way of attempting to neutralize populist excesses (especially in Latin America where compulsory voting is widespread) by eradicating the distinction between demos (conceived as voters) and the people. On the other hand, it can be seen as something which gives a nightmarish twist to the Rousseauian idea of forcing people to be free: that is to say, compulsory voting (forcing people to participate in political freedom) becomes a way of trying to prevent people from directing their critical energies in more challenging and subversive directions.. As with the myth of market freedom, the contemporary myth of democratic freedom is something which is beginning to require more and more political intervention to sustain it. Today's political weapon of collective discipline is not so much the Foucauldian one (on a straightforward reading) of state prohibition/repression but precisely participation. It is (acceptable) participatory critique and subversion that sustains the dynamic life of a totality.

It is in this context that we can make sense of Žižek's reference to the Melville character, Bartleby, and his 'I would prefer not to'. Thus what is being is affirmed

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

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

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

to thereby open up new spaces of political possibility and creativity. It would mean not only breaking with the implicit grammar and interdictions of political discourse (the veiled agreements over the 'need' for low corporate taxation, for re-capitalizing global markets, for continuing with providing incentives for financiers-investors and so on), but also more direct, and even violent, forms of confrontation as well. Both are ultimately aspects of the same undertaking: the de-identification with 'due process' and the existing horizons of possibility and political choice. Through subtlety, inspiration and terror the modal logics themselves become subject to a radical historicity. This marks the approach to what Lacan calls the act, and to what Badiou identifies as the evental.

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

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

Class struggle should not be thought of as an infrastructural datum to which all politics can be reduced ultimately, but precisely the opposite. Class struggle is the 'part of no part' (an indigestible bone in the throat of global capitalism) that manifests the irreducible nature of politics (Žižek, 2008: 295). Class struggle, in this sense, is testimony to the thoroughly political, and non-all, character of

the capitalist totality. Far from comprising a positive category, class struggle marks the dimension of the Real and persists as a radical undecidable. It is on this basis that Žižek speculates that at the most extreme edges of class resistance-blockage — the rise of mega-networks of slums — there is real potential for the development of new forms of political subjectivity; subjectivity that will be created *ex nihilo* as the part of no part.

The Four Antagonisms of the Apocalypse

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

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

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

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

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

The three central strands of Žižek's thought are clearly in evidence here. As a Hegelian dialectician, Žižek is concerned crucially to show how the different dimensions of the capitalist milieu (including its auto-reflexive forms of subversion) function as a totality. And as he stresses repeatedly, such a totality is non-all. This is where Marxism and psychoanalysis — the other two 'lost' (as in struggling) theoretical causes — come in. In identifying the four central antagonisms, what Žižek is alluding to are the ways in which the symbolic-organic purchase of this structure is being undermined and even exposed at key (nodal) points. With ecology, what is emerging is an ecology (of bio-technological intervention) without cosmic-rational limitation; with biogenetics, it is the possibility of humanity without a naturalistic human being or destiny;

with intellectual property, it is the possibility of knowledge without ownership; with the megalopolitan slums, it is the possibility of a collective without a community. In each of these cases we see an ongoing decline of today's big Other and its ability to maintain consistency. What this decline is opening up is the terrifying abyss of freedom.

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

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

At stake here are distinctive approaches to the Lacanian idea of traversing the fantasy. In radical democratic thought, the lesson of the traversal is one that tends to imply that we should assume a proper distancing in order to avoid getting caught up in the 'cataclysmic desire of fantasy' (Stavrakakis, 2007: 282). The problem therefore is one of adopting the right predisposition: to detach ourselves from object (a) and to thereby affect a condition where we can 'really enjoy our partial enjoyment' (Stavrakakis, 2007: 282). Radical politics should consequently restrict itself to revolutionary-reform rather than revolution as

such. In general political engagement should not be excessive but should avoid substantial projects of overhaul in favour of the finite, provisional and pragmatic.

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

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

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

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

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

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To Reverse our Premiss with the Perverse Core — A Response to Žižek's "Theology" in Chinese Context

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The interaction between Christian theology and the humanities has drawn widespread attention in Chinese academia recently. Scholarly works such as *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* and *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* have generated huge resonance,[1] while some leftist intellectuals and Western Marxists' debate over theology are proving particularly provocative in Chinese contexts.

In general, we must begin with an admission that Chinese academia is situated in a "non-religious" context. Accumulated research depth in theology over the past thirty years has not burgeoned from a seminary system, but from the disciplines of humanities and social sciences situated in universities. Such academic theology is distinct from "popular theology," "subaltern theology," "feminist theology" and "black theology" in the contemporary world, and many Western scholars have led discussions on such phenomenon under the rubric of "Cultural Christians."[2] Indeed, for several years, there has been persistent contestation over the issue of whether academic theology can still be categorized as a "theology" or not. This issue stands out especially in Chinese academia today.

However, what we are witnessing is the fact that once the theological logic is unrestricted by religious belief, it can create enormous intellectual space for consideration of fundamental issues such as cultural identity, value stance

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1 The academic journal *Jidujiao wenhua xuekan* (《基督教文化学刊》 *Christian Cultural Journal*), published regularly by Renmin University of China, is the major frontline for Chinese scholars' researches on theology. Ever since the year of 2003, this journal has organized many special issues including "Secular Theology," "Ethics of Belief," "Theology and Hermeneutics," "The Publicity of Theology," "Theology in Dialogue," "Theology and Public Discourse," "The Event of Theology," "Choosing the Subaltern," "Sinology and Theology," "Theology and Poetics" etc. See *Jidujiao wenhua xuekan* Vol.8-22, Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe/zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2003-2008.

2 Fredrik Fällman, *Salvation and Modernity: Intellectuals and Faith in Contemporary China*, Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2004.

and meaning-generation.[3] This is exactly the reason why theology studies can be independently developed in universities. In this regard, when Slavoj Žižek investigates theology beyond the Christian tradition, he shares similar background and confronts the same challenges as Chinese scholars. For that reason his works such as *The Fragile Absolute* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* have drawn considerable attention in China.

Interestingly, Christian theology' negative thinking finds a counterpart in classical Chinese wisdom. A basic element showcasing the strength of classical Chinese wisdom, negative thinking has been continuously lurking in the Chinese tradition of dialectical thought, where it alerts us particularly to the limitations of subjectivity and language. Humanities in Western traditions, however, may discontinue processes of self-emptying or kenosis (Philippians 2:7) for a time, and to a degree that discontinuation has led to the conspicuous difficulties of subjectivity and language in the modern philosophy. While it is hard to pinpoint an exact English translation for Derrida's account of *"Comment ne pas parler,"*[4] analogous phrases can be effortlessly found in many Chinese classics such as 知者不言 (*zhizhe buyan*, "He who knows the Tao does not speak about it, he who is ever ready to speak about it does not know it")[5] or 大辩不言 (*dabian buyan*, "The great argument does not require words")[6]. Žižek's "reverse" or "dialectical" thinking on theology for this reason resonates easily in Chinese academia.

One can possibly argue that all Žižekian reflections bear the mark of "alterity," which renders his works both attractive and easily misread. For example, in the preface to *The Žižek Reader* ("Burning the Bridges"), Žižek frankly admits: "*I am well aware that for many a reader the main attraction of my work* resides in the way the theoretical line of argumentation is sustained by numerous examples from cinema and popular culture, by jokes and political anecdotes often dangerously approaching the very limits of good taste — this is the main reason why reviewers repeatedly characterize my style as 'postmodern.'" In fact, Žižek's attention is drawn to the following question: "Where do I stand with regard to the present theoretical imbroglio in which deconstruction and the cognitive sciences, the tradition of the Frankfurt school and that of Heideggerian phenomenology,

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3 For the related Chinese scholarly works written in English, see Yang Huilin, *Christianity in China: the Work of Yang Huilin*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2004; and Yang Huilin & Daniel Yueng edited, *Sino-Christian Studies in China*, New York: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006.

4 See Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theol*ogy, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

5 《道德经》56章。

6 《庄子 · 齐物论》。

New Age obscurantism and new historicism, fight for hegemony?" Žižek generalizes the "present theoretical imbroglio" into four types of "commonplaces" and then claims that "my gesture is the exact opposite."[7]

If we follow Žižek's own explanation in approaching his standpoint and thought, the concept of the "perverse" (with its variations such as perversion, perverseness or the pervert) that continuously stands out in his work should be the essential key word. Does this "perverse" belong to the legacy of the Christian tradition? Or, does it offer a critique of postmodernism? To address these questions, we need first to restore theological meaning to the "perverse."

I

Radical Orthodoxy (an essay collection edited by Milbank, Pickstock and Ward) is the foremost contemporary theological work related to Žižek's thought.[8] Although theologians advocating "radical orthodoxy" would oppose Žižek's claims in many aspects, we cannot but notice that such "radical" and "orthodox" theology also mainly concerns "a perverse theology," namely, the theology that is manifested in a non-theological manner and within the process of "secular modernity." Compared with the disciplines of traditional theologies, *Radical Orthodoxy* shifts nearly its entire focus onto secular experience in the modern world. Language, nihilism, desire, erotic, bodies, the city, and aesthetics become major issues of the book, which is subtitled "A New Theology."

In Western history of the spirit, the construction of "a new theology" by secular experience has been necessarily linked to a literary imagination always regarded as heterodox or even insane. The 18th century English poet Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* provides a good case in point. In this poem, all the letters from A to Z are associated with certain spirits, and further equated with God. For example, "for T is truth and therefore he is God… For U is union and therefore he is God," etc. Christopher Smart was literally locked up in a lunatic asylum when he composed the poem, from which *Radical Orthodox* cites as its caption: "X has the power of three and therefore he is God." Milbank particularly mentions Christopher Smart in the book's Acknowledgements: "we hope

7 Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright edited, *The Žižek Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1999, p. viii-ix.

8 See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward edited, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

that what we have written is not foreign to the spirit of Ralph Cudworth and Christopher Smart."[9]

The "spirit of Smart" regards letters or God as symbol manifesting certain spirits. It sounds appalling but is not necessarily heterodox from the contemporary theological perspectives. When Karl Barth discusses the Bible, he also considers it to be "only a sign, indeed, it is the sign of a sign."[10] It would appear that Milbank quotes Smart's poem to reclaim the legitimacy of a reciprocal interpretation of theology and the humanities. His ultimate goal, however, is to "return theology to the center of contemporary critical debate." Consequently, the book lays out four basic propositions:

(1) Secular modernity is the creation of a perverse theology.

(2) Opposing reason to revelation is a modern corruption.

(3) All thought which brackets out God is ultimately nihilistic.

(4) The material and temporal realms of bodies, sex, art and sociality, which modernity claims to value, can truly be upheld only by acknowledgement of their participation in the transcendent.[11]

For Milbank and his collaborators, the new theology is "perverse" because modernity manifests theology in a non-theological manner. "Modern corruption" exists because modern thinkers consider reason to be incompatible with revelation. All thought becomes nihilistic inasmuch as bracketing out God is equivalent of bracketing everything out. Secular experience is no longer merely "secular" when it needs to address value in the contemporary world. In this regard, all the contemporary issues can be resituated "within a theological framework," and "aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space" — all these "sites in which secularism has invested heavily" — can be reinterpreted "in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist."[12]

Whether or not Žižek has ever paid any attention to this "new theology," I will still argue that his book *The Puppet and the Dwarf* can be deemed as a direct response to the problematic as such. As early as the year 1997, Milbank mentioned Žižek in footnotes of his work; Graham Ward, another key figure advocating the "radical orthodox," also debated with Žižek on theological issues in a scholarly work published in 2000.[13] Žižek's arguments and Milbank's discus-

[9] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward edited, *Radical Orthodoxy*, "Acknowledgement."

[10] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection with Introduction*, New York: T & T Clark, 1961, p. 74.

[11] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward edited, *Radical Orthodoxy,* head page.

[12] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward edited, *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 1.

[13] Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, New York: T&T Clark, 2008, p. 167 (footnote 9), p. 134.

sion have been assumed to be direct dialogues, seen from a collection of essays published in 2009.[14] When Milbank considers secular modernity to be a perverse theology, Žižek argues that there is no theology that is NOT perverse, because the fundamental value of Christianity lies precisely in "the perverse core."

Hence, according to Milbank, "What matters is not so much that Žižek is endorsing a demythologized, disenchanted Christianity… as that he is offering in the end a heterodox version of Christian belief." Žižek refutes him: "My claim is that it is Milbank who is effectively guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism: in my atheism, I am more Christian than Milbank."[15]

As "a materialist through and through,"[16] Žižek certainly does not intend to resituate secular experience "within the theological frame." For him, such an effort would do no good to the Christian legacy that is worth fighting over, for it can only lead to a "post-secular Messianic turn"[17] or "a new lease on life" for theology.[18] Žižek has always held different opinions on fashionable theological terms such as "deep spirituality," "onto-theo-logy," and "Otherness." Although Žižek's ideas are as sensational as those of Milbank's, their approaches to the concept of the "perverse" are distinctly different. For Žižek, the "perverse core of Christianity" not only results in a perverse epistemological logic, but also offers a perverse interpretation of theology itself. Thus, Žižek claims: "the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible… *only* to a materialist approach — and verse visa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience."[19] Such a radical expression might find a counterpart only in Gilles Deleuze's argument that "modern dialectics is the truly Christian ideology."[20] Deleuze's "general anti-Cartesian thrust" leads to Žižek's high evaluation of him. In this vein, the Žižekian "perverse" neither manifests theology in a non-theological manner, nor opposes theology within the boundary of theological discourse, but lies deeply within his "dialectical logic."

Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for? Where do we see the "perverse" element of "the perverse core of Christianity"? I would argue that the funda-

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14 Creston Davis edited, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009.

15 Creston Davis edited, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Front cover.

16 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 5.

17 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* London: Verso, 2000, p. 1.

18 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, p. 3.

19 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, p. 6.

20 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* translated into Chinese by Zhou Ying, Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2001, p.27.

mental thought of Žižek (and by extension the contemporary Western thought) hinges to a large extent on these two questions. We can not understand various scholarly discussions from different perspectives in Western academia until these two questions are answered. Among various discussions, Žižek's essay "The Structure and its Event" from *The Fragile Absolute* provides an essential key to unravel these puzzles.

II

"The Structure and its Event" is not an easy chapter to read, and the existing Chinese translation makes it even more confusing. It is, however, crucial to Žižek's theological thinking. From the concept of "in-between" — the transformation from "the being of man" to "his position among beings"[21] — Žižek teases out Benjamin's well-known paradox: "The Messianic promise of a revolutionary Act… will retroactively redeem the Past itself: the present revolution will retroactively realize the crushed longings of the past, failed revolutionary attempts."[22] However, if the "revolution" is restored to its place as the pursuit of "the Real," there arrives the essential Lacanian puzzle: "what comes first, the signifier or some deadlock in the Real?"[23] Žižek examines the relationship between "the Structure" and "the Event" to further explain the "impossible Real" as a deadlock. The incompatibility of the "symbolic order" and the "natural order" brings out the "impossible Real" — an "external truth" that "provokes us to think,"[24] and renders possible our pursuit of "the Real." In this way, the subject can only be deconstructed and reconstructed in the position of "in-between," and the outcome of the subject's pursuit of "the Real" will eventually negate the premiss of the subject itself. As Žižek argues:

> This means that the relationship between the Structure and its Event is indeterminable. On the one hand, the Event is the impossible Real of a structure, of its synchronous symbolic order, the engendering violent gesture which brings about the legal Order that renders this very gesture retroactively 'illegal,' relegating it to the spectral repressed status of something that can never be fully acknowledged-symbolized-confessed. In short, the synchronous structural Order is a kind of defense-formation against its grounding Event which can be discerned only in the guise of a mythical spectral narrative. On

21 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* p. 82.
22 Ibid., p.89.
23 Ibid., p.91.
24 Slavoj Žižek, "Hallward's Fidelity to the Badiou Event," see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, p. x.

> the other hand, one can also claim the exact opposite: is not the status of this Event itself (the mythical narrative of the primordial violent founding gesture) ultimately fantasmatic; is not a fantasy-construction destined to account for the unaccountable (the origins of the Order) by concealing, rendering invisible, the Real of the structural antagonism (deadlock, impossibility) that prevents the structural synchronous Order from achieving its balance? … The loop is therefore perfect: the Structure can function only through the occultation of the violence of its founding Event, yet the very narrative of this Event is ultimately nothing but a fantasy destined to resolve the debilitating antagonism/inconsistency of the structuring/synchronous Order. So, again, one has to distinguish between the impossible Real of the 'timeless' antagonism and the fantasmatic primordially repressed narrative which serves as the unacknowledged yet necessary spectral supplement."[25]

A close reading of this long quotation reveals that a series of Žižek's concepts derive their origins from the notions of "the Structure" and "the Event." The emphasis on the relationship between these two (The Structure *and its* Event) intends to indicate that "the Event" is the foundation of "the Structure" and the "origin of the Order." The "grounding Event" and the "impossible Real" show the essence of "the Event," which brings out the very "legal Order" that renders "the Event" "illegal." Because of the antagonistic stance of "the Event" towards the symbolized, structuralized and synchronized "Order," "the Event" has to maintain an "unacknowledged" status to "account for the unaccountable." In this regard, such antagonism is both "structural" and "debilitating": "the Event" defended by "the Structure" is itself a "fantasy-construction." This fact renders the relationship between the two "indeterminable." Thus, "the Real" only exists in the "deadlock" or in the "impossibility."

To further investigate this "perfect loop," we can put all those dense concepts into two categories. The first category includes "the impossible Real," "the engendering violent gesture," "the primordial violent founding gesture,"[26] "the grounding Event (or the founding Event)," and "the unaccountable" as "the origins of the Order." The second category involves "the synchronous symbolic order," "the synchronous structural Order," and "the structuring/synchronous Order." On the one hand, there exist the Orders (orders) that conceal and defend "the founding Event;" on the other hand, there is a mystical and spectral narrative of "the founding Event."

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[25] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* p. 92-93.

[26] It is generally acknowledged that such a "gesture" for Žižek marks the human being's separation from the natural status (mother's body) to enter into the culture (the language system in the name of father).

Further synthesis of these two categories will reveal that Žižek's fundamental concern lies in the generative and primordial "Event" — the "impossible Real" that is defended and repressed, concealed and self-concealing. The concept of "the Structure," on the other hand, indicates the synchronous, symbolic and structural "Order," and the narrative governed by the "Order" as well. Simply put, these two categories of concepts can be regarded as the contrast/correspondence between "the founding Event" and "the Order;" between "the impossible Real" and the narrative of "the Real." Such contrast/correspondence leads to an infinite loop that revolves around the deadlock and the impossibility of "the Real."

The "unacknowledged yet necessary" spectral narrative is not the "analogy" that constantly appears in theological discussions ever since Thomas Aquinas.[27] For Žižek, the narrative of "the Event" precisely "maintain(s) a fidelity to the uncertain event."[28] Human beings, from the very beginning, have not been able to grasp a "Real" with more certainty. Therefore, "our path toward truth coincides with the truth itself."[29] Since Žižek insists that the absolute "Real" is an impossible deadlock, his concept of "the founding Event" has a close affinity to "the founding myths" described by the social theologians.

For different races, traditions, beliefs or ideologies, there are correspondingly various sets of "cultural stories," in which "the founding myths" necessarily constitute the essential part. "The founding myths" can be Greek myths, myths from the Bible, from other religious classics, or even national and political myths. No matter how distinct these myths are, they have a shared characteristic — they rely on the narrative to build their language structures and symbolic systems, which conversely establish the narrative itself at the same time. From a perspective of social theology, such a process includes two steps: first, "constituting value and meaning by virtue of the experience;" and, second, "bestowing the experience with forms and orders."[30] For Žižek, this process echoes the "unacknowledged yet necessary" mystical narrative, which weaves a perfect loop between "the Event" and "the Structure."

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27 To make an "analogy" is to use the words that are applied to the sensible world to refer to the transcendent beings, such as the God. It is arguable that such symbolization process during analogical thinking can lead to the certainty of the God since divinity is beyond any comprehension and representation in essence — Translator's note.

28 Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, p. xxv.

29 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 64, see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, p. xxvi.

30 Fan Lizhu, James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Dangdai shijie zongjiao xue* (《当代世界宗教学》, *Religious Studies in Contemporary World*), Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 2006, pp.7-11, p17, pp.95-98.

From another perspective, this loop includes not only the narration and engendering of "the Order" from "the Event," the defense and concealment of "the Event" from "the Order;" but also the mutual reconciliation between "the Order" and "the Event." Just as "the Event" brings about the legal Order that retroactively renders "the Event" illegal, in order to "account for the unaccountable," the narrative has to be modulated according to a specific narrative system. The symbolic order has to be accepted because "the primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding *of* language, but understanding *through* language."[31] In this way, "the impossible Real" is necessarily concealed and rendered invisible. "The Event" that antagonizes "the Structure" and "the Order" becomes itself "a fantasy-construction."

These arguments always carry an obvious Lacanian tint: for Žižek, the symbolic order creates a world that is described, regulated and abstracted in symbols. The symbolic world can not coincide with the real world, but without the former we can not understand the latter. Lacan regards the beginning point of a person's entering into the symbolic order as a traumatic kernel. A case in point will be the time when an infant is separated from the mother's body, takes the name of the father, and leaves the natural status for a society of the symbolic order. Similarly, Žižek also argues that "the Structure" and "the Order" begin from "the engendering violent gesture (or the primordial founding gesture),[32] namely, "a traumatic, violent encounter with some external real."[33]

According to Žižek, the "founding Event" as the "impossible Real" both brings out and is defended and repressed by "the symbolic Order." It is precisely because of this mechanism that "the founding Event" can invisibly control "the symbolic Order" and render possible its "impossibility" to enter into the deadlock of the Real. Such a Žižekian "impossible Real," I would argue, is very similar to Karl Barth's theologi Barth's *Church Dogmatics* specifically discusses the issues of "the limited knowledge of God" and "the hidden God." Barth points out: "He (God) unveils Himself as the One He is by veiling Himself in a form which *He Himself* is not. *He* uses this form distinct from Himself, He uses its work and sign, in order to be objective in, with and under this form, and therefore to give Himself to us to be known. Revelation means the giving of signs."[34] Therefore, the ultimate understanding is that "one cannot understand," since

31 Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, London: Macmillan, 1991, p. 154.

32 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* P. 92-93.

33 Slavoj Žižek, "Hallward's Fidelity to the Badiou Event", see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, p. x.

34 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* p. 40.

the fundamental knowledge of God must be the "indirect knowledge of God."[35] Graham Ward, one of the editors in *Radical Orthodox*, precisely initiates his arguments from these points and likens Barth's theological thesis to Derrida's "différence"[36]

Žižek would not, certainly, agree with advocators of the "radical orthodox" who attempt to resituate all contemporary issues "within a theological framework." Neither would hesupport the "rational subject" that transforms all knowledge and values into certain one-dimensional actions. Relying on "the perverse core of Christianity," Žižek is able to establish a perverse logic of his own for the thinking of the humanities. He claims boldly without any reservation:

> The old liberal slander draws on the parallel between the Christian and Marxist 'Messianic' notion of history as the process of the final deliverance of the faithful (the notorious 'Communist-parties-are-secularized-religious-sects' theme)… Following Alain Badiou's path-breaking book on Saint Paul,our premises here is exactly the opposite one: instead of adopting such a defensive stance, allowing the enemy to define the terrain of the struggle, what one should do is to reverse the strategy by *fully endorsing what one is accused of*: yes, there *is* a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism *should* fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms — the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks.[37]

In short, "the Christian legacy" for Žižek constitutes a structure of meaning that replaces the one-dimensional subject with the "in-between" status, and uses the "indeterminate Event" to account for the "impossible Real" with certainty. In other words, "the perverse core of Christianity" reflects a dialectical relation between deconstruction and reconstruction.

How, then, do Žižek's arguments differ from Barth's "Wholly Other" or the "impossible possibility"? Why does Žižek need to refer to Saint Paul? How do we understand "the opposite premises" that Žižek finds in Badiou's work?

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35 Ibid.

36 Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

37 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* London: Verso, 2000, p. 1-2.

III

Following Žižek's thought, we may infer that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ witnesses a "violent founding Event" that leads Christianity into a structure of belief. Žižek regards such a "traumatic kernel" as "the Real" because this enforced Event occurs in the turning point from the initiation to the transformation: "the Event" establishes (or transforms) the symbolic order, but it can not be entirely expressed in language to enter into the symbolic order.

Does the crucifixion of Jesus — the "founding myth" of Christianity — indicate that the deadlock of "the Real" can retreat into a safe zone without being subjected to interrogation? Can the substantiality of "the Event" or the Revelation of God in History be exempt from critical reflections? In Chinese academia today, these issues are crucial to maintaining the distinction between theology in an academic system and theology in a seminary system. Though in a Western seminarian theology, such a simple "retreat" would be similarly hard to accept.

Thus, theologians such as Schillebeeckx note that it is necessary to "place the reality of what is meaningfully said between brackets," though we also need to look for "a form of linguistic analysis in which reality itself is brought in," giving new interpretations to the "verbal event."[38] Such theological allusion can even be found in Heidegger's writing: "the language is essentially neither expression, nor an activity of the human being. The language speaks… The human being speaks insofar as he or she corresponds to language."[39] Heidegger's writing corresponds to Schillebeeckx' s further arguments:

> The verbal event is seen as the place of dialectical tension between what is manifested and what we express, in our speech, of that manifestation, between the openness of being and our seizing hold of and understanding that being. It is in this place that the priority of the language that addresses us and the language that claims our speaking is manifested… Our primary and basic relationship with language is therefore not speaking, but listening. The act of speaking cannot be reduced… to the subjective intention of the subjects speaking… Language protects being. In the verbal event, being comes to us. Speaking is obedience, a word and answer to the 'silent language of being'.[40]

Whether Žižek agrees with "the echo with the language" (Heidegger) or "the echo with the sacred words," incarnation in Christian belief has to go through

[38] Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism*, translated into Chinese by Zhu Xiaohong etc, Hong Kong: Daofeng shushe, 2004, p.35, p.55.

[39] Quoted from Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, p. 63.

[40] Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, pp.55-56.

the "verbal event"[41] to be interpreted as the watershed between "accountable" and "unaccountable," between "possible" and "impossible," and between "Jesus Christ" and "Jesus yet to be Christ." If we exclude the psychoanalytical aspect in Žižek's explanation on "the Event" of Incarnation, his inheritance from the "Christian legacy" can be most obviously seen in his application of an uncertain "Event" to explain the "truth-procedure,"[42] the basis of "the Structure," and the origin of "the Order." Therefore, Saint Paul, who tries hard to disseminate "the Event" of Incarnation, becomes "the very symbol of the establishment of Christian orthodoxy."[43] In this regard, Žižek is not much discussing belief itself, rather, he is trying to reveal the universal structure of meaning with the aid of the Christian experience. As he argues:

> When one reads Saint Paul's epistles, one cannot fail to notice how thoroughly and terribly *indifferent* he is toward Jesus as a living person (the Jesus who is not yet Christ…) — Paul more or less totally ignores Jesus' particular acts, teachings, parables…; never in his writings does he engage in hermeneutics, in probing into the 'deep meaning' of this or that parable or act of Jesus. What matters to him is not Jesus as a historical figure, only the fact that he died on the Cross and rose from the dead… Paul goes on… organizing the new party called the Christian community.[44]

To demonstrate the link between Christianity and atheism, Žižek writes a long footnote in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* when he regards Heidegger's *Being and Time* as "(the) radical attempt to render thematic the unsurpassable finitude of the human condition." *Being and Time* also marks Heidegger's transition from "the reified ontological approach to reality ('subject' perceiving 'objects')" to "the active engagement of being-in-the-world." Such a transition occurred in the early 1920s when Heidegger read Saint Paul. There is "an unexpected additional link between Heidegger and Badiou" because "they both refer to Paul in the same ambiguous way." "For Heidegger, Paul's turn from abstract philosophical contemplation to the committed existence of a believer indicates care and being-in-the-world… In the same way, Badiou reads Paul as the first to deploy the formal structure of the Event and truth-procedure."[45]

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41 For the representative discussions on "the verbal event," see Gerhard Ebeling and Thomas Forsyth Torrance's discussions. See Yang Huilin "Dangdai shenxue dui wenlun yanjiu de qianzai jiazhi" 《当代神学对文论研究的潜在价值》 ("The Potential Value of Contemporary Theology to Literary Criticism") in *Wenyi Yanjiu* 《文艺研究》(*Literature and Art Studies*) , Vol. 3, 2003.

42 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, p. 173.

43 Ibid., p.9.

44 Ibid., pp.8-9.

45 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, pp. 173-174.

Žižek's analysis of Saint Paul, Heidegger, Badiou and Christian theology focuses on the logic of "the perverse." He notes that "what enabled him (Paul) to formulate the basic tenets of Christianity, to elevate Christianity from a Jewish sect into a universal religion (religion of universality), was the fact that he was not part of Christ's 'inner circle.'"[46] He further explains:

The key to Saint Paul's theology is repetition: Christ as the redemptive repetition of Adam. Adam has fallen, Christ has risen again: Christ is therefore 'the last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45-49). Through Adam, as sons of Adam, we are lost, condemned to sin and suffering; through Christ, we are redeemed. This, however, does not mean that Adam's Fall (and the subsequent instauration of the Law) was a simple contingency — that is to say, that, if Adam had chosen obedience to God, there would have been no sin and no Law: *there would also have been no love*."[47]

…

Adam and Christ also relate as 'negation' and 'negation of negation'… Adam is Christ 'in itself,' and Christ's Redemption is not the 'negation' of the Fall, but its accomplishment, in exactly the same sense that, according to Saint Paul, Christ accomplishes the Law.[48]

These quotations foreground the fact that "perverse" and "reverse" are the key concepts running through the account. Žižek shows considerable interest in Saint Paul's "perverse" interrogation in 2 Corinthians where Saint Paul says:

In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. (2 Corinthians 11:17)

… If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Corinthians 11:30)

… Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles." (2 Corinthians 12:9-11)[49]

According to Žižek's understanding, Saint Paul's affirmation of his weakness does not intend to say "I am weak in order to make the strength of God visible."

46 Ibid., p.10.
47 Ibid., p.81.
48 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, pp. 87-88.
49 Žižek's long quotation is an excerpt from 2 Corinthians 11 and 2 Corinthians 12. See ibid., p.90.

Rather, the opposite meaning is conveyed, namely, "in my weakness and ridicule, when I am mocked and laughed at, I am identified with Christ, who was mocked and laughed at Christ, the ultimate divine Fool, deprived of all majesty and dignity. In Paul's view, false apostles are mighty, taking themselves seriously, so the only way for a true prophet to behave is to mock oneself like a fool." Hence, Žižek argues that "we are one with God only when God is no longer one with Himself, but abandons Himself, 'internalizes' the radical distance which separates us from Him."[50] Such a reversed "core of Christianity" is precisely the "Weak God" repeatedly emphasized by the contemporary theology. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes: "the God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who makes us live in this world without using him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing. Before God and with him we live without God."[51] Paul Tillich also points out: "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."[52]

It is exactly because of this thesis of "Weak God" that the "perverse core" of Christian theology does not need to rely on Barth's "Other" to "let God be God;"[53] neither does it need to rebuild "certainty." The crucial point is that Paul's weakness and foolishness provide a starting point to construct the structure, the order, and the meaning. Just as "an apostolic subjectivity exists only through proclamation of an event (the resurrection), … a truth comes into being through the subjects who proclaim it and, in doing so, constitute themselves as subjects in their fidelity to the event."[54] In this regard, the impossibility of "the Real" and its deadlock find a solution in "the Event" of Christian Incarnation.

If Heidegger's famous line "we never come to thoughts, they come to us"[55] breezes through our mind; if Paul Celan's line "Spring: trees flying up to their birds"[56] passes by our heart; if we put Žižek's discussion in dialogue with Emmanuel *Levinas' "mourning" as the "first certainty,"*[57] or with Derrida's

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50 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, pp. 90-91.

51 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1997, p. 360.

52 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1952, p. 186.

53 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*,p. 51.

54 Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, p. xxv-xxvii.

55 Martin Heidegger, "The Thinker as Poet," translated into Chinese by Peng Fuchun, in *Shi, yuyan, shi*《诗·语言·思》(*Poem, Language, Thought*), Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1990. p.16.

56 Paul Celan, "Backlight," translated into Chinese by Wang Jiaxin and Rui Hu, in *Baoluo celan shiwen xuan*《保罗·策兰诗文选》(*Paul Celan: Collected Prose*), Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002. p.162.

57 Maurice Blanchot, "Notre compagne clandestine", *Texte pour Emmanuel Levinas*, éd. Par François laruelle, Paris: J.- M. Place. 1980, p. 86-87.

"mourning" for the "name that can get along without him,"[58] or with Habermas' "communicative rationality" that can "replace the Kantian reflective moral subjects with groups of subjects in a moral discourse,"[59]then we can conclude that Žižek's emphasis of "the perverse" is the representative thought for contemporary Western humanities. "The perverse" tries to explain the infinitude and "the Real" after "the limitations," "the unaccountable," and "the impossibility" have been consigned to "the Real." "The perverse" also reconstructs subjects when all the suspicious one-dimensional subjects have been eliminated.

Žižek points out: "(Alain Badiou's) central notion is that philosophy depends on some truth event as its external condition… What provokes us to think is always a traumatic, violent encounter with some external real that brutally imposes itself on us, shattering our established ways of thinking. It is in this sense that a true thought is always de-centered; one does not think spontaneously; one is forced to think."[60] Žižek's discussion is not much about belief itself; rather, he attempts to reveal the universal structure of meaning with the aid of Christian experience. This is no doubt also the fundamental concern for which Žižek calls himself "a Paulinian materialist."

IV

Žižek's discussion on theology is not so different from his discussion on other cultural issues. He manages to shift among quotations from the Bible, Karl Marx, and adult jokes all in a single text. For Žižek, the notion of "the perverse core of Christianity" can be widely applied. When he was invited to interpret forty-two classic films in a documentary, he claimed to regard cinema as "the ultimate pervert art." With a tone of advertisement and a style of "Lecture Room"

58 Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p13.

59 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Introduction: A Critical Reception for a Practical Public Theology*, see Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza edited, *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992, p. 2.

60 Slavoj Žižek, "Hallward's Fidelity to the Badiou Event," see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, p. ix-x.

(百家讲坛, *Baijia jiangtan*),[61] Žižek claims: "It (cinema) does not give you what you desire, it tells you how to desire."[62]

Film media is not the only vehicle that does not satisfy your desire but can "tell you how to desire." Other vehicles include: the certainty that is achieved by "maintaining fidelity to an uncertain event;" the replacement of "the impossible Real" during the "truth-procedure;" the decentralization of "true thought" in the process of forcing people to think. All these seemingly irresolvable issues in human spiritual activities (e.g. cultural identity, value stance and meaning generation) are re-interwoven into an entire cultural story, which explains and resolves the issues under the same "symbolic Order." This solution benefits from "the perverse core of Christianity" and its ensuing "perverse" logic.

Although the "Christian legacy" is worth fighting for and Christian theology can provide the paradigm for its theoretical deduction, Žižek's "perverse theology" is different from the "secular modernity" advocated by the "radical orthodox." Žižek notes:

> One possible definition of modernity is: the social order in which religion is no longer fully integrated into and identified with a particular cultural life-form, but acquires autonomy… This extraction enables religion to globalize itself (there are Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists everywhere today); on the other hand, the price to be paid is that religion is reduced to a secondary epiphenomenon with regard to the secular functioning of the social totality. In this new global order, religion has two possible roles: *therapeutic* or *critical*. It either helps individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the voices of discontent."[63]

Within this space, the Holy Spirit as a signifier can enter into the world[64]. Beyond this space, theology can only be called as a "puppet."[65]

Compared with Milbank's *Radical Orthodoxy* that examines the tradition of Christian theology and attempts to re-stimulate it in today's cultural context, the Žižekian "theology" insists a "perverse reading"[66]based upon the

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61 "Lecture Room" is a well-known television show of lectures in mainland China. From 2001, many university professors, scientists and social elites appear on TV screen to give lectures covering various topics from arts to sciences. This show aims to render the inscrutable academic scholarship accessible to the general public. Although the style of "Lecture Room" is performative and at times professors overact their roles, it receives a warm response from the general Chinese audience.

62 http://www.thepervertsguide.com/about.html

63 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*, p.3.

64 Ibid., p.9. Žižek's reading draws inspiration from Lacan.

65 Ibid., p.3. Žižek's reading draws inspiration from Walter Benjamin.

66 Ibid., p.53

self-reflection tendency in contemporary humanities. If we consider that Žižek tries to grasp "Christianity-in-becoming" rather than "the established positive dogma,"[67]Milbank and his collaborators would most surely agree with Žižek on this point.

Hence, at least for Chinese academia, Žižek's discussion on theology does not intend to bring out a "Messianic turn" or "a new lease on life" for theology. Rather, it implies a fundamental argument: the Christian legacy is not merely the religious experience of belief; it is the basic model of Western truth and value system. The Christian legacy not only regulated the previous intellectual paradigm, but also enlightens and integrates humanities today. Furthermore, it renders possible our affirmation of the "absolute" in the "fragile absolute," our reconstruction of the subject after the vulnerable subject, and our pursuit for "the Real" beyond the deadlock of "the Real."

Translator: Yizhong Gu (University of Washington)

Renmin University of China

[67] Ibid., p.10.

Christianity or Communism?
Žižek's Marxian Hegelianism and Hegelian Marxism

Lorenzo Chiesa

"Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge"
Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

"From one moment to the next / Red negativity in the street / Now I think it's all right to feel inhuman"
Animal Collective, *For Reverend Green*

Introduction

It is generally assumed that Slavoj Žižek's works result from an unproblematic synthesis of his innovative readings of Lacan, Hegel, and Marx. In this regard, Alain Badiou's opinion should be taken as emblematic: "Today, Slavoj Žižek is possibly the only thinker who is able to keep himself as close as possible to Lacan's contributions and, at the same time, support with continuity and energy a return to the Idea of communism. The fact is that his actual master is Hegel, of whom he proposes a completely new interpretation".[1] Leaving aside Žižek's appropriation of Lacan — which is both highly original, especially in its pedagogic intentions, and still indebted to a basic Millerian interpretative framework — I would like to focus on the role played by Hegel and Marx in two of his most recent, and compelling, writings. Initially, one cannot but be struck by the way in which the authors in question appear to be, against all expectations, repeatedly opposed to each other. This is particularly evident in "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity", one of the long articles Žižek contributed to *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), and to a lesser degree in *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (2009). If the former text advances that "something happens in Hegel, a breakthrough into a unique dimension of thought, which is obliterated, rendered invisible in its true dimen-

[1] A. Badiou, *L'hypothèse communiste* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009), p. 187.

sion, by postmetaphysical thought"[2] (including Marx's, who is, in this piece, the post-Hegelian philosopher Žižek refers to the most), the latter — whose very title paraphrases a passage from Marx's "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction" (1843-4) — puts forward Žižek's own "communist hypothesis" and concedes that there are "two versions of Hegelianism", one of which is irremediably "conservative".[3] To the best of my knowledge, commentators have not yet confronted these tensions — which, in different and more attenuated guises, could also be tracked back to earlier books — preferring to take for granted a perfect overlapping of dialectics with Marxism in the thought of the Slovenian philosopher.

The Monstrosity of Man

In the seventy-six pages of "The Fear of Four Words", Žižek explicitly criticises Marx and Marxism from a Hegelian standpoint on at least five occasions.[4] His attack revolves around one major issue. First and foremost, Hegel's philosophy of *religion* is the only "philosophy which thought the implications of the four words ['He was made man'] through to the end"; for this very reason, it alone allows us appropriately to approach the "'big' ontological question" concerning human nature and the related problem of freedom in a materialist way.[5] On the other hand, Marx's *critique* of religion — which Žižek further qualifies, in the same article, as "standard Marxist", "young Marx-Feuerbachian", and "Feuerbachian-young Marx pseudo-Hegelian" — [6] proposes a "direct dis-alienation" that ultimately relies on an idealist presupposition, namely, the primordial unity of subject and object.[7] Žižek develops his argument cogently. Hegel's great merit is to show the way in which the Christian "God's self-alienation", the fact that He antagonistically becomes part of his own creation, doubts himself and dies on the cross, "overlaps with the alienation from God of the human individual who experiences himself as alone in a godless world".[8] Therefore, man's own dis-alienation — his reconciliation with God — cannot

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2 S. Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity", in S. Žižek and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectics?* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 26-27.

3 S. Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 148.

4 "The Fear of Four Words", p. 59, pp. 73-76, p. 80, p. 105, p. 107.

5 *Ibid*., p. 26. "The ultimate question is thus: in what kind of universe is freedom possible? What ontology does freedom imply?" (*ibid*., p. 82).

6 *Ibid*., p. 59, p. 73, p. 75, p. 76.

7 *Ibid*., p. 73.

8 *Ibid*., p. 57.

relegate Incarnation to the subaltern role of an epiphenomenal mediation which would simply be needed for the sake of mankind's final redemption/salvation and, thus, exclusively posited from the perspective of man as a means to reach God. Dis-alienation can only take place through the full assumption of the "monstrosity" [*das Ungeheure*] of Christ, the "inappropriateness in general" [*die Unangemessenheit ueberhaupt*] of the appearance of God in the body of a human animal.[9] Such inappropriateness structurally informs both human *and* divine nature, marking the threshold of their indistinction: while God is divine only as a "God [who] made Himself man, [so] that man might become God *who made Himself man*", man is truly human only by identifying with Christ, the crucified dead God.[10]

This view of reconciliation through an identification with "inappropriateness" is precisely what, according to Žižek, would be missing from Marx's critique of religion as man's self-alienation — the thesis for which religion is the opium of the people created *by* the people — and, more importantly, from his general logic of dis-alienation — the idea of progress towards the universal equality of communism. In other words, Marx would fail to appreciate that (religious) alienation — which, in this context, we could also call "dis-unity" — is not just a product of man's positing, but the presupposition of his very own ability to posit. Given its clarity, it is worth quoting in full the passage in which Žižek develops this argument:

> The limit of the Feuerbachian-Marxian logic of dis-alienation is that of positing presuppositions: the subject overcomes its alienation by recognizing itself as the active agent which itself posited what appears to it as its substantial presupposition. In religious terms, this would amount to the direct (re)appropriation of God by humanity: the mystery of God is man, "God" is nothing but the reified/substantialized version of human collective activity, and so on. What is missing here is the properly Christian gesture: in order to posit the presupposition (to "humanize" God, reduce him to an expression/result of human activity), the (human-subjective) *positing itself should be "presupposed", located in God as the substantial ground-presupposition of man, as its own becoming-human/finite*. The reason is the subject's constitutive finitude: the full positing of presuppositions would amount to [the] subject's full retroactive positing/generation of its presuppositions, i.e., the subject would be absolutized into the full self-origin.[11]

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

I think we could go as far as suggesting that, for Žižek, the "Feuerbachian-Marxian logic of dis-alienation" tacitly depends on the naïve circularity of subjective idealism which is usually attributed to Hegel by simplistic readings of his work. Only the young Marx should be considered as derogatively "Hegelian", not Hegel himself. More precisely, in limiting itself to positing the (subjective) presuppositions (of religion), the young Marx's logic of dis-alienation would inevitably give logical priority to the *unity* of subjectivity and objectivity over the very positing of the subject. Or, better said, the positing would ultimately posit the presupposition (Christ as God-man; substance) as the *subjective* primordial unity of subject and object ("the full positing of presuppositions would amount to [the] subject's full retroactive positing / generation of its presuppositions"). On the contrary, in radical opposition to such a synthetic and pacifying view of origins, in analysing Christianity in his *Lectures on the Philosophy or Religion*, Hegel "presupposes the positing", that is, as Žižek puts it, his logico-ontological "starting point" corresponds to a non-unitary, pre-subjective "contingent multitude".[12] This means that the subject's positing of his own substantial presuppositions can only be thought as itself deriving from substance: through a three-phased retroactive sequence (contingent substance; subject; necessary substance), the subject is able to posit *après-coup* substance as necessity only insofar as substance has contingently given rise to subjectivity.[13]

It is possible to summarise all the above by arguing that, for Žižek, Marx's logic of dis-alienation ends up idealistically reifying the subject into substance (and vice versa) since it does not regard the subject's self-alienation as itself presupposed by substance's *non-totalizability*.[14] To put it simply, real materialism must pass through Hegel's "idealism", for only the latter effectively opposes any notion of "ontological completeness" and consistently claims — in accordance with some of the most important discoveries of twentieth-century science, *in primis*, quantum indeterminacy — that "material reality is non-all".[15] Žižek's reading of Hegel's philosophy of religion in "The Fear of Four Words" can thus not be limited to an attempt to demonstrate the way in which the "Christian legacy" (of love, fidelity to the event, maintenance of sexual difference, etc.)

12 *Ibid*.

13 "For subjectivity to emerge — not as a mere epiphenomenon of the global substantial ontological order, but as essential to Substance itself — the split, negativity, particularization, self-alienation, must be posited as something that takes place in the very heart of the divine Substance" (*Ibid*., p. 59).

14 I agree with Badiou's suggestion that Žižek's "new interpretation" of Hegel primarily revolves around the fact that it "ceases to [be] subordinated to the motif of Totality" (*L'hypothèse communiste*, p. 187).

15 "The Fear of Four Words", p. 107, p. 95.

is "worth fighting for", that is to say, should be appropriated by real materialists as an anti-ideological weapon against so-called "democratic materialism" (its compulsory hedonism, false tolerance, spontaneous egalitarianism, etc.).[16] Hegel's account of the relation between substance and subject — especially as delineated in his philosophy of religion — rather amounts *tout-court* to *the* correct materialist ontology of incompleteness: in this sense, contemporary materialism can only be Hegelian. Furthermore, by formulating an ontology of irreducible multiplicities and void for which "the One emerges later" as well as, in parallel, by stressing the irreducibility of the subject's free act to the human animal — "repeat[ing] within the materialist frame the elementary gesture of idealist anti-reductionism: human Reason cannot be reduced to the result of evolutionary adaptation" — Badiou himself would be one of the few philosophers who today tacitly follows this Christian-Hegelian legacy.[17] (Let it be said in passing that Badiou would never accept such a lineage. Significantly enough, in the very same passage on Žižek from *L'hypothèse communiste* I quoted above, Badiou speaks of "two ways of saving today the Idea of communism in philosophy: renouncing Hegel, not without suffering for this, repeatedly examining his texts, which is what I do, or proposing a different Hegel, an unknown Hegel, which is what Žižek does starting from Lacan".[18])

While the broad speculative and political aims of the materialist agenda that makes Žižek privilege Hegel's indirect reconciliation over Marx's supposed direct dis-alienation are commendable — avoidance of the false alternative between the "radical culturalization" of Foucauldian discursive materialism and the "radical naturalization" of Chomskyan scientific materialism; grounding of the questions of freedom and equality beyond the dubious realism of Engelsian dialectical materialism and philosophy of nature — I find his insistence on defining his programme as a "materialist *theology*" very problematic to say the least.[19] Why, following Hegel's philosophy of religion, should the material

[16] On the anti-ideological function of the "Christian legacy", see especially Žižek's books of the early 2000s *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2001) and *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001). With regard to the legacy of Christian love in Žižek's works, see L. Chiesa, "Pasolini, Badiou, Žižek und das Erbe der christlichen Liebe" (in M. de Kesel & D. Hoens [eds.], *Wieder Religion?* [Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2006], pp. 107-126) and L. Chiesa & A. Toscano, "*Agape* and the Anonymous Religion of Atheism" (in *Angelaki*, 12, 1, 2007, pp. 113-126).

[17] "The Fear of Four Words", p. 92, p. 90.

[18] *L'hypothèse communiste*, p. 187. Although this is not stated explicitly, Badiou seems to imply that Žižek's "unknown Hegel" is, after all, not supported by textual evidence from Hegel's own works.

[19] "The Fear of Four Words", p. 82, p. 93, but see also *The Parallax View* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 68.

pre-subjective / pre-representational "it" of substance's contingent multiplicities be associated with God (or, more precisely, the "abyss of Godhead, the Origin-Source of everything")[20] and its dialectical sublation with the "monstrous" God-man of Christianity in which redeemed believers come to identify themselves as a community? At the risk of questioning what may seem obvious, we should ask ourselves whether, when, in polemics with Marx, Žižek states that "it is not only that humanity becomes conscious of itself in the alienated figure of God, but: in human religion, God becomes conscious of himself. It is not enough to say that people (individuals) organize themselves in the Holy Spirit (Party, community of believers): in humanity, a transsubjective 'it' organizes itself",[21] he is simply interpreting Hegel or seriously proposing the latter's philosophy of religion, *with all its self-evident anti-materialist theological implications*, as the only viable model for contemporary materialism. To put it even more simply, does Žižek assume that Hegel ultimately remains a Christian philosopher? Does he fully acknowledge that his own materialist project is after all promoting a Hegel-without-God and that the resumption of Hegel's philosophy of religion has in this context only an analogical role? My criticism here is straightforward: would it not be strategically more consistent for a materialist to understand the Hegelian threefold dialectical relation between substance and subject in non-theological terms, for instance by means of the set-theoretical axiom of separation (which could be used to conceive the presupposed contingent multiple of substance as anticipating what the subject *qua logos* retroactively separates out of it as a posited sub-multiple of substance)?[22] Even if we were to concede that Žižek somehow distances himself from so-called materialist theology — as he appears to be doing in at least one instance in "The Fear of Four Words" when, in the very last page, he specifies that "true atheism [should] return to belief (faith?), asserting it *without reference to God*" — would it be sufficient for him to rebrand his general philosophical enterprise as an "a-theology" whose main category

[20] "The Fear of Four Words", p. 36.

[21] *Ibid*., pp. 75-76.

[22] For a discussion of the axiom of separation in relation to Badiou's mathematical ontology of multiplicities and Lacan's notions of the Symbolic (subject) and the Real (substance), see L. Chiesa, "Count-as-one, Forming-into-one, Unary trait, S1", in P. Ashton, A.J. Bartlett, & J. Clemens (eds.), *The Praxis of Alain Badiou* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2006), especially p. 169.

is "unbelief" ("the pure form of belief deprived of its substantialization") in order to prevent real materialism from relapsing into religious obscurantism?[23]

My impression is that, in "The Fear of Four Words", Žižek dismisses the early Marx far too quickly. Texts such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and, especially, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" already offer us a materialist Hegel-without-God for whom, in opposition to Žižek claims, dis-alienation must be achieved *indirectly* by identifying with *human* monstrosity, that is to say, with the inhumanity of the *proletariat*. Furthermore, this is only possible after philosophy has reinvented itself as a *critique* of the critique of religion (namely, as a critique of the Feuerbachian logic of self-alienation / direct dis-alienation). Let us focus on the first point. I would argue that the truly materialist — i.e. philosophically non-theological — legacy of Hegel's four words "He was made man" is adopted and developed by the early Marx's notion of man's species-specific "impoverishment", or "denaturing" [*Entwesung*]:[24] the latter displaces the idea of "inappropriateness in general" from the level of the scandalous incarnation of the divine Logos to that of *homo sapiens* as an indeterminate — if not altogether non-adapted — speaking and working animal. Insofar as man has always lacked any specific determination, his nature is as such impoverished and, at the same time, irreducible to the animality of other species.[25] Most importantly, according to Marx, the historical emergence of the proletariat as the monstrous classless class "which is, in a word, the *total loss* of humanity"[26] should be regarded as a necessary precondition to grasp man's constitutive indeterminacy. This means that alienation is both structural (i.e. a substantial presupposition of the human animal) and dependent

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23 "The Fear of Four Words", p. 101 (my emphasis). John Milbank's patronising dialogue with Žižek's theological and political reflection (and manipulative appropriation of it) can only reinforce our doubts: Marx and Engels's warning against "Clerical Socialism" and "Feudal Socialism" — "half lamentation, half lampoon: half echo of the past, half menace of the future" — in *The Communist Manifesto* is still to be taken very seriously (see K. Marx & F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [London: Penguin, 2002], pp. 245-247).

24 K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 118. On (dis-)alienation, see, more generally, the Third Manuscript, but also Sections XXII-XXVI of the Second Manuscript.

25 Giorgio Agamben has recently resumed this early-Marxian theme — without referring it to Marx — and developed it in terms of the theologico-political apparatus of "glory": "Human life is inoperative and without purpose, but precisely this *argia* and this absence of aim make the incomparable operativity [*operosità*] of the human species possible. Man has dedicated himself to production and labour [*lavoro*], because in his essence he is completely devoid of work [*opera*], because he is the Sabbatical animal *par excellence*" (*The Kingdom and the Glory* [Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011]).

26 K. Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction", in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 256 (Marx's emphasis).

on a retroactive dialectic of asymptotic dis-alienation (i.e. a subjective positing that cannot be limited to the animality of the human animal, yet stems from it). In other words, not only does communist action indicate *après-coup* that indeterminacy has always been the unessential essence of man but, by promoting/producing equality as universal impoverishment — the proletariat's political universality lies, in the first place, in "universal suffering", the fact that "the wrong it suffers […] is *wrong in general*" and is thus addressed to all mankind –[27] also forever preserves indeterminacy, un-determines determination, that is, continuously *re*-determines the life of the human species through "*social* organs"[28] in particular historical situations. To sum up, for the early Marx, alienation cannot be accounted exclusively by means of subjective-ideological self-alienation; concomitantly, it is undistinguishable from indirect dis-alienation — to the extent that the latter precludes any final conciliatory *Aufhebung*.[29]

It is worth noting that, in "The Fear of Four Words", Žižek dwells on the issue of undetermined determination — and its continuous re-determination — precisely when he treats the relation between divine and human poverty in a *theological* context. Following Henry Corbin, Žižek criticises Eckhart whose mysticism would fail to acknowledge the materialist implications of incarnation highlighted later by Hegel's philosophy of religion; the Christian God really becomes God only insofar as he passes from "absolute indetermination" to "determinate (finite, temporal) reality", not vice versa (the idea of the personal God as just "one step on the way" of the mystic's communion with the abyss of Godhead).[30] Becoming man — "achieving 'poverty'", which can also be conceived as "monstrous" undetermined inappropriateness — God is "absolved of the indetermination of the original Absolute".[31] At the same time, he is able to redeem the determinate differences of man — human poverty as excentricity with regard to God and the rest of creation — precisely inasmuch as he has overcome primordial indetermination *qua* supreme negative determination ("the Absolute being absolved of all determination still remains to be absolved of this determination"[32]). Moreover, we should pay attention to the fact that incarnation

27 *Ibid*. (Marx's emphasis).

28 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 94 (Marx's emphasis).

29 For a more detailed discussion of the early Marx's concept of *Entwesung* (as well as a full explanation of the polysemy of the German term) in relation to the generic life of the human species and the universal production of communist action, see F. Ruda's remarkable article, "Humanism Reconsidered, or: Life Living Life", in *Filozofski Vestnik*, Volume XXX, Number 2, 2009.

30 "The Fear of Four Words", p. 41; H. Corbin, "Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism", in *Umbr(a)* 2007, p. 72.

31 "The Fear of Four Words", p. 39; "Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism", p. 71.

32 *Ibid*.

is perpetually renewed and must be regarded, in Corbin's own words, as "the *eternal birth* of the personal God".[33]

While it is easy to see the way in which this dialectical scheme of redemption could be mapped back onto Marx's dis-alienating logic of proletarian *Entwesung* as I described it above, we should not underestimate that, in "The Fear of Four Words", Žižek does not ever attempt explicitly to subtract it from the field of religious discourse. In one instance, he relates the passage from absolute indetermination to undetermined re-determination in Hegel's philosophy of religion to Freud's psychoanalysis, for which "the true task is not to uncover the pre-Oedipal primordial texture of drives that precedes the Oedipal order of the Law, but, on the contrary, to explain how, out of this primordial chaos of preontological virtualities, the Word (the symbolic Law) emerges" –[34] as well as, we should add, to return to the Word's emergence and reinvent it through psychoanalytic treatment. In another case, Žižek hints at the connection between Hegel's three-phased retroactive sequence contingent substance / subject / necessary substance and Freud's (and Lacan's) dialectical account of ontogenesis, by explaining how, for psychoanalysis, "there is a problem with [the] duality of [substantial] human animal and subject: in order for the Event to inscribe itself into the human animal's body, and thus transform the individual into the subject, this human animal itself has already to be derailed".[35] In my opinion, this specification — which I have tried to develop elsewhere independently as a problematisation of Badiou's contradictory understanding of the human animal –[36] rightly points in the direction of a more detailed investigation on the compatibility of the Freudian (and Lacanian) anthropology of "helplessness" [*Hilflosigkeit*] — the basic non-adaptation of *homo sapiens* with regard to its

33 *Ibid*., p. 72.

34 "The Fear of Four Words", p. 41.

35 *Ibid*., p. 93.

36 I have attempted to show how Lacan's pronouncements on the human animal provide us with a valuable tool to criticise Badiou's (unacknowledged) vacillation between an ultimately transcendent notion of the subject of the event and a certain biological exceptionality of *homo sapiens* as material support of the subject (see L. Chiesa, "The Body of Structural Dialectics. Badiou, Lacan, and the Human Animal", in *Nessie. Revue numérique de philosophie contemporaine*, 6, 2011). In a private conversation with me, Žižek has confessed that he also regards Badiou's notion of the human animal — and, more generally, his philosophy of nature — as the "Achilles' heel" of his system of thought. Žižek's position is confirmed by a short but eloquent passage from "The Fear of Four Word": "What Badiou misses is the fact that there is no human animal (governed by pleasure and reality principle, bent on survival, etc.) — with humanity proper, animality is derailed, instinct is transformed into drive, and it is only into such a distorted animal that an event can inscribe itself" ("The Fear of Four Words", p. 93).

environment –[37] with the Hegelian ontology of contingent multiplicities and the contiguous Christology of "inappropriateness in general"/"monstrosity". What, however, still remains to be unfolded in order to move *with* Žižek's materialism *beyond* its (a-)theological dimension is the link between, on the one hand, this complex Hegelo-Freudian motif — which I would propose to tentatively call "monstrous humanism" –[38] and, on the other, Marx's political universalism of *Entwesung* / proletarian "inhumanity".

The Proletarian Realisation of Philosophy

My general thesis is the following: the early Marx reinterprets what Žižek calls Hegel's "starting point" — substance as the contingent multiplicities of Godhead (the impersonal "it" of origins) — in terms of the human animal's pre-subjective "impoverishment" [*Entwesung*], its constitutive indetermination. In parallel, Christ's theological monstrosity (the trans-subjective "it" of the Church as a community) is translated politically into "the total loss of humanity" embodied by the proletariat. As Marx and Engels specify in the third part of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) in opposition to "the German *literati*'s" appropriation of the "Communist literature of France", such inhumanity should not abstractly be understood as a capitalised "'Alienation of Humanity'", for this would obliterate the criticism of the economic function of money and of the bourgeois state on which the creation of communism rests.[39] The historical emergence of the proletariat cannot simply be equated with a return to undetermined *Entwesung*. Conversely, to speak of "the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class" amounts to nothing else than to advocate an empty form of universalism that forecloses political economy; man-in-general "has no reality, […] exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy" and the "no class" of abstract Human Nature must in no way be short-circuited with the classlessness of the proletariat.[40] Although this point has so far generally been overlooked by critics, I would claim that the early Marx provides us with a persuasive — albeit circumscribed — *economic* analysis of the link

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37 To put it in more explicitly Hegelo-Marxian terms, according to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the human animal is a helpless primate which retroactively transcends *itself* into an inter-subjective dialectic of *undetermined* (*qua* re-determined) desire. For a comprehensive treatment of this issue, see L. Chiesa, "The World of Desire: Lacan Between Evolutionary Biology and Psychoanalytic Theory", in *Filozofski Vestnik*, Volume XXX, Number 2, 2009.

38 On the contiguous notion of "humanism of impossibility", see again F. Ruda, "Humanism Reconsidered" and L. Chiesa "The Body of Structural Dialectics".

39 *The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 248-249.

40 *Ibid*., p. 250.

between general *ontological* species-specific impoverishment (which is itself re-determined by historically different social organs / modes of production: ancient, feudal, mercantile, etc.) and the *political* inhumanity of the proletariat — which finally assumes impoverishment as such — whenever he brings into play the progressive, and inevitable, *pauperisation* of the bourgeoisie under capital. We should emphasise that this pauperisation is *de facto* a proletarianisation that proposes economically the classless class as a potential universality prior to any politicisation of the process in question. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels write that "the lower strata of the middle class […] sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus the proletariat is recruited from *all* classes of the population".[41] The potential universality of purely economical proletarianisation, which is to say, the ultimate impossibility of dividing "true" capitalists and "proletarianisable" bourgeoisie into two different classes, is reinforced after few pages when the authors state that "entire sections of the *ruling classes* are […] precipitated into the proletariat".[42]

If we now turn to Marx's "Contribution", it is interesting to focus on the way in which this earlier text already further complicated the overlapping of the ontological, economical, and political aspects of "poverty". Here, in a dense paragraph that anticipates the analysis of the economical process of bourgeois pauperisation carried out in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx comes to distinguish "natural poverty" from "artificially produced poverty":[43] the proletariat is said to be formed primarily by the latter, that is, "not from the mass of people mechanically oppressed by the weight of society but from the mass of people issuing from society's *acute disintegration* and in particular from the dissolution of the middle class".[44] Therefore, not only, as we have seen in *The Communist Manifesto*, should the poverty of the proletariat be separated from the impoverishment of "Man in general", but also not reduced to the object of the oppression "naturally" exercised in a given society by what Marx names the — historically specific — "class of overt oppression".[45] Without this specification, we cannot properly appreciate the centrality of the epochal emergence of the proletariat, which brings about nothing less than a division of history into two. Although

41 *Ibid*., p. 228 (my emphasis).
42 *Ibid*., p. 230 (my emphasis)
43 "Contribution", p. 256.
44 *Ibid*. (Marx's emphasis).
45 *Ibid*., p. 254.

the theme of *Entwesung* is possibly less evident in the "Contribution" than in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, it is doubtless the case that we are dealing here with three different kinds of poverty: species-specific impoverishment; "natural" poverty caused by pre-capitalist economy; artificial poverty caused by Capital's unprecedented "acute disintegration" of society, that is, unnatural pauperisation of the ruling classes.

But what does Marx mean, more precisely, by "society's *acute* disintegration"? I would like to clarify this phrase from a different perspective by returning briefly to the issue of indirect dis-alienation as real dis-alienation in his early works. That which Marx calls, on the very same pages of the "Contribution", "the total redemption of humanity"[46] can historically commence through revolutionary communist action only after the middle class / bourgeoisie has itself become "artificially" (we could also say "inappropriately"…) impoverished / disintegrated — in a potentially universal way. In this sense, (economic and religious) dis-alienation cannot be direct since it must also involve the class that rules and structures society as such, the very presupposition of its alienating function: real dis-alienation necessitates the bourgeoisie — the class that establishes, supports, and controls capitalist productive and ideological alienation — being put in a position from which it can assume, as well as re-determine, together with all other classes, the general poverty of the species in its historical particularity — i.e. identify with the "monstrosity" of the proletariat. Beyond any theoretically local critique of (capitalist-bourgeois) society, its "acute" disintegration is needed for real dis-alienation to take place; the struggle for the universalism of equality can be initiated only after "the dissolution of all classes" has occurred; the proletariat, first and foremost, the becoming-proletarian of the bourgeoisie, "*is* [such] *actual* dissolution".[47]

At this stage, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that, in the "Contribution", Marx discusses indirect dis-alienation through active identification with the political universality of the proletariat at the same time as he *criticises* the critique of religion. The two issues cannot be separated. I come here to my second main objection to Žižek's dismissal of the early Marx. While the "Contribution" is mostly remembered for the motto "[religion] is the *opium* of the people"[48] — a perfect formula for an understanding of religion as direct self-alienation — critics often underrate that this is the position Marx unequivocally parts ways with and intends to overcome. It goes without saying that Marx

[46] *Ibid*., p. 256.
[47] *Ibid*. (Marx's emphasis).
[48] *Ibid*., p. 244 (Marx's emphasis).

shares with Feuerbach the idea that "*Man makes religion*, religion does not make man"; however, according to Marx, it is now a matter of "unmask[ing] self-estrangement in its *unholy forms* once the *holy form* of human self-estrangement [i.e. religion] has been unmasked".[49] In other words, "the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*".[50] It seems to me uncontroversial that such programmatic statement witnesses to a major shift of interest towards political economy which will constitute the basis of Marx's later — and most well-known — works. In addition to this, the "Contribution" openly and repeatedly presents this separation from Feuerbach's "criticism of religion" in favour of an engagement with the "*truth of this world*" as an enterprise that *philosophy* alone can accomplish: it is nothing other than "the immediate *task of philosophy*".[51] As Lucio Colletti argues, in the "Contribution", "Marx is concerned with redefining the object of philosophy. Philosophy must criticize not *religion* (as Feuerbach and others would have it) but the *real* world, of which religion is merely the 'halo'".[52] In other words, political acts in the real world, and eventually the promotion of communism as universal equality, rely on the philosophical overcoming of the critique of religion as self-alienation, and vice versa. Indirect dis-alienation by means of political economy goes together with indirect dis-alienation by means of a redefined philosophy that abandons the "misty realm of fantasy". Most importantly, the notion and reality of the proletariat as discussed above (its function of redeeming humanity through its total loss, i.e. through the emergence and assumption of its poverty-impoverishment) lie at the juncture between these two strands of emancipation (practical and theoretical) and bridge their gap: the *proletariat realizes philosophy*. As Marx has it, "just as philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *intellectual* weapons in philosophy".[53]

If, on the one hand, Žižek correctly insists on the association of indirect dis-alienation with a critique of the critique of religion, on the other, he fails to grasp their inextricability in the works of the early Marx, whose position he prefers to identify with Feuerbach's. For this reason, Žižek does not even acknowledge that the early Marx's notion of dis-alienation as a critique of the critique of religion is already explicitly formulated in the guise of a philosophy for which "the criticism of theology [should turn] into the criticism of politics":

49 *Ibid*. (Marx's emphasis).
50 *Ibid*., pp. 244-245 (Marx's emphases).
51 *Ibid*., p. 244 (Marx's emphases).
52 L. Colletti in K. Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 243.
53 "Contribution", p. 257 (Marx's emphases).

the correlation of theory and practice thanks to which philosophy is realised in the proletariat, and thus abolished as a separate abstract field, cannot give rise to a (Hegelian) philosophy of religion — as, on the contrary, Žižek's materialist a-theology seems to imply. To put it differently, I would suggest that in "The Fear of Four Words" — but the claim could also be applied to a different degree to earlier texts — Žižek underestimates the truly philosophical — that is, materialist and anti-theological — depth of the foundations of the critique of political economy laid by Marx's writings of the 1840s. In this way, he runs the risk of magnifying out of proportion a supposed break between the early (idealist and ontological) and the later (materialist and politico-economical) Marx, which is not supported by textual evidence. This threat becomes clear when, in "The Fear of Four Words", Žižek speaks approvingly of (the later) Marx's notion of freedom only a couple of pages before attacking his notion of dis-alienation as naively anti-ideological.[54] The unavoidable question here is the following: how would have Marx been able to develop a correct dialectical notion of freedom, for which — as Žižek lucidly explains in agreement with my previous analysis of bourgeois emancipation as a precondition for real dis-alienation — "it is the very 'alienated, bourgeois' freedom which creates the conditions and opens up the space for 'actual' freedom",[55] out of an incorrect — only apparently dialectical — notion of dis-alienation/emancipation entirely dependent on the motto "religion is the opium of the people"? Last but not least, on this basis, Žižek's analysis of the early Marx is also liable to being confused with Engels's reading (itself appropriated by Plekhanov, Lenin and, through them, by the Marxist orthodoxy of Really Existing Socialism), which reputed this phase of his thought to be incompatible with the dominant philosophy of nature of dialectical materialism but, contradictorily, also aimed at minimising any difference between the latter and Marx's overall oeuvre.[56] Thus, as Colletti writes in his introduction to *Early Writings*, after Marx's youthful philosophical work was published largely between 1927 and 1932, "they became, almost at once, 'the early writings'. […] The adjective 'early' served to emphasize their heterogeneity and discontinuity *vis-à-vis* the doctrine of the subsequent period. […] They were seen above all as

[54] "For Marx […] communism will not abolish freedom but, by abolishing capitalist servitude, bring about actual freedom, the freedom which will no longer be the form of appearance of its opposite" ("The Fear of Four Words", p. 71). Marx and Engels already outline this argument in *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 237.

[55] "The Fear of Four Words", p. 71.

[56] Žižek has always condemned orthodox dialectical materialism, including Lenin's, for its naïve notion of matter ("materialism has nothing to do with the presence of damp, dense matter", *ibid.*, p. 91; see also p. 107).

the remains of a line of thought which had led nowhere, or into a blind alley".[57] While this juxtaposition with Marxist "orthodoxy" does not render justice to Žižek's detailed and highly original investigation of the theme of dis-alienation/freedom, which was undoubtedly marginalised by the Engelsians, it can nonetheless not be averted as long as his overall interpretative framework relies on a neat division between the two Marxs ("Feuerbachian pseudo-Hegelian" young Marx — in Žižek's own words — versus truly Marxian later Marx).

Given Žižek's inability to recognise indirect dis-alienation and the critique of the critique of religion as central elements of the production of the early Marx, I find it all the more remarkable that, in his recent and powerful *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, he seems to be calling for a programmatic displacement of philosophy from the critique of ideology and of religion to the critique of political economy that closely resembles the one carried out by the early Marx in the "Contribution". Inevitably, this shift — intended, first and foremost, in function of the promulgation of a new "communist hypothesis" — also amounts to a less enthusiastic, or, at least, less unilateral, assessment of the legacy of Hegelian dialectics to contemporary materialism. In a number of important passages from *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Žižek appears to be updating almost verbatim the distinction between (Feuerbach's) anti-ideological "irreligious criticism"[58] and communist theory carried out by Marx in the first pages of the "Contribution". Žižek's bold definition of philosophers as the only "true *realists*" should appropriately be contextualised in this light.[59] According to him, our late-capitalist predicament, characterised by the double death of Fukuyama's dream of "the end of history" and of the ideal of global politico-economical freedom of the "happy '90s" — suffered, respectively, at the hands of 9/11 and the 2008 financial meltdown — offers philosophy an epochal opportunity to distinguish the real world from that portrayed by "liberal utopia".[60] The latter should be conceived as nothing else than a "utopia in power", in spite of the fact that, by posing as "pragmatic realism", it presents itself as a "neutral social mechanism" which is spontaneous (if not even natural) and thus entitled to condemn any antagonistic ideology as potentially totalitarian.[61] The anti-fundamentalist and de-regulative imperatives of the ruling utopia ulti-

57 L. Colletti, "Introduction", in K. Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 15.
58 K. Marx, "Contribution", p. 244.
59 S. Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, p. 79 (my emphasis).
60 *Ibid*., p. 3, p. 79.
61 *Ibid*., p. 79, p. 77, p. 25. "Capitalism itself is presented in technical terms, not even as a science but simply as something that works" (*ibid*.).

mately serve only capital — *qua* the "Real of our lives" — [62] but can today be unmasked by thought for what they truly represent beyond any opportunistic apology of liberalism. On the politico-economical level, the contemporary task of philosophy is to highlight the way in which the alleged reformist gradualism of liberal capitalism — "the liberal-pragmatic idea that one can solve problems gradually, one by one ('people are dying right now in Rwanda, so let's forget about anti-imperialist struggle')" — is actually promoting a worldwide authoritarian "capitalism with Asian values" that has by now abandoned any democratic simulacrum.[63] At the same time, on the anti-ideological/"irreligious" level, which is itself firmly grounded on the politico-economical, philosophy can finally denounce the way in which liberal anti-fundamentalism is of necessity accompanied by a new triumph of religion; "Religion is now reinventing its role" as the explicit/direct utopia/ideology disallowed by the implicit/indirect utopia/ideology of capitalism, especially insofar as the latter "is not global at the level of meaning, there is no 'capitalist world view', no 'capitalist civilization' proper", and its global dimension pertains exclusively to the "truth without meaning" of the Real of the market.[64]

Although Žižek sporadically refers to Lacan and reworks the latter's distinction between truth and meaning via Badiou, the notion of the "Real" which he recurrently refers to is definitely more indebted to Marx, *in primis* the early Marx, than to psychoanalysis.[65] I would argue that this is not sufficiently acknowledged: *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* openly presents itself as a Marxian text to the extent that its main message is the promotion of a "communist hypothesis" — one that maintains "the precise reference to a set of actual social antagonisms which generates the need for communism; Marx's notion of communism not as an ideal, but as a movement which reacts to such antagonisms, is still fully relevant".[66] However, the book does not engage with Marx's work analytically enough and thus overshadows what could be taken as a clear turn in Žižek's thought from the Hegelian-Christian "four words" to the Marxian-communist

62 *Ibid*., p. 80.

63 *Ibid*., p. 77, p. 131.

64 *Ibid*., p. 25.

65 The same applies to Badiou's use of the "real" in *L'hypothèse communiste*. In spite of the fact that, in the last chapter — entitled "L'idée du communisme" — the "three instances of the Subject according to Lacan: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic" are widely employed as a basic matrix to "formalise the operation of the Idea in general, and the communist Idea in particular" (p. 187), the primary meaning of the term "real" in this book refers — like Žižek's "Real of our lives" — to the "immediate and reflected life of all those who live in this [capitalist] world" (p. 78). The Marxian origin of this terminology emerges clearly in the chapter entitled "De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle?", dedicated to the 2008 financial meltdown.

66 *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, pp. 87-88.

"real world". Žižek re-enacts the early Marx's critique of the (liberal) critique of religion/ideology and, with the same move, also criticises his own critique of the critique of religion — incorrectly addressed against the early Marx — that is, his Hegelian materialist a-theology, its forgetting of the "real" of political economy, ultimately, its being a philosophy of *religion*, and not a philosophy. If Žižek's work of the 1990s can be regarded mainly as a continuation of the Freudo-Marxian tradition, focusing on the link between commodity fetishism and the superego's libido, i.e. the structurally "obscene" side of power, and that of the 2000s revolves around a resumption of the Christian legacy whose most noticeable outcome is a Hegelian materialist a-theology that tends to confine its Marxian politico-economical corollaries to a journalistic context (a split between theory and practice?), the 2010s announce to be a decade in which Žižek will consecrate himself to the resumption of communism as *philosophy*, for which, following Marx, the critique of the critique of ideology issues into politico-economical thought.

My argument is reinforced by at least two further topics Žižek incisively treats in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. First and foremost, his preservation and stressing of the notion of the proletariat — which, as we have seen, according to Marx, realises philosophy — together with his detailed investigation of contemporary forms of universal becoming-proletarian. For Žižek, not only should we "certainly not drop the notion of the proletariat, or of the proletarian position", but resist the "triple threat" posed today to the "commons" of culture, external nature, and internal nature — by, respectively, the notion of private property in relation to "intellectual" property, the impending ecological catastrophe, and the implications of new developments in biogenetic technology — that potentially "renders us all proletarians".[67] These threats, themselves strictly related to the persistence of capitalism's socio-politico-economical apartheid between classes, help us identifying today's antagonisms; in other words, the reference to the new threatened commons and to "apocalyptic proletarianization" justifies a resuscitation of communism.[68] I would add that since, as Žižek overtly concedes, contemporary proletarianisation is also closely related to the "potential scarcity

[67] *Ibid*., p. 92; see also p. 99.

[68] *Ibid*., p. 94. Having said this, Žižek also believes that "'class' struggle between the Excluded and the Included" (*ibid*., p. 99) should no longer be given priority over other forms of (intellectual, ecological, biogenetic) antagonism. This is clearly incompatible with the central role Marx assigns to the proletariat *qua* class struggle. Personally, I disagree with Žižek's attempt to motivate his marginalisation of class struggle — and, conversely, his generalisation of the proletariat — by relating it to the obvious implausibility of "the old Marxist logic of 'historical necessity'" (*ibid*.). Here, he runs the risk of throwing away the baby with the bathwater…

of three basic material resources (oil, water, and food)",[69] the early Marx's motif of the historical (re-)emergence of species-specific impoverishment/*Entwesung* could here be revisited and valorised also from a geo-political perspective.

With regard to the second topic that I believe further substantiates my reading of *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* as heavily dependent on Marx, and the early Marx in particular, in it, Žižek resolutely upholds that the only real political alternative for the future is that between communism and socialism. On this point, he could not have been more adamant: "Communism is to be opposed to socialism, which, in place of the egalitarian collective, offers an organic community (Nazism was national socialism, not national communism)".[70] Most importantly, "the only way for the global capitalist system to survive its long-term antagonism and simultaneously avoid the communist solution, will be for it to reinvent some kind of socialism — in the guise of communitarianism, or populism, or capitalism with Asian values, or some other configuration".[71] Therefore, the alternative between communism and socialism turns out to conceal a more fundamental opposition between communism and *socialist capitalism*. Here Žižek agrees with Michael Hardt and the Negrian anti-socialist — albeit clearly not dualistic — rhetoric of *Goodbye Mr. Socialism* in claiming that, in addition to eliminating private property, communism should also aim at overcoming state property, that is to say, "property as such in the commons".[72]And yet, he does not ever quote Marx's own incredibly derogative pronouncements on socialism, or comment on them; these can leave no doubt as to the reasons why (the early) Marx did *not* deem it to be the "lower phase" of communism, as instead Really Existing Socialism insisted on claiming.[73] While I would argue that such an attack is fully developed from a politico-economical standpoint only in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), where Marx takes into consideration specific historical events and political parties (the rise to power of Napoleon III and the role of French Social Democracy in it), we already find a whole-hearted theoretical denunciation of (reactionary, conservative or bourgeois, and critical-utopian) "socialist literature" in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), one that occupies more than a fifth of the entire book. If, on the one hand, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* shares with Žižek a condemnation without

69 *Ibid*., p. 83.
70 *Ibid*., p. 95.
71 *Ibid*.
72 *Ibid*.
73 Žižek is rather ambiguous on this point. In passing, he states that, for Marx, socialism was "vulgar communism" (*ibid*.). He must have specified that this "vulgarity" should in no way be confused with the "roughness" of a presumed "lower phase".

appeal of socialism's (authoritarian; anti-democratic) aspiration to transform class antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat into a utopian "harmonious whole",[74] on the other, *The Communist Manifesto* vividly anticipates the thesis according to which socialism remains after all internal to the economic logic of capitalism and the bourgeoisie: "The Socialistic bourgeois want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom. They desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements. *They wish for a bourgeoisie without a proletariat*".[75]

Either Hegel or Marx, or Both…

Interestingly enough, in the conclusion of *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Žižek associates the sharp division between communism and socialism with the neat separation he draws between a progressive and a reactionary Hegel: "The future will be Hegelian […]. The only true alternative that awaits us — the alternative between socialism and communism — is the alternative between the two Hegel. […] Hegel's 'conservative' vision uncannily points forward to 'capitalism with Asian values': a capitalist civil society organized into estates and kept in check by a strong authoritarian state with managerial 'public servants' and traditional values. (Contemporary Japan comes close to this model.)".[76] With regard to the "progressive" Hegel, referring to Susan Buck-Morss, Žižek speaks of "the Hegel of Haiti": the slave uprising that resulted in the constitution of the free Haitian republic took the libertarian/egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution more literally than the French themselves and should be considered as the historical source of inspiration for the emancipative Hegelian dialectics of Master and Slave.[77] Against post-colonial studies' campaigning for "self-definition", real freedom for colonised/enslaved nations can only stem from an appropriation of the egalitarian philosophical tradition of the oppressors; in this way, the latter is itself, with the very same move, redefined and fully actualised.[78]

Although Žižek does not explain the details of this dialectical passage, it is doubtless the case that he is here developing another variant of the Hegelian logic of indirect dis-alienation investigated in "The Fear of Four Words", this

74 K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr &Company, 1913), p. 52.
75 *Ibid*., p. 252 (my emphasis). Here, Marx and Engels explicitly condemn Proudhon.
76 *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, p. 148. See also p. 131.
77 *Ibid*., pp. 111-112.
78 *Ibid*., p. 120.

time applying it explicitly to politics via the Haitian "point of reference". We should therefore not be surprised by the fact that, in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, the promulgation of a communist hypothesis inextricably linked to the constitution of a new "Hegelian Left"[79] — in its turn regarded as antithetical to the proto-socialist "harmonious whole" of Hegel's own conservative vision — is, at the same time, (at least in one instance), identified with Christianity, or, more precisely, "the 'Holy Spirit' — the space of a collective of believers *subtracted* from the field of organic communities, or of particular life-worlds ('neither Greeks nor Jews')".[80] Žižek is clearly attempting to both sublate and further complicate the protracted oscillation between the Christian-Hegelian and the Communist-Marxian poles of his thought. On the one hand, we are offered with a political constellation in which philosophy renders the Christian "four words" compatible with the enslaved proletarians' "world to be won" of Marxian memory. On the other hand, this very relation — and especially the complex way in which Žižek arrives at its formulation — obliges us to assess a series of unexpected paradoxes concerning the history of philosophy and its legacy: the "good" Hegel is a true communist, unlike "standard" Marxists. Conversely, the "good" Marx is a true Hegelian: this is the very reason why the "early" Marx is both "pseudo-Hegelian" (like the "bad" Hegel) and not yet a communist.

In addition to my reservations concerning Žižek's reading of Marx's writings of the 1840s, I believe that there remains two main open questions about his overall Hegelo-Marxian project — which, let it be avowed plainly, I continue to find extremely stimulating and far more systematic than superficial critics often assume. The two questions at stake can perhaps be better expressed as two risks that must be averted. Firstly, Žižek should at all costs keep away from the all-encompassing, and consequently almost meaningless, theologico-politico-philosophical equations proposed by Gianni Vattimo's "Catholic-Communism": in the latter's works of the last five years, especially *Ecce Comu* (2007), not only are Catholicism and Communism used as quasi-synonyms, but also all too hurriedly superimposed with so-called "weak thought" ("It is as a 'weak' philosopher and as a Christian that I am becoming communist again"), emancipative Nietzschean nihilism ("A Leftist political position in the spirit of 'weak'

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 148.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

philosophy or, more clearly, nihilism"), as well as hermeneutics.[81] Secondly, Žižek should avoid falling back into a rigidly dichotomic reading of Hegel that, at a close inspection, results to be more indebted to Engels than Marx. As Colletti reminds us, while Engels and the Left Hegelians — as well as Really Existing Socialism after them — "held that there was a contradiction in Hegel between his revolutionary principles [and method] and his conservative conclusions",[82] Marx "distinguishes not the revolutionary method from the conservative system, but two different and opposed aspects *of the Hegelian dialectic itself* — that is, two aspects of the 'method'. These are the 'rational kernel' which must be saved, and the 'mystical shell' which should be discarded".[83] I would claim that, for the sake of his materialist programme, Žižek should resist the temptation to divide neatly between a revolutionary and a conservative Hegel, and, rather, carefully ponder the way in which the "two aspects of the method" inevitably lead to discard the Christian legacy as part of the "mystical shell". Moreover, I would also single out the first chapter of Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* — a book Žižek has often admitted to admire — as a model for such anti-Christian reassessment of the legacy of Hegel's dialectics to contemporary materialism and the communist hypothesis, one that further problematises "the two aspects of the method". For Badiou, "there are two dialectical matrixes in Hegel […] It is the kernel itself that is cracked"; out of this constitutive division, we cannot

[81] G. Vattimo, *Ecce Comu. Come si ri-diventa ciò che si era* (Rome: Fazi, 2007), p. 91, p. 93 (see also p. 79). Vattimo's Catholic-Communist facile slogans sound at times uncannily Žižekian. For instance, contemporary Leftist culture should pay more attention to the "possibility of founding a politics on nihilism, that is to say, on a *Christianity understood as the message of the* kenosis*, the Incarnation of God who becomes man* and, in this way, abandons and secularizes his violent and primitive essence" (p. 97, my emphasis). In the same context, "becoming communist again" entails "thinking our current [political] situation in 'apocalyptic' terms" (p. 59). For Žižek's detailed account of the Christian *kenosis* — which would be what "the standard Marxist critique of religion as the self-alienation of humanity misses" — and of "an eschatological apocalyptism which does *not* involve the fantasy of the symbolic Last Judgement", see, respectively, "The Fear of Four Words" (pp. 57-61) and *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (pp. 148-151) (Žižek's recent major book is significantly entitled *Living in the End Times*).

[82] L. Colletti, "Introduction", p. 11. The sentence continues as follows: "Hegel had chosen to come to a personal compromise with the Prussian state, against his own principles. Once liberated from his compromise, the essentially revolutionary principles of his philosophy were destined to dominate the future". This common interpretation of Hegelian politics as a "compromise" is by no means confined to orthodox Marxism: for instance, Carl Schmitt similarly proposes that "Hegel's philosophy […] sought a systematic mediation of revolution and tradition". However, for Schmitt, at its core, "it could be considered to be conservative, and it was". Its revolutionary principles are actually just "revolutionary sparks" (*Theory of the Partisan* [New York: Telos Press, 2007], p. 48).

[83] "Introduction", p. 13 (Colletti's emphasis). Although this view is openly stated only in the "Post-face" to the second edition of *Capital* (1873), Colletti convincingly maintains that it already informs the early Marx thanks to his appropriation of Feuerbach's anti-Hegelian link between the critique of religion and materialism (*ibid.*, pp. 11-12).

derive any "secondary unity" of the kernel; the absence of a unitary kernel in the materialist matrix of Hegelian dialectics is precisely what denounces — beyond Hegel's intentions — Christianity's "theological circularity, which, presupposing the absolute in the seeds of the beginning, leads back to this very beginning once all stages of its effectuation, its alienation, its going outside itself, and so on, are unfolded".[84]

[84] A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 3, p. 19. In spite of his later proudly professed anti-Hegelianism, Badiou's Marxian-Maoist reading of Hegel remains unsurpassed. Yet, it must be noted that — unlike Žižek — Badiou locates the theme of "alienation" at the heart of the *idealist* matrix of Hegelian dialectics, not of the materialist (*ibid*., p. 3).

Interpassivity and Misdemeanors
The Analysis of Ideology and the Zizekian Toolbox

Robert Pfaller

1. Materialism in philosophy and the role of the example

A significant characteristic of Slavoj Zizek's theory jumps immediately to eye of any reader of his writings: Zizek's theory is a philosophy which proceeds through examples. This philosophy has its turning points and finds its crucial highlights in elements like the Rabinovitch jokes, the Hitchcockian McGuffin or the obscenities exchanged between soldiers of the former Yugoslav people's army. Such a way of proceding has, in particular in the psychoanalytic tradition, been referred to as "phenomenological",[1] and since this "phenomenological" method is one of the constant points of philosophical disagreement with regard to Slavoj Zizek's theory, I want to take advantage of this specific occasion (the kind invitation by the British Society of Phenomenology), in order make a few considerations about the characteristic features and the specific stakes of Zizek's "phenomenological" method.

My first claim here is that proceeding through examples in philosophy is a necessary, never missing *mark of materialism*. Zizek's way of proceeding has to be compared with those pertaining to the great materialist tradition in philosophy: with the methods of philosophers such as Epicurus, Spinoza, Pascal, Marx, Freud, Wittgenstein, Althusser and — not to forget — Lacan. Yet, as Ferdinand de Saussure (another materialist, with great examples) has remarked, it is always easier to find a certain truth than to assign it to the right place. The truth that materialism in philosophy necessarily proceeds through examples does not explain why this is necessary and what the role of the example is.

A first catch here may be the idea that the example stands for the particular, as opposed to the general, and that the role of the example is to illustrate the general idea that it exemplifies. From this idea one could be inclined to draw the conclusion that materialism would, by its nature, always take the side of the particular, as opposed to the general. This would bring materialism close to nominalism or empiricism; yet, as materialist philosophers like Louis Althusser have proved,

[1] cf. for example O. Mannoni 1985: 33.

empiricism is not necessarily materialist; it can be precisely its opposite. (Since empiricism, according to Althusser, often presupposes the idea that the real explains itself; that there are no theoretical tools and no theoretical operations necessary in order to gain knowledge from the raw material of theoretical practice.[2])

Yet not only the conclusion is misleading here; already the first concept of the example as a concrete illustration of an abstact idea has been completely wrong with regard to Zizek. In Zizek's theory the example fulfills a completely different function. In order to sum up this very special, paradoxical function of the example in Zizek's theory, one may recall here the structure of the well-known "Radio Erewan" jokes that Zizek sometimes refers to, and ask: "Was Zizek's example a concrete element that illustrated an abstract idea presented before?" — Radio Erewan would then answer: "In principle: Yes. But, first, the idea was not totally abstract, second, the example was not more concrete than the idea, and, third, what the example did to the idea was not to illustrate it at all."

2. What Zizek does with examples: an example

Let us look for instance at one of Zizek's classics, one of his most brilliant key passages: the development of thoughts concerning the "objectivity of belief" (cf. Zizek 1989: 33-35). Starting from Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism, Zizek directs his argument along a chain of connected examples: the Tibetan prayer wheel; the Lacanian interpretation of the role of the Chorus in Greek tragedy; the function of "canned laughter" in contemporary TV Sit-Coms; the joke about the fool and his fear to be a grain for a hen.

First, it has to be stated that the idea which Zizek in his elaboration points at is far from being there at the beginning. Marx' theory of commodity fetishism does not at all include this idea. On the contrary, Zizek uses his first example, the Tibetan prayer wheel, in order to dismiss the idea usually connected with Marx' formulation — the common understanding of it as an argument situated on the level of *economy*, the humanist criticism of economic relations in capitalism ("we have become the objects of our objects"). Instead, Zizek suggests to read Marx' argument not as an economic criticism but as a theory of *ideology* — yet in a sense in which ideology has hardly ever been conceived of; not in the Marxist tradition, and not outside of it. The theoretical twist, the new meaning that Zizek, with the help of Tibetan prayer wheels, gives to Marx' formulation is: things are able to believe instead of us.

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[2] cf. Althusser 1990: 226.

It has to be remarked, though, that even this second element, Tibetan prayer wheels, is far from containing the new idea clearly and without ambiguity. The idea that religious people in Tibet may indulge in obscene phantasies while "objectively" praying through their ritual instruments is an idea that European theorists have hardly dared to conceive of (despite some statements by the Dalai Lama which appear to testify the paradoxical "detached" status of this ritual practice[3]) — be it by reasons of intercultural respect alone.

Therefore, in a third step, a new example, connected with conceptual support by Lacanian theory, has to be introduced: Lacan's idea that our most intimate feelings, beliefs and convictions can assume an "external existence" and that the chorus in Greek tragedy had precisely such a function (cf. Lacan 1986: 295): to feel fear and compassion vicariously, on behalf of the spectators. Yet, again, Lacan's idea may appear as an audacious, highly speculative and arbitrary interpretation with little empirical support and even less plausibility. It is no wonder, then, that this passage in Lacan has for a long time passed unnoticed; nobody made any use of it or referred to it, not even within Lacanian theory.

It is here that, in a fourth step, Zizek makes Lacan's historical assumption for the first time clear, plausible and justified by connecting it with an example from our own contemporary culture. The phenomenon of canned laughter in television (connected with the observation that usually we do not laugh when this laughter appears) allows Zizek to give full credibility and concreteness to the idea of Lacan which had until then remained a kind of theoretical "sleeper". Zizek's merit here is considerable: just as in ethnology, also in this case the element belonging to another culture is not understandable as long as we are not able to overcome our strange blindness for its precise counterpart in our familiar context. The Greek chorus remains an enigma as long as canned laughter is treated as going by itself. Only by "estranging" and problematizing our own practice, i. e. by recognizing its strangeness and by transforming its previous evidence into a question, we get a key for replacing our astonishment and the respective assumptions about foreign phenomena by theoretical concepts. (Ludwig Wittgenstein proceded the same way when, in his critical objections against Frazer's theory of "savage" magic, he pointed out that there exists a magic of the "civilized", and that precisely this "civilized" magic, which is not based in magic assumptions or convictions, has

[3] cf. http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm: "His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has said that having the mantra on your computer works the same as a traditional *Mani* wheel. As the digital image spins around on your hard drive, it sends the peaceful prayer of compassion to all directions and purifies the area."

to be taken as the model for understanding its counterpart in foreign cultures. cf. Wittgenstein 1993: 140, 124)

By adding a fifth element, the fool-hen-joke, Zizek finally points out the remarkable power our beliefs assume once we have delegated them to things: delegating one's beliefs makes them even stronger than they were before. Believing "objectively", through external objects or vicarious agents, does not provide any release from the constraints exerted by our beliefs; on the contrary, as soon as we have transferred these beliefs onto external agents, they become "ontologically" relevant. Now these illusions determine the objectivity of the outer world, thus transforming our "enlightened" knowledge about how this world "really" is into a purely subjective abstraction. This reinforced status of the illusion, precisely through "detachment", better knowledge and delegation onto things, is the reason why, as Zizek points out, laughter and ironical distance are far from helping us out of ideology (as Umberto Eco had assumed, cf. Zizek 1989: 27) and why, after the "end of all narrations" and the arrival of "cynical reason" in postmodernity, we are far from being post-ideological.[4]

3. The bending of the stick

As can be seen in this sequence of theoretical steps, performed through certain crucial examples, there is no initial "abstract" idea that would become "illustrated" by a "concrete" element. If there is an abstract idea at all (for example, a first Marxist concept of fetishism), then the example presents another abstract idea (a different Marxist concept of fetishism). Yet what the example in Zizek's texts usually refers to is in itself already another example, another concrete element. Zizek proceeds by connecting one concrete element with another: for example, "canned laughter" in TV with Lacan's idea of the role of the chorus in Greek Tragedy.

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[4] Zizek's analysis has been extremely productive. Apart from the discovery that beliefs and convictions can have an external existence, which has been crucial for a theory of ideology, it allowed another important conclusion with regard to art theory. At a moment when in art an ideology of interactivity appeared predominant, the example of canned laughter pointed into an opposite direction: it was an artwork that contained its own observation. Here, the artwork did not leave some creative activity to the observers; on the contrary, it kept all for itself, even the "passivity" of the observers. And apparently (as Zizek's own example seemed to prove) there were observers who wanted it to be like that: they did not want to observe, but preferred to delegate their observation to the artwork. Together with further examples (such as the use some TV-freaks make of their videorecorders) this lead to a general theory of "interpassivity": the wish for delegated consumption in art as well as in everyday culture (cf. Pfaller 1998, (ed.) 2000; Zizek 2004).

The function of the example is therefore not to illustrate or to exemplify its — in most cases equally illustrative and exemplary — counterpart, but to displace it; to drag it away from its initial position; to "estrange" it (in the sense of Bertolt Brecht); to shed a different light on it; to comb it against the grain, as it were — in other words: to interpret it, against its common understanding and against its self-understanding (this is the violent sense that Nietzsche gives to the notion of "interpretation"[5]).

In Zizek's texts, the example is not there in order to illustrate what can be seen in the exemplified; on the contrary it is there in order to make visible what, at first, could not be seen in it. Instead of being an *illustration of an idea*, the Zizek example is rather a *caricature of another example* — and a criticism of the idea usually connected with that example. Zizek's examples comment upon each other;[6] therefore they seem to function just like the "myths" about which Lévi-Strauss remarked that one myth can function as the interpretation of the other.

The typical Zizek example does not present an instance to which an abstract idea could be easily applied. It is not a *passive* material that visualizes something which has already been *included* in the abstract idea. Its function is rather to make something appear which was completely *foreign* to the first idea and which this idea could only be connected to with considerable theoretical effort. The example is therefore highly *active*. It is not just the object or the raw material of a theoretical explanation, but it functions as its theoretical *tool*: it makes visible a theoretical structure in the original idea which, before, was not easy to discern or which was even hidden by another structure that appeared evident. Due to its active nature, there is a certain *retroactive force* proper to a Zizek example: After you have heard the example, you can perceive something in the exemplified element that you were not able to see before. Yet, after having heard Zizek's example it is probably difficult to understand the exemplified ever again the same way you had understood it before.

For example, when Zizek uses the joke about Rabinovitch's two reasons for emigration to explain the structure of Hegelian dialectics, Zizek makes clear that, in Hegel, the antithesis is in itself already the synthesis, yet seen from another

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5 cf. Nietzsche [1887]: 269: "[…] alles Überwältigen und Herr-werden [ist] ein Neu-Interpretieren […]"

6 This is the way Octave Mannoni has conceived of a "phenomenological" use of examples: "d'essayer de présenter des exemples de façon, pour ainsi dire, qu'ils s'interprètent les uns par les autres." (Mannoni 1985: 33)

perspective.[7] This had never been visible or clear to me before I came upon Zizek's example. Yet now I can hardly think of Hegelian dialectics without conceiving it like this and recalling Rabinovitch's *chuzpe* as well as Zizek's brilliant idea to connect it with Hegel's dialectics.

One could say here: precisely by using the example, Zizek makes clear that what appeared as the "idea" of Hegelian dialectics (just as in the case before the idea of Marxian commodity fetishism) had actually not been an idea *but an example in itself*. Since what Zizek's example makes visible had not been visible in the idea itself. (And what is an idea if not something in which, by its very name, the visible should be visible.) Zizek's example therefore *de-centers* a presumed idea; it refuses its claims for universality and self-transparency and reveals its true nature, which is that of another example.

Just as psychoanalysis, according to Freud, makes the analysand say what he does not know,[8] the Zizek example makes another thing say *what, until then, it did not know*. A Zizek example is not just a particular instance of a general concept or law to which it can be subsumed. The example is not there in order to match an abstract description or concept. Finding an example is therefore not a matter of *judgement*, as in Kant[9]. Rather, this requires a kind of *witty philosophical renitence:* the ability to discover a given phenomenon's power to contradict a previous idea that we had about another phenomenon. The use of examples becomes here what Gilles Deleuze calls a "concatenation"[10]: Example and exemplified can be connected because they are logically equal elements dwelling on the same level

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7 Cf. Zizek 1989: 175s.: "… a well-known Soviet joke about Rabinovitch, a Jew who wants to emigrate. The bureaucrat at the emigration office asks him why; Rabinovitch answers: 'There are two reasons why. The first is that I'm afraid that in the Soviet Union the Communists will lose power, there will be a counter-revolution and the new power will put all the blame for the Communist crimes on us, Jews — there will again be anti-Jewish pogroms. …' 'But', interrupts the bureaucrat, 'this is pure nonsense, nothing can change in the Soviet Union, the power of the Communists will last forever!' 'Well,' responds Rabinovitch calmly, 'that's my second reason.' The logic is the same here as in the Hegelian proposition 'the spirit is a bone': the very failure of the first reading gives us the true meaning." — Zizek has given an excellent new version of this joke in 1991, showing that after the disintegration of Communism the same joke could be told again, just be reversing the sequence of the two reasons (cf. Zizek 1991: 1).

8 Cf. Freud 1940: 212s: "Mit den Neurotikern schließen wir also den Vertrag: volle Aufrichtigkeit gegen strenge Diskretion. Das macht den Eindruck, als strebten wir nur die Stellung eines weltlichen Beichtvaters an. Aber der Unterschied ist groß, denn wir wollen von ihm nicht nur hören, was er weiß und vor anderen verbirgt, sondern er soll uns auch erzählen, was er nicht weiß."

9 cf. Kant: "[…] ein Beispiel [ist] nur das Besondere (concretum), als unter dem Allgemeinen nach Begriffen (abstractum) enthalten vorgestellt, und die bloß theoretische Darstellung eines Begriffs." (Kant [1797]: 620 [A 168], footnote); see also: Kant [1781/1787]: B 171s.

10 cf. Deleuze 1980: 59ss.

of generality. Yet the example has the advantage of coming later, and has thus the chance to work upon the previous element, to transform it. Or, to put it in a Lacanian terminology: the example is a master-signifier which retroactively gives a new interpretation to a previous signifier.

For Zizek's examples goes therefore what Wittgenstein describes as the role of the "picture" in his philosophy. Wittgenstein's pictures change the previous understanding one had about a certain case:

> "I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*." (Wittgenstein 2001: 49e (§ 149))

Wittgenstein's pictures are there in order to change a previous understanding, an understanding that had, itself, already been determined by certain other (maybe unacknowledged) pictures. Therefore Wittgenstein's pictures do not give an illustration where there was nothing (or only abstract ideas) before; rather, they are *counter-pictures*. They break with previous pictures; they destroy a previous understanding which, due to the imaginary power of unquestioned pictures, had presented itself as self-evident. The Wittgensteinian picture has its crucial moment precisely when another picture "holds us captive" (cf. Wittgenstein 1980: 80 [§ 115]).[11]

Here we find the reason *why materialist philosophy cannot do without pictures*: in order to break free from the imaginary captivity in which we are held by certain images, we need other images, counter-images; since, as Spinoza has stated, something can only be limited by something else which is of the same nature.[12]

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[11] The counter-image makes visible that already before we had to do with an image. If an image "holds us captive", this happens because its nature as image is not acknowledged, and mostly because the logic of this image in itself is not taken by its letter. This has been emphasized by Nietzsche, in his criticism of the use of the optical metaphor in widespread notions of theory: "But let us, forsooth, my philosophic colleagues, henceforth guard ourselves more carefully against the mythology of dangerous ideas, which has set up a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge', let us protect ourselves from the tentacles of such contradictory ideas as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself' — in these theories an eye that cannot be thought of is required to think, an eye which ex hypothesis has no direction at all, an eye in which the active and interpreting functions are cramped, are absent, those functions, I say, by means of which 'abstract' seeing first became seeing something: in these theories consequently the absurd and nonsensical is always demanded of the eye. There is only a seeing from a perspective, only a 'knowing' from a perspective." (Nietzsche 1910: 153) — From this remark we can draw the conclusion *that there exists no philosophy which does not think in examples*. Yet some make believe that they did otherwise since they do not present and treat their examples as such. They do not stick to their own letters but treat them as "sleeping tropes".

[12] cf. Spinoza 1955: 45

Such a concept of the theoretical space is thouroughly materialist: it conceives it as a field not just of ideas but of pictures that hold us captive, of evidences that blind us, of considerable forces that keep us down; and of other forces, that have to be developed: counterforces, able to break with the former. Louis Althusser has formulated this materialist idea of the theoretical space, using another example — that of the bending of the stick:

> "It follows that if you want to change historically existing ideas, even in the apparently abstract domain called philosophy, you cannot content yourself with simply preaching the naked truth, and waiting for its anatomical obviousness to ‚enlighten' minds, as our eighteenth-century ancestors used to say: you are forced, since you want to force a change in ideas, to recognize the force which is keeping them bent, by applying a conterforce capable of destroying this power and bending the stick in the opposite direction so as to put the ideas right." (Althusser 1990: 210)

This idea that the theoretical space is such a physical field of forces did, by the way, not stem from philosophical speculation. It has been developed by one of Althusser's teachers, the scholar in the history of sciences Gaston Bachelard. Investigating the history of sciences like physics, chemistry and mathematics, Bachelard found out that a science, in order to establish itself, has not just got to find some knowledge where previously there had been none, but to break with previous, spontaneous evidences, with "epistemological obstacles" that keep the theoretical space of this very science blocked from the outset.

This is important to mention since it refers to an fundamental epistemological problem pointed out by Bachelard — a problem that can be called the problem of the *initial narcissism of theories*. When a theory does not succeed in breaking with the first spontaneous evidences provided by sources like common sense, then it does not even have an object. Whenever such a theory thinks to speak of an object, it speaks in fact about nothing but itself. What a theory "sees" when it actually sees nothing, is itself — i. e. its own expectations, presuppositions and prejudices. As Bachelard puts it,

> "It suffices us to speak about an object to make us believe that we are objective. But, through our first choice, the object rather designates us, than us designating it, and what we consider our fundamental ideas of the world, often are nothing but confidental revelations about the youthfulness of our spirit." (Bachelard 1974: 134; translation: Astrid Hager and Robert Pfaller)

Breaking with first evidences of common sense is necessary for any theory in order to obtain an object. Before being able to say something right or wrong about

an object, a theory has to leave that starting zone in which everything is neither right nor wrong and where it speaks about nothing but itself.

Providing science with an object, and breaking with its inevitable initial narcissism, is a thoroughly materialist task. This is not only so because in the history of philosophy many schools which called themselves materialist have stressed the importance, or even the primacy, of the object. There is a much more systematic reason for this (since materialism is, in the first place, not a theory of cognition). Following psychoanalytic theory,[13] we can say *that the secret, yet most general name for philosophical idealism is — narcissism.* In today's culture we can discern this narcissism in the underlying philosophical matrix that governs many discourses, creating the typical preferences of these very discourses: for example, a preference for being a subject, instead of being an object; a preference for what is constructed as opposed to what is seen as essential; a hymnic hailing of "immaterial work" (for example by Maurizio Lazzarato as well as by Hardt and Negri[14]); and, correspondingly, a fundamental distrust in materiality (for example, in art: be it physical materiality or the materiality of a determinate form that cannot be "interactively" altered or arbitrarily interpreted); distrust in the materiality of political and ideological apparatuses, neglect of the question of political organization, etc.

The fundamental philosophical disease of our time can therefore be seen in these spontaneous choices which are made, unaware of their underlying idealism and narcissism. As Richard Sennett has noted in 1974, this narcissistic attitude can be resumed in the formula "Be yourself! And do not tolerate anything that appears foreign to your precious self." Today, under neo-liberal conditions, it can be seen, how this categorical imperative of our culture leads to most affirmative forms of pseudo-emancipatory politics, and even of self-exploitation.

As opposed to this, proceeding through examples the way Zizek does, means to break with first narcissistic evidences of theory, to allow theory to accede to an object, and to recognize the materiality of the theoretical space. As a consequence, this points to a crucial philosophical perspective: not to seek one's freedom beyond the sphere of materiality.

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13 See for this especially Grunberger/ Dessuant 2000.

14 cf. Hardt/Negri 2002: 305; Lazzarato 1998: 40.

4. The filthy examples and the beautiful souls

Zizek's examples constantly show a surprising aptitude to break with given evidences. This is, to my view, what belongs to Zizek's greatest merits in philosophy: the proofs of his amazing ability to discover a certain theoretical structure, a transformative force, in a given element — in any element that culture can provide. Just like the proverbial wise man, Zizek is able to learn something from everybody and everything. Nothing is too stupid or too trivial in order to teach him something — that's probably the best one can say about a philosophical intellect. This means also, in the first place, that nothing human is foreign to Zizek; no existing phenomenon is able to blame his theories as a naive, blue-eyed idealist dream. Whereas other philosophers' ideas (for instance, Habermas' concept of non-hierarchical communication) appear funny at the very moment that you try to imagine them in comparison not just to ordinary petty-bourgeois Western academics, but, for example, to equally Western sado-masochist leather-gays, Zizek's theory appears able to face any particular challenge exerted by an existing practice — no matter how strange, kinky, awkward, dirty or cruel it may appear.

Again, this does not go by itself — and for the least in contemporary culture. Are we not surrounded by "beautiful souls" who do not allow themselves (as well as others) the use of bad words or thoughts? Is cultural theory today not totally subverted by a "childhood disease" that, at any price, tries to stay away from "adult language" as well as from the realities that this language designates? (We should not forget here that THE childhood disease, according to psychoanalysis, is (secondary) narcissism.) Is there not a sort of "enlightenment" and "pure reason" in power that does not hesitate to call for the police — or even tries to become that police — in order to prevent itself from acknowledging "filthy" matters? The problem is, of course that, in the last instance, narcissism by its very nature perceives every matter as filthy[15] (since matter represents the symbolic order which, by its rules and laws, puts constraints upon the "pure" narcissistic ego). — As opposed to this, we should remind ourselves that materialism in history has always revealed itself by its dirty, sarcastic way of speaking. Ancient authors such as Chrysippos, Diogenes and Epictetus, and their modern counterparts such as Spinoza, Mandeville, Marx or Brecht have taught us lessons of sarcastic laughter with regard to unpleasant realities. These authors have not hesitated to play the role of the black sheep, of the *bête noire* that speaks out the dirty truth nobody wants to acknowledge or to take into his own mouth.

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[15] cf. Grunberger/ Dessuant 2000: 203.

Compared to the background of contemporary "newspeak", the presumptous cleanliness that characterizes today's academic and non-academic theorists and policemen of discourse, Slavoj Zizek has taken a quite unique stance. Here in particular it becomes clearly visible that his examples function in order to brush something against its grain. In his choice of subjects, matters and ways of speaking Zizek has never cared whether he himself would appear advantageously pure or virtuous. Following the "plebejan" tradition of philosophical materialism (cf. Zizek 1989: 29), he did not hesitate to speak of bad things, and he called things by their names — preferably by their worst names: since only this can prevent theory from painting reality pink and becoming an idealist, "apologetic" narrative. "The cleaner you are, the dirtier you are" is the rule one could hear Zizek say sometimes. This position can be reformulated in Lacanian terms: If there is any chance to show respect or decency under respectless and indecent conditions, then this chance is not to be looked for on the level of the *enunciated content*. The level of *enunciation* alone — the fact that things are actually called by their names — is the only level where an utopian wish can inscribe itself without becoming immediately ideological: the wish that things may become better than their outspoken names.

As a consequence, Zizek's discourse never showed the least attempt to appear "politically correct". As opposed to that, most contemporary theorists as well as artists today in a narcissistic way constantly seek to look good when they speak about certain things (and keep silent about others). Yet this non-dialectical way of proceeding does not leave any room to move for their listeners. The latter cannot do more than agree with what has been stated ("Yes, the author is right, this minority really is in a deplorable situation"). This keeps the audience in a totally resignative, yet at the same time presumptuously satisfied position ("we are on the good side").

Unlike Rabinovitch, contemporary politically correct authors do not have "a second reason" when they speak. They never start speaking ironically or sarcastically, from a position opposed to what they mean in order to trigger a movement of thoughts, affects and responses in their audience. Therefore this discourse produces nothing but the tacit satisfaction of bourgeois classes that they are not to blame for the bad state of affairs in the world (which they, according to an obscene aesthetics of the sublime, love to observe in a safe theory or art space). Zizek on the contrary never followed this pattern. He willingly assumed the role of the *bête noire*. With regard to this gesture of his, we may feel reminded of Nietzsche's remark about

the nobility of the Greek gods who did not execute punishment but rather, more elegantly, assumed guilt themselves.[16]

A constant awareness of the "extremes" pushes Zizek's thought forward and allows him to take his very "impossible" positions which are necessary in order to render theoretical thought possible.[17] This non-naiveté of Zizek is a proper materialist stance. Louis Althusser has coined for this stance a formula which he called "the only definition of materialism": *"not to tell oneself stories"* ("ne pas se raconter d'histoire", Althusser 1994: 247). Precisely by his examples, which are often stories, Zizek succeeds in preventing his philosophy from becoming a story.[18]

5. Dirty matters as sharp tools

This theoretical familiarity with all kinds of realities, as remote as they may be from academic life or horizons, allows Zizek to build up that unique field of theoretical operation that characterizes his work. As many observers have remarked, the most heterogeneous realities become part of Zizek's theory. From "Matrix" to Marx, from one balls joke to the other, from fistfucking to Flintstones, from CIA torture to children's toys, from Coca Cola commercials to Communist party secrets; nothing is too high or too low in order to be excluded from the scope of his philosophy. This creates an extremely egalitarian atmosphere in Zizek's approach.

Yet this egalitarian spirit does not stem only from the fact that these mass culture elements are allowed to enter into "highbrow" philosophy (as they were before, for example in Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes or Umberto Eco). What makes Zizek's proceeding so egalitarian is the fact that these elements are not just there, but that they are also regarded, by Zizek, as equally apt to serve him as theoretical tools — as "synthetic aprioris", as it were. The commercial is not just there in order to be analyzed by elaborated theoretical means; on the contrary, it may very well be used to analyze a given theory, as its object. And the artwork is not just there as

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16 Cf. Nietzsche [1887]: 281: "Dergestalt dienten damals die Götter dazu, den Menschen bis zu einem gewissen Grade auch im Schlimmen zu rechtfertigen, sie dienten als Ursachen des Bösen — damals nahmen sie nicht die Strafe auf sich, sondern, wie es *vornehmer* ist, die Schuld…"

17 See for this Althusser 1990: 209.

18 Kasimir Malevich has, in his theories of painting, developed beautiful tableaus in which he analyzed what he called the "inspiring environment" of any given painters' movement: the inspiring environment of the Academic painter is a farm, with peasants and peaceful animals in front of it; the inspiring environment of the impressionist is a feudal garden; that of the futurist consists of ocean liners, locomotives and factories; and that of the suprematist are skies filled with airplanes in geometrical formations. It would probably be revealing to do the same with philosophers. Only very few would stand such a test equally well as Zizek does. (Cf. Malevich 1980)

a more or less enigmatic raw material to be interpreted by refined psychoanalytic devices; on the contrary, Hitchcock may become the theoretical tool and tell you what you always wanted to know about Lacan (but did not dare to ask).

The example is elevated to the dignity of a theoretical tool: this is what distinguishes Zizek's theory from many efforts in contemporary cultural studies which appear equally close to their respective realities. Yet cultural studies today often lack the distance to their material. They feel most adequate when they get completely immersed into their object, the cultural or subcultural reality they describe. Zizek on the contrary never enters into the same intimacy with the elements he uses. Being taken as theoretical tools, the examples help him to get at a distance from the self-understanding of the reality he deals with. This corresponds to what Louis Althusser has once called the "Golden Rule" of materialism: "Do not judge a given reality according to its self-understanding."[19]

This may also explain why Zizek appears to show little love for his cultural objects. He uses mainstream Hollywood movies, but rarely refined or extravagant productions. He refers to novels, but, as has been remarked, almost never to lyrics.[20] Yet Zizek's theory is not not film theory, but theory that works with film; not theory of literature, but theory that works with literature; not theory of everyday culture including its dark sides, but theory that works with phenomena from everyday culture including its dark sides. Precisely because his cultural objects serve him as tools, Zizek does not make his choices according to their refinement and cultural value, but to their explanatory and interpretative value.

Therefore Zizek's way of dealing with examples is not the kind of sympathetic, orbiting meditation about certain phenomena that essayists such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, John Berger or Stephen Greenblatt have presented. Zizek takes his objects directly and with force, just like a hammer in order to hit against an epistemological obstacle, and he does not care about the hammer's colour, history, provenience, inscription etc. More refined objects would not serve him equally well in the role of such a tool, therefore Zizek obviously hesitates to use them — and, if we remember Kant, it is not the worst one can do if one hesitates to use somebody "just as an instrument".[21]

The frequently made observation that Zizek completely "flattens" his examples out is not wrong here. Yet one has to remember their status as theoretical tools.

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19 Cf. Althusser 1993: 234: "Ne pas juger de l'être par sa conscience de soi!"

20 Cf. Clemens who remarks that Zizek's appetite "finds its limit in poetry, more precisely lyric poetry" (Clemens 2005: 15).

21 cf. Kant [1785]: 61.

In the field of theoretical vision, one has to make a choice: either the object is what you look at, or the object serves you as the lense through which you look at something else. And if serves as your lense, then you do not have to care for the variety of its qualities, but for one quality alone: its ability to sharpen your view on something else. In the good Spinozean tradition of producing optical lenses, Zizek sharpens the "definition" of his examples in order to get a sharp view on another object. Only in a second step one may reverse this setting. What has been, until then, the object of elaboration can then become its instrument and serve to treat the former instrument as an object. A lensmaker, for example, wearing his glasses, can make new glasses by which he, later, can sharpen his old ones. (This is the way how, for example, Freud proceeds when, in his essay "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" [Freud 1907b] he first uses religion in order to make obsessional neurosis understandable and then, reversing this explicative relationship, sheds new light on the dynamics in the history of religion with the help of his insights into obsessional neurosis.)

Since Zizek's examples are his tools, one has got to learn his examples in order to understand him. It is not enough just to know them; one has to be able to have them present in the toolbox and to master them skilfully: one has to be able to remember quickly how and where they have to be applied in order to produce an unexpected insight. This is the way how the ancient philosophers such as the Pyrrhonean sceptics or the Kynics exercised the use of their examples (which they called their "tropes"). Therefore they were so fit and quick to refer to the examples of dogs or noble Persians in order to dissipate imaginary formations such as the tragical lure of the oedipus myth — by stating sarcastically, for example, that creating children with one's mother need not necessarily be regarded as such a sad thing.[22]

At this point, it can easily be shown why a recurrent objection against Zizek's examples is besides the point. One can often read that, first, Zizek would shift too fast from one example to another, and, second, that he would often repeat his examples. In a way, this argument looks quite funny already by itself. It reminds a bit of the one that Freud calls the "borrowed kettle"-argument. ("You blame me for having returned your kettle with holes in it? — But, first, I did not borrow your kettle; second, it had holes in it already when I borrowed it; and third, I gave it back without holes in it." cf. Freud [1900a]: 138s.) The two reasons in this argument

[22] Cf. Hossenfelder 1996: 29.

seem to contradict each other just the same way: since if Zizek was to quick at the first time, then one should be glad to get the chance of a repetition.

But what counts more is the fact that this kind of objection misrecognizes the theoretical status of Zizek's examples. It takes the narrative role of the example for its logical role. It may be impolite to tell a joke a second time, given the fact that the action is about narrating jokes. Yet in Zizek's texts the jokes have a strictly logical function, and nobody would blame a philosopher like Hegel for repeatedly applying his notion of "mediation", to most diverse realities; or a mathematician for repeatedly using a formula he has invented. This status of the theoretical tool is precisely that of the joke in Zizek's text. Thus we can understand Wittgenstein's idea of a philosophical book that consisted only of jokes, yet being completely serious in itself.[23] (Apart from Zizek's texts, "Capital" by Marx appears to come closest to this Wittgensteinian utopia.)[24]

We can sum this up by saying: The more materialist a philosopher is, the less he is disgusted by silly or dirty examples, and the less he gets bored by their repetition. Yet there exists another structural reason for the necessity of coming back to the same examples again and again: As Althusser has emphasized, it is not sufficient to break with an epistemological obstacle and to open up a new theoretical field. This cannot be done just once. Since the obstacle exists by reasons different from theory, it continues to exist and to accompany the new science, constantly menacing it, even from its inside. As Althusser puts it,

> "… not only does ideology precede every science, but ideology survives after the constitution of science, and despite its existence." (Althusser 1994: 22)

Therefore theory has got to keep its instruments in its hands. The "epistemological cut" has to be made again and again. Its opponent is too sticky to let science go alone. Blaise Pascal has observed this necessity of the repeated effort and gave a beautiful formula to it:

> "These great mental efforts on which the soul occasionally lights are not things on which it dwells; it only jumps there for a moment, not for ever, as on the throne." (Pascal 1995: 251 [§ 829])

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[23] cf. Maruschi 1976: XIII.

[24] One could even imagine that, as Zizek once suggested, the examples in one of his texts were just the same as in another text, yet the complete theory was different.

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A reply: with enemies like these, who needs friends?

Slavoj Žižek

Let me begin by admitting how I admire he texts collected in the present volume: while (some more, some less) critical of my work, they all display a will to engage in a serious dialogue beyond narcissistic games of academic competition. In all of them, the topic is not myself but the problems in which we are all engaged.

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Adrian Johnston is my most systematic critic, and I can say without any irony that I learned from him a lot about myself. Since we are engaged in a long debate about the meaning of materialism today, I will try to provide some further clarifications on this topic. Today, THE scientific discovery which needs philosophical rethinking is quantum physics — how are we to interprete its ontological implications AND avoid the double trap of superficial pragmatic empiricism and obscurantist idealism ("mind creates reality")?

Higgs field undermines the standard New Age appropriation of the quantum Void as the Nothing-All, the pure potentiality as the abyssal origin of all things, the Plotinian formless Over-One in which all determinate Ones disappear. The "Higgs field" controls whether forces and particles behave differently or not: when it is "switched on" (operative), symmetries are broken between the elementary particles, and their complex pattern of differences emerges, while when it is "switched off" (inoperative), forces and particles are indistinguishable from one another, i.e., the system is in a state of vacuum — this is why particle scientists search so desperately for the (hypothetic, for the time being) "Higgs particle," sometimes referring to is as the "divine particle": this particle would have been the particle equivalent of what Lacan calls *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, namely the cause of disturbing the symmetry of a vacuum, the x which breaks the symmetry and introduces differences — in short, nothing less than the cause of the passage from nothing (vacuum, the void of pure potentialities) to something (actual different particles and forces). How is this miraculous particle

even thinkable in a materialist way, how can we avoid here the obscurantist idea of a mystical cause of all objects? (All theosophical speculations focus on this point: at the very beginning (or, more precisely, BEFORE the beginning), there is nothing, the void of pure potentiality, the will which wants nothing, the divine abyss prior to God, and this void is then inexplicably disturbed, lost.) The materialist solution is a very precise, and it concerns the key paradox of the Higgs field: as every field, Higgs field is characterized by its energy density and by its strength — however, "it is energetically favorable for the Higgs field to be switched on and for the symmetries between particles and forces to be broken."[1] In short, when we have the pure vacuum (with the Higgs field switched off, inoperative), the Higgs field has to spend some energy — nothing does not come free, it is not the zero-point at which the universe is just "resting in itself" in total release — nothing has to be sustained by an investment of energy, i.e., energetically, it costs something to maintain the nothing (the void of the pure vacuum). Maybe, some theosophical traditions are on the right pass here, like the Talmud idea that, prior to creating something, God had to create nothing, i.e., to withdraw, to clear the space for creation.

This paradox compels us to introduce the distinction between two vacuums: first, there is the "false" vacuum in which the Higgs field is switched off, i.e., there is the pure symmetry with no differentiated particles or forces; this vacuum is "false" because it can only be sustained by a certain amount of energy expenditure. Then, there is the "true" vacuum in which, although the Higgs field is switched on and there is symmetry is broken, i.e., there is a certain differentiation of particles and forces, the amount of energy spent is zero, i.e., energetically, the Higgs field is in the state of inactivity, of absolute repose.[2] At the beginning, there is the false vacuum; this vacuum is disturbed and the symmetry is broken because, as with every energetic system, Higgs field tends towards the minimization of its energy expenditure. This is why "there is something and not nothing": because, energetically, something is cheaper than nothing.

Perhaps, this gives us a minimal definition of materialism: the irreducible distance between the two vacuums. And this is why even Buddhism remains "idealist": the two vacuums are there confused in the notion of nirvana. This is what Freud also didn't get quite clearly, confounding sometimes death drive with the "nirvana-principle," i.e., missing the core of his notion of death drive as

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1 Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok, *Endless Universe. Beyond the Big Bang,* London: Phoenix 2008, p. 82.

2 Op.cit., p. 92.

the "undead" obscene immortality of a repetition which insists beyond life and death: nirvana as the return to a pre-organic peace is a "false" vacuum, since it costs more than the circular movement of the drive. (Within the domain of the drive, the same gap appears in the guise of the difference between *goal* and *aim* of a drive, as elaborated by Lacan: the drive's goal — to reach its object — is "false," it masks its "true" aim, which is to reproduce its own circular movement by way of repeatedly missing its object. If the fantasized unity with the object would have brought the full/impossible incestuous *jouissance*, the drive's repeated missing of its object does not simply compel us to be satisfied with a lesser enjoyment, but generates a surplus-enjoyment of its own, the *plus-de-jouir*. The paradox of the death drive is thus strictly homologous to that of the Higgs field: from the standpoint of libidinal economy, it is "cheaper" for the system to repeatedly traverse the circle of drive than to stay at absolute rest.

There is nonetheless a way in which authentic Buddhism is aware of this paradox. Let us not be afraid to take an example from popular culture": when, in the new version of *The Karate Kid* (from 2010), the young American boy protests to his Chinese kung fu teacher "How can I win my fight if I only stand still?", the teacher replies: "Being still is not the same as doing nothing." One can understand this proposition against the background of the well-known (but no less adequate) cliché about a wise ruler who knows how to play one against the other his subordinates, so that their plots mutually neutralize themselves — a simple example of how the Whole of the kingdom is at peace while parts fight each other. Opposed to this central "doing nothing" sustained by the very frantic activity of the parts is the case of a standing still, a sudden interruption of movement, which perturbs the peace of the harmonious functioning (circular movement) of the Whole. Do we not have here a homologous duality of vacuums, the vacuum of "standing still" and the vacuum of "doing nothing"? In a kind of repetition of the paradox of the Higgs field, in order to effectively "do nothing," one should not "stand still," but be active in a certain way, since, if one is really inactive, if one just sits still, this immobility causes havoc and chaos. What this means is that, if we want to describe the minimal ontological coordinates of the universe, it is not enough to posit just the endless multiplicity of phenomena against the background of the vacuum/void as their universality: the vacuum itself is always-already split between the "false" and the "true" vacuum, and it is this split which originally/constitutively disturbs the vacuum.

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For years, I feel deeply indebted to Adam Kotsko's critical reflections on my work. Since his essay focuses on the simple but crucial question "Why do I still cling to theology?", I will try to clarify this point, beginning with Christianity.

Lacan's premise is that the moment we speak, we (unconsciously, at least) believe in God — it is here that we encounter Lacan's "theological materialism" at its purest: it is (our, ultimately) saying which creates God; however, God is here the moment we talk — or, to quote *Talmud*:

"You have made me into a single entity in the world, for it is written 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our god, the Lord is one,' and I shall make you into a single entity in the world."(Babylonian Talmud, *Masechet Hagiga*)

Therein resides the limit of Judaism: of course it can do the humanist reversal, we — collective of believers — create God-One by praying to him, but *Christ*, its monstrous excess, cannot be thought here. The Talmud formula exemplifies the standard circle of subjects and their virtual substance kept alive by subjects' incessant activity, substance as "the work of one and all." In his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan opposes to the thesis of the death of God the claim that God is dead from the very beginning, it is just that he just didn't know it; in Christianity he finally learns it — on the cross. The death of Christ is thus not an actual death, but rather a becoming aware of what is already here. One should nonetheless take note of how this process unfolds in two stages, the Jewish and the Christian one. While, in pagan religions, gods are alive, Jewisg believers are already taking into account his death — indications of this awareness abound in Jewish sacred texts. Recal, from *Talmud*, the story about the two rabbis who basically tell God to shut up: they fight over a theological question and, unable to resolve it, one of them proposes: "Let Heaven itself testify that the Law is according to my judgment." A voice from heaven agrees with the rabbi who appealed to it; however, the other rabbi then stands up and claims that even a voice from heaven was not to be regarded, "For Thou, O God, didst long ago write down in the law which Thou gavest on Sinai, 'Thou shalt follow the multitude.'" God himself had to agree: after saying "My children have vanquished me! My children have vanquished me!", he runs away… In short, after the act of creation is accomplished, God survives only in the dead letter of the Law, without retaining even the right to intervene into how people interpret his law. To put it in Hegelese, God is here dead "For us or In itself," which is why even if believers no longer really believe in him, they continue to practice the ritual of belief — it is only in Christianity that God dies "for itself." God thus has to die two times, in itself and for itself: in Judaism, it dies in itself by way of being reduced to the performative effect of (humans) talking about

himself; but such a god continues to function, so it has to die for itself, and this happens in Christianity.

So why did Christ had to die? The paradox is that, for the virtual Substance (the big Other) to die, the price had to be paid in the real of flesh and blood. I.e., god is fiction, but for the fiction (which structures reality) to die, a piece of real had to be destroyed. Since the big Other as a virtual order, a symbolic fiction, is efficient in its very inexistence — it doesn't exist, but it nonetheless works —, it is thus not enough to destroy the fiction from outside, to reduce it to reality, to demonstrate how it emerged from reality (this is what "vulgar" atheists like Dawkins are doing). The fiction has to be destroyed from within, i.e., its inherent falsity has to be brought out. To put it in descriptive terms, it is not enough to prove that god doesn't exist — the formula of true atheism is that *god himself must be made proclaim his inexistence*, must stop believing in himself. Therein resides the paradox: if the destroy the fiction from outside, just reducing it to reality, *it continues to function in reality*, to exert its symbolic efficiency, as in the famous joke about the atheist Zionists who do not believe that God exists, but nonetheless believe God gave them the land of Israel.

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Glyn Daly's of the political implications of my work is precise and up to the point, so I will just add some reflections on Freud, Lacan, and politics. 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, without any external guarantee, where ethical decisions are made and negotiated — the idea that one can ground politics in ethics, or that politics is ultimately a strategic effort to realize previous ethical positions, is a version of the illusion of the "big Other." From the question "Which ethics fits psychoanalysis?", we should therefore pass to the question: "Which politics fits psychoanalysis?"

With regard to politics, Freud's ultimate position is the same as Lacan's: psychoanalysis does not provide new positive political programs for action; its ultimate achievement, the "bottom line" of analysis, is to discern the contours of a "negativity," a disruptive force which poses a threat to every stable collective link. Since a political act intervenes into a state of things, simultaneously creating instability and trying to introduce new positive order, one can say that psychoanalysis confronts us with the zero-level of politics, a pre-political "tran-

scendental" condition of possibility of politics, a gap which opens up the space for the politics to intervene, a gap which is saturated by the political engagement to impose a new order. In Lacanian terms, psychoanalysis confronts us with the zero-level at which "nothing is taking place but the place itself," while politics proper intervenes into this place with a new Master-Signifier, imposing fidelity to it, legitimizing us to "enforce" the project sustained by this Master-Signifier onto reality.

The question which arises here is, of course: which are the political consequences of asserting this gap? There are three options. First, there is the liberal option basically advocated by Freud himself: the gap means that we should not fully identify with any positive political project, but retain a minimal distance towards all of them, since politics is as such the domain of the Master-Signifier and symbolic and/or imaginary identifications. Then, there is the conservative option: against the eternal threat of destructive "negativity," one should all the more impose onto social life a strict order based on a Master-Signifier. Finally, there is a Trotskyte-Deleuzian Leftist version: true radical politics is the one of the "permanent revolution," of persisting in the permanent negativity of self-revolutionizing, without allowing this negativity to stabilize itself into a new positive order. With Lacan and politics, it is thus the same as with Hegel: there are three main interpretations, the conservative one (emphasizing the symbolic authority as a *sine qua non* of the social order), the Leftist one (using Lacan for the critique of patriarchal ideology and practice), and the cynically-permissive liberal one (to each his/her own *jouissance*). This liberal interpretation participates in the short-circuit between ontology and politics which is typical of postmodern thought: radical Leftist politics is rejected as "metaphysical," as imposing onto social life a universal metaphysical vision, as striving for a totally self-transparent and regulated society, and, since life resists the constraints of such ideological straight-jacket, this politics necessarily ends in totalitarian terror. Such politics stance is very comfortable: while legitimizing a pragmatic politics without risks, it is able to present its cynical liberalism as the most radical-critical position.

This stance of liberal wisdom was fully articulated in Jacques-Alain Miller's reading which focuses on late Lacan: in his last seminars, Lacan leaves behind the notion of "traversing the fantasy" as the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic process; he opposes to the gesture of traversing the opposite gesture of accepting the ultimate non-analyzable obstacle called *sinthom*: if symptom is a formation of the unconscious to be dissolved through interpretation, sinthom is the "indivisible remainder" which resists interpretation and interpretive disso-

lution, a minimal figure/node which condenses the subject's unique mode of enjoyment. The goal of analysis is thus reformulated as "identification with the symptom": instead of dissolving his/her unique sinthom, the subject should become aware of it and learn how to use it, how to deal with it, instead of allowing the sinthom to determine him/her behind his/her back: "The analytic experience enables us to re-appropriate our desire. In the best case, one can thus hope to arrive at 'wanting what one desires' and 'desiring what one wants.' If the experience is brought to its conclusion, it allows us to identify ourselves with our 'incurable': not only to find oneself in it, but to make use of it."[3] Through this identification, the opposition of meaning and enjoyment is also overcome in their "synthesis," that of *jouissense* (enjoy-meant, enjoying the sense): the subject is not reduced to idiotic autistic enjoyment s/he continues to speak, but his/her talk now functions as a play with semblances, as an empty bla-bla which generates enjoyment. This would be Lacan's version of *eppur si muove*: even after we see through imaginary and symbolic semblances, the game goes on in the guise of the circulation of *jouissense*, the subject is not dissolved in the abyss of the real.

Relying on this new notion of the final moment of the analytic process, Miller deploys a simplified version of the "critique of instrumental reason," establishing a link between democratic culture and racism: our era privileges the universalizing scientific rationality which admits only mathematically-quantified statements whose truth-value does not depends on an idiosyncratic subjective position; in this sense, both universalism and egalitarian-democratic passion are the results of the hegemony of the scientific discourse. But if we extend the validity of the scientific reason onto the social field, the results are dangerous: the universalizing passion pushes us to search for a universal mode of enjoyment best for all, so those who resist it are disqualified as "barbarians": "Due to the progress of science, racism has thus a bright future. The more refined discriminations provided by science we have, the more segregation in society we get."[4] This is why psychoanalysis is under such an attack today: it focuses on the uniqueness of each subject's mode of enjoyment, a uniqueness which resists scientific universalization as well as democratic egalitarianism: "Democratic nivelization may be very nice, but it doesn't replace the eroticism of exception."[5]

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3 Nicolas Fleury, *Le reel insense. Introduction a la pensee de Jacques-Alain Miller,* Paris: Germina 2010,p. 136.

4 Fleury, op.cit., p. 98.

5 Jacques-Alain Miller, "La psychanalyse, la cite, les communautes," *Revue de la Cause freudienne* 68 (2008), p. 118.

One has to admit that Miller fearlessly spells out the political implications of this insistence on the uniqueness of the subject's mode of enjoyment: psychoanalysis "reveals social ideals in their nature of semblances, and we can add, of semblances with regard to a real which is the real of enjoyment. This is the cynical position, which resides in saying that enjoyment is *the only thing that is true*."[6] What this means is that a psychoanalyst "occupies the position of ironist who takes care not to intervene into the political field. He acts so that semblances remain at their places while making it sure that subjects under his care do not take them for *real*. /.../ one should somehow bring oneself to remain *taken in by them* (fooled by them). Lacan could say that 'those who are not taken in err': if one doesn't act as if semblances are real, if one doesn't leave their efficiency undisturbed, things turn for the worse. Those who think that all the signs of power are mere semblances and rely on the arbitrariness of the discourse of master are bad boys: they are even more alienated."[7] In the matter of politics, a psychoanalyst thus "doesn't propose projects, he cannot propose them, he can only mock the projects of others, which limits the scope of his statements. The ironist has no great design, he waits for the other to speak first and then brings about his fall as fast as possible. /.../ Let us say this is a political wisdom, nothing more."[8] The axiom of this "wisdom" is that "one should protect the semblances of power for the good reason that one should be able to continue to *enjoy*. The point is not to attach oneself to the semblances of the existing power, but to consider them necessary. 'This defines a cynicism in the mode of Voltaire who let it be understood that god is our invention which is necessary to maintain people in a proper decorum.' (Miller) Society is kept together only by semblances, 'which means: there is no society without repression, without identification, and above all without routine. Routine is essential.' (Miller)"[9] The result is thus a kind of cynical liberal conservatism: in order to retain stability, one has to respect and follow routines established by a choice which is "always arbitrary and authoritarian. 'There is no progressism which holds' (Miller), but rather a particular kind of hedonism called 'liberalism of enjoyment.' One has to maintain intact the routine of the city, its laws and traditions, and accept that a kind of obscurantism is necessary in order to maintain social order. 'There are questions one shouldn't ask. If you turn the social turtle on its back, you will never succeed to turn it back on its paws.' (Miller)"[10]

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6 Miller, op.cit, p. 109.

7 Fleury, op.cit., p. 93-94.

8 Miller, op.cit., p. 109-110.

9 Fleury, op.cit., p. 95.

10 Fleury, op.cit., p. 96.

Against this Miller's cynical-hedonist idea of a subject who, while admitting the necessity of symbolic semblances (ideals, Master-Signifiers, without whom any society would fall apart), relates to them with a distance, aware that they are semblances and that the only real is that of the bodily *jouissance*, one should emphasize that such a stance of "enjoy and let enjoy" will be possible only in a new Communist order which will clear the slate of nivellization and open up the field for authentic idiosyncrasies,

"a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature /.../ no longer fettered by the constraints of a now oppressive sociality, /they/ blossom into the neurotics, compulsives, obsessives, paranoids and schizophrenics, whom our society considers sick but who, in a world of true freedom, may make up the flora and fauna of 'human nature' itself."[11]

As we have seen, Miller is of course critical of the standardization of enjoyment demanded by the market to sell commodities, but his critique remains at the level of the standard cultural critique; however, he ignores the specific socio-symbolic conditions of such thriving of idiosyncrasies: as it was noted long ago, capitalism is marked by a contradiction between ideological individualism (the interpellation of individuals into subject free to follow their unique desires) and the nivellizing pressure of the market, imposing standardized modes of enjoyment as a condition of the commodification of mass consumption (while we are called to indulge in our idiosyncrasies, media bombard us with ideals and paradigms of HOW to do it). Communism is in this sense not a further nivellizing "socialization" which curtails individual idiosyncrasies, but such a social reconstruction which creates the space for their free deployment. Traces of this are found even in literary and Hollywood utopias of a social space subtracted from commodification, from the houses in whichg a group of eccentrics dwell in some of the Dickens' novels, to the crazy large family house in Frank Capra's *You Can't Take It With You* whose inhabitants include Essie Carmichael (who makes candy as a hobby and dreams of being a ballerina), Paul Sycamore (a tinkerer who manufactures fireworks in the basement and whose hobby is playing with erector sets), Mr. DePina (an ice man who came inside to speak to Paul eight years before, and never left), Ed Carmichael (an amateur printer who prints anything that sounds good to him; he prints up dinner menus for his family and little quotes that he places in the boxes of Essie's candy), Boris Kolenkhov (a

[11] Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time,* New York: Columbia University Press 1994, p 99.

Russian very concerned with world politics; he is opinionated and often loudly declares that something "stinks").

At a more theoretical level, one should render problematic Miller's (and, maybe, if one accept his reading, late Lacan's) rather crude nominalist opposition between the singularity of the real of *jouissance* and the envelope of symbolic semblances. What gets lost here is the great insight of Lacan's *Seminar XX (Encore)*: that the status of *jouissance* itself is in a way that of a redoubled semblance, semblance within semblance. *Jouissance* doesn't exist in itself, it only insists as a remainder/product of the symbolic process, of its immanent inconsistencies and antagonisms; that is to say, symbolic semblances are not semblances with regard to some firm substantial real-in-itself, this real is (as Lacan himself formulated it) discernible only through impasses of symbolization.

From this perspective, an entirely different reading of Lacan's *les non-dupes errent* imposes itself. If we follow Miller's cynical reading based on the opposition between symbolic semblances and the real of enjoyment, *les non-dupes errant* means the cynical wisdom that, although our values, ideals, rules, etc., are just semblances, we should not disturb them but act as if they are real to prevent the social texture from disintegrating. But from a properly Lacanian standpoint, *les non-dupes errant* means almost the exact opposite: the true illusion does not consist in taking symbolic semblances for real, but in substantializing the real itself, in taking the real as a substantial in-itself and in reducing the symbolic to a mere texture of semblances. In other words, those who err are precisely cynics who dismiss symbolic texture as a mere semblance and are blind for the symbolic efficiency, for the way symbolic affects the real, for the way we can intervene into the real through the symbolic.

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Yang Huilin's reflections on the role of Christianity are the most pleasant surprise in the present volume. The surprise comes from the fact that a theologist from a totally different culture can move with such authority and profound understanding in the idiosyncratic topics of my work. Since his reflections address — with a somewhat different accent — the same problem as Kotsko's text, I would like to use this opportunity to further clarify the role of my reference to Christianity. Christ is for me not a Master figure, but *objet a*, occupying the position of analyst: an embarrassing excess, answering questions with jokes

and riddles that only confound further the enigma, already acting as his own blasphemy. Recall the strange parable on talents from *Matthew*:

"For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.'

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'" (*Matthew* 25:14-30)

We can imagine how an American business-oriented Baptist priest should love this parable: does it not confirm the parallel between religion and business, promoting in both domains the dynamic capitalist spirit of venture, circulation, risk, and expansion? Preachers who expand the word of god must act like businessmen expanding their business! However, is it not possible to read the parable also in the opposite way, especially if we bear in mind its other version in *Luke* 19:11-27 which mentions that the man was a noblemen who had to leave "to a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom," although he was not

wanted there; in which the three men are not servants but (ten) slaves; in which the nobleman's attendants protest his decision to give the third man's mine to the one who already has ten of them ("'Sir, he has ten minas already!'"); and which concludes with a cruel order: "'But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be their king, bring them here and slaughter them in front of me!'" — hardly a gesture worthy of a good man? Is it not much more appropriate to do what William Herzog proposed, to celebrate the third servant as a whistle-blower denouncing the exploitation of the poor?[12] In other words, what if we read the third man's decision to just hide the talent, withdrawing it from commercial circulation, as a gesture of *subtraction* from the field of (economic) power, as a refusal to participate in it? The master's furious reaction is thus fully justified: what this servant did is much worse than stealing his money or hiding from him part of the profit — in this way, the servant would still have participated in the business spirit where I "reap where I have not sowed." His servant did much more: he rejected the entire "spirit" of profit and exploitation and thus sapped the very foundations of master's existence — and was this not why Christianity had such problems to come to terms with collecting interests, which means precisely to "reap where I have not sowed"? John Caputo is right to refer to Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus who says that humour serves as the incognito of the religious[13] — the problem resides in the precise determination of this humour, a humour inextricably mixed with horror.

One can conceive of the entire history of Christianity as a reaction not against preceding religion(s), but against *its own excessive/subversive core*, that of the true dimension of the Holy Ghost (the egalitarian emancipatory collective which cancels any organic-hierarchical social link): all the great theologists's basic effort was to render Christianity compatible with a hierarchic social body. Saint Augustine did the first great step in this direction by way of "inventing the psychological interiority" and thus withdrawing from the (socially dangerous) literal interpretation of Christ's radical sayings (to be his follower, one should hate one's own mother and father; the rich will never enter paradise; etc.). The whole art of Thomas Acquinas culminates in the sophistry destined to reconcile the literal meaning of the Bible with demands of a hierarchic society — say, he demonstrates that, although Christ preaches renunciation to earthly wealth (i.e., the sinful character of private property), this holds only for people who are them-

12 William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as pedagogue of the oppressed,* Westminster: John Knox Press 1995.

13 Op.cit., p. 138.

selves holy (priests, etc.); if ordinary people want to abolish private property, they sin against God… This, however, in no way leads to a "spurious infinity" of the gap between really-existing Christianity and the true Christianity, so that every really-existing form of the Christian Church necessarily misses its notion. The solution is here the properly Hegelian one: the true idea of Christian collective did get realized, but outside the Church as an institution — which, however, does not mean that it survived in intimate authentic religious experiences which have no need for the institutional frame; it rather survived in OTHER institutions, from revolutionary political parties to psychoanalytic societies… It is thus only in post-religious "atheist" radical-emancipatory collectives that we get the proper actualization of the Idea of the Christian collective — the necessary consequence of the "atheist" nature of Christianity itself.

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My only regret apropos Robert Pfaller's beautiful text is that he did not add some of his perspicuous criticism of my work. So I will just supplement it with some remarks about the link between the sacred and obscenity. When an atheist philosopher (like me) writes about religion, he should take great care to resist the temptation formulated long ago by Rousseau: "By accusing me of being religious you excuse yourself for being a philosopher; it is as if I were to renounce vine when it would make you drunken."[14] This temptation is at its most seductive when a philosopher encounters cases which display the obscene disavowed underside of a religious edifice, as is the case with "The Gathering" (2002), a modest but interesting horror film taking place in the English countryside where the remains of an old Christian church are discovered buried beneath the earth, with statues and reliefs carved in stone of the suffering Christ and a heterogeneous group of individuals observing him dying. It took the local clergy and archeologists some time to get the point: the sculpture is not about Christ (who is, strangely, shown from behind) but about those who came to see him dying. A priest from the local church links this sculpture to the words allegedly written by St. Aristobulus (a 1st century Bishop) about "Those who came to Watch": "From the east and the west they came, from the city and the plain. Not in holy reverence to our Lord, but in lust." At the same time, people are observed wandering around the city who strangely resemble faces on the statues, and, furthermore, a researcher founds the same faces on

[14] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Heloise,* Sixieme Partie — Lettre VIII.

many depictions of the crucifixion from the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The conclusion is clear: those who did not come to crucifixion to mourn or worship, but witnessed the crucifixion for entertainment or mere curiosity, were cursed to walk the Earth immortal and bear witness to the suffering of men — as in the case of the Wandering Jew, immortality is here not a blessing, but a curse. (Recall that Hamlet's father also returns as a ghost because he was murdered "in the flowers of his sins.") The end of the movie then takes a predictable turn: the immortal witnesses are gathering in the city because they have the premonition of something terrible to happen there…

There is a deeper question that has to be raised here: is there not *always* a moment of lust (Freud called it *Schaulust*) in witnessing a traumatic event like crucifixion? And does the justification that we are really doing it for compassion and respect not make it even (a hypocritical) worse? Such perverse logic was brought to its peak by Nicholas Malebranche for whom, in the same way that the saintly person uses the suffering of others to bring about his own narcissistic satisfaction in helping those in distress, God also ultimately *loves only himself*, and merely uses man to promulgate his own glory. Malebranche draws here a consequence worthy of Lacan's reversal of Dostoyevsky ("*If God doesn't exist, then nothing is permitted.*"): it is not true that, if Christ had not come to earth to deliver humanity, everyone would have been lost — quite the contrary, *nobody* would have been lost, i.e., *every* human being had to fall so that Christ could come and deliver *some* of them. Malebranche's conclusion is here properly perverse: since the death of Christ is a key step in realizing the goal of creation, at no time was God (the Father) happier then when he was observing His son suffering and dying on the Cross.

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Lorenzo Chiesa is also one of my critics from whom I've learned a lot. Our *differend* is centered on how to understand the unity of Marx's work: while I insist on the break between Marx's early notions of alienation/disalienation and his return to Hegel from the mid-1950s onward, his claim is that the topic for which I look for in later Marx is already there in his "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" from 1843, a key early text in which Marx does not advocate a Feuerbachian direct reconciliation (man should recognize in God his own alienated product), but a mediated dis-alienation — the way to overcome religion is not to directly appropriate its otherness as our own product, but to see in it the effect of our real-life alienation in the actual productive process.

I continue to maintain that this "complication" is not enough if our aim is to truly re-actualize Marx.

Communism should no longer be conceived as the subjective (re)appropriation of the alienated substantial content — all versions of reconciliation conceived as "subject swallows the substance" should be rejected. The Hegelian subject has no substantial actuality, it comes second, it only emerges through the process of separation, of overcoming of its presuppositions, and these presuppositions are also just a retroactive effect of the same process of their overcoming. The result is thus that there is, at both extremes of the process, a failure-negativity inscribed into the very heart of the entity we are dealing with. If the status of the subject is thoroughly "processual," it means that it emerges through the very failure to fully actualize itself. This brings us again to one of the possible formal definitions of subject: a subject tries to articulate ("express") itself in a signifying chain, this articulation fails, and by means and through this failure, the subject emerges: the subject is the failure of its signifying representation — this is why Lacan writes the subject of the signifier as $, as "barred." In a love letter, the very failure of the writer to formulate his declaration in a clear and efficient way, his oscillations, the letter's fragmentation, etc., can in themselves be the proof (perhaps the necessary and the only reliable proof) that the professed love is authentic — here, the very failure to deliver the message properly is the sign of its authenticity. If the message is delivered in a smooth way, it arouses suspicions that it is part of a well-planned approach, or that the writer loves himself, the beauty of his writing, more than his love-object, i.e., that the object is effectively reduced to a pretext for engaging in the narcissistically-satisfying activity of writing.

And the same goes for substance: substance is not only always-already lost, it only comes to be through its loss, as a secondary return-to-itself — which means that substance is always-already subjectivized. In "reconciliation" between subject and substance, both poles thus lose their firm identity. Let us take the case of ecology: radical emancipatory politics should aim neither at the complete mastery over nature nor at the humanity's humble acceptance of the predominance of Mother-Earth. Rather, nature should be exposed in all its catastrophic contingency and indeterminacy, and human agency assumed in the whole unpredictability of its consequences — viewed from this perspective of the "other Hegel," the revolutionary act no longer involves as its agent the Lukacsean substance-subject, the agent who knows what it does while doing it.

One is even tempted to talk here about Marx's "idealist reversal of Hegel": in contrast to Hegel who was well aware that the owl of Minerva takes of only at

the evening dusk, after the fact, i.e., that Thought follows Being (which is why, for Hegel, there can be no scientific insight into the future of society), Marx reasserts the primacy of Thought: the owl of Minerva (German contemplative philosophy) should be replaced by the singing of the Gaelic rooster (French revolutionary thought) — in the proletarian revolution, Thought will precede Being.

Does, however, this mean that the ultimate subjective position we can adopt is that of a split which characterizes the fetishist disavowal? Is all we can do take the stance of "although I know well there is no big Other, the big Other is only the sedimentation, the reified form, of intersubjective interactions, I am compelled to act as if the big Other is an external force which controls us all"? It is here that Lacan's fundamental insight into how the big Other is "barred," lacking, in-existing even, acquires its weight: the big Other is not the substantial Ground which secretly pulls the strings, it is inconsistent/lacking, its very functioning depends on subjects whose participation in the symbolic process sustains it. Instead of either the submersion of the subject into its substantial Other or the subject's appropriation of this Other we thus get a mutual implication through lack, through the overlapping of the two lacks, the lack constitutive of the subject and the lack of/in the Other itself. It is perhaps time to read Hegel's famous formula "One should grasp the Absolute not only as substance, but also as subject" more cautiously and literally: the point is not that the Absolute is not substance, but subject. The point is hidden in the "not only… but also": the interplay between the two, which also opens up the space of freedom — we are free because there is a lack in the Other, because the substance out of which we grew and on which we rely in inconsistent, barred, failed, marked by an impossibility.

However, what kind of freedom is thereby opened up? One should raise here a clear and brutal question in all its naivety: but if we reject Marx's critique of Hegel and stick to Hegel's notion of the owl of Minerva which takes off only in the evening — i.e., if we accept Hegel's claim that the position of a historical agent who is able to identify its own role in the historical process and act accordingly is inherently impossible, since such a self-referentiality makes it impossible for the agent to take into account to impact of its own intervention, how this act itself will affect the constellation —, what are the consequences of this position for the act, for emancipatory political interventions? Does it mean that we are condemned to blind acts, to risky steps into the unknown whose final outcome totally eludes us, to interventions whose meaning we can establish only retroactively, so that at the moment of the act, we can only hope that history will show mercy (grace) and crown our intervention with a minimum of success?

But what if, instead of conceiving this impossibility to take into account the consequences of our acts as a limitation of our freedom, we conceive it as the zero-level (negative) condition of our freedom? We are free only against the background of this non-transparency: if it were to be possible for us to fully predict the consequences of our acts, our freedom would effectively be only the "known necessity" in the pseudo-Hegelian way, i.e., it would consist in freely choosing and wanting what we know to be necessary. In this sense, freedom and necessity would fully coincide: I act freely when I knowingly follow my inner necessity, the instigations that I found in myself as my true substantial nature… but if this is the case, we are back from Hegel to Aristotle, i.e., we are no longer dealing with the Hegelian subject who itself produces ("posits") its own content, but with an agent bent on actualizing its immanent potentials, its positive "essential forces," as the young Marx put it in his deeply Aristotelian critique of Hegel. What gets lost here is the entire dialectics of the constitutive retroactivity of sense, of the continuous retroactive (re)totalization of our experience.

But, again, what does this mean for our ability to act, to intervene into ongoing history? There are in French two words for "future" which cannot be adequately rendered in English: *futur* and *avenir*. *Futur* stands for future as the continuation of the present, as the full actualization of the tendencies which are already here, while *avenir* points more towards a radical break, a discontinuity with the present — *avenir* is what is to come /*a venir*/, not just what will be. Say, in today's apocalyptic global situation, the ultimate horizon of the "future" is what Dupuy calls the dystopian "fixed point," the zero-point of the ecological breakdown, of global economic and social chaos, etc. — even if it is indefinitely postponed, this zero-point is the virtual "attractor" towards which our reality, left to itself, tends. The way to combat the catastrophy is through acts which interrupt this drifting towards the catastrophic "fixed point" and take upon themselves the risk of giving birth to some radical Otherness "to come." (We can see here how ambiguity the slogan "no future" is: at a deeper level, it does not designate the closure, the impossibility of change, but what we should be striving for — to break the hold of the catastrophic "future" over up and thereby open up the space for something New "to come.")

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Apropos Frank Ruda's text, with which I am in deep agreement, I would like to focus on the topic with which he concludes: Badiou's three modes of

negation with regard to how they relate to Aristotle's two laws: the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of the excluded middle.[15] Of the four logical possibilities, Badiou begins with dismissing the last one (negation which obeys neither the excluded middle nor the non-contradiction) as "inconsistent," equivalent to complete dissolution of all potency of negativity), so that three consistent forms remain, each of them fitting a certain logical framework: 1. Negation obeys the two principles — the classical logic (Aristotle). 2. Negation obeys the principle of contradiction, but not the excluded middle — intuitionistic logic (Brouwer, Heyting). 3. Negation obeys the excluded middle, but not the principle of contradiction — paraconsistent logic (the Brazilian school, da Costa). In classical logic, the negation of P excludes not only P itself, but any other possibility concerning the contents of the proposition P. In intuitionistic logic, the negation of P excludes P itself, but not some other possibilities which are somewhere between P and non-P. In paraconsistent logic, the negation of P excludes that sort of space between P and non-P, but not P itself — P is not really suppressed by its negation (no wonder Badiou links this negation in which "P lies inside the negation of P" to Hegel's dialectics). For example, in the classical ethico-legal domain, someone is guilty or innocent, no space in between; in the intuitionist space, we always have intermediate values, like "guilty with attenuating circumstances," "innocent because certainly guilty, but with insufficient proof," etc. In the paraconsistent space (not foreign to certain theologies), one can be both at the same time, although there is no third option: my deep awareness of guilt is the only proof I can have of my innocence, etc.

As expected, Badiou's royal example is that of revolution. The Communist revolution is classical, a radical controntation with no third option, either us or them: the poor worker who before the revolution appears as nothing in the political field, becomes the new hero of this field. In the intuitionist space of social-democratic reformism, the poor worker appears in the political field, but it is not at all a new hero of the field: the idea is to bring about a compromise, to find a third way, maintain capitalism, but with more social responsibility, etc. In the third case of paraconsistent space, we get a sort of indecidability between event and non-event: something happens, but, from the point of view of the world, everything is identical, so we have event and non-event simultaneously — a false event, a simulacrum, as in the Fascist "revolution" which denounces "plutocratic exploitation" and keeps capitalism. As Badiou concludes: "The lesson is that, when the world is intuitionistic, a true change must be classical, and a false change paraconsistent."

But what if today's late-capitalist world is no longer intutionistic? Is the "post-modern" capitalism not more and more a paraconsistent system in which, in a variety of modes, P is non-P: the order is its own transgression, capitalism can thrive under Communist rule, etc. Here, classic change no longer works, because negation gets caught in the game, so the only way to beat it is the fourth option (dismissed by Badiou, but which should be given a different reading). The first thing to remember is the radical assymetry of the class struggle: the aim of the proletariat is not simply to negate (in whatever way) its enemy, the capitalists, but to negate (abolish) itself as a class. This is why we are dealing here with a "third way" (neither proletarian nor capitalist) which is not excluded, but also with the suspension of the principle of contradiction (it is the proletariat itself which strives to abolish itself, its condition).

What does this mean in the terms of libidinal economy? In a letter to Einstein as well as in his *New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, Freud proposes as a utopian solution for the deadlocks of humanity "dictatorship of reason": men should unite themselves and together subordinate and master their irrational unconscious forces. The problem here is, of course, the very distinction between reason and the unconscious: on the one hand, the Freudian Unconscious is "rational," discursive, it has nothing to do with a reservoir of dark primitive instincts; on the other hand, reason is for Freud always close to "rationalization," to finding (false) reasons for a cause whose true ground is disavowed. The intersection between reason and drive is best signaled by the fact that Freud uses the same formulation for both of them: the voice of reason/drive is often silent, slow, but it persists forever. This intersection is our only hope.