

It's the political economy, stupid!

On Žižek's Marxism

SEAN HOMER

I have a very traditional Marxist belief that the new liberal-democratic order cannot go on indefinitely, that there will be a moment of explosion, probably caused by some kind of ecological crisis or whatever – and that we must prepare ourselves for that moment.¹

In a 1997 interview Slavoj Žižek was asked about the orientation of his series of books for Verso, *Who's War*. He responded that, while he had no overall plan for the series, its guiding principle was the rehabilitation of two orthodoxies. 'The fact is', remarked Žižek, 'that the strictly dogmatic Lacanian approach combined precisely with a not-post-Marxist approach is what is required today.'² Notwithstanding the rather coy reference to a 'not-post-Marxist' approach here, Žižek's programmatic statement underscored an increasingly evident theoretical and political trajectory in his work, a trajectory that has spectacularly reversed his status as the most fashionable and mercurial theorist of the early 1990s to the *bête noir* of contemporary cultural studies. Žižek's recent polemics against post-Marxism, multiculturalism and identity politics have only served to highlight the distance that now exists between him and his previous collaborators in the UK and USA, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.³ As Peter Dews pointed out some time ago, Žižek has always maintained a peculiarly ambiguous political profile, 'marxisant cultural critic on the international stage, member of the neo-liberal and nationalistically inclined governing party back home'.⁴ It seems to me, however, that the ambiguity of Žižek's position also extends to his international profile – as a postmodern, post-Marxist, cultural critic one moment, orthodox Marxist the next. In this article I want to begin to untangle something of Žižek's ambivalent relationship

to Marxism; for example, just how 'orthodox' is Žižek's orthodoxy and, more importantly, how consistent is this position with a strictly 'dogmatic' Lacanianism. Marxism, I suggest, has always been much more to the fore of Žižek's work than many of his commentators have cared to acknowledge, and his endorsement of post-Marxism has been equivocal at best. On the other hand, the precise nature of Žižek's Marxism has always been more difficult to fathom, while his thoroughgoing Lacanianism appears to rule out the possibility of any orthodox 'understanding' of Marxism, or, indeed, the formulation of a clearly identifiable political project.

The formation of a global intellectual

It is difficult, I think, to underestimate the extraordinary success of Slavoj Žižek in Western European and North American academic circles, and yet it has never seemed self-evident to me as to why this should be so. Žižek's idiosyncratic hybrid of Hegelian dialectics, Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis would not at first appear to be particularly congenial to an Anglo-American academic climate preoccupied with postmodernism, Queer theory and post-colonial studies. The Jameson of *The Political Unconscious* is perhaps the only comparable figure who has tried to yoke together such theoretically incommensurable intellectual systems, and he has been unremittingly criticized by the post-Marxist Left for the attempt.⁵ A significant part in Žižek's overwhelmingly positive reception lies, to be sure, in his ability to tell a joke – more often than not the same one in three different books. Significantly, the two early books that did more than anything else to popularize his work – especially *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (1991)

but also *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (1992) – are Žižek’s least political works.⁶ Marx and Marxism do not figure prominently in either of these two volumes, and Žižek’s facility to elucidate the notoriously impenetrable prose of Lacan through mainstream Hollywood film and genre fiction located him squarely with the postmodernists. The effortless shift from high theory to low culture and his undoubted love affair with North American popular culture have been crucial to his popularity. Žižek, as Robert Miklitsch writes, ‘appears to know the United States from the inside (as it seems only foreigners can do). This Žižek – the one we love to read because he reflects our own popular-cultural vision of the United States back to us (in reverse, as Lacan would say).’⁷ At least in terms of form, if not content, Žižek can be read as a thoroughgoing postmodernist and at times it would appear that Žižek himself has encouraged this reading of his work.⁸

The second, and certainly politically more significant factor relating to Žižek’s reception in the UK and the USA was the ideological filter of post-Marxism. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), the first of Žižek’s works to be translated into English, was published in Laclau and Mouffe’s series *Phronesis*, which, as its opening statement makes clear, is committed to anti-essentialism, poststructuralist theory and ‘a new vision for the Left conceived in terms of a radical and plural democracy’. In a sense, Žižek’s work could not have been translated at a more opportune moment. In Eastern Europe, the historic collapse of ‘actually existing socialism’ and the break-up of the Soviet Union was gathering pace, while in Western Europe the final demise of Western Marxism seemed assured if not already complete. The intellectual currents of postmodernism and post-Marxism were at their most vitriolic and triumphalist. Any sense, for example, that Laclau and Mouffe remained within an essentially Marxian problematic, as with the conclusion of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), was expunged from their work.⁹ From *The Sublime Object* to *Looking Awry*, Žižek, the former dissident under ‘socialism’ who also knew American popular culture better than most Americans, encapsulated the moment. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to see Žižek so unequivocally co-opted to the banner of post-Marxism as in Laclau’s ‘Preface’ to *The Sublime Object*. Laclau situates the work of Žižek and the Slovenian school in relation to Lacanianism on the one hand and classical philosophy on the other, but with only a passing reference to Marx (as a philosopher) and the influence of a certain

‘Marxist–structuralist’ theorist and ‘Marxist currents’. Laclau concludes: ‘For all those interested in the elaboration of a theoretical perspective that seeks to address the problems of constructing a democratic socialist political project in a post-Marxist age, it is essential reading.’¹⁰

Again, Žižek did much to encourage this view in interviews. As in his 1990 interview for *Radical Philosophy*, which took place on the eve of Slovenia declaring itself the first independent republic from the federation of Yugoslavia, and in which Žižek discussed his position within the newly formed Slovenian Liberal Party. In contrast to the neo-liberalism dominant in the rest of Europe, the Liberal Party in Slovenia formed part of the opposition bloc and was closely aligned with new social movements, in particular the feminist and ecological movements. What was distinctive about the Liberals, remarked Žižek, was their opposition to populist nationalism, a political tendency that united all the other major political groups, from the reformed communists and Greens to the far Right. With their ideology of pluralism, ecology and the protection of minority rights, the Liberals saw themselves as drawing on a tradition of radical democratic liberalism. It is not difficult to discern here the post-Marxist agenda, in so far as it is articulated in Chantal Mouffe’s *The Return of the Political*, and according to which the goal of contemporary politics is not so much to overturn the structures of the state but to deepen and extend the reach of democratic practices and institutions.¹¹ There is, however, one key area in which Žižek is in tune with neo-liberalism; despite defining himself as a Marxist and locating the Liberal Party in opposition to free-market economics, he observes that with regard to economic restructuring he is a ‘pragmatist’ – ‘If it works, why not try a dose of it?’¹²

Spectres of Marx

The absence of Marx and any acknowledgement of the positive value of a Marxian legacy in Laclau’s ‘Preface’ is interesting from the perspective of Žižek’s own text. The first chapter of *The Sublime Object* is entitled ‘How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?’ and presents a sustained analysis of the commodity form, commodity fetishism, ideology, Althusser and surplus value. In psychoanalytic terms one might want to argue that there is a certain moment of repression taking place here, a sense that is confirmed if one turns to Žižek’s ‘Introduction’. *The Sublime Object* opens with a consideration of ‘proper names’, or, rather, the absence of certain names from Habermas’s *The*

Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Lacan, notes Žižek, is mentioned only five times in this book and each time in conjunction with someone else – as with Marx in Laclau’s ‘Preface’ – ‘Why this refusal’, asks Žižek, ‘to confront Lacan directly, in a book that includes lengthy discussions of Bataille, Derrida and, above all, Foucault?’¹³ The answer to this enigma does not, as one would expect with Žižek, lie with Lacan himself but elsewhere; it lies with a name so deeply repressed in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* as not even to be mentioned – that is to say, Althusser. The Habermas–Foucault debate, in other words, is masking another, theoretically more far-reaching, encounter between Althusser and Lacan. Žižek writes:

There is something enigmatic in the sudden eclipse of the Althusserian school: it cannot be explained away in terms of a theoretical defeat. – It is more as if there were, in Althusser’s theory, a traumatic kernel which had to be quickly forgotten, ‘repressed’; it is an effective case of theoretical amnesia.¹⁴

It may seem a little churlish to point out that Laclau and Mouffe’s own theoretical formation was Althusserian-Marxist, were it not for the fact that, even at this early stage of their collaboration, Althusserianism is where Žižek and post-Marxism part company. Both Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism and Žižek’s Marxism are grounded in the attempt to go *beyond* Althusser.

Laclau has always acknowledged certain differences of view to Žižek – for example, over whether or not Lacan is a poststructuralist and how one should read Hegel.¹⁵ When Žižek began to formulate a more substantive critique of post-Marxism in 1990, however, this centred neither on Lacan nor on Hegel, but on that enigmatic silence that surrounds Althusser. According to Žižek, Laclau and Mouffe’s collaborative work of the 1980s marked something of a theoretical regression from their previous individual projects in one significant respect: that of the subject. The development of the notion of ‘subject positions’ from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* onwards, argued Žižek, represented a step backwards from the more ‘finely elaborated Althusserian theory of interpellation’ to be found in Laclau’s earlier books.¹⁶ Theoretically, the notion of ‘subject positions’ and the discursive constitution of identity remain locked within an essentially Althusserian problematic of ideological interpellation as constitutive of the subject. In short, ‘the subject-position is a mode of how we recognize our position of an (interested) agent of the social

process, of how we experience our commitment to a certain ideological cause.’¹⁷ Identification at this level conspicuously fails, as with Althusser’s original theory of interpellation, to take into account that we are always-already subjects prior to the moment of interpellation. ‘Strictly speaking’, writes Žižek, ‘individuals do not ‘become’ subjects, they always-already *are* subjects’.¹⁸ The question therefore is not, as Althusser thought, how we as individuals become subjects but rather how we as always-already subjects become particular kinds of ideological subjects. What remains unthought in Althusser’s theory is precisely this moment of interpellation prior to identification with the image. There is in a sense a kind of uncanny subject prior to subjectification, or, in more properly Lacanian terms, there is a void, a gap, at the core of the subject which ‘undermines the self-identity of the subject, with the subject itself’.¹⁹ A direct consequence of this failure by Laclau to move beyond the Althusserian problematic of ideological interpellation, argues Žižek, is the theoretical eclipse of the most radical dimension of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – that is to say, the notion of ‘social antagonism’, or the very impossibility of the social to constitute itself as a stable unified totality.²⁰ The whole notion of subject positions, contends Žižek, serves only to efface this fundamental traumatic experience and thus undermine the radical edge of post-Marxism.²¹ To put it another way, an anti-essentialist theory of fragmented subjectivity and multiple subject positions provides late capitalism with an intellectual justification for precisely that form of subjectivity most appropriate to meet the demands of a decentred, unstable and fluctuating global economy.

The critique of multiculturalism and identity politics

In the early 1990s Žižek’s critique of the post-Marxist conceptualization of discourse and ‘subject positioning’ turned on the question of the Lacanian notion of lack and antagonism. For Žižek, the crucial point rested upon whether or not the concept of antagonism represented an internal limit and fissure within the subject and the social itself – thus, to confront this limit was to confront the very impossibility of a coherent and unified system – or, alternatively, an external antagonism between already constituted subjects. As the latter route works within the preexisting limits of the social, it can be said to pose no real political threat at a systemic level. In his more recent work Žižek has spelled out the political consequences of subject

positioning, multiculturalism and identity politics in rather less theoretical terms:

since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the idea of an eventual demise of capitalism – since, as we might put it, everybody tacitly accepts that *capitalism is here to stay* – critical energy has found a substitute outlet in fighting for cultural differences which leave the basic homogeneity of the capitalist world-system intact. So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different lifestyles, and so forth, while capitalism pursues its triumphant march – and today's critical theory, in the guise of 'cultural studies', is performing the ultimate service for the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible: in the predominant form of postmodern 'cultural criticism', the very mention of capitalism as a world system tends to give rise to accusations of 'essentialism', 'fundamentalism', and so on. The price of this depoliticization of the economy is that the domain of politics itself is in a way depoliticized: political struggle proper is transformed into the cultural struggle for recognition of marginal identities and the tolerance of differences.²²

With echoes of Fredric Jameson, with whose work he has increasingly come to identify himself, Žižek now rails against the substitution of ethics for politics proper and the lack of Utopian imagination that allows

us to think beyond the limits of capitalism. Identity politics, he contends, are perfectly suited to our current depoliticized malaise, while multiculturalism is nothing less than the cultural expression of a consolidated global economy. The only way to combat postmodern particularism is through a (re)assertion of the dimension of universality and the messianic dimension of Marxism.²³ It is impossible today, argues Žižek, to remain impartial; to refuse to take sides is to support the global logic of capital, while, paradoxically, 'accepting the necessity of 'taking sides' ... is the only way to be effectively *universal*.'²⁴ What we are left with is, on the one hand, the retreat of radical democracy into liberalism and, on the other, the politics of the Third Way – that is to say, the politics of ideas that 'work'. Whereas the political act proper, contends Žižek, 'is not simply something that works well within the framework of the existing order but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work*'.²⁵ This Žižek is a long way from the liberal democratic 'pragmatist' I mentioned earlier, who suggested in 1990 that if economic restructuring worked then Eastern Europe should try a dose of it.

Liberalism, or, Žižek's ambivalence

I have set out a reading of Žižek that depicts an almost linear progression from his early post-Marxist sympa-



thies to his recent orthodoxy; but is Žižek really this ‘orthodox’, and if this is the case, can all post-Marxists really be such poor readers? In 1990 Žižek published an article in *New Left Review* on the disintegration of the former states of Eastern Europe and the rise of neo-nationalism.²⁶ Two years later he published an article in *New German Critique* entitled ‘Eastern European Liberalism and its Discontents’. This second article was taken from the proceedings of a talk Žižek delivered at Columbia University.²⁷ In the first of these essays Žižek presented a compelling account of Western Europe’s idealization and fascination with Eastern Europe in terms of Lacan’s notion of *das Ding*, the Thing – that is to say, that elusive and unknowable Thing that is ‘something’ only in so far as subjects constitute it as such. According to Žižek, the resurgence of ethnic violence and neo-nationalism within Eastern Europe represented not a radical break from its immediate communist past but rather its continuation. In other words, the emergence of the ‘national-Thing’ represents the return of the Real, the return of the traumatic kernel at the core of the social once the symbolic network of the communist ideology had disintegrated. Žižek posed the question as to why the peoples of Eastern Europe would immediately reimpose such a repressive, intolerant and racist system if they had just overthrown the previous one. The answer to this question lies, not as Western commentators like to think, argues Žižek, in the primitive hatreds and atavistic psychology of the people themselves but rather in the logic of capital. ‘The elementary feature of capitalism consists in its *inherent structural imbalance*, its innermost antagonistic character: the constant crisis, the incessant revolutionizing of its conditions of existence.’²⁸ As Žižek puts it, the rise of national chauvinism acts as a ‘shock-absorber’ for this very excess of capital, and the inherent instability, openness and conflict that it introduces into the system. What we see in the violence and hatred unleashed in the Balkans, therefore, is not the re-emergence of ancient tribal hatreds long suppressed by communism but the violence that underlies capitalism itself.

When Žižek was asked to address the same concerns but to a rather different audience at Columbia University, he began by characterizing the *New Left Review* article thus:

The leftist demand to give a report on what is ‘really going on’ in the East functions as a kind of mirror-reversal of this demand: we were expected to confirm suspicions, to say that people are already disappointed in ‘bourgeois’ democracy, that they slowly perceive not only what they have gained but also what they have lost (social security etc.). In my

article, I consciously walked into this trap and gave the left what it wanted: a vengeful vision of how now things are even worse, how the effective result of democratic enthusiasm is nationalist corporatism – in short, it serves us right for betraying socialism!²⁹

Let us be clear here that Žižek does not reverse his original position on nationalism but rather takes the opportunity to underscore the naïveté of those ‘Third Way’ dissidents – and one must presume that Žižek includes himself here – who believed there was an alternative to totalitarianism *and* capitalism. Along the way Žižek takes time to castigate Western Marxists whose ‘speciality’ appears to be the ability to derive pleasure from the denunciation of nationalism, which ‘is uncannily close to the satisfaction of successfully explaining one’s own impotence and failure’.³⁰ Now, certainly, we all speak to our audience, or, as Jameson used to say, we speak in code, but what is troubling about this example from Žižek is the sense in which there is a deeper underlying logic at work here. Let me give another recent and politically more questionable example.

In the spring of 1999 *New Left Review* published a series of articles on the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, which included stringent critiques of NATO’s action by Tariq Ali, Edward Said and Peter Gowan, as well as an article by Žižek entitled ‘Against the Double Blackmail’, which was highly critical of both NATO and the Serbs, especially Milosevic’s regime.³¹ Žižek’s position on the bombing, as both anti-NATO and anti-Milosevic, clearly holds a strong attraction for a Western European Left which harbours no particular sympathy for either the former Yugoslavian president or NATO:

What if one should reject this double blackmail (if you are against NATO strikes, you are for Milosevic’s proto-Fascist regime of ethnic cleansing, and if you are against Milosevic, you support the global capitalist New World Order)? What if this very opposition between enlightened international intervention against ethnic fundamentalists, and the heroic last pockets of resistance against the New World Order, is a false one? What if phenomena like the Milosevic regime are not the opposite to the New World Order, but rather its *symptom*, the place at which the hidden *truth* of the New World Order emerges?³²

‘Against the Double Blackmail’ concludes with a brief plea for a ‘Third Way’, not to be confused with the neo-liberal Third Way of Blair and Clinton but a real Third Way of breaking ‘the vicious circle of global capitalism versus nationalist closure’.³³ What is troubling about this article is that an earlier draft had

been circulating on the Internet for some time prior to its publication in *New Left Review*. This version is almost word-for-word identical to the published essay, with the exception of its reassuringly 'leftist' conclusion and one key sentence. Beyond the confines of the English-speaking world's leading Marxist journal, Žižek was not so measured in his solution to the problem of Milosevic:

So, precisely as a Leftist, my answer to the dilemma 'Bomb or not?' is: not yet ENOUGH bombs, and they are TOO LATE.³⁴

The reference here, as is clear from Žižek's subsequent paragraph, is Lacan's essay on *Hamlet* and the problem of logical time.³⁵ What Žižek is alluding to is the impossibility of the Real as the inherent fissure and antagonism that underlie the social itself; in this sense, there can never be 'enough' bombs to erase the trauma of the Real and even if there were enough bombs there would never be a right time to bomb as the encounter with the real is always missed, one always arrives too early or too 'late'. Yet, the sentence is strangely self-cancelling. What is the point of sending in more bombs if they will be too late anyway? For Žižek, therefore, the answer to the dilemma 'Bomb or not?' is apparently 'Yes and No!' From a psychoanalytic perspective one would want to say that there is something symptomatic about this statement in the sense that it unconsciously reveals what the author is quite consciously trying to hide. That is to say, there is a marked discrepancy between a sophisticated Lacanian understanding – that no amount of bombs at whatever time would be enough – and, what we can call, a naïve or surface reading which would suggest that NATO should have gone in *harder* and *sooner*. The even-handed approach to a Third Way beyond global capital and totalitarianism has now gone and what we are left with is an insistence that NATO should have intervened against the Serbs earlier and more militaristically. The sentence is indicative of Žižek's apparent refusal to adopt an identifiable political position; yet, at the same time, it reveals in a symptomatic form the ambiguity of his politics due to his underlying nationalism. The uncomfortable fact that this is the *only* sentence removed from the Internet version of his paper suggests that Žižek was acutely aware of its political reverberations, that there is a naïve political reading of this sentence as well as a Lacanian one. Indeed, the sentence changes the whole tone of the piece and serves to highlight the anti-Serb nationalism

that is evident in this article and so much of his recent writing on the Balkans.³⁶

Let me briefly return to the long quotation on identity politics as an expression of the logic of global capital given above. Almost immediately following this quotation Žižek raises the possibility of a leftist response to the 'falsity of multiculturalist postmodernism' and here one might think we would find Žižek 'taking sides' as he so stridently advocated. But no, the paradoxical conclusion to be drawn from this situation, observes Žižek, is that 'today's true conservatives are, rather, leftist "critical theorists" who reject both liberal multiculturalism and fundamentalist populism – who clearly perceive the complicity between global capitalism and ethnic fundamentalism'.³⁷ In this instance we can safely read Judith Butler, Laclau and post-Marxism for 'leftist'; but what, one might legitimately ask, would be the alternative between liberalism and global capitalism, if one has already accepted the failure of socialism? To paraphrase a recent review by Ben Watson, the question with Žižek is not whether or not to take him seriously but which one we should take seriously.³⁸

The return of the Real

Following on from their 1990 piece, *Radical Philosophy* conducted a second interview with Žižek in 1993; it is illuminating to note the different tone of this later meeting. While he suggests that the political agenda of the liberal opposition is still to promote openness against the closure of nationalism, the old post-Marxist rhetoric of hegemony, articulation and discursive struggle has gone. Indeed, the whole notion of radical democracy is brought into question:

This is why I am so suspicious of Laclau's concept of radical democracy, because basically it's simply a more liberal version of the standard liberal-democratic game – which is why he is uncannily silent about capitalism. That's his scarecrow.³⁹

Whereas previously Žižek had identified his oppositional stance with the new social movements, he now sees this as a distraction from the more pressing concerns of engaging with the contradictions and fundamental antagonisms of capital itself. Furthermore, while Žižek still at times accepts the legitimacy of identity politics – so long as we don't expect it to change anything fundamentally – at other times he argues that the creation of new forms of sexual subjectivity actively works against an emancipatory project and social transformation. 'These Foucauldian practices', he notes, 'of inventing new strategies, new

identities, are [simply so many ways] of playing the late capitalist game of subjectivity.⁴⁰ Following two civil conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, on the brink of a third and more brutal war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and after three years of economic restructuring, the subtle negotiation of identity, philosophy and culture in Žižek's work appears finally to have come up against the immovable rock of the Real, or, to put it another way, the economic logic of capital.

The Real is something of a polysemous and migratory category in Žižek's work. It also marks the distance of his project from that of classical, or orthodox, Marxism. In *The Sublime Object* the Real was explicitly aligned with Laclau and Mouffe's conception of *antagonism*:

the precise definition of the real object: a cause which in itself does not exist – which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way. If the Real is the impossible, it is precisely this impossibility which is to be grasped through its effects. Laclau and Mouffe were the first to develop this logic of the Real in its relevance for the social-ideological field in their concept of *antagonism*: antagonism is precisely such an impossible kernel, a certain limit which is in itself nothing; it is only to be constructed retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them; it prevents a closure of the social field.⁴¹

And we should keep in mind here that, as conceived by Laclau and Mouffe, antagonism is to be clearly delineated from any Marxian conception of dialectical or determinate contradiction.⁴² Žižek has also associated the Real with an Althusserian conception of History as an absent cause in his polemics against historicism:

The symbolic order is 'barred', the signifying chain is inherently inconsistent, 'non-all', structured around a hole. This inherent non-symbolizable reef maintains the gap between the Symbolic and the Real – that is, it prevents the Symbolic from 'falling into' the Real – and, again, what is ultimately at stake in this decentrement of the Real with regard to the symbolic is the Cause: the Real is the absent Cause of the Symbolic.⁴³

Finally, and most recently, the Real has come to be associated with the underlying logic of global capital itself. Reflecting on recent ecological crises in the introduction to *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek remarks that 'this catastrophe thus gives body to the Real of our time: the thrust of Capital which ruthlessly disregards and destroys particular life-worlds, threatening the very survival of humanity'.⁴⁴ The difficulty with

Žižek's Marxism, however, arises precisely from his Lacanian conceptualization of the Real.

For Žižek, it is the Lacanian notion of the Real that separates his project from *both* post-Marxism and classical Marxism. If post-Marxism asserts the absolute irreducibility and particularity of political struggles to any single determining instance – the inherent contradictions of capital, for example – Lacanian psychoanalysis argues precisely the opposite.

The multiplicity and particularity of contemporary struggles are, from a Lacanian perspective, a direct response to a single instance; that is, they are a response to the same impossible traumatic encounter with the Real.⁴⁵ But can we say that this Real is a social contradiction in a Marxian sense? No! The Lacanian Real is not a Kantian 'Thing-in-itself', it is that which is beyond symbolization and too traumatic for the subject, or the social, to bear. The Real is essentially a gap, a void at the core of subjectivity and the social; it is a moment of impossibility that forestalls the unity of the subject and the cohesiveness of the social:

The Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency.... the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes); but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious; it is something that persists only as failed, missed in the shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature.⁴⁶

According to Robert Miklitsch, the Real is in the final analysis a Hegelian pure 'Thing-of-thought'⁴⁷ but to emphasize the 'ideality' behind the concept is to miss its inherent paradoxicality. The Real is both that which supports the symbolic order and at the same time that which undermines and disrupts it. As an absent cause it is also something which is retroactively constituted and the Marxian conception of the proletariat and class struggle function in precisely this way for Žižek.

Marxism's historic originality, contends Žižek, remains its identification of the structural role of class and class struggle as central to the logic of Capital. While Laclau does not deny a role for class conflict *per se*, he does see this as only one possible subject position in a chain of potential identities and differences and, moreover, one which is declining in importance in the contemporary world.⁴⁸ Žižek, on the other hand, argues that class struggle is not simply one

social antagonism among a series of equally significant conflicts but ‘simultaneously the specific antagonism which “predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is the general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity”’.⁴⁹ In other words, the very proliferation of political subjectivities and struggles today does not relegate class antagonism to a secondary role but they are the direct result of ‘class struggle’ in the context of global capital. Žižek’s reassertion of the significance of class conflict in an era of globalization and the overestimation of the politics of recognition is to be welcomed.⁵⁰ The ‘political’ issues arise when we come to consider what he means by ‘class struggle’ and whether this can have a *positive* formulation or whether it simply represents ‘a certain limit, a pure negativity, a traumatic limit which prevents the final totalization of the social ideological field’.⁵¹

From a Lacanian perspective the subject is not an entity in itself but is rather the subject of the signifier; it is that which one signifier represents to another, or, to put it another way, it is a *breach* in the signifying chain.⁵² Moreover, the subject can be seen to be constituted retrospectively; the subject comes into being, so to speak, as an answer to the question posed by the Real, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ Marx’s formulation of the proletariat, suggests Žižek, provides a perfect example of this ‘substanceless subjectivity’:

the proletariat as the apogee of the historical process of ‘alienation,’ of the gradual disengaging of the labour force from the domination of the ‘organic,’ substantial conditions of the process of production (the double freedom of the proletariat: he stands for the abstract subjectivity freed from all substantial-organic ties, yet at the same time he is dispossessed and thus obliged to sell on the market his own labour force in order to survive).⁵³

Marx’s mistake was to imagine that through the act of proletarian revolution a dialectical reconciliation of subject and substance could take place – that is to say, a process of disalienation and the full transparency of the process of production. Thus, in *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek provides a defence of Hegelian dialectics against the Marxian ‘materialist reversal’ and argues that it is not Hegelian philosophy that is a closed self-contained system but Marxism itself. What else, argues Žižek, is the Marxian conception of the proletariat if not the embodiment of this moment of closure, when the social is rendered in its entirety and

self-transparent? Whereas Hegel’s inscription of the negative at the very core of his system prevents any, one might say ideological, view of social transparency. Perhaps, writes Žižek, ‘after more than a century of polemics on the Marxist ‘materialist reversal of Hegel’, the time has come to raise the inverse possibility of a Hegelian critique of Marx’.⁵⁴ In short, Marx’s critique of Hegel as an ‘absolute idealist’ is nothing less than a displacement of his own disavowed ontology and is symptomatic of ‘the inherent impossibility of the Marxian project’.⁵⁵

Class struggle: yes and no!

For Žižek, the Lacanian Real is a moment of radical impossibility; it is that which will forestall all attempts at forging a unified coherent identity and as such rules out the possibility of an orthodox Marxian response. The Real is the lack at the core of subjectivity and the void around which the social is structured, but as such it seems that it can be filled by anything. In Žižek’s polemics with Butler and Laclau one can see how for the latter two, however much I disagree with their particular projects, the Left constitutes and articulates a specific platform and political agenda. For Butler there is a need to engage in specific political struggles, even if they do not accord fully with one’s theory, rather than just debate the conditions of possibility for politics as such. Similarly for Laclau there is a need to engage in a Gramscian ‘war of position’ to secure democratic gains. The difficulty with Žižek’s position, suggests Laclau, ‘is that he never clearly defines what he understands by the global approach to politics’.⁵⁶ Moreover, his ‘discourse is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and an insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism’.⁵⁷ Both Laclau and Butler insist on the need for Žižek to jettison the traditional Marxian conception of class and class struggle; I want to suggest to the contrary that it is Žižek’s thoroughgoing Lacanianism that is the problem. It is his commitment to a Lacanian notion of the Real that rules out the possibility of giving his political project any positive content and thus reduces the political act to one of dissidence and opposition. As Denise Gigante writes,

Žižek is unique, and where he makes his radical break with other literary theorists who take up a position, any position at all that pretends to some notional content or critical truth, is in the fact that he fundamentally has no position.⁵⁸

In short, the point is to be anti-capitalist whatever form that might take. In the late 1980s for Žižek, this

position was represented by liberalism and the new social movements; in the early 1990s by the possibility of ecological crisis; by the late 1990s it was opposing the logic of global capital; and now, with *The Fragile Absolute*, we find it is the 'radical' legacy of Christianity.⁵⁹ This may be orthodox Lacanianism but it is hardly orthodox Marxism.

Notes

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1. Slavoj Žižek, 'Postscript', in Peter Osborne, ed., *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 44.
2. Slavoj Žižek, Interviewed by Andrew Long and Tara McGann, *JPCS: Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1997, p. 133.
3. See in particular Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Verso, London, 1999, pp. 171–244. See also Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, London, 2000.
4. Peter Dews, 'The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian Dialectics', *Radical Philosophy* 72, 1995, p. 26.
5. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Methuen, London, 1981. For a critical analysis of Jameson's synthesis of Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, see my *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, ch. 2; and for a reappraisal of the arguments presented there in the light of Žižek's work, see my 'Narratives of History, Narratives of Time' (forthcoming).
6. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991, and *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Routledge, London, 1992.
7. Robert Miklitsch, "'Going through the Fantasy": Screening Slavoj Žižek', in *Psycho-Marxism: Marxism and Psychoanalysis Late in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Miklitsch, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1998, p. 478.
8. In his 1990 *Radical Philosophy* interview Žižek was challenged on Marx's distinction between those processes constituted by social recognition, such as money, and those beyond recognition, such as capitalist production; on this point remarks Žižek, 'I would be willing to describe myself as a "postmodernist"' (p. 34). Earlier in this interview Žižek also favourably contrasts the postmodern acceptance of 'a certain division of the price of freedom' (p. 24) with modernism's utopian vision of disalienation, a position starkly in contrast to his concluding statement in his exchange with Butler and Laclau where Žižek strongly endorses a Jamesonian utopianism: 'today's predominant form of ideological "closure" takes the precise form of mental block which prevents us from imagining a fundamental social change, in the interests of an allegedly "realistic" and "mature" attitude.' (*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 324; italics in the original)
9. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', *New Left Review* 166, November–December 1987, reprinted in Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Verso, London, 1990, pp. 97–132.
10. Ernesto Laclau, 'Preface' to Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p. xv.
11. See in particular 'Radical Democracy: Modern or Post-modern', in *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London, 1993.
12. Peter Dews and Peter Osborne, 'Lacan in Slovenia: Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl', in Osborne, ed., *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, p. 31.
13. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 1.
14. Ibid.
15. The most sustained engagement between Laclau and Žižek on the position of Lacan in their work and their divergent readings of Hegel can be found in a series of point-by-point exchanges in their co-authored (with Judith Butler) book *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. In brief, Laclau argues that Hegel's system is a closed totality beyond which no further advance is possible, and consequently it excludes contingency (pp. 60–61). Žižek, on the other hand, insists on the openness of the Hegelian dialectic through the mystery of 'positing the presuppositions' – that is to say, the dialectical transformation of a contingent feature into the necessity of a structuring principle (pp. 227–8). For a critique of Žižek's 'arrested' dialectic, see Dews, 'The Tremor of Reflection'.
16. Slavoj Žižek, 'Beyond Discourse Analysis', in Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 250.
17. Ibid., p. 251.
18. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 60.
19. Ibid., p. 62.
20. This argument is developed more extensively in my 'Psychoanalysis, Post-Marxism and the Subject: From the Ethical to the Political', *PS: The Journal of the Universities Association for Psychoanalytic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1998, pp. 18–28.
21. Žižek has most recently restated this position in *The Ticklish Subject* where his critique of Badiou, Rancière, Balibar and Laclau turns on their common tendency to reduce the question of subjectivity to the process of subjectivization. As Žižek writes, 'their theoretical edifices are to be conceived as four different ways of negating this common starting point, of maintaining (or, rather, gaining) a distance towards Althusser'. This is to miss the force of Althusser's original formulation; 'subjectivization, of course, is not to be confused with what Althusser had in mind when he elaborated the notion of ideological (mis)recognition and interpellation: here subjectivity is not dismissed as a form of misrecognition; on the contrary, it is asserted as the moment in which the ontological gap/void becomes palpable, as a gesture that undermines the positive order of Being, of the differential structure of Society, of politics as police' (p.

- 232).
22. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 218.
 23. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, Verso, London, 2000, and *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 142.
 24. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 223.
 25. Ibid., p. 199.
 26. Slavoj Žižek, 'Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead', *New Left Review* 183, September–October, 1990, pp. 50–62.
 27. Slavoj Žižek, 'Eastern European Liberalism and its Discontents', *New German Critique* 57, 1992, pp. 25–49. A version of these two papers forms the final chapter of *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1993.
 28. Žižek, 'Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead', p. 59.
 29. Žižek, 'Eastern European Liberalism and its Discontents', p. 25.
 30. Ibid., p. 31.
 31. Tariq Ali, 'Springtime for NATO', pp. 62–72; Edward Said, 'Protecting the Kosovars?', pp. 73–5; Peter Gowan, 'The NATO Powers and the Balkan Tragedy', pp. 83–105; Slavoj Žižek, 'Against the Double Blackmail', pp. 76–82, all in *New Left Review* 234, March–April 1999.
 32. Žižek, 'Against the Double Blackmail', p. 79.
 33. Ibid., p. 82.
 34. Žižek, 'Against the Double Blackmail', at w2fd.hotmail.com/cgi-bin/ge.G923730488.1&start+262297&len+45800 1999, p. 4, emphasis in the original. I would like to thank Ian Parker for tracking down this version for me and Eugenie Georgaca for her suggestions.
 35. Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', in Shoshana Felman, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis, The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1981. See also 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism', *News Letter of the Freudian Field*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1988, pp. 4–22.
 36. See, for example, Žižek's critique of the Western liberal and leftist fascination with the Bosnian film director Emir Kusturica in *The Fragile Absolute*, pp. 5–7.
 37. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 221.
 38. Ben Watson, 'The Tamagochi and the *objet petit a*', *Radical Philosophy* 97, 1999, pp. 42–4.
 39. Žižek, 'Postscript', p. 37.
 40. Ibid., p. 40.
 41. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 163–4.
 42. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, London, 1985, pp. 122–7. 'Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown ... antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the 'experience' of the limit of the social. Strictly speaking, antagonisms are not *internal* but *external* to society; or rather, they constitute the limits of society, the latter's impossibility of fully constituting itself' (p. 125).
 43. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 30.
 44. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 4. See also Žižek's critique of discursive relativism and historicism in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 'today's real which sets a limit to resignification is Capital: the smooth functioning of Capital is that which remains the same, that which 'always returns to its place', in the unconstrained struggle for hegemony' (p. 223).
 45. Judith Butler argues against this 'universalization' of the Real in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, London, 1993, and restates this criticism of Žižek's deployment of the Lacanian Real in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (p. 13).
 46. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 169.
 47. Miklitsch, 'Going through the Fantasy', p. 486.
 48. See *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, pp. 296–301, wherein Laclau poses two 'unassailable' arguments against the prioritization of social class: '(a) how do you know that these sets of descriptive features come together in some 'actually existing' social agents?; (b) even if you could point to empirical agents who would correspond to the Identikit of the 'working class', is not that very plurality of criteria showing already that the working class today is smaller than it was in the nineteenth century?' (p. 298).
 49. Ibid., p. 320.
 50. Butler's argument against Žižek's prioritization of class struggle is illuminating for its narrowness of vision. It would seem that the pressing political concerns today are the rolling back of the frontiers of the state, gay marriage and gays in the military. There is no acknowledgement in Butler's intervention that this might be a specifically North American agenda, that other parts of the globe might have a rather different perception of the role of the state and civil society. When Butler does come to reflect upon European matters, the conflict in the Balkans for instance, we find a depressingly familiar reiteration of NATO's line through the demonization of the Serbs and insistence on the legitimacy of the North American and Western European response.
 51. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 164.
 52. See Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, for a clear and accessible elaboration of the Lacanian conception of the subject.
 53. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 26.
 54. Ibid.
 55. Ibid.
 56. Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 198.
 57. Ibid., p. 205.
 58. Denis Gigante, 'Toward a Notion of Critical Self-Creation: Slavoj Žižek and the 'Vortex of Madness'', *New Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1998, pp. 153–68.
 59. This article was completed before Žižek's most recent writings on Trotsky and the legacy of Leninism. See, for example, 'Repeating Lenin' at lacan.com/replenin.htm.