

Žižek, political philosophy and subjectivity

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Of the various aims put forward in the first editorial of *Subjectivity*, one philosophical objective was particularly crucial: the need to advance a theorization that understood subjectivity as more than subsidiary effect. This was not only a response to a theoretical impasse in deconstructionist and poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity – surely, after all, the subject must be more than ‘a produced form, the outcome of a complex constellation of textual, material, institutional, historical factors?’ (Blackman *et al*, 2008, p. 8) – it was also a reaction to the political limitations of such approaches that seemed unable to conceptualize effective forms of political resistance beyond the textual or the performative.

Slavoj Žižek is one of the few voices within contemporary philosophy to have advanced a radical and substantive political alternative to such conceptualizations. His philosophical writings have brought a distinctive new vocabulary and energy to bear on the theorization of political subjectivity. Drawing creatively on both philosophical and psychoanalytic resources, Žižek’s work instigates a direct challenge to the rhetoric of historicist, discursive or performative approaches to (or gliding over of) subjectivity. His work in fact actively endorses a series of problematics effectively foreclosed by the bulk of post-structuralist thinking. Instead of shying away from the notion of universality, Žižek champions its progressive potential. Similarly, he points to the properly revolutionary potential of what he terms the ‘act’ and problematizes in a productive, if perhaps disturbing, way our conception of enjoyment (that is, the obscene libidinal gratifications of *jouissance*). Not only then does Žižek present a new way of thinking our social world and our being in that world, he also provides a radical new means of resuscitating the notion of political subjectivity.

Deserving of particular attention in this respect is a distinction that Žižek insists upon time and time again, that between subject and subjectivization:

subjectivization designates the movement through which the subject integrates what is given them into the universe of meaning – this

integration always ultimately fails, there is a certain left-over which cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, an object which resists subjectivization, and the subject is precisely correlative to this object. In other words, the subject is correlative to its own limit, to the element which cannot be subjectivized, it is the name of the void which cannot be filled out with subjectivization: the subject is the point of failure of subjectivization. (Žižek, 2005, p. 276)

That is to say – and this is a point of considerable significance if one is to understand the possibility of resistance – neither the mechanisms of interpellation or of discursive subject-positioning can ever exceed the subject. The commonplace of discourse-theory is thus reversed: rather than understanding the subject as the outcome of subjectivization we ought, following Lacan, to understand the subject as *preceding* subjectivization. That is to say, it is the subject that is the precondition of subjectivization, the ‘inner life’ of experience conventionally assumed to be the ground of subjectivity. In this sense, then, for Žižek, subjectivization is a ‘defense against the subject’ (Žižek, 2008, p. 343). In this way we can supplement Althusser: individuals are no doubt interpellated into subjecthood, but this interpellation is never total, it always fails, and this failure, the inadequacy of interpellation, is what Žižek calls ‘subject’.

It is important to emphasize here that this inadequacy of interpellation underscores the fact that the subject is always already addressed as divided; ‘Power always interpellates us, addresses us, as split subjects ...’ (Žižek, 2005, p. 286). This stresses the fact that there is always a gap between symbolic mandates, the ‘call of power’, on the one hand, and the subject’s failure to fully integrate its designated role, to effect power’s demands, on the other. The two failures here cannot be collapsed into each other. It then follows that the subject is, as such, necessarily hysterical, at least inasmuch as they represent a failed interpellation, in the sense – also emphasized by Levi-Strauss – of never fully acceding to its socio-symbolic placement, and of incessantly questioning the how and wherewithal of their supposed fit within the symbolic matrix (the ‘Why am I what I am said to be?’).

What then is the subject before subjectivization? Žižek’s Hegelian answer is less than comforting: the subject is ‘positive force in itself, the infinite force of negativity called by Freud the “death drive”’ (Žižek, 2008, p. 344). The qualification that needs to be added here is that death drive, as Žižek often reiterates, is not in any literal way a self-destructive impulse, the drive to return to the inanimate. It is rather the very opposite, the ongoing ‘undead’ element that exists in excess of life itself, that is, the immortality of the repetitive drive-impulse that heeds no bounds. It is for this reason that ‘humans are not simply alive ... [but are] possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life ... passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things’ (Žižek, 2006, p. 62).

It is precisely this feature of excess, as McGowan argues in the opening paper of this special issue, which proves to be the fulcrum in Žižek's account of political change. Moreover, the *political* potential of the death drive also proves a crucial point at which to distinguish the theoretical approaches of Žižek and Alain Badiou, two philosophers who are otherwise strongly united in their opposition against attempts to dispense with the category of the subject. The notion of a radical historical rupture is likewise central to both thinkers, who, accordingly, each develop sustained accounts of the revolutionary subject of such epoch-shattering moments. For Žižek, the crucial concept in question is the act. The Žižekian act indicates a violent, 'nonsensical' and seemingly pathological action – as in the case of Sethe's murder of her daughter in Morrison's *Beloved* – which 'wipes the slate clean' and effects a complete break from the presiding symbolic coordinates in which it occurs.

Inasmuch as such a rupture tears the individual apart from their symbolic moorings – and their hopes for a world beyond trauma and loss – it necessarily entails the death drive, that is, the *repeated pursuit of loss* that subverts all attempts to find happiness and jettisons all possibility of returning to what went before. It is through such 'utter dismemberment', says McGowan, that the subject emerges: 'This process engenders subjectivity because it denaturalizes the individual and lifts it out of mere animal being'. The factors of subjectivity and drive are thus considered essential to revolutionary change. How so? Well, in McGowan's words: 'The rupture from being occurs through the drive, and subsequent repetitions of the drive within historical situations repeat this original rupture'. Furthermore, the encounter with and recognition of absolute loss in the death drive is none other than 'the original rupture of subjectivity that makes possible all subsequent ... ruptures from the [historical] situation'.

This difficult notion of subjectivity preceding subjectivization not only requires a rethinking or restaging of the relation between the subject and the socio-symbolic realm within which the subject encounters itself. It is not simply that the very possibility of our grasping our own subjective position is always already forged within socio-symbolic space; that such an attempt occurs through the very ideological frameworks we may choose to challenge. This very grasping itself is always doomed to a certain failure. As noted above, the lack in the socio-symbolic edifice and the lack in subjectivity cannot be reduced to each other, and yet, as we experience it, as Feldner and Vighi put it, 'there is no difference between my self-alienation and my alienation in society'. It is the hard work of confronting this impasse, which forms the basis of Feldner and Vighi's argument. While Žižek's critique of dominant ideology and the subjectivity that might be bound to it is well disseminated, it is not always clear where this critique leads. Žižek's politics appears to situate an impossibility that, on a first encounter, seems to point to a choice between stepping out of rationalism or embracing a pure subjectivity that stands against current ideology. The problem with both of these options is that they operate in reaction to and thus in terms of

what is and can thus be understood as always already recuperated to what is. It is not enough, then, to resist the overt mechanism of ideology but, as Feldner and Vighi put it, we need also to ‘refrain from forms of participation in the hegemonic practices and rituals that function as their inherent supplement’, we need to approach matters in a manner other than that which was already expected. It is, then, only through an elucidation of the underside of ideology that we can begin to appreciate the truly ethical dimension of Žižek’s argument; what Vighi and Feldner term a politics of subtraction.

In his novella *Bartleby, the Scriviner: A Story of Wall Street* (1853) Herman Melville details the peculiar stance adopted by the titular character of simply refusing to engage in what is expected of him. ‘I would prefer not to’, he responds whenever asked to comply with his duties. Žižek champions such a stance as truly radical in that it can be understood to disrupt the recuperative operations of ideology. The difficulty here lies in how exactly we understand this ‘I would prefer not to’. The key lies in appreciating the non-sensical but self-supporting death drive of ideology itself, a death drive in which the subject itself is already implicated. It is in this sense that theory becomes a key weapon in resistance. In order to truly prefer not to, we have to take on board not only the overt dimensions of the system but also its implicit, indissoluble underside. Doing so cannot be reduced to a simple disengagement – which may amount to little more than slavish passivity – but must progress through an analytics of the very subjective position from which it is enounced. Feldner and Vighi articulate this stance through a timely discussion of the current economic situation, arguing that ‘Rather than pathologise the current economic crisis, naturalise the system that gave rise to it and join the paranoic search for scapegoats ... [we should confront] the capitalist form of social reproduction with its symptomal truths’. Only in so doing, can we effectively strive to redefine the coordinates of the debate.

Sharpe’s ‘When the logics of the world collapse’ insists on the need for putting just such an analytics of subjectivity into play within the political domain. He runs together Arendt’s writings on totalitarianism – paying particular attention to her idea that such regimes disenable the public space of shared political experience (or ‘world’) – and Žižek’s often acerbic treatments of the same topic. The lack of a more developed notion of subjectivity in Arendt’s work leads, for Sharpe, to problems in differentiating types of totalitarianism. As Sharpe demonstrates, Žižek’s utilization of Lacan’s theory of the four discourses adds texture to an analysis of the modes of totalitarianism. A greater fluency with ‘the elementary symbolic co-ordinates of human sociability’ means that we are able to avoid the typical conflation of fascism and Stalinism. Whereas, for Žižek, fascism functions as a discourse of the master, entrenching the will of the Leader as ‘Master-signifier’, Stalinism operates – often perversely – according to Lacan’s discourse of the university and via appeals to the Other of historical necessity itself. This framework provides an understanding of how such political

regimes erode the spontaneity of everyday political subjectivity, foreclosing it from public life altogether in Stalinism and locating it solely in the will of the Leader in Fascism. It also allows us to grasp the ‘inmixing’ of *jouissance* and discourse in politics such that we are better placed to understand, in Sharpe’s words, ‘*why* subjects could have so enthusiastically embraced and *acted for* the regimes in question’.

Johnston turns to the core of the question of what constitutes a subject in his discussion of Žižek’s engagement with the neurological work of Antonio Damasio. Crucial to Johnston’s contrasting of Žižek and Damasio is the positing of the emergence of the subject in relation to the ‘natural’ as opposed to the ‘anti-natural’. Johnston’s article raises important issues that take us back to the key question of how it is that – or in relation to what – subjectivity emerges. The apparent paradox here concerns the attempt to disentangle a socially constructed subjectivity and the biological foundation that would anchor or facilitate such a subject. What Damasio’s account of our natural basis misses is that through emergence as a subject, what might have been taken to be natural is thus already effectively denaturalized. Put simply, there is strictly speaking no possibility of conceiving of the ‘natural’ precisely because such a conception would be just that, a conception, a construct, which is what the so-called natural is being posited against. What might be taken to be a pre-socialized, a retro-actively assumed *before* of subjectivity, cannot be conceived (*concipere* – taken in) without being symbolized. There can, that is, be no reference or recourse to a ‘nature’ that precedes symbolic ordering without this reference itself already being shaped in terms of our symbolic order. This is not to say that it does not impact, does not have effect, but rather that it remains excessive, remains of the Real. It is in renewed engagement with this Real excess that the political work of thinking subjectivity must labour, and this is a labour that is very much of the moment, a labour of ongoing debate and re-engagement, a labour that demands a real passion or, in the terms of Žižek’s fellow traveller, Alain Badiou, a passion of the Real.

It is fitting then, that the fifth article in this special issue of *Subjectivity* is a response by Žižek to the preceding four articles. Žižek’s response not only demonstrates a true generosity and passion but, moreover, ensures we turn again to the questions discussed, forcing us to question our very engagement and where we go from here.

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