

Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Revolution: A Critique

Professor Alan Johnson, Edge Hill University

johnsona@edgehill.ac.uk

2011 Political Studies Association Conference, London

Introduction

... there is that kind [of voluntarism] which ... celebrates itself in terms which are purely and simply a transposition of the language of the individual superman to an ensemble of “supermen” (celebration of active minorities as such, etc) ... one has to struggle against the above-mentioned degenerations, the false heroisms and pseudo-aristocracies... (Gramsci 1971: 204).

In 2000, when I was an editor at the Marxist journal *Historical Materialism*, the Slovenian cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek unveiled his new theory of revolution. Trotsky, he claimed, ‘went as far as proposing ... the universal militarisation of life...That is the good Trotsky for me’ (2000a:196). Now, in 1919 Trotsky called for the temporary, emergency militarisation of *labour*, and that was bad enough. He certainly never called for ‘the universal militarisation of life’ Žižek’s slip it turned out, was Freudian. His theory of revolution – for which I will suggest the signifier *Wild Blanquism* – rested on the following notions: ‘[t]here are no “democratic (procedural) rules” one is a priori prohibited to violate’ because ‘revolutionary politics is not a matter of opinions but of the truth on behalf of which one often is compelled to disregard the “opinion of the majority” and to impose the revolutionary will against it’.

Revolutionary duty lies in ‘the assertion of the unconditional, ‘ruthless’ revolutionary will, ready to “go to the end”, effectively to seize power and undermine the existing totality’. (ref). Having apparently learnt nothing from the historical record of the use of ‘iron will’ and ‘ruthlessness’ in the pursuit of utopia – Žižek admits his leanings are ‘almost Maoist’ (2002c) – he argued that revolutionaries must ‘act without any legitimization, engaging oneself in a kind of Pascalian wager that the Act itself will create the conditions of its retroactive “democratic” legitimisation.’ (2002a:153). He also identified a danger to his project: ‘a priori norms (“human rights”, “democracy”), respect for which would prevent us from “resignifying” terror, the ruthless exercise of power, the spirit of sacrifice.’ And he even sensed where his new theory was taking him, but did not allow this destination to put off. ‘[I]f this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as *Linksfaschismus*, so be it!’ (in Butler, Laclau, Žižek, 2000:326). Welcome to the ‘New Communism’.

Žižek wrote up his new theory of revolution in 2008 in a 500-page warrant for totalitarianism, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. However, as Adam Kirsch pointed out in *The New Republic*, ‘the louder [Žižek] applauds violence and terror – especially the terror of Lenin, Stalin and Mao ...the more indulgently he is received by the academic left which has elevated him into a celebrity and the center of a cult’ (2008).¹ This essay does not seek to explain that scandal, only to make the case that it is one. In part one I describe Žižek’s theory of revolution, and in part 2 I draw on resources from two left-wing antitotalitarians, Claude Lefort and Hal Draper, to critique it.

Part 1: Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Revolution

¹There are a few exceptions. Paul Kellog (nd) and Ian Parker (2004) have written critiques of Žižek from a revolutionary socialist viewpoint.

Žižek's theory of revolution is a child of the disastrous 19th century marriage between Hegelianism and Blanquism.² That marriage was consummated in the 20th century when Lenin substituted a dictatorial conception of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' for Marx's (ill-named) democratic original. Once unmoored from self-emancipation and democracy, Leninist and Stalinist 'Marxism' was reduced to a kind of *Organised Blanquism*: the Party-elite was to seize power by force and then try (and fail) to remake society and man from above according to an Ideology or Truth. Žižek's is a *Wild Blanquism* – an ultra-violent and one-dimensional 'Leninism' is rendered not just voluntarist but positively unhinged by Žižek's readings of Alain Badiou's concept of 'Fidelity to the Event' and Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'Act', which Žižek's interprets in a wild Antigonian spirit. The old crude 'Jacobin-Communist' programme of putsch and educational dictatorship - what Karl Marx famously called the 'old crap' – is dressed up in new garb.

The 19th century marriage of Hegelianism and Blanquism: Arbitrary Construction and the Cult of Force

The German social democrat Eduard Bernstein was one of the first socialists to raise the alarm about the intimate relationship between the philosophy of Hegelianism and the politics of Blanquism that was transforming post-Marx Marxism into another 'socialism from above' - an *Organised Blanquism*.³ Hegelianism and Blanquism were joined by two connecting

² The French conspirator and revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805-81) believed that the revolution would be made by a small elite band acting ruthlessly, i.e. a putsch. After the seizure of power, according to Hal Draper, the Blanquist believed that '[t]he revolutionary band of idealistic dictators alone would exercise the transitional dictatorship, for an unspecified period of time, at least a generation' (Draper 1987:13.) Blanqui opposed universal suffrage. Žižek's theory of revolution is a 'wild' version of this Jacobin-Communism of the Babouvist-Blanquist type. In a meticulous account of the Marx-Blanqui relationship, Draper concluded that 'Marx did vigorously reject Blanquist (Jacobin-Communist) putschism...from his earliest known writings to his last, with unusual consistency' (1986:145). Hal Draper called Blanquism 'the "left" way to reject self-emancipation' (1986:162).

³ See Bernstein's chapter, 'Marxism and the Hegelian dialectic', chapter 2 of his 1899 book *The Preconditions of Socialism*. This chapter was not translated by Edith C. Harvey in *Evolutionary Socialism* (1961), but was included in Henry Tudor's 1993 translation, which also restored the original title. Of course, Kolakowski was

wires and both are constitutive of Žižek's own theory of revolution, as we will see: arbitrary construction and the cult of force.

Social democrats, warned Bernstein, were being lured from the 'solid ground of empirically verifiable facts' into the ethereal world of 'derived concepts' and 'arbitrary construction' by an 'a priori deduction dictated by the Hegelian logic of contradiction'. He bemoaned the result: 'all moderation of judgement is lost from view' and 'inherently improbable deductions' are embraced regarding 'potential transformations' (1993: 31).⁴

While accepting the general idea that societies developed through the resolution of antagonisms, Bernstein worried that Hegelian Marxists could not resist 'speculative anticipation of the maturation of an economic and social development which had hardly shown its first shoots'. Speculative philosophies of development encouraged the reckless attempt to leap over the gulf between 'actual and postulated maturation' and Hegel was no exception; his dialectic '[t]ime and again got in the way of a proper assessment of the significance of observed changes' (1993:34). In short, a properly strategic view of politics became impossible once reality was forced into a preconceived schema.

Bernstein warned that this 'almost incredible neglect of the most palpable facts' *had to be* partnered by 'a truly miraculous belief in the creative power of force' (1993:35).⁵ The

correct to point out that Bernstein's critique of the role of Hegel's dialectic in Marx's thought was 'summary in the extreme,' and that Bernstein's real target was surely *any* speculative system, *any* philosophic mentality that bracketed the real world in order to make room for 'a single tremendous qualitative change which is to transform and save the world' (1978:105).

⁴ Bernstein thought Hegelianism a 'treacherous element in Marxist doctrine' (1993:36), even encouraging Blanquism in Marx and Engels. He claimed that Marx and Engels in Germany after 1848, 'working on the basis of the radical Hegelian dialectic, arrived at a doctrine very similar to Blanquism' (1993:37). By romanticising the proletariat as the 'antithesis' they reached the lunacy of expecting a proletarian revolution in Germany *in 1848*: 'This position led directly to Blanquism' (1993:38). It has not been only the devil Bernstein who raised this alarm. Sebastiano Timpanaro thought that 'the intrinsically idealist character of the dialectic was not clearly recognised by either [Marx or Engels]' and that 'Hegel has had certain negative effects on the thought of Marx and Engels which cannot be brushed aside' (1975: 89, 129 n 82).

⁵ In a different language, Laclau and Mouffe repeat Bernstein: '..."dialectics" exerts an effect of closure in those cases where more weight is attached to the necessary character of an a priori transition, than to the discontinuous moment of an open articulation.' (1985:95)

chasm between the recalcitrant contingency of the world and the abstract idea of necessity could only be closed by a cult of force.⁶

Ian Parker points out that Žižek's Hegel is the one who reappeared in France in the 1930s as 'a bit of an ultra-leftist' in the lectures of (the Stalinist agent) Alexandre Kojève (2004:39). This Hegel is a 'figure of perpetual negativity' and he provides Žižek with a cluster of notions that decisively shape his own theory of revolution, such as the notion that one can retroactively constitute the grounds on which one acts, that redemptive repetition is the proper reaction to failure (the foundational idea of the New Communism), and the notion of 'abstract negativity' as the 'source and motor of revolutionary change.' The latter licenses Žižek's view of revolution as a *deus ex machine*. 'Revolution is the god lowered by stage machinery to resolve the plot and extricate the protagonist from a difficult situation. In his own words, the revolution will 'wipes the slate clean for the second act, the imposition of a new order' (quoted in Parker 2004: 43-5).⁷

Bernstein glimpsed the future - Marxists embracing a Hegelianism 'no longer contemplative' or 'inspired by the glow of twilight' but burning with 'the light of the morning...unrestrained and militant' (Finkelkraut 2001:71). This embrace carried an existential danger, outlined by the Italian Marxist Sebastiano Timpanaro: as soon as Marx decided the dialectic was a body of laws that had an objective existence (and not a mere way of thinking) then the question arose, could the Marxists 'establish the existence of these laws in reality through empirical means *without doing violence to reality in order to make it agree*

⁶ Sidney Hook contrasted "the cult of revolution" to an earlier Marxist ideal of revolution. The cultist 'rejects the processes of democratic social change as hopelessly ineffective or deceptive or both'. He also rejects the working class as hopelessly corrupted, He substitutes -this, in societies with welfare states and mass reformist social democratic parties and governments - violence, revolutionary myth, 'emancipatory terror', and dictatorship (2002:204-7). Hook might have been describing Žižek. See also Robinson and Tormey (2006).

⁷ Peter Dews (1995) argues that Žižek's (mis)reading of Hegel excludes the very possibility of self-emancipation because the subject is considered not even capable of self-reflection. Robinson and Tormey (2005) BBB. Parker notes that the result is an oscillation in his thought between conservatism and ultra-leftism, each 'the cracked mirror of the other' (2004:124).

with pre-established laws’ (1975: 89, emphasis added)?⁸ The danger to Marxism as a tradition of *emancipatory* thought was existential – to do violence to reality was also to abandon the values of freedom.

But this existential danger Žižek treats as an *opportunity*. His theory of revolution is the doing of violence to reality. It is not a process of self-emancipation but a brutal ethics of force. For example, he views the ‘achievement’ of the mass murderer Mao as ‘tremendous’ because it showed that ‘the victorious revolutionary subject is a voluntarist agent which acts against “spontaneous economic necessity”, imposing its vision on reality through revolutionary terror’ (2007b). How far we have travelled from Mar and Engels ‘self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority’.

Bernstein grasped that the marriage between an abstract philosophy of development and a ‘miraculous belief in the creative power of force’ – a union between Hegelianism and Blanquism - was the great danger lying in wait for Marxism. He warned that commentary on Blanquism tended to stop at its externals (the absurdity of the secret societies, the tragicomic failed putsches, and so on). In fact, these were only the time-bound surface expressions of an underlying political *theory* concerning ‘the immeasurably creative power of revolutionary political force and its manifestation, revolutionary expropriation’ (1993:38). A terrible destructive ardour was the fruit of the marriage between the Hegelian faith in ‘absolute necessity’ and the Blanquist faith in the transformational power of revolutionary violence. Yoked together, they were ‘the treacherous element’ that had, Bernstein insisted, ‘never been criticised from the Marxist side’ (1993:46).

The 20th century consummation: Lenin’s ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’

⁸ Milovan Djilas was another who spotted this aspect of the Hegelian legacy for Marxism. ‘In the forefront of facts marched the a priori truths; and the struggle for their realisation [which] stifled the ethical sense and even became transformed into its own ethic, the highest ethic of all’ (1969:72-3).

We should stop the ridiculous game of opposing the Stalinist terror to the ‘authentic’ Leninist legacy betrayed by Stalinism: ‘Leninism’ is a thoroughly *Stalinist* notion (Žižek 2002e: 193). What I like about Lenin is precisely what scares people about him – the ruthless will to discard all prejudices. Why not violence? (Žižek 2002c)

In the 20th century the marriage of Hegelianism and Blanquism would transform Marxism itself when Lenin substituted an anti-democratic Blanquist concept of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ for Marx’s democratic original. This substitution is the second source of Žižek’s own theory of revolution. Žižek applauds the fact that ‘Lenin violently displaces Marx’. His is a Stalinist ‘Lenin,’ the Lenin who Marxified arbitrary construction and the cult of force.

The Marx scholar Hal Draper (1986, 1987), by meticulously reconstructing the context of each and every use of the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the thought of Marx, established that the ill-starred term was invented by Marx as a way to *re-educate Blanquists away from Blanquism* by confronting the Blanquist mind with his, Marx’s, democratic conception. Marx did not have in mind a special dictatorial governmental form *at all* but was referring only to the *class content* of the state. Generally speaking, the ‘rule of the proletariat’ meant, for Marx, the working class leadership of an ‘immense majority block’ while the *governmental form* of that rule was the democratic republic: popular control over the sovereign body of the state, universal suffrage, representative democracy, a democratic constitution, and truly mass involvement in political decision-making. Engels, in his 1895 critique of the Erfurt Programme, linked (social) form and (political) content thus: ‘the working class can come to power only under the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Engels, in Draper 1986: 318).

Draper also demonstrated that Marx’s democratic conception was soon replaced by a doppelganger: the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ came to mean, to Marxists, specially

dictatorial governmental forms and policies (1987:44).⁹ Plekhanov was the originator of this fateful substitution, writing it into the programme of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903 (1987:39-41, 68-75), and Lenin would later adopt Plekhanov's conception, not as an emergency measure but - *this* was the great theoretical disaster - in principle, as the very mark of revolutionary virtue. Lenin (sounding rather like Žižek, it must be said), argued that 'The scientific term "dictatorship" means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force. The term 'dictatorship' has no other meaning than this' (1987: 90). Draper argued that this formulation was 'a theoretical disaster, first class [with] nothing in common...with any conception of the workers state' held by Marx (1987:91). Yet it is this precise formulation that Žižek adopts as the *differentia specifica* of a true revolutionary today (2000b:176). As Robinson and Tormey note, 'The 'Lenin' who arises from Žižek's work is a messianic despot ruthlessly committed to cling to power at all costs (2003: unpaginated). And Žižek is fully aware of this: 'Nothing should be accepted as inviolable ... [not] the most sacred liberal and democratic fetishes. *This* is the space for repeating the Leninist gesture today (2007a: 95)¹⁰

Žižek radicalizes Lenin's fateful substitution by calling for us to accept 'a double equation: divine violence = inhuman terror = dictatorship of the proletariat' (2008:162). He goes in for thuggish-Robespierriest talk: 'just and severe punishment of the enemies is the highest form of clemency' and 'rigor and charity coincide in terror' (2008:159). When he rescues the idea of revolutionary terror for 'today's different historical constellation' he cites Saint-Just ('That which produces the general good is always terrible') and adds this gloss:

⁹ The idea that Marx's original concept of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' was democratic, only to be systematically misunderstood by his followers, can also be found in Sidney Hook's 1934 article 'Workers Democracy' in *The Modern Monthly*, and in Lucien Laurat's *Marxism and Democracy* (Left Book Club, 1940).

¹⁰ Parker argues that Žižek is not a Marxist, but only 'uses Marxism tactically against other political and theoretical systems' (2004:96). See also Laclau's discussion of Žižek's 'rather acritical' approach to Marxism, the absence of anything other than Marx and the Russian Revolution, and his 'insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism (in Butler et al, 2000:204-6). See also Homer 2002.

‘These words should not be interpreted as a warning against the temptation to violently impose the general good on a society but on the contrary, as a bitter truth to be fully endorsed’ (2008:160). Little wonder that Žižek writes of ‘Stalinism’s inner greatness’ (2002e).

Wild Blanquism (1): Revolution as Badiouian ‘Event’

The decisive contemporary theoretical influence on Žižek’s theory of revolution is the ‘New Communism’ of the French Maoist philosopher Alan Badiou. A member of the ultra-left group L’Organisation Politique, Badiou resurrects ‘the “eternal idea” of Communism’ which is composed of ‘strict egalitarian justice, terror, voluntarism and “trust in the people.”’ In Badiou’s work the ‘revolution’ is spiritualized; no longer the descriptor of a substantive political overturn inaugurating a process of social transformation, but rather a plot point in what Terry Eagleton astutely calls Badiou’s fantastical ‘born-again narrative’ (2003:248). Casting politics in an apocalyptic mold, Badiou seeks a ‘total emancipation’ beyond both good and evil and serious political strategy. Substituting for both is unconstrained violence and pure will: ‘extreme violence [is], therefore, the reciprocal correlative of extreme enthusiasm’ he argues (2007:13).

Žižek finds the Badiouian concept of ‘Event’ a praiseworthy combination of ‘voluntarism, an active attitude of taking risks, with a more fundamental fatalism: one acts, makes a leap and then one hopes that things will turn out all right.’ After 100 million Communist corpses, Žižek thinks this is ‘precisely what we need today ... the freedom fighter with an inhuman face’ (2002a: 81-2). McLaren notes that Žižek’s marriage of Badiou’s Maoist ontology with a prior Leninist-cum-Schmittian decisionism leaves his theory of revolution curiously ungrounded (2002). To which one can only respond, you can say that again. The Žižekian-Badiouian Truth-Event is positively unhinged. For one thing it creates its

own pre-conditions: ‘a demand possesses, at a specific moment, a global detonating power; it functions as a metaphoric stand-in for the global revolution: if we unconditionally insist on it, the system will explode’ (2002b:164). Žižek Leninises (and Lacanises) this extreme voluntarism in these terms:

The Mensheviks relied on the all-embracing foundation of the positive logic of historical development; while the Bolsheviks (Lenin at least) were aware that “the big Other doesn’t exist” – a political intervention proper does not occur within the coordinates of some underlying global matrix, since what it achieves is precisely the reshuffling of this very matrix (1999).

Actually, political interventions do occur within an underlying global matrix, or what we might call ‘circumstances not of our own choosing’ or ‘conjuncture’ as we choose. Žižek’s theory of revolution has trouble seeing mere material circumstances through the incense, for his violent Truth-Event is, perhaps above all else, *salvific*. The revolution will force the individual to ‘accept that his or her life is not just a stupid process of reproduction and pleasure-seeking but that it is in service of a Truth’ (2002a:69-70). And it is only when we act with ‘excessive intensity’, risking all and being willing to die for this Truth that we can be considered to be truly alive. All else is a ‘living death,’ an ‘anemic spectacle of life dragging on as its own shadow.’

Wild Blanquism (2): Revolution as Lacanian-Antigonian ‘Act’

To transcend this miserable horizon anything goes. Enormity must be risked. Žižek’s recklessness is licensed by his (mis)reading of Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of the ‘Act’ – the fourth source of his theory of revolution.

There is a moment in Lacanian psychoanalytic clinical practice when the desperate analysand makes a ruthlessly honest self-assessment, gathering up all her courage and

ignoring all her fears in order to make a therapeutic breakthrough. Parker argues that Žižek turns this ‘psychotic “passage à l’acte” ... into something that is the model of proper political action’ (Parker 2004:80). By reading the Act in this way, and by idealizing the drive (Parker 2004:111) Žižek, I claim, renders Blanquism *wild*.

Ernesto Laclau noted the most obvious problem with all this - Žižek’s theory of revolution is ‘not ...a truly *political* reflection’ but is rather ‘a psychoanalytic discourse which draws its examples from the politico-ideological field’ (in Butler et al 2000:289). Terry Eagleton has criticised Žižek for being ‘startlingly causal, almost naive in the way he moves directly from the psychoanalytic to the political’ (2003).¹¹ Parker points out that when he generalises from the clinical to the political Žižek treats psychoanalytic change ‘as the model of social transformation’ when it plainly isn’t; we must accept the incommensurability of ‘individual self-questioning in a clinic’ and ‘political strategies in public collective space’ (2004:63). The result is a series of ‘disastrous conceptual errors’ caused by this bracketing of the profound and multiple differences between individual free association and collective political agency, and by this taking of a ‘psychotic “passage a l’ acte” in which the subject is ‘impervious to any call of the Other’ as a model for doing politics (2001a: 111, 175). Parker astutely dubs Žižek’s theory of revolution a Psychoanalytic Stalinism (2004:120).

We could also call it *Antigonian*. Sophocles’ Antigone, we will recall, was deranged by the denial of a proper burial to her brother by the King, and is eager to sacrifice herself to secure his burial. (‘And if I die for it, what happiness!’) Now *that*, says Žižek, is a real political Act, while dismissing all who oppose such violent excess and astrategic absolutism as people who ‘effectively oppose the act *as such*’ (2002a:153). Žižek’s version of the Lacanian ‘Act’ is ‘an act without after,’ as Stavrakakis puts it, i.e. psychotic and unconditional, believing that a genuine ethico-political ‘Act’ must risk death, an idea he

¹¹ See also Ebert 1999,

projects onto politics in the form of a claim that a '1794' is an inevitable and necessary corollary of each and every '1789' (2008:393; 486-7 n.10).

Stavrakakis (2007) has argued that Žižek's shifting readings of *Antigone* distort Lacan's original concept by dangerously valorising pure desire and parading a complete indifference regarding the consequences for the polity of such an unhinged Act.¹² He also claims that Žižek's is a *misreading* of Antigone who does not actually 'risk' anything, the notion of risk always implying a bare minimum of calculation and strategy. She does not so much act, or even Act, as 'act out' desire - a very poor model for political action in complex liberal democracies. The Lacanian Grigg has observed that Žižek's account of Antigone 'implies that all political action is gratuitous' while Robinson and Tormey note that 'pursuing the impossible becomes in Žižek's account not only possible but desirable' (2005:96). They helpfully point out that the figures of the Leader and the elite in Žižek's political thought 'perform the "anamorphic" role played by the analyst in clinical psychoanalysis'. Žižek's rejection of the possibility of self-emancipation is at stake here.

Because the subject (in this case, the working class or its equivalent) is constitutively incomplete, it cannot achieve its own emancipation, and needs to rely on an external agent to return its message in the 'true-inverted' form. Since 'what is "spontaneous" is the misperception of one's social position', an external agent is necessary to capitalise on the Truth of a situation (RL 5, RG 189) ... It is a manifesto for those who would substitute for others while claiming to represent them, and therefore for a repetition of the Stalinist disaster' (Robinson and Tormey, unpaginated).

Part 2: Two sources for an antitotalitarian critique

¹² Ian Parker claims 'there is a significant difference between Lacan's own references to the "act" and Žižek's' (2004:80).

The 'anonymous intentionality' of the totalitarian regime of thought and language: the critique from Claude Lefort

Claude Lefort argues that a totalitarian *regime of thought and language* is common to fascism and communism and it is the bearer of an anonymous intentionality that ensures that each form of totalitarianism 'acquires such a vast efficacy' and 'succeeds in being diffused so widely in social life' (1998:2-3). Lefort locates four bearers of this anonymous intentionality embedded within the totalitarian regime of thought. Žižek's thought I claim, is in thrall to each.

(i) The dream of a society unified and transparent to itself

The first bearer of anonymous intentionality in the totalitarian regime of thought is the dream of a society unified and transparent to itself. Lefort warns that 'With the demand for ... a concrete community freed from the reign of abstraction, is attached the endless elimination of the enemy' (1998:22). Žižek, despite a public image as a free spirit, actually yearns for a world with a 'point'. The name of his desire is 'final victories and ultimate demarcations' achieved by a 'radical and violent simplification'. He craves for a 'magical moment when the infinite pondering crystallises itself into a simple "yes" or "no."' He seeks a life lived in the service of a 'Truth' understood not as *Istina* (truth as adequacy to the facts) but as *Pravda* – 'the absolute Truth also designating the ethically committed ideal Order of the Good'. (2002a:70, 80). He follows Badiou in believing that the task of the day is nothing less than 'the advent or commencement of man: the new man ... a real creation, something that has not yet come into existence because it arises out of the destruction of historical antagonisms' (2007:16). He wants 'definitive Solutions' (capitalised) and sneers at the 'merely pragmatic temporary solutions' (2002a:78) that any democratic way of life relies upon.

The totalitarian regime of thought views the good society as wholly unified and transparent to itself. And because that is impossible to realize a host of crimes and pathologies follow in its wake. Lefort:

...the representation, which should be called phantasmal, of a society unified in all its parts, released from the opaqueness which derived from the division of interests and passions, mobilised by the task of self-realisation and the aim of eliminating all those who conspire against the power of the people ... does not this representation imply the position of someone who is detached from everyone, all-powerful, all-seeing, omniscient, thanks to whom the people calls itself One ... the image of a man who considers obedience to legality as a simple prejudice, who is constantly proving his will of iron who presents himself as invested by Destiny, elucidates the character of the regime (1998:10).

(ii) The individual subject submerged in 'Necessity' as expressed in 'The Idea'

The second bearer of anonymous intentionality in the totalitarian regime of thought is its submergence of the poor benighted individual beneath an 'Absolute Necessity' expressed by 'The Idea'. Lefort argues that totalitarianism never offers a novel idea but rather *transforms an existing doctrine into a total ideology* through 'the intensification of the belief into a comprehensive intelligibility and predictability of the processes of history' forcing the internalisation of necessity and the surrender of the individual subject (1998:14).

Žižek's recent writing, influenced again by Badiou, is saturated with the idea that the authentic life is one that is given up in self-sacrificial fidelity to the 'Event.' Martyrdom is valorized and aestheticised throughout his writings. For example, Robespierre's 'sublime greatness' lies in the fact that he was 'not afraid to die', treating his death at the hands of the revolution as 'nothing.' Žižek finds death more interesting, authentic, and meaningful than

(merely bourgeois) life. Again and again his gaze falls lovingly on death. Thus, Mao's insouciance in the face of the threat of nuclear war is lauded, as is Che Guevara's willingness to risk nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. 'There is definitely something terrifying about this attitude,' Žižek admits, but adds 'however, this terror is nothing less than the condition of freedom'. (Note, in passing, how in Žižek's hands the Antigonian embrace of the psychotic and the unhinged has become the very condition of liberation, the new base camp from which revolutionary strategy sallies out.)

The revolutionary's role is to adopt the 'proper attitude of a warrior towards death' as illustrated by, of all people, the Zen Priest Yamamoto Jocho. Žižek quotes Mr Jocho approvingly: 'Every day without fail [the warrior] should consider himself as dead ... This is not a matter of being careful. It is to consider oneself as dead beforehand'. Žižek even praises those Japanese soldiers who, during World War Two, performed their own funerals before they left for war. It is easy to laugh at this and assume Žižek is joking. But he isn't. He tells us this 'pre-emptive self-exclusion from the domain of the living' is 'constitutive of a radical revolutionary position' (2008).

Lefort points out that it is the totalitarian ideology *itself* that establishes the supreme law, exalted far above law-as-such which shrinks to mere command, indistinguishable from terror (1998:14). Because Žižek's revolution is a 'magic moment of enthusiastic unity of a collective will' then even mass murder can be valorised when carried out in the name of that enthusiasm. Mao's Red Guards, for example, may have killed half a million people during the Cultural Revolution but for Žižek all is redeemed because... it 'sustained revolutionary enthusiasm'; indeed, it was 'the last big installment in the life of this Idea' (2008:207). Žižek invites his readers to 'heroically accept this "white intellectual's burden" (2008:107), observing that Heidegger was great 'not in spite of, but because of his Nazi engagement' (2008:119) while Foucault's support for the Iranian Islamists is to be applauded because

'[w]hat matters is not the miserable reality that followed the upheavals, the bloody confrontations, the new oppressive measures, and so on, but the enthusiasm that the events in Iran stimulated in the external (Western) observer, confirming his hopes in the possibility of a new form of spiritualised political collective'.

(iii) '*Organisation*' to control and regulate behaviour in every sphere of life

The third element of the totalitarian regime of thought that bears its anonymous intentionality is the use of organisation to 'place the doctrine at the service of a plan for total domination' and ensure the end of the distinction between the political and the non-political (1998:14). The ideology is grounded in a 'single source, that of power materialised in the party' and that party presents its unity as 'untouchable.' Thus, in totalitarianism, 'the power of discourse and the discourse of power become indistinguishable' (1998:3-4) The most shocking example of this *erasure of the gap between might and right* in Žižek's own writings is this ugly piece of braggadocio.

To be clear and brutal to the end there is a lesson to be learned from Hermann Goering's reply, in the early 1940s, to a fanatical Nazi who asked him why he protected a well-known Jew from deportation: "In this city, I decide who is a Jew!" (2008:136)

Why is a cynical Nazi thug an exemplar for Žižek? Because he wants to *mimic* Goering. He admits that *he too* yearns for a future in which he can say "In this city we decide what is left" and in which he can "simply ignore liberal accusations of inconsistency".¹³

¹³ One mystery of the Žižek phenomenon is that he loudly informs the left-liberal academics who fawn over him that he is itching to send them to the camps, Goering-style! How to explain this? Deep self-loathing in the liberal democracies ('Down With Us!'), deep unseriousness in the academy (social theory as a form of entertainment and play) and the deep penetration of intellectual life by the celebrity culture (Žižek is enjoyed as an entertainer - 'the Elvis of cultural theory' - or a narcotic, capable of providing the best 'intellectual high') – for sure, these all play their part. But there is something else. Anne Appelbaum, author of *The Gulag*, calls it a 'dearth of feeling'. The average Western leftist is simply unchastened; he or she lacks a sensibility reshaped by a deep and sustained engagement with *left-wing* totalitarianism.

Lefort understood that unlike mass parties that operate in democratic societies, the entire point of organisation in totalitarian ideology is ‘to control and regulate behaviour in all spheres of social life ... all situations where human relations are formed outside institutional frameworks ... to render everything organisable, everything [a] matter for party organisation’ (1998:16). By erasing the distinction between the political and the non-political, the totalitarian ideology renders suspect *all* social ties forged by ‘a spontaneous mode of socialisation’. But as spontaneity can’t actually be fully repressed, the active minority must stand guard over the ‘maleficent adversary who is everywhere active [and] conspiratorial’ (1998:17).

That is why Žižek yearns for a time when ‘terms like “revisionist traitor” were not yet part of the Stalinist mantra, but expressed an authentic engaged insight’ (2000b 177), and he expresses such nostalgia for the good old days when GDR workers would have their marriage raked over by co-workers because, after all, ‘private problems themselves (from divorce to illness) are put into proper perspective by being discussed in one’s working collective’ (2001a:133). Žižek’s image of the post-revolutionary society is captured in his opinion that ‘Lenin was right: after the revolution, the anarchic disruptions of the disciplinary constraints of production should be replaced by an even stronger discipline’ (2000b:177).

(iv) Embracing the totalitarian politico-aesthetic of the ‘substantialist ideal,

The fourth bearer of anonymous intentionality within the totalitarian regime of thought is its aestheticised incorporation of all individuals in one social ‘body’: the ‘substantialist ideal’. Lefort notes the price: first, the constant replication and representation of the state-unified people not only functionally but also in a host of state-run front organizations, and second, a new bloody aesthetics in which the drama of the healthy social body in pursuit of purity, fighting off its parasites to survive, is played out endlessly.

Badiou says a revolutionary must view the world as ‘an ancient world full of corruption and treachery. One has to constantly start again with purification...’ (2007:14) Žižek is attracted by the aesthetic of ‘the new man who gladly accepts his role as a bolt or screw in the gigantic coordinated industrial Machine’. The poor benighted individual is exactly ‘what is to be crushed, stamped on, mercilessly worked over, in order to produce a new man’ (**CHU 131**).

This Žižekian hatred for the parasite, expressed in his thuggish Goering-talk for example, saturates his writings. In ‘The Leninist Freedom’ he reports gleefully on Lenin’s response to the Menshevik defenders of democracy in 1920: ‘Of course, gentlemen, you have the right to publish this critique – but, then, gentlemen, be so kind as to allow us to line you up against the wall and shoot you!’ (Actually, Lenin said ‘Do your job, gentlemen – we too will do our job,’ but Žižek captures his meaning well enough.) (**ref**)

The adoption of the tone of the commissar and the aestheticising of murder - these are two sure signs of the anonymous intentionality of the totalitarian regime of thought eating its way through a thinker.¹⁴ Since then, Žižek’s writings have all been cast in this leather-booted register. Orwell and Camus, Arendt and Berlin are all abused: ‘Anti-totalitarian thought appears in all its misery as what it really is, a worthless sophistic exercise, a pseudo-theorisation of the lowest opportunist survivalist fears and instincts, a way of thinking that is ... reactionary’ (2008:4). Antitotalitarians are ‘conformist liberal scoundrels’ who denounce ‘every attempt to change things’ and like the Mensheviks, they deserve to be shot (2001a:4). Big Lies backed up by violence: the New Communism mimicking the Old, albeit only using words, for now.

No Socialism Without Democracy: the critique from Hal Draper

¹⁴ It has been eating its way through Žižek since around 2000 when he made his turn to linksfaschismus in the middle of his debate with Ernesto Laclau, the decisive rupture in his political thought.

Žižek has called for a 'left alternative to democracy' (**ref**) and he has praised philosophers, from Plato to Heidegger, who have been 'mistrustful of democracy, if not directly anti-democratic' (2008:102). On the very first page of *In Defense of Lost Causes* he announces that there is no difference between three statements: 'the Church synod has decided', 'the Central Committee has passed a resolution,' and 'the people have made clear its choice at the ballot box'. (2008:1). Praising Alain Badiou's view that 'Today, the enemy is ... called Democracy' (in Žižek 2008:183) Žižek rejects democracy is 'in its very notion a passivization of the popular Will' (2009c:135) and a form of 'corruption' (2009c:136) and – an echo of Plato, the original totalitarian – a political system unable to provide a 'place for Virtue'. He scorns liberal-democratic politics as a void and its partisans as 'the party of the non-Event' (2002a:151). A tendentious joke hints at his alternative. 'You've had your anti-communist fun, and you are pardoned for it – time to get serious once again!' (2009c:157).

Is democracy a luxury that no theory of revolution can afford? Hal Draper's four volume *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution* aimed to establish how seriously Marx took democracy. He was 'the first socialist figure to come to an acceptance of the socialist idea through the battle for the consistent expression of democratic control from below.' Marx, uniquely, 'came through the bourgeois-democratic movement: through it to its farthest bounds, and then out by its farthest end. In this sense, he was the first to fuse the struggle for consistent political democracy with the struggle for a socialist transformation.' Marx's revolution in thought was not Capital but his claim that it was *only* on the social ground of *self-emancipation* that the *integration* of political democracy and the 'social question' could be worked out:

Marx's theory moved in the direction of defining consistent democracy in socialist terms and consistent socialism in democratic terms. The task of theory ...is not to adjudicate a clash between the two considerations...but rather *to grasp the social*

dynamics of the situation under which the apparent contradiction between the two is resolved. (emphasis added)

It is those very social dynamics - i.e. self-emancipation - that Žižek's theory of revolution brackets. For Marx: 'We say to the workers: "You will have to go through fifteen, twenty, fifty years... to change yourselves and fit yourselves for the exercise of political power."' ¹⁵ For Žižek: 'We are the ones we have been waiting for' (2009c:154). Marx believed the *first* step was 'winning the battle of democracy' because the encroachment of a new social logic is impossible without untrammelled democracy, civil liberties, a culture of pluralism, with maximum space for initiative from below, and for enforcing the accountability of the government representatives. Žižek prefers Badiou: 'the enemy is called Democracy'.

Žižek and Badiou ignores another harsh lesson of the Stalinist experience - *without democracy, stratification equals totalitarianism*. They both desire to give a fresh existence to the communist hypothesis but they yearn for a *redemptive repetition*. They believe the obstacle to the communist hypothesis is to find its new conditions of existence; *the hypothesis itself* is placed beyond criticism, the Event to which one has fidelity. In pursuit of redemptive repetition of the communist hypothesis 'Wild Blanquism' functions to ward off a confrontation with communism's historical nemesis: real people (not Badiou's totalitarian category 'The People'). By 'resignifying terror', by mocking all who warn of a totalitarian danger, by rehabilitating the educational dictatorship, by grounding politics in a Truth that must be imposed against the people in the name of 'The People' Badiou and Žižek *evade* those 100 million corpses and by so doing prepare new slaughters. As Robinson and Tormey put it, Žižek simply refuses to 'stop and think'. Ultimately, Žižek's is 'a politics based on formal structural categories instead of lived historical processes' (Robinson and Tormey

¹⁵ See Norman Geras' essay 'Marxism and Proletarian Self-Emancipation' for the case that the principle of self-emancipation is 'central, not incidental, to historical materialism' (1986:134).

2005:103). There is what Engels, talking of Babouvist “Conspiracy of the Equals,” called ‘Communism...of a very rough and superficial kind’ (quoted in Draper 1986:120-1).

Draper argues a materialist case for democracy being the sine qua non of self-emancipatory socialism. Certainly, for Marx, democracy is ‘not merely of sentimental or moral value ... nor is it merely a preference. It is ‘the only way in which the rule of the working class can exist in political actuality’ and ‘you cannot have any kind of democracy ... without the political freedom of people to enter into opposition uncontrolled as far as the government is concerned’ (Draper 1962).

Bracketing Marx and his concept of self-emancipation, Žižek leans instead on Leon Trotsky’s worst book, *Terrorism and Communism*, written when his thought was undergoing ‘a deep-going and systematic break with Marx on the nature of a workers state’ in 1920 (Draper 1987:139). He praises Trotsky’s disastrous notion that ‘the Soviet regime ... achieve[s] meaning not in statically reflecting a majority, but in dynamically creating it’ - quite as if the Gulag had never happened.¹⁶

Conclusion: Why We Must Keep Saying Totalitarianism

Today, the Left desperately needs theoretical resources that help it to do two things at once: deepen and extend the democratic revolution begun in the 18th century, while completing what the French antitotalitarian writer Pierre Rosanvallon calls the ‘reconceptualisation of the political in the light of the totalitarian experience’ (2006). Slavoj Žižek’s theory of revolution sunders the political project of the left from both. It reprises as an academic farce in this century what was a genuine tragedy in the last, when, in the plangent words of Albert Camus, ‘The great event of the twentieth century was the forsaking of the values of freedom by the

¹⁶ In March 1921 Trotsky defended the party’s right to ‘assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy’ (cited in Geras 1986:164). Norman Geras, writing as a Trotskyist in 1970, described a revolutionary who had badly lost his way in 1919-1921, taking up ‘authoritarian positions which amounted to an explicit violation of the principles of socialist democracy...’

revolutionary movements. Since that moment a certain hope has disappeared from the world and a solitude has begun for each and every man' (quoted in Howe 1982:132-3). Žižek may make us laugh. But he does not restore that hope, nor lift that solitude.

References

- Budgen, Sebastian, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek (2007) 'Introduction: Repeating Lenin' in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- Badiou, Alain (2007) 'One Divides Itself into two' in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) 'Introduction: Repeating Lenin' in *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- Bernstein, Eduard (1993) (1899) *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (2000) *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, London.
- Colletti, Lucio (1972) *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, Verso, London.
- Dews, Peter ()
- Djilas, Milovan (1969) *The Unperfect Society. Beyond the New Class*, Unwin Books, London.
- Draper, Hal (1962) Transcript of a talk to Centre for Study of Democratic Institutions, Santa Barbara, (unpublished, May 4).
- Draper, Hal (1986) *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution. Volume III The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat'*, Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Draper, Hal (1987) *The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' from Marx to Lenin*, Monthly

- Review Press, New York.
- Eagleton, Terry (2003) *Figures of Dissent. Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*, Verso, London.
- Finkielkraut, Alain (2001) *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, Pimlico London.
- Geras, Norman (1986) *Literature of Revolution. Essays on Marxism*, Verso, London.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London.
- Howe, Irving (1982) *A Margin of Hope, An Intellectual Autobiography*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York.
- Hook, Sidney (2002) 'The Cult of Revolution' in *Sidney Hook on Pragmatism, Democracy and Freedom*, edited by Robert B. Talisse and Robert Tempio, Prometheus Books, New York.
- Kellog, Paul (2008) *Slavoj Žižek's failed encounter with Leninism*, Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal, <http://links.org.au/node/1500>
- Kirsch, Adam (2008) 'The Deadly Jester', *The New Republic*, December 2.
- Kolokowski, Leszek (1978) *Main Currents of Marxism, Vol.2. The Golden Age*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London.
- Lefort, Claude (1998) 'The concept of totalitarianism', *Papers in Social Theory*, Warwick Social Theory Centre, Coventry. Lefort's essay was reprinted in *Democratiya* 9 (Summer 2007) http://dissentmagazine.org/democratiya/article_pdfs/d9LeFort.pdf.
- See also 'Introducing Claude Lefort: From the Critique of Totalitarianism to the Politics of Democracy' by Dick Howard, *Democratiya* 11, Winter 2007.

http://dissentmagazine.org/democratiya/article_pdfs/d11Howard.pdf

McLaren, P. (2002) 'Slavoj Žižek's naked politics: Opting for the impossible, a secondary elaboration', *Journal of Advanced Composition Quarterly*, 21 (3), pp. 614-37.

Parker, Ian (2004) *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, Pluto, London.

Robinson Andrew and Tormey, Simon (2003) "What is Not to be Done! Everything you wanted to know about Lenin, and (sadly) weren't afraid to ask Žižek", unpublished manuscript. Available at

<http://web.archive.org/web/20061207054738/http://homepage.ntlworld.com/simon.tormey/articles/Žižeklenin.pdf>

Robinson, Andrew and Simon Tormey (2005) 'A Ticklish Subject? Žižek and the Future of Left Radicalism, *Thesis 11*, 80, pp.94-107.

Robinson, Andrew and Simon Tormey (2006) 'Žižek's Marx: 'Sublime Object' or a 'Plague of Fantasies'?' *Historical Materialism*, 14, 3, pp. 145-174.

Rosanvallon, Pierre (2006) *Democracy Past and Future*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Shachtman, Max (1998) (1944) 'The Party We Need', in *The Fate of the Russian Revolution. Lost Texts in Critical Marxism Vol 1*, edited by Sean Matgamna, Phoenix Press, London.

Stavrakakis, Yannis (2007) *The Lacanian Left*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Timpanaro, Sebastiano (1975) *On Materialism*, Verso, London.

Žižek, Slavoj (1999) *When the Party Commits Suicide*. The Human Rights Project

<http://www.bard.edu/hrp/Žižekessay2.htm>.

Žižek, Slavoj (2000a) 'An Interview with Slavoj Žižek' conducted by Matthew Beaumont and Martin Jenkins, *Historical Materialism* 7, Winter.

Žižek, Slavoj (2000b) 'Postface: Georg Lukacs as the philosopher of Leninism' in Georg

- Lukacs, A Defence of History and Class Consciousness. Tailism and the Dialectic, Verso, London.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2001a) *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion*, Verso, London.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2001b) 'The Leninist Freedom' available as an extract from *On Belief* at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ot/Žižek.htm>
- Žižek, Slavoj (2002a) *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, London.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2002b) 'A cyberspace Lenin-why not?' In *International Socialism* 95, Summer.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2002c) *Interview with Doug Henwood*
<http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2002/59/Žižek.html>
- Žižek, Slavoj (2000d) *The Fragile Absolute*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2002e) *Revolution At The Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, New York: Verso
- Žižek, Slavoj (2005) 'Revenge of Global Finance', *In These Times*, May 21.
<http://www.lacan.com/Žižekfinance.htm>
- Žižek, Slavoj (2007a) 'A Leninist Gesture Today: Against the Populist Temptation', in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, edited by Sebastian Budgeon, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek, Durham, Duke University Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2007b) *Mao Zedong: The Marxist Lord of Misrule*, Lacan.com
<http://www.lacan.com/zizmaozedong.htm>
- Žižek, Slavoj (2008) *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2009) *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Verso, London.

