

BOOK REVIEW

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Or, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek,  
Waiting for Something to Happen

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*Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*

By Alain Badiou. Trans. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2002

*Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*

By Alain Badiou. Trans. Ray Brassier. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003

*Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*

By Alain Badiou. Trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens. London: Continuum, 2003

*Badiou: A Subject to Truth*

By Peter Hallward. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003

*On Belief*

By Slavoj Žižek. New York: Routledge, 2001

*Repeating Lenin*

By Slavoj Žižek. Zagreb: Bastard Books, 2001

*Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917*

By Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2002

*The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*

By Slavoj Žižek. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003

*Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*

By Slavoj Žižek. New York: Routledge, 2004

*Conversations with Žižek.*

By Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly. Cambridge: Polity, 2004

THERE IS A GROWING AWARENESS ON THE LEFT THAT LIBERALISM IS dying in its sleep. By the time this essay appears in print, we will know whether the governing Right has blundered its way out of power; if it has, what will take its place will be nothing like traditional liberalism. For a time, there was even serious talk of a kind of coalition candidacy that would ignore ideological differences (because there were no substantial ones) in order to guarantee a return to responsible management. Of course this empirical demise, in one country, is nothing compared to the profounder death implied by the more conspicuous death of Communism. For if Communism as an ideological enemy virtually required liberalism as Capitalism's answer to the socialist promise, the new enemy is declared nonideological: even those who talk sincerely about "hearts and minds" insist that there is nothing ideological at stake in anti-American violence, only nihilism, resentment, fanaticism, or fundamentalism. But if the enemy is nonideological, there can be no ideological response, no liberal alternative offered to someone else's radical temptation. The only possible response is brutal reprisal, and any squeamishness in the face of this violence is a strictly private matter.

Of course, all of this is at the level of appearances, since both the responsible management of the economy and the political instrumentalization of religion (and in the current situation “democracy” is an abstract value of strictly the same order as politicized religion) are thoroughly ideological. Despite all appearances, then, the discrediting of liberalism—not by the Left, which has been working on this for over a century, but by a Right which no longer has any need for it—may be an opportunity for a more robust Left, one which is no longer required to genuflect before the liberal language of rights and respect for differences: a language which has existed, at least since Schiller (“everything—even the tool which serves—is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest”), as an alternative to a genuine politics (Schiller 1967, 219). A contemporary politics which revolves precisely around the problem of that “tool which serves” has been the goal of both Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, whose writings occupy the gap left by liberalism in different ways. Slavoj Žižek has clearly exploited this opening as his writings have become more unambiguously political in the past several years. The history of Alain Badiou’s work bears witness to this phenomenon in a different way: Badiou, who has been ignored by Anglophone audiences for several decades, is suddenly the subject of reading groups at the hipper graduate programs, and his work since his major theoretical statement *L’être et l’événement* (1988, soon to come out in English translation by Oliver Feltham) is being translated at an astounding pace.

Questions of religion and belief have been central to both Žižek’s and Badiou’s recent work. Much of Žižek’s recent writing, in fact, presupposes Badiou’s riveting pamphlet on Saint Paul, nicely translated by Ray Brassier. But why should the contemporary Left be interested in belief? Why should an effectively atheist politics be particularly interested in Christianity? Hasn’t the Left for too long stood accused precisely of having too close a relationship, all the more corrupting for being unacknowledged, with revealed religion? Is not the legacy in Marx of the Hegelian incorporation of the Christian narrative precisely what most raises the hackles of sensible liberals? Of course the answer is yes, and the gamble taken by both Badiou and Žižek is to endorse this legacy full-throatedly rather than to disavow it. As Žižek puts it in a more-than-usually unguarded moment at

the beginning of *The Fragile Absolute* (2000): “the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks” (2) What is attractive to both Badiou and Žižek in this legacy is the incompatibility of its conception of belief with the prevailing liberal-pragmatist or liberal-hermeneutic orthodoxies, which would both reduce belief to nothing more than “counting as true” for some (cultural, linguistic, professional, etc.) group. While nobody is so naïve as to believe that there are any beliefs that are empirically universal, Žižek and Badiou sensibly affirm that a truth without a universal vocation is a poor thing—in short, not a truth at all—and that furthermore, without the notion of truth (a belief which is addressed to everyone), there can be no ideology (or rather, only one entirely hegemonic and therefore invisible ideology) and therefore no politics, only the management of (cultural, linguistic, professional, etc.) differences. In this they agree with the recent work of such disparate thinkers as Walter Benn Michaels and Mahmood Mamdani, who are equally suspicious of the culturalization of truth but who haven’t much apparent use for anything like a religious conception of truth. So while Žižek’s and Badiou’s entertaining potshots at liberal sophistry generally hit the mark, the question still remains: Why Christianity? Why Saint Paul?

For Badiou, the question is how a truth leaves its site, the particular, idiosyncratic situation from which it emerges and comes to be affirmed as true “for all.” The most captivating chapters of *Saint Paul* rediscover Paul the militant (in whom Žižek will find the analog and precursor of Lenin), who travels throughout the Empire organizing small Christian cells and occasionally making interventions (the epistles) into their operations. I am in no position to judge Badiou’s biblical scholarship, but his reconstruction of Paul’s itinerary from the scanty and textually unreliable evidence of the gospels spins Paul’s epistles into a compelling drama. In Badiou’s telling, Christianity without Paul would likely have remained nothing more than a heretical but minor Jewish sect, of no more importance today than, say, the Essenes or the Herodians—just as Žižek will say that without Lenin, there would be no Marxism, only the Marx who appears in the early Foucault as a moderately important theorist of labor.

Paul's essential contribution was not to preach to Gentiles, but to condense Christianity into a single doctrinal point—the resurrection of Christ—in the light of which the difference between Jew and non-Jew shrinks into irrelevance. Paul, outside the inner circle of the apostles, is relatively indifferent both to Jesus the man and to his teachings—which, we are given to understand, fit relatively unremarkably into contemporary genres of religious charlatanism and thaumaturgy. All that matters is

a single point: Jesus, son of God . . . , and Christ in virtue of this, died on the cross and was resurrected. The rest, all the rest, is of no real importance. Let us go further: the rest (what Jesus said and did) is not what is real in conviction, but obstructs, or even falsifies it. (*Saint Paul*, 33)

From this one statement, the truth to which Paul remains doggedly faithful—Jesus, son of God, died and was resurrected—emerges Paul's entire doctrinal universe.

One of the virtues of *Saint Paul* is its startling reinterpretation of the Pauline lexicon. Badiou's readings give a new relevance to Paul's writings on, for example, the mutual implication of sin and the law, which turns out to require something very like a theory of the unconscious, figured through a language (that of life and death) which renders it all but illegible to a casual or conventionally theological reading. But Badiou's reinterpretation, far from imposing an anachronistic meaning on the material, gives Paul's lexicon a new immediacy precisely by triangulating its terms against its own historical horizon. "Faith" (*pistis*), "hope" (*elpis*), and "charity" (*agapé*), for example, which have obviously lost their original meanings, regain their militant dimensions as "conviction" (about the event that conditions the truth), "love" (which guarantees the universal address of the truth), and "certainty" (about the power of this truth to affect the state of things).

More surprisingly, the words "Jew" and "Greek" neither refer to two ethnic or cultural "nations," nor exhaust metonymically the "empire's 'national' complexity" (*Saint Paul*, 40). Rather, they refer to two distinct regimes of discourse: a ("Jewish") discourse of signs, and a ("Greek") discourse of wisdom:

For Paul, whether the cosmic totality be envisaged as such or whether it be deciphered on the basis of the sign's exception, it institutes in every case a theory of salvation tied to mastery (to a law), along with the grave additional inconvenience that the mastery of the wise man and that of the prophet, necessarily unaware of their identity, divide humanity in two (the Jew *and* the Greek), thereby blocking the universality of the Announcement. (42)

The Pauline language of “folly” and “weakness” also emerges from this matrix: any attempt to think the resurrection in terms of existing regimes of discourse (in terms of wisdom or the sign) will only render it absurd or impotent. Christian discourse must instead “proceed from the event itself” (*Saint Paul*, 42)—and in the light of this procedure, it is the wise who come to be foolish, and the powerful who come to be impotent. Finally, then, the discourses of the “Jew” and the “Greek” are identical: “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek” (Romans 10:12) does not mean that there are not ethnic or cultural differences, even very obvious ones, but that finally, with regard to the Christ-event, these differences are trivial: “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing” (1 Cor. 7:19).

Badiou also reinvigorates the familiar Pauline oppositions “flesh” and “spirit,” “father” and “son,” “death” and “life.” Given the singular status for Paul of the Resurrection, it is clearly the last of these that will be most important. For Paul, Christ's death (and suffering) has no value in itself; it is nothing more than evidence that in Jesus, God renounces transcendence: Jesus really is a man, a son, a brother. Any god can send an avatar; to send a son is something else altogether. The important thing is that it is precisely from the site of fleshly death—from Jesus' mortality, his full humanity—that the possibility of spiritual life emerges. Through the fact of Jesus' death—an eventuality which pertains to everyone—the possibility of spiritual resurrection becomes immanent in mortal flesh. Pauline truth, the construction of a community of the spirit, is therefore addressed to everyone.

As Badiou himself admits, however, the subtitle of *Saint Paul*, “The Foundation of Universalism,” is exorbitant. Universalism is, to use one of Badiou's own examples, already present in “this or that theorem of

Archimedes” (106), and the foundation of Badiou’s universalism, built as it is on post-Cantorian set theory (more on this later), is closer in its self-conception to mathematics than it is to religion. Badiou (who positions himself, in his *Ethics*, as emerging between the two established ethical discourses of Kantian universalism and the Lévinasian ethics of the absolutely-other: “neither Greek nor Jew”) clearly finds in Paul a powerful example, a historical figure who fits Badiou’s own conceptual schema remarkably well. Paul is not so much the founder of universalism as he is a particularly good illustration of a subjective structure that Badiou has developed elsewhere, most notably in his own foundational *Being and Event*. Why is it, then, that Badiou’s theory of truth finds its best expression in a figure whose truth proceeds from something patently untrue: a miraculous resurrection?

Badiou acknowledges the question in more than one place, but in a form which answers it in advance. If Paul had laid the foundation of universalism, then a proper, secular universalism could be built on this ancient foundation; or, to use a different metaphor, we can “extract a formal, wholly secularized conception of grace from the mythical core” (*Saint Paul*, 66). But if, on the contrary, Paul is a kind of exemplary case, the question still stands. The problem is deeper than the position of this brilliant pamphlet in Badiou’s larger work; it goes right to the core of Badiou’s philosophy. Put more broadly, the issue is how a certain subjective-epistemological-ontological structure (the structure of a “truth procedure,” to which we shall return), which is itself constitutively empty as to content, is to be restricted to the sites which, in Badiou’s thinking, are capable of truth. Paul Cohen’s contribution to the science of set theory and Saint Paul’s contribution to the religion of Christianity seem to conform to Badiou’s outline of a “truth procedure” equally well. On what basis do we exclude Christianity’s “mythical core” without recourse to such notions as, say, consensus or verification, for which Badiou has, for good reasons, only contempt? Questions of love, politics, and art—whether I love you, whether class is the fundamental political category, or whether Ken Vandermark is a charlatan—cannot be referred to agreement or accuracy; and as the history of set theory seems to demonstrate, neither can certain fundamental questions in

mathematics. But to this list of four empirical fields (love, politics, art, and science, which exhaust the areas Badiou will allow as potential sites for truth), why not add religion? Or, indeed, why not add business? Badiou, of course, doesn't think religion or capitalism are capable of producing truth. I might be inclined to agree; but as opinions, these judgments are irrelevant to the philosophical problem.

Badiou attempts to address this problem in another small book, the manifesto-like *Ethics*, which was originally published in French as a general-audience text and quickly became Badiou's best-selling book. One might ask the same question about ethics that one asks about Saint Paul: Why ethics? If Nietzsche wasn't enough, didn't Brecht (in, for example, *The Good Person of Szechwan* or *St. Joan of the Stockyards*) establish for the Left that thinking ethics before thinking Capitalism was putting the cart before the horse? The questions ethics can answer are trivial compared with the problems we really (if less immediately and obviously) face, like collective responsibility for a half century of shameful and disastrous policies in the Third World which we benefit from and tacitly endorse every day, even if we consciously oppose them. Thankfully *Ethics*, far from endorsing the contemporary ethical revival, exhibits a "fury" against a "world . . . deeply plunged in 'ethical' delirium" (liiv). The ethics that Badiou will pursue has little in common with the familiar ethical discourses, which he dismisses as more or less corrupt or inconsistent. Instead, *Ethics* seeks to reformulate completely the ancient question of ethics: the question of good and evil.

*Ethics*—cogently translated by Peter Hallward, who also provides a pertinent introduction and appends a probing interview with the author—is, if anything, even more exhilarating than *Saint Paul*. Badiou begins from a critique of the discourse of human rights. This ethics has the virtue of being simple and self-evident: the ethical imperative is to prevent suffering. But Badiou exposes its hollowness by staging it. While the ethic of human rights obviously presupposes a human subject posited as universal, in practice this subject is radically split between victim and benefactor. And at this point it might raise our suspicions that the location of this split is remarkably consistent: the benefactor is always "us"—the armed Western

democracies or our allies, who have suddenly acquired the right to intervene. (Badiou does not address the hypocrisy of using the language of human rights to justify intervention in situations where the “Western democracies” are in fact responsible for the situation in the first place, or of the reluctance to intervene where there is little strategic benefit. If the ethics itself were justifiable, then the hypocrisy would have to be addressed as a separate issue.) This “humanitarian” intervention, moreover, can only conceive humanity—or at least the victim—as an animal: “the status of victim, of suffering beast, of emaciated, dying body, equates man with his animal substructure” (*Ethics*, 11). What is foreclosed at the outset is any possibility of conceiving the situation of “abuse” as political. (Think of the current situation in Haiti.) Since what is taken into account is only animal suffering and never the political situation that determines it, the attitude of humanitarian intervention is, despite initial appearances, one of profound contempt: violations of human rights require not political analysis, but only the identification of barbarism.

The ethical orientation of human rights is purely negative: it has no conception of the good other than the absence of evil, of suffering. Lacking any imperative to inquire into the good, it discourages any substantial consideration of alternatives to the status quo. The exclusive concern of human rights with the question of evil—its practical identification of the human being with “that which can suffer evil”—means that any attempt to base a political project on a conception of the good (which might, it is true, involve a share of suffering, not least on the part of those who uphold it) is deemed “utopian,” doomed to transform itself into its opposite, a totalitarian nightmare. To begin from the good, therefore, leads directly to evil. For Badiou, this is “sophistry at its most devastating” (*Ethics*, 13), and the second half of the book is an attempt to think through an ethics that would begin from the good.

First, however, Badiou must deal with the other dominant ethical discourse, this time the broadly Lévinasian thematics of the “respect for the other.” Badiou himself has the greatest respect for Lévinas, and in fact offers no direct critique of Lévinas’s ethics. He merely demonstrates what Lévinas would never deny, which is that there is nothing that guarantees

the essential otherness of the other (whose relation to me or to a third might always bring us under the category of the Same) except the existence of an Altogether Other who shines through the appearance of the other. The foundation of an ethics of alterity, in other words, can only be an ineffable God; it cannot be secularized without losing this support. While there is nothing inconsistent about Lévinasian ethics, what it demonstrates is that “ethics is a category of pious discourse” (*Ethics*, 23).

What guarantees the otherness of the other in the absence of the Absolutely Other? Nothing, which means it can only be posited. What this implies, first of all, is that the ineffable other is a product of my own thought and therefore not other at all. Second, we are compelled to ask: why this will to otherness? Once again, Badiou critiques the laicized, multiculturalist version of this ethics by staging it. In its everyday form, without the support of the Altogether Other, the ethics of difference bifurcates as soon as it is put into play. Its attitude towards any rigorously sustained difference is entirely different from the attitude it believes itself to have towards difference-as-such. A rigorously sustained religious difference? Fundamentalism. Rigorously sustained political difference? Extremism. Rigorously sustained cultural difference? Barbarism. “As a matter of fact, this celebrated ‘other’ is acceptable only if he is a *good* other—which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*?” (*Ethics*, 24). The only acceptable difference is one that also merely “accepts” difference. This restriction means that the discourse of the other is effectively a discourse of the Same: a cosmopolitan fantasy of liberal-democratic, free-market society: “nothing other than the identity of a wealthy—albeit visibly declining—‘West’” (24).

Does Badiou’s suspicion of the ethics of difference imply a hostility to difference as such? No. On the contrary, differences are simply the stuff of which the world is made. The point, rather, is that fetishizing difference is as ideological as the cruel attempt to suppress it. As we saw in Badiou’s version of Saint Paul, any truth will simply be indifferent to such differences that exist, while at the same time—precisely because it is addressed uniformly to all and therefore admits no tolerant “agreement to disagree”—introducing a new cleavage between those caught up in this truth and those who refuse it.

Now, for Badiou, the genuine problem of ethics, the question of the good, is entirely bound up with the status of truth. For the only thing that distinguishes human from animal is the vocation for truth: outside of this vocation, humanity is simply, like any other predatory animal “whose charms are not obvious” (*Ethics*, 12), beneath good and evil. The human subject does not preexist truth: on the contrary, there is “only a particular kind of animal, convoked by certain circumstances, to *become* a subject. . . . [A]t a certain moment, everything he is—his body, his abilities—is called upon to enable the passing of a truth along its path” (41). Only in relation to truth does humanity become capable of good or evil. But what is a truth? The precise answer is something like “the configuration that arises when a situation is transformed by people acting in fidelity to an event which, despite appearances and without guarantee, belongs to that situation.” The simplest example is love: the truth of love is the transformation of a simple situation, that of two ordinary people, when they act in fidelity to an encounter which, unlike every other chance meeting, constitutes an Event.

But this formulation, as well as its more technical versions, is indifferent to the content of a truth. If one’s own support of a truth is fundamentally a matter of decision, what is to distinguish untruth from truth? Didn’t, for example, at least some Germans (Heidegger is the obvious example) believe that, far from representing a monstrous falsehood, their participation in a fascist movement was fidelity to an event, the Nazi seizure of power in 1933? “[W]hen all is said and done, it is obvious that reaction, even the forces of death, can be stamped with the creative force of an event” (*Ethics*, lvii).

Since mere predation is beneath good and evil, evil must take its sense from some perversion of a truth-procedure; and since a truth-procedure has essentially three parts (the event, fidelity to the event, and the truth this fidelity constructs), there are three ways a truth-procedure can be perverted into evil. The first is the substitution of a simulacrum for the event, the second is betrayal of a real event, and the third is to ascribe to the truth-process total power. It seems to me that these three modes of evil are meant to correspond primarily to three political evils, although only the first is spelled out. The “revolution” of National Socialism was a simulacrum of

the previous revolutions of 1792 and 1917: because it convokes the plenitude of an ethnic “Germany” instead of the (universalizable) exclusion on which this plenitude was founded, it blocks any possible truth-procedure. In a strange echo of Heidegger’s scandalous paragraph on the gas chambers, the (ontic) extermination of the Jews appears here as the effect of an (ontological) blockage of truth: inasmuch as “Jew” names the address to all that Nazism cannot make, its referent must be eliminated. The second evil, that of betrayal, could be taken to refer to the abandonment of the revolutionary movements in the Third World—the corruption of the political class in Angola after the MPLA took power, or the strange quiescence of some Brazilian radicals in the face of the military dictatorship in the late 1960s. The third evil ascribes total power to the truth-process—as though a truth, rather than reconfiguring the situation from which it emerges, could actively become the situation, subjecting everything to a single rule. The referent here would seem to be Left absolutism.

This apparatus is a powerful lens, and there can be no doubt that Badiou is describing something important; perhaps it is even an aspect of evil. But is it really Evil (*Mal*) itself? Badiou’s evil, like his truth, is indifferent to content, a merely formal label. In its formalism, its insistence on fidelity to any Event whatever—on “ethical consistency” itself as a value—Badiou’s good is almost an aesthetic rather than an ethical category. (At one point, in an echo of Kant’s purposeless purpose, ethical consistency is even described as “disinterested interest.”) While there is something undeniably attractive in ethical consistency (and something ugly in its lack), the most important thing for a modern ethics may be to push these sentimental considerations aside. The value of ethical consistency is authorized by Lacan’s well-known dictum not to give up on one’s desire [*ne pas céder sur son désir*]. But we should not forget that this maxim derives from the reading of *Antigone* in *Séminaire VII*. Yes, Sophocles’ Antigone, in her awful ethical consistency, is a captivating figure. Brecht’s Galileo, on the other hand, in his opportunism and wavering inconsistency, is a bit distasteful. But Antigone is a reactionary, and Galileo invents physics.

Further, Badiou has no way of sorting out different evils beyond his tripartite division. *Ethics* tells us what Nazism and scientific obscurantism

have in common. But an ethics would have to be able to tell them apart. The distinction between, say, the abandonment of a social movement by its leader and the abandonment of a poem by its author cannot be made without some kind of qualitative supplement. Since, as we shall see, Badiou's philosophy is predicated precisely on the subtraction from consideration of all qualitative predicates, this supplement can only be vulgar, nonphilosophical. Perhaps the supplement it requires is the language of human rights, which, whatever its faults, can tell the difference between a concentration camp and a creationist textbook. (What if, as Žižek suggests, the international war-crimes tribunal were simply to refuse the *de facto* bifurcation of the subject of human rights which is currently written into its constitution: "arrest Kissinger or shut up!" [*Revolution*, 266]?) Or perhaps, genuinely spurning such a supplement, it is really no different than Pauline faith. Since Badiou himself uses the language of grace when speaking of the Event, he cannot regard it as very damning that his conception of the Event shares something with religious revelation. But can we be satisfied with an *Ethics* that remains in the "category of pious discourse"?

*Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy* is not quite the unified volume its subtitle suggests, but rather a collection of Badiou's essays and papers brought together and translated by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens. However, it is anything but the opportunistic beachcombing exercise that such volumes often are; the selection of material turns out to be surprisingly cohesive. The first six chapters, though they originally pertain to quite disparate contexts, all show us Badiou investigating different fields—desire, truth, politics, psychoanalysis, art, and cinema—in an attempt to link them up to his own general theory. The interest of these chapters will primarily be for those who, already captivated by Badiou's work, will want to see how it can comprehend one or more of these topics. Since, in Badiou's conception, the task of philosophy is precisely to draw together its contemporary universe of truths into a single figure (see chap. 9), this book exposes us to an integral part of his philosophical project. For the most part, however, though Badiou has interesting and sometimes startling things to say about each—the chapter on cinema and its relationship to the universe of images is particularly suggestive—there is, for obvious

reasons, not the same sustained engagement that drives his other works, including *Manifesto for Philosophy* (Badiou 1999), which covers some of the same territory.

The next two chapters, whose titles suggest the same general problematic, are instead interventions into political questions. The first of these, “Philosophy and the ‘Death of Communism,’” addresses this putative death as a non-event, or more accurately, as the betrayal, long-preceding the disintegration of the Soviet state, of the event of October 1917. And the betrayal of an event in Badiou’s sense can never be itself an event, but only acquiescence to the existing state of things. “Philosophy and the ‘War against Terrorism’” slyly inhabits rhetoric of Anglo-American analytic philosophy (whose legitimate aim, as he puts it in a different essay, is to demarcate “those utterances which have meaning and those which do not” [*Infinite Thought*, 43]) in order to turn it against the most visible policy of the Anglo-American alliance. Badiou abstracts a generalized statement, something like “The Western democracies are fighting a war against Islamic terrorism,” and shows, one by one, how each of the key terms has either no meaning or no legitimate meaning. It is a brilliant exercise, and one which brutally exposes the bankruptcy of the “war on terrorism.” The editors provide an introduction which does a good job of summarizing the main tenets of Badiou’s general theory, and they conclude with an interview which asks some important questions, but sometimes fails to press them forcefully enough.

The issues raised in the discussions of *Saint Paul* and *Ethics* cannot be answered without turning to Badiou’s philosophical system itself. In the absence of the translation of *Being and Event*, we can only consult Peter Hallward’s impressive *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. Fortunately, this book is everything such a book should be: comprehensive, intelligently written, and sympathetic without being credulous. It presents cogent outlines of Badiou’s major concepts, discusses all of his major works (including material still forthcoming in French), and provides the important context of Badiou’s political activities since the 1960s. It includes an exhaustive bibliography, including secondary material and relevant mathematical texts. And, most helpfully, Hallward appends an enlightening and plausible his-

tory of set theory which substantially clarifies the conceptual underpinnings of Badiou's mature system. Unfortunately—and this is all the more the case since Badiou himself is such a clear and forceful writer—much of the heart of this book will be rendered obsolete by a competent translation of *Being and Event* and a few other key texts. Through no fault of Hallward's, a great deal of the power of Badiou's argument is lost when removed to the distance of a "For Badiou," where the force of subjective necessity tends to evaporate into the third person of opinion.

One of the most unexpected aspects of Badiou's mature work is its foundation in transfinite set theory. Set theory is neither an empty shell on which Badiou constructs his system, nor a mere analogical device on the level of so many maddening and naïve invocations of chaos theory, the uncertainty principle, or general relativity. Put simply, set theory is Badiou's ontology. This identification does not require any mystical correspondence between mathematical thought and reality; quite the contrary. Rather, the thesis is that Being—what is left when all quality and predication is removed from what is—is simply number. Therefore, what can be said about Being as such (from the perspective of experience, not much) can be said in mathematics.

Badiou posits that every "situation" can be described as an infinite set: as infinite generic multiplicity enclosed by some more or less arbitrary counting operation.<sup>1</sup> An important quality of sets is that the number of possible subsets they contain always exceeds the number of elements. In fact, given a set with  $n$  elements, the set of subsets, called the power set, has  $2^n$  elements. A set with three elements—say  $\{a,b,c\}$ —has  $2^3$  or 8 subsets:  $\{a\}$ ,  $\{b\}$ ,  $\{c\}$ ,  $\{a,b\}$ ,  $\{a,c\}$ ,  $\{b,c\}$ ,  $\{a,b,c\}$ , and  $\emptyset$ , the null set. A set with 26 elements, like the alphabet, has 67,108,864 possible combinations. With an infinite set, the situation is similar but, as Paul Cohen established in 1963, the excess of subsets over elements is not only huge but rigorously immeasurable. If, as Badiou posits, every human situation is an infinite set, then there are immeasurably many more possible subsets of a situation than there are elements in it. In other words, there is, in all human situations, a rigorously immeasurable excess of the parts over the whole. Any human situation can only appear well ordered by suppressing an immanent anarchy.

Further, every situation is “founded on the void,” which is more prosaic than it sounds. The void of a situation, what set theory calls the null set  $\emptyset$ , is simply what is not counted. Set theory does not deal with things but with elements, and these elements are not unities in themselves but only counted-for-one. Every element—everything which counts as one—is composed of infinitely many other elements, and so on ad infinitum. The only unity that elements possess is imposed by the count; and the void is, in one approximation, what precedes the count. The pure inconsistent multiplicity that it is cannot be presented as what it is: any presentation, counting out elements, forces the void back into nothingness. What is counted is “made of” this multiplicity, but inconsistent multiplicity itself is constitutively excluded from the count. From within the situation, the void is nothing, not counted; but neither is it non-being, since it is at the same time the stuff of which consistent presentations are made. Nor can it be conceived as a noumenal plenitude, since the void is only the void of a particular situation: what evades this count. The void is each situation’s “suture” to its pure being, but there is no void as such.

The state of a situation is literally a matter of representation: the presentation of what is already presented in the situation. The state, in other words, is the presentation of allowable subsets, the counting-for-one of subsets of elements that already count for one. The dictionary, for example, lists out most of the subsets English allows out of the 67 million possible “words.” It is the state of the situation that organizes the native anarchy of subsets into a coherent representation, and at this point it will be obvious that in using the word “state” to signify this representational ordering, Badiou pushes political implications to the fore. To the state belongs the function of classifying, ordering, and organizing the situation. It is possible, however, for an element to be presented without being represented; it may belong to the situation, but not be included in its state. It is, then, “on the edge of the void,” the nearest thing to pure generic multiplicity—and for this reason it can never be included in the state of the situation, which is nothing other than the resistance to exposure to generic multiplicity. In political situations, generic multiplicity would simply be humanity as such. The homeless are counted—even counted meticulously—and clearly belong

to the social situation. But they are not included in its state, the representation of society's normal functioning. If they were, the situation would plainly appear intolerable. The homeless are "on the edge of the void" in the sense that in any situation, it is only through what is excluded from the state that generic multiplicity—humanity as such, without predicate—can be approached. From within the situation, the site of "the homeless" can only be indiscernible: a matter of, as is it often said, invisibility. But it is only the existence of such an element, which Badiou calls an "evental site," that opens up the possibility of a break with the state of the situation.

The last major elements of Badiou's theory we have already seen in action in *Saint Paul* and *Ethics*. The Event is what emerges from this site, and it is untheorizable, "*hasardeux*." It seems to arrive, like Christ's resurrection, out of nowhere—in fact, this apparent "coming from nowhere" is its distinctive feature. But—and it is important to note that this follows immediately on Badiou's description of the "evental site"—precisely because it does not belong to the state of the situation, its evental status can never be verified. Since it by definition fails to connect with the state of the situation, the state has nothing to say about it. Knowledge cannot be brought to bear on the event; but the event can be the origin of a truth. A "truth-procedure" is the construction of a new multiple based on connection to the event: a truth. And since, once again, it is constitutively uncoupled from the state of things, this multiple can only be constructed as a generic set, one element at a time: hence its necessarily universal address. Finally, the space of subjectivity is opened up by the decision to be faithful to the event, to participate in the construction of a truth.

The clear political and intellectual kinship between the antidialectical Badiou and the thoroughly Hegelian Žižek leads one to raise the question of the relationship between Badiou's thought and the dialectic. Since North America does not have a strong Hegelian tradition, and certainly no experience with either a dogmatic philosophical Hegelianism or a vulgar political Hegelianism, European anti-Hegelianism has tended to be accepted uncritically here and adopted conveniently into a context in which it has no historical teeth. If anything, the critique of Totality functioned here mainly as a respectable prop for the ideological distinction between (Left)

totalitarian and (Right) authoritarian states. Badiou, on the other hand, like most consequent critics of the dialectic, is a formidable dialectician: his critique of the ethics of difference, for example, is a paraphrase of the transition from Being to Nothingness in Hegel's encyclopedia *Logic*. Further—and here is the real point of contact between Badiou and the dialectic—the immanent rupture represented by dialectical “truth” is not far from Badiou's “truth” constructed from the immanent void. But the dialectic has no need to restrict this rupture to certain empirical fields—and we will return to the question of why Badiou does have such a need—or to connect it to the good, which also requires an empirical supplement. If one were to say, in a dialectical vein, “capitalism is the truth of all social forms”—meaning that capitalism is the repressed content of all exploitation—this would not require that capitalism be good or itself capable of truth.

Badiou's ontology cannot usefully displace the dialectic. Because the Event must descend like a grace, Badiou's ontology can only describe situations and never History. Since the event emerges from outside of the state of the situation, it is rigorously untheorizable: as we saw above, it is theorized as untheorizable. Despite every protestation to the contrary, Badiou's system cannot address the question “What is to be done?” because the only thing to do is to wait for the Event. What happens when the precipitation of the Event is precisely what needs to be done? Yes, we can be faithful to a previous event, as Badiou says Lenin was to the Paris Commune. But surely this solution mitigates the power of the Event as the irruption of the void into *this* situation. The dialectic, on the other hand, conceives the void as immanent contradiction. While both contradiction and void are immanent to the situation, contradiction has the tremendous advantage of having movement built in, as it were: the Event does not appear out of an immanent nowhere, but is already fully present in itself in the situation, which it explodes in the movement to for-itself.

Meanwhile, the question of the dialectic leads us back to the twofold meaning of “state”: both the law and order that govern knowledge, and law and order in the everyday sense. This identification authorizes Badiou's antistatism, forcefully reflected in his own political commitment, the Organisation Politique (whose members do not vote), which has made lim-

ited but effective interventions into the status of immigrant workers. In Badiou's system, nothing can happen within the state of a situation; innovation can only emerge from an evental site, constitutively excluded from the state. But can a principled indifference to the state ground a politics? The state surely has the function of suppressing the anarchic possibilities inherent in the (national) situation. But it can also suppress the possibilities exploited by an anarchic capitalism. It is well known that the current rightist "small-government" movement is an assault on the class compromise represented by the Keynesian state. To be sure, one should be suspicious of that compromise and what it excluded. But it also protected workers against some of capitalism's more baleful effects. As with *Ethics*, Badiou is certainly describing something: the utopian moment of a total break with the state may be a part of any genuine political transformation. But, unless we are talking about the sad old interplay of transgression and limit—which posited the state as basically permanent, with transgression as its permanent suspension—this anarchic moment says nothing about the new state of affairs that will ultimately be imposed on the generic set it constructs. Surely the configuration of that state will be paramount—in which case state power has to be fought for, not merely evaded. L'Organisation Politique, it must be said, has come to recognize this. But doesn't this recognition imply a philosophical problem as well—one which the dialectic, in Lukács's writings on party organization (on what amounts to the imposition of a state on the evental site itself) is called upon to answer?

If, as suggested earlier, Pauline militancy is not the foundation of universalism but a striking analogue of Badiou's own, on what is the latter really founded? Surely the foundation of any modern universalism is capitalism itself, and in a very specific sense: the endless conversion of use value into exchange value, the sweeping away of "all fixed, fast frozen relations"—in brief, the universal conversion of quality into quantity. Badiou admits as much himself in *Manifesto for Philosophy*: "Capital . . . exposes the pure multiple as the foundation of presentation" (1999, 56). Of course, this in itself poses no problem. Capital's initial deterritorialization, as the Marxian tradition has always understood, is the only possible foundation for a modern politics. Nor can Badiou stand accused, in Heideggerian vein,

of advancing the technologization of being, which always stands with the state and against creative intervention. But what is strange is the vehemence with which Badiou maintains his distance from the economic—from what classical Marxism called the “base,” the elements of a situation that pertain to its own reproduction. It is perfectly orthodox to say that there can be no purely economic intervention in the economy: even with the best intentions, the World Bank could not solve the problem of Third World poverty. However, in Badiou’s system the economy is not merely reduced to one aspect among many, but actively dismissed from consideration. Material reproduction is reduced to the sneering Lacanian contempt for “*le service des biens*,” the servicing of goods which pertains to the human animal beneath good and evil. Why should Badiou fully endorse Marx’s analysis of the world economy (“there is no need for a revision of Marxism itself,” [*Ethics*, 97]) while keeping Marx’s entire problematic at arm’s length?

In fact, capitalism is the point of impasse in Badiou’s own system, the problem which cannot be actively thought without grave danger to the system as a whole. Capital’s great power, the tremendous ease with which it colonizes (geographic, cultural, psychic) territory, is precisely that it seizes situations at their evental site. In their paraphrase of a brilliant but much-maligned passage in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, Deleuze and Guattari insist that “capitalism has haunted all forms of society, but it haunts them as their terrifying nightmare, it is the dread they feel of a flow that would elude their codes.”<sup>2</sup> Is this flow that eludes every society’s codes not identical with generic multiplicity, the void which, eluding every representation, nonetheless haunts every situation? Does not capitalism make its entry at a society’s point of impasse—social relations already haunted by variously dissimulated exploitation—and revolutionize them into the capital-labor relation? A safely non-Orientalist version of this would be the eruption from modernist art’s evental site—the art market, which belonged to the situation of modernism while being excluded from its represented state—of what we might call the “Warhol-event,” which inaugurates the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of (artistic) labor under Capital. It makes perfect sense to say that this transition is the truth of the

Warhol-event. As we saw earlier, the real subsumption of labor under Capital, the conversion of every relation into a monetary relation, is the origin of formal equality: that is, the foundation of universalism. And far from pertaining to mere animal life beneath the level of the truth-procedure, capitalism itself fits perfectly the form of the revolutionary Event. It would then appear that capitalism is, like religion, eliminated from the art-politics-science-love series only by fiat.

And why is this? Because the economic, the “servicing of goods,” cannot enter Badiou’s system without immediately assuming the status of a cause. Excluded from direct consideration, capitalism as a condition of set theory is perfectly innocuous; its preconditional status belongs to a different order than what it conditions. It opens up a mode of presentation, but what is presented existed all along: look at Paul, for example. But included as the product of a truth-procedure, capitalism immediately appears as the basis for all the others: it is, in fact, the revolutionary irruption of Capital (in whatever society) that conditions any modern process of science, art, love, or politics. If Badiou’s system were to consider capitalism directly, some elements, those pertaining to the “base,” would appear to have more weight than others—the “superstructure.” The effects of such an inclusion of capitalism in Badiou’s system—an inclusion which nothing prevents—would be catastrophic. Radical universality (as opposed to the historically conditioned universality imposed by the emergence of capitalism) would become unthinkable. The “eternity” of truth would yield to historicism. Most importantly, set theory itself would no longer be able to supply the model of a situation. If some elements are in fact more important than others, the ontological reduction to number, which is predicated on the subtraction of all predicates (and therefore all elemental hierarchy) can only be accomplished at an intolerable cost.

Badiou cannot think Capital precisely because Capital has already thought Badiou. And let’s face it: despite Badiou’s inspiring presentation, nothing is more native to capitalism than his basic narrative matrix. The violent seizure of the subject by an idea, fidelity to it in the absence of any guarantee, and ultimate transformation of the state of the situation: these are the elements of the narrative of entrepreneurial risk, “revolutionary

innovation,” the “transformation of the industry,” and so on. In pushing away material reproduction, Badiou merely adapts this narrative to the needs of intellectuals, who, in Badiou’s conception, have a monopoly over much of the field of truth.

Unlike Badiou, Slavoj Žižek needs no introduction; his interpretation (and welcome democratization) of the Lacanian contribution has been inescapable for some time. His surprising and provocative essays on current events—sometimes first disseminated in a rough-and-ready form on the Internet—brilliantly assimilate and synthesize registers and aspects of events that for most of us are still raw and unprocessed. In the months after 9/11, the near-silence from the Left in the face of the tremendous conservative onslaught was devastating, and I am sure I was not alone in finding Žižek’s essay on the attacks a kind of godsend, a sign that someone out there was still able to think clearly about the situation and to say something about it. When these topical essays are turned into books (like his *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, forthcoming from Verso), often with recourse to filler from his other works or to standard Žižek boilerplate, they become less interesting, and it is well to get out of the way some obvious and familiar problems with Žižek’s recent output before moving on to more substantive matters. Most of Žižek’s books are both too short and too long: too short, because they are missing the systematic exposition that would give his arguments their full force, and too long because his constant repetition and self-plagiarism are intensely annoying. Žižek’s work on religion and belief, for example, spans four books (*The Fragile Absolute*, 2000; *On Belief*, 2001; *Revolution at the Gates*, 2002; and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 2003). Edited down into one coherent volume, these books might sit on the same shelf as Kierkegaard or Pascal; alternatively, what is new in each could have been developed into smaller, less ambitious works that might have intervened decisively in particular fields. Instead, the effect is distinctly dilutive, and Žižek has yet to give us anything like a master work. What will probably ultimately be seen as his most important contribution—a vigorous and original interpretation and defense of the Hegelian tradition—has not yet received systematic treatment. Žižek’s frenzied publication schedule is detrimental in other ways as well. His contempt for the pedantry of

Anglo American editing practices is both legitimate and funny—an MLA-style reference is really not necessary for “To be or not to be”—but the sting would be sharper if he always got his quotations right. Copyediting is sketchy, though the results are sometimes charming, like a Europeanized Monica “Levinsky.” And the indexes to his books—surely necessary for navigating Žižek’s zigzagging arguments—are often haphazard, or missing altogether.

The first half of Žižek’s *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* is, however, far more concentrated than some of his other recent books, and offers tantalizing elaborations on some of Žižek’s cornerstone concepts. The triad Real-Imaginary-Symbolic has always seemed to have both a tremendous heuristic efficacy and an unsatisfactory lability. The Real, for example, has sometimes seemed in Žižek’s writings to refer to a (Kantian) noumenal plenitude, at other times to a (Hegelian) immanent rift, and at others simply to the limit of symbolization. Žižek attempts to stabilize these concepts by running them through a process of combination, effectively producing nine concepts from three: the real Real, the symbolic Real, the imaginary Real, and so on. Whether this is altogether convincing I am not quite sure; and whether, after this elaboration, it still makes sense to call these three very different concepts by the single name Real is also unclear. Nonetheless, it marks a welcome gesture towards systematization, rather than the merely tactical deployment of concepts. The main thrust of *Organs without Bodies*, however, is still critical rather than systematic. If Badiou’s thought offers at points an intriguing ease of translation into dialectical language, *Organs without Bodies* proposes an altogether more radical transformation.

As is well known, one of Deleuze’s practices is to read other philosophers (Plato, Descartes, Kant) in free indirect discourse, a process he has described as “buggery or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception. . . . I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous” (quoted in *Organs*, 46). And Deleuze is not only himself a reflexive anti-Hegelian, but also the hero of a certain North American antidialecticism. What better project for Žižek, then, than “taking Deleuze from behind,” performing a “Hegelian

buggering of Deleuze” (48), reading Deleuze himself as the ultimate Hegelian? For obvious reasons, Hegelians will probably love this book without really getting that much new out of Deleuze, and Deleuzians will take issue with much of it without changing their minds about Hegel. But I think the contribution here may be less to our thinking about Deleuze than our thinking about Hegel. For Žižek’s intellectual promiscuity has always been about “taking [Lacan, Hegel, Marx, Hitchcock, whoever] from behind,” and the most interesting of these buggeries remains his reading of Hegel. Together with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (which required Žižek to mount a defense of his reading of Hegel against consequent offensives by Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau), *Organs without Bodies* continues Žižek’s modernization of Hegel, discarding the well-known panlogistic certainties and bringing out a far more radical Hegel for whom negativity is “not just a detour on the path of the One’s self-mediation” (52).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the Hegelian bugging of Deleuze is not complete; there remains a Lacanian bugging as well. If one is going to make Deleuze Hegelian, why not make the coauthor of *Anti-Oedipus* a Freudian, too? This is the second half of the argument, the whole of which is cleverly implied in the book’s title. If the “body without organs” is a concept Deleuze borrows from Marx at his most Hegelian (in the same section of the *Grundrisse* mentioned earlier), then the “organ without a body” is, of course . . . the phallus.

That’s the first half of the book, which at one point Žižek refers to as a “booklet.” It doesn’t seem unlikely that the second half, which is often only tangentially related to Deleuze or not related at all, is a kind of afterthought. Unlike the sustained effort of the first half, the second consists of what has become his usual mix of brilliance and filler. Some of his musings in this section seem decidedly off-the-cuff: at one point he wonders about the ethical dilemmas implied by a hypothetical drug that would “strengthen my resolve and dedication” (*Organs*, 131). Would I still be responsible for my intellectual performance if I took such a drug? That’s a tough one; I’d better think about it over a cup of coffee and a cigarette. At one point he falls into a trap he has exposed as fraudulent so many times before, that of a paranoid insistence on an “other of the other,” an all-powerful “they”

behind the social order: “Those in power [know] full well when to use drugs as a weapon against self-organized resistance” (201). As in the Lacanian fable about the paranoid man whose wife was really cheating on him, even if this is sometimes true, the invocation of dark powers that he is not a very helpful analysis of why social movements fail. And at times Žižek is frustratingly slow at getting to the (in my view usually correct) vulgar materialist thesis he is aiming for. An extended discussion of biogenetic discoveries and technologies (123–32) goes on seemingly interminably before arriving at the very old (and very useful) proposition that the analysis of Capital has to precede any analysis of technology. This is surely true: the thinking-through of the ethical consequences of a given knowledge or technology cannot precede the thinking-through of the society in which they exist and from which they take their meaning. (It is precisely, for example, at the point of ownership and access that biogenetics becomes threatening: who profits from the drought-resistant crops, who gets to have children free from birth defects?) But it also has the effect of making much of the previous discussion unnecessary.

Glyn Daly’s *Conversations with Žižek* is a dismal affair. A master at turning back difficult questions by, as he might say, returning them to their sender in inverted (true) form, Žižek is at his best when confronted with a substantial interlocutor. But this kind of intellectual give-and-take is entirely missing from *Conversations with Žižek*. A blurb on the back claims that “Daly succeeds here in punctuating the febrile forward rush of one of the most distinctive and influential voices of our time. . . . Žižek responds with wily candour. . . . As invigorating and substantial a conversation as anyone is likely to come upon.” Of course, we are supposed to be in on the joke on the incestuous North American blurb-writing tradition—the endorsement is by Joan Copjec, to whom he dedicates *Organs Without Bodies*. Nonetheless, one is led to expect something more than invitations to explain, yet again, the Lacanian idea of the *objet petit a*, for which one could turn, almost indifferently, to any of Žižek’s books. This particular explanation (a brilliant riff on two confections, the Central European chocolate “Kinder Surprise” egg, and the French cake called *la tête du nègre* [85–86]) shows to much better effect as the appendix to *The Puppet and the*

*Dwarf*. Žižek does share some interesting biographical stories in the first conversation that will be interesting to his fans, who will surely find the later sections frustratingly repetitive. And I doubt anyone else wants to know what book Žižek would take with him to a desert island. I'll save you the \$15; it's Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*.

Of more relevance to the questions posed by Badiou's work are Žižek's recent works on belief. Of these, *On Belief* seems to me to be the weakest—though, given Žižek's modular and repetitive writing habits, I cannot say with certainty that it does not seem that way because I read it last. The fascinating section on G. K. Chesterton in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* develops the Chestertonian notion of the “thrilling romance of orthodoxy”: that the investigation of an orthodoxy is far more adventurous than the transgressive act which does nothing more than reaffirm the matrix it transgresses. Put another way, orthodoxy is the true transgression: Luther and Lacan, to use widely disparate examples, both saw themselves not as breaking with orthodoxy, but as returning to it against the drift of opinion. And perhaps the Left could use a little thrilling orthodoxy itself. Instead of the constant calls to “rethink Marxism”—a call which is usually answered by dressing up more or less commonplace critical procedures in a pseudoradical rhetoric—perhaps what is needed is a return to Marx, and in particular to the materialist axiom which lies at Marxism's heart.

Of the books on belief, *Revolution at the Gates* (which places Lenin's writings from 1917 alongside the rearranged text of Žižek's own *Repeating Lenin*, published a year earlier) is the best. Some of the major theses (the formula Lenin = Paul, the thesis of the radical groundlessness of “Lenin's choice” to push for the “second revolution” of 1917, and the gesture of “shamelessly and courageously endorsing the boring classic criticism according to which Marxism is a ‘secularized religion’” [187]) are plainly authorized by Badiou's work on Saint Paul and don't require further elaboration here. Žižek is at his best in this book when he delves into the symbolic universe of Stalinism, which he outlines with a profound and chilling plausibility far removed from, say, the conceptually useless comparisons with Nazism to which we have become accustomed. Žižek's description of Stalinism as a functioning subjective universe is, if anything,

more frightening than such hysterical comparisons because it allows us to project ourselves into it. And the book contains a version of the 9/11 essay (“Welcome to the Desert of the Real!”), which is as provocative and necessary now as it was when it first appeared.

Before at we arrive at the political thesis of Žižek’s writings on Lenin, it is worth pointing out that Žižek’s work is shot through with an ethical imperative which is not often explicitly thematized. Like Badiou, Žižek’s ethics is one of subjective self-consistency, sustained, like Badiou’s, by Lacan’s “*ne pas céder*.” This ethical self-consistency is not to be confused with the substantial self-consistency of the subject—we know the Lacanian barred subject, written \$, never fully coincides with itself—but rather refers to a kind of “going all the way,” a refusal to compromise on one’s desire, even if this desire is ultimately self-destructive. Žižek’s contempt for an inconsistent ethical position—where the in-itself of a political position and its for-itself fail to coincide—is palpable. Nobody provokes Žižek’s ire so much as

pseudo-radical academic Leftists who adopt an attitude of utter disdain towards the Third Way, while their own radicalism ultimately amounts to an empty gesture which obliges no one to do anything definite. (*Revolution*, 172)

The great majority of today’s “radical” academics silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model, with a secure tenured position as their ultimate professional goal (a surprising number of them even play the stock market). (171)

The basis of this contempt is its inconsistency: the “pseudo-radical academic Leftist” experiences his position as radical, while in fact it is nothing more than the empty quietism of Hegel’s beautiful soul, benefiting from what it denounces while deriving disavowed pleasure from its presumed superiority to the same.

There can be no doubt that the figure of the beautiful soul remains a potent figure for political critique. In fact, one could turn it against Žižek

himself. But what is fundamentally wrong with the beautiful soul is not its inconsistency, but simply the quietism it masks. The consequence of Žižek's valorization of ethical consistency is a strange admiration for bad but consistent positions:

With regard to this radical chic, our first gesture towards Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be one of praise: at least they play their game straight, and are honest in their acceptance of the global capitalist coordinates. (*Revolution*, 172)

Žižek reproduces this gesture several times, with regard to, for example, the “refreshing” Francis Fukuyama (“In our intellectual space full of false protesters, here we finally have a fully pledged *apologist for the existing order*” [*Organs*, 132 n. 23]), or, in the introduction to *On Belief*, his grudging preference for a reactionary fundamentalist preacher over the doctrinal equivocation of a liberal rabbi and priest.

The problem with this ethics—as Brecht showed us, with ethics in general—is that, under capitalism, the only fully consistent ethical position is ruthless self-interest. There is no ethical position that is both minimally compassionate and fully ethically consistent. Mauler in *Saint Joan* is doomed to make money from all of his generous impulses; the good woman of Szechwan can only help her neighbors by taking advantage of them. In fact, this split constitutes part of capitalism's dynamism. The ideological force of capitalism is that so many people are given a subjective interest in maintaining the stability of capitalism, even if this interest involves competing with neighbors who share an “objective” interest in ending it. Any “opting out” is at present simply quixotic, and only possible on the basis of substantial privilege. Plainly, professors want tenured positions, for the same reason the unemployed want jobs: because they exist. (As for playing the stock market, this criticism buys neoliberal rhetoric hook, line, and sinker: most academics who “play the stock market” do so because universities, like many other U.S. employers, have shifted the burden of risk from their own retirement systems onto the individual employees.) For the wealthy—and this includes the famous tenured radical—self-interest only

lines up with political interest in cynical defense of privilege. Our first gesture towards the pseudoradical academic should therefore be the exact opposite of Žižek's. True, academics by and large live their lives in accordance with their interest in the long-term stability of Capital; but at least they don't go all the way, contributing to its ideological legitimation in that small zone in which they timidly exercise their freedom.

The only fully consistent leftist ethical position is revolutionary. Žižek has this right, but currently this position is easier to endorse than to occupy. (Of course, it would be easy to show that Žižek's own position, or mine, is just as compromised as that of our hypothetical tenured radical. But if we are not going to get upset at liberal hypocrisy, we can't get upset at Žižek's either. That would be hypocritical.) One of Žižek's hidden targets in *Revolution at the Gates* is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (which appears here only in a footnote, while it gets fuller treatment in *Organs without Bodies*). Žižek's main critique (an adaptation of Lukács's critique of utopianism) is simple but damning: their political horizon is irredeemably abstract. Global citizenship, universal minimum wage, and so on: these are obviously wonderful ideas, but without any concrete proposals for getting there, they might as well be anything else or nothing at all. The more abstract the goal, the easier it is to achieve unanimity: pretty much everyone can agree that the world ought to be just, but as soon as concrete proposals for achieving justice are proposed, all unanimity disappears. The notion of the purely immanent, unorganized "desire of the multitude" is undeniably attractive; but, since this desire is an abstraction from concrete desires that may be incompatible, how could it form itself into a political subject without the imposition of an organization transcendent to it—a Party? Hardt and Negri know this: "The only event we are awaiting is the insurgence of a powerful organization. We do not have any models to offer for this event" (2000, 411). The similarity to the Pauline language of the Event as grace is striking, but is this not also a genuinely shocking admission, a virtual admission of defeat? The event they can only await in silence is the only event that would matter.

But in the absence of any attempt to answer it, how does Žižek's question—"How do we invent the organizational structure which will confer on

[contemporary social unrest] the form of universal political demand?” (*Revolution*, 296)—get us any farther than Hardt and Negri’s empty expectation? While Žižek fully understands the theoretical need for a Party (and here I am not talking about any particular party or even any particular form of organization, but simply the fact that organization is primary), this exigency remains completely formal. The closest Žižek comes to attempting an answer to this fundamental question is by invoking (weirdly, it seems to me) a kind of belated cyberspace Utopia, updating Lenin’s famous slogan “Socialism = electrification + the power of the soviets” as “Socialism = free access to the internet + the power of the soviets” (294). Well, this is fine as far as it goes—internet technology has a liberatory edge that cannot be realized in a market economy—but where are the soviets, exactly?

The question itself—what is to be done?—is urgent: the current global political and economic instability may loosen the death grip of neoliberalism, but it doesn’t guarantee that what comes after will be better. Immanuel Wallerstein even thinks the capitalist world system will collapse of its own internal contradictions somewhere between 2025 and 2075. This assertion sounds less crazy now than it did a few years ago, but it isn’t very helpful for trying to influence what comes next. Once again, the attitude is one of waiting until the right conditions emerge. When Heidegger famously claimed that “only a god can save us now,” this was to be understood not theologically, but as a *deus ex machina*: as an unforeseeable Event. It is a symptom of the weakness of the Left that we effectively agree with Heidegger. Are we really condemned to await some unexpected turn, some unforeseen development that will emerge like a god from the machine of Capital? If, on the contrary, the question is how, without any quixotic *passage à l’acte*, one is to contribute to the organization of the “multitude against Empire,” then waiting for a messiah will only waste time.

The equation Lenin = Paul—already implicit in Badiou, made explicit by Žižek—is false. To say there was no certainty that the revolution of 1917 would succeed is true but banal: lots of things are hard to discern without belonging to an indiscernible register of being. Lenin’s writings do reveal a kind of excessiveness to his conviction, yes. But they also show an extraordinarily detailed and insightful analysis of the concrete situation, and a

remarkable theorization of the political opening offered by an immanent crisis in Capital (an effort which, if we were really to “repeat Lenin” today, would have to focus on the inability of Capital to absorb the propertyless masses on its periphery). What we are offered is not really the equation of Lenin and Paul, but a choice: Lenin or Paul? Do we wait for the Event, or do we organize to bring it about? Badiou, Hardt and Negri, and Žižek—along with Heidegger—all side with Paul. Do we?



#### NOTES

1. An adequate presentation of relevant aspects of transfinite set theory cannot be pursued here. For further discussion, consult Hallward (2003, 323–48).
2. See Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 140). Deleuze and Guattari’s gloss is on Marx (1973, 471–514). These pages pertain to “forms which precede capitalist production” (471).
3. See Žižek (1989), and Butler, Laclau, and Žižek (2000).

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