

An Introduction

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Without the Erased this will not succeed!

—Slogan from Slovene street protest

Why Slavoj Žižek in *Slavic Review*? Despite Žižek's total disinterest in the "discursive particularism" of specialized area studies, and Slavic studies' equal disinterest in high theory, both sides share the Cold War as their common origin. Instead of being rewarded for their contributions to the collapse of the USSR and the east European socialist bloc, departments of Slavic studies lost their geopolitical cachet with the rise of the victorious neoliberal ideology and today are facing significant cuts in funding and even threats of closure. In a recent *NewsNet* article, Laura L. Adams delivers the grim news about "a growing sentiment in Washington and elsewhere that area studies in general should be sustained by the universities now, and that post-Soviet studies in particular is obsolete."¹ Because of the ideological shift from eastern Europe to the Middle East, post-Soviet studies now are left to reinvent themselves in the market economy. Žižek, by contrast, a self-declared "Stalinist" (less than serious but more than a joke), agent of the "losing side," ascended to global intellectual prominence and has become an intellectual commodity in demand, suggesting that even in a time of economic austerity funding is available for the "right" thing. At a time when the liberal ideologies of postindustrial and postideological societies are celebrating the victory of the free market over Marxist ideological regimes, Žižek boldly asserted that not only were the neoliberal ideologists wrong about the end of ideology but their fervent self-congratulation would make Leninism and Stalinism globally relevant again. His book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* successfully rescued Louis Althusser's concept of the ideological interpellation of the subject from its functionalist self-closure.² This idea, enhanced through the unavoidable unconscious supplement of nationalistic ideology, found instant confirmation in the rise of west Balkan ethnic nationalism in the 1990s and in the subsequent decade of Islamic fundamentalism in Asia. So what went wrong for post-Soviet studies during this ideological war? This remains to be examined. We hope this cluster on Žižek will initiate that debate.

One thing to be learned from Žižek is the perennial relevance of ideol-

1. Laura L. Adams, "The Crisis of US Funding for Area Studies, *NewsNet* 53, no. 2 (March 2013): 1.

2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989); Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 2001), 115.

ogy. Žižek recognized the value of ideology for western academic discourse in the post-Soviet era. As a highbrow insider and an instant interpreter of the events in Yugoslavia (and in Romania) in the 1990s, he attracted the attention of western academia on the heels of these ethnic conflicts. His book *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (1994) was dedicated to the war in Bosnia, in which he advanced his metapolitical discourse by engaging in the nontextual reality of the war. As a result of this discursive engagement with the ideological reality of nationalist ideology, Žižek developed a cluster of concepts widely used today not only in Balkan studies. Some of these are nationalism as the collective projection of the fear of castration into the ideological narrative about the ethnic other; the notion that the omnipresent Balkans are every nation's Other; the idea that the Balkans represents the unconscious of Europe; and the realization of the importance of a psychoanalytic analysis of ideology. Most important, relying on his concept of ideology as an integrated whole in which what is excluded ultimately returns as an unconscious symptom, Žižek registered the ethnic violence in the Balkans as an aspect excluded by western liberal democracies. As the symptom returning to the site of the exclusion, the Balkans signify the internal contradictions within western liberal democracies. By this gesture Žižek reversed the established cliché about the Balkans as a special case of archaic ethnic hatred and turned it into the central problem of global capitalism.

For all these reasons Žižek deserves our attention, not only as an occasional reference, but also as the occasional main topic in east European studies. There is a tendency among academics who do not specialize in Slavic area studies to erase the historical context of Žižek's Balkan genesis and to treat him as part of the inventory of western philosophy. And yet, as one of the founders of the Slovene Liberal Party on whose platform he ran unsuccessfully for a place in the Slovene collective presidency in 1990, Žižek not only analyzed the Balkans but also politically participated in the war of the Balkan ideologies from the neoliberal perspective—a point of view that Žižek himself always recognized as inconsistent with his Marxist orientation. In the face of today's economic crisis in Slovenia, where the austerity measures demanded by the European Union threaten to dismantle the long tradition of a welfare state, and in the face of Žižek and his party dominating the Slovene political scene for a decade and promoting neoliberal social policies, the present Slovene reality seems to turn his praxis into its own ideological symptom. To paraphrase Žižek's own notion of ideology, "Something has been *erased* in his praxis that is hitting the object of its exclusion as *Titanic* its rock."³ Here is where Balkan area studies can contribute to a proper understanding of Žižek's metapolitics.

Proposing outright ignorance of this symptom that is of Žižek's own making, philosopher Adrian Johnston from the University of New Mexico, for example, argues that "It is perfectly possible . . . for a philosopher's political reflections and his or her political activities to be out of joint with one another,

3. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 69.

loosely connected or utterly disconnected.”⁴ Johnston further poses the question that seeks to make a project like this one in *Slavic Review* irrelevant: Why should we be concerned, Johnston ponders, with Žižek’s “non-textual interventions and sociopolitical situations” given that they “are long forgotten by everyone save for a few specialist intellectual historians and biographers.”⁵

Contrary to Johnston, Sean Homer, the British Marxist and Lacanian living in Greece but teaching at the American University in Bulgaria, is of the opposite view. In his article in this cluster, Homer challenges Žižek’s Leninist “wager” by returning to Vladimir Lenin’s “beginnings” as a way of returning to Žižek’s “beginnings.” To this end Homer focuses on three areas of Žižek’s political practice: his relation to the Roma and to internal immigrants to Slovenia, to violence and revolutionary terror, and to the state as a formal structure for political action. In each of these areas Homer unpacks the radical discrepancy between Žižek’s declared leftist politics and his neoliberal practice, which after canceling each other out amount to “empty talk.”

Homer questions Žižek’s return to Lenin’s revolutionary violence. A positive relation to violence and political terror differentiates, Žižek insists, radical politics from neoliberalism; the violence of the capitalist system justifies revolutionary violence against the system. The recent youth demonstrations in Paris (2005) and in Athens (2012), even though they were pseudoreactive and had no specific program, demonstrate for Žižek the structural opening within liberal democracies for the communist project. In his other works Žižek affirms the Jacobin streak in Leninist revolutionary state terror carried out by the party of radical politics as the necessary counterforce to the structural violence of liberal democracy. Homer challenges Žižek with respect to both of these forms of violence. From Homer’s own experience with Greek violence, he argues that Greek youth violence operates as a ritualized coupling with state violence and fundamentally has nothing to offer. As for the terror of the state, Homer urges us to consider Žižek’s own involvement with state terror through the actions of his own Liberal Party during the early 1990s. It is precisely at this juncture of organized state violence intimately linked to Žižek that Homer discovers Žižek’s ideological symptom and the deployment of violence, not in the service of radical politics, but in the service of Slovene nationalism and big capital, that is responsible for today’s crisis.

For example, Homer brings up Žižek’s perennial silence about the Erased, which after twenty-three years has become the master signifier for the Slovene protesters who oppose the failed neoliberal politics practiced by Žižek. In 1991, when Žižek’s Liberal Party entered government with the opposition party coalition DEMOS, Minister of the Interior Igor Bavčar, a member of Žižek’s party and manager-turned-politician who had previously been the chairman of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, secretly erased approximately

4. Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, 2009), xxii.

5. Ibid. Johnston’s claim is really ignorance elevated to a “philosophic point,” yet unfortunately symptomatic of the psychoanalytic metapolitical amnesia that frankly borders on a soft geopolitical racism.

20,000 personal files of people from other former Yugoslav republics residing at the time in Slovenia, creating overnight a stateless population faced with criminal prosecutions, arrests, torture, and deportations.⁶ One Slovene deputy, Borut Mekina, called this Kafkaesque injunction “soft ethnic cleansing.”⁷ As Homer points out, not only did Žižek not question this act of state terror but, when asked about it in an interview with Geert Lovink (1996), he fully supported his government.⁸ And yet, Žižek publicly supported 287 migrant workers on hunger strike in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece, in the spring of 2011, arguing that they were “fighting for more than just [their] rights”; they were fighting for the future of Europe and its “legacy of universal emancipation.”⁹ Furthermore, Žižek’s shuttle of universal subjectivity purportedly emptied of any ethnic essence seemed to run aground when flying over his national space. Sharply disavowing Nicolas Sarkozy’s forced expulsion of the Roma from France, Žižek however produced a different narrative when the Slovene government resettled a Roma family whose presence was undesired by the local villagers. Critical of the Slovene multicultural bias among those who came to the defense of the Roma family, Žižek threw his support in with the “local racist” on the ground that the Roma are in fact thieves. If theft is a criterion for resettlement, should the same not be applied to the foreign bankers in Slovenia? And if not, why Roma resettlement?

If one thing should be credited to Žižek’s genius it is the introduction of *fantasy* into the critique of ideology. As many would agree, amending Althusser’s theory of the ideological interpellation of the subject marks Žižek’s discursive beginnings in the west. According to Althusser, the ideological apparatuses of the state that are spread throughout society (schools, family, church, media, and so on) interpellate subjects into productive members of society who act, identify, and feel according to the rules of the hegemonic ideology. What is missing from this system, according to Žižek, is the unconscious, the subject’s supplement that allows escape from the symbolic interpellation. This “unconscious economy of the subject, as traumatic, senseless injunction,” is the very condition of ideology as political fantasy.¹⁰ To say it differently, fantasy is not

6. Jasminka Dedić, Vlasta Jalušič, and Jelka Zorn, *The Erased: Organized Innocence and the Politics of Exclusion* (Ljubljana, 2003).

7. Borut Mekina, “Izbrisani: Birokratska samovolja ali politična odločitev? Mehko etnično čiščenje v Sloveniji,” *Večer* 26 (November 2002): 5.

8. In the interview with Glyn Daly, Žižek said, “I admire people who are ready to take over and do the dirty job, and maybe this is part of my fascination with Lenin.” Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004), 50–51. Then he revealed that the ministerial position held by Igor Bavcar, the man responsible for the Erased, was first offered to him after DEMOS took over the government from the communists: “The only thing that interested me—again the old story, but it’s not a joke—was either being Minister of the Interior or Head of the Secret Service, and, crazy as it may sound, I would have been considered seriously for both. Probably, if I had wanted it years ago, then I could have got one of these posts” (49–50). Given Žižek’s respect for the Leninist ethics of “dirty jobs,” would Žižek have done the same thing as Bavcar?

9. “Slavoi Zizek and Costas Douzinas Calling for Support of the Hunger Strikers in Athens” *Greek Left Review*, 18 February 2011, at greekleftreview.wordpress.com/2011/02/18/no-human-is-illegal (last accessed 20 August 2013).

10. Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 43.

the opposite of reality; it is one of its essential components. In this regard not only does Žižek render unsustainable Karl Marx's attempt to speak objective truth to ideology, but also the notion of truth as the opposite of fantasy. Every truth sits on the kernel of an unconscious fantasy that only psychoanalysis can properly unpack.

Žižek's union of Lacanian psychoanalysis and G. W. F. Hegel's idealist philosophy placed him on a collision path with the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical philosophy and empirical reasoning. The gap between officially declared ideology and social practice in real socialism parallels, in Žižek's view, the gap in liberal democracy between the officially declared commitment to reason and political reality shaped by industries of fantasy such as film. It is the latter that interests Žižek more than sociology's or history's interpretations of social reality. To this analytic end he follows only one idiosyncratic rule: film is phenomenon; psychoanalysis is its logic.

It is precisely such fantasy-based analysis of ideology that has branded Žižek as a prominent film analyst. Žižek always has something interesting to say about films, but are his analyses factual and valid? Should they be appreciated or criticized? This question is posed in Mario Sluga's article, which "scrutinizes the ways [Žižek] engages various theoretical frameworks within film studies (including cognitivism, enunciation, and auteur theory), and, finally, focus on the key aspect of his engagement with film that brings all of these issues together—his readings of specific films." Sluga admits that interpretation need not be governed by certain sets of rules that render its outcome correct or incorrect; he pleads, however, for some boundaries to be observed for the sake of academic validity. For example, Sluga elicits two boundaries, "the conceptual coherence of semantic fields" as an external boundary, and some of Žižek's own imposed boundaries.

Sluga contends that Žižek's whole film noir analysis is predicated on the concept of the *Real*, namely, that which escapes language and conceptualization, which is itself inaccessible to a concept (a denaturalized Freudian unconscious). For Lacan, the *real*, written in lowercase, simply meant the limits of language; for Žižek, the *Real*, written with a capital letter, is elevated to an impossible idiom, a "non-object object." How can we, Sluga ponders, validate a claim that explains something by way of nothing? What is the actual value of the theory of nothing? Is Žižek selling us an "air guitar"? Take for instance, Sluga continues, Žižek's "codified marker" that signals the transition from an objective to a subjective camera shot, from a fixed to a moving camera shot, for example. When he interprets the aerial shot of Bodega Bay from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), Žižek writes that the birds' entry into the frame "resignified, subjectivised into the point of view of the evil aggressors themselves."¹¹ But as Sluga points out, "no cue marks the transformation into the subjective shot; the camera does not shake nor does it start to move together with the flock of birds." Here Sluga argues that Žižek asks the reader to rely on his formula before himself stepping outside it and interpreting anew, violating his own interpretative criteria. Žižek seems to demonstrate what

11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London, 2001), 36.

Ludwig Wittgenstein could have called the perspicuous case of a language gone on vacation. To sustain such inconsistent and self-violating analysis, Sluga suggests, Žižek's rhetorical strategies rely on a series of tactics such as: "bluffing," "provocation," "eclecticism," "binarism," "intentional misunderstanding," and "ontological conflation," to name the most obvious ones.

Perhaps Žižek's interpretative transgressions, while empirically erring and in violation of his own rules, may function as zones of imaginative utopias, concocted in order to act retroactively on the reader to earmark and tease out a subdued transgressive desire poised to explode for radical change. Perhaps there are two Žižeks figuring for two different discursive purposes. Indian feminist and postcolonial scholar Nivedita Menon has raised the possibility of resolving the paradox of Žižek's contradictions between inciting a radical critique of global capitalism and defending the neocolonial mindset of Eurocentrism in her recent response to Žižek's lecture given in New Delhi on 21 December 2011, titled "Tragedy and Farce." And in his article, Gautam Basu Thakur takes up the issues raised in the Žižek-Menon debate in order to challenge both views. Basu Thakur posits that a radical critique of capitalism followed by the promise of, as Menon put it, a "heterogeneous communism located in and arising from the experiences of different kinds of communities all over the world" of the first Žižek are predicated on the logic of the second Žižek. Basu Thakur dissolves the apparent opposition between the two Žižeks proposed by Menon "in favor of a Žižek whose critique of global capitalism needs to be read alongside his Eurocentrism, and vice versa."

In a nutshell, the part of Žižek's lecture challenged by Menon and Basu Thakur consisted of a challenge to Indians as former colonial subjects. Critical of Indian postcolonial particularism of self-victimization, Žižek called for a shifting of focus from the west-east divide to the Big Other, the system that splits, the dismantling of which, he stressed, requires a universal vantage point. In so many words, Žižek demanded that his Indian audience be mature, get over colonialism, consider Europe not only as a center of colonialism but also as the language of the French Revolution, Hegel, and Leninism; after all, Žižek asked, who gave you the Congress Party if not the Oxford intellectuals? To which Basu Thakur responds: "*my use of 'your' language is different from your use of 'your' language as far as you did not teach me to challenge you in your language.*" Yes, the Indian critique of western colonialism uses the western system of categories, but these categories that once migrated to India do not turn against themselves by themselves; for that we need a non-European perspective, which turns "universal" European into "provincial" European.¹²

By pointing to the neocolonial gesture lurking beneath Žižek's radical leftist rhetoric, Basu Thakur returns Žižek to his "beginnings" and to the Balkans. What Žižek asked of Indians is exactly what he asked of Slovenes at the time of the collapse of Yugoslavia: disidentify from the Balkans, be Europeans (as if the Balkans were not European). Basu Thakur concludes that local disidentification is the foundational gesture of Žižek's metapolitics, which applies to Žižek's India as much as to Žižek's Balkans.

12. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2008).

At one point in his lecture, Žižek introduced Indian untouchables as ideological symptom. The all point of ideology as a false universalism, he posited, is to claim that “there is a place for everyone in the social edifice but their [the untouchables’] place is no-place.”¹³ In other words, “there are no castes without the outcasts.”¹⁴ Considering Žižek’s own theoretical claim about the false universality of ideology and particularly his own political state practice, which produced the Erased as its “no-place,” does it not follow then that “There is no Slovene state without the Erased”? It is precisely in the return to Žižek’s Balkan “beginnings” emphasized by Homer that Basu Thakur dissolves two Žižeks into a single one.

The Erased and the One Žižek are intricately linked. One of Žižek’s attractions, not unrelated to the society of the spectacle and the hegemony of the image, is his performative presentation of himself. At his talks he is always “in character” as a “subversive revolutionary,” often introduced as the “Elvis of Cultural Studies” or “the most dangerous philosopher” and so on, but as Dr. Wolf, the notorious gangster from Quentin Tarantino’s masterpiece *Pulp Fiction* (1995) played by Harvey Keitel, a “philosopher” of crime, noted, “Just because you are *in* character does not mean you *have* character.” Lacking character, just as lacking the principles of consistency while being *in* character, is quite consistent with Erving Goffman’s theory of “dramaturgy.”¹⁵ According to this theory, the self performs its public “front” while hiding the “back stage,” the hidden aspects of a behavior that are inconsistent with its “front.”¹⁶ This is not a mental anomaly but the practical structure of a public self. For Žižek, who has made himself into a staged ideology, the “backstage” to his revolutionary “front” is the ideological practice of his neoliberal “beginnings” marked by Žižek’s silence about the Erased. Because Žižek’s “front” is so useful for western academics like Johnston, they willingly trade off Žižek’s “backstage” for the metapolitical utility of his “front.”

This Žižek cluster has been three years in the making and was seven papers at its start. Chasing down Žižek’s contradictions and paradoxes has been a slow and arduous process. For every claim made by Žižek there is at least one other counterclaim, which anonymous reviewers have not hesitated to point out. Trying to arrive at a coherent publishable text on Žižek can be compared to the danger of walking down a road lined with booby traps. In this regard this cluster in no way represents Žižek’s oeuvre in its complexity, if something of that sort were even possible. What these three articles succeed in doing is to anchor Žižek’s writings within a stable geopolitical referent, such as his political practice in Slovenia or the factual validity of his interpretations. Both of these referents have tangible empirical boundaries. Žižek is on record stating that he appreciates criticism, but he also has been known to dismiss criticism as “stupid,” and not worth responding to. Which Žižek will respond?

13. “Slavoj Žižek at India Habitat Center: First Annual Navayana Lecture. (Part 7),” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dI_hSTB2nfw (last accessed on 20 August 2013).

14. “Slavoj Žižek at Indian Habitat Center: First Annual Navayana Lecture. (Part 10),” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMtRCYIFc7w (last accessed 20 August 2013).

15. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Woodstock, N.Y., 1959), 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 22, 124.