

# To Begin at the Beginning Again: Žižek in Yugoslavia

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In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek suggests that it is time to “start over again.” He approvingly quotes Vladimir Lenin’s remark that communists who have no illusions, and who preserve their strength and flexibility “to begin from the beginning” over and over again on approaching an extremely difficult task, will not perish. This is Lenin at his “Beckettian best,” he continues: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” The lesson Žižek draws from Lenin, however, is not that we must make one more effort, one more push toward “true” socialism, but rather that we return to the starting point itself.<sup>1</sup> *First as Tragedy* thus concludes with a resounding call to the international Left to “not be afraid, join us, come back! You’ve had your anticommunist fun, and you are pardoned for it—time to get serious once again.”<sup>2</sup> Žižek’s call to get serious, learn from our mistakes, and start the “patient ideological-critical work” of castrating those in power is heartening, but surely the key question to ask is what it is that we are being welcomed back to.<sup>3</sup> And here Žižek endorses Alain Badiou’s recent stance: “The communist hypothesis remains the right hypothesis. . . . If this hypothesis should have to be abandoned, then it is not worth doing anything in the order of collective action. Without the perspective of communism, without this Idea, nothing in the historical and political future is of such a kind as to interest the philosopher. Each individual can pursue their private business and we won’t mention it again.”<sup>4</sup>

For Badiou, we must retrieve the “Idea” of communism, which is not to say that we simply repeat the “obscure disaster” of twentieth-century communism but that we rethink the general framework itself from the ground up. This is not an entirely new idea for Žižek, and, as he puts it in “Repeating Lenin,” the idea itself is not to repeat the mistakes of the past but to repeat what Lenin “FAILED TO DO, his MISSED opportunities.”<sup>5</sup> If we are to “seriously” assess Žižek’s recent political interventions, then we must take him at his word and return to the beginning to assess those interventions—what his missed opportunities were and what he failed to do.

This return calls for a return to Yugoslavia as the context of Žižek’s intellectual beginning, a beginning habitually ignored or omitted by his western commentators.<sup>6</sup> For example, Jodi Dean locates the development of Žižek’s

1. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London, 2009), 86.

2. *Ibid.*, 157.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

5. Slavoj Žižek, “Repeating Lenin” (26 April 2001), 20, at [www.lacan.com/replenin.htm](http://www.lacan.com/replenin.htm) (last accessed 19 July 2013). Emphasis in the original.

6. Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London, 2004), is the exception here and I have outlined the differences in our arguments elsewhere; see Sean Homer, “The Sublime Object of Slavoj Žižek,” *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 14 (2006): 273–75.

politics and thought in relation to a formidable list of western European—and one North American—thinkers but completely ignores his formative experience in the former Yugoslavia. This decontextualization facilitates Dean's next move, which is to recontextualize him within "the problems and concerns presently occupying contemporary American political theorists."<sup>7</sup> Žižek thus provides the answer to the North American Left's current impasse. Dean endorses Žižek's emphasis on the party as the provider of "the formal position of Truth" but ignores Žižek's relation to his own former party. Once we recognize the formal role of the party, Dean argues, we can then understand Žižek's answer to the question, "What is to be done?" In a word: nothing.<sup>8</sup> To do nothing, however, is not a recipe for inactivity but an injunction to "Bartleby politics," that is to say, an act of "refusal as such" for which there is no determinate content.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Adrian Johnston adopts the position that "it isn't valid to evaluate the ideas of other philosophers in light of their behind-the-texts activities," especially when the "historically specific details of their non-textual interventions and socio-political situations are long forgotten by everyone save for a few specialist intellectual historians and biographers."<sup>10</sup> While I agree that Žižek's political interventions may not invalidate his philosophy, they do tell us something about his politics, and, as Žižek frequently reminds us, he is not simply playing intellectual games; he is serious about changing the world, and in this sense his actual interventions matter.<sup>11</sup> Given the complexity of Žižek's politics, it behooves us to scrutinize his praxis in order to better understand how this highly seductive theory plays out in practice.

### There Is Chaos in the Universe

Žižek has recently taken to lambasting armchair radicals with the sayings of Mao Zedong, in particular the quote, "There is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent."<sup>12</sup> Academic leftists, he argues, have been waiting for the system to collapse and hoping for a revolution for so long that they should be pleased it is now actually taking place. Žižek is right: the Left has for decades wished for a systemic crisis that would bring about radical social transformation, and now that the crisis is here they should be seizing the moment. This is not the position that he adopted when the crisis hit the former Yugoslavia, however. Once in power, the Slovene Liberal Democratic Party was the party of capital, and Žižek's response in subsequent interviews when asked about the policies of the Liberals in government was that the party

7. Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York, 2006), xxi.

8. *Ibid.*, 197.

9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 384.

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

11. In response to a highly critical essay from Geoffrey Hartman, Žižek writes, "I fully assume his central thesis that my work presents a threat to the Western way of life. More precisely, I hope this thesis is true, because I am not playing intellectual games and my ultimate aims are ruthlessly radical." Slavoj Žižek, "Critical Response: A Symptom—of What?," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 503.

12. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London, 2010), xii.

saved the country from chaos.<sup>13</sup> He even went so far as to suggest that if a little neoliberal privatization of the economy worked, then why not try it.<sup>14</sup> Žižek took the side of the state against the social movements, and he is quite clear he would do so again today: “I should say that in the breakup of Yugoslavia just as in most other conflicts between the state and civil society, I was regularly on the side of the state. Civil society meant democratic opposition; it also meant, however, violent nationalism.”<sup>15</sup>

There are a number of problems with taking this last assertion at face value. First, in an interview with *Radical Philosophy* Žižek characterized the position of the new Liberal Party rather differently, namely as part of the democratic opposition closely aligned with the new social movements, especially feminism and environmentalism. With their ideology of pluralism, ecological preservation, and protection of minority rights, the Liberals saw themselves very much in the tradition of radical democratic liberalism. What was distinctive about their position, argued Žižek, was their opposition to populist nationalism.<sup>16</sup> The second issue turns on the false choice we are being presented between the state on the one hand and a democratic but nationalist opposition on the other. Without any context in which to assess these alternatives, the choice seems quite straightforward, with everyone opposed to nationalism opting for the state. What this false dichotomy leaves out, however, are the presence of non-nationalist opposition movements in Yugoslavia and an acknowledgment that the Slovene state, including the Liberals once in power, was also nationalist.<sup>17</sup> More often than not, the only context we have for understanding Žižek’s interventions is the one he provides, which is often problematic.

### Defending the Legacy of European Enlightenment

Though Žižek has certainly been radicalized over the past two decades, he continues to return to previous interventions, which now sit rather uneasily with his current political positions. His views on European anti-immigration policies and the Roma, for example, remain split between those applied outside Slovenia and those operating within. In *First as Tragedy* Žižek argues that the only principled political stance we can adopt today against the European Union’s racist immigration policies is to endorse the slogan of Badiou’s *L’Organisation politique*, “those who are here are from here.” This is a fine

13. Parker, *Slavoj Žižek*, 33–34; Geert Lovink, “Civil Society, Fanaticism, and Digital Reality: A Conversation with Slavoj Žižek” (21 February 1996), at [www.cttheory.net/articles.aspx?id=79](http://www.cttheory.net/articles.aspx?id=79) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

14. Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl, “Lacan in Slovenia” in Peter Osbourne, ed., *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals* (London, 1996), 32.

15. Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. Peter Engelmann (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 65.

16. Žižek and Salecl, “Lacan in Slovenia,” 28.

17. Eric Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park, 1999); Susan L. Woodward, *The Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C., 1995), chap. 3.

principle and one that, as Žižek says, “has a direct link to reality.”<sup>18</sup> It is a principle he has restated in his support for 287 migrant workers on hunger strike in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece, in the spring of 2011. Žižek offered the hunger strikers his full solidarity, 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.<sup>19</sup> I fully endorse Žižek’s views here and agree that the fight against the “reasonable racism” of European politicians, such as British Prime Minister David Cameron, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, will be one of the defining moments for the future of the European Union (EU).<sup>20</sup> This is a rather different principle, however, from the one applied in Slovenia in 1992, when approximately 20,000 migrant workers were erased from the register of permanent residents and immediately became illegal immigrants.<sup>21</sup> I am not suggesting that Žižek was involved in the decision to erase these people, but, as a part of DEMOS, the Slovene Democratic Opposition, he was a prominent member of the Liberal Democratic Party, which was then in government and passed these anti-immigrant laws. Along with many other prominent members of DEMOS, Žižek remained silent on the issue—he did “nothing”—and in subsequent interviews he has defended these actions against his critics.<sup>22</sup> If this is not simply a case of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) politics, then what is? What happened to the Liberal Party’s defense of minority rights, and why should we support the rights of immigrants as a universal principle except in the case of Slovenia? Indeed, his silence on the issue of the Erased is in marked contrast to the position of radicals within Slovenia today.<sup>23</sup>

It may seem unreasonable to condemn Žižek for views he expressed over

18. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 118–19.

19. Slavoj Žižek, “Slavoj Žižek 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/](http://greekleftreview.wordpress.com/2011/02/18/no-human-is-illegal/) (last accessed 19 July 2013). After 44 days and with 100 of the hunger strikers hospitalized, the strike was called off on 9 March 2011. The “Socialist” government of Greece had authorized state-employed doctors to force feed anyone in imminent danger of death and reached a compromise granting the strikers temporary residence.

20. Slavoj Žižek, “Liberal Multiculturalism Masks an Old Barbarism with a Human Face,” *Guardian*, 3 October 2010, at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/03/immigration-policy-roma-rightwing-europe](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/03/immigration-policy-roma-rightwing-europe) (last accessed 20 August 2013).

21. Dusan I. Bjelić, “Immigrants as the Enemy: Psychoanalysis and the Balkans’ Self-Orientalism,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 87, no. 3 (July 2009): 503–7.

22. Lovink, “Civil Society, Fanaticism, and Digital Reality.” It was this refusal to take a stance on the issue of the Erased that created the rift between Žižek and the anticapitalist and antiracist movements in Slovenia at that time, rather than simply personal animosity or jealousy, as he has implied in interviews.

23. Rastko Močnik, “On the Margins of Europe: An Interview,” *Prelom* 8 (2006): 39–56. In Slovenia the issue of the Erased is also still very much alive. See Jelka Zorn and Uršula Lipovec Čebtron, *Once upon an Erasure: From Citizens to Illegal Residents in the Republic of Slovenia* (Ljubljana, 2008); Neža Kožovšek, Jelka Zorn, Sara Pistotnik, Uršula Lipovec Čebtron, Veronika Bajt, Brankica Petrovič, and Lana Zdravkovič, *The Scars of the Erasure: A Contribution to the Critical Understanding of the Erasure of People from the Register of Permanent Residents of the Republic of Slovenia* (Ljubljana, 2010).

twenty years ago, as today he argues that immigrants should not be satisfied with the “normalizing” strategies of the EU: “It is not enough to find new terms with which to define oneself outside of the dominant . . . tradition,” writes Žižek; “one should go a step further and deprive the [majority] of the monopoly on defining their own tradition.”<sup>24</sup> In short, we should reject the sham tolerance of multiculturalism, which accepts the other only insofar as the other is detoxified and does not disturb our comfortable liberal world or intrude on our space.<sup>25</sup> Immigrants should forcefully and unapologetically assert their rights. In doing so, they are defending nothing less than the European legacy of emancipation. Immigrants are a topic of consideration once more in Žižek’s *Living in the End Times*, although here they are Roma in Slovenia:

In Slovenia recently, a big problem arose with a Roma family who were camping close to a small town. When a man was killed in the camp, the townspeople started to protest, demanding that the Roma be moved from the camp (which they had occupied illegally) to another location, organizing vigilante groups, etc. Predictably, Slovenian liberals condemned them as racists, locating racism in this isolated small town, though the liberals, living comfortably in the big cities, had no contact with the Roma other than meeting their representatives in front of the TV cameras. When the TV reporters interviewed the “racists” from the town, it became clear they were a group of people frightened by the constant fighting and shooting in the Roma camp, by the theft of animals from their farms, and by other forms of minor harassment. It is all too easy to say (as did the liberals) that the Roma way of life is (also) a consequence of centuries of exclusion and mistreatment, that the townspeople should be more receptive to the Roma, and so on and so forth. What nobody was prepared to do vis-à-vis the local “racists” was offer concrete solutions for the very real problems the Roma camp evidently posed for them.<sup>26</sup>

This extraordinary, and appalling, paragraph could have been written by Sarkozy himself as he expelled the Roma from France for “illegally” setting up camps, engaging in criminal activities, and terrorizing local populations with violence.<sup>27</sup> I take Žižek to be referring to an incident concerning the Strojanc family, who lived in the village of Ambrus. In November 2006 a mob of villagers attacked approximately thirty members of the family after one of them was involved in a criminal incident. The Minister of the Interior persuaded the family to temporarily leave the village and then told the mob that the family would never return. The family was resettled to an isolated area owned by the Ministry of Defense, their homes were destroyed, and over a year later they remained without a proper residence. It would seem that defending a

24. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 120.

25. Žižek, “Liberal Multiculturalism.”

26. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 45–46.

27. Sarkozy’s expulsion of Roma from France was prompted by an incident on 16 July 2010, when a Roma man drove through a police checkpoint in Saint Aignan, Loire, knocked down a police officer, and was shot as he drove through a subsequent checkpoint. The following day approximately fifty Roma rioted, destroying a police station and attacking other government buildings. Sarkozy also justified his action on the basis that the Roma were in France illegally.

principle in France or Greece while living comfortably in London is one thing, but applying the same principle to one's own country is another.<sup>28</sup> Suddenly, it seems, we must show understanding to racists and offer "concrete solutions" to a "very real problem." Whatever happened to fighting for the emancipatory legacy of the European Enlightenment, one might ask? Indeed, what has happened to the distinction between a radical politics of the act, which reconfigures the entire socio-symbolic field, and mere political activity, which serves to shore up the existing political order? This distinction, as we will see below, appears to be rather arbitrarily applied.<sup>29</sup> It would appear that fidelity to the truth of the party and the passive refusal to take a stance can both support the symbolic order of late capitalism and undermine it equally as well. There seems to be nothing particularly radical in do-nothing politics. This is not, however, what Žižek means by either the party or acts of radical refusal.

### The Politics of Not-All

The party can only be presented to us as the solution to our present impasse, insofar as the party as such does not exist; rather, it is a purely formal designation that can never be immanently present. Rex Butler clearly elucidates how such a procedure takes place, arguing that Žižek's politics are a politics of the party, but that this is not the party as we knew it:

The Party *formalizes* the Revolution in the sense that it institutionalizes it, gives it structure, breaks with the ideology of "spontaneism" and "popular sentiment." . . . But at the same time as this "immanence," there is also something else to be seen. It is to think that, despite the emphasis on the actual practice of Lenin, his institutionalization of Marx, there is nevertheless a certain "Lenin" beyond any such "Leninism," or a Lenin "beyond" Stalin. That is, if the destiny of Marxism is to be institutionalized, it is also to be what would render this forever incomplete.<sup>30</sup>

Žižek's language of the party is "precise," but we do not have to worry about the actualization of the party insofar as it can never be immanently present. We repeat something only insofar as it is unfinished and has yet to happen. Moreover, it can never happen in the sense of a full self-presence, as repetition is governed by the feminine logic of the not-all.

28. Jelka Zorn, "Slovenia: Ethnic Exclusion in a Model Accession State," in Bernd Rechel, ed., *Minority Rights in Central and Eastern Europe* (London, 2009), 218. As Zorn argues, since Slovenia's emergence as a sovereign state in 1991, it has developed discriminatory immigration policies targeting people from the former Yugoslavia, especially the Erased and the Roma (211). I would like to thank Nikolai Jeffs for alerting me to the details of this incident.

29. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, 1999), 264. One does see a pattern emerging, though, in which Žižek's interventions are often less radical at home than abroad. I have discussed Žižek's tendency to play to the audience in relation to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in a previous paper: Sean Homer, "It's the Political Economy, Stupid! On Žižek's Marxism," *Radical Philosophy* 108 (July/August, 2001): 11.

30. Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London, 2005), 118–19. Emphasis in the original.

For Butler, repetition and incompleteness (Jacques Lacan's not-whole) are the keys to understanding Žižek's politics. Briefly stated, in psychoanalysis repetition is associated with the death drive and the idea of repetition compulsion. Lacan extended the notion of repetition, deeming it the general characteristic of the symbolic order itself, insofar as the signifying chain operates through that repetition. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we are doomed to repeat, and it is through this repetition that something comes from nothing. Repetition, as Butler writes, "only repeats what is already therefore before . . . and reveals that what is does not exist before this repetition."<sup>31</sup> Repetition is the recurrence of a certain experience of impossibility and gives rise to what Butler defines as a politics of the not-all.<sup>32</sup> The woman, for Lacan, is defined as that which is not wholly within the symbolic order and thus experiences a form of *jouissance* beyond the symbolic law of castration.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the masculine logic of exception, the feminine logic of not-all suggests that the process itself becomes its own self-exception, in the sense that there is no exception to this process and yet we cannot say exactly what the process actually is because it is its own exception. This is precisely how concepts such as "party" or "class" work for Žižek: Class is not an exception, in the sense that it is excluded from the social as that which the social cannot accommodate or tolerate, but it is that which renders the social "not-all." There is no social without class, and class is precisely that which cannot be accounted for within the social. This is one definition of the Lacanian Real.

For Butler, Žižek's politics are entirely formal, as he does not offer a coherent political or ethical program and his interventions are specifically historical and contextually determined. Indeed, all Žižek tells us is the form that such interventions must take. Thus Marxism, like psychoanalysis, is a formalist method and, in this sense, offers no coherent worldview, identifiable program, or procedure. Many Marxists today would take issue with this view. Fredric Jameson, for one, has long argued that Marxism reduced to a mere method of historical analysis, which does not project an alternative future or alternate set of social relations, is worse than dead—it is utterly worthless.<sup>34</sup> Such projections are the function of ideology rather than science, and Jameson has long advocated developing a properly Marxist ideology to accompany its scientific and historical methods. In *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson demonstrates this very point in his controversial discussion of the transitional demand for full employment as a utopian fantasy that is at once "practical and revolutionary," in the sense that the demand "could not be realized without transforming the system beyond recognition."<sup>35</sup> Terry Eagleton has also argued recently that Marxism is a specific unity of theory and

31. *Ibid.*, 26.

32. *Ibid.*, 132.

33. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 20: Encore 1972–1973; On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Sexuality*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, 1998), 71–77.

34. Fredric Jameson, "Science versus Ideology," *Humanities in Society* 6, nos. 2–3 (1983): 297.

35. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, 2005), 147.

practice, of utopian vision and hard-nosed realism, and that if we as socialists are to break with the present state of things, then we must be “prepared to spell out in some detail how this would be achieved, and what institutions it would involve.”<sup>36</sup> This does not mean that we can foresee the future or that there is any kind of teleology involved here, but it does suggest that we need to think about what kind of society we want and how we might get there. Similarly, Erik Olin Wright’s project on envisioning real utopias sets out to identify existing institutional practices that prefigure radical alternatives to capitalism.<sup>37</sup> Jameson, Eagleton, and Wright not only offer us a trenchant critique of capital, as Žižek does, but also put forward specific proposals to debate and struggle for. For Žižek, though, the proper political act is just to keep open a fundamental choice; there is no content to this choice, just the form of maintaining it. In short, Žižek “fundamentally *has nothing to say*.”<sup>38</sup> It is this politics of the not-all that allows Žižek’s supporters to easily accommodate all his talk of class struggle, revolution, and the party without worrying too much about the implications of these things in actuality. They become empty signifiers (in Ernesto Laclau’s sense) that each of us can invest with whatever form of politics suits us. It is telling that when Žižek does make specific political statements—such as his politically incorrect remarks on the 2005 Paris riots or the necessity of organizing and politicizing the slum dwellers of Latin America—his commentators immediately take offence.<sup>39</sup> I agree with Butler that Žižek’s interventions are historically specific and contextually determined, but does this not oblige us to scrutinize that context in order to determine how this formal choice positions him?

### Taking Sides

Butler argues that what is radical about Žižek’s position is precisely his refusal to take sides, his insistence on maintaining a position of undecidability, that is to say, to refuse to accept the terms of the false choice we are offered. Here he cites the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and Žižek’s position against the double blackmail of either refusing NATO and supporting Slobodan Milošević or else refusing Milošević and supporting NATO.<sup>40</sup> Both sides of this forced choice are equally bad, and thus the only radical thing to do is to refuse the choice itself and keep open the formal possibility of a real one. So far so good, but there are two problems with this position: First, Žižek is quite clear in

36. Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven, 2011), 73.

37. See Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London, 2010).

38. Butler, *Slavoj Žižek*, 123. Emphasis in the original.

39. Slavoj Žižek, “Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France and Related Matters,” at [www.lacan.com/zizfrance.htm](http://www.lacan.com/zizfrance.htm) (last accessed 19 July 2013). See also Jodi Dean, “A Limit Experience: On Žižek’s Recent Remarks,” 22 November 2005, at [jdeanicite.typepad.com/i\\_cite/2005/11/a\\_limit\\_experie.html](http://jdeanicite.typepad.com/i_cite/2005/11/a_limit_experie.html) (last accessed 19 July 2013) and “Žižek versus Who?,” 10 April 2006, at [jdeanicite.typepad.com/i\\_cite/2006/04/zizek\\_versus\\_wh.html](http://jdeanicite.typepad.com/i_cite/2006/04/zizek_versus_wh.html) (last accessed 19 July 2013). Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, “Play Fuckin Loud: Žižek versus the Left,” *The Symptom 7* (Spring 2006), at [www.lacan.com/news/paper7.htm](http://www.lacan.com/news/paper7.htm) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

40. Slavoj Žižek, “Against the Double Blackmail,” *New Left Review* (I) 234 (March/April 1999): 76–82.

his recent books that the only principled choice we can make today is to take sides, whether for or against global capital.<sup>41</sup> Second, he has always taken sides, and he originally took a pro-NATO position on the bombing, though he has erased the record of this position in subsequent publications.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, many on the western European Left and within the former Yugoslavia tried to maintain the difficult position of refusing to support either the NATO bombing or Milošević's nationalism. The problem once again is that Žižek supplies the context, which is then uncritically accepted by his advocates.

Žižek's analysis of the rise of so-called Islamo-fascism in Afghanistan and Europe provides another intriguing example of this dynamic. He observes that only thirty years ago countries such as Afghanistan and Bosnia had strong secular traditions, which raises the question of what happened to these traditions. "Back in the 1970s and 1980s," Bosnia and Herzegovina "was (multi) culturally the most interesting and lively of all the Yugoslav republics, with an internationally recognized cinema school and a unique style of rock music." How then do we account for the rise of fundamentalism in Bosnia? "The root cause of this regression," Žižek writes, "lies in the desperate situation of Bosnian Muslims during the 1992–95 war, when they were basically abandoned by the Western powers to the Serb guns."<sup>43</sup> What is interesting about these recent references to Sarajevo and the siege of this vibrant, multicultural center of creativity is how profoundly western European they are. The Balkan film scholar Dina Iordanova has observed that Sarajevo was something of a cultural backwater during the 1970s and 1980s in relation to the other republics.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, this was part of the distinctiveness of Emir Kusturica's early films.<sup>45</sup> The idea of Sarajevo as a multicultural, cosmopolitan city—and since when, one might ask, has Žižek been so interested in multiculturalism?—is largely a construct of the western European media, one that Žižek is now reproducing.<sup>46</sup>

The issue of western Europe's response to the plight of Bosnian Muslims is complex, and I cannot possibly address the subject adequately here; it does serve to raise the problematic issue of taking Žižek at his word on Yugosla-

41. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 6; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London, 2009), 421.

42. Homer, "It's the Political Economy, Stupid!," 12. The initial version I have of this article is no longer accessible on the web. The *Balkan Witness* version, at [balkanwitness.glypx.com](http://balkanwitness.glypx.com) (last accessed 19 July 2013), was posted 13 April 1999 and cites the *New Left Review* as its source; however, it still contains the deleted sentence, the first sentence in paragraph 13.

43. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 73–74.

44. Iordanova describes her brief passage through Sarajevo in the mid-1980s, where she found "an ordinary Balkan city, like any other in the region," with its prevailing media image at the time as a "deeply provincial, sleepy oriental town." It was the long siege of the city that replaced this with "the image of a dynamic cosmopolitan location that had now fallen pray [sic] to dark forces." Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and Media* (London, 2001), 235.

45. In an interview in 2001, Kusturica described Sarajevo as a provincial backwater, where "sad, drunken railway men and taxi drivers" met in pubs and drank. Iordanova continues, "It was this provincialism and the traditionalism of the patriarchal and yet cozy isolation of Bosnia that Kusturica's early films reflected." Dina Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica* (London, 2002), 50–60.

46. We must distinguish between a multiethnic city, which Sarajevo surely was, and a multicultural city, which is how Žižek is discussing it here.

via, however. He takes Toni Negri to task in a footnote to *In Defense of Lost Causes*:

Another of Negri's weirdly inadequate readings is his note on the post-Yugoslav war, where he fully endorses the disintegration of Yugoslavia as the result of a dark plot by Germany, Austria, and the Vatican, which sustained financially and ideologically murderous nationalisms; plus, as expected, he insists on the equally distributed guilt . . . The inadequacy of this reading, as well as its pro-Serb bias, cannot but strike the eye: if the agents of the disintegration of Yugoslavia were the separatist Croats and Slovenes, then the Serbs are *less* guilty . . . Plus it is not clear how to account in these terms for the original moment of the crisis, the Kosovan problem and the rise to power of Milošević.<sup>47</sup>

Is this really such a weird and inadequate reading of the situation? In *Balkan Tragedy*, her authoritative study of the breakup of Yugoslavia, Susan Woodward notes that from the mid-1980s Austria and the Vatican "had pursued a strategy to increase their sphere of economic and spiritual influence in central and Eastern Europe, respectively."<sup>48</sup> Slovenia began economic collaboration with Austria as early as 1988, and they began secretly buying arms from the west in 1990; at the same time, Croatia was illegally buying arms from Hungary.<sup>49</sup> This was the same year that meetings were held between Milošević and Franjo Tuđman to divide Yugoslavia between Serbia and Croatia, with Serbia getting Kosovo in return for Croatia taking control of the Krajina.<sup>50</sup> From 1987 onwards, argues Woodward, the leaders "in Slovenia and Serbia were pursuing the same goal: putting what they defined as the national interests of their republics and nations above those of Yugoslavia."<sup>51</sup> What differed were not their positions as such but their styles. To argue that nationalist forces in Croatia and Slovenia also played a significant role in the violent breakup of Yugoslavia is not to absolve the Serbian leadership of guilt, but it is to refuse the false logic by which the west demonizes one side of the conflict while exempting itself and its allies in the former Yugoslavia of any responsibility for the violence that took place. If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, it would also be good to know how Slovenia's secession from Yugoslavia helped the Kosovars (or the Bosniaks, for that matter).<sup>52</sup>

Žižek's enthusiasm for Bosnian multiculturalism has also manifested it-

47. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 510n54. Emphasis in the original.

48. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, 148–49.

49. *Ibid.*, 97, 137, 149.

50. *Ibid.*, 139. In this respect, see also Peter Gowan, "The NATO Powers and the Balkan Strategy," *New Left Review* (I) 234 (March/April 1999): 83–105, for a persuasive analysis of the role of Germany, Austria, Hungary, and the Vatican in the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

51. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, 93.

52. After a strike by Kosovan miners in 1989, Belgrade imposed a state of emergency on Kosovo. The Slovenes responded with the Ljubljana Declaration (1 March 1989) calling for greater democracy and the recognition of minority rights. The Declaration was rejected by Belgrade and in 1990 Slovenia held the first "free" democratic elections and withdrew from Yugoslavia later that year. Žižek is right that the issue of Kosovo and minority rights were central to the breakup of Yugoslavia, but I fail to see how Slovenia's secession from the Federal Republic was at all beneficial for those same minorities. On the issue of Kosovo, see Branka Magaš, "The Spectre of Balkanization," *New Left Review*

self recently in the celebration of Sarajevo's New Primitivs as exemplars of traversing the fantasy of overidentification:<sup>53</sup>

Instead of bemoaning the tragic fate of the Bosnians, [*The Top List of the Surrealists*] daringly mobilized all the clichés about the “stupid Bosnians” which were a commonplace in Yugoslavia, fully identifying with them—the point thus made was that the path of true solidarity leads through direct confrontation with the obscene racist fantasies which circulated in the symbolic space of Bosnia, through playful identification with them, not through the denial of these obscenities in the name of “what people are really like.”<sup>54</sup>

The New Primitivs have come to replace Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) as an exemplary form of subversive cultural politics.<sup>55</sup> What I am not clear about is how this example of a newfound cultural politics accords with Žižek's critique of Kusturica as the poet of ethnic cleansing, given that Kusturica was closely associated with the New Primitivs.<sup>56</sup> Again, Žižek's references to the vibrant and subversive multicultural life of Sarajevo only work if his commentators never get past his own contextualization and are not interested in the opposition movements that challenged both Milošević and other nationalists movements in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>57</sup>

### The Leninist Gesture

Žižek's Leninist turn in the early 2000s marks a break with his previous post-Marxist interlocutors and an explicit radicalization of his work. The 2001 con-

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(I) 174 (March/April 1989): 3–31, and Magaš, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the Break Up, 1980–92* (London, 1993), chap. 1.

53. The New Primitivs spelled their name without the “e.” For an account of the group, see Pavle Levi, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema* (Stanford, 2007). *The Top List of the Surrealists* was originally a radio program and then a television show and not, as Žižek suggests, a rock group. Žižek, *In Defense*, 329.

54. Žižek, *In Defense*, 329–30.

55. As Žižek explains, he broke with NSK when they began to insist in the mid-1990s that their role in Slovenia's national revival had not been properly recognised; he refused to contribute to a volume of essays putting the record straight, which included contributions from the nationalist right. Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: With Defenders Like these, Who Needs Attackers,” in Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds., *The Truth of Žižek* (London, 2007), 232).

56. Kusturica fell out with his former associates in Sarajevo over the issue of nationalism and the *No Smoking Orchestra* split, with one group remaining in Sarajevo during the siege and another based in Belgrade. Kusturica was with the latter. Levi, *Disintegration in Frames*, 62. For Žižek's reading of Kusturica's controversial film *Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* (1995), see Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, 1997), 60–64, and “The Military-Poetic Complex,” *London Review of Books* 30, no. 16 (14 August 2008): 17. I have argued against Žižek's reading of the film as an apology for ethnic cleansing elsewhere. See Sean Homer, “Nationalism, Ideology and Balkan Cinema: Re-reading Kusturica's *Underground*,” in Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, eds., *Did Somebody Say Ideology: Slavoj Žižek and Consequences* (Cambridge, Eng., 2007), 237–48; and Homer, “Retrieving Emir Kusturica's *Underground* as a Critique of Ethnic Nationalism,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 51 (Spring 2009).

57. See Mladen Lazić, ed., *Protest in Belgrade: Winter of Discontent* (Budapest, 1999); and Gordy, *Culture of Power*.

ference “The Retrieval of Lenin” in Essen, Germany, was attended by nearly every major academic Marxist writing today, as well as leading activists of the Trotskyite Left and Žižek’s new post-Maoist friends. The conference was also contemporaneous with the publication of Žižek’s dialogue with Judith Butler and Laclau, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*.<sup>58</sup> What started out as a dialogue “to establish the common trajectory of [their] thought and to stage in a productive way the different intellectual commitments” they shared eventually degenerated into an increasingly acrimonious exchange between Laclau and Žižek.<sup>59</sup> In his final contribution to the volume, Laclau expresses his exasperation—he can discuss politics with Butler, because she talks about the real world and the strategic problems people face in their actual struggles, but with Žižek it is hopeless: “The only thing one gets from him are injunctions to overthrow capitalism or to abolish liberal democracy, which have no meaning at all.”<sup>60</sup> In the unlikely event, he continued, that Žižek’s ideas were ever accepted, they would set the Left back fifty years. Ironically, what was crucial to the demarxification of Slovene politics was the introduction of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* into the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1980s, through the journal *Mladina* and their association with Žižek.<sup>61</sup> Žižek was at the time a member of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, a committee in defense of Janez Janša, a *Mladina* journalist and peace activist who later became the Minister of Defense and subsequently a right-wing prime minister and extreme nationalist. Žižek enthusiastically supported the committee’s role in creating an open, pluralistic, and “democratic front,” as well as a renewed public sphere (or, “public space of democracy”).<sup>62</sup> As Ozren Pupovac notes, the committee confirmed the political force of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*’s conceptual categories, and the work played a decisive role in the emergence of a “proper post-socialist political sequence” in Slovenia.<sup>63</sup> Paradoxically, Žižek’s retrieval of Lenin sought to reverse a political situation that his own interventions had played a significant role in creating.

Žižek concedes that the idea of “reactualizing” Lenin will today be greeted with derision. Lenin stands for the failure to put Marxism into practice. He is a figure of the past whose ideas—the party, revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat—now seem outdated. But to repeat Lenin is not to return to Lenin. Rather, “to repeat Lenin is to accept that ‘Lenin is dead,’ that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving. To repeat Lenin means that one has to distinguish be-

58. The papers from the Essen conference were subsequently published: Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth* (Durham, N.C., 2007).

59. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London, 2000), 1.

60. *Ibid.*, 290.

61. Ozren Pupovac, “Springtime for Hegemony: Laclau and Mouffe with Janez Janša,” *Prelom* 8 (2006): 118.

62. Quoted in Pupovac, “Springtime for Hegemony,” 129. In June 2013 Janez Janša was sentenced to two years imprisonment for corruption.

63. *Ibid.*, 130.

tween what Lenin effectively did and the field of possibilities that he opened up, the tension in Lenin between what he effectively did and another dimension, what was ‘in Lenin more than Lenin himself.’”<sup>64</sup> Žižek’s Lenin is primarily the Lenin of *The State and Revolution* and other writings from 1917.<sup>65</sup> That is to say, it is the Lenin who faced defeat (the collapse of the Second International following the catastrophe of 1914) but, rather than succumb to resignation and the idea of a gradualist, reformist move toward a socialist state, reasserted the need for a violent revolution to abolish the state.<sup>66</sup> The Leninist event—this break with the evolutionary historicism of the Second International—emerges from the recognition of “the Truth of THIS catastrophe.”<sup>67</sup> Out of this moment of despair arises the kernel of the Leninist “utopia,” “the radical imperative to smash the bourgeois state, which means the state AS SUCH, and to invent a new communal social form without a standing army, police or bureaucracy, in which all could take part in the administration of . . . social matters.”<sup>68</sup> The Leninist utopia arises, then, from the recognition of utter failure and the demand for the impossible, for a complete social revolution, at a time when not even the Bolshevik Party thought it possible. For Žižek, Lenin’s greatness resides in the fact that he was not afraid to succeed. He squarely faced the truth of the situation and dared to think beyond the horizon of that failure. Lenin, writes Žižek, “stands for the compelling FREEDOM to suspend the stale existing (post)ideological coordinates, the debilitating [situation] in which we live—it simply means that we are allowed to think again.”<sup>69</sup>

We should note here that Lenin’s utopian spark is predicated upon an initial act of negation, what Žižek calls “wiping the slate clean”—that is, smashing the old state to allow the new to emerge. For Lenin, the state could not simply be abolished overnight (this was the utopian dream of the anarchists); the proletariat had to first win state power, and only then could it be smashed. The proletariat needs state power, writes Lenin, “a centralized organization of force, an organization of violence, both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to lead the enormous mass of the population” in the task of constructing a socialist economy.<sup>70</sup> In contrast to the approach of many on the Left today—such as Simon Critchley’s strategy of making impossible demands upon the state, or Badiou’s strategy of subtraction, maintaining a distance from the state—Žižek does not shy away from Lenin’s insistence on the necessity of revolutionary violence and seizing control of the state.<sup>71</sup>

64. Žižek, “Repeating Lenin,” 20.

65. See Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917* (London, 2002).

66. Insofar as the state is an “organ of class rule, an organ for the *oppression* of one class by another,” the proletariat cannot take over the existing state and use it for its own ends, it cannot be ameliorated. Vladimir Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1968 [1917]), 266. Emphasis in the original. The bourgeois state is a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonism. Therefore it must be completely smashed, and this cannot take place without a violent revolution (277).

67. Žižek, “Repeating Lenin,” 9. Emphasis in the original.

68. *Ibid.*, 10. Emphasis in the original.

69. *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

70. Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 279.

71. Žižek, *In Defense*, 346; Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 282.

There is an ambiguity running through Žižek's return to Lenin, however, which turns on the actuality of Lenin and his formalization. Žižek's return is a return to a politics of Truth in the face of postmodern relativism and skepticism: "Lenin's wager—today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever—is that truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive but condition each other: the *universal* truth in a concrete situation can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position. Truth is by definition one-sided."<sup>72</sup>

It is this partisan Lenin that Žižek wishes to reanimate—his mode of analysis, his discipline, and above all his ability to seize the moment, to intervene in the specific conjuncture. As Evan Calder Williams has pointed out, though, the nature of this intervention remains problematic. There were at least two versions of Lenin being retrieved in Essen: the post-Maoist Lenin of Badiou and Žižek, with an emphasis on partisanship (notwithstanding their major differences), and the Trotskyite Lenin of the party.<sup>73</sup> While the notion of the party was frequently invoked, not least by Žižek himself, its actual form remained opaque, and the question of how we might reanimate the notion of the party today was never directly addressed. Writing from Greece, a country where the party retains the formal position of truth to such an extent that the different leftist parties will not march in the same demonstration as each other and in which this truth, for the communist party specifically, is unapologetically Stalinist, I find this more than a little problematic. Surely five decades of New Left and feminist critique of precisely this kind of party organization has taught us something, and to find the notion of the party simply invoked today without any consideration of its actualization seems perverse at best.<sup>74</sup> Paraphrasing Lenin's slogan "advanced politics needs advanced theory," Williams observes that this particular retrieval of Lenin "remains a *theoretical* enterprise," leaving aside the difficult issue of the party's form and organization.<sup>75</sup> Žižek's Lenin, far from retrieving a Lenin beyond Lenin, appears to offer us a Leninism without Lenin.

### What Is So Divine about Violence?

If the issue of the party was never fully addressed at the Essen conference, neither was the question of violence and the relationship between revolution and violence. Indeed, the question of revolutionary terror and violence is probably the central issue that differentiates Žižek from many on the Left today. In his work he repeatedly insists on the necessity of revolutionary violence. In *The Parallax View* he notes that "in every authentic revolutionary

72. Žižek, "Repeating Lenin," 4. Emphasis in the original.

73. Evan Calder Williams, review of *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, by Sebastian Bubgen, Eustache Kouvélakis, and Slavoj Žižek, *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 19, no. 3 (2011): 159. On Badiou and Žižek's differences, see Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, 133–34.

74. Žižek's endorsement of a politics of the party is just one issue that separates him from his "comrade" Alain Badiou. See Badiou, "Politics Unbound," *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London, 2006), 68–77, for Badiou's critique of the party/state couple.

75. Williams, 162. Emphasis in the original.

explosion, there is an element of ‘pure’ violence,” and it is this that liberals and the “soft” left cannot accept.<sup>76</sup> More recently, in a discussion of the relationship between the Serbian and Montenegrin national poem, *The Mountain Wreath*, and “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, Žižek writes, that “the great divide between the liberal and the radical left concerns the question: how are we to counter this violence?”<sup>77</sup> This is not a problem only for liberals, but it is significant that Žižek’s most ardent academic admirers also ignore the issue of violence in their discussions of his politics.<sup>78</sup> One problem that commentators do have with Žižek’s discussion of violence, however, is that it is not simply philosophical or psychoanalytic but centers on actual acts of violence. Unlike his Leninism, Žižek’s endorsement of violence cannot be accommodated as simply a matter of formalization.

In the past, Žižek has written interestingly and persuasively on the breakup of Yugoslavia in terms of the Freudian notion of *das Ding*.<sup>79</sup> As I discussed above, he also endorsed NATO’s military intervention against Serbia in the 1990s.<sup>80</sup> Today, however, his reflections on violence have moved from the fantasy structures that sustain nationalist violence to the distinction between systemic state violence and revolutionary violence. The first thing to note here is that there is nothing particularly novel about the idea of revolutionary violence or the need to distinguish between state violence and revolutionary violence in the discourse of the revolutionary Left. Second, Žižek’s association of terror(ism) and violence with authentic political acts is not recent. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Žižek defines an authentic political act as that “which reaches the utter limit of the primordial forced choice and repeats it in reverse sense,” and he cites “the gesture of Gudrun Ensslin, leader of the ‘Red Army Faction,’ a Maoist ‘terrorist’ organization, who killed herself in the maximum security prison in 1978” as an example of such an act.<sup>81</sup>

What sets Žižek apart from many on the Left is his insistence on “strict egalitarian justice” and “disciplinary terror” as key elements of a new form of “Jacobin-Leninist” politics.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, revolutionary terror is not, as he insists, some kind of Stalinist aberration, but rather an intrinsic part of Marxism’s historical legacy that Marxists must acknowledge. The problem today, he argues, “is not terror as such—our task today is precisely to reinvent emancipatory terror.”<sup>83</sup> Thus in an interview Žižek suggests that while the actions of the Vietcong in chopping off the arms of children who had been vaccinated by the U.S. Army might be “difficult to sustain as a literal model to follow, this

76. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 380.

77. Žižek, *In Defense*, 468.

78. There is not even an entry for violence in the indexes of either Dean’s *Žižek’s Politics* or Johnston’s *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*.

79. See Slavoj Žižek, “Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead,” *New Left Review* (1) 183 (September/October 1990): 50–62; and Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, 1993), chap. 6.

80. Lovink, “Civil Society, Fanaticism, and Digital Reality.”

81. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London, 1992), 77.

82. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 125. Emphasis in the original.

83. *Ibid.*, 174.

thorough rejection of the Enemy precisely in its helping ‘humanitarian’ aspect, no matter what the costs, has to be endorsed in its basic intention.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed! Žižek’s examples of revolutionary sacrifice so often involve women and children that it is not unreasonable to ask what is going on here. Undoubtedly the use of extreme examples has a certain shock value in his ongoing polemic against political correctness and liberal sentiment, but at the same time there is a discernible macho swagger that is all too familiar in Balkan leftist politics. Furthermore, endorsing such a ruthless intention hardly amounts to a useful strategy for convincing people that the Left offers a viable alternative to the systemic violence of capitalism. Indeed, it could well play into the hands of the state, as we see in Greece today.<sup>85</sup>

Žižek draws on Walter Benjamin’s distinction between mythical and divine violence in order to distinguish between the objective, systemic violence of the state and the divine violence of the revolutionary as a subjective reaction to systemic violence.<sup>86</sup> Subjective violence, argues Žižek, is always sustained by two forms of objective violence: the symbolic violence embedded in language itself, and the systemic violence that arises from the everyday operation of the capitalist economic and political system. Therefore, before we judge subjective violence we should first set it in the context of objective, systemic violence. It is systemic violence that provides the conditions for subjective violence, and, by remaining silent on the issue, liberals and “soft-hearted” radicals are complicit in the socioeconomic violence of everyday life. For Žižek, Benjamin’s divine violence is precisely the direct subjectivization of this unacknowledged objective violence. Moreover, we should not dismiss too hastily sudden, “irrational” eruptions of violence that seem to come out of nowhere, as these could presage a more sustained form of engagement: “Recent events in Europe—student protests in Greece, for example—already mark the first step in this passage from ‘abstract’ to ‘determinate’ negation: while they are no longer just blind acting out, many observers have noted their evident violent character as a key feature. Not violent in the sense of killing people, but violent in the sense of disturbing public order and destroying symbolic objects of private and state property.”<sup>87</sup>

What particularly impresses Žižek about the Greek protests is that they represent a “no” without content or concrete demands, but as such they open up “the space into which concrete demands and projects of change can inscribe themselves.”<sup>88</sup> The protests were not an end in themselves but an excess of means over ends, an excess without end. What Žižek misses here is

84. Butler, *Slavoj Žižek*, 147.

85. The right-wing press is currently blaming the rise of racist violence from Golden Dawn on the Left, and, as Golden Dawn’s very public displays of violence increase, so does their support. From my prospective, what we need is not reciprocal violence but rather mass protests against Golden Dawn, when and wherever they mobilize.

86. Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (1920–21; London, 1997), 132–54.

87. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 482. Žižek has not, to my knowledge, reconsidered this statement in the light of the deaths of three young bank workers who died when their bank was firebombed in the general strike of 6 May 2010. These deaths resulted in a lull in the mass demonstrations and the Black Bloc going to ground for the following year or so.

88. Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 482.

the entirely ritualized form that violence takes in most Greek demonstrations. The confrontation between the Black Bloc and riot police at the end of every major demonstration is entirely predictable and would appear to be a perfect illustration of what Žižek criticizes elsewhere as “pseudo-activity.” As such, these acts only serve to legitimize state violence rather than challenge it.<sup>89</sup>

Žižek appears to draw similar conclusions in his earlier reflections on the 2005 riots in Paris’ *banlieues*:

The Parallels with May ’68 make clear the total absence of any positive utopian prospect among the protesters: if May ’68 was a revolt with a utopian vision, the 2005 revolt was just an outburst with no pretence to vision. If the much-repeated commonplace that we live in a post-ideological era has any sense, it is here. There were no particular demands made by the protesters in the Paris suburbs. There was only an insistence on *recognition*, based on a vague, unarticulated *ressentiment*.<sup>90</sup>

Žižek characterizes these protests as “an implicit admission of impotence,” the kind of pseudo-activity that we should resist.<sup>91</sup> Resisting the hermeneutic temptation to give meaning to the riots, Žižek insists that they were essentially meaningless, a form of what Lacan called *passage à l’acte*, “an impulsive movement to action which can’t be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration.”<sup>92</sup> At the same time, they were about visibility—an excluded group claiming the right to be recognized as citizens within the country in which they live. Žižek’s discussion of the riots in Paris and Athens certainly has a degree of analytical purchase, but the question of how we might move from this abstract negation to a more determinate one is not entirely clear. Without some kind of party or organizational form, how are we to channel this demand for visibility into something more radical and transformative? As Badiou puts it in a dialogue with Žižek, it is not enough to be negative today, we must also have affirmative proposals.<sup>93</sup>

Badiou introduces some clarity into the situation by offering us an alternative reading of these events through his distinction between immediate, latent, and historical riots. An immediate riot signals unrest among a section of the population, nearly always in response to an act of state violence; it is led by the young, it takes place in a specific locality, and its demands remain

89. In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek cites the violent demonstrations that followed the police shooting of Alexandros Grigoropolous in December 2008. These protests were more complex and contradictory than I can discuss here, but in Thessaloniki they involved at least three distinct groups: anarchists, students, and immigrants, each with very different agendas. The fact that the state restrained the police from any direct confrontation with the protestors also facilitated the continuation of violence beyond the usual one night. I can see little that distinguishes these protests from those in France in 2005.

90. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London, 2008), 63. Emphasis in the original.

91. *Ibid.*, 69.

92. *Ibid.*, 65.

93. Badiou and Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 81. Interestingly, now that the anti-austerity riots have extended to Slovenia, with mass protests on 17 November 2012 and violent demonstrations on 3 December 2012, Žižek has remained silent on the issue. To my knowledge, he has not, at this writing, written or spoken publicly in Slovenia in support of the protests.

indistinct.<sup>94</sup> Immediate riots are not political. At best, they can pave the way for a historical riot; at worst, they merely reveal the state's inability to control certain spaces. The riots in Paris in 2005 and in Athens in 2008 and 2010 are immediate riots, in that they were led by young people, they were localized, and they articulated no specific demands. Badiou also notes that the presence of organized crime, apparent in the Athens riots of both 2008 and 2010, is a sign of the riots' complicity with the state. A historical riot, on the other hand, indicates "the possibility of a new situation in the history of politics, without for now being in a position to realize that possibility." The uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East are thus historical riots, insofar as they represent a direct challenge to the state and articulate the demand that the existence of the masses of people who have "no existence" be recognized. The historical riot therefore has the potential to become a prepolitical event if it can coalesce around an idea. In order to produce an idea that can universalize the rioters' demands, however, a form of organization needs to be created through the work of militants.<sup>95</sup> It is too early to tell what will become of the struggles in the Middle East, but for Badiou they have the potential for radical change that the riots across Europe currently lack. Badiou's analysis highlights the weakness in Žižek's demand-without-content. For a riot to challenge the state it must be able to universalize its demands beyond the immediate grievance. So far in western Europe this has not been the case.

In the conclusion of *Violence*, Žižek draws three lessons concerning the nature of divine violence. First, to condemn violence outright is an ideological operation par excellence, insofar as it obfuscates and therefore colludes with systemic violence. Second, "the ultimate difference between radical-emancipatory politics and such outbursts of impotent violence is that an authentic political gesture is *active*, it imposes, enforces a vision, while outbursts of implicit violence are fundamentally reactive."<sup>96</sup> Third, violence is not the property of individual acts but is distributed between acts and their contexts—that is to say, between acts and activity.<sup>97</sup> In this context it is better to do nothing than to participate in localized acts of violence that only serve to help the smooth functioning of the system itself. The real threat today, Žižek concludes, is not passivity but rather the urge to do something, to be active, and to engage, when we should withdraw, step back, and do nothing.<sup>98</sup> So is divine violence active or passive? How do we assess the French and Greek protests in light of this conclusion? How do we assess whether violence is imposing a new vision or simply reinforcing the status quo? For this, we would need much more detailed analyses of the specific situations than Žižek provides.

If we are to return to the beginning again and avoid the mistakes of the past, then it is worth reflecting on the fact that we have also been here before, namely in the 1970s, as Žižek is well aware. Žižek repeats his view of the 2008

94. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London, 2012), 22.

95. *Ibid.*, 21–27.

96. Žižek, *Violence*, 179. Emphasis in the original.

97. *Ibid.*, 183.

98. *Ibid.*

student protests in *Living in the End Times*, but this time he links the protests directly to leftist political terrorism (the Red Army Faction [RAF] in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, Action Directe in France), arguing that sometimes the masses are so totally immersed in capitalist ideological torpor that they need a wake-up call, such as direct action. “While one should reject without ambiguity the murderous way in which this insight was enacted,” he writes, “one should not be afraid to endorse the insight itself.”<sup>99</sup> Just as an earlier generation of ultra-leftist radicals turned to Benjamin’s work to justify acts of terrorism and violence, Žižek is now repeating those mistakes. The radical Left travelled this path once before and it was disastrous, not only in its immediate consequences but for many years afterwards, as the Left wrestled with the legacy of the Red Army Faction.<sup>100</sup> Revolutions, as Eagleton has recently argued, are not necessarily violent affairs any more than reforms are necessarily peaceful.<sup>101</sup> I am under no illusion that the ruling class will give up without a fight, as evidenced across North Africa and the Middle East today, but Marxists have traditionally been “hostile to what they call ‘adventurism’ by which they mean recklessly throwing a small band of revolutionaries against the colossal forces of the state.”<sup>102</sup> For Marx, the question of revolutionary violence is directly related to his analysis of the material forces at work in society, and this analysis is frequently absent from Žižek’s writings on violence. It is also worth recalling, as Eagleton writes, that historically the “working-class movement has not been about violence, but about putting an end to it.”<sup>103</sup> The kind of revolutionary violence Žižek sometimes advocates is a complete dead end, and if we are to seriously start over again, then repeating these kinds of mistakes—either theoretically or in actuality—will get us nowhere.

Žižek has recently defended his pragmatism in response to the kinds of criticism that I have advanced above, namely that his politics are inconsistent: “One of the standard reproaches to my political writings is that, when it comes to my proposals of how to act, what is to be done, I oscillate between three options: (1) the ‘Bartleby politics’ of doing nothing; (2) preparing (or, rather, waiting) for a big violent radical Act, a total revolutionary upheaval; (3) engaging in local pragmatic interventions.”<sup>104</sup>

Žižek’s answer is “guilty as charged,” but then he asks why we have to choose in the first place. Different situations call for different kinds of politics, and in these “obscure times” in which we live only a Leninist “concrete analysis of concrete circumstances” can show us the proper way to act.<sup>105</sup> I

99. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 390.

100. See Irving Wohlfarth’s excellent three-part essay on the Red Army Faction’s misuse of Benjamin’s text: “Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 1,” *Radical Philosophy* 152 (November/December 2008): 7–19; “Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part 2,” *Radical Philosophy* 153 (January/February 2009): 13–26; and “Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction Part 3,” *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March/April 2009): 9–24.

101. Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 179–95.

102. *Ibid.*, 186.

103. *Ibid.*

104. See Slavoj Žižek, “Some Concluding Notes on Violence, Ideology and Communist Culture,” *Subjectivity* 3, no. 1 (April 2010): 101; and Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 398.

105. Žižek, “Some Concluding Notes on Violence,” 101.

agree, but such an analysis is not present in Žižek's own work, and so the only way we have of assessing his politics is by looking at his specific interventions. The question also arises as to how such pragmatism is different from the kinds of postmodern politics Žižek attacks. One of the great attractions of Žižek's work in these relativistic times has been, for some of us at least, his universalist assertion of a politics of truth. As I have argued above, however, these principles seem to be applied rather arbitrarily. Lenin's formalization of Marx was forged in direct response to and in tension with the demands of a mass movement and the ebb and flow of class struggle. While there is plenty of resistance and struggle today, it is the mass movement that we are lacking—a movement that can endow our acts of resistance with enough consistency to challenge the system itself. Žižek does not have an answer to this dilemma any more than the rest of us, and, as he constantly reminds us, if we are waiting for a philosopher to come up with the answer, we have already lost the cause. Unless his political categories—the party, class struggle, and revolutionary violence—are merely empty signifiers that theoretically formalize a process but do not commit one to any particular political position, then it is surely worth scrutinizing how these categories have been deployed in practice and whether they help us answer questions of organization and strategy today. Žižek's ambiguous role in the politics of the former Yugoslavia provides us with an indication of how his theoretical interventions have played out in the past. We ignore them at our own cost.