

The Magician of Ljubljana

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Intellectuals possess a special kind of power. Unlike politicians, generals, or corporate bosses, they lack both the authority and the ability to impose their will directly on others. They must therefore rely on “symbolic capital,” a term the historian Shlomo Zand of Tel Aviv University explains this way:

The power of their presence in the consciousness of their colleagues, or in wider public circles, is what establishes their status. As an offshoot, their power source is predominantly the symbolic prestige capital they accumulate. This capital, in many ways similar to financial capital, is obviously not a “thing,” but an attitude. To a certain extent it may be said that the thought patterns of consumers of intellectual output are the banks in which this precious capital is accumulated. This symbolic power can be measured in academic degrees, in prizes, in the extent of mentions and attributions, in the number of publications, and in many other practices routinely employed in the stock exchange of respect and acclamation.¹

By these standards, it is safe to say that a sizable quantity of “symbolic capital” is today concentrated in the hands of Slavoj Žižek, philosopher, cultural commentator, and abounding wordsmith. Since the 1989

publication of his first book in English, Žižek, a senior researcher in the faculty of social sciences at Ljubljana University, has become the hot name of the Western intellectual scene. His books, translated into dozens of languages, have earned near-unanimous acclaim: *The New Yorker* crowned him an “international star” and credited him with putting his mother country, Slovenia, on the world map of ideas.² Sarah Kay, professor of French literature at the University of Cambridge and author of a critical introduction to Žižek’s work, maintains that his enormous influence on the humanities and social sciences is reminiscent of the profound impression made by French thinker Michel Foucault on these academic disciplines during the seventies and eighties.³ And Glyn Daly, a senior lecturer in politics at University College, Northampton, who published a book of conversations with Žižek, describes him as “the philosophical equivalent of a virulent plague.”⁴ For its part, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* employed a slightly less ominous metaphor to describe the unique status of the Slovenian theoretician: “Žižek,” it writes, “is the Elvis of cultural theory.”⁵

What is the secret of Žižek’s magic? It is not, as we might expect, his theoretical innovations—he himself, after all, shrinks from claims of originality. Rather, it must be traced to his unique, highly idiosyncratic style. Unlike philosophers and academics who are only too happy to ensconce themselves in an ivory tower, Žižek is a master at bridging the gap between sophisticated theoretical ideas and popular, “low” culture. Thus, one finds in his writings a psychoanalytical analysis of scenes from Hitchcock films or an erudite discussion of the philosophical significance behind the surprise in Kinder chocolate eggs. His stockpile of associations is both wide-ranging and inexhaustible; no cultural phenomenon, however vulgar or banal, escapes his theoretical scalpel. His essays are also awash in humor and irony—both of which he often directs against himself—and although it is often difficult to follow the convoluted course of his arguments, his books always make for rollicking good reads.

But Žižek’s cultural criticism is not merely an intellectual diversion. Rather, his thinking aims to make a political statement of practical

significance. Žižek disdains intellectuals who renounce the ambition to alter reality; instead, he wholeheartedly adopts the old Marxist adage according to which it is not enough to interpret the world—one must also set it right.

In light of this pretension, and of Žižek's celebrated status in intellectual discourse, some attempt should be made to clarify the political vision that guides him, and to determine how precisely he believes the world should be "set right." The answer may be hard to swallow: Žižek is perhaps the most extreme and outspoken of those intellectuals who align themselves with what goes by the name of "radical" politics. He routinely defends repressive, totalitarian regimes, openly supports political terror tactics, and advocates the violent dismantlement of the existing order.

We should not make the mistake of dismissing these opinions as the inane provocations of an eccentric personality. After all, they are firmly rooted in Žižek's theoretical beliefs, and derive from his interpretation of central concepts in philosophy and psychoanalysis. True, it is no simple matter to pin down Žižek's political convictions, owing to his fondness for rhetorical pyrotechnics and intentional self-contradictions. Yet anyone who is held sway by the explosive power of ideas cannot ignore the arguments of the magician of Ljubljana, or remain indifferent in the face of the abyss to which he would lead us.

II

The sources of Žižek's inspiration are many and varied. In particular, he is influenced by the idealistic philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel and F.W.J. von Schelling, by the writings of Marx and Lenin (to which he has returned more and more frequently in recent years), and by the radical philosophy of neo- and post-Marxist intellectuals such as Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau, and Alain Badiou. If Žižek can be said to have a true spiritual and

intellectual mentor, however, it is undoubtedly the controversial French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Indeed, in many ways, Žižek's writings are a sophisticated elaboration of Lacanian concepts. It might be helpful, then, to offer here a brief—if somewhat crude—clarification of these concepts.

It should be noted that Lacan himself never laid claim to an original theory, preferring instead to describe his work as a “return to Freud.” He insisted that Freud's innovations had not been accurately understood by his disciples (especially those in the English-speaking world). In particular, they missed the truly subversive aspect of his investigations into the nature of sexuality and unconscious desire. Lacan was determined to correct this misconception, and to re-expose the radical potential of the Viennese genius' insights.⁶ Yet Lacan could never be accused of blinkered loyalty to the source: On the contrary, he greatly extended the mantle of psychoanalytical discourse, bringing to it ideas and terms borrowed from the structuralist school of thought in linguistics and anthropology, European philosophy, and the Parisian avant-garde. Some consider Lacan's ambitious synthesis a monumental intellectual accomplishment; others see in it an unmitigated presumptiveness that collapses under its own theoretical weight. Either way, no one can deny its prodigious effect, or its vast cultural importance.

At the core of Lacanian theory is the distinction between three different orders, or “registers,” that affect mental processes: The “imaginary,” the “symbolic,” and the “real.” Over the years, as Lacan's thought evolved, the precise meaning these terms held for him changed, as well. For the purpose of our discussion, however, it is worth identifying their basic characteristics.⁷

The imaginary register began to engage Lacan's attention early in his career, when he presented his research on the “mirror stage” at the fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress in 1936.⁸ The mirror stage denotes a specific period in an infant's development (between the ages of six to eighteen months) during which he begins to identify his reflection in a mirror. Lacan asserts that this recognition provides the infant with something he has not previously experienced: A sense of selfhood and wholeness. Since

the infant still lacks full control over his motor activities, Lacan explained, and since he continues to be dependent on others, his reflection in the mirror is essential to his conception of himself as a complete and coherent “I”—in other words, an ego.

The ego that evolves during the mirror stage is nonetheless based on distortion, or self-alienation. That is to say, the infant identifies with his reflection—something outside himself—to evade the internal fragmentation that characterizes his mental experience. This narcissistic process grants the infant an imaginary sense of control and autonomy, but it also requires that he attune himself to an external field of perception. This attunement continues to characterize the mature ego, as well: The imaginary register, created at the infantile development stage, becomes an inseparable part of our mental makeup, and impels us to seek recognition outside ourselves in order to bolster our desired self-image.⁹

Self-alienation also accompanies the child’s initiation into the symbolic register—the order of language, logic, and law. In Lacan’s view, this register is personified in the character of the father, who breaks the child’s imaginary unity with its mother—the first object of its love—and introduces him to a world of rules, prohibitions, and differentiations of culture.¹⁰ The entry into the symbolic register thus undermines the ego’s illusory sense of autonomy, since it subordinates man to social codes originating someplace outside himself. Lacan calls this external source “the big Other”¹¹ in order to emphasize its radical alterity—that is, the impossibility of assimilating it into oneself through imagined identification—and its crucial importance to our constitution as thinking, speaking creatures in communication with our surroundings.

The bedrock of the symbolic order is the system of language signs into which we are born and from which we cannot extricate ourselves.¹² Lacan’s view of language is strongly influenced by the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralist linguistics. De Saussure held that language is made up of signs, and signs of two parts—the signifier, a mental picture created by a sound (such as a word), and the signified, which is not to be

confused with the object itself, but is rather its psychological concept, or “idea.” The connection between these two components is arbitrary, the product of nothing more than social convention; nonetheless, de Saussure believed that the sign locks them together in a stable and permanent manner, like two sides of the same coin.¹³ Lacan contested this claim, however, insisting that the meaning of the signifier is not chained to the signified, but is rather derived from its *relation* to other signifiers. Thus, for example, the dictionary definition of a particular word uses other words in order to clarify its meaning.¹⁴ As a result, the search for the meaning of a particular sign inevitably leads us along a complex and dynamic chain of signifiers that is reminiscent, in Lacan’s words, of “rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings,”¹⁵ without our ever leaving the realm of the symbolic order.¹⁶

Furthermore, since there is an unbridgeable gap between the signifier and the signified, and since language does not fully and completely manifest what lies outside itself, gaps are created in the symbolic order. This phenomenon induces the dynamic of “desire,” a word central to the Lacanian theory of the human psyche. Desire, as opposed to mere “need,” means the yearning for “something else” that will always be beyond our reach.¹⁷ The original object of our desire, usually associated with the mother, is lost to us. Left behind is a void that in time is filled with substitutes, or different signifiers, from which we derive only temporary gratification. The only way to come to terms with our desire is to decipher the way it is encoded in our unconscious, itself structured like a language and located in the symbolic order.¹⁸ This, in a nutshell, is the principal goal of psychoanalytical treatment.

The symbolic register is present in all areas of our lives, but it is neither total nor all-encompassing. Outside and underneath it lies the “Real,” which cannot be represented or signed. The register of the Real is identical not with reality, but instead with all that resists symbolization. It is the crude, threatening, and repellent aspect of our existence with which we must contend, like something “glued to the heel” of our shoes.¹⁹ Our encounter with the

Real arouses fear and leaves traumas in its wake; it causes nightmares and delusions, and occasionally even leads to psychotic breakdowns. In Lacan's words, it confronts us with the "impossible."²⁰

Lacanian psychoanalysis delineates an astonishingly intricate system of links between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. These concepts serve as the foundation for a vast theoretical construct, embellished not only with a string of arcane terms, but also with algebraic symbols, equations, diagrams, and arguments couched in enigmatic and impenetrable language. Indeed, Lacan did not make it easy for his audience to comprehend his theories—nor, for that matter, did he particularly aspire to being understood. Just the opposite, in fact: His esoteric style enhanced the intellectual aura associated with his writing. For his part, Lacan reveled in his own obscurantism, as illustrated in a remark he once made to his students: "The less you understand, the better you listen."²¹

In this way Lacan became a kind of guru, the charismatic leader of a sect of acolytes, his theories accepted, according to one scholar, as "the official philosophy of France" in the 1960s and 1970s.²² The acclaim he received from his coterie of admirers was equaled only by the indignation of fellow psychoanalysts, who considered him a charlatan, and a dangerous one, at that. The methods of treatment he introduced were indeed controversial: Unlike other practitioners, who believed that effective mental therapy should repair the patient's damaged ego and make it whole, Lacan believed that the analyst had to steer precisely the opposite course—to jolt the patient and "liquidate" his illusionary ego so that he might confront his shattered self. To do so, Lacan would abruptly fall silent during sessions with his patients, sometimes even discontinuing them after only a few minutes.²³ Obviously, such methods threatened to tip people already in a perilous state of mind over the edge of sanity.

Although the personality cult surrounding Lacan abated somewhat after his death in 1981, his allure has not entirely faded. His ideas have been eagerly taken up by academic disciplines such as literary studies, film studies, and gender theory,²⁴ and his theoretical influence has extended

beyond France to other European countries, the United States, and South America. In Slovenia, for instance, a flourishing Lacanian school formed around “The Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis” founded in Ljubljana during the seventies. Among the society’s eminent members were philosophers and theorists such as Miran Božovič, Mladen Dolar, Renata Salecl, Alena Zupančič, and, of course, Slavoj Žižek himself, who was introduced to Lacanian teachings by the master’s son-in-law and heir, the philosopher Jacques-Alain Miller.²⁵

Over the last ten years, Žižek has consolidated his status as the outstanding—and certainly the most prolific—interpreter of Lacan. In twenty-seven books and countless articles, he has analyzed a broad spectrum of cultural phenomena through the lens of French psychoanalysis, in so doing restoring something of the intellectual attraction it held in its heyday. The most significant aspect of Žižek’s work, however, has been his attempt to formulate a political agenda with a Lacanian orientation,²⁶ an enterprise with far-reaching repercussions: The “subversive” message of psychoanalysis prized by Lacan became, in Žižek’s hands, something far more ominous, whose implications extend far beyond the psychiatric clinic and the lecture halls of academia.

III

Žižek’s political philosophy is marked by a close identification with the humanist tradition of modernism and its aim of releasing humankind from the yoke of oppression and prejudice. This may at first seem surprising, given that Lacan is generally considered a post-modern thinker whose doctrine is far removed from the universal project of the Enlightenment. Žižek attempts to correct this allegedly erroneous impression through a sophisticated synthesis of Lacan’s ideas and German idealism, a cornerstone

of the philosophy of modernity.²⁷ Not surprisingly, this theoretical synthesis produces a captivating, if extremely problematic, view of the essence of man and his relationship to reality.

To understand just how bold Žižek's assertions on this point are, it is worth recalling the intellectual legacy with which he has to contend. The Enlightenment, from Descartes on, pinned its hopes on the existence of a universal human *cogito* ("I think"), or, in other words, on the belief that in each and every one of us there exists a subject with self-awareness, the power to think rationally, and the potential for moral autonomy. Traditionally, the discovery and cultivation of this broad common ground was supposed to provide humanity with a way to overcome its internal divisions and establish a more enlightened and rational society. But Lacan paints a rather different picture: He insists that the human subject is a fractured and dependent being, ruled by the "big Other" of language and law. Unlike the ego, which belongs to the imaginary register, the subject exists only in the symbolic order; its existence and desires are the products of language, and it is in turn bound by language's dictates. Since, according to Lacan, the subject is a "speaking being," modulated by external codes and contact with its environment, it cannot possibly be perceived as an autonomous entity capable of free and independent action, as Enlightenment philosophers believed. It is clear, then, why this perception of the human subject earned Lacan honorary membership in the post-structuralist pantheon, along with the likes of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, each of whom sought to invalidate the humanist notion of the subject as a universal "essence" and represent it instead as a derivative of cultural, social, and political structures.²⁸

Žižek disputes this widely held perception of Lacan, however, viewing both himself and his mentor as the *legitimate* offspring of the Enlightenment, or at least of its philosophical mainstream. Indeed, he identifies striking points of similarity between Lacanian theory and certain ideas expounded by Kant, Schelling, and Hegel. Each of these philosophers, says Žižek, observed that human subjectivity has an aspect of emptiness, or lack. Kant, for example,

saw the pure “I” exerting its powers of perception on reality as “an empty form of thought.” Its existence is a logical imperative, he conceded, but it cannot be sensed through inner experience or intuition. Kant therefore split the subject into the empirical, tangible “I” that we are able to comprehend, and the transcendental (i.e., prior to any experience) “I,” which is the precondition for the very *possibility* of this comprehension, yet lies, of necessity, beyond its reach.²⁹ Žižek attaches great importance to this division. In his opinion, one of the main consequences of the Kantian revolution in philosophy was the loss of the illusion of the subject’s stability and its representation instead as a “void” or “vortex” moving under its own power.³⁰

Žižek finds a more radical development of this notion in the philosophy of Schelling, in particular in the second draft of his essay *The Ages of the World*. In this ambitious work, Schelling describes the divine being before creation as a “chaotic-psychotic universe of blind drives”; in other words, utter chaos.³¹ But even the primordial chaos is not the real beginning, he says, for it was preceded by the “abyss” of the absolute Nothing, which is characterized by boundless freedom. This freedom is not the domain of any subject; rather, it expresses a pure, impersonal will that wants nothing. Under these conditions, the birth of the divine being as an actual persona is made possible only by a drastic self-contraction—an act of madness undertaken by a god who was, as Schelling put it, “out of his mind.”³² Žižek’s interest in all this is not religious, but psychological: He sees the process outlined by the German philosopher as an apt description of the emergence of subjectivity from a state of nothingness, or “pure negativity.”

In order to gain a more basic insight into the nature of this fundamental negativity, Žižek also draws on Hegelian philosophy, which attaches great importance to the concept of negation. He pays special attention to a section in an essay written by Hegel in 1805-1806, which sketches a graphic likeness of insanity:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations,

images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful.³³

Hegel regarded this madness of the “night of the world” as a morbid regression from reality to a lower, animalistic state. But Žižek considers it a necessary transitional state, one which enables the subject to emerge as a mediator between nature—identified with the Lacanian “Real”—and culture, which is embodied in the symbolic order. According to the theoretical model Žižek proposes, the subject originates in the traumatic detachment of human from nature, and in its “psychotic” withdrawal into itself. As a result of this rupture, man ceases to be an inseparable part of the material world and can no longer be considered a mere object, a thing without consciousness. From a psychological point of view, however, he still lacks a positive essence of his own. In the absence of a stable identity or defined attributes, he is a “pure negativity”: His consciousness is a gaping abyss, or, as Hegel puts it, an “empty nothing that contains everything in its simplicity.”

As long as the consciousness remains pure negativity, the mind is merely a jumble of blind instincts and random images without meaning or direction. It is rescued from madness only by virtue of the symbolic register, which provides it with stability. Through language, the fleeting glimpses of the “night of the world” become durable;³⁴ from the psychotic abyss is born a personality with defined characteristics. In this way, man goes through a process of “subjectivization” in which he gains an identity and occupies a specific position in the social order. Only thus, claims Žižek, the “chaos of the encounter of the real is transformed into a meaningful narrative.”³⁵

Yet, as Žižek emphasizes, even after we have been integrated into the symbolic register, a core of pure negativity remains hidden within us. Since it is impossible to represent this negativity, it must belong to the dimension

of the Real. Žižek describes the “inner kernel of the Real” as the zero point of human consciousness—on the one hand, the ground upon which mental development is possible, but on the other, a subversive power that threatens to disrupt our psyche, drawing it into madness. A distinction must therefore be made between the pure, “real” subject, which is essentially a void, and the symbolic subjectivization that fills it with different narratives of “content.” As Žižek says:

The crucial point is to conceive the relationship between subject and subjectivization as an *antagonistic* one. By means of “subjectivization,” the subject (presup)poses the existence of a symbolic network which enables him to experience the universe as a meaningful totality, as well as to locate his place in it, i.e., to identify himself with a place in the symbolic space... The counterpoint to this process of subjectivization, the encounter of the real in its senselessness, however, is not a “process without the subject,” but *the subject itself*: What the subjectivization renders invisible is... its void—subjectivization is a way to elude the void which “is” the subject, it is ultimately a defense mechanism against the subject.³⁶

This distinction is what allows Žižek to provide an ingenious riposte to the post-structuralist critics of the Enlightenment narrative: He agrees that man’s identity is normally shaped by the cultural order in which he lives, but at the same time believes that a certain universal and ahistorical subjectivity lurks behind that particular identity. This may well be a hollow universality, but it is precisely because of its vacant nature that a diversity of symbolic constructs is able to agglomerate and disintegrate within it according to historical circumstances. According to Žižek, the difference between the Lacanian position and the views held by post-structuralists derives exactly from this point:

In “post-structuralism,” the subject is usually reduced to so-called subjectivization... But with Lacan, we have quite another notion of the subject. To put it simply: If we make an abstraction, if we subtract all the richness of the different modes of subjectivization, all the fullness of experience

present in the way the individuals are “living” their subject-positions, what remains is an empty place which was filled out with this richness; this original void, this lack of symbolic structure, *is* the subject.³⁷

To demonstrate this idea, Žižek proposes a fascinating example from Hollywood. He points out the essential difference between the classic “film noir” genre of the forties and fifties and films like *Blade Runner* and *Angel Heart*, which belong to the wave of noir films made during the eighties. In the old Hollywood detective films, says Žižek, the hero would occasionally suffer from amnesia, which caused him temporarily to forget who he was or what he was doing. The problem was solved if and when he regained his memory with the aid of a psychological “exorcism,” and rediscovered his place in the symbolic order. In contrast, in the fictional universe of *Blade Runner* (at least in the director’s cut) or in the magical world of *Angel Heart*, the hero completely loses his identity and discovers, to his anguish, that he is living a lie with respect to who he is—that he is, in fact, someone or something completely different. In this respect, these films reflect the basic split between conscious personality, which is nothing more than a transient symbolic fiction, and its receptacle: The hidden, unconscious subjectivity.³⁸

In this way, Žižek wrests the Lacanian subject from the post-structuralist bear hug. But at what cost? As he himself notes, it is difficult to accommodate both the model that he outlines and the conventional view of the subject in modern humanist philosophy. The Cartesian *cogito* at the heart of this philosophical tradition is characterized by the ability to know and understand oneself, whereas Žižek describes an existence that is impenetrable, and cannot be completely represented or rationally interpreted. Žižek admits that he did not intend “to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated modern thought (the self-transparent thinking subject), but to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent Self.”³⁹ Yet we cannot but wonder if it is in any way appropriate for the subject as described to be called *cogito*, “I think,” considering that its

inclusion in the register of the Real demonstrates the very *limitations* of human thinking and its inability to recognize even those conditions that make it possible in the first place.⁴⁰

The main problem, however, stems from the vast difference between the subject as described by Žižek and the modern ideal of autonomous man, capable of altering reality through the power of his intelligence and his moral capabilities. This ideal rests on a belief in the beneficent potential of the human subject and in the confidence that he is, in fact, an entity capable of rational and responsible behavior. It was in this spirit that Kant defined the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” adding that “Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”⁴¹ But in Žižek’s opinion, the universal subject, which grounds all symbolic identity, is not the embodiment of intellect or maturity, but its very opposite: “The ‘night of the world,’ the point of utter madness.”⁴² And since “the pure ‘subject of the Enlightenment’ is a monster,”⁴³ any kind of autonomy is out of the question—not just because the subject is totally governed by the “big Other,” as Lacan maintained, but because, in Žižek’s understanding, it has no stable or enduring existence.

Thus, little of the idealist philosophers’ vision remains in Žižek’s interpretation. Kant, Hegel, and Schelling, each in his own way, believed that the human spirit was progressing towards a better future, one in which men would be able to rise above their differences and subdue their demons. Žižek, in contrast, is interested not in self-improvement, but in the fractiousness, terror, and madness that characterize the “authentic” state of the subject. Like Lacan, who exhorted his patients to confront their psychotic “inner kernel,” Žižek is convinced that the way to redemption is through hell. Basing the ambitious project of the Enlightenment on such a platform, however, is like building a castle on a fault line: A sure recipe for disaster.

IV

Whereas Žižek's concept of the subject aligns itself with German idealism, his social theory is strongly influenced by Marxism, a worldview traditionally located at the opposite pole. Accordingly, Žižek presents his work as a "critical" project that attempts to analyze and expose the sickness of the existing order. The main target of his criticism is global capitalism, which, after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, became (to Žižek, at least) an inexorable hegemony. Indeed, the proliferation of capitalism has, for many intellectuals, been a source of great distress these last hundred and fifty years: How can it be, they ask, that the masses permit the existence of such an oppressive system, and—even worse—seem perfectly happy to collaborate with it? Part of the answer, according to Marxists, lies in the ability of the ruling hegemony to make effective use of "ideology"—a word that, for them, paints a distorted picture of the world—to preserve the status quo.⁴⁴ Žižek adopts this argument in principle, and so is likely to be portrayed, mistakenly, as a full-fledged neo-Marxist. A careful reading of his works, however, shows that the ideological criticism he proposes actually *undermines* the very foundations of Marxist thinking, sweeping it, along with the other doctrines that come under its scrutiny, into a philosophical black hole.

Žižek is aware that by insisting on using the word "ideology" as a tool of critical analysis he may appear slightly anachronistic. After all, there are many who believe that the attraction of the great "isms" has diminished considerably. Žižek himself notes that post-modern capitalist society is marked by a cynical attitude towards institutions and ideas.⁴⁵ Yet, despite this outward show of cynicism, the overwhelming majority of people continue loyally to play their roles in the existing order; it does not occur to them to rebel against it. This conformity proves for Žižek that the classic

conception of ideology as a naïve consciousness is no longer commensurate with reality. Therefore, he proposes a different concept of ideology, more attuned to the present reality:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he nonetheless still insists upon the mask.... Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: One knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.⁴⁶

It follows, then, that the cynical attitude is not truly post-ideological. True, it arouses in us an illusion of sobriety, but it does very little to undermine our willingness to obey hegemonous mechanisms. “Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: Even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.”⁴⁷ We therefore need, Žižek claims, to reappraise the role of ideology in our time, and to expose the ingenious ways it makes us obedient—not through beliefs, as Marx believed, but by acts. On this point, Žižek adopts the conclusion of the neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, according to which “the ‘ideas’ of a human subject exist in his actions.”⁴⁸ Thus, it appears that the causal relationship between rituals and faith may be quite the opposite of what we initially thought: External actions performed out of a sense of formal obligation often generate “true” internal conviction only after the fact.⁴⁹

Society, Žižek concludes, is therefore governed by ideological apparatuses, even—and perhaps especially—when the prevailing mood of cynicism leads us to believe otherwise. But Žižek is not satisfied merely to lift the veil from the covert involvement of ideology in every aspect of our lives; he also seeks to explain how ideology has become so essential to the perpetuation of the social order, and why there appears to be no refuge from it. To this end, he enlists the help of Lacanian theory. This time, however, the object under analysis is not the subject himself, but society as a whole.

Žižek maintains that it is possible to identify clear similarities between the circumstances in which the social order is created and the development of the human child. In both cases the unconscious—individual or collective—conceals within it traces of a formative traumatic experience, an internal split that cannot be healed. In the case of society, this trauma is the bitter conflict or antagonism between certain groups—that is, the crisis out of which a community is born, and that in one form or another remains with it forever.⁵⁰ Since this trauma is so hard to bear, it is impossible to internalize or even acknowledge it consciously; thus, we choose to repress or deny it. In Lacanian terms, this trauma embodies the menacing presence of the Real in the social fabric.

Although this constitutive trauma does not lend itself to full representation, it is nevertheless possible to feel its side effects. For a “leftover” of the Real always remains to haunt the symbolic field, like some elusive, phantasmic apparition. According to Žižek, this surplus proves that our “reality,” created by the symbolic fiction, is never truly complete; rather, it contains an unprocessed aspect of which we cannot rid ourselves.⁵¹

The phantasmic remainder, then, embodies the failure of the symbolic order, and may well come to be regarded as a threat to it. But Žižek attributes to it quite a different function: Its spectral presence, which takes many forms, conceals the menacing abyss of the Real and so reinforces the illusion of permanence and coherence.⁵² Even though this “leftover” is not part of the symbolic order, it both completes it and facilitates its survival by acting as a buffer between order and the insufferable, traumatic “thing” itself.⁵³ According to Lacanian theory, this is precisely how the psychological mechanism of fantasy operates: As a screen that keeps loathsome reality out of sight.⁵⁴ Without the magic veil this vestige provides, sexual relations, for example, would be rendered impossible on account of the repulsive aspect of human physicality:

With so-called “real sex”: It also needs some phantasmic screen... any contact with a “real,” flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we

find in touching *another* human being, is not something evident but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only insofar as this other enters the subject's fantasy-frame. What happens, then, when this screen dissolves? The act turns into ugliness—even horror.⁵⁵

Ideology, says Žižek, operates in an identical fashion, acting in effect like a collective fantasy in the service of the hegemonic power. The picture it paints blurs the traumatic antagonism in the depths of the social order and, no less importantly, the fact that it is impossible to heal this internal split. To sustain the distorted image, ideology enlists the shadowy vestige of the Real, and offers it as the exception that proves the rule: “‘Fantasy’ designates an element which ‘sticks out,’ which cannot be integrated into the given symbolic structure, yet which, precisely as such, constitutes its identity.”⁵⁶ Nazi ideology, for example, conjured up the specter of the Jew in order to foster the illusion that only this vestige prevented the establishment of a harmonious society:

What appears as the hindrance to society's full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: By transposing onto the Jew the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society *qua* consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible.⁵⁷

Racism is not the only form of ideological distortion in modern society. Another, perhaps even more important example is the democratic system. Žižek condemns liberal democracy as a typical ideological distortion that serves the capitalist order with frightening efficiency: “Democracy is today's main political fetish, the disavowal of basic social antagonisms: In the electoral situation, the social hierarchy is momentarily suspended, the social body is reduced to a pure multitude which can be numbered, and here the antagonism is also suspended.”⁵⁸ The right to vote in elections, Žižek contends, lends the masses the illusion that they have a part to play in determining society's character, when in truth this character is governed wholly by apparatuses whose aim is the efficient management of the exploitative

capitalist economy. The democratic system does not and will not change this reality; it only perpetuates it. Žižek offers an amusing metaphor to illuminate his argument:

It is a well-known fact that the close-the-door button in most elevators is a totally dysfunctional placebo which is placed there just to give individuals the impression that they are somehow participating, contributing to the speed of the elevator journey. When we push this button the door closes in exactly the same time as when we just press the floor button without speeding up the process by pressing also the close-the-door button. This extreme and clear case of fake participation is, I claim, an appropriate metaphor [for] the participation of individuals in our post-modern political process.⁵⁹

In view of this, we should ask ourselves: If Žižek's analysis is accurate, and "objective" social reality is shaped in practically every respect by ideological apparatuses aimed at reinforcing a collective illusion, why do so many—including some of the most eminent intellectuals of the Left⁶⁰—believe that this criticism is no longer productive as a theoretical basis for political, social, and economic analysis? Žižek claims that the reason derives not from any dilution of ideology, but rather from the fact that it has become "too strong": The presence of Ideology in our lives is so dominant that it has reached a point at which it "begins to embrace everything, inclusive of the very neutral... supposed to provide the standard by means of which one can measure ideological distortion."⁶¹ There is no escaping this trap: "The stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it."⁶²

Yet if, as Žižek reminds us, it is impossible to identify any external vantage point free from the influence of Ideology, then there cannot be any objective position from which it is possible to critique the existing order. Nevertheless, Žižek insists on the need for this critique: "Although no clear line of demarcation separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as 'reality,' we must nonetheless

maintain the tension that keeps the *critique* of ideology alive.”⁶³ As a way out of this impasse, he proposes a somewhat enigmatic formula:

Ideology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, *but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality*—the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology.⁶⁴

“The empty place” to which ideology is denied access is that of the repressed traumatic Real. Since the symbolic reality can neither represent nor assimilate the Real, it is experienced as a void or lack. Žižek insists that it must remain so if we want to hold on to it as an Archimedean point of resistance to the distortion wrought by ideological apparatuses.

All this seems terribly theoretical and not very practical at all. But Žižek identifies at least one example of the kind of critique required: The old notion of the class struggle. In contrast to capitalism and nationalism, which foster a sham social harmony, the concept of the class struggle succeeds, for Žižek, in penetrating the mask and exposing the original antagonism that lies beneath the surface.⁶⁵ This is the reason we never really encounter this type of confrontation: Although the dynamic of the class struggle influences every aspect of life, since it contains the seed of society’s repressed trauma, it necessarily remains hidden. In simpler language, in the absence of the class struggle, the “objective social reality” is more or less required by the fact that it exists only in the pre-symbolic register of the Real.⁶⁶

The Slovenian philosopher’s legerdemain is at its best here, breathing as it does new life into an idea that appears to have fallen by the wayside. Yet it is premature to celebrate the renaissance of Marxism in Žižek’s philosophy. From an epistemological point of view, after all, Marxist philosophy trod—and generally continues to tread—the path of optimistic realism: It believes in the existence of an objective truth that is discoverable, comprehensible, and expressible; as a whole, it attributes to itself the status of a scientific theory. Žižek’s approach, in contrast, is far removed from this, something he wholeheartedly admits: If the symbolic social

structure is subject, as he describes it, to systematic ideological manipulations, and the kernel of the Real is, by its nature, beyond our conceptual grasp, then there is no prospect of acquiring positive and impartial knowledge about reality.⁶⁷ Even the class struggle, a concept that directly impinges on the repressed social trauma, can be comprehended only from a subjective or ideological angle: “Class struggle is... the unfathomable limit that cannot be objectivized, located within the social totality, since it is itself that limit which prevents us from conceiving society as a closed totality.”⁶⁸

Reading this description, we may rightfully wonder: Is Žižek, like everyone else, trapped in the net of ideology, or has he alone, inspired by a Lacanian revelation, been granted some insight into the nature of the unseen and evanescent “Real”? Žižek himself does not provide a satisfactory answer to this question. His critical theory is marked by displays of intellectual brilliance and the ability to describe and explain a wide variety of phenomena, but, like his concept of the subject, it is ultimately based on the “empty space.” We can only wonder how this negativism can possibly lead to positive political action, and how any actual deeds may be derived from it—that is, not just philosophical and psychoanalytical strokes of genius that catch our breath. Žižek is certainly aware of the problem, and tries to cope with it; but, as we will now see, the answer he proposes turns out to be more disturbing than the question itself.

V

From Žižek’s insistence on his commitment to the project of modernity (in both its idealistic and Marxist versions) and from his assertion that there is a real need for “global social transformation,”⁶⁹ we might conclude that like other progressive intellectuals, he seeks to free the human race from its chains, to smash oppressive regimes, and to build a freer world. Sadly,

this is far from the case. Žižek may well extol the ideal of freedom, but at the same time he insists that winning this supreme prize demands the establishment of a totalitarian despotism, which imposes on its citizens a reign of fear and a blind obedience to authority.

Capitalism, which Žižek critiques as the hegemonic order of our time, embodies the complete opposite. Interestingly, some of the arguments Žižek puts forward to discredit capitalism make him sound like an arch-conservative: He points to the demise of all the centers of authority we once obeyed, the ingrained traditions, the old and venerated institutions, the written and unwritten codes, the rules of good taste—all these, he laments, are fading and evaporating under the weight of global market pressures. Capitalism encourages unbridled permissiveness, exhorts us to pure hedonism, tempts us to give free rein to our passions; any missed opportunity leaves us with pangs of guilt.⁷⁰ The symbolic order, the “big Other” itself, threatens to disintegrate, leaving in its wake confusion, terror, and helplessness.⁷¹

To deal with this crisis, post-modern subjects adopt different and often outlandish strategies that reflect the pathology of the times. To compensate for the erosion of “official” authority, for example, they explore relationships of power and domination in their private lives (hence the growing popularity of sado-masochistic practices);⁷² desperately seeking meaning and rules to live by, they turn to spiritual gurus and self-help books; they develop paranoid beliefs in the existence of the “Other of the Other,” omnipotent forces secretly pulling the strings behind the scenes;⁷³ and their passion for the Real itself is often expressed by indulgence in self-ruination and an appetite for destruction.⁷⁴ “The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century,” writes Žižek, “was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.”⁷⁵ Paradoxically, the yearning to penetrate the Real through the cobweb of mere semblances of reality culminates in an “effect” of impressive aesthetic vision. Žižek finds a hair-raising example of this kind of effect in the September 11 terror attacks:

And was not the attack on the World Trade Center with regard to Hollywood catastrophe movies like snuff pornography versus ordinary sado-masochistic porno movies? This is the element of truth in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art: We can perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art's "passion for the Real"—the "terrorists" themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*. When, days after September 11, 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the WTC towers... we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated *ad nauseam*, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was *jouissance* at its purest.⁷⁶

All these phenomena, Žižek claims, indicate the loss of "symbolic efficiency" in post-modern capitalist society, in which individuals suffer from narcissistic, hysterical, and paranoid syndromes, and are drawn towards the obscene underside of the Real. At the same time, however, thanks to the ingenious ideological apparatus of "cynical reason," they continue to conform to the capitalist order. Civilization is thus poised on the edge of the abyss. Indeed, Žižek does not balk at apocalyptic terminology: "In some sense, we can in fact argue that, today, we are approaching a kind of "end of time": The self-propelling explosive spiral of global capitalism does seem to point toward a moment of (social, ecological, even subjective) collapse, in which total dynamism, frantic activity, will coincide with a deeper immobility."⁷⁷

The fear of social, cultural, and moral collapse is common to elements on both the Left and the Right, but Žižek dismisses both sides' agendas as inadequate or fraudulent: Rightist nationalism, in his view, is not a genuine alternative to post-modern capitalism, but rather its rotten fruit;⁷⁸ liberals are cowards who collaborate with the status quo; and social democrats, cast in a similar mold, propose mere cosmetic changes to it.⁷⁹ Žižek also writes disparagingly of leftist circles engaged in the "politics of identity," multiculturalism, and "radical democracy," who ruffle feathers with their demands for minority rights, but ultimately make no real difference:

All the talk about new forms of politics bursting out all over, focused on particular issues (gay rights, ecology, ethnic minorities...), all this incessant activity of fluid, shifting identities, of building multiple *ad hoc* coalitions, and so on, has something inauthentic about it, and ultimately resembles the obsessional neurotic who talks all the time and is otherwise frantically active precisely in order to ensure that something—what *really matters*—will *not* be disturbed.⁸⁰

Žižek rejects all conventional political alternatives for their failure to provide genuine emancipation from the clutches of the dominant ideology. How, then, are we to change “what really matters”? According to Žižek, the answer lies in what he calls “the ethics of the Real.” These ethics—which may also be described as “radical politicization”—are bound up in the recognition that “the big Other” does not exist, and it is therefore pointless to look for it.⁸¹ In other words, instead of taking refuge in phony symbolic security, one must embrace the arbitrariness and instability of the Real, which is also the authentic state of the subject. The practical application of these ethics is the “act,” a concept central to Žižek’s doctrine and a key clause in his political manifesto. According to Žižek, the act is the ultimate challenge to the existing order: An extreme and shocking action, devoid of any tangible cause or identifiable rationale, involving the ruthless rejection of symbolic injunctions. It is a savage blow to all that is considered “proper” and “normal.” Žižek is quite explicit on this point:

Every act worthy of this name is “mad” in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: By means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a “crime,” a “transgression,” namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong. The act is defined by this irreducible *risk*: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always *negative*, i.e., an act of annihilation, of wiping out—we not only don’t know what will come out of, its final outcome is ultimately even insignificant, strictly secondary in relation to the NO! of the pure act.⁸²

The “annihilation” entailed in the act is also—and perhaps mainly—self-annihilation of the subject. For by this act, the perpetrator is fundamentally altered, undergoing an irreversible mental metamorphosis. “In it,” writes Žižek, “the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not).”⁸³ In other words, by his act, the subject detaches himself from his symbolic identity and returns to “the night of the world;” that is, he experiences himself anew as pure and primordial negativity. In Žižek’s view, this extreme detachment endows the act with universal meaning: It returns the subject to its basic position in the “empty place,” where it is not governed by the symbolic “big Other.”⁸⁴

Žižek cites several famous cases to demonstrate what he means when writing about the act. Some of his examples are discomfiting, to say the least: He recalls, for example, the scandal of the American teacher, Mary Kay Letourneau, who had an affair with a thirteen-year-old student, became pregnant by him, and was subsequently prosecuted and jailed. Žižek is fascinated by Letourneau’s willful devotion to her juvenile lover, a devotion that caused her to suspend those powers of rational judgment that enable us to distinguish between good and evil. “Is not such a suspension, however, one of the constituents of the notion of the authentic *act* of being truly in love?” he asks. “Crucial here was Mary Kay’s unconditional compulsion to accomplish something she knew very well was against her own Good: Her passion was simply too strong; she was fully aware that, beyond all social obligations, the very core of her being was at stake in it.”⁸⁵

Žižek takes a no less disturbing example from the film *The Usual Suspects*. In one of the thriller’s best-known scenes, the arch-criminal Keyser Soze returns home to find his wife and young children held hostage by a rival gang. His reaction defies all expectation: He shoots dead his own family. Then he turns to his enemies and announces that now, since they no longer have any hold over him, he is free to kill them and their families, as well. Soze’s willingness to take the lives of his loved ones so as to be “free” to exact bloody vengeance is presented by Žižek as a near-heroic act: “Something

like this is always at work in an authentic act,” he says. “You always have this dimension of sacrificing the most precious part of yourself.”⁸⁶

In both examples, the act is an extreme action undertaken by individuals willing to take a stand against the conventions of the society in which they live. Žižek stresses, however, that the act may also be a collective initiative, whose most obvious political form is revolution. He attacks idealists who are seduced into referring to revolution as an exalted notion, not to be translated into the language of reality lest it fail; so, too, does he mock those who eulogize the auspicious starts of the great revolutions in France and Russia, but lament their tragic descent into violence. Against all these temptations, he argues, “one should insist on the unconditional need to endorse the act fully in all its consequences,” because “the act always and by definition appears as a change ‘from Bad to Worse’ (the usual criticism of conservatives against revolutionaries: Yes, the situation is bad, but your solution is even worse...). The proper heroism of the act is fully to assume this worse.”⁸⁷ Accordingly, we should rid ourselves of the pragmatic wisdom typical of the liberal outlook, and dare to do what must be done: Overthrow today’s status quo through resolute action. He writes:

The democratic political order is of its very nature susceptible to corruption. The ultimate choice is: Do we accept and endorse this corruption in a spirit of realistic resigned wisdom, or can we summon up the courage to formulate a leftist alternative to democracy in order to break the vicious cycle of democratic corruption and the rightist campaigns to get rid of it?⁸⁸

One of the most conspicuous problems with this kind of revolution, however, is the stupidity of the masses that have been brainwashed by ideology. Therefore, Žižek insists, the revolution demands leaders who can correctly identify potential opportunities and perform the authentic political act, with all that it entails. And if we need an example of such a leader, Žižek has one for us: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, father of the Bolshevik revolution and institutor of Soviet despotism.

Žižek admires Lenin for understanding the true significance of the revolutionary act. This understanding, Žižek maintains, was the reason for his split with the Mensheviks on the eve of the October revolution: Lenin knew that there was no point in waiting until conditions were favorable. The act does not accommodate itself to circumstances; instead, it is directed at changing them. Moreover, Lenin provides the perfect proof that a revolutionary act is impossible without what Žižek terms “the terrorism that characterizes every authentic ethical stance.”⁸⁹

Žižek’s candid and ardent support for “revolutionary terror” of the Bolshevik or Jacobin kind proves that he is not a naïve idealist who categorically ignores bitter historical experience. On the contrary, he is quite familiar with the abuses of revolutionary tyrannies—he himself lived for some time under a communist regime, albeit a relatively moderate one—yet is nonetheless staunch in their defense. He is well aware that the regime he envisages depends on the violent suppression of resistance, but he has no intention of applying the brakes; if performing the revolutionary act means “the ruthless exercise of power,” and “if this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as *Linksfaschismus* [fascism of the Left]—so be it!”⁹⁰

Žižek does not appear particularly perturbed by the blind obedience revolutionary regimes demand from their subjects. In fact, he heartily endorses such demands. He cites approvingly the infamous Leninist distinction between “formal” freedom and “actual” freedom. He claims that citizens of democratic countries enjoy only the former: The dominant liberal ideology persuades them that they are free to choose according to their conscience and preferences, but in truth, theirs is a restricted choice, defined by a predetermined symbolic set of coordinates. Actual freedom, in contrast, is expressed in the radical act that alters the coordinates themselves—that is, in the act that *determines* the possibilities, rather than conforms to their framework.⁹¹ Since most people are incapable, Žižek believes, of taking this bold step on their own, they must be shown the way by leaders like Lenin, who can do it for them. In Žižek’s view, obedience to an authoritative leader

of this kind does not mean relinquishing freedom, but rather taking a necessary step towards its full realization:

Liberal democracy tends towards “rational” decisions within the limits of (what is perceived as) the possible; for more radical gestures, proto-“totalitarian” charismatic structures, with a plebiscitarian logic where one “freely chooses the imposed solution,” are more effective... often, one *does* need a Leader in order to be able to “do the impossible.” The authentic Leader is literally the One who enables me actually to *choose myself*—subordination to him is the highest act of freedom.⁹²

This is typical totalitarian sophistry: The argument that obedience to the leader is “the highest act of freedom” could well be straight out of George Orwell’s *1984*. Žižek even rejects the word “totalitarianism” as illegitimate, seeing it as a convenient pejorative with which to lump together and dismiss all the alternatives to liberal ideology.⁹³ He argues emphatically that there is a qualitative difference, for example, between communism, which, even in its Stalinist version, boasts a “liberatory potential,” and Nazism, which has no authentic “inner greatness.”⁹⁴ Either way, it is difficult to ignore the unmistakably despotic features of his political vision. “One should take the risk of radically questioning today’s predominant attitude of anti-authoritarian tolerance,” he declares, and in the same vein asserts that “the model of a free collective is not a group of libertines indulging their own pleasures, but an extremely disciplined revolutionary body.”⁹⁵ Similar formulae, used as the quasi-official platform of communist dictatorships, led to mass murder and the oppression of millions in countries like the USSR, China, Cambodia, and North Korea. Yet Žižek asks us to remain open-minded, and to adopt a comparative approach: “Since, today, capitalism defines and structures the *totality* of human civilization, every ‘Communist’ territory was and is—again, despite its horrors and failures—a kind of ‘liberated territory.’”⁹⁶

Žižek appears to believe that the war against the hegemony of global capitalism not only justifies, but also necessitates, taking horrific action. He thus grants an intellectual and moral seal of approval to every tyrant or terrorist who has acted under the banner of a war against “the enemy”—namely, America and all it stands for. This struggle brooks no compromise, and winning requires a kind of determination that Žižek defines by way of two anecdotes:

There is a will to accomplish the “leap of faith” and *step outside* the global circuit at work here, a will which was expressed in an extreme and terrifying manner in a well-known incident from the Vietnam War: After the U.S. Army occupied a local village, their doctors vaccinated the children on the left arm in order to demonstrate their humanitarian care; when, the day after, the village was retaken by the Vietcong, they cut off the left arms of all the vaccinated children.... Although it is difficult to sustain as a literal model to follow, this complete rejection of the enemy precisely in its caring “humanitarian” aspect, no matter what the cost, has to be endorsed in its basic intention. In a similar way, when Sendero Luminoso took over a village, they did not focus on killing the soldiers or policemen stationed there, but more on the UN or U.S. agricultural consultants or health workers trying to help the local peasants—after lecturing them for hours, and then forcing them to confess their complicity with imperialism publicly, they shot them. Brutal as this procedure was, it was rooted in an acute insight: They, not the police or the army, were the true danger, the enemy at its most perfidious, since they were “lying in the guise of truth”—the more they were “innocent” (they “really” tried to help the peasants), the more they served as a tool of the U.S.A. It is only such a blow against the enemy at his best, at the point where the enemy “indeed helps us,” that displays true revolutionary autonomy and “sovereignty.”⁹⁷

This, then, is the sum total of “the ethics of the Real”: The murder of innocent civilians by virtue of their association with “the enemy”; the persecution of the regime’s opponents who have dared to reject “the actual freedom”

its leader offers; and a willingness to sacrifice everything, even humanity itself, in the name of “the authentic act.”

It would certainly seem that Žižek is more concerned with destruction than with order. He is enamored of the *call* to revolution, but remains largely unconcerned with its long-term consequences. Indeed, Žižek appears uninterested in the possible outcome of breaking the rules, or in how the new reality, born from the ruins of the old hegemony, will look.⁹⁸ And so, if the means are indicative of the end, then Žižek’s vision will be, truly and simply, “the night of the world.”

VI

What are we to make of Žižek’s philosophy? We could view it as merely a thrilling intellectual challenge, and content ourselves with identifying those theoretical aspects that give rise to objectionable political views. We could also focus on Žižek’s demonstrable attraction to the dimension of the Real—his almost obsessive fascination with the obscene underbelly of human experience—and contrast it with his critical stance towards the symbolic order, and then point to the powerful nihilistic impulse that emanates from this approach. We could also give serious consideration to the implications of his notion of “empty universality,” showing that it places him squarely on the “dark side” of the Enlightenment project. Indeed, both common sense and historical precedent teach us that a desire for nothingness becomes a terrifying power when translated into political terms: Only tyrants and mass murderers thrive in a normative vacuum.

Obviously, Žižek is not the first intellectual to laud extreme, explosive, and unfettered political action. While it is true that he anchors his understanding of the “act” in Lacanian theory and in the ideas of the radical

French philosopher Alain Badiou,⁹⁹ his praise of determination, violence, and self-sacrifice may remind us of other notable European intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century who lent their unflinching support to the darkest regimes known to man. Žižek himself recalls the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who believed for some time that the authentic political expression of the German nation was embodied in the Fuehrer's vision.¹⁰⁰ It is also difficult not to sense an uncomfortable similarity of thought between Žižek and Carl Schmitt, the brilliant German thinker and "crown jurist" of the Third Reich, who extolled pure "decisionism," a doctrine that advocates a sovereign act of violence that is grounded only in itself, and seeks no external legitimization.¹⁰¹ Clearly, both Schmitt and Žižek nurture—one in the notion of the act, and the other in the idea of decisionism—a form of political romanticism that "presents the demand, so to speak, for the son to create the mother and to call the father into being out of nothing," as the theologian Paul Tillich remarked ironically.¹⁰²

Political romanticism is indeed a dangerous game. Of course, it holds considerable allure. It is immeasurably more fascinating than the tedious and banal philosophy of liberal democracy, which is based on compromise, pragmatic solutions, and interminable litigation. For this reason, perhaps, it is a constant source of attraction for intellectuals with a radical worldview. It would be a grievous error to underestimate their clout; as guides for younger generations of thinkers and citizens, their influence on the future face of society is considerable.

In view of all this, it is disturbing to discover that Žižek was once involved in actual political activity: At the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, members of the Slovenian Lacanian school were enlisted to help the Slovenian Liberal-Democrat Party. Although the party's moderate reformist platform did not jibe with the Lacanians' radical views, they nonetheless felt compelled to support it in order to block the rise of the nationalist Right. Žižek himself ran for a seat on the four-person Presidential committee in the 1990 elections. He came in fifth, with only a handful

of votes separating him from the coveted seat of power. A few years later, the Slovenian prime minister approached him with the offer of a ministerial post. Žižek recalls the incident with hilarity:

The prime minister said: “Do you want Science? Culture?” I told him: “Are you crazy? Who wants that crap? I am only interested in two posts—either Minister of the Interior or the head of the Secret Police.”¹⁰³

This anecdote is far less amusing once the political credos of the speaker have been made clear. Žižek may be blessed with a scintillating intellect and a winning personality, but his theoretical positions place him beyond the pale of the democratic consensus. Thus it is particularly troubling that Žižek is considered the darling of the intellectual scene in the West. Whether this misplaced adulation stems from a lack of understanding or—even worse—a blunting of moral sensibilities, it would be a serious mistake to ignore it. It is worth understanding precisely what Slavoj Žižek expects of us, even if only to be able to place a warning sign in front of his words.

Assaf Sagiv is Associate Editor of AZURE. His last essay in AZURE was “Globalization: Just Do It” (AZURE 19, Winter 2005).

Notes

1. Shlomo Zand, *The Intellectual, Truth, and Power: From the Dreyfus Case to the Gulf War* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), p. 19. [Hebrew] The term “symbolic capital” was coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard, 1984).

2. Rebecca Mead, “The Marx Brother,” *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2003.

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3. Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p.1.
 4. Glyn Daly and Slavoj Žižek, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 1.
 5. Scott McLemee, “Žižek Watch,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 6, 2004). This article was the first in a series of four on Žižek, all of which can be found at www.mclmeee.com/id117.html.
 6. Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Lacan’s Turn to Freud,” *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1-24.
 7. Lacan’s most important essays are contained in the anthology by Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977). Because of the book’s abstruse style, interested persons are advised to read Lacan’s lectures first, contained in the following selected volumes of the “Seminars”: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. J. Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988); *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1988); *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993); *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992); *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Penguin, 1979). For a general review of Lacanian theories, see, for example: Alain Vanier, *Lacan*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other, 2000); Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991); Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).
 8. The theory of the “mirror stage” was first presented as an article in 1949, entitled “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” See Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 1-7.
 9. It should be noted that the Lacanian concept of the imaginary has had a profound influence on film studies. Jean-Louis Baudry, for example, wrote a well-known essay on the experience of watching films—and in particular on the identification of the viewer with the images and events shown on the screen, and even with the camera itself—based on the idea of the imaginary register and the “mirror stage.” See Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” in Gerald Mast, Marshal Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford, 1992), pp. 302-312.
 10. Lacan is referring at this point not to the flesh-and-blood father, but to a symbolic father that he calls *Nom-du-Père*. This symbolic father thwarts the consummation of the child’s Oedipal desires, representing the prohibition on incest,
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and thus rescues the child from the psychosis of imaginary identification with the mother.

11. Lacan distinguishes between the “little Other” (*autre*), which is the imaginary reflection of the other in the ego itself, and the “big Other,” which could be either the symbolic order itself, or a particular subject (such as a judge or police officer) who represents that order.

12. It is important to stress that, for Lacan, language does not totally coincide with the symbolic order; it appears to have some imaginary function, as well. Thus, the “I” that speaks a language can be the symbolic subject, but also the imaginary ego. Lacan distinguishes the “empty speech” of the ego, which expresses the self-deception characteristic of the imaginary, from “full” or symbolic speech: The latter is both “true” and laden with meaning, since it is by means of this that the subject recognizes its desire.

13. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1974).

14. It is important to stress that the signifier may also be something non-verbal, such as an object or a symptomatic action.

15. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 153.

16. The fact that the symbolic order is based on an arbitrary and unstable relation between the signifiers and the signified provides it with a certain dynamism: No symbolic alignment can be considered permanent or inevitable, since it is not anchored in “true” objective reality.

17. Lacan distinguishes between “desire” (in French: *désir*), “need,” and “demand.” Need is a biological instinct, like hunger or thirst. Since the infant cannot supply its own needs, it articulates them through a demand from the Other. The appearance of the Other—in this case, probably the mother—in response to this demand is perceived by the infant as an expression of love. However, although the Other can satisfy the biological need, it has no way of providing the additional aspect of the demand—the expectation of unconditional love. This unsatisfied “leftover,” created in the gap between need and demand, is the desire.

18. One of Lacan’s main innovations stems from his assertion that the unconscious is not only the seat of the instincts, as some of Freud’s adherents claimed, but a symbolic system “structured like language.” For this reason, the unconscious, like language, is not an “internal” mental realm, but an inter-subjective phenomenon that also lies somewhere “outside.”

19. Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies*, 1972, p. 55.

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20. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 167.
21. Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 141.
22. Chris Oakley, "Basta Cos!": Mikkel Borch-Jacobson on Psychoanalysis and Philosophy," in Todd Dufresne, ed., *Returns of the "French Freud": Freud, Lacan, and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 209.
23. A comprehensive description of the life and work of Lacan and the controversies surrounding both can be found in the extensive biography by Elizabeth Roudinesco: *Jacques Lacan and Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (London: Free Association, 1990).
24. For a discussion of the Lacanian influence on literary studies, see, for example, the anthology of essays by Shoshana Felman, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982). Lacan also wields an enormous influence on gender theory, in particular on the philosophies of his students Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, feminist thinkers who were also sharply critical of their teacher's arguments. Such criticism is evident, for instance, in the following books: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell, 1985); Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia, 1984).
25. Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 5-6.
26. Yitzhak Binyamini, one of the editors at the Resling publishing house, which has published a number of books (in Hebrew) dealing with Lacanian themes, brought my attention to the fact that Lacan himself was apparently inclined to political conservatism, although, as an adult, he was careful to distance himself from any involvement in public life.
27. "The core of my entire work," writes Žižek, "is the endeavor to use Lacan as a privileged intellectual tool to reactualize German Idealism." Slavoj Žižek, "The Specter of Ideology," in *The Žižek Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. ix.
28. Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, eds. *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 382.
29. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke, 1993), pp. 13-18. See also the relevant discussion in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 152-169.
30. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 135.
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31. Slavoj Žižek and F.W.J. von Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1997), p. 14.

32. Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom*, p. 11.

33. This quotation is taken from Hegel's "*Jenaer Realphilosophie*." See Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (Albany: SUNY, 1985), pp. 7-8. The same section also appears in Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 29-30.

34. The price, explains Žižek, is a deepening of the split between us and the Real, the living entity from which we sprang, because of a contraction of "the organic whole of experience" to "appendix to the 'dead' symbolic classification." Through his use of language, man engages in a kind of violence against nature; when he calls things by their names, he strips them of their vitality and reduces them to signifiers, which are nothing more than culture-dependent, fictitious categories. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 51.

35. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 186.

36. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 186.

37. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 174-175.

38. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, pp. 9-12, 39-42.

39. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 2.

40. The eminent neo-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau points out that "if Descartes had come to terms with the obverse side to which Žižek refers, he would have considered that his intellectual project had utterly failed. And it is also clear to me that one cannot relate Lacan to philosophers such as Hegel or Descartes, in the way Žižek wants, without emptying them of what constitutes the kernel of their theoretical projects." See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 73.

41. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1970), p. 54.

42. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 34.

43. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 136.

44. In the Marxist sense of the word, "ideology" is not exactly "false consciousness." According to Marx, it may well have been a distortion of reality, but it was no lie. It always contains a grain of truth, which it bends to its needs.

45. On this subject, Žižek quotes a book by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, published in Germany in 1983. By “cynical reason,” Sloterdijk means the prevalent approach that avoids translating critical beliefs into deeds, and prefers to remain, at least formally, loyal to the status quo. This is rather like the behavior of the priest who sleeps with a girl and then explains to her that he is all for preserving the moral norms he has just broken as a basis for social order. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987).

46. Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, p. 29.

47. Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, p. 33.

48. Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 42.

49. Slavoj Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” pp. 65-66. It is superfluous to point out that this argument is not unknown in Jewish tradition: The popular *Book of Education* (*Sefer Habinuch*), written in the thirteenth century, highlights the positive effect of observing the commandments, even on the soul of unmitigated evil, for “hearts are drawn after actions.” See *The Book of Education*, commandment 16. See also in this context Pesahim 50b; Sota 22b; Sota 47a; Sanhedrin 25b.

50. Žižek uses the word “antagonism” with the meaning given to it by the neo-Marxist philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards Radical Democratic Politics* (London, Verso, 1994).

51. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” pp. 73-74. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 19.

52. Žižek identifies this surplus with the Lacanian term *objet (petit) a*, the object of fantasy, the embodiment of the leftover of the Real—or the emptiness prevailing in its place—in the symbolic order (see Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, p. 163). This object is unattainable and therefore cannot satisfy the desire (unrealizable by its very nature)—but relentlessly arouses and provokes it. In this context, Žižek offers an amusing analogy: “*Kinder Surprise*, one of the most popular confectionary products on sale in Europe, are empty chocolate eggshells wrapped in brightly colored paper; when you unwrap the egg and crack the chocolate shell open, you find inside a small plastic toy (or small parts from which a toy can be put together). A child who buys this chocolate egg often unwraps it nervously and just breaks the chocolate, not bothering to eat it, worrying only about the toy in the center—is not such a chocolate-lover a perfect case of Lacan’s motto ‘I love you but, inexplicably, I love something in you more than yourself, and, therefore, I destroy you’? And, in effect, is this toy not *l’objet petit a* at its purest, the small object filling in the central void of our desire, the hidden treasure, *agalma*, at the center of the thing we desire? This material (“real”) void at the center, of course, stands for the structural

(“formal”) gap on account of which no product is ‘really *that*,’ no product lives up to its expectations.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT, 2003), p. 145.

53. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” p. 74.

54. In his ingenious way, Žižek also argues that the Lacanian Real is not only the referent that the screen of fantasy covers, but the screen itself, an obstruction that distorts the way in which we perceive the referent. See Slavoj Žižek, “*The Matrix, Or, The Two Sides of Perversion*,” at www.lacan.com/zizek-matrix.htm. The essay also appears in the book by William Irwin, ed. *The Matrix and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

55. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 183-184.

56. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 89.

57. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 90.

58. Žižek, *Welcome*, pp. 78-79.

59. www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-human-rights-and-its-discontents.html.

60. See, for example, Ernesto Laclau, ed., *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 1; Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1998), vol. iii, p. 229.

61. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” p. 69.

62. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” p. 60.

63. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” p. 70.

64. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” p. 70.

65. Žižek stresses that by “the class struggle” he does not mean the concrete historical quarrel between two specific classes, but rather a more basic confrontation between those who answer the call to social revolution and those who ignore it. The particular identities—bourgeoisie, proletariat, aristocracy, etc.—are only poured into that universal mold. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 227.

66. Žižek, “The Specter of Ideology,” pp. 74-75. It is no coincidence that ignoring this radical antagonism is one of the most outstanding characteristics of the “post-ideological” order, which is the most ideological of all. Žižek writes: “One of the commonplaces of the contemporary ‘post-ideological’ attitude is that today, we have more or less outgrown divisive political fictions (of class struggle, etc.) and reached political maturity, which enables us to focus on real problems (ecology, economic growth...) relieved of their ideological ballast... (but) One could thus claim that what the ‘post-ideological’ attitude of the sober pragmatic approach to reality

excludes as 'old-ideological fictions' of class antagonism, as the domain of 'political passions' which no longer have any place in today's rational social administration, is the historical Real itself." See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 163.

67. And what about science? Žižek insists that "Lacan is... far from relativizing science into just one of the arbitrary narratives, ultimately on equal footing with Politically Correct myths, etc.: Science DOES 'touch the Real,' its knowledge IS 'knowledge in the Real'—the deadlock resides simply in the fact that scientific knowledge cannot serve as the symbolic 'big Other.'" Žižek, *The Matrix*. This is a problematic conclusion that does not tally with other claims Žižek makes—claims that pull the rug out from under science's attempts to arrive at positive truth about the world. It should also be remembered that for Lacan, scientific knowledge is not necessarily empirical, but principally by mathematical formulization—an approach according to which science really belongs, so it would seem, to the symbolic discourse. This opinion is also reflected in Lacan's attempt to formulate his psychoanalytic theory in algebraic terms.

68. Žižek, "The Specter of Ideology," p. 75.

69. Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality*, p. 101.

70. From the lecture "The Superego and the Act" that Žižek delivered in 1999. The lecture is presented as an article at www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-superego-and-the-act-1999.html.

71. See, for example, Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 342.

72. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 344-345.

73. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 362.

74. In this context, Žižek remarks on the phenomenon of the "cutters," people with an ungovernable urge to cut themselves. Žižek sees this as "a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body," and contrasts it with the custom of tattooing, which expresses, in his opinion, the subject's desire to be integrated into the symbolic order. Žižek, *Welcome*, p. 10.

75. Žižek, *Welcome*, pp. 5-6.

76. Žižek, *Welcome*, pp. 11-12.

77. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 134.

78. Žižek explains that the main feature of "post-modern" nationalism, which he identifies with the brutal manifestations of ethno-centrism and racism in the Balkans and other places, is the suspension of moral prohibitions and the casting off of the yoke of liberal "political normality." "The cliché according to which in

a confused, secular, global society, passionate ethnic identification restores a firm set of values should be turned upside down: nationalist fundamentalism works as a barely concealed 'you may.' Our post-modern reflexive society which seems hedonistic and permissive is actually saturated with rules and regulations which are intended to serve our well-being (restrictions on smoking and eating, rules against sexual harassment). A passionate ethnic identification, far from further restraining us, is a liberating call of 'you may': you may violate (not the Decalogue, but) the stiff regulations of peaceful coexistence in a liberal tolerant society; you may drink and eat whatever you want, say things prohibited by political correctness, even hate, fight, kill and rape." Slavoj Žižek, "You May!" *London Review of Books*, March 18, 1999.

79. Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality*, p. 127; see also Žižek, *Welcome*, pp. 151-152.

80. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 354.

81. Daly, *Conversations*, p. 163. The ethics of the Real is obviously connected with the "Ethics of Psychoanalysis" that Lacan dealt with at length in his seminar of 1959-1960. Lacan distinguished between those ethics, which are articulated "from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the Real." and the moral philosophy of Aristotle, Kant, and others. Psychoanalytical ethics are based, for example, on encouraging the authentic expression of the desire, an approach that runs counter to moral ethics because it occasionally entails "a radical repudiation of a certain ideal of the good." Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 11. One of the outstanding essays on "the ethics of the Real" is the book by Alenka Zupančič, one of Žižek's colleagues: Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000).

82. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 44.

83. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* p. 44.

84. Žižek's "act" relies to a great extent on the Lacanian concept of *passage à l'acte* (passage to the act). The passage to the act is an impulsive action, usually violent, whose significance is an escape from the big Other, a departure from the symbolic register, and a return to the Real, involving the disintegration—albeit temporary—of the subject.

85. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 386.

86. Žižek, "The Superego and the Act."

87. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 377.

88. Žižek, *Welcome*, p. 79.

89. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 91.

90. Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality*, p. 326.

91. Slavoj Žižek, “Can Lenin Tell Us About Freedom Today?” *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Summer 2001). The article can be found at www.egs.edu/faculty/zižek/zižek-can-lenin-tell-us-about-freedom-today.html.

92. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* pp. 246-247.

93. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* p. 3.

94. Žižek, *On Belief*, p. 39.

95. Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 117-119.

96. Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* pp. 130-131.

97. Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, pp. 83-84.

98. For criticism of this kind, see, for instance, Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 122.

99. On the connection between Žižek’s idea of the “act” and Badiou’s idea of the “event,” see the witty discussion in the chapter “The Politics of Truth” in Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 127-170. See also Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

100. According to Žižek, Heidegger was “the philosopher who provided the definitive description of an authentic political *act*.” See Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 143.

101. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT, 1998). Žižek devotes at least one article to Schmitt, which obviously focuses on the concept of decisionism and its place in today’s post-political era: Slavoj Žižek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics,” in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 18-37.

102. Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 32.

103. Mead, “The Marx Brother.”