

# ACT WITHOUT DENIAL

## Slavoj Žižek on Totalitarianism, Revolution and Political Act

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Quel homme sur la terre a jamais défendu  
impunément les droits de l'humanité?  
Robespierre (May 26, 1794)<sup>1</sup>

The difficult decision had to be taken to cause  
this *Volk* disappear from the earth .  
Himmler (October 4, 1943)<sup>2</sup>

In the final section of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Slavoj Žižek analyzes *Big Brother*, the well-known TV-program, and puts it in the context of the more general issue of *reality shows*.<sup>3</sup> In his characteristically direct style, he writes:

So what is so unsettling about 'reality' soaps? The Horror that sensitive souls experience apropos of 'Big Brother' is of the same order as the horror many of us experience at cyberspace Virtual Sex. The hard lesson of Virtual Sex is not that we no longer have 'real sex', intense contact with another person's body, simply a stimulation engendered by substanceless images which bombard us from the screen. Rather, it is the much more uncomfortable discovery that there never was 'real sex': sex was always-already a game sustained by some masturbatory fantasmatic scenario. (Žižek 2001: 251-252)

Such a reversal is typical of Žižek's way of thinking. What we imagine is our most authentic experience – sexual love for example – is found to be lacking in all authenticity. And anyone who thinks Big Brother is a *new* phenomenon, overlooks the Brothers and Fathers of old who are still controlling us and whose control we like more than we admit. The 'authentic' has in fact always been fake, and the fake seems to be the only 'authentic'. This methodical reversal, ending in a paradox is a fundamental strategy of Slavoj Žižek's critical thought.

In what follows, I propose to clarify the Lacanian background of Žižek's paradoxical way of thinking (1). This will enable me to show how Lacan's theory of the subject is an indispensable tool for understanding Žižek's analysis of totalitarianism (2-6), as well as his reflections on politics and, particularly, political acts (7). Finally, we will examine how Žižek develops the abyssal paradox of the political act (8-10).

## 1. Virtual

One of Žižek's major theoretical frames is Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of Freudian psychoanalysis. One of its fundamental theses is the idea that we live not in a *real*, but in a *symbolic* world – in a *virtual* world, so to speak.<sup>4</sup> We deal with things, not *as they are*, but as 'signifiers', as semiotic elements that extract their meaning only in reference to other signifiers. We live in a world where 'alienation' is the normal state of things, a world categorically 'other' than the real world. This is not as tragic as it seems, for it is after all what desire needs most. A world where everything exists only insofar as it refers to something else is the perfect environment for maintaining desire as unsatisfied and therefore *desiring*. Which is, according to Lacan, of vital importance, since we *coincide* with desire. We not only *have* desires; on the most fundamental level, we *are* desire.<sup>5</sup> *Completely* satisfied desire would be death. Although we long for true satisfaction, satisfaction is only possible if it is never complete, never real. We simply cannot live in a 'real' world; as desire, we need a slippery world of signifiers. The world of the real – 'das Ding an sich', as Kant would say – remains perpetually unknown. We are only dealing with an 'unreal', 'virtual' and 'symbolic' world, a world 'castrated' from the real.<sup>6</sup> Even in the intimacy of sexual intercourse, for instance, we deal not with our partner's real essence, but with 'signifiers' that refer endlessly to other signifiers, making us long for our partner without ever *really* reaching him or her. Whatever we do, we remain ensnared within a virtual world of signifiers, in what Lacan calls the 'the Big Other' ('*l'Autre*', with a capital). 'Big Brother' is only one of the latter's specific shapes.

Yet, who are *we* in this virtual world? Lacking any *real* status, are we merely signifiers as well? Here, we confront the fundamental paradox of Lacan's theory of the subject. Although we '*are*' a story made of signifiers, we do not fully coincide with those signifiers. At the most fundamental level, we are merely something that signifiers refer to, yet we do not belong to them *as a signifier*. This is why, at that level, we always remain absent in our own story, although we only exist in and through the story that represents us. Or, as Lacan puts it: the subject who talks about him or herself is, by definition, never the subject that he or she is talking about.<sup>7</sup> The subject of a story is not one of the signifiers *in* the story; it is not a signifier at all, but something which falls outside the signifier's scope, and which only exists insofar as it is *represented* by that story, never being *present* in it.<sup>8</sup>

Note that we have already entered a second-degree virtuality. I not only live in the virtual realm of signifiers; in this realm, my subject is also absent as a signifier. So, the virtual concerns me in a double way: the world in which I live is virtual, and, within that world, I

exist only virtually, i.e. as an absentee, as someone who never will have *really* been present there. A virtual absentee in a virtual world: this is how Lacan defines the subject.

Most Lacanian-orientated critical theories, including Žižek's, use this paradox as the formal scheme for their analyses. First, they reveal reality's virtual – i.e. symbolic – character (reality is never the real objectivity we think it is, but a totality of signifiers invested with libido and desire). And, secondly, they search for its subject that secretly bears the symbolic reality without being a part of it, nor something real *beyond* it (i.e. beyond the signifier). An ideology, a system or a regime will become totalitarian, Žižek will explain, when it denies the virtual character of both its world and its subject. Referring explicitly to Lacanian theory, Žižek recognizes in this denial a 'perverse' logic. The insight in this logic enables him to detect and to unmask the tricks and ruses at work in a totalitarian system.

## **2. From communist 'bad' to nationalist 'worse'**

The reasons why a regime turns into totalitarianism are not to be found in its *real*, but in its *symbolic* dimension. This, for instance, suddenly became clear when the Yugoslavian communist society, once a strong totalitarian power, collapsed in 1989. At that moment, everyone thought that the end of the communist regime would happen almost noiselessly. Had not the system itself almost completely eroded during the eighties? Žižek himself writes how, in these years, the Party recruited new members, not from among those who were fully convinced of communism's truth, but precisely from those who were not (Žižek 2001: 91-92). Of course, they did not take those who were openly dissident. The new candidates, too, were expected to praise the regime's blessings as well as the superiority of the communist doctrine, but they were only admitted when the jury could hear that they 'knew better'. This is only one of numerous indications that show how almost everyone has lost faith in the communist doctrine, even the system's highest leaders. The once so oppressive system itself was now making room for real freedom. At least, this was what everyone expected from a system held up by lies and now collapsing as a tainted pudding. But what happened? The unmasked lies did not make room for long-expected freedom, but for catastrophe and horror. A flood of nationalisms burst out and threw the whole country into a series of wars that lasted more than ten years.

For Žižek, this showed how the Yugoslavian communist system of the late eighties was not held up by means of its real-based veracity, but only by the power of its signifiers, as hollow and empty as they were. The entire system might have become a sham; but this sham

was the only base holding it up. When this web of empty signifiers ended up imploding, and people were supposed to finally become free, they simply became slaves of new signifiers. These signifiers not only sounded as shrill as the earlier ones, they were, if possible, still more empty, more hollow than the previous, communist ones. ‘Nation’, ‘People’ Serbian or Great-Serbian Republic, Croatia, etc.: in the name of these signifiers, people were, even more than before, willing to wage war and sacrifice their lives. Once again, the long-anticipated freedom was out of reach. One empty story had taken the place of another, and, again, pushed freedom aside as a far dream. Or, which is even worse, in the name of the same freedom, the new story screamed for greater, crueler sacrifices. As before, people received slogans screaming about freedom instead of freedom itself. Once more, freedom became mere propaganda, making any free life impossible.

This kind of extreme situation shows that people were, in fact, nothing but ‘*subjects* (bearers) of *signifiers*’. Instead of really being free, they were subjects of – and subjected to – slogans that only told them about freedom. Their freedom was nothing but a story, a discourse made of hollow signifiers. In that sense, it is significant how easily this kind of ‘freedom discourse’ asked people to sacrifice life and freedom in order to realize it. Karadžić was serious when he told his people how free and happy they would be in a future Serbian Bosnia, liberated from all ‘foreigners’ (a few months ago still their neighbors), just as he was serious when, in the same speech to the same people, he told them that they should therefore be willing to sacrifice their freedom and even their lives. Their enthusiasm, their spontaneous attachment to empty signifiers such as ‘freedom’, ‘fatherland’, ‘nation’, their excessive readiness to make sacrifices: all this indicates that their identity consists in being the subject (bearer) of – and being subjected to – ‘virtual’ signifiers. Even death itself could be imagined as a way of realizing freedom. In reality, they are the bearers of a virtual signifier to which they are bound until death, making them in fact completely unfree. Perhaps, there is no better example – however macabre it might be – for illustrating Žižek’s (and Lacan’s) concept of ‘the signifier’s primacy’ (the primacy of the Big Other, of the symbolic order), and the virtual status of the human subject.

### **3. *Repression versus Denial***

The wave of nationalisms that ravaged Ex-Yugoslavia manifests the same totalitarian features as the former Tito-regime, Žižek claims. Can these features be found in the lies and empty slogans characteristic of the nationalists as well? Certainly not. For, as Lacanian theory

claims, reality *always* consists of signifiers that are *as such* completely empty, senseless and without any truth. Every truth-claim is built on a kind of primordial lie (a ‘proton pseudos’) that keeps unsaid that truth rests upon the signifier’s meaningless materiality.<sup>9</sup> This is what every truth-claim unconsciously and necessarily does, totalitarian as well as a democratic. So, the totalitarian character of a regime is not due to the untruth it claims, but to *the way it relates to* this basic lie that truth is based upon. Either this lie is *repressed* or *denied*. A totalitarian discourse *denies* it; a non-totalitarian discourse *represses* it.

The typically Lacanian distinction between (neurotic) *repression* and (perverse) *denial* – or, in Freud’s term, between *Verdrängung* and *Verleugnung* – is crucial here.<sup>10</sup> Claiming that the lie underlying truth is *repressed* implies that this lie nevertheless remains a part of the performed truth discourse. Or, as Freud puts it: the repressed always returns.<sup>11</sup> This is why repression is the way we ‘normally’ – which psychoanalytically equals ‘neurotically’ – deal with truth’s unstable and deceitful ground. Of course, we swear by truth, but do we not often claim a few minutes later that we all have our own truth and that everything is but relative? Even someone who celebrates truth as the most sacred thing on earth, from time to time is grateful for the fact that no truth is immune to criticism, including his or her own. The space that democracy allows for criticism indicates that democracy permits truth’s basic lie to implicitly play a part in it. It is a way of acknowledging truth to be first of all *desire for* truth, and therefore that no claim is ever capable of completely satisfying this desire. When this essential impotence is the drive of our relation to truth, we are dealing with *repression* (*Verdrängung*).

In Lacanian theory, *denial* (the Freudian *Verleugnung*), is a structurally different procedure, typical of *perversion*. Here, the lie underlying truth – or, what amounts to the same thing, the primacy of desire over truth – is disavowed and disclaimed. Truth denies its untruthful ground by explicitly claiming that it has a fully real ground. A Serb is a Serb – to recall only one example – not because he desires to be so (implicitly acknowledging he never really is the Serb he is longing for), but because it is, as he openly claims, his real nature.

The violence at work in the perverse kind of truth-claims is crucial here. Since man is essentially an unsatisfiable desire and therefore marked by radical lack, nothing can take this lack away. Perverse denial cannot do this either. But the pervert can act *as if* this were possible. He can set up a scene where he passes his own lack onto someone else in order to blame him or her for a lack that is in fact his. Then, in his eyes, it is *their* disbelief, *their* criticism or *their* supposed sabotage that keeps his unquestionable truth from being realized.

So as to give his truth the chance it deserves, he imagines that he first of all must attack *them*, and, if necessary, to do away with them.

#### 4. Perversion

In a number of his books, Žižek analyzes this kind of perverse logic that is operating in totalitarian discourses.<sup>12</sup> As an illustration of this, he often refers to the totalitarian apotheosis under Stalin. The communist doctrine of the time taught that the capitalistic exploitation of the proletarians necessarily had to end up in class struggle, which for its own part had to result in the dictatorship of the proletariat and, finally, the installation of a classless society. Well, the October Revolution did bring class struggle, which the proletarians did in fact win, and the installed 'dictatorship of the proletariat' just had to complete the realization of society's classless heaven. But in its place came totalitarian terror. The system's crucial weakness was its incapacity to face its *own* faults and failures. How, despite this rigid logic, could true heaven fail to be realized? How could the socialist prosperity standard not pass the capitalist concurrence? How could poverty, social inequality, corruption, favoritism, and all other diseases of the old bourgeois society still be the order of the day in a communist community?

Confronting such mistakes, the system had no other reaction than to blame others. *Others* were blocking the progress; *others* kept poverty and inequality up, *others* conspired against the communist project. It was all *enemies of the people's* work, and the thing now was to unmask these enemies, to disarm and even to eliminate them. Of course, these 'others' were to be found among the capitalist nations, fearing the threat of proletarian revolution. But increasingly, the regime focused on the 'enemies' operating *within* its own borders. Being invisible, these enemies were even more dangerous, and the arrears that communism had fallen into were basically the result of their subversive sabotages.

This perverse logic penetrated into the smallest segments of the entire Soviet society, giving it its 'totalitarian' character. Anyone anytime could be accused of being 'the people's enemy'. It was enough to say or do something that was not completely in conformity with the official truth. And since no word and no deed is ever *completely* in conformity with it, literally every act and everyone became suspect. The most insignificant gesture could be interpreted as high treason. Drinking vodka on an early spring day, while everywhere around communism was endangered, could be taken for a sign of indifference, or even hostility to the communist project. The slightest critique could be understood as a failure to believe in the unshakable truth of communism and, therefore, one of the sources of its failures. Thus, critique

of the system became the very cause of what was criticized. The system could immediately blame the critic as one of the main sources of its crisis.

This kind of *argumenta ad hominem* is typical of the perverse, double bind logic of a totalitarian system. In such a system, every mistake is immediately *my* – or *yours, his, her* or *their* fault, simply because *I, you, he, she, they* never completely coincide with the *we* of communist society. Already the fact that I take a position different from that of society's totality (and can I ever take another position?), can logically be interpreted as high treason. Each *singular* attitude, each *single* word, each one's *singularity*: all are suspect because they forgo the communist 'we'. Moreover, not only am I suspect in what *I* do or say, I am also suspect in how responsible I feel for what *others* do or say. This is why I must control them, for I can be considered guilty of the mistakes they make. The simplest word or act of the other can always be seen as suspect – which gives me the opportunity (and maybe the *only* opportunity) to show my fidelity to the Party. And if my neighbor apparently dislikes me doing this, or even when he does not show full enthusiasm for my control, I can – and must – interpret it as a sign that he is probably guilty. In fact, blaming the other is the only way for me to escape being blamed of being myself unfaithful to communism's truth.

Here, Žižek refers to Robespierre who, in the high days of *La Terreur* (1793/94) showed the *Assemblée* a little handwritten notebook that contained, so he said, the names of all traitors. And he adds, "if anyone in this room now fears that his name is in this booklet, this very fear is an irrefutable proof that he is a traitor" (Žižek, 2001: 236).<sup>13</sup> When dominant, this kind of logic turns the entire society into a paranoid web of telltales who all are always in the right. Social life turns into a real witch-hunt where everyone constantly prosecutes everyone else in the name of an unshakable truth.

It is now clear that truth only exists 'symbolically' – i.e. as story, as signifier – and that 'man', being the subject of that story, literally falls outside its scope. Totalitarian logic denies both of these aspects. It not only denies that its doctrine is based upon signifiers (and not upon *real* reality), it denies its subject as well, i.e. the 'bearer' upon which these signifiers take place without being itself a signifier. There, on that precise point, one should locate 'man' as the subject of the symbolic order – in this case, of communism. But totalitarian logic denies this point; it literally shut the subject out, and sacrificed it in a cruel kind of 'enjoyment'. This is what happened in the GULag.<sup>14</sup> There, precisely the best communists, i.e. those who bore the revolution from the very beginning, were shut out.

The GULag was indeed the system's 'enjoyment', its '*jouissance*' in the Lacanian sense of the word.<sup>15</sup> There, the system imagined it was taking the last step *before* enjoying its

final actualization, not realizing that this cruel action itself was its very enjoyment, and more precisely, its *perverse* enjoyment. ‘There is still a little effort to make, we just have to destroy the last ‘enemies’, and then, finally, perfect communist society will be reality’, so the system’s leaders claimed. But they did not notice that this destruction was the only way left to keep the *desire* of the system going, and to prevent its indispensable lack from disappearing. According to Lacan, libidinal satisfaction does not imply that this lack disappears or that desire ‘extinguishes’ it. In *jouissance*, both remain, but the subject feels *as if* the lack has disappeared and desire extinguished. For, in this moment of satisfaction, it ‘fades’ in its very quality of subject. ‘Enjoyment’ (*jouissance*) is a feeling of entire satisfaction without a subject being able to live it knowingly, as Lacan’s definition puts it (Lacan 1966: 821). This is why, in the very moment of *jouissance*, no one is really able to be *present*. One can long for it, one can remember it; but, while enjoying, one can never say consciously ‘*now, I am enjoying*’. *Jouissance* implies a “fading of the subject”.<sup>16</sup> At that moment, the whole libidinal system is only supported by desire’s ultimate ‘object’, conceptualized as the ‘object a’ or ‘the Thing’ (*das Ding*).<sup>17</sup> In the normal, neurotic situation, this fading of the subject in ‘the Thing’ is repressed (*Verdrängung*). We repress that we are not able to be present in our *jouissance*: we, in a way, ‘know’ this and we suffer from it; but we are never really fixed on it, and most of the time forget it.

The pervert, however, is always fixed on it, and can never forget it. He cannot stand his fading away in his moments of enjoyment; he cannot tolerate that he coincides with the very lack in his *jouissance* (as well as with the lack in his desire). This is why he transfers this lack onto others in order to deny it with them.<sup>18</sup> By torturing the other, the sadist (as one of the figures of perversion) transfers his *own* lack literally onto the other’s body where he, precisely, denies that very lack. The other has become part of a scene showing him the very absence of lack or desire, i.e. the very absence of what makes full satisfaction impossible (the absence, for example, of rules and laws prohibiting all *jouissance*). In that cruel scene, the sadist ‘sees’ the other enjoying beyond any lack, desire, pain, death, law and rule. This is the pervert’s way of enjoying, as well as his proof that enjoyment is real, i.e. that it is *really* beyond any lack, desire or law.

The same way, the GULag ‘proved’ the Soviet system as being without any lack. Unable to acknowledge its lack, unable even to neurotically repress it, the system was obliged to *perversely* deny it: it built up a scene where the lack was literally transferred onto others (this happened quasi-ritual of the infamous ‘show trials’ of the thirties), and where those others, now the bearers of that lack, were sacrificed. This way, the system imagined is was

being purified, while in fact, it was ‘enjoying’: it was fading its subject, not in a symbolic, but in a *real* way. It burned the best of its communists, those who formed the most excellent ‘bearers’ of the system. No wonder that, in the long run, the system was fatally on the way to self-destruction.

From this perspective, Stalin’s role in this logic of terror was as much to moderate as to stimulate it. At any rate, this logic was not *his* invention; it was an effect of communism’s absolute truth-claim. Stalin only ‘managed’ it, and benefitted from it.<sup>19</sup> In a way, his main preoccupation was to prevent this logic from going all the way to the end. For this would result in the suicide of the Party, and even of the entire society. *Not one* single communist was exactly the communist that the doctrine says he should be. So, logically, a radical purging should send *all* communists to the GULag. If only because of the approaching war with Nazi-Germany, Stalin had to moderate the ‘great purges’ of the thirties.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. “(Laughter)”

“When the Party Commits Suicide”, the third chapter of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, explicitly goes into Soviet totalitarian logic.<sup>21</sup> There, Žižek focuses on the Bukharin trial – Bukharin being one of the first ‘bearers’ of the revolution who, in 1937, was condemned for entirely false and fictitious reasons. This trial is an excellent example of what ‘denying the subject’ means.

Žižek analyzes Bukharin’s final confrontation with the Central Committee, 1937 February 23. Two day before<sup>22</sup>, the former member of the Politburo had announced a hunger strike in protest against the unjust charges brought against him. In addition, he explicitly asked that only the sitting members of the Committee – and not the entire Party – should be briefed about his initiative. During the confrontation, Bukharin honestly tells the Committee about his difficult decision. He absolutely cannot agree with the false accusations and, therefore, *must* give an ultimate sign of protest. But, at the same time, he clearly wants the Party not to be responsible for his innocent death. This is why he refuses to commit suicide and prefers a hunger strike, so “I die, as it were, from illness”, he literally says.<sup>23</sup> In short, the problem Bukharin discusses with the Committee is basically a personal one: although he does not agree with the wrong the Party did to him, he nonetheless wants to remain totally loyal to that same Party.

In this sense, his problem is literally that of the subject. All humiliations notwithstanding, he still feels fully responsible for the Party, and wants to remain its ‘bearer’,

its 'subject'. But at the same time, he realizes that, despite his total loyalty, he is not completely swallowed up by the Party. He reserves a place, however virtual that place may be, *outside* of it. This is what he wants the Party to recognize, and to acknowledge that unconditional devotion cannot be automatically assumed and that anyone who is so it deserves appreciation. Bukharin is willing to openly sacrifice his life for the Party, even when all accusations against him are false. Except, he wants the members of the Central Committee, maybe not to appreciate it, but at least to recognize it. He is willing to give up his subject-position, but he wants to be recognized in doing this. He explicitly asks his 'comrades' to at least not deny *this*. And it is precisely this that they will deny him.

In Bukharin's confrontation with the Central Committee, this denial took the form of almost anonymous and annihilating laughter. At a certain moment, as one can read in the record, Stalin's sarcastic reaction even aggravates the effect:

Bukharin: I won't shoot myself because then people will say that I killed myself so as to harm the party. But if I die, as it were, from an illness, then what will you lose by it? (Laughter)

Voices: Blackmailer!

Voroshilov: You scoundrel! Keep your trap shut! How vile! How dare you speak like that!

Bukharin: But you must understand – it's very hard for me to go on living.

Stalin: And it's easy for us?!

Voroshilov: Did you hear that: 'I won't shoot myself, but I will die'?!

Bukharin: It's easy for you to talk about me. What will you then lose, after all? Look, if I am a saboteur, a son of a bitch, than why spare me? I make no claims to anything. I am just describing what's on my mind, what I am going through. If this in any way entails any political damage, however minute, then, no question about it, I'll do whatever you say. (Laughter.) Why are you laughing? There is absolutely nothing funny about any of this ... (Žižek, 2001: 102-103; Getty & Naumov 1999: 370)

Bukharin refuses the full confession that the Party forces him to make, but neither does he want any damage to occur to the Party – and to Communism in general. He wants to do what he is asked to do, i.e. to disappear, to be sacrificed; but he asks the Party to know and to acknowledge that he does this of his own free will. Months later, when, under pressure, he finally signed a (false) confession of guilt, he writes Stalin a painfully touching letter, asking him once again the same thing (Žižek, 2001: 106-107). He agrees to Stalin condemning him in order to not blame the Party; he is happy to be sacrificed in favor of the objective truth of the communist paradise; but the only thing he asks is that 'Koba' (Stalin), his old comrade – entirely secretly, with no one else noticing it – be so kind as to recognize the moral greatness of his act (his sacrifice). And it is precisely this that Stalin and any of the old comrades refuse

to do. They are only able to *deny* Bukharin's most human demand, and to laugh it away. For this is what the Party's totalitarian logic wants: for the accused to completely fade away underneath his accusations, *even in his quality of 'subject'*. His sacrifice to the Party must be total: he is not even allowed to be the subject of his own self-sacrifice. This is how the Party lies to itself and presumes that it is *itself* its own 'subject'.

## 6. The subject of a totalitarian system

Bukharin's request for subjective recognition is at the same time a request to acknowledge the true subject of communism. For this subject is not communism itself but the mass of 'concrete' communists, i.e. each communist insofar as he does not coincide with the signifiers that 'make' him. According to Žižek's Lacanian 'grammar', communism *an sich* is a symbolic system, a set of signifiers not resting in itself (or, which amounts to the same thing, not being its own subject). Its subject – i.e. the place where this symbolic system 'takes place', where it has its 'ground' – is not itself symbolic. It is the very lack in the symbolic system.<sup>24</sup> There, we have to locate man as subject of a symbolic order, Lacan claims.

However, man does not rest in himself either, nor is he his own subject. He has no ground or consistency in himself, for his whole consistency is due to the symbolic system of which he is the subject. So, paradoxically, being himself a lack (a lack of being<sup>25</sup>), man has to be the subject of the symbolic system at the very place where this system has its lack. That is why, being subject (bearer) of that system, man *disturbs* at the same time the system's very consistence. Constructing the system, the subject at the same time *deconstructs* it. The system thus rests in its lack, and man, located in that lack, both fill up this lack *and keeps it open*. This is how the system's *desire* is kept going. And, as Lacan emphasizes again and again, desire is the basic drive of human reality – including communism. Insofar as no communist totally conforms to it, communism keeps alive, remains an open system, i.e. a reality in which desire can flourish. This is the only way a system can give room to desire or, which amount to the same thing, to human life (human life and desire being synonyms according to Lacanian theory).

Here we find the structural locus of the subject: we participate in a system as if we do not belong to it, as if we are located outside it and, precisely in this quality, we are the system's subject.<sup>26</sup> A system becomes totalitarian when it denies this locus, this 'outside' as its very subject.

However, this denial at the same time betrays this locus/subject. Consider for instance the uncanny feeling of solidarity in Soviet society during Stalinist Terror. It was due to the fact that everyone, apparently obeying communist law, was secretly in fact taking a ‘criminal’ position *outside* it. Almost everyone had falsely betrayed someone, or had at least told compromising lies about some of his friends or relatives. Enforced public confessions had deprived many people of self-respect. In one way or another, everybody had violated the most basic social and moral laws; and this precisely in order to express their fidelity to the most ideal society ever. Everyone appeared to do what he or she was told to do, while terror made them do their duty from a ‘criminal’ position outside any law. Except that they constantly denied this position – a common denial that made them feel even more guilty and, therefore, still more bound to one another. Stalinist Terror made any normal social life impossible, while in a way social cohesion was never stronger than during these years. While nobody remained uninfected with the perfidious virus of terror, everybody was obliged to act *as if* there was no virus at all, as if everyone, while executing the most awful terror, simply was doing his daily duty.

This perverse kind of duty is also at work in the other well-known totalitarian system, Nazism. Of course, the leaders of the ‘Endlösung’ knew very well that the ‘work’ to be done in the extermination camp was emotionally extremely hard, but the SS-men in charge should never forget that this was a job required by Nature itself. The Jewish race was a ‘mistake’ within Nature, and it was Nature itself that commanded a ‘final solution’. Moreover, these SS-men should realize that, fortunately, it is the Germans who do the job, as the Nazi-leaders added. For Germans consider it their sacred duty, while other, lower races would consider it as an invitation to sadism and cruelty. Only Aryan Germans are civilized enough or – which, according to Nazi-ideology amounts to the same thing – racially pure enough to worthily fulfill Nature’s own assignment.<sup>27</sup>

All this painfully illustrates what the ‘denial of the subject’ is about. What is denied here is the fact that the anti-Semite doctrine is ‘borne’ by these SS-men and by the Germans in general; that the fascist truth only exists because of the people who believe in it. According to Himmler, the SS-leader, he as along with his SS-men and the entire Nazi-project was nothing more than an *instrument* in the hands of truth – a truth which, in his eyes, coincided with Nature. It is not he who is acting, nor his soldiers: through them, Nature is acting. They are simply Nature’s assistants. They believe that the bearer – the subject – of their truth is to be found in that very truth itself and that they are only truth’s servants. In their eyes, truth is ‘total’ and man must primordially be considered as belonging to this totality.

This approach is totalitarian, for it denies that man by definition does *not* entirely belong to that totality. It is blind to the fact that man strictly never belongs to the truth he claims.<sup>28</sup> Truth exists only insofar as it is supported or borne by man. The place where truth ‘occurs’, where it ‘takes place’, where it finds a ‘bearer’ or a subject: this place is called ‘man’.

Does this mean that, because he is a subject, man can promote whatever he wants as truth? This question presupposes the old, Cartesian idea defining the subject as a substance resting on its own – the subject as a self-assured position facing the world as an object delivered to his free will. Here, Žižek’s Lacanian theory breaks with Descartes. Man is not a substance resting on itself; he is entirely the product and the effect of the world he is living in. Only, this world is a world of signifiers functioning by means of a fundamental lack. This world rests on its lack or, so to say, on its lack of rest. And at the very locus of that lack, the ‘unrest named man’ takes his seat. It is in that sense that man is to be defined as subject: not subject of himself (as Descartes would say), but subject of the world of signifiers he lives in.

World, history, truth: all this has a certain autonomy, and man is more its effect than its author. However, world, history and truth ‘take place’ at the very place where their autonomy ends or fails. That place is man’s locus. In a way, it is his definition. This is why he often rebels against his own realizations or creations. In the final analysis, he is that piece of resistance against all there is. Somehow, he remains alien to the totality he nonetheless lives on. The twentieth century’s totalitarian regimes all made frenetic attempts to fight that ‘alienation’, to break that resistance, and to reconcile man with his ‘true’ sociability. In a way, their failure shows that alienation and resistance are man’s very ‘essence’, or, more precisely, that by definition, he resists any presumed ‘essence’.

## **7. Subject of a revolution**

A totalitarian system denies its own subject; it refuses to see that it rests upon its own lack, its own radical alienation. This is why it denies the *revolution* that it comes of as well. Here again, Žižek refers to the history of Soviet-communism, and now analyzes Lenin’s decisive intervention in the Russian Revolution (Žižek, 2001: 114-117). It is he who, in October 1917, turned the diffuse revolutionary atmosphere of that year into a univocal coup d’état. He took the decision at the moment he and his Bolsheviks broke definitively with the Mensheviks, i.e. the opposition within the socialist movement of that time. Being advocates of a proletarian revolution too, they were in a way more orthodox Marxist than Lenin. Marxist theory had

discovered the objective lines in history, and taught that a socialist revolution could only be successful *after* a democratic one. This is why the Mensheviks did not abhor a certain rapprochement with the ‘bourgeois’ social democrats. Nor did Lenin have any doubts about Marxist theory and he too believed in history’s ‘objective’ line of progression. Yet, at a certain moment he nonetheless deliberately intervened in it. Fully understanding that a proletarian revolution was indeed premature (and, thus, fully aware of Marxist theory’s truth), he nonetheless started the proletarian revolution. ‘History’, so he said, ‘will never forgive us if we do not take the power right now’.

Here, Lenin shows his understanding of history’s real subject, as Žižek interprets it. This is not to be found *within* the objective line that Marxist theory ascribes to history, but precisely in a point *outside* this line. This is the point where history ‘occurs’, where its signifiers ‘take place’, i.e. where they deliver themselves to contingency, to brutal occurrence – to what Lukács would call ‘Augenblick’, and Badiou ‘événement’ (Žižek, 2001: 117).<sup>29</sup> Assuming this formally negative point, one is able, not to create new history ‘ex nihilo’, but to rearrange and reorient history’s existing co-ordinates. When a political constellation is looked at *awry*<sup>30</sup> and tackled from that point, revolution is at hand. Yet, revolution occurs when some individuals – or even a single one – take the risk of jumping into that empty point and consciously assuming history’s contingency. This is what Žižek calls an ‘act’: a jump beyond the symbolic order, beyond the signifier’s security. This is why he defines it as a jump into the ‘real’, or, referring to some of Lacan’s concepts for the real, a jump into ‘the Thing’ (*das Ding, objet petit a*).<sup>31</sup> Unlike totalitarian denial, the revolutionary act acknowledges contingency – and thus lack, subject and desire. An act is not truth’s implementation; rather, it leaves all truth behind and delivers it to contingency, with is the only way to make it *really* happen.

This is the decisive distinction between Lenin and Stalin, Žižek argues. The latter swore by the truth, and was, therefore, forced to deny truth’s contingent ground – its subject. Lenin also held onto truth – the same truth as Stalin’s – but he did not swear by it. He passed into action and, so, handed truth over to its contingent ‘bearer’. This was the only way of realizing the truth.

Žižek does not recoil from relating our time to Stalin rather than to Lenin. Of course, we no longer adhere to Stalinist doctrines, nor do we suffer under a similar terror, but our post-modern certainties – those that tell us there are no certainties – nestle just as much in their own pretensions. Although it considers every ideological battle over, it nonetheless shamelessly functions as a real ideology, and holds each revolutionary élan or truly political

act at a great distance. The consequences are even no less drastic as in Stalinist times, except that, seated at the rich Western table as we are, we never feel it that way. We leave that feeling to our fellow world-citizens in the ‘South’. They personally experience what it means to live in a so-called post-revolutionary world, freed from all ideology. In other words, they feel directly how the one and only dominant capitalist ideology maintains its totalitarian grip on the whole planet, and how terribly difficult – if not simply impossible – it is not to become the victim of its perverse tricks and ruses.

This is what Žižek has in mind when, in one of his essays, he makes a ‘plea for intolerance’.<sup>32</sup> Our world-wide *depoliticized* ideology of tolerance requires a *repolitization*. This is why a rehabilitation of Marxist theory is so welcome. It is an indispensable tool for analyzing and critiquing current world capitalism. For capitalism, too, must be confronted with its ‘subject’, i.e. with what escapes from its grip. This subject is nothing other than the slaughtered economies in the ‘South’. Opting for a mondial, universal culture therefore equals showing partiality, i.e. siding with its victims, Žižek claims. To his mind, we are far from being beyond the age of revolutions. On the contrary, it is precisely our current ‘Stalinist’ times that need revolution, and in that sense require a return to Lenin, or even a ‘repetition of Lenin’ – to refer to one of his essays.<sup>33</sup> Mondial capitalism’s ‘arrivism’ demands revolutionary inventions, for only these can keep it from denying its subject.

## 8. Antigone revisited

However, is the distance between the subject of revolution and the subject of a totalitarian system really all that great? Do they not both concern the same ‘lack’? For this is what revolution as well as totalitarianism rests on. Yes, but each possesses a different relation to this lack/subject. While a revolutionary act fully *acknowledges* it, totalitarianism (despite its monolithic ‘revolutionary rhetoric’) *denies* it.

However, is the conceptual difference between acknowledging and denying so tenable, especially concerning a revolutionary act? Recognizing the lack, an act is supposed to blindly jump into it and leave all truth behind. However, is such a jump possible without holding on, in a quasi-totalitarian way, to the pretended truth of that gesture? When Lenin’s act started the revolution, was he able to leave his truth behind without secretly believing that this was the precise way of making it come through, of turning it into reality? Was it not that he was able to make a jump into the lack, precisely because he already *knew* his truth required this? And is this not a perfect way of denying truth’s lack? Is this not the trickiest kind of denial of all, and

thus a perfect and a perfectly totalitarian one? In other words, is every act inherently totalitarian?

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Žižek raises this question himself. Reflecting on Antigone – who, in his eyes, performs an archetypical example of political act – he literally asks if she is “not a proto-totalitarian figure” (Žižek 2001: 157). First of all, Žižek argues, she certainly is a *revolutionary* figure. Illegally burying the dead body of her politically incorrect brother (Polynices had waged war against the city), she shakes the coordinates of the existing system, and, aware of the death-sentence this will result in, she clearly performs an act in the Žižekian sense of the word. It is a real jump into Nothing, i.e. into the non-recognized void the system rests on. In her eyes, her brother’s dead body represents the lack in Kreon’s official Law. And while totalitarian Kreon denies that lack, Antigone acknowledges it by jumping into it. This is her way of confronting the existing system with its own lack, the very lack it is grounded upon. In other words, she forces the system to stop denying its ‘subject’.

Here, Žižek raises the question of whether her act is not “proto-totalitarian”. Pointing out the gap (the subject) in Kreon’s law, her act nonetheless seems immediately to fill up this gap, if only because of the unconditional way she takes her position on its place. What is more, taking this position is not so much *her* decision; it is the decision of the “other within her”. The act is so blind, because *another* decided in her place. She acts as if she is only the instrument of an autonomous “other” operating independently from her. The act’s absolute autonomy coincides with its absolute necessity. Are we not approaching intolerably near to the perverse totalitarian logic we heard from Himmler and Stalin. They, too, demanded that we act not for ourselves but to obey the ‘other inside us, which in their case was, respectively, racial nature or history’s objective logic. No wonder, Žižek suggests, her act looks so merciless, so inhuman, even “monstrous” (Žižek, 2001: 163). Fully recognizing the lack within the existing law, Antigone’s revolutionary act implies at the same time the denial of that lack. An anti-totalitarian acknowledgment seems to coincide with a totalitarian denial.

This – and in fact the entire issue of the act – is one of the main problems that Žižek’s thought constantly circles around without ever finding a satisfying solution. So, let us now have a closer look at the act and, more precisely, the way Žižek’s theory connects the act with the problem of the subject.

## 9. Act & subject ...

As we already know, an act is defined as an affirmation of the *'historicity'* in which a given symbolic order is founded. No order is unchangeably definite. An order – an ethical, political, cultural order – is finite, and therefore 'happens' as an 'event. It is never definitely what it is; it occurs, as it were, each time as something different. History should not be seen as the continuous evolution, but as a discontinuous series of events – events in which precisely the logic of evolution is broken each time and in which things happen "ex nihilo". An act is "an intervention *ex nihilo*" (Žižek, 2001a: 178) and, in this quality, it is an affirmation of an event. This is why an act is by definition revolutionary. In an authentic act, one breaks an evolution, and establishes the event of what happens as new, as radically other.<sup>34</sup> It endorses the revolution in which the world (i.e. the symbolic order as historic entity) is grounded.

So, an act not only makes use of the inconsistency of the symbolic order. An act *has* to do so, or, more precisely, we have to perform acts so as to be faithful to the world in which we live. Our world is profoundly historical and finite, and thus changeable. Therefore, man *has* to perform acts, in order to affirm the historicity – the changeability – of his world. To be in conformity with the world, man *actively* has to change it. He has to follow the changes by which the world, each time in a different way, occurs. And because these changes can only be revolutionary, his acts must be so as well. That is why, once again, at the most fundamental level, politics is revolutionary. At this level, politics is not to be reduced to 'Realpolitik', nor is it merely a question of democratic rules and formal procedures: it is a question of acts that suspend all rules and procedures, including the democratic ones.<sup>35</sup>

An act is a jump into the Thing, i.e. a jump into the inconsistency of the symbolic order, into the negative soil – the lack or the void – upon which our world is built. But it is not only a jump *into* it. It is at the same time a jump *out of* it. It is (as already cited) an "intervention *EX nihilo*". It is a creation 'from nothing'; it creates something radically new. It is both a jump *into* and a creation *from* the 'nihilo' in which our world is grounded. To my mind, this double sense – which is not without ambiguity – is the crucial point around which Žižek's theory of the act turns. More precisely, does this double sense mobilize the problem of how we should consider the subject of an act?

In any event, this subject is *not* the one that jumps into the Thing. This kind of subject, the subject in the normal Lacanian sense of the word, is precisely that which an act leaves behind. Ordinarily, man is subject – 'subjectum', 'support', 'bearer', 'ground' – of a set of signifiers having their origin in the Other and its desire. In a 'full word' (this is usually translated as "full speech") (*'une parole pleine'*), one is able to assume that he or she is the bearer (subject)

of the desire of the other. In an act, this subject is left behind.<sup>36</sup> At the end of *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek writes:

If there is a subject to the act, it is not the subject of subjectivization, of integrating the act into the universe of symbolic integration and recognition, of assuming the act as ‘my own’, but rather an uncanny, ‘acephalous’ subject through which the act takes place as which is ‘in him more than himself’ [one of Lacan’s formulation of *das Ding* or *object a*<sup>37</sup>].<sup>38</sup>

While directly taking the place of *das Ding* (‘the Thing’ of *object a*, i.e. the object beyond the symbolic order), the ‘normal’ subject has ‘lost his head’. A few lines further, it seems to have lost its *Ding* (its *object a*) as well. Yet, the conclusion Žižek draws from this can easily be misunderstood:

In the act, the subject, as Lacan puts it, *posits himself as his own cause*, and is no longer determined by the decentred object-cause. (Žižek, 1999: 375).

Here, the subject is said to have become “his own cause”. Does this mean that it has become totally free, that it is not only no longer determined by the signifier of which it is the ‘bearer’, but that it is no longer even determined by its ‘*objet cause du désir*’, i.e. by its *Ding*? Does the subject, after losing its head and its *Ding*, really cause itself now? Yes, but only insofar as there is no longer any ‘self’ to assume the ‘acephalous’ subject. The subject of the act has, in a sense, become the ‘event’ itself. Or, as Žižek puts it a few lines back, referring to the Greek (Aristotelean) term for ‘event’, *tuche*:

the act in its traumatic *tuche* is that which divides the subject who can never subjectivize it, assume it as ‘his own’, posit himself as its author-agent (Žižek, 1999: 374).

It causes itself insofar as it causes nothing, insofar as its act is mere passivity. Or, as he puts it in the following page:

the act is precisely something which unexpectedly ‘just occurs’, it is an occurrence which also (and even most) surprises its agent itself (after an authentic act, my reaction is always ‘Even I don’t know how I was able to do that, it just happened!’). The paradox is thus that, in an authentic act, the highest freedom coincides with the utmost passivity, with a reduction to a lifeless automaton who blindly performs its gestures. (Žižek, 1999: 375)

So, not unlike in '*jouissance*', the subject of an act is nothing but the radical absence of the subject. However, in '*jouissance*', the fading subject is still supported by an imaginary scenario of signifiers, its fantasy (its '*fantasme*', in the 'technical sense Lacan gave this term'<sup>39</sup>). In an act, such support is lacking. Literally, *no one* and *nothing* is acting. What acts is mere passivity.

Nevertheless, it is not an abstract 'nothing' so to speak, that supports the act. It is rather dangerously concrete. It is what an act concretely has to destroy in order to be an act. When the act is a revolution (and revolution is the act par excellence, he writes in the same essay [Žižek 1999: 377]), its subject has to be defined as 'its children eaten by it'. A few pages further, Žižek writes:

A revolution is achieved [...] when it 'eats its own children', the excess that was necessary to set it in motion. In other words, the ultimate revolutionary ethical stance is not that of simple devotion and fidelity to the Revolution but, rather, that of willingly accepting the role of 'vanishing mediator', of the excessive executioner to be executed ('as a traitor') so that the Revolution can achieve its ultimate goal. (Žižek, 1999: 379)

In the psychoanalytic cure, the patient finds 'him- or herself', i.e. his or her 'subject', at the end of a long process. So, too, does the act find its 'subject' only at the end of its process, i.e. when it realizes it has eaten "its own children", its subject. *The subject of an act is what the act, while acting, is eating.*

Now it becomes clear why "there is nonetheless something inherently 'terroristic' in every authentic act", as Žižek puts it a few pages earlier (Žižek, 1999: 377). In fact, terror seems to be the proper subject of the act. The act rests upon its own radical negativity, upon what the act itself destroys, on what it is 'eating up'. But it now also becomes clear why such a subject can "never subjectivize it[self], assume it[self] as 'his own'; why it cannot posit himself as its author-agent" (as cited above). For, if its subject appropriates the inherent terror of an act, it leaps into a perverse position and becomes a real terrorist.

In *perversion*, the impossibility of assuming the divided (finite, impossible) subject I am, is imaginarily handed over to the other, and there, in the other, denied. In sadism, I transfer my own impossibility (my finitude, my symbolic castration) literally to the other in the shape of pain and torture, which there, in the other, I deny. I behave as if the pain I do to the other is mere 'enjoyment' ('*jouissance*'). I torture him or her precisely to 'see' how human being is not marked by lack and desire (because even not marked by pain or death), but seems, on the contrary, able to experience *real* 'enjoyment'.

The same logic is at work in totalitarianism. There, too, the inconsistency of the system (its lack, its symbolic castration, its impossibility to become *really* what it desires to be) is handed over to the ‘other’ – for example, to ‘the enemies of the people’ – and by punishing or destroying the ‘other’, the totalitarian leaders believe they keep the system clean. In fact, they will have to find – or invent – new ‘enemies of the people’ again and again, because the lack (the impossibility, the ‘otherness’) hindering the system from really becoming what it is, cannot be destroyed but only denied. While fighting against the lacks in the system, the executors of this ‘purification’ are nothing but the instrument of the system’s enjoyment (which, for Lacan, is the definition of a *perverse* enjoyment<sup>40</sup>). The system itself is founded in that very lack; it is its ‘ground’, its ‘subject’. The expressed terror is nothing else than a way of denying the system’s subject. Or, more precisely, the actual totalitarian terror is the denying of the *fundamental* ‘terror’ (its impossibility, its lack, its inconsistency) upon which the system is built.

An act is a jump into the brutal negativity (the ‘terror’), upon which a symbolic system is built; yet, an act can only be authentic when it does *not* subjectivize this terrifying negativity. Or, to put it in terms of the paradox Žižekian theory is leading towards: an act can only be authentic when it does not subjectivize its own ‘subject’. Only then can the act be the “«good terror»” Žižek is searching for. For the ultimate horizon of current politics is not ‘discourse’ and signifier – and therefore democracy – but the act that jumps beyond discourse and signifier: this is the “good terror” of the act. In *The Ticklish Subject*, he writes: <sup>41</sup>

no, Liberal Democracy is not our ultimate horizon; uneasy as it may sound, the horrible experience of the Stalinist political terror should *not* lead us into abandoning the principle of terror itself – one should search even more stringently for the good ‘terror’. (Žižek, 1999: 378)

However, it remains quite difficult –for Žižek too – to correctly conceptualize the “good terror” an act has to perform. For what does it mean to perform an act without subjectivizing it? If I do so, don’t I rather perform an *inauthentic* act, in which *anything* can be done, in other words, an act opening to the wildest arbitrariness? But what is an authentic act, if it lacks any ‘autos’, any ‘self’? In other words, when it is in no way *mine*? What is an act, if it is mere passivity? How can one avoid, in that case, becoming the instrument of the Other and, thus, of his *jouissance* (of the enjoyment of the system, the leading ideology, the supposed objective truth of history)? For in that case, I will have made myself the servant of the perverse logic described above. Thus, even when I do not subjectivize the act I am performing, I still

threaten to fall into the trap of perversion and to become the instrument of the ‘enjoyment’ of the big Other.

There is still another question that is to be raised here. If the political is ultimately based upon the radicalism of a desubjectivized ‘act’, how will it, subsequently (after the revolution), be possible to ‘claim’ such an act? How can it claim its founding act, without subjectivizing the act and its ‘terror’? On the one hand, the political system necessarily has to refer to this act in order to legitimize itself, but, on the other, when it does so, it threatens to subjectivize the ‘terror’, upon which the act rests. Again the risk of falling into the totalitarian trap is not far away.

In short, how can such a subtle kind of ‘act’ function as the paradigm or the horizon for a global political theory?

## 10. ...& object

Perhaps these questions will become a little less enigmatic if we consider the problem of the act’s subject in relation to its ‘object’. Certainly, the act has, in a sense, left its object behind as well. Like the subject, the object also disappears in the jump of the ‘act’. However, the object still marks the place where the act is to be located. The act is a jump into the object (the Thing), i.e. into that which always already has dropped out from the Other (the symbolic order). For the ultimate object of desire is an object, which the Other – the system, the ideology, the society, et cetera – has originally locked out in order to keep desire going. Jumping into its radically negative object, an act jumps into – so to say – the ‘*objectal*’ negativity of a symbolic order. The act hands the subject over to the ‘nothing’ expelled by the existing order. Antigone’s act is a choice, not so much for an abstract negativity, but for that which the prevailing law has declared as being nothing. This is why her act, which takes a step *beyond* the symbolic order, is nevertheless entirely embedded *within* this order. Particularly for this reason, her act – as well as any act – is by definition *political*.

To explain this, Žižek refers in some of his essays to a central notion in the work of Jacques Rancière: “*le singulier universel*” (“the universal singular”).<sup>42</sup> According to Rancière, the political made its appearance from the moment that, in Ancient Greece, the mass of ordinary people, the ‘*demos*’, which at that time was politically ‘nothing’, proclaimed themselves to be the true ‘polis’, the real people. The ‘*demos*, the “part of no part” (Žižek 1999: 189), declared itself the true name for all parts, for the whole of the community. The ‘object’ expelled from the political became the political itself. The singular claimed to express

the true universal. This political ‘act’ turned the existing system upside down and created a new one. According to Rancière, it created politics *as such*.

In the same way, the dissident ‘forums’ in the former DDR “proclaimed themselves representative of the entire society against the Party *nomenklatura*”, or, during the French Revolution, “*le troisième état* proclaimed itself identical to the Nation as such, against the aristocracy and the clergy” (Žižek, 1999: 188). Note that the Athenian ‘*demos*’, the East-German ‘*forums*’ or the French *third estate* did not so much assert their own rights as they have claimed *universal* rights. It is the universality of this claim made by a singular “part of no parts” that makes this act a political one. In this sense, Antigone’s act is political, not because she jumped in the nothingness of her singular, ‘bad’ dead brother, but because she claims a truth concerning the universal law in force.

But does such ‘political act’ fill up the gap between the singular and the universal? Does it neutralize the antagonistic tension between the universal that the singular is fighting for, and the singular itself? In the act that inaugurated politics as such, did the ‘*demos*’ really become the ‘*polis*’? Did the ‘bourgeois’ really represent the state in the political act performed by the French *third estate*? Did the East-German ‘forums’ really become ‘the people’? Of course, the question is not whether their political act really actualized the desired political order. This order is by definition finite and, thus, imperfect. But the question is whether, in the moment of the act itself, the gap between the singular and the universal is filled up.

Žižek’s paradoxical claim concerning the act states that the gap is both filled up and left open unfilled. In the act, the singular directly becomes the universal. In communist revolution, for example, the proletariat behave unreservedly as if it were the universal people. However, at the same time, the gap between the universal order and ‘itself’ remains. This order is what Lacan calls ‘the Other’, and, in that quality, it remains other than itself. For this precise reason, the act, in which the otherness (the lack, the nothingness of the Thing) acts, implies the fading – the disappearing, the destruction – of its subject. This is why only a self-destructive ‘terror’ can be its ‘subject’. The crucial point is that this terror *cannot* be subjectivized. No one, not even the actor, can speak in the name of his act. Certainly, he or she speaks while acting, but in this revolutionary moment, his or her speaking *is* the act. In this moment, one cannot speak *about* his act, nor can he speak *in the name* of his act, i.e. in the name of the ‘terror’ as the act’s most basic support (its ‘subject’). When a political system, after the act or the revolution on which it is based, presumes to speak *in the name* of that ‘terror’, it enters into totalitarianism. Then its acts will soon become openly acts of brutal terror – acts in which the existence of the fundamental ‘terror’ is precisely denied.

Nevertheless, a political act cannot be left *unnamed*. How else can an act function politically, if it is not recognized – i.e. named – as such, and if it is not taken up into society's life and system? While act is located outside the symbolic order, it immediately has an impact within that order. It is not only a jump *into* the 'Thing of Nothing', it is also a creation *from* this Nothing, a *creation EX nihilo*. Arising from this Nothing, it is an intervention at the level of the signifiers. More precisely, it is the creation of great new names, i.e. of master-signifiers, by which the former order is reorganized or totally renewed. And as along with the universe of signifiers mastered by them, these new master-signifiers necessarily have a support, a bearer, a subject. How can the subject of that new order then avoid speaking in the name of the act upon which its whole system is built? How does one avoid speaking in the name of the *Nihil* – the *Nothing*, the lack – that made everything possible? How does one ground a political order upon an act, without speaking in the name of the *Nihil* – and the terror – upon which this order is built? How to avoid subjectivizing it?

Here the function of the 'object' should be emphasized. To avoid the subjectivization of the act and its terror, we should be aware that the ultimate 'bearer' of a symbolic system is not its subject, but its expelled object in which this subject, in its act, gets lost. It is the object, which in the moment of the act – i.e. when the subject becomes lost in it – resists subjectivation. The emphasis on the object forces us to reconsider both Žižek's and Rancière's examples illustrating the concept of 'the universal singular'. When, in Ancient Greece, the *demos* claimed to be the 'polis', this was not so much the act of the *demos* itself, but of some of its members (or even of others) who pretended to speak *in the name* of the *demos*. It was an act performed by singular ones disappearing in the *demos* which, at that moment, was politically still 'nothing'. It was a jump into the object/*Thing*, that made them lose their position of being subject. This is why they did not *conquer* this 'object' and become the owners of the 'universal singular'. Once their battle was won, once the *demos* became the universal 'polis', this new shape of the political, time and again, produced new "excremental" objects (Žižek, 1999: 228), new expelled categories of people, which, after a while, were recognized as being the true name of the universal.

In a similar way, liberal capitalism of the nineteenth century 'produced' its object/*Ding*: the proletariat, who certain singular individuals (as Marx and others) recognized as the true universal. Such recognition was not merely intellectual; it was an 'act' in the strong sense of the word. Similarly, in the last decade of the twentieth century, our globalized world produced a new kind of object/*Ding*: the '*sans papier*', the illegal immigrant who, without residence permit or other 'paper', went into hiding. 'Proper politics' begins from the moment one

recognizes that the universal world of ‘equality, liberty and brotherhood’ we established in 1789 is not so much represented by our well organized social democracy, as by those who have no place – no ‘paper’ – in it. This recognition can function as an ‘act’, modifying radically the co-ordinates of our existing system.

Here, the subject of the act is not the *‘sans papier’* himself, but the militants speaking in his name. Being the act’s subject, these militants lose themselves in the act, and – which amounts to the same thing – in the *sans papiers*. This is precisely why, speaking in their name, the militants can never claim to be the owners of their voice. They can never legitimate their act by referring to the ‘authority’ of the *sans papiers*. Their single legitimization is the illegitimacy of their act. This is the “terror” of the act: on the one hand, the militants have to lose themselves in the lack of ground which is the hallmark of the truth they defend, while on the other hand, this ‘sacrifice’ fills up this lack and makes them speak and act as if they were troubled by no lack at all. Recognizing the lack, the jump into it (i.e. the act) risks denying this very lack. That is, once again, why the act is so close to the denial of perversion.

But now we see more clearly how important the object of the act is. For the object of an act – the ultimate thing an act desires, its ‘object-cause’ of desire – is more obstinate, less manipulable than the subject. While the subject fades away in the act, the object persists. Not as a signifier, but as a remainder created – and excluded – by the signifiers. Bringing the object in as signifier makes the system create – exclude – a new object. This object, this remainder, this time and again recreated ‘originary’ rest, is the ultimate ‘ground’ of a political system. Politics must speak in its name, but at the same time be aware that it cannot once and for all make a name (a signifier) for it. The basis of politics will always be something radically excluded from it and, speaking in the name of the excluded, politics must at the same time forever remain open to the excluded ‘Thing’. Although the act jumps into this ‘Thing’ and acts in its name, this ‘Thing’ is the first to persist to the act. Even if politics is based in the act and, thus, in a jump into the ‘Thing’, it must, in order not to deny it, acknowledge the resistance of the Thing.

This is why we should not consider Antigone merely as an example of the act, as a model for the way we should act. When Antigone takes the position of her brother’s dead body, she does indeed jump into the Thing – i.e. into that which the existing symbolic order (Kreon) had declared ‘nothing’ (not even deserving of burial). But her tragic act shows us first of all how impossible it is to hold that position. Even a politics based on the act must acknowledge the impossibility of ‘conquering’ the object it aims at. That is why, for Lacan, Antigone is not an example but an image, or, to put it in German to make the distinction clearer, not ‘Vorbild’,

but ‘Bild’.<sup>43</sup> This is what he explains in his 7<sup>th</sup> seminar, where he introduces Antigone in an ethical context. If she is of ethical value, Lacan claims, it is not because she is our model or example, but only because this is beautiful. She is of ethical value exclusively because of her aesthetic quality: she shows us an image that we cannot follow, but which gives us an impression of the ultimate object of our desire: an object of *jouissance* which is, precisely for that reason, an unlivable and destructive thing.

The political is indubitably based upon the radicalism of an impossible but inevitable act. But that is precisely why it cannot function without a purely aesthetic image of that kind of act, an image in which it must be careful not to see an example to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Bouloiseau & A. Soboul (2000), *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre, Tome X, 27 juillet 1793 – 1794*, Paris: Phénix Éditions, p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> Himmler spoke these words to SS leaders in Posen October 4 1943. See: P. Padfield (1990), *Himmler, Reichsführer SS*, London: Macmillan, p. 469. Quoted in: S. Žižek (2002), *Welcome to the desert of the real. Five essays on September 11 and related dates*, London & New York: Verso, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> S. Žižek (2001a), *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*, London & New York: Verso.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, this thesis about the primacy of the Symbolic order is not originally lacanian. Lacan stresses himself again and again that he took this from Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1949), in which the latter introduced the concept of the symbolic, had changed definitely the course of Lacan’s thought. The only thing, in a way, Lacan added to Lévi-Strauss structuralism, was a theory of the subject – which in fact subverted entirely the Lévi-Straussian structuralism not recognizing the subject as an decisive factor in a culture. Cf. C. Lévi-Strauss (1949), *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; (1969), *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode. For the relation between Lacan and Lévi-Strauss, cf. R. Georjgin(1983), *De Lévi-Strauss à Lacan*, Lausanne: L’âge d’homme.

<sup>5</sup> The foundations of Lacan’s theory of desire and its subject, are to be found in his essays of the fifties included in his famous *Écrits*, for instance his ‘Discours de Rome’: “*Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse*” (J. Lacan [1966], *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, p. 237-322). In his fifth and sixth seminar, Lacan gives a more elaborated version of his theory of desire and its subject: J. Lacan (1998), *Le séminaire. Livre V. Les Formations de l’inconscient, 1957-1958*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris: Seuil; (1996), *Le séminaire, Livre VI, Le désir et son interprétation: 1958-1959*, Paris, Publication hors commerce de l’Association Freudienne Internationale.

<sup>6</sup> “So, by way of the Kantian transcendental turn, reality itself is virtualized, becomes an artifact, becomes ‘virtual reality’ in the precise sense this term has acquired in today’s computer sciences; and the Lacanian Real designates precisely the hard kernel which does not yield to this ‘virtualization’, which is *not* a transcendental artifact.” (S. Žižek, *Terrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 85).

<sup>7</sup> In Lacanian terms: the “*sujet de l’énonciation*” is never the same as the “*sujet de l’énoncé*”. For that conceptual distinction, cf. Lacan 1966: 664. Cf. as well: J. Dor (1985), *L’introduction à la lecture de Lacan: 1. L’inconscient structuré comme une langue*, Paris : Denoël, p. 150-152. Lacan expresses the subject’s radical dependency from the signifier (i.e. the symbolic order) in one of his well-known formula: “the subject is what a signifier represents to another signifier” (cf. Lacan 1966: 819, 835, 840).

<sup>8</sup> Lacan takes the word subject in the strictly lexical meaning of the term. ‘Subjectum’ is the Latin translation of the Greek ‘hypokeimenon’ and means bearer, platform, base. Originally, it is the word Aristotelian logic uses for the ‘bearer’ of attributes. In the proposition ‘the table is red’, table is the ‘hypokeimenon’. It is this word that since Late Antiquity is translated in ‘subjectum’. Cf. L. Couloubaritsis (1990), “La question du ‘sujet’ dans la philosophie grecque”, in: *Cahiers de l’École des sciences philosophique et religieuses* 8 : 9-42.

<sup>9</sup> Originally, ‘proton pseudos’ is a term from Aristotelian logic (Aristoteles, *Prior Analytica* II, XVIII, 16-17). Freud uses the term in one of his early basic texts, *Entwurf einer Psychologie* (Freud [1987], *Gesammelte Werke, Nachtragsband*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, p. 375-447).

<sup>10</sup> Lacanian psychodiagnostics is not a *descriptive* but a *structural* one, and makes a distinction between tree (and only tree) structures: neurosis (repressing castration, i.e. the fundamental lack, desire), psychosis (rejecting castration) and perversion (denying castration). Lacan elaborated his theory of perversion in his tenth seminar (*Angoisse [Anxiety]*, 1962-1963) and in his essay *Kant avec Sade* (Lacan 1966: 765-790). See also the article of Piera Aulagnier (who largely influenced Lacan in his theory of perversion): P. Aulagnier-Spaurani (1967), "La perversion comme structure", in: *L'inconscient 2*: 11-41. Cf. as well S. André (1993), *L'imposture perverse*, Paris: Seuil.

<sup>11</sup> In the *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (1905) Freud already establishes a link between repression and 'anamnesis' (S. Freud [1972], *Studienausgabe, Band V, Sexualleben*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, p. 82-83. In general, a symptom too can be considered as what *keeps* the repressed, and makes its return possible.

<sup>12</sup> To quote only a few passages: S. Žižek (1991a), *For They Know Not What They Do, Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London & New York: Verso, p. 234-236; 245-249; (1991b), *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge (Mass) & London (UK): MIT Press, p. 108-109. Cf. also: Žižek, 1993, p. 194-195.

<sup>13</sup> See also S. Žižek (1997), *Het subject en zijn onbehagen*, Amsterdam: Boom, p. 195. Maybe, Žižek refers to a passage of Robespierre's speech to the Convention on the day Danton was arrested. Feeling the audience's fear (each of them knew that, after Danton, he could be 'next'), Robespierre declared: "I say that anyone who trembles at that moment is guilty, for innocence never fears public scrutiny", a sentence responded with applause (Bouloiseau & Soboul 2000: 414, 416). For a detailed analysis of this passage, see: C. Lefort (1986), *Essais sur le politique XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris: Seuil, p. 81-82; (1988), *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by D. Macey, Cambridge (UK): Polit Press, p. 64-65.

<sup>14</sup> GULag is the abbreviation for the Russian expression 'Gosudarstvennoe Upravlenie Lagerej', which means: State Office for Camp-Control.

<sup>15</sup> Lacan elaborated the concept of '*jouissance*' (enjoyment) for the first time in his 7<sup>th</sup> seminar (on "the ethics of psychoanalysis). See chapter XV ("La jouissance de la transgression") in : Lacan (1986), *Le séminaire, Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris : Seuil, p225-241); translation by D. Potter in: Lacan (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Edited by J.-A. Miller, Book VII*, London: Routledge, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, p. 191-204.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., for instance, Lacan 1966: 656, 677, 800, 816, 835.

<sup>17</sup> Lacan borrows the notion of '*das Ding*' from Freud's *Entwurf* (Freud 1987: 375-447) and turns it into one of his own central theoretical concepts in his seminar on 'the ethics of psychoanalysis' (Lacan 1986: 55-86), precisely the seminar where he introduces his concept of '*jouissance*'. This 'Thing' is the term used for the object of desire, an object which is a void of a lack, so desire keeps on even when satisfied. But, so Lacan discovers in his 7<sup>th</sup> seminar, this object is not only the symbolic lack within the symbolic order (which he conceptualizes as the 'phallus'). This kind of symbolic lack is still the motor of the symbolic. The 'Thing' is the 'originary rest' of the symbolic, that which always has been excluded from the symbolic; it is the *real* side of this lack. The concept of *das Ding* forms the basis for his theory of '*objet petit a*', elaborated in the years after his seminar on ethics, and stressing the 'real' status of the lack upon which desire rests.

<sup>18</sup> For an explanation about Lacan's theory of sadist perversion, see, besides his own (quite 'unreadable') *Kant avec Sade*, for instance: S. Žižek (ed.) (1992), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan, But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, London & New York: Verso, p. 219-222.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek refers to the execution, in 1938, of Yezhov, Stalin's main executioner in 1937: "the purge of Yezhov was a kind of meta-purge, the purge that ends all purges (he was accused precisely of killing thousands of innocent Bolsheviks on behalf of foreign powers – the irony of it being that the accusation was literally true: he *did* organize the killing of thousands of innocents Bolsheviks ...)." (Žižek, 2001a: 120-122).

<sup>20</sup> At the end of the thirties, the situation of the famous Red Army was absolutely disastrous. The purges had so terribly decimated its old executives, and the new executives were so incompetent and so paralyzed by fear, that they were in fact not able to hold back the German attack in 1941. Cf. Dmitri Volkogonov (1996), *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld.

<sup>21</sup> In that chapter, Žižek discusses J. Arch Getty & Oleg V. Naumov (1999), *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-39*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London.

<sup>22</sup> Getty & Naumov 1999: 365.

<sup>23</sup> Getty & Naumov 1999: 370.

<sup>24</sup> There is an evolution in Lacan's theory concerning the lack/subject. In the fifties, he considers this lack of the symbolic system as the lack with which that system is operating; it is the signifier's lack, i.e. its incapability to generate a definitive signification. In the sixties, Lacan strengthens this theory: the lack is not only the lack the signifier is operating with, it is also what has always been excluded from the signifier, namely the real (the 'Thing', or '*objet petit a*').

<sup>25</sup> A “manque à être”, as Lacan would say (cf. Lacan 1966: 655, 667). Man is not so much being (*être*) as longing for being (*désir de l'être*), another way to express the primacy of desire (over being).

<sup>26</sup> In his 11<sup>th</sup> seminar (1964), Lacan formulates this in terms of *alienation* and *separation*: at the one hand, the subject is *alienated* in the Other (i.e. the symbolic order), on the other hand, it is separated from it. Cf. chapter XVI of this seminar: J. Lacan (1973), *Le séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris: Seuil; (1977), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translation A. Sheridan, London: Hogarth Press & Institute of Psychoanalysis.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Himmler's speech of October 4, 1943, out of which Žižek quoted a passage in *Welcome to The Desert of The Real* (Žižek 2003: 31; cf. also the motto above this essay). For a comment of the whole speech, see Fieldman 1990: 465-473.

<sup>28</sup> See note 7.

<sup>29</sup> For my reflections upon Badiou's notion of the 'event', see: M. De Kesel (2003), “Truth as Formal Catholicism”, in: *Communication and Cognition* (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> I refer to the title of one of Žižek's first books: S. Žižek: *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (The MIT Press, Cambridge Mss. & London).

<sup>31</sup> See above, note 17.

<sup>32</sup> This is the title of the German and Dutch version of one of his *New Left Review* articles: S. Žižek (1997), “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism”, in: *New Left Review* 225: 28-51. The modified German version appeared as a little book: S. Žižek (1998), *Ein plädoyer für die Intoleranz*, Wien: Passagen Verlag. For the Dutch booklet, see: S. Žižek (1999), *Pleidooi voor intolerantie*, Amsterdam: Boom.

<sup>33</sup> “Repeating Lenin” is still only available on the internet (<http://lacan.com/replenin.htm>) or in a Croatian version, edited in 2002, Zagreb: Arkzin.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, S. Žižek (2001b), *On Belief*, London & New York: Routledge, p.: 111, where he elaborates this idea in connection with Francis Fukoyama's idea of ‘the end of history’. For Žižek, this does not mean so much that history has come to an end as that it has come to a breaking point, in which history is open to the ‘event’ of its radical otherness.

<sup>35</sup> This is why, according to Žižek, democracy is not the horizon of today's politics. In a response to an article of Yannis Stavrakakis, he refers to Lacan to explain his point, saying that the early Lacan, stressing the primacy of the symbolic order, is in a way the “Lacan of democracy”; the late Lacan however, stressing the drive and the real (beyond the symbolic), “points towards a post-democratic politics” (S. Žižek [2003], “«What Some Would Call ...»: A Response to Yannis Stavrakakis”, in: *Umbr(a)*, 2003: 134).

<sup>36</sup> This is conform to what Lacan says about the act – in fact about the “psychoanalytical act” – in his seminar on that issue: “c'est une dimension commune de l'acte, de ne pas comporter dans son instant la presence du sujet” (J. Lacan [1997], *L'acte psychanalytique: séminaire 1967-1968*, Paris: Publication hors commerce, Document interne à l'Association freudienne internationale et destiné à ses membres, p. 58). However, this does not imply that Žižek's theory of the act – which, to him, is first of all a political act – is entirely conform to Lacan's reflections on “the psychoanalytical act”. At least, this is still to be examined – an investigation which will be aggravated by the fact that there is still no official edition of that important Lacan-seminar available.

<sup>37</sup> See the last chapter of J. Lacan (1973), *Le séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil; (1977), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translation by A. Sheridan, London: Hogarth Press & Institute of Psychoanalysis.

<sup>38</sup> S. Žižek (1999), *The Ticklish Subject: the absent center of political ontology*, London & New York: Verso, p. 375.

<sup>39</sup> Lacan elaborates his theory of the fantasy (*fantasme*) in his sixth seminar, the one on “Desire and its Interpretation” (J. Lacan [1996]).

<sup>40</sup> In his act, the sadist, for example, imagines himself beyond every law, beyond every lack and desire. He presumes to be the full owner of his *jouissance*, while in fact he is obedient to the obscene law of the other, commanding him again and again to repeat the same (failing) scene. It is not him who is enjoying, it is the ‘Other’ (the law, the system, the symbolic order). See for instance Žižek 1991a: 257.

<sup>41</sup>: “no, Liberal Democracy is not our ultimate horizon; uneasy as it may sound, the horrible experience of the Stalinist political terror should *not* lead us into abandoning the principle of terror itself – one should search even more stringently for the good ‘terror’.”

<sup>42</sup> J. Rancière (1995), *La méésentente: politique et philosophie*, Paris: Galilée; (1998), *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translation by J. Rose, Minneapolis (Minn.): University of Minnesota Press. Žižek refers to it in *The Ticklish Subject* (Žižek 1999: 187ff.; 228ff.).

<sup>43</sup> All comments of Lacan's Antigone-interpretation overlook his emphasis – again and again repeated – that Antigone is not an exemple of “la fonction du bien” (the function of the good, also in the economical sense of the word), but of “la fonction du beau” (the function of the beautiful). See Lacan 1986: 257-281. See also: M. De Kesel, *Eros & Ethics: Reading Lacan's 7<sup>th</sup> Seminar*, forthcoming.