

The Materialism of Spirit  
Zižek and the Political

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How does the political emerge in contemporary society? In his compelling opus, *Politics and Vision*, Sheldon Wolin shows how early (liberal) modernity was characterised by a steady absorption of the political into a rational organicist conception of society that was dominated by discourses of universal technique: governance (statecraft), economics, sociology and so on (Wolin, 2004: 257-263). With the rise of a postmodern ethos and its affirmation of diversity and disorganicism, however, the paradigmatic view is that our age is one that is marked essentially by a return of the political (e.g. Lefort, 1986, Mouffe, 1993, Rancière, 2007). Our condition is one of basic reflexivity in which there is a central awareness that human reality is always a contingent-historical enterprise that can only achieve the semblance of authenticity through practical forms of political engagement.

Yet are these two paradigms so far removed from each other? Along the lines of Han Blumenberg (1986), is there not a certain re-occupation of the ground of substantial organicism with a kind of pure politicism? Early rational optimism has given way to a melancholic view of engagement with the world in which we always miss the 'real thing' but which, in Freudian terms, appears even more present through persistent referral to its absence/impossibility. Universality is dissolved and, at the same time, reborn through a cosmopolitan pragmatism regulated by an ethics of failure and incompleteness. Moreover does not the assertion that we are eternally haunted by the mercurial remainders of every undertaking comprise effectively the 'professional' technique of today's hegemonic player and their sense of the political?

A predominant view in postmodern thought is that the labour of philosophy is essentially over: the old paradigms have dissolved and the new era is one of practical political engagement. Yet it is precisely in respect of the latter – the on-the-ground issues of strategy, radicalisation, effective intervention and so on – that philosophical tensions are again becoming more explicit. It is in this context that the question of materialism and its relationship with politics, and the political, is assuming critical importance.

Idealist and materialist positions have been presented traditionally as exclusivist. While idealism involves the attempt to realize the inner necessity of the world in some way, materialism is viewed as an explicit rejection of the latter. In a materialist approach the emphasis is placed on that which is always in excess of necessity and intrinsicity (i.e. matter) and which thereby frustrates all attempts at final positivistic realization. The deconstructive intercession, however, has been to show how this type of distinction is actually a precarious historical construct that is itself prone to de-stabilization and re-configuration. In this sense, materialist excess and openness only makes sense in relation to idealist undertakings to establish closure, and the latter exists as an ongoing endeavour to master the former. Against an idealist ‘metaphysics of presence’ – and, in particular, Hegel’s notion of the dialectical absorption of all inessentials – Derrida presents a new type of ‘transcendental’ metaphysics that is crucially emptied of independent positive content. Conceived in terms of ‘trace’, ‘différance’, ‘undecidability’ and so forth, this (post-) metaphysical order of thought is one that underscores not only the ineradicable nature of excess/negativity but also the insurmountable and ongoing tensions between the idealist and materialist tendencies.

On this view the notion of the political – as developed by Lefort and relayed through Rancière, Balibar, Laclau and Mouffe and others – is considered to bear witness to this type of materialist metaphysics. The political is an unbinding that shows the contingency of all origins. It is constitutive of, but set apart from, all order and systematicity and is thereby bestowed a basic primacy and autonomy. Indeed the concept of the political has taken on an almost totemic quality in contemporary discourse. But is this justified? Does the political represent a pure release of possibility in the manner that is generally suggested and what consequences does it hold for political practice? More specifically, does the political reveal the proper dimension of materiality at work? As a way of approaching these questions, this paper will begin with a discussion of certain key insights from Hegel.

### Hegel on *The Beach*

In German idealism the question of engagement with, and being in, the world becomes paramount. In different ways, what this philosophy renders visible is not only an asymmetry between human beings and the world but also an intrinsic asymmetry between the human being and itself. As Hegel puts it:

‘Man is a spirit only insofar as he knows himself and has arrived at that state of division and opposition whose destiny contains both good and evil’ (Hegel, 1975: 217).

Our nature is precisely supernatural in its condition of estrangement and irreconcilability as regards the order of being. Man is the ‘antithesis of nature’ (Hegel, 1975: 45), such that our destiny is one that has to be made, not discovered. Yet Hegel is often presented as an arch idealist who affirms the progressive overcoming of all negativity towards the Idea: an ultimate understanding of the inner rationality of all that is Real. In this way, Hegel is seen as a thinker who tries (and fails) to resolve the dimension of excess through his method of dialectical conflictuality. From a Žižekian perspective, however, this critical dismissal is somewhat premature. Against conventional reading, Hegel should be seen as a kind of indigestible figure vis-à-vis Enlightenment thought. That is to say, Hegel does not conceive reason as an independent process of progressive illumination over the dark forces of irrationality, madness and so on that dwell beyond its domain - rationality does not struggle to overcome an external threat. The point is rather that reason is something that has to contend with its own excesses, its constitutive madness (see Žižek & Daly, 2004: 61-63). In striving for basic universals – order, justice, peace and so on – reason is simultaneously confronted by its very own capacity to break with the latter and to strive for the Kantian perversity of ‘diabolical evil’ along the lines of Sade. This is the very condition of division and opposition that dominates our supernatural existence. Against Enlightenment philosophy, darkness is seen to be at the very centre of our engagement with the world. For Hegel the illumination of reason is ultimately a certain perspective on the existential ‘night of the world’ and, of course, *vice versa*. So the analytical lens needs to be drawn further back. Implicit in Hegel – though arguably not fully developed – is the notion that idealist endeavour is always confronted by an excess/madness which is thoroughly inherent and constitutive. In the very midst of his philosophical reflections, Hegel is drawn inexorably towards

a radical materialism. His absolute idealism becomes simultaneously an affirmation of the absolute inhesion of excess and negativity.

From this perspective it is instructive to look again at two novels that *prima facie* explore similar themes: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Alex Garland's *The Beach*. Reflected here is a basic tension between the Enlightenment and Hegelian approaches to reason/law. With Golding we have the allegorical tale of a group of youths stranded on an island and who, in the absence of a strong symbolic order of law, fall prey to their primitive urges and passions with disastrous consequences – the Hobbesian nightmare of a return to the state of nature. In Garland's novel, by contrast, there is an inversion of this theme. The problem does not concern the absence of law – thereby giving free reign to the passions – but rather the way in which the latter is inherently supplemented by excess. As Garland's story unfolds what we discover is that it is precisely in the midst of rationalising the new order of the beach community, and establishing its regulatory principles, that the nightmarish excess is born. The narrative reflects the uncanny distinction/relationship between the beach as a set of contingent features and its supernatural qualities (its universal spirit). What the central character, Richard, understands is that the object of his quest is more than a mere 'beach resort' (as it is initially described by the character of Sal – the obscene leader of the 'community'), but that it contains within it the potential of becoming the utopic space. The issue is not so much one of finding as one of inscription and identification; of marking the space in terms of basic universals (freedom, harmony, fulfilment and so on). In Hegelian terms, Richard understands that the contingent elements of the 'resort' need to be transposed in order that their inner necessity can be realised at the level of spirit. It is on these grounds that he is prepared to carry out the various acts of violence, murder and expulsion; acts which are not the result of a simple breakdown of law/reason but which are carried out in tacit support of the latter, for the purpose of the general good etc. What Richard bears witness to is the way in which the community-ideal is typically rooted in a (superego) structure of excess. He becomes a functionary along the lines of Hegel's notion of the cunning of reason: i.e. the way in which reason manipulates the (unconscious) passions with a view to incarnating itself.

So this is not the Enlightenment-based cautionary tale of Golding (that you need a strong universal-rational system of law in order to contain the passions of mere individuals), but precisely the opposite: it narrates a process whereby the very commitment to regulate a coherent and integrated social space, with all its rituals, prohibitions and so on, is one that contains and releases its own passions. The passions explode not despite reason but because of reason and its

visionary aptitude. This passionate (excessive) attachment to reason is also reflected in the cover illustration of the paperback version of the novel: the image of an eye that is even more intensely blue than the shoreline water and which is suggestive of the way in which reason is sustained (and sutured) by the very gaze of fantasmatic inscription.

### The Spirit of the Political (and the Political in the Spirit)

A crucial theme in Hegel concerns the capacity of reason to contemplate itself in its Otherness. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’, for example, confront each other as different types of rationale on a perspectival continuum. This reflexive dimension allows for a different way of thinking about materialism and politics. In postmarxism the political is understood generally to name an irresolvable gap between contingency and necessity: there is (incomplete) order and there is an infinite capacity (in principle) to subvert that order. On these grounds democracy is affirmed as a unique historical configuration which is able to contemplate its own contingency and to thereby assign a proper materialist dignity to the dimension of the political. For postmarxism democracy contains the promise of a new form of engagement in which political subjects acknowledge hegemony as a basic existential and demonstrate an awareness of both their historical limitations and the provisional and partial basis of their interventions. In this way hegemony and the political are presented as categories that are reaching their full maturation in the context of the logics of contemporary democracy.

Yet the distinction between necessity and contingency – where hegemony and the political are typically viewed as allied to the latter – is, from a Hegelian perspective, overdrawn. For Hegel the point is rather to see how necessity develops (retroactively) in the very midst of contingency. In other words, what is overlooked is an account of the speculative dimension of spirit: i.e. the continually unfolding historical attempts to realize a rational consistency vis-à-vis lived existence. Spirit is something that marks the supernatural and contingent character of our engagement with the world. As he puts it, ‘the spirit begins in a state of infinite potentiality’ (Hegel, 1975: 131). Spirit does not refer to anything outside itself but is entirely self-positing with the sole purpose of attempting to produce and actualize its consciousness in objective terms: to disclose and reify the universal principles, or truth, that implicitly govern our engagement with the world.

In this context reason functions as a reflection of ‘self-conscious spirit’ (Hegel, 1975: 209). But this is not to embrace simple closure. As Hegel points out repeatedly, spirit is something that by its very nature and movement introduces the very divisions and dissonances that it seeks to overcome:

‘Spirit in the element of essence is the form of simple oneness, which therefore is equally essentially an othering of itself...In this simple beholding of itself in the ‘other’ the otherness is therefore not posited as such; it is the difference which, in pure thought, is immediately no difference; a loving recognition in which the two sides, as regards their essence, do not stand in antithetical relation to each other’ (Hegel, 1977: 466-67).

Spirit engenders its Otherness and simultaneously engenders *itself* in striving for reconciliation with that Otherness. Notions of good and evil, for example, cannot be externally measured: ‘Evil lies not so much in an abuse of natural existence as in the very conception of it as other than, remote from, Spirit’ (Hegel, 1977: 588). Reason, moreover, can be likened to love in the sense that both may be said to function in terms of losing and finding themselves in the other (Harris, 1993: 28). This stands in stark contrast to the Enlightenment view of reason as (objectivist) illumination. For Hegel reason is something that bears witness to the constitutive darkness within such illumination. It shows how dissonance and negativity are integral to the world spirit of human endeavour; reason cannot come into being without Otherness and excess. So far from being a pan-rationalist – where history is reduced simply to *a priori* principles – Hegel’s thought can be seen in terms of a radical perspectivism. In this sense the phenomenology of spirit needs to be taken quite literally for there is nothing to be discovered behind spirit - there is no objectivism waiting to be rationally uncovered. Reality results from the realm of multiple spirits where each (historical) spirit succeeds another by becoming aware precisely of its own limit; a limit which is both constitutive and impelling in terms of world history. Spirit fundamentally is its own depth. It is ‘the Subject of the movement and is equally the *moving* itself’ (Hegel, 1977: 477). This is what Hegel means by the ‘absolute notion’ (Hegel, 1977: 492). And it is in these terms that we can speak of the materialism of spirit.

The implicit materialism here is also present in Hegel’s view that spirit cannot be abstracted from its phenomenal context (Hegel, 1975: 96). Spirit does not simply ‘float’ but is always embodied in some sense. It exists as a kind of surplus dynamic to the phenomenal context, refining and drawing the latter towards a realization of a conceptual ‘necessity’ that results from this dynamic. Here the contemplative element of democracy – i.e. the institutionally inscribed ‘awareness’ of

the empty place of power and so on – can be given a different twist. In other words, we can extend Hegel’s argument concerning the speculative nature of spirit to democracy and the way that it reflects upon, and reproduces itself through, its own forms of contingency in characteristic fashion – contingency which, in its very field of engagement, become necessary to it.

We might also say that Hegel adds a third element, a kind of negation of the negation. In classical democracy there is the positing of democracy as a communitarian ideal (an elite polis). With modern democracy there is a progressive rejection of this ideal and a new emphasis on contingency and the autonomy of politics. Finally there emerges an Hegelian auto-reflective dimension of democracy: something that refines the paradigmatic quality of democratic engagement with its own non-ideal/Othering and thereby underscoring its constitutive limits. From this viewpoint, democracy (even radical democracy) should not be thought of as simply liberating ‘the political’ as such, but rather as something that gives rise to a specific historical spirit of the political.

The liberal-capitalist-democratic imagination and its attempts to realize a world order, for example, shows how the dominant paradigm is speculatively engaging with its inherent Othering and trying to take its own dissonances and counter-forces into account. Thus the ‘contingent’ antagonisms of terrorism, civilization clashes and so on are presented as the ongoing birth pangs of an ascendant global harmony. It is in this context that Žižek speaks of an ultra-political where the gaze is directed to an external threat in order to sustain the overall functioning of the system (Žižek, 1999: 190). The ‘war on terror’ functions as an implicit supplement to Western liberal tolerance – they are part of the same economy. Just as we have the idea of sustainable farming, resources and tourism (etc.) - conceived as part of an existing ‘ecological’ whole - we can say that in international politics there exists a kind of sustainable terrorism: i.e. a constitutive ‘recognition’ in support of a certain holistic (and retroactive) unfolding.

But with the ultra-political perhaps we should also speak of an *infra*-political. Improvising on Lacan we might characterise this as the political less than the political. The *infra*-political is essentially ‘fake’ in the sense that it opens a certain space for contingency and subversion but in ways that do not fundamentally challenge the existing order within which it is functioning. There is a certain ‘grammar’ at work that filters the acceptable from the non-acceptable in its reproduction. This is especially true of our multiculturalist ethos where the emphasis is primarily on difference and accommodation. More and more the tendency today is for organisations to

develop an auto-reflective capacity (an institutional spirit) that embodies this ethos but which, at the same time, gives rise to its own prohibitions and taboos. In British social welfare, for example, the official position regarding employment is that if unemployed persons have moral, religious and/or cultural objections to particular jobs (e.g. retail in adult shops) then they have the right to be offered an alternative. While this self-reflecting differential awareness appears appropriate at one level, what remains hidden and untouched is the ‘natural’ premise that people should be obliged to take on some form of work in such circumstances: i.e. it is they, rather than the economic system (which relies upon structural unemployment and under-employment), who must assume responsibility for their own marginalisation – they must adopt a work-ethic towards a system that ethically betrays them. So what is disavowed is the more basic marginalisation behind the surface marginalisation.

At the other end of the spectrum we see how the paradigm of ‘business ethics’ continues to expand rapidly in academia and corporate life. Increasing stress is placed on diversity, environmental awareness, personal growth/valorisation, the development of ‘emotional intelligence’ and so on; the world of business should be enabling and respectful. Seemingly all aspects of the working lives of people can be scrutinized, agonized over, but *not* the basic economic decisions that ultimately govern those lives – these remain sacred and inviolable. Every facet of business can be drawn into question except the logic of business itself.

The limits of today’s differential culture are explored with piercingly comedic effect in Sacha Cohen’s *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). In what is essentially a road movie, the eponymous Borat travels to the ‘US of A’ to make a documentary and to acquire information for the purpose of resolving national problems in Kazakhstan: ‘economic, social and Jew’. Driving coast to coast in a disused ice-cream van with his producer, Borat encounters different aspects of American socio-cultural life from the perspective of a ‘barbarian’. The comedy relies upon showing what happens when the reflexive economy of multiculturalist tolerance breaks down in such a way that the Other ceases to be simply ‘different’ and becomes an inassimilable real Other: someone who cannot, or will not, accept the terms of such an economy. After a series of social ‘transgressions’ Borat’s position moves, in Moebius-band-like fashion, from that of eccentric guest to unacceptable alien who consequently has to be dealt with by security/police. The dramatic purchase turns upon showing how, far from comprising a cosmopolitan ‘open society’, Western multiculturalist tolerance is, in fact, a highly regulated configuration underpinned by an authoritarian exclusivism.



The limits of the filtration process are perhaps at their most critical in respect of the issue of class. In postmodern and cultural studies discourse the notion of class tends to be treated as a virtual taboo; the very mention of which already spoils the party in its old-fashioned crudeness. Postmarxism provides theoretical grounds for rejecting the Marxist idea of class: (i) the relative homogeneity of the working class in early capitalism is progressively dissolving; (ii) the political orientation of class cannot be guaranteed in advance (see Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 75-85). Class has little/no analytical content and will not play the role that classical Marxism intended for it. Laclau and Mouffe consequently reject the Marxist view of class because it presents a closed and necessitarian picture of identity that does not reflect the true nature of contingent undecidable identities and their basic materialism.

But it is precisely this distinction that is under question. To affirm the authenticity of contingent-plural identities against the falsity of class necessity is perhaps already to adopt a certain infra-political gaze and to stand inside the reflexive economy of modern spirit. Viewed from the negative, class does not appear as a positive position (endowed with a historic destiny etc.) but rather as a non-position: the impoverished, the destitute, the 'wretched of the earth' and all those who do not 'count' - a vanishing-point of value in order for the system of socio-economic valuation to function. Along the lines of Badiou, class stands for the void that is constitutive of multiplicity. It is the alchemical *caput mortuum* (death's head) of Lacan: i.e. something which is itself empty of value but which, like a catalyst, is essential for the substance of value to be produced. So while postmarxism is right to critique the positivistic status of class, what it overlooks is a view of class as an inherent and fundamental symptom of a systemic process in which capitalism tries to realize itself as a necessity - a kind of underlying dark matter that supports and stabilizes the positive forms of the capitalist universe. And it is precisely in its condition of symptom, of necessary anomaly, that the contingent nature of capitalist necessity is shown.

This also indicates a central problem with the idea of radical democracy: that is, it does not provide any real or systematic account of today's symptoms or of those who are in a position to hold up the mirror to, to show the truth of, today's cosmopolitan capitalism. In arguing for equivalences to be established between all disaffected groups *within* the terms of the democratic imaginary, the propensity exists for radical democracy to become removed from the more basic and constitutive forms of exclusion and to become increasingly entangled in endless cycles of

infra-political networking. Political subjectivity would consequently become hyper-active - endlessly fascinated by its own positions, continually refining itself and so forth - but incapable of acting as such. So the danger exists that radical democracy could devolve into a rather empty proceduralism: regulating the provisional character of all political engagement, repeatedly marking the empty place of the universal, always reinforcing its own prohibition concerning the privileging of one democratic struggle over another and so on. It is on this basis that Norval (2004) draws direct, and rather uncomfortable, parallels between radical democracy and a Habermasian deliberative democracy. Here the radicality of radical democracy would amount to a kind of 'contingency incorporated' approach to decision-making that would do little to alter the underlying power structures.

The central point is that hegemony and the political are not simply independent categories whose time has now come and which can be fully realized in the (post) modern era. The philosophical framing of the problem is paramount. What the Hegelian perspective enables us to grasp is that the materialist 'cut' is not straightforwardly between order and contingency (with hegemony functioning as an open-ended process of particularities striving to occupy the empty place of universality) but rather between different modalities of order and contingency. And this cut already functions to deliver the political and logics of hegemony in characteristic fashion.

Luhmann, for example, shows how systems are not simply closures but rather processes of autopoietic development and encounter with their sense of 'environment'. Systems remain, as it were, fascinated by their inherent constitutive Otherness and their capacity for transformation/subversion. Autopoiesis is not simply repetition but more a kind of paradigmatic production of, and engagement with, Otherness in which the 'inside' and 'outside' of a system are parts of a reciprocal perspectivism. In contrast to Laclau's view that the (constitutive) outside of a discursive order is a '*radical* outside without any common measure with the "inside"' (Laclau, 1990: 18), emphasis should be given to the Hegelian speculative dimension in which the inside and outside reflexively contain each other. The Sadean excesses, for example, are not simply crimes *against* reason – i.e. a radical outside without any common measure with what it opposes – but rather crimes *of* reason; of reason in its Otherness (the writings of Sade show precisely their passionate attachment to bourgeois reason). What the Hegelian logic shows is that the appearance of the internal and the external is already an effect of the reflexive attempts to realize a 'totality'. It is not so much that we have 'objectivity' as a positivity of elements (Laclau, 1990: 18) which is then subject to various forms of subversion from 'outside'. The point is rather to see how being

develops in terms of a dynamic self-generating spirit that strives to posit itself as a necessary life-world-totality.

A totality, in this sense, is something that is historically improvised and which simultaneously functions to structure improvisation as such. This insight informs the Frankfurt School's critique of the jazz form. That is to say, the field of jazz improvisation and spontaneity is ultimately a set of 'subversive' variations on dominant motifs within a phonic economy. The improvisations implicitly accept the terms and conditions of the musical 'contract'. Here we see a parallel with today's 'open' discourse of rights. The imposition of human rights is increasingly an attempt, by violence, to impose liberal capitalist terms and conditions of entry as regards political engagement on a global scale. As Condoleezza Rice puts it, 'American values are universal values' - America is God's messenger (quite literally in the case of Bush).

### Suture

Taking our lead from Hegel, the central question concerning necessity is not *whether* it exists but *how* is it produced in concrete terms? Yet here it could be argued that Hegel's thought reaches a certain limit. That is to say, what is overlooked is the way in which the realization of spirit ceases to be a means to an end but becomes an end in itself: an economy of avoiding full disclosure in order to prolong production. Psychoanalysis makes a critical contribution in foregrounding this economy as an object of analysis and in drawing the consequences in respect of the constitution of social reality.

In psychoanalytic theory necessity results from an articulation of elements that revolve around a fundamental organizing principle: the Lacanian suture. Different interpretations of the latter have led to different conclusions as regards, for example, the constitution of politico-ideological reality. In postmarxism suture tends to designate an impossible-closure effect where privileged signifiers (nodal points) attempt to 'fix the meaning of a signifying chain' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 112). Yet from a psychoanalytic position – following Miller *et al* - suture does not simply fix meaning. Rather it connotes a point of exhaustion for meaning and which consequently has to be resolved (quilted) through fantasmatic support. Moreover it is at this exhaustion point that the (non-discursive) presence of *jouissance* asserts itself. Žižek gives the example of nationhood where there is an attempt to provide a meaning through reference to language, culture, humour,

moral outlook (etc.), but this widening of the signifying chain is not enriching. The chain exhausts itself and has to fall back on a tautologous reference to a 'way of life': i.e. a Thing imbued with *jouissance*. So suture is not simply closure but a point that marks a gap between the signifying chain and the Thing of enjoyment, and which thereto acts as the object-cause of that chain. It pulls off the trick of 'completing' the circuit of authenticity via a reflexive fantasy about how the Other envies and/or yearns to possess 'our' enjoyment: i.e. a fantasy about the fantasy of those deemed to be outside the privileged/intended community of *jouissance*.

In classical religious the figure of God provides the ultimate suture in liquefying all meaning. In his first letter, St. Peter – a founding pillar of the early Christian church – wrote the following on 'the meaning of service':

'For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering pain unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval'

So here we have all the elements at play. God acts as a principle of dissolving meaning through fantasmatic inscription; a final 'answer' to being up to and including pain and suffering. The silently operating injunction is to suspend critical inquiry – to stop asking 'why?' - and to embrace acceptance as a way of reaching grace. Libidinal satisfaction is derived from the knowledge of adopting the right attitude vis-à-vis God – again the fantasmatic economy of how the Other is deemed to perceive and appreciate 'us'. This in itself is its own reward: the fantasy of receiving divine approval through incommunicable communion. Perversely, the more one suffers (the more one is *tested*) the more one receives approval. The solution (to suffering etc.) is more of the same – to observe the injunction even more strictly. You get 'it' once the position of God is accepted as a liquefying horizon – the sense of closure is an effect of this.

In New Age therapies we also see this type of suturing logic at work. If you are following a particular type of diet/therapy – naturopathy, macrobiotics, sunlight diet etc. – and you continue to suffer (which is invariably the case) then you simply require more of the same: the suffering is an 'energy crisis', the release of 'negative vibrations', the need for 'cosmic/bio-rhythmic realignment' and so on. It is through an acceptance of these experiences that one truly gets 'it' (the 'real thing'). Your degree of suffering becomes the measure of your commitment: 'how much more satisfying it will be once you see it through'.

With today's predominant neo-liberal discourse the category that performs this function of suture is, of course, the market. In a way that is uncannily reminiscent of St. Peter, neo-liberal discourse refers to a kind of virtuous suffering in accordance with the exigencies of the capitalist market process. These exigencies are conferred the status of intrinsic necessity, as ultimately (and objectively) beneficent and consequently beyond meaning or critical inquiry. In support of cutting supplies in the international coffee market, Brink Lindsay - Director of the Centre for Trade Policy Studies - writes:

‘Cutting supply is painful. It means lost jobs, falling incomes, and real hardship for desperately poor people in desperately poor countries. Under the present circumstances, unfortunately, some measure of pain is unavoidable...’ (www.adamsmith.org)

Although it is ‘never pleasant for market incumbents to be displaced by more efficient new entrants’, one simply has to accept that ‘creative destruction lies at the very heart of the market process; it is not a market failure’ (Lindsay, www.adamsmith.org). The capitalist market is seen as immaculate/infallible. The more suffering that is experienced as the result of ‘creative destruction’, the more you are getting the real thing, the more you approach the blessed realm of the market. The solution to market problems is even more of itself – a deeper inscription in its divine validity. We should note here Hegel's critique of Berkeley's idealism in which God is viewed as a cosmic principle who ‘works out everything for us’. In similar vein, the market is seen as something that works out everything for us (it saves us from acting/intervening), and underpins the postmodern cliché that there are no real problems today, it is simply a matter of allowing the ‘flows’ of the market to work their magic and so on.

In this way the market suture establishes its own spectral economy. It involves the fantasy of how the Other (‘poor people’) embraces the idea of undergoing toil and struggle so that they too can become like ‘us’: i.e. a perception of how we are perceived as their elevated role models. The catch is that while ‘they’ should certainly aim to be like ‘us’ they should not approach too closely or assume any kind of parity or identity - they should maintain a proper degree of proximity (not too far and not too close). So suture is not a static form of closure. Rather it designates a dynamic process of relating to Otherness and of regulating the fantasmatic support for reproducing social reality. This allows for a more subtle approach to the one usually presented in postmarxism. For Laclau (1996) the ideological illusion consists in the idea of extra-discursive closure. More especially the ideological operation is one of attempting to attribute the impossible role of closure to a particular content: that is, the belief in a specific ‘social arrangement which can bring about

the closure and transparency of the community' (Laclau, 1996: 206). Closure cannot be fully achieved, it can only be incarnated through the equivalential deformation of the elements making up a discursive field (e.g. the concatenation of 'democracy', 'freedom of the press', 'civilization' and so on).

Yet this does not appear to be the whole story. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the ideological does not simply comprise the belief in a specific closure but connotes the broader and more complex configuration of a fantasmatic economy that supports such a belief. Paradoxically, the issue is not so much closure but how ideology maintains a certain *non-closure*; how it regulates a vital distance with the Thing of closure. Ideology sustains in critical tension precisely this gap and is rooted in a kind of libidinal clause of non-realizability. Thus it is not so much the 'grip of ideology', as Glynos (2001) puts it, but rather the *ideologisation of grip*. The ideological subject derives a perverse satisfaction from being in the very grip of an image that cannot, or should not, be approached too closely: it must remain de-reified and beyond tangible reach in order to maintain its libidinal spell. This is why the New World Order remains ultimately at the level of an abstract ideal: as something that, in order to avoid the pain of real transformation (power-sharing, the eradication of poverty, the development of equality and liberty in a meaningful sense), precisely should not be realized – 'a noble idea but...'

So the distinction between ideology, as extra-discursive closure, and the political, as the moment of openness/contingency, is not clear-cut. While ideology produces and conjures with its own non-closure, the logic of the political is not innocent of its generative conditions and can function to bring about *de facto* closure. This is one of the problems with contemporary democracy. That is to say it is the very emphasis on the 'empty place', contingency and reactivating the political that becomes the most insidious ideological aspect. Along the lines of a smoker who boasts that s/he could give up any time they want, democratic ideology is one that reproduces the fantasy that it can submit everything (including global economic activity) to conscious political control and that we could change if we *really* wanted to. In a far more insidious way than any totalitarianism, closure can be achieved through the very (fantasmatic) sense of political openness.

### Be Impossible, Demand the Realistic!

Does this perspective lead ultimately to another form of structuralist closure where nothing escapes the totalizing logic of spirit? The answer I think is negative. The point is rather to see

how the logic of the political is never a simple purity (except perhaps in a formal sense) but is always 'economized' in some way. Here we might connect Hegel with Gramsci and say that there exist historical blocs that produce, and engage with, their own sense of Otherness. We do not have a positivity of terms ('objectivity') on the one hand and political subversion (negative surplus/distortion) on the other. Rather the historical bloc attempts to deliver an entire mode of objectivity/subversion that, in a Hegelian sense, characterises the very life of a social reality. The 'totality' is not an inert fixity but constitutes a dynamic and integrative process in which there is reciprocity of movement between and within the positive and the negative dimensions. And on this very basis, the totality cannot be achieved in ultimate terms and always remains – to use Lacan's vernacular – not-all.

In this sense our autonomy is at once more precarious and more radical. Today we are bombarded with all sorts of choices (consumption, lifestyles, customization of communication technologies etc.) that identify us as 'free individuals'. Yet we also possess the capacity to refuse the field of choosing and freedom; to reject the very *modality* of making changes to our lives and to break with the terms and conditions that are implicit in the latter. Along the lines of the famous monologue from *Trainspotting*, we are in a position in which we can choose 'not to choose life'. This involves the more radical ethical freedom of which Hegel speaks and of assuming a certain position of 'being impossible' – i.e. of refusing the terms of identitarian inscription.

To avoid misunderstanding, the argument is not that we are obliged to choose between choosing and not-choosing or between capitulation and full scale assault on the existing mode of choosing. There is more ambiguity than may appear at first sight. A particular choice may be 'officially' permitted and yet implicitly prohibited (e.g. the declaration of atheism in American public life) and thus the making of that choice 'within' an existing modality may very well have the effect of undermining the modal logic. Equally, refusing to engage in making decisions or, what amounts to the same thing, making 'impossible demands' without any real substance can very quickly evoke a beautiful-soul-syndrome and an intrinsic passivity/inaction in the face of existing states of affairs. As Marx is reported to have said, insurrection is an art (cited in Trotsky, 1977). By this I take to mean that insurrection is a process of subversion that also undermines the existing logics of subversion as a way of forging new (utopic) spaces of political invention and creativity.

It is in this context that Badiou's idea of a politics of subtraction becomes important: i.e. a process of strategic withdrawal in such a way that it destroys not only the symbolic edifice but its

very architectural logic as well. Of central importance is the attitude adopted towards the liberal democratic imagination. Radical democracy is something that strives to deepen and sharpen the latter (against capitalist and repressive logics etc.). But from this perspective the task of the Left cannot be to simply embrace this imagination as if it were a *de facto* end of history containing infinite potentiality. A Left politics of subtraction would mean above all standing with the symptomatic truths of our age and recognising the way in which its multiculturalism and infra-political engagement are already implicated in, fractalised as part of, the totality of cosmopolitan capitalism and its deliquescence over such issues as global poverty and hunger.

A politics of subtraction could be further augmented by a Lacanian traversing of the fantasy or, following Žižek, a kind of excess literality. So there would be subtraction in the sense of a refusal of the suture (its implicit 'grammar'), but this would be combined with taking the logic of inscription to extreme conclusions. The one would be achieved in connection with the other. Here we could again take a lead from the character of Borat. Borat's transgressions do not simply step outside the rules. What is truly subversive about his character is his over-application of the rules. There is a formal observation of the rules ('high five', 'pleased to meet you' and so on) but from an entirely different 'place'; a place that has no place. Suffice it to mention two sublime scenes from the film: the rodeo and dinner party. At the opening of the rodeo Borat gives a speech in which he interprets literally and enthusiastically the 'kick-ass' culture of America:

'We support your war of terror...May US and A kill every single terrorist. May George Bush drink the blood of every single man, woman and child of Iraq. May you destroy their country so that for the next thousand years not even a single lizard will survive in their desert.'

This rude interpretation of 'well-intended' Americans is, in a way, far more subversive than straightforward 'political' satire precisely because it serves to de-regulate the proper distance from the obscene superego world of *jouissance* and to demonstrate the underlying collective fervour. It reveals, as it were, the flammable nature of public liberal sentiments as fuelled by enjoyment.

In the middle-class setting of a dinner party, by contrast, there is the almost painful encounter where Borat presents the hostess with his faecal matter in a plastic bag and asks her politely where to put it. At one level this can be read as a kind of returning of the message in inverted form: you patronize us as barbarians so we will play the barbarian for you ('he's a delightful



man...it wouldn't take very much time for him (Borat) to really become Americanized'). But more importantly he literally assumes the position of naïve subordinate - always seeking guidance, asking permission and acting to the letter. There is constant probing of the 'American Way' as regards, for example, the extent to which hospitality can be extended – the party quickly turns sour when it is revealed that Borat has invited his friend, a black prostitute. In this way bourgeois cosmopolitanism, in its very practice of openness, is revealed as something that relies on implicit rules that strictly regulate the mode of social inclusion/exclusion.

This also holds for today's democracy. Just as Borat is obliged to be gracious towards his hosts and not unduly test their hospitality, the Western *zeitgeist* is one that projects democracy as infinitely adaptable and open-ended, but which nonetheless we should not place too heavy a burden upon (lest it become 'overloaded', 'ungovernable' and so on). In effect Western democracy exhibits a form of institutional narcissism in the sense of relishing but not realizing its potential. We are no longer confronted with the old problem of politics (i.e. scarce resources in the face of exorbitant demands), rather the mystery of today's politics is that we have relatively unlimited resources but extremely modest demands. This is the perversity identified by the Frankfurt School: a collective moral investment in our condition of socio-economic betrayal. So we might say that a contemporary form of Bolshevism is something that has to be supplemented by a kind of Boratism: that is, an attempt to seize historical opportunities by detonating the critical markers (the points of suture) that allow for the flow of liberal-capitalist currency in a relatively undisturbed way.

The ideological predicament of today's capitalism is that, in determinate socio-economic terms, it is no longer confronted with a clear sense of enemy (as in the 'evil empire' of the Soviet bloc). The old formula that socialism is an ideal and dangerous fantasy while capitalism provides a practical alternative that appeals directly to the foibles of human nature is becoming increasingly redundant. Capitalism is effectively 'the last man standing' and the struggles that it sees itself faced with are presented as largely 'empirical' threats: the remainders of barbarity, ignorance and so on. Yet this is where the problems begin. In achieving global ascendancy, capitalism also has to assume global responsibility. It cannot simply put the blame on the Other but is more and more confronted with itself. At the same time as taking up the mantle of 'civilisation', capitalism is simultaneously revealed as something which is increasingly abstract, indiscriminating and indifferent. The paradox that is emerging is that while socio-economic reality is being rendered

transient and manipulable - the rise of virtual capitalism - there appears to be no concrete agency capable of effective intervention.

So the problem for the New World Order is how to sustain victory. In the very midst of its own virtualization, capitalism is faced with the problem of trying to *naturalize* itself. Against this background explicit forms of appeal are being made to discourses of universal values/principles, ecology, bio-power and so on. One of the most prominent, and influential, of these is the ‘natural capitalism’ discourse of Hawken *et al* (1999). The central idea is that the challenge of the new capitalist era is to adapt itself in accordance with the ‘basic principles that govern the earth’ (1999: 313). The authors claim that the greening of commerce and production is already occurring in a spontaneous and systemic manner with new techniques of bio-mimicry and so on – the practices of transnational corporate capital, on the other hand, are passed over in silence. Despite the crude ideological portrayal of good-news-capitalism, the one point of interest concerns their view of developing a new type of integrated calculus on a global basis:

‘It (the natural capitalism view) is based on the simple proposition that *all* capital be valued. While there may be no “right” way to value a forest, a river, or a child, the wrong way is to give it no value at all.’ (Hawken *et al*, 1999: 321)

Instead of simply dismissing this as fanciful illusion, the Left should rather engage with this in a quite literal and ‘naïve’ way. In straightforward terms it should seek to factor in not only the costs of environmental destruction but also the human costs of poverty, privation and exploitation through, among other things, a direct system of taxation; one that not only serves to effectively regulate and realize corporate tax, but which also develops widening categories of tax (resource, energy, social and so on) for redistribution in a targeted and transparent manner. It might, of course, be objected that this would amount to little more than (radical) democratic reform – and certainly there is no necessary incompatibility. But here everything depends on the way that such measures would be articulated.

There are two important, and related, elements that allow for progressive intervention. First, such an initiative would break with the multiculturalist taboo against prioritizing certain struggles over others. The basic political focus would be placed on confronting capitalism with its own symptomatic truths - in psychoanalytic terms, to implicate the subject in the fantasmatic scene of their making. The second is that by coldly developing this type of accountancy – an accountability in respect of what counts and how – the Left can begin to disturb the fundamentals

and implicit (infra-political) grammar of global order and thereby de-naturalize its hold over the horizon of reality. In this regard, the Left should not simply assume the position of ‘adversary’ within the terms of liberal-democratic hegemonic politics. Rather it should take on a much stronger position of ‘enemy within’; of pushing existing logics to their extreme. Reversing the Parisian slogan of 1968 (‘Be realistic, demand the impossible!’), the Left should exert itself to be impossible precisely by demanding what is realistic. Beyond populist manoeuvring, the Left should strive to bring about the full realization of ‘natural capitalism’ as a way of exhausting its fantasmatic life-world and overturning its systemic principles. This means taking on the full responsibility of ethical freedom and confronting the traumatic fact that there is no naturalism or big Other capable of grounding our actions. Against the apologetic Yodas of today’s capitalism it means not only disturbing the force but asserting that there is no force that is not of our own making. It means, in other words, engaging with the materialism of spirit.

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