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A Subject that Matters: Žižek's Ideology Critique Today

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In this article we explore Žižek's understanding of subjectivity in relation to the process of subjectivation that binds us to the other's desire (Lacan's "big Other"). We first outline the impact that Žižek's two main sources, Hegel and Lacan, have on his formulation of the subject. We then move on to consider the political strategies that might emerge from Žižek's conceptualisation of subjectivity, looking at how his recent take on subtraction ("Bartleby politics") activates the transformative capacity of the subject, while in turn intersecting with the transformative potential of the social. Finally, we propose a reading of the current economic crisis through the category of subtraction that demonstrates the political relevance and topicality of Žižek's approach. The aim of the article is to begin to outline the contours of a Žižekian field of critical enquiry where Žižek's own propositions are taken seriously by drawing out what is "in Žižek more than Žižek himself".¹

Based on the psychoanalytic axiom of the split subject at the mercy of unconscious knowledge, Slavoj Žižek's lesson could be seen as a sobering one: since our desires are never our own but always the other's in as much as they are articulated by the big Other in advance,² how can we think freedom and agency? If even our innermost fantasies are not truly ours, how are we supposed to assert a position of autonomy with regard to the choices we make? Are we not condemned to a ghostly perambulation in a deterministic universe, forever prevented from understanding the basic reasons behind our actions? Žižek insists

that we are *always* duped, especially when we believe we are not, since we can never subjectivise the unconscious content that binds us to a given symbolic order of meaning. His succinct definition of the ruse of ideology is in this sense exemplary: '*the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*' (Žižek 1994: 6). Our options would then seem to be melancholically reduced to either accepting being constitutively duped, or being duped twice through an illusory endorsement of individual autonomy. This, however, is not the whole story.

Dialectics of the subject

As is well known, Žižek's notion of the subject is not only influenced by Lacan, but also by an original reading of Hegel. Rejecting the Kantian transcendental subject, Žižek draws on Hegel's Absolute Subject, intending it however not as the "Being of Beings", the triumphant, pan-logicist culmination of modern metaphysics whose dialectical movement sublates every otherness into its own ideal moment. Rather, for him the Hegelian subject is constitutively marked by negativity, that is to say by a traumatic antagonism that cannot be resolved. If, as Hegel famously put it in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, truth should be grasped 'not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*' - i.e. not only as "reality" but also as "consciousness" - this means that 'Substance is, as Subject, pure, *simple negativity*' (Hegel 1977: 10).

Žižek argues that the self must embrace its own absolute otherness (negativity) to become subject, thus endorsing Hegel's view that 'tarrying with the negative' is 'the magical power' through which the subject comes into being (Hegel 1977: 19). The Hegelian equation between Substance and Subject on the basis of their common ground in negativity is crucial to grasp Žižek's view of our immersion in the socio-symbolic arena. In Hegel, the axis Substance-Subject is predicated upon a 'disparity between the "I" and its object', which should be intended reflexively as 'the *defect* of both [...] or that which moves them' (Hegel 1977: 21). This captures in a nutshell the passage from Kant to Hegel appropriated by Žižek: 'the fissure between us (the subject) and the Absolute, is the very way the Absolute is already with us' (Žižek 2008a: 91). In other words, what brings Substance to coincide with Subject is the very splitting that prevents each of the two notions from fully coinciding with themselves: 'the Hegelian "subject" is ultimately nothing but a name for the externality of the Substance to itself, for the "crack" by way of which the Substance becomes "alien" to itself' (Žižek 1993: 30).

This reading of Hegel belies the cliché that individuals and society are organic wholes forever prevented from truly connecting. Quite on the contrary, Žižek tells us, we are always connected with the social precisely because we are split, i.e. because we are never really

connected with ourselves. Ultimately, there is no difference between my self-alienation (the fact that my unconscious prevents me from accessing the truth about myself) and my alienation in society, and the point is that *precisely this shared impasse allows me to communicate* (though, of course, communication never fully succeeds). Social and cultural exchanges are correlative to our attempts to deal with the impossibility of true communication, which is why the fundamental limit of the human condition is also its condition of possibility.

These considerations are at the heart of Žižek's damning analysis of postmodern subjectivity. Increasingly at the mercy of capitalist ideology, the postmodern individual is fundamentally solipsistic and narcissistic, perceiving himself as detached from the socio-symbolic field. In today's dominant form of subjectivity, existential self-fragmentation is conducive to aggressive individualism, which obfuscates the transformative potential of the subject. While the other is increasingly branded as a potential encroachment upon our fragile narcissistic balance (the other as "smoker", "stalker", "voyeur", etc.), we tend to withdraw more and more into proto-psychotic solipsism.

The problem is, evidently, a political one, since breaking down the solipsistic wall of postmodern subjectivity should be seen as the first step towards the re-configuration of a collective political subject. Such a collective subject beyond fragile individualistic apathy, of course, would not be uncomplicatedly self-transparent. Instead, it would be deeply informed by its self-alienation, Žižek's wager being that only the endorsement of our "lack to ourselves", our radical finitude, can lead us not merely to make authentic contact with others, but also, more crucially, to imagine a true political intervention. Žižek's "subject" thus re-appropriates the utopian urge inherent in what Lacan called 'subjective destitution' (see Lacan 1995: 8): the traumatic "fall of knowledge", the assumption of the non-existence of the big Other and consequent evacuation of all subjective ideals and points of identification.³

In political terms, then, self-alienation is not a problem but the key to the solution. When Žižek claims that '[t]he leftover which resists "subjectivation" embodies the impossibility which "is" the subject: in other words, the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive condition' (Žižek 1989: 209), he means not only that our being split is what guarantees our identity through its (the split's) disavowal, but also that this explosive antagonism is simultaneously what makes us subjects. If the first step is the acknowledgement of the internal antagonism that divides us, the next one is its full assumption. As we shall explore below, this is decisive to map out Žižek's attempt to politicise *subjectivity* as opposed to *subjectivation*, which is its necessary obverse, signalling our successful entrance in the socio-symbolic network through the swipe of (symbolic) castration.

This brings us back to the importance of psychoanalysis. With the way Žižek reads Lacan, it is not enough to claim that the subject is split, dispersed, unable to find itself due to its division. This is perhaps satisfactory for the relativistic ontology of deconstruction and postmodern thought in general. The key point about the Lacanian subject, however, is that it stages the same type of dialectical reflexivity staged by the Hegelian subject, for it can be defined as the place where the otherness that prevents us from achieving full identity coincides with the very inconsistency/non-existence of the big Other. Ultimately the Lacanian subject is strictly correlative to the inconsistency of the big Other,⁴ which is of course embodied by that special object named *objet a*. This is why, for example, in scopical (visual) desire the Lacanian subject finds itself in the traumatic encounter with the impossible gaze, i.e. in the stain, the constitutive distortion, that simultaneously characterises external reality. Such a view calls for the awareness that ‘I myself am included in the picture constituted by me’ in the form of a blind spot; my material existence, that is, derives from my being both outside and inside the reality I behold: ‘Materialism means that the reality I see is never “whole” – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it’ (Žižek 2006: 17).

The challenge that psychoanalysis poses to philosophy can be summarised in this seemingly paradoxical view of the subject as a decentred object. More to the point, what is externalised and out of reach for Lacan is self-consciousness itself. It is not simply that I can never be fully self-conscious because of the presence in me of an objectal leftover that I cannot subjectivise. Much more radically, this decentred kernel of otherness embodies my self-consciousness, the only place where I have a chance to locate the truth about myself. As far as my existential options are concerned, this reasoning points to two mutually exclusive outcomes: I either accept my alienation – the fact that I am the product of the swipe of castration, that my identity is fully mediated by the Other – or, exercising the only true freedom I have, I stretch towards the other in me (the objectal surplus that I am unable to subjectivise) in an effort to become subject. For Lacan, as well as for Žižek, it is only the second option that should be regarded as ethical, for in it I do not compromise my desire – instead, I turn it into drive.

Negativity and its forms of appearance

It is worth underlining that Žižek does not hypostatise negativity. His conception of the subject does not lead to a morbid fascination with void, death or destruction, as many of his critics have suggested. Rather, he accomplishes the Hegelian step from negativity as such to the “reflective determination” of negativity, whereby a given identity emerges as ‘an inverted presentation of its opposite’ (Žižek 2008a: 87), i.e. the *form of appearance* of the negative

determination that subtends it. Let us take the previous point that our identity is never self-transparent, “identical with itself”. Žižek’s reading of Hegel allows us to grasp that this impossibility does not merely relate to the fact that identity is bewitched by the power of the negative. What needs to be added is that this subtending negativity itself is mediated into a form of appearance whose inert, non-symbolic presence sustains identity *qua* field of meaning. The classic Hegelian example here would be the State as the symbolic field par excellence whose actual consistency, however, is sustained by the “supernumerary”, excessive, ultimately irrational character of the monarch intended precisely as the form of appearance of its opposite (i.e. an appearance of fullness embodying negativity). In Lacanian terms, this logic can be appreciated through the opposition Symbolic/Real mediated by *objet a*, since *objet a* is the fascinating “thing”, the paradoxical enmeshment of appearance and void, which confers consistency upon our field of meaning precisely by being in excess of it, irreducible to symbolisation.

We should therefore be careful to avoid the misrepresentation of the Žižekian subject as merely a void that potentially explodes all forms of subjectivity. Although the subject is, ultimately, abstract negativity – the very gap that corresponds to the gap in the other – Žižek’s point is that the subject *qua* abstract negativity can only apprehend itself through an “objective correlative” of such negativity – the very “stuff” of which Lacan’s *objet a* is made. The subject thus encounters itself in an excessive materialisation of otherness which, although substantial, no mirror would ever be able to reflect. Another way of putting this is by saying that an individual is paradoxically more present *as subject* in the traces he leaves about himself than in his full presence, ‘as in the well-known experience after somebody’s death when it is by going over his remaining everyday personal objects – his writing-table, little objects in his bedroom – that we become aware of who the deceased really was’ (Žižek 2008a: 134).

The implications of this view are fairly obvious: we are neither in the presence of the self-transparent Cartesian *cogito* nor at the mercy of deflagrating negativity; what is at issue, rather, is the prospect of conceiving subjectivity in relation to the *failure* of subjectivity itself. Žižek’s wager is that the affirmation of the *cogito*, of the Lacanian subject of enunciation (subjectivity mediated by the big Other), hinges on a mechanism of exclusion or disavowal (symbolic castration) which is at the same time the condition of its potential failure. The originality and unique political appeal of this view lies, it would seem, in two interconnected features. Firstly, we need to stress the inseparability of subject and substance (Hegel), or the simultaneous emergence of subjectivity and symbolic order (Lacan).⁵ Secondly, and as a direct consequence of the first point, Žižek’s politics hinges on the potential failure of the totalising gesture of disavowal which produces subjectivation and simultaneously the order of meaning. From Žižek’s Marxist perspective, the key manifestation of the Real upon whose

disavowal society is erected is, of course, class struggle. Although its disavowal makes social coexistence possible, it simultaneously disturbs it by perpetually haunting our symbolic space, reminding us of its inconsistency and demanding ever-new symbolisations.

Here the previously introduced Hegelian concept of “reflective determination” can be put to good use, for the sheer negative magnitude of class struggle, an antagonism which cannot be symbolised, is absorbed and partially gentrified in forms of appearance of its opposite, i.e. objective concretions of its excessive character (from political leaders to commodities). The point being that entire socio-symbolic contexts are “sutured” and kept together, in an illusion of consistency, by a series of elusive and fascinating objects whose basic role is homologous to that of the monarch in Hegel’s theorisation of the State. In brief, for Žižek class struggle is the Real that organises the Symbolic not so much through its absence/non-existence, but through the transformation of its negative magnitude into forms of appearance of fullness, which in Lacan go under the name of Master-Signifiers. What does a master-signifier do? It quilts all the floating elements of the signifying chain, retroactively creating the necessary illusion that they were always linked in some kind of meaningful and consistent linearity. Thus, meaning always emerges *ex post facto*, that is to say, after the intervention of a master-signifier that sutures the openness of the symbolic order.

Ultimately, Žižek maintains that all social formations are answers to the same formal deadlock or impossibility, which however manifests itself through different contents, thus requiring different tactical interventions. If every society is sustained by a secret reference to the a-historical kernel called class struggle, this kernel is historically determined and mobilises radically heteronomous logics.

On freedom and liberation

At this stage we need to confront the Žižekian claim concerning the coincidence of radical agency (the act) and freedom. We had started by considering how the conscious activity of individuals is not free but instead determined by the symbolic network through which they come into being. However, having shown how we are in excess of ourselves, it follows that the only free act we are given to accomplish is guaranteed by our over-identification with what is “in us more than ourselves”, that very subject which at the same time embodies the destabilising excess that (su)stains the symbolic structure. It is this excess that justifies Žižek’s recurrent use of such terms as “inhuman” and “monstrous”, through which he intends to oppose the biopolitical reduction of man to a “mere life” to be administered, exploited, or used as a springboard for potential emancipation.⁶ Making the most of both the psychoanalytic tradition he follows and Hegelian dialectics, Žižek aims to dehumanise the subject, reclaiming a role for the meaningless truth that inhabits us, so that an opening can

be envisioned in today's depoliticised universe. It is vital to clarify that inhuman does not mean external to humanity, but 'marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as "humanity", is inherent to being-human' (Žižek 2006: 22). Thus Žižek's writing fully embraces 'the paradox that every normative definition of the "human" is possible only against an impenetrable ground of "inhuman", of something which remains opaque and resists inclusion in any narrative reconstitution of what counts as "human"' (Žižek 2006: 111).

An act, in this context, is itself always "monstrous", for it involves 'a momentary "suspension of the big Other", of the socio-symbolic network that guarantees the subject's identity' (Žižek 2000a: 263-4). Put differently, the dimension of the act is governed by the death-drive, whose intervention signifies the necessity for the agent to experience the symbolic breakdown of its own subjective economy in so far as it is mediated by the big Other. Žižek's "act" draws equally on Hegel and Lacan:

What is therefore crucial for Hegel's notion of the *act* is that an act always, by definition, involves a moment of externalization, self-objectivization, of the jump into the unknown. To "pass to the act" means to assume the risk that what I am about to do will be inscribed into a framework whose contours elude my grasp, that it may set in motion an unforeseeable train of events, that it will acquire a meaning different from or even totally opposed to what I intended to accomplish – in short, it means to assume one's role in the game of the "cunning of reason". (And what is at stake in *la passe*, the concluding moment of the psychoanalytical process, is precisely the analysand's readiness to fully assume this radical self-externalization, i.e., "subjective destitution": I am only what I am for the others, which is why I have to renounce the fantasy-support of my being, my clinging to "my own private Idaho", to some hidden treasure in me, inaccessible to others) (Žižek 1993: 31).

Radical agency is therefore decidedly on the side of the Lacanian Real. However, we should not forget that the Real is itself qualified by its uncanny ambiguity at the level of symbolic meaning. Although it is radically other and therefore traumatic, it emerges from and is glued to symbolisation, i.e. thought. It is the measure of our failure to fully symbolise the world. One implication here is the Žižekian thesis according to which the act of freedom against a repressive ideological predicament does not comport the shunning of ideology but rather full identification with the core of ideology itself. To redress a common misreading of Žižek, then, it should be noted that the act does not affirm the irrationalist 'mysticism of a sublime Subject', nor 'a Lacanian existential heroism' (Resch 2001: 6 and 18). Instead, it is aimed at re-inscribing a politically viable understanding of antagonism within today's increasingly saturated and impenetrable ideological constellation.

Let us recall that the process of subjectivation is our answer to the uncanny otherness we experience in external reality. Our identities are constituted through the circulation of desire accompanied by its inseparable correlative, fantasy. How exactly? As anticipated, what sets

our desire in motion, allowing us to construct those historically-specific fantasies that help us to constitute what we perceive as our unique identity, is always our indecision vis-à-vis the other's desire. In other words, we form our selves against the background of a troublesome question that threatens to undermine our relationship with external reality, inclusive of all its "others". This question is Lacan's famous *Che vuoi?* ("what do you want?"), which tells us that what is at stake in desire is not our fantasy ("what do I want?"), but the other's fantasy ("what does he/she want from me?"). As in the case of Freud's little daughter Anna's dreaming about strawberries,⁷ our desires are effectively an answer to the bothering gaze of the other, a gaze invested by *jouissance*. In Žižek's interpretation of Freud's daughter's dream, 'the crucial feature is that while she was voraciously eating a strawberry cake, the little girl noticed how her parents were deeply satisfied by this spectacle, by seeing her fully enjoying it' (Žižek 1997: 9). Despite Žižek's somewhat inventive reading of Freud's text (the strawberries become a strawberry *cake* – which might work as a Freudian slip in its own right – and the whole added part on Anna's parents looking at her while she was eating) his Lacanian point about the reflexivity of desires remains instructive. If, then, our identity emerges as an intrinsically desperate strategy to answer the other's desire, this means that by stripping our desire of its protective function we get precisely what we seek to avoid: the radical inconsistency that marks the status of subjectivity proper. That is to say: if the process of subjectivation designates the space where we recognize ourselves through the other, the subject proper is the non-symbolisable fracture/excess that compels us to construct our identity via the socio-symbolic network. It is at once the driving force and the limit of all forms of subjectivation, and thus correlative to the Real.

Here we should go back to the crucial question of free will, which Žižek understands in connection with the German idealist account of the term, arguing that the idea of subjectivity there proposed *does* endorse access to freedom of will – provided, however, that we conceive of this freedom as a destabilising encounter with contingency. Žižek's point is that free will hinges on the paradox of the frightful disconnection from causality brought about by drive,⁸ i.e. an encounter with our radical finitude, which ultimately coincides with the radical contingency of reality itself. In short, necessity covers both the actual causal link (the inevitability of what happens to us) *and* its virtual background of multiple un-actualised possibilities and directions. And freedom is consubstantial with necessity in so far as it sabotages causality *by endorsing it fully* – inclusive, that is, of its un-actualised background. By so doing, freedom triggers the retroactive choice of a different causal link, i.e. 'it changes the future by changing the past' (Žižek 2006: 203).

Thus conceived, subjective freedom implies a form of self-determination which begins with the thwarting intervention of drive followed by the redefinition of my causality: it corresponds to 'my ability to choose/determine which causes will determine me. "Ethics", at its most

elementary, stands for the courage to accept this responsibility' (Žižek 2006: 203). This "positing the presuppositions" (Hegel) is the minimal but crucial power of the subject, through which we can retroactively assume a new causal link. Put differently, the causal link in which we are embedded creates an effect it cannot contain, an effect which threatens to *subvert the cause itself*. This is why freedom, for Žižek, has the form of a loop: we have a chance to disconnect and opt for a different cause, i.e. choose a process of subjectivation with a different content. The whole point is that while I cannot choose *directly* what I will be in the future (as that would entail bypassing the process of subjectivation), I can nevertheless embrace change *by transforming my past*, identifying with one of my past history's un-actualised causal chains. The key move towards liberation thus hinges on my perceiving my cause as virtual. From a political angle, the Žižekian "defence of a lost cause" (such as Communism) is precisely the attempt to actualise an opportunity that was missed at a given point in the past – and that, if actualised, could change the future.⁹ This is why Žižek endorses Hegel's claim that infinity is not to be conceived as endless expansion but 'active self-limitation (self-determination)' (Žižek 2006: 205). Why? Once again, because nothing escapes necessity, inclusive of its own excess:

The question of freedom is, at its most radical, the question of how this closed circle of fate can be broken. The answer, of course, is that it can be broken not because 'it is not truly closed', because there are cracks in the texture, but, on the contrary, because it is overclosed, that is, because the subject's very endeavor to break out of it is included in advance. That is to say: since our attempts to assert our freedom and escape fate are themselves instruments of fate, the only real way to escape fate is to *renounce* these attempts, to accept fate as inexorable. [...] accept fate as inevitable, and you will break its grasp on you (Žižek 2006: 207)

If we agree with this understanding of freedom as over-identification with the causal chain, inclusive of its un-actualised causes, then the key political questions, simple as they may sound, can be put along these lines: what is it that brings about the dimension of drive? How can drive be connected to a specific political project that actualises our lost causes?

Theory and the act

For Žižek, every political decision is marked by its abyssal trans-strategic value, which not only guarantees that we are acting freely, but also makes it impossible for us to establish a priori what will happen after the act. However, we could still legitimately argue that a politics of the Real needs to find ways of strategically conceiving a given project as "driven" rather than activate itself after the act. More precisely, could we not argue that drive itself, the intrusion of traumatic negativity that opens up the potential for change, can take place as the

(unexpected, excessive, pervasively unconscious) result of our concrete political engagement with a lost cause, no matter how such engagement is pre-empted by its ideological context? What if the problem that lies ahead concerns the necessity to become aware of how the gap between our inevitably limited strategy towards change and change itself is already immanent to our strategy? The wager here is that the conscious definition of a subversive political strategy already *necessarily* includes drive and the dimension of the act, for although the act brought about by drive is by definition incommensurable, it can be conceived as synchronous with the attempt to disturb the core of the hegemonic ideological constellation – which means that the real question has to do with the strategic definition of the feasibility of an intervention that successfully politicises class struggle.

Evidence for the synchronicity of a strategy based on class struggle and drive is provided by the very definition of subjectivity given by Žižek. The paradox of subjectivity, as we have seen, is that it does not coincide with consciousness, for the simple reason that consciousness does not coincide with itself. The entire edifice of Žižek's politics hinges on the definition of consciousness as traversed, distorted, disfigured by its own self-generated excess, which is precisely the locus of the subject (*self-consciousness*). The moment we speak of/through consciousness, the latter has already been divided and deformed by the "other speech" of the unconscious. Because of its connatural abnormality, every political decision, as well as every communicative act, cannot be fully contained in a rational context. By the same token, because ideology is incapable of fully controlling itself, it fails to fully control what falls in its way.

As anticipated, this position should not be read as a glorification of irrationalism, or an attempt at creating a transcendental teleology centred on an elusive "outside". The point, rather, is to draw politics to confront the evidence that the outside/otherness mobilised by the act is always-already "included out", and that precisely by occupying an uncharted location *in thought*, it drives us. Since radical dislocation is constitutive of subjectivity, and thus of thought and knowledge, every authentic political intervention needs to elaborate a theoretical procedure that accounts for and intervenes in this dislocation, in the awareness that every such intervention is simultaneously aimed at changing the symbolic configuration of our social experience. Ultimately, the strategic, conscious moment of the struggle for hegemony, in so far as it constitutes itself as a form of class struggle, is by definition an attempt to disturb the "unknown knowledge" ensconced in the unconscious. What should not be neglected, therefore, is the attempt to theorise a strategic intervention in our social constellation that lives up to the sublimity of the act. Although the former will always be hampered and pre-empted by its original debt to the dominant ideological order, by which it is necessarily mediated,¹⁰ it will also inherit from that order its very excess, or inconsistency, which it needs to put to good use.

If there is a limit to Žižek's theorisation of subjectivity in its relation to politics it is that it stops all too readily at the assertion of the necessity of drive, often neglecting drive's consubstantial strategic moment. Though Žižek knows all too well that the revolutionary act, inclusive of its violent dimension, cannot succeed without a rational evaluation of the context and a theory that prepares its "groundless ground", his politics runs the risk of privileging an abstract Real at the expenses of the Symbolic from which the Real emerges. Let us take the following emblematic quotation:

The point is not simply that, once we are thoroughly engaged in a political project, we are ready to put everything at stake for it, including our lives; but, more precisely, that *only such an "impossible" gesture of pure expenditure can change the very coordinates of what is strategically possible within a historical constellation*. This is the key point: an act is neither a strategic intervention *in* the existing order, nor its "crazy" destructive negation; an act is an "excessive", trans-strategic intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing order (Žižek 2004: 81).

This passage captures both the strength and the weakness of Žižek's politics. While we should wholeheartedly retain the vital emphasis on the necessity of a gesture that can only appear as "impossible" from within the coordinates in which it is conceived, on the other hand we would reformulate the second part of the quotation, stressing that "an act is *both* a strategic intervention in the existing order *and* the excessive intervention that redefines the rules of the game". The key point, however, is that this gesture should be applied to theory itself. The emphasis should be placed on the consubstantiality of the symbolic intervention aimed at a specific political agenda (defined by the awareness of class struggle) and the Real of an act incorporated in that specific theoretical intervention.

In connection with his notion of the subject, there would seem to be two specific positions to Žižek's politics. Although both are centred on the key moment of the potential over-identification with the Real, they seem to be based on different strategies. They endorse either an explosive act of purification, whereby the Real of *jouissance* is fully assumed, or an act of subtraction, whereby the Real is reached via the opposite movement of self-contraction, i.e. as a way to evoke *jouis-sans* (lack of enjoyment). As an example of a political analysis that may open the way for an act within thought, in the final section of our article we offer a Žižekian application of Bartleby's famous "I would prefer not to" with a view to determine what a politics of subtraction means vis-à-vis the current economic crisis.

Bartleby with Marx

Whatever might be criticised about Foucault's analytics of power, he was right to emphasise that power and resistance were caught in a deadly mutual embrace. The crucial point, however, is whether they are simply and entirely caught in a deadly mutual embrace. As Žižek points out, what the Foucauldian gaze overlooks is the possibility that power technologies themselves might give birth to a force whose excess they are not able to control. While it remains important to stress that resistances to power are generated and branded by the very matrix they seem to oppose, what needs to be factored into this equation is the dialectical reversal in the relationship between power and resistance, i.e. that the mechanics of power itself becomes affected by what it endeavours to control (Žižek 1999: 251-257). What our trained judgement tends to overlook is that regimes of power rely on an obscene supplement to sustain their own operation, a surplus of illicit *jouissance* which escapes their control and could function as a vehicle for change. The whole point of Žižek's work is to figure out how we could make use of this inconsistency (i.e. the fact that power is split, antagonised by its own excess) and conceive of an intervention which breaks free from the vicious circle whereby regimes of power reproduce themselves by continuously creating and obliterating their own excess.¹¹

If Žižek's philosophical battle-cry is "Discourse analysts of all countries get Real!", his political motto is "Identify with the excess – don't be hysterical – *enjoy* your symptom!". His notion of the act implies precisely that, namely that subjects assume as their own the inconsistency of the symbolic order and identify with the abyss of negativity that the order has to conceal if it is to attain symbolic efficiency. Žižek's preferred way of getting at this is Bartleby politics: "Subtract yourself – be impossible – demand what is realistic!". Žižek's notion of subtraction, or 'Bartleby politics', is modeled on Hermann Melville's character *Bartleby the Scrivener* who answers every request with an enigmatic 'I'd prefer not to'. As a strategic withdrawal, Bartleby politics is meant to exert pressure on the points of suture in order to undermine the libidinal economy of the very system from which it withdraws. Whatever its limitations, Bartleby politics forces us to confront the devices through which we distance ourselves from the "system" in order to convince ourselves that we are not part of the problem.¹²

However, while Žižek's Bartleby politics of subtraction might be good in theory, how instructive can it be for us in practice? Let us take a look at the most acutely felt problem today, i.e. the current economic crisis. How should we react to the challenges it poses? Up to now – it is January 2009 – the spectrum of responses to the bailout packages around the world has ranged from outright rejection ('road to socialism') to cynicism ('the worse the

better') and unconditional embrace ('state intervention at all cost'). Two interrelated responses are particularly striking.

Representative of the first one is Naomi Klein's rejection of the initial bailout plan of the Bush administration last autumn. Klein insisted that '[r]eal change depends on stopping the bailout profiteers' now. To underline the significance of this momentous choice, she placed it in the context of the recent US elections and the desire for change expressed thereby:

The first order of business [...] must be halting the robbery-in-progress known as the "economic bailout" [for it] should be regarded as the Bush Administration's final heist. Not only does it transfer billions of dollars of public wealth into the hands of politically connected corporations [...], but it passes on such an enormous debt burden to the next administration that it will make real investments in green infrastructure and universal health care close to impossible. If this final looting is not stopped [...], we can forget about Obama making good on the more progressive aspects of his campaign platform, let alone the hope that he will offer the country some kind of grand Green New Deal (Klein 2008a).¹³

Indeed, throughout the 20th century financial crises have often preceded the predatory raiding of whole state economies, as Klein (2007) has shown. Historical crisis indicators included 'soaring and uncontrollable internal budgetary deficits, a balance of payments crisis, rapid currency depreciation, unstable valuations of internal assets [...], rising inflation [and] unemployment, falling wages, and capital flight' (Harvey 2005: 189). If this list is anything to go by, then in our assessment of the current crisis, Klein and others clearly have a point.

And yet, what eludes her critique is the crucial fact that the blackmail imposed on us by the "rescue packages" is real and effective, as Žižek (2008c) observes. While it would be desirable to spend these gargantuan sums on health, education and run-away climate change (how inconceivable it seemed some months ago that such sums could be made available at all for a concerted political effort!) rather than recapitalising banks, throwing billions at the Moloch of the City, it would not address the problem. What we would save on bailout expenditures would be more than lost in a deeper recession. After all, one of the key ingredients of the Great Depression was the collapse of thousands of banks during the years between 1929 and 1932. The social and economic destruction of a rerun of this in the globalised world of today would be immeasurable. So, rather than venting our hysterical spleen on the bailouts (the economic efficacy of which we have no way of assessing) and their fraudulent initiators (did not the current British prime minister proclaim the end of boom and bust?), we ought to pause for a moment and direct our attention at the social system that makes it possible for such blackmail to work. As Žižek puts it:

The great Immanuel Kant's response to the conservative motto "Don't reason, Obey!" was by no means "Don't obey, Reason!" but rather "Obey, but Reason nonetheless!" If

we feel blackmailed by the bailout plans to save the banks, we should stop for a moment to recognise that this blackmail is downright successful. Thus, we should not succumb to the popular temptation and let our anger run wild. Instead, we should turn our wrath into cold resolve and ask what kind of society we live in where such blackmail is possible (Žižek 2008c: 64).

In other words, so long as we are 'stuck with capitalism' it is hypocritical to simply dismiss the trickle-down argument (that prosperity will spread to the poor as the rich get richer) as a disingenuous defence of the wealthy. It contains a grain of truth: 'the collapse of Wall Street really will hit ordinary workers' (Žižek 2008d). Which leads us to the second response.

The most popular reaction to the current crisis is to blame it on the greed of the bankers and financial speculators ('looting stars'), and to call for a more moral form of capitalism that puts an end to 'casino banking [...] murdering honest-to-God commercial banking' and ensures 'that capitalism will be arranged more fairly in future'.¹⁴ Business analyst William Keegan expresses the spirit of the imagined new era of honesty and responsibility when he concludes that '[t]he fact of the matter is that a capitalist economy runs on debt; it is just that banks and consumers need to regain a sense of proportion' (Keegan 2009). Understandable as it is, to blame rapacious CEOs as the central causal agent of the current dilemma is politically misleading and factually wrong.

A brief look at *Capital* is instructive in this context. Right at the beginning, in the preface to volume one, Marx felt obliged to 'prevent possible misunderstandings' of his critique by pointing out that, even though he did not 'depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours', his standpoint 'can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them' (Marx 1976: 92). Indeed, the vast majority of "greedy" managers have acted in conformity with the imperatives of the capitalist system, insofar as their primary responsibility within this system is neither to serve their customers, nor to look after the common good, but to make profit (and enough of it to stay afloat and keep their shareholders happy). Far from being a pathological preference of the individual entrepreneur, '[t]he production of surplus-value, or the making of profits, is the absolute law of this mode of production' (ibid: 645). That the bankers dealt with "toxic" (rather than "honest-to-God") products did not matter so long as the going was good. On the contrary, their financial wizardry triggered waves of rapture while the social standing of hedge-fund managers reached staggering heights. Now that things have turned sour, we ought to abstain from the ubiquitous lament over the usual suspects – greedy bankers, incompetent government, the idle rich – and turn to the elementary question of why the banks were able to act so "irresponsibly" in the first place, knowingly dealing with "toxic assets" from subprime

mortgages and collateralised debt obligations to credit default swaps and other “derivatives”. In fact, why they *had to* act like this.

Bartleby politics means in this context that we resist facile calls for a “return of the state”, “nationalisation” and “regulation”. The problem we are faced with here, politically as well as psychologically, is the extent to which the neoliberal mythology of the free market has become ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs’ (Treanor 2008). The degree to which it penetrates every nook and cranny of contemporary life is paralleled and underpinned by the fetishistic disavowal of the devilish enjoyment we feel towards it. Our deep libidinal attachment to and investment in the forms of exploitation and domination that have made us who we are is part and parcel of the current crisis. They cloud our imagination and lead us to wrong alternatives.

To start with, the “state” has never been on leave (nor did “free and open markets” ever exist) and the past three decades of neoliberal hegemony were no exception. Let us recall the monetary policies of the Federal Reserve under Paul Volcker (raising the interest rates towards 20% which created a fierce recession that scared labour into submission and drove the world’s debtor countries into the arms of the IMF) or the very deregulation policies initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and continued by their successors. It was the capitalist state that rolled out neo-conservative policies throughout large parts of the world. More state please? The state is not some kind of guardian angel but an aspect of the circuit of capital, its main functions being to maintain the circuit and to remove the blockages to accumulation. In its current shape it is part and parcel of the neoliberal setting. It is no coincidence that the current British government, while assuming ownership of the largest bank in the country, recoils from exercising control.

As for the calls for “nationalisation” (the takeover of the banking system by the state), in its current form it means to nationalise the crisis of deficit-driven growth (“financialisation”), which comes at a hefty price. Robert Peston (2008) estimates that the support provided by taxpayers around the world equals now £9,000bn, the equivalent of more than 25% of the global GDP, a figure which excludes the recent bailouts from January 2009. Yet it is not only belligerent and costly. The statist solution is also hopelessly anachronistic to the extent that it takes refuge in an earlier version of the capitalist matrix whose growth-generating potential had exhausted itself in the 1970s. The neoliberal model of financialisation was, however, not simply a mistake. While aggravating the deep structural crisis of capital on a global scale, the semblance of growth it provided gave the capitalist matrix a new lease on life, if only temporarily.

As for the call for “regulation”, far from reining in the financial industry and its culture, neo-Keynesian regulation will leave intact the capacity as well as the incentives for future “deregulation”, as the historical fate of the *New Deal* goes to show. After all, Keynesianism

has never been anything else but the doctor at the sickbed of capitalism. What is more, the call for re-regulation overlooks the fact that the decline of symbolic efficiency (traditional authority) characteristic of neoliberal regimes has produced a barrage of regulations and surveillance measures in its wake which police large sectors of everyday life along corporate lines. The political key to understanding the neo-statist turn in the face of economic disaster is the need to discipline and pacify the disgruntled masses through a mix of paternalistic and authoritarian means. What the hypocritical and self-righteous rants against finance or “casino” capitalism have in store for us is *neoliberal Keynesianism*, a set of economic policies designed to provide leviathanian solutions to the crisis of capitalism reminiscent of the medicine administered against the “crisis of classical modernity” during the inter-war period of the last century.

Bartleby politics of subtraction, however, does not mean to abstain from direct engagement in the system but *to resist the urge to merely resist* (performing a blocking action). It means to refrain from forms of participation in the hegemonic practices and rituals that function as their inherent supplement and are expected of leftist resistance (see Žižek 2008b: 412). To give an example, there is no point in getting exercised about the fact that the politics attached to the governments’ financial bailouts is a contradiction in terms in that it requires the individual banks to act against their own interests. While right now it is in their interest to shrink (to contract the volume of credit they provide), what governments demand of them is to be “socially responsible” and expand again (i.e. to return to “risky” lending). This debate is part of the game. The banks are not able to lend in the required rate as long as the prices of property, shares and other assets continue to fall, no matter what noise politicians will make. By the same token, there is no point in fuelling the purely academic debate as to whether the rescue packages (including the latest one of the British government announced on January 19, 2009) prompt the banks to lend again, rather than simply improving the banks’ liquidity and balance sheets. The bailout and stimulus schemes are already unrealistic, at once too small and too costly, requiring taxes to be lowered and raised at the same time.

Economic crises are endemic to the capitalist mode of production. The history of capitalism is littered with crises and globalisation (rationalisation investment) has further increased this tendency. Their systemic role is to resolve the gridlock to capital accumulation at the expense of weaker capitals and labour. Rather than pathologise the current economic crisis, naturalise the system that gave rise to it and join the paranoiac search for scapegoats that flows from this, Bartleby politics confronts the capitalist form of social reproduction with its symptomatic truths. It redefines the coordinates of the debate by centring on the systemic points of suture. What liberal ideology in all its variants “sutures” is first and foremost the

historical fact that capitalism is a system of social reproduction that weaves three implacable and destructive conflicts into the social fabric.

1. It subordinates the production of use value (goods and services) to the production of surplus-value (profits). In doing so, it renders the right to exist precarious for anyone and anything unable to be employed or utilised on profitable terms. This is the single most important impediment to tackling climate change today and also the root cause of the current economic crisis.
2. The capitalist mode of social reproduction sets in motion a class conflict over the performance and appropriation of surplus labour. The conflict originates in the dual nature of wage labour as both source of profit and cost factor. It not only constrains purchase power in an economic system that thrives on mass consumption, leading periodically to the eruption of crises. It also undermines the historical capacity of capital to generate exchange-value (the specifically capitalist form of wealth) and surplus-value (the very purpose and driving force of the capitalist mode of production). What we experience today is not primarily the result of a “credit crunch” but a momentous profit crunch.
3. The capitalist mode of production locks our social and economic development in a universal race for surplus-value and abstract growth in the face of relatively decreasing profit margins (global market competition). Its blind dynamics not only accelerates what it wishes to combat (the relative fall in the rate of profit), it produces “finance bubbles”, social devastation and military conflict in its wake.

Woven into the social fabric like Ariadne threads, the three interrelated conflicts lead us to the heart of today’s economic meltdown. They also hold the key to our battle with climate change. Just as it is not enough anymore to call for a return of the state and Keynesian regulations to tackle the current recession, so it is insufficient to throw money at a Green New Deal while the systemic gap between work to be had and work to be done is historically widening before our eyes. Realistic, sustainable and desirable solutions must take into account the deep systemic roots of the unfolding ecological catastrophe, which are rather concealed than revealed by the much debated cyclical aspects of the rampant economic crisis. As a strategic attitude, a politics of subtraction has an important part to play in this. Yet it can only help to prepare the ground for change. This brings us back to the core of our argument.

Žižek’s brand of ideology critique confronts the symptomatic points of the socio-symbolic order with an intellectual energy that remains second to none in the history of critical thought. By politicising subtraction it reveals potentialities that lie dormant or repressed. What is needed now within the Žižekian field is the conceptualisation of subtraction as inseparably linked to the notion of a different social order. If not complemented by a political vision, the

“politics of subtraction” will be turning into yet another case of “subtraction from politics”.
History has returned with a vengeance and it is time we take care of it.

Notes

- ¹ An extended version of our argument appears in *Subjectivity*, 3 (2010), no. 1. We would like to thank the editors of the journal for their generosity.
- ² The big Other is defined by Lacan as ‘the locus in which everything that can be articulated on the basis of the signifier comes to be inscribed’ (Lacan 1998: 81), or, more succinctly, as ‘the locus in which speech is constituted’ (Lacan 2000: 274). In other words, the big Other is the invisible symbolic framework that needs to be presupposed if the subject is to engage in any communicative activity or social exchange.
- ³ Apropos Lacan’s notion of subjective destitution, Žižek claims that ‘at the end of the psychoanalytic cure, the analysand has to suspend the urge to symbolize/internalize, to interpret, to search for a “deeper meaning”; he has to accept that the traumatic encounters which traced out the itinerary of his life were utterly contingent and indifferent, that they bear no “deeper message”’ (Žižek 2007: 94).
- ⁴ Which also means that through the process of subjectivation we set up the symbolic order, i.e. the self is what “plugs the hole” in the big Other.
- ⁵ This also means that the field of meaning exists only in so far as we submit ourselves to the process of subjectivation. In other words, it becomes actual for us only if we assume it, as exemplified by Kafka’s famous parable of the ‘Door of the Law’ in *The Trial*. Here, a man from the country seeks to enter the law through a doorway guarded by a gatekeeper who makes him wait for years. Eventually, the gatekeeper shouts in the ear of the dying man from the country that the door was there only for him. What the man from the country had failed to account for through his fascinated reverence to the law, which prevented him from daring to enter it, was precisely that his very being was always-already included in the law *qua* symbolic order.
- ⁶ In contemporary philosophy, Giorgio Agamben can be seen as the main champion of negative biopolitics, while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri find in it a positive potential. We shall explore the connection between psychoanalysis and biopolitics in our next article.
- ⁷ In his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud tells about his nineteen months old daughter talking in her sleep about strawberries (as well as other types of food). Since she had been kept without food all day as a consequence of feeling sick, Freud argues that her dream expressed a clear case of wish-fulfilment. More precisely, Anna was taking revenge on the nurse who had sentenced that her sickness was due to her gorging on strawberries (Freud 1997: 41).
- ⁸ We should remember here that the real libidinal aim of the drive as conceived by Lacan is to *miss* the imaginary object of desire. More precisely, while in desire we become aware that the object, in so far as it enjoys, is out of reach, in drive we realise that we are the locus of an excessive, unshakeable, and unbearable *jouissance* which derails the ordinary run of things.
- ⁹ Žižek’s main inspiration here is clearly Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and the notion of historical materialism there articulated, especially in relation to Benjamin’s well-known approach to a given historical subject as ‘a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’ (Benjamin 1986: 263).

- ¹⁰ This is also the meaning of Žižek's claim that 'those who think ontologically have to err ontically' (Žižek 2008b: 98): the unsurmountable gap between theory and practice is also the gap between symbolic planning and the Real actualisation of the plan. This gap, he argues, can be defined with the word "trauma": 'a traumatic encounter entails a "loss of reality" which has to be understood in the strong philosophical sense of the loss of ontological horizon – in trauma, we are momentarily exposed to the "raw" ontic thing not yet covered/screened by the ontological horizon' (Žižek 2008b: 146).
- ¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Žižek and Foucault, see Vighi and Feldner (2007).
- ¹² We draw here on Daly (2007) and Kotsko (2008: 124). On the origins and theoretical implications of Bartleby politics, Žižek version of Badiou's politics of subtraction, see Žižek (2006: 381-185), (2008b: 404-412), and (2008a lxxii-lxxxi).
- ¹³ See also Klein (2008b) and (2008c) where she reinforces her argument, claiming that '[t]he Wall Street bailout looks a lot like Iraq — a "free-fraud zone" where private contractors cash in on the mess they helped create'. Klein's veto was echoed in various quarters, if for different reasons, making for strange bedfellows as the initial reactions by several Democrats in the US Congress, the German government and the French President demonstrate.
- ¹⁴ 'Looting stars' (2009), Hutton (2008) and (2009). See in this context also Obama (2009) and Skidelsky (2009) who recommends that 'we must find ways to rub the rough edges off globalisation'.

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