

What is *Not* to be Done! Everything you wanted to know about Lenin, and (sadly) weren't afraid to ask Zizek

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It is, perhaps, not surprising that Slavoj Zizek, the most flamboyant *provocateur* on the contemporary intellectual scene, should have decided over the last few years to tie his name to the “Leninist” banner¹. This interest follows logically from his love of provocation. There is little which can be guaranteed to irk Zizek’s favourite polemical targets, such as Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler, more than an attachment to the ‘fundamentalist totalitarianism’ associated with Lenin. It should be readily clear that the signifier ‘Marx’ is too little to achieve this effect - Marx is, after all, a perfectly acceptable ‘critical’ figure - while the signifier ‘Stalin’ is perhaps still one step too far even for Zizek, when Lenin more than suffices as a bogeyman of ‘radical democracy’. In this context, the signifier ‘Lenin’ could be said to stand as a border-post between the ineffectual posturing for which Zizek harangues his intellectual opponents and a committed, muscular, effective revolutionary politics. He admits that his use of the ‘Lenin’ signifier is motivated by its effects rather than its meaning: the fact that it provokes a response from multiculturalist liberals is taken to prove the ‘subversive edge’ of the signifier, justifying its use to radicalize or ‘formalize’ contents drawn from elsewhere. Lenin’s impenetrability to today’s critical theorists is supposed to show that they lack ‘a certain historical dimension’ (RG 311-12). It is as if, to be allowed into the camp of the ‘authentic’ revolutionaries, Zizek feels the need to brandish his hammer and sickle like a passport: ‘it’s alright, comrades, I’m one of you’ - or, perhaps, to use it to taunt his adversaries: ‘I’m not one of you, for goodness sake deport me to the other side!’

In addition to this symbolic value, we would add that Lenin is an obvious reference-point for anyone concerned about radically transforming the world, rather than merely reforming the existing system. This is particularly so given the emergence of the anti-capitalist - or anti-globalisation – movement since 1999. For the first time since 1968 issues concerning revolutionary strategy, of *how* the world is to be changed, have been raised amongst activists of a wide variety of ideological and post-ideological hue. Although Lenin was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving his goals, the revolution associated with his name succeeded in overthrowing capitalism and establishing an alternative social system. This alternative is of crucial importance for Zizek, because, despite his awareness of the limitations of ‘actually existing socialism’, he continues to refer to such regimes as existed in

¹ On a matter of terminology, we should note that Zizek does not refer to his gesture of ‘repeating Lenin’ as ‘Leninism’. He counterposes Lenin to Leninism, viewing the latter as the repressed emancipatory potential within Stalinist systems (RG 193). However, we feel Zizek’s identification with the ‘Lenin’ signifier is indistinguishable from a declaration of ‘Leninism’, if only because there is no better adjectival rendering of adherence to Lenin. Also, in some passages (e.g. WLCTF 2), Zizek uses the term ‘Leninist’ to refer to his own position. We would also add that our use of Stalinism to refer to the eastern European regimes is broader than Zizek’s usage, since he reserves the term solely for the period of Stalin’s own rule (DSST 93, 96). We prefer this term to Zizek’s favourite, ‘actually-existing socialism’, because this term confers undue legitimacy on the regimes in question. Without getting into the interminable debates about the ‘class nature’ of the regimes, we wish to problematise the idea that what ‘actually existed’ was in any sense Marxian socialism.

the eastern bloc as ‘liberated territory’ (WPCS 46). Another overlap between Žižek and Lenin is that Lenin has a reputation for intransigence, determination and ruthlessness. Žižek, who styles himself as a ‘daring’ author standing up to those who ‘shirk’ authentic commitment, unsurprisingly identifies with this aspect of Lenin’s personality. Lenin was not content to be a tragic-romantic failure and to be remembered in the future in the same way as the Spanish Brigades and the Communards. He was not content to polemicise ineffectually from the sidelines, nor was he prepared to limit himself to ‘reformist’ manoeuvres within the confines of the existing system. Rather, he was determined to be part of a movement which could seize and retain state power, and use it to achieve substantial social transformations. In Žižek’s language, he ‘*wasn’t afraid to succeed*’ (RG 6). Hence, one finds the dovetailing of a number of concerns in Žižek’s ‘Leninism’.

In our view there is, nonetheless, good reason to question Žižek’s recent turn to the ‘Lenin’ signifier. Is Žižek’s ‘Lenin’ all he/it seems? Why, furthermore, should we care about what Žižek thinks? Žižek is not, it should be recalled, primarily a political theorist, and much of what passes for “politics” in his work is asserted in passing. Usually, he discusses politics as an afterthought, during analyses of other subjects, such as a particular film or novel. He does not seem to feel any sense of dissonance in discussing (for instance) an event such as the September 11th attacks, a popular Hollywood blockbuster and the ideas of classic thinkers such as Kant, even in the same breath. This is both Žižek’s brilliance and his greatest weakness, for it often leaves his politics unclear to the casual reader. As a result, his ideas have often been taken for something they are not². Žižek does not help this process by his often dismissive attitude to exegetical questions: for him, the truest reading is a ‘brutal rape’ of the original text (PF 96). The signifiers he uses frequently bear little resemblance to anyone else’s usage of them. Like his broader concerns, Žižek’s politics cover a huge range of subjects, from eastern European nationalism to the class structure of China, from the Nazi concentration camps to the politics of the Internet, and from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the contours of the ideology of the “Third Way”. Perhaps his most important current fascination today, however, involves the specific issue of “repeating Lenin” and the ‘meaning’ or relevance today of the signifier ‘Lenin’ and the event (in the common as well as the precise Žižekian sense) with which this name is associated, i.e. the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. A study of Žižek’s relationship to Lenin therefore offers an important case-study of his politics and of the political implications of his theories. Is he able to offer a committed revolutionary politics for the new millennium, or is he confined to the position he denounces in others, as a theorist unable to move beyond intellectual provocation, negative assertions and abstract posturing?

Depleting Lenin, or, Did somebody say “Leninism”?

‘Why Lenin?’ asks Rowan Wilson in a recent article about Žižek, echoing one of Žižek’s favourite anti-fascist jokes³. ‘Assuming we need symbols to ignite resistance to liberalism and the capitalism it supports, why use the very symbol whereby a liberal can cross

² The positive reception Žižek’s ‘Marxism’ has received from authors such as Homer, Doherty and Callinicos is a case in point. See Robinson and Tormey, ‘Žižek’s “Marx”: Sublime Object or a Plague of Fantasies?’ (Historical Materialism, forthcoming).

³ i.e. the one where somebody asked who causes Germany’s problems replies, ‘the Jews, and the cyclists’. ‘Why the cyclists?’ asks his Nazi questioner. ‘Why the Jews?’ he replies (e.g. WDR 56). In Žižek’s case, however, the ambiguous signifier is a positive pole of identification rather than a bogeyman. Perhaps one could rephrase the joke: Slavoj Žižek is a Leninist, and also a hobgoblin. Why a hobgoblin? *Why a Leninist?*

his arms and smugly say “that way lies terror”?’⁴. The irony here is that Žižek turns to Lenin precisely *because* his name has this effect on liberals. The almost unspeakable character of “Leninism” as an orientation in academia today designates it in Žižek’s vocabulary as a ‘symptom’ - a ‘touchy nodal point’ where an enforced silence maintains the master-signifier which holds together the status quo. For Žižek, the point of an authentic Act is precisely to adopt this signifier of ultimate transgression, to ‘identify with the symptom’ so as to explode the existing constellation of social relations. Indeed, Žižek’s “Leninism” cannot be understood outside the context of his theory of the Act, the central principle of his ‘ethics of the Real’. We have already dealt with this aspect of Žižek’s politics extensively in a previous paper⁵, and we shall offer here only a brief summary of the conclusions of that paper.

For Žižek, conflict, violence and antagonism - often subsumed in the concept of the Lacanian Real - arise as a good in themselves. As a result, Žižek demands that ethics take the form of the advocacy of what he terms an ‘authentic ethical act’, or simply ‘the Act’. This is to be a ‘militant, *divisive* position’ of asserting the unconditionality of a dogmatically-constructed claim to ‘Truth’ (DSST 237-8). Through such a gesture, one can identify with and embody the constitutive lack which, as a Lacanian, Žižek places at the root of social relations, and traverse the fantasy which sustains the existing system, causing it to explode. By identifying with the ‘social symptom’, the disavowed element on which the coherence of the status quo depends, one becomes in Žižek’s vocabulary a ‘proletarian’, and therefore ‘touched by grace’ (TS 173, 227; CHU 122, 125). One must identify with this position for one’s Act to be authentic; otherwise, it is a ‘false act’ which sustains the status quo. On one level, an Act is a radical form of subjectivity, but on another, it is a total negation of subjectivity, a submission to an external Event, Leader or Cause which overwhelms the individual. Often, says Žižek, ‘one does need a leader in order to be able to “do the impossible”... subordination to [the leader] is the highest act of freedom’ (DSST 246-7). An Act is experienced by its agent as ‘something violently *imposed* on me from the Outside through a traumatic encounter that shatters the very foundation of my being’, and it is simultaneously the highest freedom and the most abject prostration (TS 377). It is something one feels one simply has to do, because of an irrational and unconditional ethical injunction (DSST 14). It is necessarily dogmatic - a shibboleth (TS 138, 144) - and involves a ‘leftist suspension of the ethical’, rejecting all a priori standards (inclusive of epistemological and ontological as well as ethical standards). It also involves a masochistic gesture which Žižek refers to as ‘symbolic destitution’, ‘excremental identification’ and ‘shooting at’ or ‘beating’ oneself (e.g. CHU 122-3). Through an Act, one rejects one’s humanity and embraces the pain of being a Nothing (e.g. FA 147-8). One can then remould oneself as a new man. Žižek hints that this new man is to be an authoritarian leader, someone capable of the ‘inherently terroristic’ gesture of ‘redefining the rules of the game’ (TS 377).

The idea of the Act is crucial to understanding Žižek’s use of Lenin. Indeed, Žižek’s entire attachment to Lenin hinges on his interpretation of Lenin’s actions as an Act. For Žižek, this Act of Lenin’s is at the root of the Russian Revolution, and, notwithstanding his recent lip-service to the ‘micropolitics’ of the revolutionary process and the masses ‘taking matters into their own hands’, the overwhelming trend in his work is towards a personalised reading of revolutionary change. For instance, he portrays Lenin as someone who ‘immediately perceived the revolutionary chance’ and ‘imposed his vision’ (RG 6-7). Indeed, the ‘Lenin’ signifier turns out to stand for the Act itself, the gesture of suspending the

⁴ Rowan Wilson, “Why Lenin? Against Terror and War Post 9/11”, *Situation Analysis* 1, October 2002, p. 49.

⁵ Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, “A Ticklish Subject? Slavoj Žižek and the Future of Left Radicalism”, Thesis 11 (forthcoming).

denkverbot which holds radicalism back (RG 11) and of revealing the underlying matrix of the existing society which generates all its competing narratives (RG 191) - what one might, in Maoist rhetoric, term the 'primary contradiction'. The role of the Lenin signifier is tactical. 'The reference to Lenin should serve as the signifier of the effort to break the vicious circle of these false options [i.e. of the Third Way, multiculturalism, etc.]. The first thing to do is to learn the way the basic political conflict continues to function as the secret point of reference of even seemingly "apolitical" antagonisms' (RG 308). Zizek demands 'the Leninist gesture of initiating a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capitalist world order and unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of its repressed truth' (WCLTF 3), stamping his own authority on the situation by positing his own presuppositions (OB 115). The defining feature of Lenin's politics is for Zizek the gesture of 'taking sides': there was only one kind of deviation in Lenin's texts, that of opportunistically avoiding this risk, whereas Stalin in contrast had different deviations expressing different extremes. Imbalance and zigzagging of all kinds is to be encouraged, as the essence of life itself (WDR 89).

For Zizek, *What is to be Done?* is an anti-concrete intervention, expressing a will to intervene in such a way as to dismiss all compromises, 'adopting the unequivocal radical position from which it is only possible to intervene in such a way that our intervention changes the coordinates of the situation'. Unlike those who advocate grandiose dreams but 'shirk' the concrete and cruel interventions (such as secret police and academic censorship) which are 'the actual price to be paid', Lenin took responsibility. 'Like an authentic conservative, a true Leninist is not afraid to pass to the act, to assume all the consequences, unpleasant as they may be, of realizing his political project... [A] Leninist, like a Conservative, is authentic in the sense of assuming the consequences of his choice - that is, being fully aware of what it means to take power and to exert it' (WCLTF 2; c.f. TS 236)⁶. Furthermore, Zizek specifically counterposes his repetition of Lenin to Lenin's own programme: '*repeating* Lenin does not mean a *return* to Lenin - to repeat Lenin is to accept that "Lenin is dead", that his particular solution failed... but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving. Repeating Lenin means that we have to distinguish between what Lenin did but the field of possibilities he opened up'. For Zizek, Lenin stands for the Act, the moment when 'the games are over' (RG 310-11). Zizek is concerned with determination, with 'Lenin's ruthless readiness to seize power and impose a new political order' (OB 126).

In accomplishing an Act, Lenin is in rather strange company. His political equivalents include not only other self-proclaimed revolutionaries such as the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, but also such unlikely 'leftists' as Pope John Paul II, St. Paul and Charles de Gaulle (DSST 246-7, TS 227, AF 72-3). All of these figures gain the same quasi-iconic status in Zizek's theory because their intransigent and authoritarian adoption of a militant, divisive position allowed them to reconfigure the symbolic coordinates of their respective societies, 'traversing the fantasy' of a socio-political 'given'. The Pope, for instance, qualifies because of his militant, divisive opposition to contraception and abortion. It is clear, therefore, that it is not Lenin's specific politics which Zizek wishes to repeat, but a particular formal gesture he ascribes to Lenin. It is the Lenin who is unafraid to succeed from whom, according to Zizek, we still have plenty to learn (RG 6). What he admires is not Lenin's motives and objectives, about which he says very little. Nor is he primarily committed to goals such as workers' control, land reform and radical decentralisation, which

⁶ One should also note the implicit essentialism hiding within this assumption that one knows 'what it means', and the populist moral accounting involved in the idea that every gain has a 'price'.

might be associated with Lenin's revolutionary programmes⁷. What he admires is how Lenin's ruthlessness supposedly enabled him to traverse the fantasy and accomplish an Act.

Lenin's Act also arises in a slightly different formulation: 'actual freedom'. This is defined exclusively of 'formal' freedom, and seems to be a way of rendering repression as a form of freedom. Actual freedom includes a right to suppress one's opponents if they reject the Truth. It is basically identical to the Act, since it is a freedom which redefines 'the very situation in which one is active'. Through actual freedom, one posits one's Truth as universal and rejects the 'full contextualization' which would deny one the right to determine subjectively the 'objective' meaning of others' acts. Crucially, there is only a single site at which actual freedom can be exercised, the one site which will explode present power-relations (in Mao's terms, the primary contradiction). Other freedoms should be assessed in terms of how they affect this fundamental revolutionary Choice, which is the only freedom which matters (WCLTF 3-4, 7; OB 121-2). An authentic freedom is a moral freedom imposed over and against one's 'pathological' interests (TS 44). In other words, 'actual freedom' turns out to be a submission to a predetermined logic. The Act is necessary to construct the 'forced choice'. For Žižek, 'I have a (free) choice only on condition that I make the proper choice... I am told what I must choose freely' - for instance, someone who chooses to be a revolutionary chooses to have been chosen by history. Such 'forced choice' is necessary to avoid psychosis, which for Žižek is the ultimate taboo, or perhaps his own repressed Outside, as well as to avoid the only alternative: liberal vulgarity (TS 18-19). The choice seems, in effect, to be no choice at all: one *must* achieve the Act, and one's only choice is to accept responsibility for it retrospectively.

As a historical account, Žižek's reading of Lenin is problematic. He often seems to feel he has little need for evidence to back his claims. He is satisfied to read contingent events in extremely abstract ways (for instance, interpreting the Stalinist Terror as a 'suicide' by a collective subject), and the evidence he provides is highly selective. One finds, for instance, that his discussion of the Stalinist Terror is based on only a single text which he embraces because it shares his theoretical reference-points (WPCS). This attitude is not too surprising. It is, after all, the 'Lenin' signifier and not the 'historical' Lenin which interests Žižek, if one can still speak of the 'historical Lenin' in today's postmodern times. At one point, Žižek even confirms the suspicion that he 'gets from Lenin more or less just the name'

⁷ Žižek is very circumspect about what changes he proposes. In "A Ticklish Subject", we suggested this was due partly to his desire to keep open the 'utopian space' of social change, but also partly to the fact that he does not in fact think that a great deal can be changed. This is clearest in his discussion of de Gaulle, when he asserts very clearly that the role of an Act is to enable an agent to accomplish the present, pragmatic tasks of governance more effectively (AF 72-3). Žižek does not have a great deal to say about what political forms should replace the liberal-democratic institutions he opposes, or about the organisation of the economy. In his recent work, he has hinted at ideas such as 'socialisation', but in a somewhat ambiguous way. In *Revolution at the Gates*, he identifies it with something akin to Lenin's idea of control by soviets. However, he applies it to some very strange areas, such as gene patenting, cyberspace, CCTV and scientific knowledge (DSST 256, TS 356-7). It is hard to see how any of these could be under workers' control even in the limited sense of accountable use, let alone workers' management. It makes more sense to interpret Žižek's concept of 'socialisation' as meaning 'state control', i.e. 'socialisation' by the big Other under the control of the master-signifier. This is suggested by one instance in the paper "Repeating Lenin" where he uses the two terms as equivalents, one in the text and one in the footnote (RL 19, 50). This reading is also suggested by his opposition to privacy and his embracing of 'big brother' control. For him, the appropriate response is not a right to privacy but an even more extensive socialisation of cyberspace (DSST 256). If our suspicions are right, 'socialisation' is a menacing, not a liberating, possibility: Žižek is giving the green light to eugenicists, Internet censors and Lysenkoites. Gene patenting and CCTV should be eliminated, not socialised, and the effects of 'socialisation' on science and the Internet would be liberating only if limited to the process of production and distribution. Furthermore, there is nothing reactionary about rejecting ever-increasing intrusion by the social system into one's life.

(RG 312). One should keep in mind, however, that the usefulness of the ‘Lenin’ signifier cannot be separated entirely from the historiography of the Russian Revolution. In short, if the ‘historical’ Lenin did not accomplish something akin to a Zizekian Act, Zizek’s entire account becomes little more than a historical sophism. Zizek might be permitted a fictive Lenin, but not a fictional one. We would suggest that there is something in Zizek’s analysis of Lenin, but that one might nevertheless query the validity of Zizek’s account on a range of points.

Notwithstanding his denials, Zizek’s construction of Lenin portrays him basically as a ‘voluntarist’⁸. After his ‘subjective destitution’, Lenin is supposed to have taken a stance in favour of something akin to Zizek’s own model of subjectivity, rejecting the idea that action is constrained by ‘objective conditions’ and opting instead for an Act which might change the very construction of these ‘conditions’. Lenin is supposed, in Zizek’s terms, to have accepted the ‘paradox’ of having to organise his own foundation and act without a guarantee from the big Other of objectivity. Indeed, he is supposed to have opposed any idea of waiting for ‘objective’ facts or conditions, sharing Zizek’s view that such passivity is a shirking of the Act (RG 8-9) and adhering to an image of philosophy as an ungrounded Choice between incompatible perspectives (TS 38-9)⁹. Zizek’s Lenin is a gambler who took a leap on the basis of the wager that a ‘premature’ intervention would itself change the very objective circumstances which render it premature. He is supposed to have rejected any idea of ‘objective’ stages of development, opting instead for an Act without foundation (WPCS 37-8, DSST 114-16). Lenin took a stance of demanding the impossible, and Stalinism was, if anything, a return to realistic ‘common sense’ (RG 5). Indeed, Stalin’s mistake was to misinterpret Lenin’s radical stance of asserting a Truth as a mere standpoint of neutral, objective knowledge (RG 191-2)¹⁰. Far from being simply an application of Marx’s theory, the Leninist Act avoided the depoliticization of Marx. ‘Lenin violently displaces Marx’, ripping Marxism from its context and thereby universalizing it (WCLTF 2). The initial Act was supposed to have occurred in April 1917, with the publication of the April Theses, and to have culminated in the October Revolution. It is as if Zizek has forgotten that July comes between April and October (or perhaps the structure of the calendar is suspended in the euphoria of the Act?). His reading renders Lenin’s words and deeds during and after the July Days, including the text ‘Marxism and Insurrection’, virtually incomprehensible. If Lenin gambled on an Act which would change the entire situation, and did so in April, why did he leave the realisation of his gamble until October, and not make it in July? Clearly, such a strategic decision - based, in Lenin’s own words, on the balance of social forces, on the need for mass support and the folly of revolution without it, i.e. on social ‘objectivity’ - is not a Zizekian Act. It does not express a subjectivity rejecting objectivist calculation, but a particular type of calculation based on a conception of objectivity at variance with the Mensheviks’. There is also an implicit contradiction in Zizek’s position, since he praises Lenin for his awareness of the limits of possibility once he took power, and chides Stalin for his ignorance of these (RG 9-10). The Act therefore seems to be rather hypocritical: one acts

⁸ Zizek does not accept the portrayal of his position as ‘voluntarist’, but in our view, this is because of the complexities surrounding his attempts to portray a basically idealist position as materialist. For more details on this issue, see “Zizek’s Marx”. The reason Zizek gives as to why his ‘Lenin’ is not ‘voluntarist’ is his belief that an Act can only be accomplished at the point of the gap in the symbolic order (RG 10). This does not negate his voluntarism on the level of positing a new reality through a grounding act of will. The status of the gap is, furthermore, unclear. If the gap cannot be discerned by means of analysis of ‘objective’ reality, how is it possible for one to perceive where it falls?

⁹ The latter view is in fact an Althusserian view, and Zizek follows Althusser in wrongly attributing it to Lenin.

¹⁰ Zizek also chides Stalin for viewing the proletariat as an empirical class, rather than as an ascriptive group of those ‘touched by Grace’ (TS 226-7). This is based on a contentious reading, not only of Marx and Lenin, but also of Stalin, whose use of class terminology is highly selective and instrumental (e.g. the concept of “ideological kulaks”).

as if everything is possible, so that one can get into a position of power where one can once again insist on the intransigence of 'objective conditions'.

For Žižek, Lenin went through an Act in April 1917, a possibility brought on by his 'subjective destitution' after the collapse of the Second International's anti-war position in 1914 (RL 12). The emotional and intellectual break involved in this 'trauma' was for Žižek sufficient to provide the personal denial or distance from one's social position necessary to accomplish an Act. It was, he claims, a 'shattering experience', a '*désastre*, a catastrophe in which an entire world disappeared' (RG 3-4). Lenin's support for revolution was an Act because it was a 'mad' position, rejected even by his comrades and going against the 'objectivist' claims of orthodox Marxists (RL 13). *State and Revolution* articulated the '*madness*' of a new utopia arising from an '*urge of the moment*'. It was mad because it was 'highly idiosyncratic' and was labelled as crazy by Lenin's comrades (RG 5). This suspension of orthodoxy (Marxist as well as liberal) meets one of the central criteria of an Act, while Lenin's ostensible subjective destitution meets another. As a result, 'Lenin was the only one who... articulated the Truth of the catastrophe' (RG 4). One could also note that Lenin's sacrifices 'for the revolution', his suppression of his own emotions and his lack of a 'normal' family or sex life provide evidence of 'subjective destitution'. As Brinton puts it, 'deportation, imprisonment and struggle under conditions of persecution and illegality had prevented most of the [Bolshevik] Old Guard from enjoying a normal sex life', and this had an important effect on Bolshevik ethics, which such 'dedication' converted retrospectively into a virtue (Brinton 66). One could, however, query the idea of Lenin as someone who simply accepts responsibility for whatever unexpected consequences his Act produces. Lenin's last works reveal that he regretted and tried to amend many of the developments to which he had contributed (see Lewin, 1985; Farber; Lenin's Final Struggle).

Lenin's intransigence and ruthlessness are not simply a figment of Žižek's imagination, and his position is supported by some of Lenin's texts. 'After its victory', Lenin insisted, 'the proletariat has to make the most strenuous efforts, to suffer the pains of martyrdom... to "liberate" itself from... pseudo-revolutionaries' (Left-wing Comm. 102). It should make sure it 'is not afraid of itself' and be ready to use 'immediate and severe punishment', ignoring the 'empty hypocrisy' of 'those who show... fear', who belong to the old society 'which utters the word "justice" without believing it' (Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power? 42). This aspect at least of Žižek's Lenin provides a historical basis for his account: Lenin's texts show the same dismissal of opponents as Žižek's, and Lenin shared Žižek's urge to break with the present, no matter what it cost. As Žižek suggests, Lenin was prepared to put aside the promise of emancipation when the regime felt threatened by a lack of 'order', and to use (almost) all available means to retain power. He also celebrated the use of force and terror to underpin the new 'revolutionary' symbolism. This is not, however, the end of the story, for Lenin's ruthlessness is not necessarily evidence of nihilism. Firstly, Lenin's 'terrorism', if one can call it such, is by no means as all-encompassing as Žižek suggests. Samuel Farber's work provides a careful analysis of Bolshevik terror and repression prior to the rise of Stalin, and, while Lenin hardly comes out of this work spotless, he is by no means as unthinking in his ruthlessness as Žižek implies. For instance, he tried to constrain the worst excesses of the Cheka (Farber 1990).

Žižek also demands that a revolutionary Act have a Bataillean dimension, in which all standards - especially goal-oriented instrumentalism - are suspended in a 'bacchanalia' and an 'orgy of revolutionary destructive violence' (RG 260-1). For Žižek, the 'terror' used during the civil war, such as the looting of wine cellars and the burning down of mansions, was

sufficient to justify the view that the Russian Revolution was an authentic Act. The moment when the Red Guards succumbed to a destructive hedonism, the moment of Bataille excess, is for Žižek the moment of utopia (RL 21). Whatever the status of events on the ground, one should keep in mind that Lenin was not an advocate of activities of this kind. He made statements specifically opposing orgiastic releases of energy. 'The revolution demands concentration, increase of forces. From the masses, from individuals. It cannot tolerate orgiastic conditions' (cited Brinton 92). Lenin's emphasis, even at his most 'utopian', was on the supposed virtue of proletarian 'discipline', and this is clearly at odds with the model of an individual swept up by uncontrollable forces which is at the heart of Žižek's Act.

Aside from his ambiguous, and very occasional, references to socialisation (see note 3), the only specific *content* of Bolshevism which Žižek embraces is a work-ethic he sees as central to its utopia (DSST 133, 135). It is for Žižek to be celebrated that some Bolsheviks fantasised about reducing people to cogs in a giant socio-industrial machine. This is the man of early Soviet art, 'no longer the old man of sentimental passions and roots in tradition, but the new man who gladly accepts his role as a bolt or screw in the gigantic coordinated industrial Machine', as one of the 'robots endlessly repeating the same mechanical gestures'. This 'de-psychologization' and mechanisation of individuals is for Žižek a 'utopian' theme and a necessary step towards 'free subjectivity'. It is in this aspect that the 'emancipatory potential' of the Soviet system resides. The factory as a 'fantasmatic space cut off from its environs', a space of 'whiteness' lacking the 'background noise' and the 'substantial wealth and texture' of everyday life, cutting off historical memory by destroying 'the very capacity to dream', is for Žižek some kind of emancipation. It is the process of losing one's concrete context which provides the freedom Žižek seeks (RG 262-3; c.f. RL 19, OB 123-4). One finds similar echoes when Žižek describes music as arising from the 'collective work rhythm' (RG 220), and in his attack on leftists for 'a profoundly conservative mistrust of the dynamic of globalization and digitalization, which is quite contrary to the Marxist confidence in the powers of progress' (RG 331). Indeed, Žižek elsewhere suggests that it is not capitalism but the psychological individual from which he seeks emancipation.

The Act and the concept of 'actual freedom' are supposed to be necessary in order to reject the blackmail which presents market domination the outcome of 'a "psychological" subject endowed with propensities that s/he strives to realize' (WCLTF 4). It should be emphasised that, for Žižek, such an individual is an impossibility: any such image can only be the internalisation, through people's basic submissiveness, of an irrational injunction (WCLTF 6). Therefore, it is better that one reject this image, preferring to be a cog in a machine (WCLTF 7-8). Indeed, for Žižek, a revolutionary conception of man is one which views man as 'what is to be crushed, stamped on, mercilessly worked over, in order to produce a new man', by the Party which acts as a 'vanishing mediator' between the old and the new man, representing the new man for the series of ordinary men (CHU 131).

Even more noticeable is the work-ethic implied in Žižek's idea that 'hard work' has replaced sex as the repressed enjoyable practice of the contemporary world, 'the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye'. What this concealment and its symptoms (such as the blowing-up of hidden factories in James Bond films, and *ostalgie* in eastern Europe) express is the 'utopian' potential of 'the collective process of material labour' as 'the site which can generate an authentic sense of community and solidarity' (DSST 133-5). This is akin to what Marx terms 'barracks communism', and, in an ironic way, to Marx's attacks on the empty 'freedom' of the wage-labourer. It is also reminiscent of Stalinist productivism. When Žižek praises eastern Europe for the belief that personal issues

such as divorce and illness are put in their 'proper perspective' by being viewed in relation to their effects on the work process (DSST 132-3; Why we Love to Hate Haider), he is unknowingly repeating, with a reversal of signs, Sartre's attack on the inhumanity of a system which can declare in all honesty: 'tuberculosis harms production' (****). In other words, Zizek is proposing not the emancipation of humanity, but subordination to an imposed system of social control which reduces humans to what he imagines to be our essence: excrement to be burnt on the fires of a new industrial dystopia. In his own rhetoric, one might say that he is the 'ultimate capitalist fantasist': he dreams of a social machine so total that it no longer need concern itself with the 'total individual', in other words, a machine which fully realises the misanthropic potential of the capitalist system of work. It is to be the fantasy of the 'powers of progress', minus its disavowed supplement, the individual. It also depends on the rather unlikely claim that labouring in sweatshops or Stalinist hell-holes is somehow enjoyable, as well as exaggerating the pervasiveness of capitalist concealment of work. Capitalists hide sweatshops (not so much to conceal work as to conceal exploitation), yet they still rely on the cult of work - for instance, in the context of 'welfare to work'. Indeed, one could interpret much of the politics of the contemporary world as an attempt to cope with a situation where the wage system remains dominant, but where the amount of potential productive work is becoming less and less¹¹. The disavowed potentiality of the present is not the disavowed enjoyment of being an ultra-exploited sweatshop labourer, but the fact that no-one is prepared publicly to say "no" to the logic of work.

Whose 'Lenin' Is It Anyway?

Aside from the validity of Zizek's reading of Lenin, there remains the question of whether this reading is a step forward for left-radical theory and politics. The paradox of Zizek's 'defence' of Lenin is that it reproduces almost exactly the conservative account of why Lenin should be renounced as a messianic 'totalitarian' despot - simply with the value-sign inverted. This is the Lenin of Bertrand D. Wolf, Leonard Shapiro and Adam B. Ulam, the Lenin of the Gulag and the Evil Empire, the Lenin whose 'Bolshevism proved to be less a doctrine than a technique of action for the seizing and holding of power' (Shapiro 14). It is Lenin the bogeyman, the big bad wolf who had the other Wolf and his colleagues hiding under their beds - at least if there weren't too many 'reds' under there already. This 'Lenin' is precisely the figure that generations of left-leaning scholars - at least, that portion of them who wish, like Zizek, to reclaim Lenin for the left - have been trying to qualify, undermine, challenge or rebut. A good example of such a scholar is Neil Harding, whose work is oriented towards rehabilitating Lenin as an orthodox Marxist and, more importantly, as a democratic socialist (see Harding 1981). It is, therefore, paradoxical that Harding turns out to be the main source of his information about Lenin.

Zizek's Lenin is a messianic figure, built through an intentionalist, leader-fixated 'Great Men' approach to history which almost completely ignores the subaltern strata. In this, again, Lenin echoes Bertram Wolf, the author of *Three Who Made a Revolution*. As we have already shown, Zizek simply assumes that a Master is necessary for social change to be achieved. This is a formula for a messianic, leader-fixated, authoritarian politics in which change is delivered to the masses by a Great Leader. Zizek's Lenin is a 'Messiah' to whom one should commit in a 'leap of faith' (RL 5). The role Zizek assigns to a theorist, therefore, is to identify or generate such a leader (perhaps by giving the impulse to a reader to

¹¹ In culture, too, one can problematise Zizek's claims. For instance, what about the rise of "docusoaps", reality shows and dramas set in the workplace (from *A Life of Grime* and *Clocking Off* to *The Club* and *The Salon*)?

accomplish an Act), rather than to identify means whereby ordinary people can actively achieve their own liberation or emancipation. As Zizek's discussion makes clear, he conceives the leader as a social engineer who should be given every opportunity to manipulate others in order to produce an authentic Event (DSST 117). The role of the follower, meanwhile, is to identify with the Cause and the Leader. Members of the Party are to be tied together by a loyalty so strong that 'in the name of our fidelity to the Cause we are ready to sacrifice our elementary sincerity, honesty and human dignity' (SOI 212). While the leader is only the leader because of the support for the people, the people is only the people through its leader, and Zizek seems to advocate 'substitutionism'. Since in Zizek's view one really can experience one's deepest emotions through another, this Trotskyite term is entirely appropriate to typify his view (see SOI 146-7, 165-6, PF 110, TS 266-7). The Party is supposed to be the elementary form of political organisation, necessary to produce 'the universal political demand', and according to Zizek, 'politics without the organizational form of the Party is politics without politics' (RG 296-7). One could hardly get further from the Deleuzian model of rhizomatic movements. A comparison can be made here with the typology of social groups outlined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (****). For Sartre, it is fused groups, similar to Deleuze's rhizomes, mobilised around immediately-felt concerns, which make revolutions; pledged groups, identified by characteristics similar to those of Zizek's Party (submission to the Cause, 'fraternity-terror', etc.), arise when the immediate basis for the fused group has retreated into the background. In other words, Zizek's model of revolutionary purity (or, perhaps, of pure revolutionary dirtiness) is not revolutionary at all. If Zizek looked in more detail at the 'micropolitics' of the Russian Revolution, he would find that, formalities notwithstanding, rhizomatic/fused organisation predominated among the grassroots activists, whether in the Bolshevik Party or not. One should add that Lenin was well aware that the Party could not make a revolution alone, and that he was notoriously wary, even when surrounded by sycophants, of identifying the revolutionary process directly with the Party leadership. Lenin the messiah was more noticeable in Stalinism than in Lenin's own discourse.

The leader also has a specific role in Zizek's theory. For him, a leader and a revolutionary Party is necessary in order to perform the 'anamorphic' role played by the analyst in clinical psychoanalysis. 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). Theorists must bring knowledge to the working class from the outside, and 'the Party must intervene from the outside, shaking [the working class] out of its self-indulgent spontaneity' (RG 187). Zizek is hostile to perspectives such as those of Deleuze, who opposes the construction of an overarching, impositional totality. 'What disappears in this perspective is simply the fundamental Marxist insight that the molar State has to totalize the molecular multitude *because a radical "antagonism" is already at work within this multitude*' (RG 259). The antagonism necessitates the construction of a 'subject supposed to know' (i.e. the Party), and this subject is therefore a structural necessity (RL 4-5). This is an implicitly Stalinist position, echoing in particular Mao Zedong's slogan 'from the masses, to the masses': the Party takes ideas from the masses, and returns these ideas in the form of top-down commands (Selected Works 3: 119). 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. Even the Lenin of *What is to be Done?* would have blanched at such an approach, and with good reason. Aside from the problems with the idea of a constitutive split, it is unclear why such a split would require the

existence of an overarching Power. Further, this Power (whether in the form of the analyst, the State or the Party) would have to itself be somehow immune from the logic of constitutive splitting/lack in order to perform this role. If the Party is similarly split, there is no way it can operate as a simple anamorphic function; it will also act in ways just as ‘neurotic’ as the ‘spontaneity’ of those for whom it substitutes.

Zizek’s position on the relationship between Lenin and his successors is ambiguous. With occasional exceptions, he maintains that it was Lenin’s and not Stalin’s politics which was an authentic Act. There are even instances where he demonstrates Lenin’s ‘authenticity’ by contrasting the two. However, the fact that the revolution was ‘betrayed’, that it (or its successors) ate its own children and created a new Master and a new Order through horrific purges in contradiction to its own goals, does not seem to make Zizek stop and think about whether this is indeed a model to be ‘repeated’. Rather, such a ‘suicidal’ end is to be celebrated as evidence of the authenticity of the Leninist Act (TS 194). A revolution compatible with Lacanian assumptions cannot be extensively transformative; it can suspend the symbolic order, but must later restore it. Thus, Zizek identifies, not with the transformative agenda of *State and Revolution* (mentioned only for its strategic claims and voluntarism), nor for early reforms such as workers’ control of factories, democratisation of the army and political decentralisation (which hardly figure in his account)¹², but rather, with Lenin’s determination to restore order even at the cost of abandoning such transformations. Lenin is to be praised for accepting ‘the burden of taking over’, taking ‘responsibility for the smooth running of the social edifice’ and becoming the ‘One who assumes the ultimate responsibility, including a ruthless readiness to break the letter of the law... to guarantee the system’s survival’ (TS 237). This appears to be necessary because of a gap which separates revolutionary enthusiasm from Zizek’s ultimate goal: to leave ‘traces in the inertia of the social edifice’ (RG 7). The ‘heroic’ dimension of revolution occurs when the ‘Stalinist ritual, the empty flattery which “holds together” the community’, which is ‘a dimension... probably essential to language as such’, ‘necessarily’ replaces the revolutionary moment. This is a betrayal, but, for Zizek, such betrayal is necessary (SOI 211). Indeed, Zizek also seems to value the Party as an organisational form because it is a collectivity of a certain kind, identifying as an embodiment of Truth so that taking the true path without the Party is the greatest falsehood (RG 188). It is not, for Zizek, to be regretted that the revolution ended in a new Order and a new Master, rather than a more extensive opening. The master-signifier is, so to speak, ‘what it means’ to take power. It is, after all, only via the master-signifier, and the resultant logic of ‘us and them’, that antagonism can be converted into power (Gilead 60).

In the context of Zizek’s theoretical assumptions, this should not be surprising. One should recall that, in Lacanian theory, alienation and antagonism are constitutive, so that the utopian hopes of a revolutionary moment must inevitably be ‘betrayed’, and the new social opening, while it may alter the ‘social constellation’ by installing a new master-signifier in place of the old, must ultimately reaffirm the fixed structure posited by the theorist. Zizek’s recent work has shown a slight weakening of this Lacanian position, with the idea of the Real as a terrifying negativity problematised a little (e.g. WDR 31-2) and his emancipatory themes

¹² In his most recent excursion into Lenin, the 150-page contributions to the edited collection *Revolution at the Gates*, Zizek finally commits himself, for the first time, to the idea that soviets (i.e. workers’ councils) should take power. However, he says this only in passing, as an afterthought in his discussion of the complementarity of socialism and the Internet (RG 294). Even here, it is not clear whether this is a commitment to some kind of directly democratic or directly active social organisation, or simply a case of word-play. If Zizek was serious about ‘soviet power’, he would have to clarify the relationship between the soviets and the Party, as well as reconciling soviet power with his conservative ontological assumptions.

extended into a rejection of the ‘utterly pessimistic anti-Marxist perspective’ of accepting the necessity of the ‘Stalinist Thermidor’ (RG 307)¹³, it is hard to see how he could abandon his basic conservatism without losing the core of his theoretical project. It is, after all, impossible to reconcile ‘constitutive lack’ with any revolutionary endeavour which is not more-or-less abortive. The role of an Act is to install a new master-signifier in the place of the old - it is *supposed* to produce a new Master and a new Order - and however radical an Act, it is unable to touch the structural core of Lacanian theory (the one ‘a priori’ it does not ‘suspend’). One might say, in parody of Nietzsche: ‘God is dead; long live God!’

The terroristic nature of the Stalinist regime is certainly no problem for Žižek. It is to be recalled that the Act itself is, in its very nature, inherently terroristic: it sweeps its initiators up in a truth-event regardless of their will, and the most one can do is claim responsibility for what occurs (SOI 221). Indeed, Žižek goes a step further, calling for the ‘mad dance’ of postmodern subjectivities to be brought to an end in ‘a new form of Terror’ (CHU 326). Indeed, Žižek’s argument for Lenin against Stalin is, rather, that the former was more openly terrorist than the latter. Lenin’s terror was ‘openly admitted’ and based on a declared belief in constitutive (class) antagonism, and it was therefore superior to Stalin’s, which operated as an ‘obscene shadowy supplement’ and depended on the concealment of antagonism beneath images of the Social Whole and its Other, images which restore the hated image of the ‘human face’ (WPCS 36, RG 262, OB 124). He adds the similar claim that the Stalin regime is superior to fascism, because its terror is more extensive. The Soviet terror is a Good Terror whereas the Nazi one isn’t, only because the Soviet terror was allegedly more far-reaching, intruded into everyday life and left no-one (regardless of whether they belonged to an out-group) safe (WPCS 44, DSST 128-9, TS 227-8). The ‘self-destructive terror’ of Stalinism has equivalents in clinical analysis which Žižek identifies as positive (RG 316), and Žižek also suggests that the height of the terror, when it became a ‘breaking of all rules’ and when the Party committed suicide, was an ‘authentic act’ (WPCS 41-2, DSST 120). The Party acted as a vanishing mediator precisely because it committed suicide in this way.

Indeed, the only difference between Žižek’s ‘leftist’ ethics and the ‘rightist’ stance of such villains as the anti-Dreyfusards, the Taleban, the Nazis and Oliver North is the nature of the legitimation offered for terroristic acts. Whereas rightists justify their actions by reference to a higher good, leftist terror is more far-reaching, suspending also the higher good (Multiculturalism 49-50; CHU 127; RL 32). Žižek therefore goes well beyond defending violence as a ‘means to an end’: it is, rather, part of the end itself, the utopian excess of the Act through which the ‘boring’, ‘peaceful’ operation of everyday life is shattered. The closest parallel is not Lenin, but political nihilist texts such as Nechaev’s “Catechism of a Revolution”, which proclaims that ‘everything is moral that contributes to the triumph of the revolution; everything that hinders it is immoral and criminal’ (cited Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible* p. 283).

¹³ This position does not necessarily mean that Žižek has abrogated his earlier insistence on the necessity of betrayal of the Act. It is, rather, that Lukács, his target in this passage, is supposed to have rejected the ‘actual freedom’ embodied in Lenin’s politics, i.e. the possibility of achieving an Act. His ‘pessimism’ therefore appears to reside in his shirking of the Act. While Žižek’s denouncement of Lukács for believing that the struggle against domination and exploitation must fail would *appear* to imply that Žižek thinks it can succeed, appearances about Žižek’s work are often deceptive. It is possible that Žižek is beginning to move away from the position we are attacking in this article; he certainly contradicts his earlier statement that one should accept the necessary betrayal of the revolution in order to fully endorse the Act and its consequences (TS 377). The crucial points, however, are firstly that he has not yet clearly declared that he is doing so, and secondly that, if he adopts a more substantively revolutionary position, he will either have to reject his current ontology or enter into sharp self-contradiction.

At times, Žižek's endorsement of Stalinism goes further than his conception of it as a necessary betrayal of Lenin, and beyond his occasional nostalgia for 'good old Stalinist' rhetoric (e.g. DSST 244, NRRT 250). For instance, he claims that Stalinist societies, even in the later, post-Stalin phases which are for Žižek even more degenerate, remained 'a kind of "liberated territory"', sustaining a space for critique. He wishes 'to confront the radical ambiguity of Stalinist ideology which, even at its most "totalitarian", still exudes an emancipatory potential' (DSST 131). He also claims that Stalinism is a radicalization of Lenin (RG 317). Stalinism is supposed to have 'inner greatness', albeit of a type which exists in a perpetual conflict with an unspecified other, and which therefore has to be kept hidden for the regime to survive (e.g. RG 193). This 'true greatness' is unbearable to the regime itself (RG 197), and seems to consist in the rejection of individual subjectivity connected to the 'utopia' of reducing people to cogs in a machine, discussed above. Further, Stalin has the privileged status of a 'vanishing mediator', mediating between the Lenin period and the later Thermidor (WPCS 45), as well as being the realiser of Marxism, however 'perverted' its realisation (TS 339). Žižek praises the show-trials for the idea that the standpoint of innocence is 'the ultimate guilt': one is guilty because one shirks the Act by adopting a stance of innocence and insisting on abstract individuality. The trials therefore return the victims' message in its true-inverted form (RG 194, CHU 255). This demand that one reject one's personal autonomy has for Žižek 'a certain ethical dignity', similar to that of a Kantian ethical act. This demand is not the problem with Stalinism - rather, the problem is its unreflexive failure to accept responsibility (WPCS 35-6). One is necessarily guilty if one is not touched by the Grace of the Truth-Event (DSST 101). Further, Stalinists are also supposed to attain a kind of subjective destitution through their very sense of superiority (SOI 145). Žižek even claims on one occasion that the 1917 Revolution was a false act, 'similar to the Fascist revolution'; the real revolution was the Stalinist forced collectivisation of agriculture (TS 194). One also finds instances where Žižek embraces other Stalinist regimes. He wavers on the subject of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, portraying it in one passage as an authentic Act and in another as a false act foreclosing economics (RG 261, 270-1). It is supposed to show 'the paradoxical overlapping of extreme dictatorship and extreme emancipation of the masses' which typifies an Act, as well as to overlap with Lacan's actions in closing down his organisation (RL 21-2). On one occasion, he declares the Khmer Rouge and Sendero Luminoso to be the model of a movement that rejects both capitalism and its disavowed pre-capitalist (e.g. Oedipal and fundamentalist) supplements. These movements are therefore taken to be instances of the 'radical evil' which alone can found a new order by starting from scratch (EE Lib 40-1).

Such instances of overt Stalinism, occasional though they are, suggest that Žižek is more enthusiastic about Stalinism than his discussions of Lenin suggest. Indeed, Žižek's own politics is disturbingly authoritarian. For instance, he openly advocates academic censorship and secret police (DSST 236, 256, WCLTF 2). When he takes positions against the Stalin regime - for instance, in a passage where he proclaims Trotsky to be the repressed truth of Leninism, hidden beneath the Stalinist thermidor which should not be accepted - he does this in the name of the repressed utopian potential (RG 305-7). When it comes to discussing Trotskyism today, Žižek has nothing but criticism for themes such as the 'fetishization' of the working class, defence of the welfare state, use of traditional Marxist concepts and support for liberation struggles such as anti-racism (RG 308). Trotskyism is to be rebuked for its 'nostalgia' for the pre-Thermidor revolution when faced with its 'regrettable but unavoidable later betrayal'. This position is a failure to 'endorse the act fully in all its consequences' (TS 377).

Zizek assumes (without good reason) that Lenin must in some sense have 'understood' that the revolution would necessarily betray itself, and that all revolutions are structurally doomed to fall short of whatever ideals and principles motivate them. He also implies that the success or failure of a revolution has nothing to do with whether the modes of thought and action, social relations and institutions which follow are at all related to the original revolutionary ideals and principles (hence his emphasis on the persistence of a 'utopian' element under Stalin and later, regardless of the link between such rhetoric and the actual system). What matters is that power is held by those who 'identify with the symptom', who call themselves 'proletarian'. Zizek therefore endorses the claim that Lenin's utopian moments were Machiavellian manoeuvres or at best confused delusions, veiling his true intention to seize power for himself and a small elite: Lenin was, after all, the 'ultimate political strategist' (RL 16). That Zizek endorses nearly every accusation made by anti-Leninists against Lenin serves to underline the degree to which Zizek's politics are wedded to conservative assumptions that repression, brutality and terror are 'always with us'. Rejecting the claim that politics could be different, Zizek wishes to grasp, embrace and even revel in the grubbiness and violence of modern politics.

Zizek's Lenin, therefore, is not the 'Lenin' of the left, but the 'Lenin' of the right. Just as conservative critics are interested in 'Lenin' insofar as he gave us Stalin, orthodox Communism, the Cold War and the gulag, so Zizek is interested in a 'Lenin' of the Master, the Act, the carving of the field and the Good Terror. Zizek's Lenin is also the 'Lenin' that Stalin built: the 'cult of Lenin' Stalin used to legitimate his own agenda of the omnipotence of the Leader, widespread terror and power as an in-itself. To establish the kinship between Zizek's Lenin and Stalin's, one need only look at Stalin's own remarks - for instance, that Lenin was the 'creator' of Russian Communism (Foundations of Leninism 9) whose methods during the civil war are valid for an 'entire historical era' (43) and who advocates 'iron discipline', 'voluntary submission' and constant purges (114, 116-17). Stalin's eclectic 'radicalism' - mixed, like Zizek's, with social and sexual conservatism - could not be reconciled with other left radicalisms and could succeed only by murdering Lenin's comrades (Trotsky, Bukharin, Radek, Zinoviev, etc.) and millions of others, not to mention by crushing what remained of the victories of 1917 (such as what little was left of the soviets) even while applauding them. In betraying itself, Stalin's Leninism conforms precisely to Zizek's model of revolution. Zizek's Leninism is remarkably similar to Stalin's: it can succeed only by a new terror which silences the 'mad dance' of leftist concerns. This is a Leninism for those who hate the 'wishy-washy' sentimental values of the left radical tradition itself, such as fraternity, solidarity and care for others. It is a Leninism which revels in violent excess in itself, ignoring the fact that, for many participants in Russia, revolutionary violence was justifiable only by reference to the ideals for which it was mobilised. It is a Leninism that heartily endorses the reading of Lenin as a 'vanguardist' and 'substitutionist', as a thinker and leader concerned only with seizing and retaining state power as an end in itself. In short, it is a Leninism for Stalinists.

Zizek's endorsement of *this* Lenin suggests that there is something more sinister at work than simply a refounding of a committed revolutionary politics, and illustrates in stark terms why his project should be rejected by those seeking to advance a left agenda. Zizek's 'Leninism' simply reaffirms the centrality of the concept of the Act in his work. Given the particular 'brand' of 'Lenin' on offer, it remains unclear *why* one should support the 'Leninist' Act, and why one should wish to 'repeat' it. The 'Lenin' who arises from Zizek's work is a messianic despot ruthlessly committed to cling to power at all costs, and his Act institutes a new Terror which is ultimately unable to overcome the psychological matrix

requiring the restoration of 'order'. Zizek's 'Leninism' ultimately confirms the importance of the Act for his theory and its primacy over all political, ethical and other concerns.

Conclusion: Smashing the Fragile Absolute

Zizek's Lenin takes his place amongst the various elements in Zizek's theory which operate as a conservative pull on the possibility of a transformative politics. Basically, Zizek is telling left radicals to abandon the notion of the state - even an authoritarian or totalitarian state - as a source of unwanted violence and oppression. Instead, he urges his readers to see the state as part of the solution to, rather than the problem of, reorganising social life. The state is a useful ally because it is the instrument through which to impose the Good Terror. Zizek denounces anti-statism as idealistic and hypocritical (RL 16, FA 171, DSST 271), and he attacks the anti-capitalist movement for its lack of political centralisation (RL 20). He does not offer any alternative to the violence of the existing state, or rather, the alternative he offers is (in his own phrase) a replacement of Bad with Worse. In Zizek's world, to misquote an anarchist slogan, 'whoever you fight for, the state always wins'. Opponents of imperialist war and the arms trade, of police racism and repression against demonstrators, will find no alternative in Zizek; while he may oppose the acts of existing states, his own preferred institutions look remarkably similar. He offers no alternative to statist violence, only a new militarism, a Good Terror and yet another Cheka. In this, he goes further even than Lenin, who in *The State and Revolution* committed himself, at least on paper, to the eventual elimination of the state. Here is one absolute Zizek never suspends, the universal which remains operative at the very heart of his own theory.

In a memorable cartoon, Wildcat insists: 'I don't just want freedom from the capitalists. I also want freedom from people fit to take over' (ABC 24). This sums up what is wrong with Zizek's position: for all his radical posturing, he restores the same kind of oppressive logic which operates in the present social system. Granted, he wishes it to operate under the banner of a new master-signifier, and to achieve such a displacement there needs to be a revolution. However, his entire project is geared towards the creation of people 'fit to take over', prepared to do what is necessary to restore order and make sure that the core dogmas of the Lacanian schema are not threatened by revolutionary energies which exceed 'order'. In this way, Zizek acts as a representative of the strand of psychoanalysis which operates as a normalising practice, entrapping desire and existence within the Oedipal cage. This places him firmly within the 'party of order', not within the 'party of anarchy', the proletariat (see Marx, 18th Brumaire p. 19). He may not be a 'liberal', but he still has little to offer politically, besides a politics of domination.

Perhaps, then, there is a need to take up against Zizek the clarion-call he sounds against other theorists. He expects his reader to respond to his blackmail: stop shirking the Act, or you are not a committed revolutionary! He counterposes this to the rightist blackmail: stop supporting revolution, or you are a totalitarian! In this context, one should remember his call, during the Balkans wars, to reject the 'double blackmail' (****). The path to a committed radicalism, Zizek rightly observes, does not lead through the 'moderation' and 'reasonableness' of quasi-liberal politics. At the same time, however, it does not lead through the Zizekian Act either. It lies in the flows of desire and activity which exceed Zizek just as much as they exceed his opponents in their rejection of the traps of state, Party and master-signifier. It lies with a demand for the 'impossible' which is not a demand for Nothingness, but for new openings, greater possibilities and a freedom which is lived actively

and without the hierarchy and subordination we would argue is implicit to any Zizekian schema.

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