

same”)—rehearses the canonical Freud of “Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming” in order to highlight not fantasy’s fundamental ambiguity but its radical *falsity*. With this systematic and, in fact, totalizing move, Žižek effectively slams the door on other alternative, less circumscribed conceptions of the fantasmatic—including, one might add, those explored elsewhere in his own work (for example, in the concluding chapter of *Looking Awry* where, in the context of an attempt to think an ethics of fantasy, he recommends respecting the “absolutely particular way” the other person organizes his enjoyment).

Need I add that one could make the very same claim, if one were wont to employ homologues, about *particular* works of art? Interpretation, psychoanalytic or otherwise, should involve a minimal respect for the formal integrity of the work of art. Žižek has said—with his usual exorbitant counter-expectational brio (“I’m going to say this officially, so you can use it: I don’t care”)—that he hates art: “Visual art and I just do not agree. It’s even worse than cinema” (Olson and Worsham 270). This is, from one perspective, a refreshing, because cheekily scandalous, thing to say. I mean, why can’t Žižek have his cake and eat it too—*sans* frosting? From another perspective or reverse angle, however, Žižek’s cavalier attitude about art gives one pause, since the aesthetic radically exceeds, or so it seems to me, both the clinical *and* the ethical-political, the theoretical *and* the philosophical.

In the conclusion to the interview featured in *JAC*, Žižek says that his “big dream” (in addition, presumably, to penning a volume of *Cliffs Notes*) is to write à la Adorno on music—on, for instance, Beethoven’s late string quartets (285). Beethoven, according to Adorno, is the musical analogue of Hegel and thus, it would appear, a perfect subject for Žižek. At the very same time, there’s a good reason—an “aesthetic” one, if you will—why Adorno was never able to finish his book on Beethoven: you may well be able to make poetry, even great poetry, out of the late string quartets (*vide* Eliot), but Beethoven’s music and, more particularly, the riddle, Sphinx-like character of the work of art ultimately resist, as Adorno also understood, the “universal” blandishments of philosophy, even and especially those of Hegelian philosophy.

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Slavoj Žižek’s Naked Politics: Opting for the Impossible, A Secondary Elaboration

Peter McLaren

Rather than offer a formal point-counterpoint response to Slavoj Žižek’s vertiginous pronouncements (on just about everything, it seems), I’d like to respond to just a few themes touched on in his *JAC* interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham. In doing so, I’ll pay close attention to Žižek’s overall political project, which he defines as decidedly “anti-capitalist.” In particular, I’ll examine his treatment of concepts such as ideology, capitalism, and class struggle (which betray a lineage that can be traced directly to Marx) in the context of current attempts to rethink Marxist revolutionary praxis. Many of the issues dealing with class struggle and

revolutionary consciousness exercised by *añk* enjoyed some critical currency among progressive educators in the early 1980s but until recently had been retraversed by post-Marxist critics and pronounced as largely “empty terms” that had outgrown their utility and explanatory power. When they were not glaringly absent in discussions pertaining to educational reform, they were employed in a vulgarized, domesticated, and watered-down fashion. In recent years, however, they have become more visible in an emerging new Marxist educational literature. In fact, as educators attempt to rethink educational transformation in the context of discussions over the globalization of capitalism, classical Marxist terminology is slowly arching its way back into the lexicon of the progressive educational critic.

The reappearance in educational criticism of analyses inspired by the old bearded devil—marking a Marxian *risorgimento* of sorts—can be explained in part by the current crisis of capitalism and the growing dissatisfaction among educators with the decade-long fashion of leftist postmodernist educational critique. Our smug “victory” as Cold War warriors over the evil empire—an empire widely understood to have been spawned by Marx and his legion of renegade idealists and opportunists—has blinded many critics to the fact that we have not yet left the monopoly stage of capitalism. Such a stage is marked by that reified totality of barbaric acts expanded into a world-system that Lenin referred to as imperialism, where almost the entire globe has been drawn into the capitalist system. Today, the very idea of freedom wobbles precariously on the shaking foundations of the current “hurrah capitalism,” on a scaffold of empty bourgeois dreams premised on the illusion that an era of post-scarcity is just around the corner if only we could make the most of the latest available stock market options. The standard view of history long debunked by Marxists—that takes capitalism for granted as the outcome of transhistorical processes (the expansion of trade and technological progress)—has now become so naturalized in the cultural logic of the developed countries of the West that even the most *soi-disant* postmodern critics tend to ignore it. In fact, postmodernists like to blame destructive effects that should be ascribed to capitalism on the Enlightenment project’s commitment to universal human emancipation (Wood, “Modernity” 33). We are now a breath away from the monstrous eventuality when the commodity-form penetrates every corner of the social world. The more universal capital becomes, the more difficult it is to see. We increasingly need non-capitalist eyes to recognize it, and with the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries, those

are no longer being produced on the grand scale or with the ceaseless regularity that they used to be.

The theft of the White House by George W. Bush, and its takeover by transnational corporations, is emblematic of the fact that capitalism has taken control of the political process itself. Globalization today means the universalization of the imposition of the economic logic of capitalism—a logic that includes the imperatives of accumulation, competition, commodification, and profit-maximization that together bring about the steady immiseration of those who continue to be crushed by debt, austerity programs, and environmental and health catastrophes (Wood, “Modernity” 33). Globalization also means capitalism’s continued effort to drive the living standards of the world’s workers—those whose struggles history has shown to be the most effective in preventing the worst tendencies of capitalism from being implemented—to the barest minimum in order to maximize profits (see McLaren et al.).

According to *añk*, this capitalist logic has created the background against which a generalized economy can thrive. But it has not placed an insurmountable limit on anti-capitalist struggle. Capitalism has entered an era in which no rival systems exist but in which no exit routes exist either. The neoliberalism that has emerged with the collapse of state demand-management and the Keynesian welfare state is a particular species of imperialism (“capitalism with the gloves off”), one in which the inner contradictions have become exacerbated beyond imagination. The record-breaking profit growth we hear so much about in the boomspeak of the nightly newscasters typically fosters the belief that capitalism is in the process of retooling itself for the elimination of poverty. While corporations continue to argue that the solution to poverty is to stimulate growth and create wealth, there is little evidence that increased national wealth actually alleviates poverty, provoking David Korten to offer this stinging retort: “What the Gross National Product (GNP) measures is the rate at which the economically powerful are expropriating the resources of the economically weak in order to convert them into products that quickly become the garbage of the rich” (qtd. in Ellwood 68). We only need to witness the continuing “epidemics of overproduction” and the explosion in the industrial reserve army of the dispossessed that stake themselves out in their *casas de cartón* on the streets of our urban metropolitan centers. Capital’s ability to migrate overseas in search of low wages follows deindustrialization and the mass displacement of workers (primarily workers of color). It is becoming increasingly clear that the quality of life in capitalist nations such as the United States is

implicated in the absence of freedom in less developed countries. Corporate overworlders profiteering from human suffering and armed with a vision of transforming the environment into Planet Mall are bent upon reaping short-term profits at the expense of ecological health and human dignity and are drawing ever more of existence into their expanding domain, cannibalizing life as a whole. We are experiencing a re-Feudalisation of capitalism, as it refuels itself with the more barbarous characteristics of its past through the global arbitrage of corporate carpetbaggers (McLaren and Farahmandpur). While in the developed western economies wages have not yet been pushed down to subsistence levels as Marx predicted, he was frighteningly accurate in his predictions that oligopolistic corporations would swallow the globe and that industry would become dominated by new technologies. In a value-producing society such as ours (one that disavows the basic principle of its own functioning: that it is premised upon the exploitative extraction of surplus value from living labor), the worker is always a “producer of overproduction” because the means of consumption cannot be greater than the needs of capital for labor power. In this sense, the current global casino of advanced capitalism is perhaps best understood as a universal quest to produce value (see Rikowski). Any empirical nonrealization of capital—such as the proliferation of skid row conditions throughout the metropolitan centers of the developed western nations—has to be explained away not as exceptions or rude aberrations but as part of the necessary condition for what Žižek has described as the “universal structural principle of capitalism.” To be sure, the universal structural principle of capitalism admits certain aberrations (the economic abjection of millions of people; real sites of resistance), but Žižek emphasizes the logical interdependence of these exceptions and the rule.

Capital as the central force structuring social relations is systematically obscured by poststructuralist and anti-foundationalist conceptions of power as diffuse, variegated, and contextually specific. In a rejection of old-style *Kulturkritik*, the transcendental ego of science has been displaced by the concept of subject position produced as a discursive practice or as an effect of textuality. The ubiquity of ideology has, in this perspective, little to do with class struggle and more to do with the architecture of desire, the production and plasticity of meanings within discourse and representation, and an endless self-reflexive interrogation. To his credit, Žižek is one of the few prominent cultural critics who have attempted to bring an analysis of capitalist social relations of exploitation and an advocacy for socialism back into the conversation about cultural

politics (in the interview, he amusingly refers to himself as “an old Stalinist” and as a “naive Old Leftist.”) He explains how, at the moment that one seriously interrogates the existing liberal consensus, one is accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for outdated ideological positions. Despite the derision that is certain to follow attacks on liberal democracy, he warns that we are entering perilous waters if we follow the post-Marxists in their cowardly wavering on the notion that “actual freedom of thought means the freedom to question the predominant liberal-democratic ‘post-ideological’ consensus—or it means nothing” (“Repeating” 2). And while his work is fundamentally Lacanian in its analytical thrust, attempting to produce a *replâtrage* between psychoanalysis and Marxism (it argues, for instance, that fascism is the inherent symptom, the return of the repressed of capitalism and not just its external contingent deviation), Žižek candidly admits that psychoanalysis likely will not help social theory resolve its problems. Yet, he remains persuasive in making the case that the psychoanalytic tradition (particularly the work of Lacan) can assist Marxists in thinking through a number of concepts crucial to understanding global capitalist culture, ideology being the most significant. Against the standard reproach that psychoanalysis (comprised of notions deployed for the treatment of individuals) cannot be applied to social-ideological processes (collective entities), Žižek responds that the field of social practices is something the individual him or herself has to experience as an order that is externalized or at the very least minimally reified. Therefore, the problem is not how to jump from the individual to the social level, but how to structure the decentered socio-symbolic order of institutionalized practices so that the subject can remain sane (“Repeating” 54). Žižek’s dilemma is that he believes Marxist theory is still inadequate for an understanding of current manifestations of globalized capitalist exploitation; he believes that we can’t repeat the “old Marxisms” but at the same time he is now firmly convinced that what can be loosely termed “postmodern theory” is largely wrongheaded. Like Pascal, he wants to remain faithful to tradition while at the same time moving beyond tradition. In other words, he would like to remain faithful to Marx’s central ideas, yet at the same time he wants to rethink some of his notions while deepening and extending (and rejecting) others. In a field as contentious as Marxist scholarship, it is understandable that the question of how successful Žižek has been is a matter of sharply divided opinion. Some will see his scholarship as displaying world-historical significance; others will pronounce it as clever but largely Thermidorian.

đñk's coy admission that he has not read much more than summaries of many of the literary works upon which he has based his nuanced appraisal of them raises the question of whether he is one of the few internationally acclaimed social theorists who has written more books than he has read. His writings spew forth ideas like a swirl of Lacanized lava vomited up from an orifice deeply recessed in his Gothic-laced unconscious. The point to emphasize here is that his criticisms are staggeringly erudite and scintillatingly innovative. The paroxysms that spike his ideas and his cross-dressing of different codes recall surrealism. Reading him is like being invited to drink formalist logic from Marcel Duchamp's urinal. To some of his critics, his writing finds its Archimedean point in the desires that it serves rather than in the unmasking of the *auta ta pragmata* or actual disposition of things. His volcanic theoretical constructs conveyed in the thick-boned prose of a debt collector create an exciting contrast that has captured the imagination of many progressive intellectuals. Whether one believes that **đñk**'s *oeuvre* represents a seismic shift in Marxist analysis or avant-garde cultural criticism disguised as revolutionary struggle, it is impossible not to admire the scope and depth of his theoretical understanding, especially his acute familiarity with and probing analysis of issues that range across so many disciplinary traditions. One cannot but welcome his brash attempt to break with the post-Marxist radical democracy project spearheaded by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

đñk's peculiar strength is that he is able to respond to historical reality as it is in the process of becoming unreality; his work has so persistently anticipated the basic tendencies of the human psyche traumatized by daily life in the orbit of capital that he can arguably be considered one of the most brilliant cultural critics in the world today. His work does not betray an eyes-averted ontological loathing of the masses or a cheery celebration of their outlawed passions. Yet, his insights are those of a night crawler, a hyena on methamphetamine, circling his topics with a presence so carnivorous that he seemingly can ingest them without contact. Lacan is not so much the origin of **đñk**'s insights as the host upon which he feeds in order to provide the sustenance that he needs to stalk his ever more elusive academic prey. In canvassing the detritus of a world gone mad, he makes popular culture the springboard for his *sans-culotte* intellect. His mind effortlessly careens into the theoretical stratosphere where it spins out of control like a wounded owl of Minerva, only to regain its balance and dive bomb its unwitting victims—filmmakers, artists, politicians, writers, and the more sublunar cultural critics who

scurry about the charred ruins of capitalist culture, rummaging through the works of De Certeau and seeking explanations for the chaos.

His personal zeal for exposing the contradictions within the greater logic of capital belies his obsessional fear of exposing personal aspects of himself to the public. In a recent interview in *Lingua Franca*, he writes that for him, "shopping is like masturbating in public" (Boynton 48). In the *JAC* interview, he notes that for him "writing poetry would be masturbating in public" (254). Here it appears as if **đñk** doth protest too much. Is this his way of telling readers: "Try not to think of a purple elephant!"

No theory is so strong that it can break down all the walls of the historical world, and on this point **đñk** appears uncharacteristically to concur. He is passionately committed to a politics that shapes the contours of the present and is at no loss of words in decrying the "false radicalism" of leftists whose radical positions are so removed from everyday political struggles that they partake of what he calls "interpassivity." In other words, their radical positions produce, in his view, a "cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility" because they do not let their actions get close to a certain limit. These radicals are, in his view, nothing more than imposters. The hidden logic of their positions assumes the following form: "Let's talk as much as possible about the necessity of a radical change to make sure that nothing will really change" ("Repeating" 3, 5).

Following a rather conventional format, I will comment on what I appreciate most about **đñk**'s work—not all of which is touched upon in the *JAC* interview—followed by a discussion of what I perceive to be some problems with and limitations of his work.

Outclassing Identity Politics

đñk is to be applauded for refusing to follow recent post-Marxist trends. For instance, we do not see him rejecting the dialectic in favor of the more fashionable varieties of ludic pragmatism, poststructuralist nominalism, and obscurantist idealism for sale in the rag-and-bone shop of today's theoretical marketplace. His brilliant defense of the dialectic is most welcome, especially by historical materialists such as myself. The absolute centrality that Marx now plays in his work is not just fashionable theoretical brigandism, but a sincere attempt to rethink social relations outside of the social universe of capital where there exists so much suffering, oppression, and exploitation.

While admittedly he does not offer a brass-knuckle defense of revolutionary Marxism (in fact his Lacanian Marxism proposes in some instances a fascinating yet not unproblematic Hegelian re-reversal of Marxism), it is nonetheless possible for Marxists to appreciate the way that he has rejected the poststructuralist obsession with identity politics and made the globalization of capital a central theme in his most recent work. He appears to have recognized the dilemma put forward by Ellen Wood: “Once you replace the concept of capitalism with an undifferentiated plurality of social identities and special oppressions, socialism as the antithesis to capitalism loses all meaning” (“Identity” 29). Given the obstacles to revolutionary praxis put forward in poststructuralist criticism, it is worth appreciating his assertion that “the crucial point is how to create an international political movement that would politicize economy itself” and that “the old Marxist logic of capitalism generating its own contradictions is still relevant” (Olson and Worsham 277).

Žižek challenges the relativism of the gender-race-class grid of reflexive positionality when he claims that class antagonism or struggle is not simply one in a series of social antagonisms—race, class, gender, and so on—but rather constitutes the part of this series *that sustains the horizon of the series itself*. In other words, class struggle is the specific antagonism that assigns rank to and modifies the particularities of the other antagonisms in the series. He notes that “the economy is at one and the same time the genus and one of its own species” (*Totalitarianism* 193). In what I consider to be his most important work to date, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (coauthored with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau), Žižek militantly refuses to evacuate reference to historical structures of totality and universality and argues that class struggle itself enables the proliferation of new political subjectivities (albeit subjectivities that ironically relegate class struggle to a secondary role). As Marx argued, class struggle structures “in advance” the very terrain of political antagonisms. Thus, according to Žižek, class struggle is not “the last horizon of meaning, the last signified of all social phenomena, but the formal generative matrix of the different ideological horizons of understanding” (“Repeating” 16–17). In his terms, class struggle sets the ground for the empty place of universality, enabling it to be filled variously with contents of different sorts (ecology, feminism, anti-racism). He further argues that the split between the classes is even more radical today than during the times of industrial class divisions. He takes the position that post-Marxists have done an excellent job in uncovering the *fantasy* of capital (vis-à-vis the endless deferral of pleasure) but have

done little to uncover its *reality*. Those post-Marxists who are advocates of new social movements (such as Laclau and Mouffe) want revolution without *revolution*; in contrast, Žižek calls for movements that relate to the larger totality of capitalist social relations and that challenge the very matter and antimatter of capital’s social universe. His strategic focus on capitalist exploitation (while often confusing and inconsistent) rather than on racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity is a salutary one: “The problem is not how our precious particular identity should be kept safe from global capitalism. The problem is how to oppose global capitalism at an even more radical level; the problem is to oppose it universally, not on a particular level. This whole problematic is a false one” (Olson and Worsham 281). What Žižek sets himself against is the particular experience or political argument. An experience or argument that cannot be universalized is “always and by definition a conservative political gesture: ultimately everyone can evoke his unique experience in order to justify his reprehensible acts” (“Repeating” 4–5). Here he echoes Wood, who argues that capitalism is “not just another specific oppression alongside many others but an all-embracing compulsion that imposes itself on all our social relations” (“Identity” 29). He also echoes critical educators such as Paulo Freire, who argues against the position that experiences of the oppressed speak for themselves. All experiences need to be interrogated for their ideological assumptions and effects, regardless of who articulates them or from where they are lived or spoken. They are to be read with, against, and upon the scientific concepts produced by the revolutionary Marxist tradition. The critical pedagogical act of interrogating experiences is not to pander to the autonomous subject or to individualistic practices but to see those experiences in relationship to the structure of social antagonisms and class struggle. History has not discharged the educator from the mission of grasping the “truth of the present” by interrogating all the existing structures of exploitation present within the capitalist system where, at the point of production, material relations characterize relations between people and social relations characterize relations between things. The critical educator asks: How are individuals historically located in systematic structures of economic relations? How can these structures—these lawless laws of capital—be overcome and transformed through revolutionary praxis into acts of freely associated labor where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all?

Žižek considers capitalist democracy to be infinitely perverse, in the sense that it can invest a lot of energy in protecting the rights of a serial

killer or war criminal while at the same time supporting massive violations of the rights of ordinary people. We live at a time in which capitalist democracy does its work through legal norms that cynically and perversely present themselves as already compromised by multiple intersections. This false self-transparency is what gives ideology its hold on contemporary populations (*Totalitarianism* 246). In his challenge to assist individuals in penetrating beyond what Jürgen Habermas has called the “*neue Undurchsichtigkeit*” (new opacity) of postmodern culture, Žižek has placed his political project securely within a Marxist problematic. In his call to overthrow capitalism and liberal/bourgeois democratic arrangements, he criticizes contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler for insisting that human emancipation has to occur in civil society against the state by claiming that state power is itself split from within and that it has its spectral underside. While he joins Butler in positing an unbridgeable gap between ideal and imperfect reality, between the goal of a political project and the limits of its realization, he refuses this as the ultimate horizon of political engagement because he chooses to remain mindful of both the shortcomings of his project and the importance of remaining enthusiastic about it.

Ideology on the Brink

Arguably, Žižek’s most important theoretical advance is his reconceptualization of the theory of ideology, the theoretical contribution for which he is best known. The idea of the unconscious has not lost its relevance for Marxists, if for no other reason than the fact that the world economy is dominated more than ever by the unconscious and unplanned mechanisms of the world market. We have become victims of the market’s structural unconscious, which has opened up humankind to the crises and wars that result from attempts to control the productive forces. Žižek’s cardinal concept of ideology repays close attention by Marxists, especially those who have (rightly in my mind) abandoned Althusser yet still yearn to establish a link between ideology and the unconscious. The concept of ideology should have a singular purchase for Marxists, especially during a time when the product of digitalized society is “interpassivity”—when, according to Žižek, the subject remains active while displacing onto another the fundamental passivity of his or her being. Since we are “entering the last stage of modernity full speed,” where cyberspace functions like a gnostic dream that tells us that we can all become Gods, Žižek’s psycho-Marxist approach to ideology apparently will help us free ourselves of our need for passive support while we

make our ascent to Mount Olympus (Olson and Worsham 269, 270). Clearly, for Žižek, such an approach is indispensable “in order to really grasp the paradoxes of consumer culture” (Olson and Worsham 257).

Žižek’s conception of ideology is represented by a rip in the fabric of the symbolic order, by that which remains stubbornly resistant to symbolization, by that which cannot be named or marked. We can loosely describe this as a “structured absence” or a “missing fullness”—or what Žižek calls a “fetishistic inversion”—that functions in the unconscious as a specter. This phantasmic guardian or specter (the *object a* or “sublime object”) protects this tear or gap in the unconscious from our awareness of it. The purpose of the specter is to disguise the gap between reality and the real by camouflaging the unmarked and the unmarkable real that subjectivity must foreclose if it is to have ontological consistency; such an act of disguise is necessary in order to protect reality’s dark secret: that we are always already implicated in relations of domination and oppression. Thus, the sublime object or specter sustains the misrecognition necessary for ideology to do its work and to maintain itself as a frame within which the subject’s psychosocial fantasies are structured in dominance. In other words, the mission of ideology is to render invisible the symbolic fiction that passes for the real. Ideology reflects the untenable and unassimilable notion that to assume the role of the subject of history is to be a priori implicated in discursive regimes and social practices linked to race, class, gender, and sexual exploitation.

Take the case of Timothy McVeigh. During the Gulf War, McVeigh drove a bulldozer that shoveled Iraqis into mass graves, some of them buried alive. He referred to his Oklahoma bombing victims as “collateral damage,” the same term the U.S. military used to describe Iraqi civilian casualties. During the war, he wrote to his mother that “after the first one, it got easier.” In Žižekian terms, ideology—writ large in this instance—functions to enable significant numbers of the public at large to misrecognize the contradiction contained in the fact that George Bush’s war machine made McVeigh a killer and that the junior Bush then proceeded to execute McVeigh for taking to the utmost extreme the violent logic around which the patriotism of his country is structured. Ideology, in other words, works to contain the ambivalence felt in recognizing unbearable contradictions such as this. It does this by supplying the subject with a non-signifying surplus or *jouissance* that helps make the ambivalence pleasurable. The dominant media certainly have drawn an equivalence between executing mass murderers and patriotism. We praise the executioners when mass murder is undertaken

in the name of war, but we condemn them when our erstwhile students of terror turn their butcher's skills against their teachers in the name of patriotism.

Moving beyond the structuralist problematic of Althusser, whereby individual subjects (as defined by the intersection of historical and biographical vectors) are interpellated as subjects through a process of misrecognition, **đñk** does not view ideology as functioning to distort or disguise reality. He argues, instead, that ideology is not an illusion that masks reality but a process that enables reality to be lived precisely by refracting it and rendering its constitutive antagonisms oblique to our conscious mind. In other words, ideology structures the way that we perceive reality such that we are motivated (through surplus desire) to misrecognize it at the level of the *socius*. This misrecognition allows us to survive the traumatic kernel of and our impossible encounter with the Real. To glimpse inside the fissure that separates the Real from reality is to witness the unthinkable; it is to discover that the sun has a cold, silken anus. Precisely in this fashion is the social able to be retrospectively constituted by the terrain of the symbolic. Thus, the notion of "false consciousness" (social practices are real but our beliefs about them are false) is rejected by **đñk** in favor of a view of ideology that posits the mechanisms by which illusions constitute the prevailing structure of our social practices. As he is wont to emphasize: ideology "prohibits something that it already claims is itself impossible" (Olson and Worsham 276).

đñk explains this process by locating ideology within the logic of the signifier, in the discursive structure of the unconscious where our social reality is engineered by fantasy and desire, where ideology effaces the threat of social antagonism constitutive of capitalist subjectivity. Ideology, for **đñk**, is not an escape *from* reality but an escape *to* reality. But it is a special kind of reality—an unconsciously mediated reality where presuppositions are always already minimally posted, a special kind of reality that conceals its scaffolding and the surplus-enjoyment that the unconscious serves up in order to compensate for its motivated amnesia. This is what he refers to when he notes that ideology is a "false psychology" that is imposed on individuals and internalized by them. He argues that ideology sells individuals "new un-freedoms" as freedoms; it is "where something is really imposed on you by the external symbolic social network but you tend to identify with it, to internalize it as your own free psychological choice" (Olson and Worsham 266). Mas'ud Zavarzadeh puts it succinctly when he notes that "what is regarded as 'freedom' of the

individual subject is not 'natural,' but is an ideology effect: the dominant ideology posits the individual as free in order that he/she may freely consent to the ruling regulations of production which, through the social division of labor, produce and maintain (economic) inequality" (27–28). The notion of free choice, therefore, "functions practically as its opposite" (Olson and Worsham 266). In other words, the only free cheese is in the mousetrap. Ideology in this sense perpetuates what Marx referred to as "an imagined association" of freely associated human beings.

We are reminded that ideology works paradoxically and becomes post-ideological the moment it exposes its own soiled undergarments. Here **đñk** is emphasizing the point that in this age of cynical reason where the brutal workings of capitalist machineries of oppression are laid bare for all the public to see (do you remember how Ronald Reagan made racism fashionable, how George Bush made Ronald Reagan fashionable, how Clinton reduced welfare recipients to half-citizens, and how George W. Bush began early on in his presidential term to lay the ideological groundwork for making the idea of public executions more palatable—even attractive—within the quotidian habitus of his "compassionate" consumer citizenry?), ideological critique itself has become a fetish object that conceals the social mode of production and the historical Real. Of course, all this gets intensified when **đñk** considers how subjectivity is isotopically constituted by the new media technologies. We become cyborgs, or cyber-communists, as the subtitle of the *JAC* interview indicates.

đñk demands that we distinguish symptom (return of the truth in the universalized lie) from fetish (the lie that enables the subject to sustain the truth) and that we recognize that today ideology functions at the level of everyday life in a way that is much closer to the notion of fetish. In the current historical juncture, "we've passed from symptom to the functioning of fetish." Today it is important to identify our fetishes because, in the current historical juncture "in which nothing is repressed," we have adopted "very cruelly realistic attitudes" sustained by small fetishes (Olson and Worsham 260, 259). Here we see that the contradictory process of ideological functioning, as "fetish"—far from being impossible in a moment where nothing is repressed—serves as the mode of appearance and condition of possibility of an official position that nothing is repressed. **đñk**, like Marx, believes that fetishes are necessary forms of appearance of alienated life. Certainly, they have a moral claim on our attention. Having a less clear claim on the attention of the revolutionary left is **đñk**'s work on multiculturalism.

The Multiculturalist Canard

In focusing on how multiculturalism functions rather than on the contradictions within its theoretical optic, **Ñk** chooses the bold path of criticizing liberal multiculturalism's key signifier: "tolerance." In doing so, he correctly emphasizes that multiculturalism frequently works to legitimize the "logic of universalized victimization," in that the Other becomes good insofar as he or she remains a victim. He is also right to assert that a conventional approach to multiculturalism too frequently "translates problems of economic and political struggle into problems of fundamentalism and tolerance" and thus "obliterates the actual roots of intolerance," not to mention psychologizing what are, in effect, material social relations (Olson and Worsham 278, 279). He clearly recognizes the fetishism of normative plurality within liberal multiculturalism that occludes issues of social class and rejects the notion of hegemony (see San Juan). Condemning the "patronizing, naive attitude of 'learn to cope, learn to tolerate each other'" that has infected the liberal variant of multiculturalism (and admitting that this is his "*only* problem with multiculturalism"), he goes on to defend what he calls the positive notion of multiculturalism. This positive notion—that other cultures can be tolerant—is celebrated as a modern Eurocentric idea that is praiseworthy because it postulates a Cartesian subject. In claiming that it is "*only* against the background of Cartesian subjectivity that you can experience your own culture as something that is contingent," it might appear that the thrust of his analysis is Eurocentric—as if he were saying, in effect, that only European cultures (presumably those that reflect the Judeo-Christian tradition that he supports) are capable of tolerance (Olson and Worsham 279, 280; emphasis added). Admittedly, there is some ambiguity here. But as a historical materialist, he is also saying, in effect, that the "cogito" is coterminous with capitalism and that capitalism itself is the condition under which cultural tolerance emerges as a problem.

While it is easy to agree with **Ñk** that communication among groups is less in need of contextualization and more in need of an understanding of their own political, economic, and cultural embeddedness, it is more difficult to swallow his idea that multicultural communication can be nothing more than a "shared perplexity" that follows when two groups realize that they share the same problem (he describes this as the overlapping of two misunderstandings) but do not necessarily share the same approach to resolving the problem, assuming it is resolvable (Olson and Worsham 273–74). One of the difficulties with this perspective is that it fails to specify on what basis non-Cartesian/Kantian subjects will be

able to communicate with Cartesian subjects, since according to **Ñk** only a Cartesian/Kantian subject ("an empty subject, which, precisely because of this, needs identifications or fantasies in order to fill in its own gap") can experience the contingency of his or her own culture (Olson and Worsham 273). One of the central difficulties with **Ñk**'s pronouncements on multiculturalism is contained in his argument that the ideological practices of Eurocentrism constitute the very forces out of which multinational capital "thinks" itself. In making this claim, he presumes that corporate capitalism is able to recuperate any gains made by a critical multiculturalism. But, as Anna Kornbluh has presciently noted, critical multiculturalism is not always reducible to the same project as multinational corporate capitalism, insofar as the totality of capitalism is not able to colonize fully—in advance—each and every space of ethnic, racial, or class subversion.

There is no gainsaying that **Ñk** develops an important point when he claims that a fundamental dimension of Eurocentrism is premised on the belief that "we were somehow deprived of some original jewel of wisdom that is then to be sought elsewhere," a process that leads to a false evaluation of the other (this is similar to the way in which the progressive academic in the West "needs the dream that there is another place where they have the authentic revolution so that they can be authentic through an Other") (Olson and Worsham 261, 270). Admittedly, it is difficult to argue against the idea that at the bloody heart of racism and patriarchy exists ideal Otherness. I am prepared to give some credit to the notion that a false elevation of the Other can be problematic on a number of fronts. For example, such an uncritical elevation of the Other has instanced forms of idealization that have had a troubling history, the Nazi idealization of the German peasant being a case in point. And then there are those paradoxical instances of a different register, such as certain Afrocentric ethnosociological readings of Egyptian civilization, often paradoxically deriving their claims and methods from European sources, and sometimes unconsciously utilizing European epistemologies to validate non-European ones, while simultaneously denigrating European epistemologies. And we are also faced with the chronic dilemma of the romanticization of cultures that have been "disappeared" by European settlers and with the cultural appropriation of marginalized groups by Euro-Americans. In a similar vein, one also thinks of Ruth Beebe Hill's novel, *Hanta Yo*, and her depiction of, in the words of Ward Churchill, "the collectivist spirituality of the nineteenth-century Lakota as nothing so much as a living prefiguration of her friend Ayn Rand's grossly individualistic

cryptofascism” (100). Not to mention the poet, Gary Snyder, who sometimes pretends to see the world through the eyes of an American Indian “shaman,” and Lynn Andrews, “an airhead ‘feminist’ yuppier” who has been putatively charged by the power of Jaguar Woman and sent forth “to write a series of books so outlandish in their pretensions as to make [Carlos] Castaneda seem a model of propriety by comparison” (Churchill 100, 101). But when **Ñk** makes the claim in the interview that indigenous peoples were “as bad as we,” he appears to shift the goalposts (261). It is an unfortunate statement, and if I were not familiar with many of his numerous works, I would be tempted to claim that here he is establishing a false equivalence between the elevation of the symbolic Other and the elevation of the real Other. While his remark assumes a selective affinity among himself and his interviewers (presupposing a mainly Euro-American readership of *JAC*), it also appears to endorse an “us-versus-them” positionality.

Ñk runs into serious problems that seemingly he is unable to surmount when he makes the claim that Native Americans were “as bad as we” are and other such claims. However, upon closer examination, and in reading this statement in the context of his other works, he appears to be doing something quite different. By arguing that Native Americans were “as bad as we,” he is not trying to render American Indians “normal” like he and his fellow Europeans, which would be an absurd (not to mention pernicious) move; rather, he is trying to underscore how ideology works by incorporating the Other within itself—in this case, so that the dominant white majority can recognize its secret longings in the Other that historically it has all but vanquished (261). Whereas his comments in the interview appear contradictory, they are more clearly expressed in his written work. For instance, in a recent essay he claims that it is precisely in the struggle against Eurocentrism by Euro-American liberal multiculturalists that another—and more devious—species of racism is produced. One such struggle is embodied in the false elevation of the Other. The myth of Native Americans living in undisturbed balance with nature instead of trying to dominate and transform it is, he claims, the ultimate racist myth, because it implicitly reduces Native Americans “to beings who, like animals, left no traces of themselves on their land, while ‘aggressive’ Western man cultivates it” (“Repeating” 76). What he does not sufficiently elaborate on is the way in which the false elevation of the Other works in conjunction with the imperial demonization of the Other. What he could have emphasized in his critique of liberal multiculturalism is the motivated amnesia of the European colonizers and ruling dictator-

ships everywhere who have attempted to erase the traces of *los olvidados* whom they now “showcase” as a display of their morally elevated “tolerance.” One of the most powerful ways exercised by the ruling classes for erasing the traces of a people whom they have slaughtered and whom they continue to exploit is to erase their memories. Eduardo Galeano tells of a story by Spanish writer Don Ramón Gómez de la Serna about a fellow who had such a bad memory that one day he forgot that he had a bad memory and remembered everything. The colonizer continues to work hard to put memories to sleep. The danger, of course, is to risk a rebirth of remembering as a form of dangerous memory, a reawakening of subjugated knowledges, memories cathecting with and catapulting revolutionary struggle into the guarded precincts of hope. Galeano notes that “A memory that’s awake is contradictory, like us. It’s never still, and it changes along with us. It was born to be not an anchor but a catapult. A port of departure, not of arrival. It doesn’t turn away from nostalgia, but it prefers the dangers of hope. The Greeks believed memory was the sister of time and the sea, and they weren’t wrong” (211). Galeano is worth quoting at greater length on this issue:

Impunity is the child of bad memory. All the dictatorships that have ever existed in Latin America have known this well. They’ve burned entire mountain ranges of books, books guilty of revealing an outlawed reality and books simply guilty of being books, and mountains of documents as well. Military officers, presidents, priests: the history of burnings is a long one, dating from 1562 in Maní de Yucatán when Father Diego de Landa threw Mayan books into the flames, hoping to reduce indigenous memory to ashes. To mention only a few bonfires: in 1870, when the armies of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay razed Paraguay, the historical archives of the vanquished were torched; twenty years later, the government of Brazil burned all the papers that testified to three and a half centuries of black slavery; in 1983, the Argentine brass set fire to all the records of their dirty war against their countrymen; and in 1995, the Guatemalan military did the same. (211)

Ñk is only partially successful in his critique of liberal multiculturalism because he does not comment upon the danger in asserting that Native Americans were “as bad as we” as an antidote to the false elevation of the Other—possibly because he meant the comment to be ironic. In fact, there is a danger that **Ñk** will disappear into the liberal multiculturalism that he so trenchantly contests. The argument that the Other was “as bad as we” is an argument that liberal multiculturalists put forward all the time. It is

the condition of possibility for the comment that we are all really the same under our skin, and that we should be anti-racist because “all our blood runs red.” *Ñk* is aware of this, but he leaves the implications of this argument unaddressed. It is the basis for a “colorblind” multiculturalism and sets up a false equivalence that flattens or makes symmetrical the European/Other couplet as if it were a “unity of opposition” floating in some transcendental ether, when, in fact, this move camouflages the fact that at the level of the materiality of social relations, the European/Other functions not as a binary opposition so much as a “distinction” within a dependent hierarchy (see Wilden). The playing ground is far from equal today, and to assume otherwise is as naive as it is tendentious. One wonders how such a dependent hierarchy could be rationalized by liberal multiculturalists as “normal.” Liberal multiculturalists offer the horrors of colonial genocide an alibi when they leave racism at the level of the signifier, where it remains sundered from the hierarchy of historical determinations in existing capitalist social relations—relations that have shattered the lives of millions of indigenous people through capital’s quest to dominate nature and to exploit populations for their labor power. That this hierarchy exists is not so much the result of the return of the repressed vomited up by a false elevation of the Other as much as it is the product of the violent acquisition of territory, the exploitation of nature, the quest for an endless accumulation of capital, and the demonization of indigenous peoples through systems of classification developed by science, religion and anthropology that constitute the center of the legacy of European colonial conquest.

At this point, one is reminded of Walter Rodney’s systematic challenge to established beliefs about the nature of slavery in traditional African societies. In his now famous debates with J.D. Fage, Rodney acknowledged and lamented the participation of Africans in the slave trade and in practices of domination and exploitation among Africans prior to the coming of the Europeans. However, Rodney was able to point out how the trans-Atlantic character of slavery was essentially alien to Africa and how it subsequently corrupted elements of indigenous African institutions and values. He thus exposed African history as part of the myths of Eurocentric historiography in the academy that served “as a weapon of domination, keeping Africans at home and blacks in diaspora” (Adeleke 44).

In a similar vein, liberal multiculturalists fail to identify racial practice as stemming from the structure of race rather than racism—in particular from the functioning of the master signifier of whiteness linked

to capitalist social relations of production (see Seshadri-Crooks). In other words, they fail to identify the unconscious function of the signifier in the constitution of the subject of race as one that is informed by whiteness as a specific regime of looking that shapes the perceptual structure of ruling class Euro-Americans—a regime given ballast by capitalist social relations of production.

In steamrolling their politics across the landscape of differences, liberal multiculturalists level out the concept of difference itself so that now the European putatively can become the subaltern Other of the Native American because, after all, they are just like us. In their desire to relativize Native Americans, to bring them down to earth, to reduce them to the North American analogue of the multicultural Other, liberal multiculturalists trivialize the unique historical determinations that create the objective conditions for racism, no doubt a consequence of reading the Native American from the standpoint of the European settler. Also, isn’t the remark that Native Americans are “as bad as we” are just another way of saying “what belongs to you belongs to us.” This certainly helps to explain the contemporary pillaging of Native American spirituality by white yuppies. A comment by Russell Means, the leader of the American Indian Movement, is appropriate here:

What’s at issue here is the same old question that Europeans have always posed with regard to American Indians, whether what’s ours isn’t somehow theirs. And, of course, they’ve always answered the question in the affirmative. When they wanted our land they just announced that they had a right to it and therefore owned it. When we resisted their taking of our land they claimed we were being unreasonable and committed physical genocide upon us in order to convince us to see things their way. Now, being spiritually bankrupt themselves, they want our spirituality as well. So they’re making up rationalizations to explain why they’re entitled to it. (qtd. in Churchill 104)

The central problem with liberal multiculturalism so effectively unaddressed by *Ñk* is that it de-links multiculturalism from its founding gesture in global capitalist relations. It is one thing to admit that there are no uncontaminated origins (cultures, philosophies, sciences); it is quite another to reduce all cultures to the same level of historical culpability (we are all sinners in our heart of hearts and thus should be bound together by our human frailty). The slaughter of Native Americans by European imperialists cannot be reduced to an uncomfortable hiccup in the drunken brawl of history. It is an event that continues to haunt the present, one that

should, at the very least, extract an acknowledgment that the conditions of global capitalism from which European imperialism sprang must also be held accountable. The supra-national cultural identity of the metropolitan European powers that has historically defined itself as shouldering the “white man’s burden” of bringing universal values to bear on Native Americans—a burden that had been nurtured by the “Hellenomania” that buttressed European chauvinism; a burden that continues to be influenced by the Aryan model of ancient history that banished the so-called “wisdom traditions” in Egyptian, Hebraic, Babylonian, Mesopotamian and Sumerian cultures, excluding them from the canonical definition of philosophy; a burden that has always concealed its genocidal intentions under the cloak of a civilizing mission—did not grow out of a vacuum, nor was it tributary to the racist and imperialist logic in the literary, religious, philosophical, and scientific traditions of these empires (Critchley 19). So I remain perplexed: from what “enlightened” space are liberal multiculturalists speaking when they claim that Native Americans are just like us? This resembles the wish-fulfillment of the postcolonial critic whose views are actually a symptom produced by Western master-theories of the sublime (see San Juan). To harbor the fantasy that you can “speak from the standpoint of the excluded without being excluded” that you can “speak from the margins whilst staying at the centre,” is to imbibe “the fantasy of a romantic anti-Hellenism or Rousseauesque anti-ethnocentrism” (Critchley 20). Multiculturalism needs to be understood as often having more to do with maintaining such subliminal fantasies than with defending the dream of ethnic pluralism. In fact, it still has a great deal to do with camouflaging imperialist aggression and defending imperial domination in various forms throughout our transculturalized planet.¹

Žižek is acutely aware that multiculturalism too often is predicated on a number of specious assumptions: that monoculturalism and nationalism are often relegated to evils in themselves; that there has been an egregiously tendentious failure on the part of multiculturalist theorists to recognize that many Eurocentric universal values have been open to internal contestation; that Eurocentric values also include pluralism and skepticism; and that multiculturalism has too often ignored social relations implicated in the globalization of capital. While he correctly identifies the major contradiction within the order of race—the institution of difference and the desire for sameness (“Contrary to the slogan that western racism wants to make the world uniform, I think it thrives on differences”)—he does not sufficiently locate this contradiction in the

specific investments in the order of race by the subject of race; he also gives too little attention to the desire of the white capitalist for absolute mastery of the non-white Other (Olson and Worsham 261). In short, by failing to expose more fully the contradiction of the order of the European subject of race, he falls prey to reproducing the very Eurocentric/liberal multiculturalist prescriptions about race that he ostensibly opposes; that is, he avoids encountering the desire at the heart of the system of race founded on the master signifier of European whiteness (is this a symptom of his secret desire for sameness?). While his selective valorization of the Cartesian-Kantian-Hegelian abstract subject of history does not prohibit him from being attentive to historical determinations (in a recent conversation with me, he readily admitted that the heinous crimes of the European colonizers cannot—and should not—be compared with those of their victims), he does not attempt to deal sufficiently with the traces of his own Eurocentrism operative within the very terms he uses to critique liberal multiculturalism (see Katz). This is possibly due to the fact that multiculturalism is contaminated by a historicist relativism that is informed by proto-Nietzschean ontological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of reality; multiculturalists, in his view, dismiss “science” as a discursively generated power relation, whereas he sees science as “premodern” or “holistic” discourses because of its inherent truth value (*Totalitarianism* 219). This is not to say that his critique of liberal multiculturalism does not have a great deal to offer.

Class Struggle as Present Absence

A provocative exchange between Žižek and Laclau occurs at the end of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Here Laclau decries Žižek’s attempt to distinguish between class struggle and postmodernism. Laclau links Žižek’s call for the direct overthrow of capitalism and liberal democracy to Žižek’s futile and irascible attempt to create a new version of the base/superstructure model—considered anathema by concessionary, left-liberal, post-Marxists such as Laclau. Whereas Žižek sees class struggle as spontaneously and tendentially more universal in its effects because it occurs at the nexus of the capitalist system, Laclau believes that class struggle should in no way be considered a privileged locus of universalist political effects. For instance, Laclau believes that workers’ demands can be as easily integrated into the system as any other group (292). However, Žižek claims that he is not conceiving of the logic of capital as an “essentialist anchor” that limits the struggle for hegemony; rather, he argues that the economy represents the *positive condition* of

hegemonic struggle. In contrast to Laclau, **Žižek** refuses to relegate the concept of class to that of a floating signifier. He refuses, as well, to consider all elements that enter into hegemonic struggle as—in principle—equal. He sees class struggle as overdetermining the horizon upon which multiple struggles play out: political, economic, feminist, ecological, ethnic, and so on. He uses the example of “oppositional determination” to make a convincing case that class struggle is that part of the chain of antagonisms that structures in advance the very terrain on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony.

When Laclau claims that **Žižek**’s anti-capitalist/anti-postmodernist position as well as his opposition to the liberal-capitalist regime is mere “empty talk” and a prescription for “political quietism and sterility” (apparently because **Žižek** does not address the issues of bureaucracy and social control of the productive processes), **Žižek** responds in kind. He argues that Laclau’s support for what he calls the “democratic control of the economy” and “radical democracy” means either “palliative damage-control measures within the global capitalist framework, or it means *absolutely nothing*” (321). **Žižek** attempts to move beyond the left-liberalism of Laclau by not treating social class as an empty signifier, the contents of which are to be struggled for within the horizon of the democratic imaginary. This bold refusal on the part of **Žižek** is propelled by his realization that the contradictions now being spawned by global capitalism are “potentially even more explosive than those of standard industrial capitalism” (322). Here we need to appreciate the significance of the break between **Žižek** and liberal proponents of radical democracy such as Laclau and Mouffe. In effect, he is telling the post-Marxists to “sod off.” For instance, **Žižek**’s desire to “repeat Lenin” (to be distinguished from reinventing him) in the Kierkegaardian sense—to retrieve Lenin’s “impulse” in the current historical juncture—can be admirably contrasted to Laclau and Mouffe’s reduction of the economy and material production to a limited empirical sphere. Capital, for **Žižek**, is not a limited empirical sphere but rather constitutes a socio-transcendental matrix that generates the totality of social and political relations (“Repeating” 38). But has **Žižek** gone far enough? Has his work moved sufficiently beyond the “cosmetic surgery” and “resignifications” of the liberal-democratic horizon that he contests? Is his psychoanalytically driven dialectics rendered ineffective in the face of the capitalist juggernaut that he so boldly and fearlessly confronts?

One of the challenges of **Žižek**’s project is to provide a sufficient explanatory framework for redefining the role of the proletariat in

addition to the proletariat’s function within the “social form” of the party. For all the clarion calls to dismantle global capital that pullulate his work, his essentially psycho-culturalist strategies—while crucial to the revolutionary imagination—are insufficient in contesting the universalizing effects of the new hydra-headed forms of finance capital that he so brilliantly analyzes and vociferously condemns. The unity of theory and practice is either evaded or resolved mainly at the level of theory, although admittedly there are some recent indications that his work is engaging the concept of praxis, especially in his recent discussions of Lenin, whose leadership in 1917 reflected a purely autonomous and ethical act in the Kantian sense. I think **Žižek** is correct to avoid the idea of historical inevitability; his notion of “the event” as a sudden, unexpected irruption into everyday life is powered by a decisionism built around a (in my mind highly problematic) coupling of a Schmittian Leninism to Alain Badiou’s Maoist ontology.²

In order to appreciate his assertion that we must “repeat Lenin,” we need to realize that **Žižek**’s assertion of materialism is not to be found in a positioning of objective reality outside subjective mediation but in arguing that the external object effectively inheres in subjective mediation itself and that it is precisely this external object that prevents thought from achieving or attaining full identity with itself. He does not insist on the (idealistic) notion of the independent existence of material reality outside of consciousness. For **Žižek**, the partiality of the “subjective reflection” occurs on the basis of the fact that the subject is included in the process that it reflects. Thus, he subscribes to the ultimate perspectivism of figures such as Gilles Deleuze—the view that the distorting aspect of a partial perspective is inscribed into the very material existence of things (“Repeating” 87). In this view, the infinite becomes the negative self-canceling of the finite. Yet, **Žižek**’s perspective could effectively be called materialist in the way that he articulates class struggle. He argues that the only universal class whose singularity (exclusion from the society of property) *guarantees* actual universality is the proletariat. The proletariat should not be considered the negative of positive full essential humanity, or the “gap” of universality, but rather the singularity of the social structure, the universal class or the non-class among the classes. Here, he is describing class struggle as the Form of the Social. In other words, all social phenomena are overdetermined by it. He sees class struggle as the traversing of the political across the entire social body. All of this helps to explain why he attributes tremendous importance to Lenin’s call for a consciousness that would be introduced from the outside

by intellectuals (that is, the vanguard party)—but intellectuals who, while they may be outside the economic struggle, are not outside of class struggle (“Repeating” 11). When Lenin describes the knowledge that intellectuals should deliver to the proletariat, he cautions that much depends on the status of this knowledge. According to **đnk**, Lenin’s wager is that universal truth (knowledge) and partisanship—the gesture of taking sides—*condition* each other. Universal truth can only be articulated from a partisan position. (I would add: truth can only be articulated from the perspective of class struggle; class struggle is the founding gesture of radical critique, declaring the impossibility of remaining neutral and affirming the strategic centrality of proletarian revolution.) Intellectuals external to the proletariat are needed because the proletariat cannot fully perceive its own place within the social totality—a perception that will enable it to accomplish its mission. This task must be mediated through an external element. Yet, we need to remember that, for **đnk**, externality is strictly internal: “The need for the Party stems from the fact that the working-class is never ‘fully itself’” (“Repeating” 14). To understand the role of the party is to understand how Lenin was able to form-alize Marx. For Lenin, the party becomes the political form of its historical interaction with Marxist theory. The party stands for *the form of our activity*, not its interpretation. It is, in other words, the form of subjectivity. The concept of form here has little to do with the liberal notion of formalism—a space of neutrality, or a form independent of its contingent context—rather, the concept of form here “stands for the traumatic kernel of the Real, for the antagonism, which ‘colors’ the entire field in question” (“Repeating” 17). **đnk**’s defense of Lenin’s concept of the party shares much in common with Gramsci’s work, in the sense that Gramsci always advocated that the party educate the spontaneity of the proletariat so that the proletariat could gain a critical appreciation of its historical potential and eventually overcome bourgeois hegemony. Here, the masses are not considered to be the repositories of truth. The role of the political party as an educational and organizational entity is essential for engaging in protracted struggle against the state (see Holst).

đnk points out that Lenin’s greatness resides in his reaction to the despair in 1914 brought about by the adoption of the patriotic line of the Social Democratic parties. Out of the catastrophe of 1914, Lenin’s utopianism was born in his desire to crush the bourgeois state and invent a new communal social form without any police or bureaucracy—the Lenin that many of us associate with *The State and Revolution*. **đnk**

notes that Lenin’s close reading of Hegel’s *Logic* helped him discern the unique chance of revolution. Kevin Anderson, Peter Hudis, and Raya Dunayevskaya, among other Marxist humanists, would certainly concur on this point. All of them have written about the influence of Hegel’s *Logic* on Lenin (underscored, for instance, by the fact that Lenin shifts his understanding of cognition as something that not only reflects the world but creates it). But **đnk** fails to articulate the contractions between Lenin’s views of the state and revolution and his concept of vanguardism and discipline from above. **đnk** would do well to consider further the ease with which a “vanguard” party becomes the basis of a new bureaucracy after the revolution. According to Peter Hudis (in a personal communication), the question facing our generation, in light of all those aborted and unfinished revolutions, is not simply “how to make the revolution” but “how to avoid the tendency of revolutions to so quickly transform into their opposite” and create new forms of oppression. This is where, according to Hudis, the need for new forms of organization does make itself felt. In virtually every case that we have in the twentieth century of mass spontaneous revolt against the conditions of capitalism, either in the “West” or the supposedly “socialist” East, the masses have eschewed centralized vanguard forms and have shown a marked preference for decentralized, multiple forms of organization: Hungary in 1956, Paris in 1968, Poland in 1980, and Seattle in 1999. To Hudis, this suggests that the means to achieving liberation has to somehow reflect the goal of liberation itself, insofar as breaking down sharp divisions between “leaders” and “led” and workers and intellectuals is concerned (isn’t this the real meaning of “radical democracy”?). In the arena of critical pedagogy, this reflects the position of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, who insist that the pedagogical ‘act of knowing’ reflects the liberatory goal of a socialist politics.

This is in no way an argument against the need for an organization of “disciplined” revolutionaries that exists independent of, so to speak, the spontaneous actions of the masses. Hudis notes that even the greatest spontaneous outburst does not by itself fill the theoretical void in the revolutionary movement, nor does it provide full direction for its ultimate development. What is needed today is an organization of committed Marxists who see their responsibility as providing a full restatement of what Marx’s Marxism means for today. What is needed is a revolutionary party that can challenge the alienation of labor at the point of capitalist production. **đnk**’s view of the party is important in that he not only examines the “objective conditions” of revolution but also stresses the

importance of human agency in what he calls (after Alain Badiou) the “event” (the seizure of power). However, Hudis is critical of Žižek for dismissing Rosa Luxemburg’s concern for what happens after the seizure of power so that the revolutionary process continues in permanence (“Dialectic”). The question becomes: what is the nature of such a revolutionary organization for revolutionaries? For Žižek, as for Lenin and Gramsci, this took the form of the party. Yet, Žižek offers little insight into revolutionary strategies that could be carried out in this current historical juncture under the direction of a revolutionary party. This is no doubt partly due to Žižek’s belief that today we are not faced so much with the old Marxist choice between private property and its socialization as with the choice between hierarchical and egalitarian post-property society (a belief that I consider highly questionable). As evidenced in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek is “not preaching a simple return to the old notions of class struggle and socialist revolution,” and he acknowledges “the breakdown of the Marxist notion that capitalism itself generates the force that will destroy it in the guise of the proletariat” (352). While his attempt to “recover politics” is laudatory, his discussion of revolutionary class struggle fails to provide convincing strategies for contesting the rule of capital, both in organizational terms and in terms of a coherent philosophy of revolution. It is here that a Marxist humanist/historical/materialist approach offers a more lucid political response to the traumatic impasse of always already existing in the intersection of various ideological fields.

In effect, Žižek’s psycho-Marxism relies too heavily on a theory of language that focuses on the erotogenic body and ignores the toiling body. Granted, his work in this regard is a vast improvement on that of Jacques Derrida, whose work is grounded in an “economy of fictitious capital” where our birth into language is detached from our origin in the bodies of others in the same way that money/capital is supposedly self-generating, without an origin in labor. In their rage against decidability, Derrida and his poststructuralist supporters deny the origin of value in labor—in the life-giving, toiling, body in labor (see McNally). Derrida, as you will recall, argues that there is only “*différance*,” that unknowable form prior to language, that condition of undecidability and the very condition of possibility of that undecidability that permits the endless play of reference that Derrida famously discusses in his large corpus of work (he seems enraptured by difference and enraged by sameness, norms, standards). When Derrida makes the claim that “*différance*” is the most general structure of the economy, he denies the praxis and labor that ground economic relations (see McNally). For Derrida, the body is reduced to a

site of mediation where signification exceeds itself and undecidability reigns supreme. Žižek argues that Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* is emblematic of the problem in Derrida’s understanding of global capitalism. In Derrida’s work there exists a tension between his avowedly anticapitalist sentiment and his analysis of the irreducible spectrality that has to supplement the gap of every positive ontological edifice as the proto-transcendental a priori that opens up the space for the spectrality of capital (“Repeating” 38). This tension helps to explain why Derrida views Marx’s critique of capital essentially as a form of reductionism. Derrida sees capital as an order that contains its own excess so that it already constitutes its own difference and therefore lacks any fixed center to be subverted. Contrast this to Marx, who argues that capital does not discursively engender itself but exploits the workers’ labor power and converts it into surplus value. Whereas Žižek follows Lacan in collapsing the distinction between the ethical and political, Derrida retains yet mobilizes the “gap” between ethics and politics, preventing the full ontologization of justice and its transposition into a determinate political intervention (*Totalitarianism* 156–57). While Žižek is not prepared to follow Derrida in dismissing the connections among discourse, subjectivity, and the production of value through laboring bodies, Žižek nevertheless leaves us with little more to work with than a strategic admonition: Confront the Real of our desire, disinvest ourselves of our fantasy objects, exorcise our specters, and decaethect ourselves from economies of desire and the fetish objects that help to sustain our disavowal. Žižek’s approach bears some tactical similarities to the work of Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin’s project is a direct challenge to the autonomy of thought—that is, to objective, concrete, sensuous life being subsumed by the self-movement of thought. His critique of commodity fetishism abolishes fetishes by undressing them, undoing them, and (through revolutionary praxis) abolishing the capitalist social relations that have produced them. But by developing revolutionary praxis we also mean uncovering redemptive possibilities within the commodity form itself. David McNally discusses how Benjamin realized the redemptive possibilities within the de-mythified and barren landscape of capitalism. In his work on the *flâneur*, for instance, Benjamin conveyed the insight that everyone in capitalist society is a prostitute who sells his or her talents and body parts. We live in the charred world of capital, a dead zone inhabited by corpses and decaying commodities. Benjamin argued that such a realization can help break through the naturalization of history and enter the terrain of historical action.

According to McNally, Benjamin effectively ruptures the myth of the self-made social agent: we are all dead objects awaiting the meanings we have yet to write. McNally sees Benjamin as establishing a political project in which the oppressed class must reclaim the libidinal energies it has cathected onto commodities and rechannel them into a revolutionary praxis, a praxis of historical struggle toward emancipation. Revolutionary action involves the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, of challenging the repressed bourgeois desires linked to the rise of capitalism and embodied in the collective dreams of a pathological culture, a society gone mad. According to McNally, Benjamin views the body as the site of a transformative type of knowing, one that arises through physical action. Revolutionary practice, for Benjamin, means cultivating a “bodily presence of mind.” We need to locate new energies—in hip-hop, in art, in protest demonstrations (like those of the Zapatistas)—without being reinitiated into the giddy whirl of bourgeois subjectivity, its jacuzzi reformism, and its lapdog liberalism. That can only happen when you have a collective political project that posits as a central objective transforming through revolutionary praxis the material and social practices under capitalism that deform human relations. Bringing this about requires direction. For me, such direction comes from a commitment not only to defeat the capitalists, but to defeat capital in the larger struggle to replace the bourgeois state and social relations with proletarian rule. Admittedly, we are consigned by history to live in the disjunction between the defeat of capital and the recognition that such a defeat is not likely to happen soon.

Žižek’s work points to the need for a materialist history of the laboring body that can be linked to a quest for universality within the absolute movement of becoming of which Marx so presciently spoke—a becoming whose condition of possibility is the transformation of capitalist social relations of production (see Anderson). Here, the Marxist humanism of Dunayevskaya proves to be of signal importance.

What remains promising yet still largely underdeveloped in Žižek’s attempt at a rapprochement between Marxism and psychoanalysis—a psycho-Marxism, if you will—is a coherent pedagogy of the concrete. I use the term “pedagogy” here in the Freirean sense of praxis. The purpose of a pedagogy of praxis is to enable subjects to grasp the specificity of the concrete within the totality of the universal—for instance, the laws of motion of capital as they operate out of view of our common-sense understanding. Furthermore, a pedagogy of praxis plays a key role in enabling our understanding of history as a process in which human beings

make their own society, although in conditions most often not of their own choosing. It employs the Hegelian-Marxist practice of double negation (absolute negativity) as a hermeneutical device for examining the movement of both thought and action by means of revolutionary praxis, or what Dunayevskaya has called the “philosophy of history.” Dunayevskaya rethought Marx’s relations to Hegelian dialectics in a profound way—in particular, Hegel’s concept of the self-movement of the Idea from which Marx argued the need to transcend objective reality rather than thought. Dunayevskaya notes how Marx was able to put a living, breathing, and thinking subject of history at the center of the Hegelian dialectic. She also pointed out that what for Hegel is Absolute knowledge (the realm of realized transcendence), Marx referred to as the new society.

A pedagogy of praxis is more like a “living philosophy” than a psychoanalytical practice such as Žižek’s, in that it proceeds from social reality, that messy web of contradictions between the forces and relations of production. Such a praxis is achieved by revolutionary agents not only by grasping the contradictions within their own position within society, but also by elevating the contradictions into a principle of knowledge and action (see San Juan). The emphasis here is on helping students through “the labor of the negative” in order to analyze human development from the perspective of the wider social totality. Critical analysis, however, must be part of a revolutionary praxis aimed at replacing capitalist relations of production with freely associated labor under socialism. This approach relies heavily on Marx’s appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic—specifically, how we can comprehend more clearly how the positive is always contained in the negative. Of course, István Mészáros warns that positive transcendence by means of the negation of the negation cannot be envisaged in merely political terms but must be concerned with the universality of social practices as a whole (161). The point here is to develop a living philosophy that addresses both the objective conditions of the laboring subject and the subjective conditions for laboring agents to become revolutionary subjects.

While Hegel’s self-referential, all-embracing, totalizing Absolute is greatly admired by Marx, it is, nevertheless, greatly modified by him. For Marx, absolute knowledge (or the self-movement of pure thought) does not absorb objective reality or objects of thought but provides a ground from which objective reality can be transcended. By reinserting the human subject into the dialectic, and by defining the subject as corporal being (rather than pure thought or abstract self-consciousness), Marx

appropriates Hegel's self-movement of subjectivity as an act of transcendence and transforms it into a critical humanism. Marxism, in this instance, becomes the unity of the theory and practice of class struggle.

In her rethinking of Marx's relationship to the Hegelian dialectic, Dunayevskaya parts company with Derrida, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, Negri, Deleuze, Mészáros, and others. She has given absolute negativity a new urgency, linking it not only to the negation of today's economic and political realities but also to developing new human relations. The second negation constitutes drawing out the positive within the negative and expressing the desire of the oppressed for freedom. Second negativity is intrinsic to the human subject as an agent; it is what gives direction and coherence to revolutionary action as praxis. Subjective self-movement through absolute negativity hastens forth a new relation between theory and practice and can connect us to the realization of freedom. Absolute negativity in this instance becomes a constitutive feature of a self-critical social revolution that, in turn, forms the basis of permanent revolution for an associated humanity. The creation of a social universe not parallel to the social universe of capital (whose substance is value) is the challenge here. The form that this society will take is that which has been suppressed within the social universe of capital: socialism, a society based not on value but on the fulfillment of human need (see Rikowski). For Dunayevskaya, absolute negativity entails more than economic struggle over allocations of dwindling resources; it means the full liberation of humanity from class society. This is necessarily a political revolutionary struggle over rights and responsibilities and not only an economic one. This particular insight is what, for me, signals the fecundating power of Dunayevskaya's Marxist-humanism—the recognition that Marx isn't talking about class relations only but how relations of class are implicated in the production of human relations. However, we need to follow the Marxist-Leninist insight that the transformation of the social relations of production is absolutely central to the transformation of human relations. Human relations can be liberated by transforming the current objective economic conditions that imperil human dignity and survival worldwide. A dialectical grasp of the “working day” is necessary for such a transformation to occur. A coherent philosophy of revolution can “educate” revolutionary consciousness and give direction to human praxis. There is a danger that the search for new forms of freely associated labor and revolutionary praxis can become opposite sides of the same bourgeois coin. One of the important challenges of Marxists such as Rosemary

Hennessy, Teresa Ebert, and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh has been to ensure that the brash iconoclasm, scandalous provocations, and engineered liberation from coherence of the postmodernists—not to mention their happy regressions to a pre-Cartesian unconscious—are not mistaken for authentic socialist practices. The flea market eclecticism, forced spontaneity, and gloved intimacy that comprise the postmodernist *coup de foudre* amounts to little more than an extended advertising campaign, the collective sentiment of which is reminiscent of atavistic individualism and the twin sponsorship of esotericism and charismatic authority—characteristics that have little in common with socialist principles and Marxian science.

Dialectical movement is a characteristic not only of thought but also of life and history itself. But today it appears that history has overtaken us, that the educational left is running a losing race with history. Consequently, we require a pedagogy whose critical practices are not defanged by resignation or despair, a critical pedagogy that meets the conditions of the current times. We need to understand that diversity and difference are allowed to proliferate and flourish provided that they remain within the prevailing forms of capitalist economic and social arrangements. Unlike postmodern revolutionaries, who are content to “mime” resistance in subversive parodies that ingratiate the powerless in the face of their oppressors—a gestural, symbolic move that resignifies exploitation as an unconscious act of dissent—Marxist revolutionary pedagogical praxis eschews self-congratulatory performances that lead to political quietism and instead takes seriously the seizure of state power by the working class organized with revolutionary leadership from below.

Žižek's perspectives on capitalism, multiculturalism, racism, gender, and ideology—while often dazzling and courageous—have a mixed currency in the development of a Marxist revolutionary praxis. Combining Lacan, popular criticism, and a critique of political economy is an eclectic gambit that carries heavy freight. One does not need to populate one's language with speechifying “oughts,” messianic calls for the overthrow of the state, sky-punching rallying cries to storm the barricades, or placard-waving sloganeering designed to empty the adrenal glands in order to give class struggle its due. I am not asking Žižek to be like Hope, the “maniac maid” in Shelley's “The Mask of Anarchy,” and rouse the masses to “Rise like Lions after slumber” and agitate the many against the few. After all, for all of Žižek's calls to overthrow the capitalist state, he rejects such strategies and tactics as woefully outmoded. But in his attempt to revitalize Marxist theory, he needs to specify how class

struggle, as the defining problematic of his project, can proceed apace without the proletariat as the major motor of contestation. Consequently, it is unclear how he would suggest that we proceed—politically and organizationally—in our mission to slay the beast of capital. The contradiction between the forces of production and its system of ownership and control is still the fundamental historical force that leads to revolutionary change. That this central contradiction remains insufficiently developed in Žižek's work enfeebles his avowed socialist project.

As revolutionary Marxists, we are not seeking the spontaneous self-development of human capacities but the transformation through class struggle of the exploitation of labor within capitalist social relations. Žižek's work can greatly assist us in understanding the constitutive desire that enables these social relations to reproduce themselves. But in order to effectively challenge and transcend the universalization of the logic of capital and its relations of exploitation, the left needs to link a politics of intelligibility to a praxis of revolutionary struggle. To accomplish this, we will need to look beyond Žižek, but his ideas can still prove fruitful in such a search.³

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Notes

1. Žižek's unblushing support of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia has, by his own admission, left much of the democratic left aghast. His comments fail to explore the connection between the NATO bombings and U.S. policy of global military intervention against socialist countries who refuse to make sufficient room for international finance capital or countries whose leaders try to enforce IMF austerity policies but whose governments are deemed too unstable. The bombing of Yugoslavia as a way of forcing Yugoslavia to hand itself over to the free market increases the relevance of Aijaz Ahmad's recent remark: "The power of capital comes today, as it has always come, out of the barrel of a gun" (32). In his remarks on the NATO bombings, Žižek fails to account for the singular universals that would define a general Serbian left or that would re-politicize the economy (see Katz 216–17).

2. Here I agree with Alex Callinicos that Žižek's notion of "the event" suggests that it springs forth from a void. There is surely a problem with Žižek's positing of a correspondence between Carl Schmitt's decisionist theory of sovereignty (where the abysmal act of violence is grounded only on itself) and Leninist politics. And there is also a problem with his mapping onto this correspondence Badiou's ontology of the event in which events are irreducible singularities of situations. Far from springing from the void of the death drive,

of radical negativity, Lenin's political interventions during 1917 were propelled by his close reading of Hegel's *Logic* that enabled him to see how the contradictions of the imperialist system created points of vulnerability and revolutionary opportunities (as in Russia as the "weakest" of the imperial states) that could be seized upon (see Callinicos). Callinicos makes two very important criticisms of Žižek's work. First, that his account of universality (based on Laclau's work) can never receive a principled justification in its own right. Second, that there exist insurmountable contradictions in Žižek's concept of the Real/capital. Sometimes Žižek describes the Real/capital as the positive condition for hegemonic struggles, and also its negative founding gesture. On other occasions, the Real/capital sets limits to hegemonic struggles.

3. In preparing this response, I am grateful to Anna Kornbluh, Ramin Farahmandpur, and Noah DeLissovoy for their suggestions.

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Our Daily Fantasies and Fetishes

Slavoj Žižek

I am proud to have such good and attentive readers as those who read and publish in *JAC*, and so I'd like to respond to the three essays that examine my interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham.

With regard to Jeffrey Nealon's "The Cash Value of Paradox," I am tempted to claim that there is a well-known paradox that retains its full