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Thomas Brockelman

The failure of the radical democratic imaginary

Žižek versus Laclau and Mouffe on vestigial utopia

Abstract Starting from the author's critique of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this essay offers a comprehensive interpretation of Slavoj Žižek's political theory. Žižek's position drives a wedge between two concepts foundational to Laclau and Mouffe's 'radical democratic theory', namely 'antagonism' and 'anti-essentialism'. Anti-essentialism, it is argued, carries with it a residual utopianism – i.e. a view of political theory as offering a vision of a desirable radicalized society or a 'radical democratic imaginary' – that the more radical concept of antagonism forbids. Effectively, anti-essentialism is shown to produce a new kind of ideology, an ideology that Žižek, deeply critical, associates with the shortcomings of multi-culturalism and political correctness.

The essay ends with a critical consideration of Žižek's claim that he himself produced a systematic political theory based upon the insight of antagonism. Having constructed (by way of return to Marx and Engels) a version of Žižek's project that makes sense of his derision for anti-utopianism by positing a utopian theory without any 'imaginary' support, the article closes with critical comments about the effectiveness of such a position. Žižek is seen to offer us a powerful political theory, one that unmaskes the hypocrisy in much contemporary work, but also a theory whose limits must give us pause.

Key words antagonism · anti-essentialism · anti-utopianism · Jacques Lacan · Ernesto Laclau · Chantal Mouffe · radical democratic imaginary · radical democratic theory · utopia · Slavoj Žižek

The political thought of the Slovenian psychoanalyst and theorist Slavoj Žižek has found only a rather puzzling reception in the United States. While Žižek has been remarkably prolific – producing more than a book a year since his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) – full philosophical interpretations of his work have been scarce.¹ Furthermore, the most visible readings of Žižek's political theory have emerged from a puzzling and, I will argue, deceptive context, the context of the neo-Gramscian and post structuralist-inspired 'radical democratic theory' of which the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is the best-known example. To read Žižek in such a context is certainly understandable: both his longtime association with Mouffe and Laclau² and the occasional sympathetic references within his work point in the direction of a shared position.³ Indeed, to dissociate Žižek's project from the project of 'radical democratic theory' is, to a certain extent, to read against his own avowed intention.

Still, interpreted in the light of the project announced in Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,⁴ Žižek the political theorist emerges, at best, as a thinker of secondary importance, a kind of younger sibling mostly interested in subsidiary issues having to do with film and popular culture. More frequently even, his work is simply dismissed by those sympathetic to Laclau and Mouffe – his Lacanian approach to the political derided as 'formalist' and obfuscating:⁵ if his writing is taken as having the same intention as other radical democratic theorists, then it is inevitably read as *less successful* in achieving those ends than the writing of others.

My contention in the following pages will be that the perspective forced by the project of a neo-Gramscian 'radical democratic theory' seriously distorts any real understanding of Žižek's thought. Indeed, such distortion is inevitable since the primary insight in Žižek's work is precisely a devastating critique of the position outlined in *Hegemony* and exfoliated in numerous places since. Departing not from the apparent coziness of Žižek and the authors of *Hegemony* but rather from the underlying insight about 'the political' contained in Žižek's writing, we find a reasoned pessimism about the viability of the very project of political theory as Laclau and Mouffe see it. If Žižek is right, then the very concepts with which radical democratic theorists hope to reinspire mass action supporting leftist causes actually only undermine the position from which they announce them. For Žižek, Laclau and Mouffe's political theory leads us to aporia rather than to political engagement.

I Radical democratic theory and the remains of Utopia

In an era when participation in democratic politics is plummeting in most of the large Western democracies and when the transformation of citizens into 'consumers of government services' seems almost complete, the project of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and their followers, a project that aims at 'constructing a "we" based upon the ideals of a certain radical democratic tradition', seems enormously refreshing.⁶ What Laclau and Mouffe aim to do – together in their pathbreaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) and separately in several works since the publication of that book – is nothing less than to reinvigorate liberal democracy. By 'articulating' (more on this technical term later) this radical democratic identity as an ideal toward which different groups might strive, in making the democratic project once again *compelling*, Mouffe and Laclau undertake a project of obvious importance.

My references to the 'radical democratic imaginary', to 'ideals' or even to the construction of group identity, should not allow us to believe our authors naive. If something of Western utopianism seems to squeeze through the closing door of critique for Laclau and Mouffe, it is only as a much reduced remainder, one thoroughly corrected by the problems of utopian thought with which all intellectuals, at the beginning of the 21st century, must have some familiarity. In a sense, the impossibility of the utopian is the very *starting-point* of radical democratic theory. No more, then, the rationalist claims of 'fully realized democracy' still prevalent in materialist Marxism: no, such realization is by the very nature of the political held to be impossible.

But the problem of the 'utopian' and of the totalitarian potential of theory has had and continues to have a devastating effect on any proposed 'renewal of the political' – any re-emergence of the radical left in the wake of the Cold War and the end of the Soviet Union. That is, it often seems that the very critique of 'utopian thinking', largely developed by Liberal and Conservative thinkers, leaves no room for the *visionary* appeal upon which revolutions must be based. Any 'image' of a radically different society seems to invite the stamp of 'totalitarianism' that is the ultimate stigma for a political theory.

In the light of this problem, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* attempts two things – both in an effort to defend the 'new social movements' that, since the 1960s, have largely taken the place of traditional leftist movements in politics. First, *Hegemony* completes a critique of the Marxist tradition aimed against its implicit *essentialism*. Under this project, Laclau and Mouffe attack both the specific 'economism' of Second International Marxism – the dogmatic treatment of economic relations as an ultimate self-contained grounding 'reality' impervious to other social/cultural spheres – and the general *determinism* implied by

such a base/superstructure model. This part of Laclau and Mouffe's project is largely a rejection of the traditions of Marxist ideology critique and is aimed at legitimizing *social* movements like feminism or indigenous identity struggles which cannot be reduced to a particular economic position (the 'working class'). On the other hand, however, *Hegemony* attempts to remove the shackles limiting leftist theories (and, implicitly, the development of Leftist politics in relationship to such theory) by proposing the 'radical democratic imaginary' as a non-totalitarian remainder of the utopian tradition.

Anti-essentialism allows *Hegemony* to arrange a marriage between a certain interpretation of poststructuralism and Gramscian analysis. Both are taken to indicate a kind of *conventionalism*. So filtered, Laclau and Mouffe's version of diacritical anti-essentialism meshes well with the Gramscian conceptions of 'articulation' and 'hegemony'. Gramsci proposes that questions of social identity and action are not referable to any external 'idea'. Articulation allows us to understand an identity as something other than a platonic essence. It is, rather, taken to be the result of the combination of two elements within a differential system of signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105). This combination produces an explicitly *new meaning* – thus, its freedom from any fixed or 'natural' understanding of meaning. That is, because the modified terms (say, 'gay' and 'progressive'), while altered, retain something of their independence from each other (we can certainly still imagine non-progressive gays and vice versa), the identity is clearly *produced* rather than something pre-existent. In the same vein, Laclau and Mouffe invoke 'hegemony' to explain the nature of social identities given their argument that they *have no* underlying (platonic) reality. 'Hegemony', they explain, refers to 'an absent totality, and to the diverse attempts at recomposition and rearticulation which, in overcoming this original absense, made it possible for struggles to be given a meaning and for historical forces to be endowed with full positivity' (1985: 7). In other words, the beginning-point of Laclau and Mouffe's argument is the *non-existence* of external truth in relationship to society.

Clearly, such a position does away with the tradition of rationalist utopianism: no city is laid 'in heaven' as rational blueprint for society. Nor can we dream of getting 'beyond politics' to a kind of rational 'administration of things'. But the elimination of rationalist utopianism should not be confounded with the constriction of politically oriented utopian *imagination*. According to Laclau and Mouffe, in the age of globalization and after the fall of the Soviet bloc we face an exhaustion of political imagination which leads to derision of genuine political decision-making. In this atmosphere, only the right can form a unifying vision. 'The absence of a political frontier', writes Mouffe, 'is the symptom of a void that can endanger democracy because that void

provides a terrain that can be occupied by the extreme right to articulate new anti-democratic political identities' (Mouffe, 1993: 5–6). And Laclau, in another context, affirms the importance of such a re-formation of a 'radical democratic imaginary'. Given the 'decline of the two horizons' that had 'traditionally structured its discourse: communism and . . . the welfare state' the demand is for (a) renewed vision(s) of a transformed society: 'there will be no renaissance of the Left without the construction of a new social imaginary.'⁷

The real question is what this renewal calls for and what it means: what is 'the radical democratic imaginary' that Laclau and Mouffe both invoke? And the first answer to this question – quite in line with their conventionalist and historicist position – is that it does not *necessarily* mean any one thing at all. That is, when faced with the challenge of this question, both Mouffe and Laclau (whether writing together or separately) will inevitably first invoke the anti-essentialism which they see as alone leaving the genuine possibility for political life: they argue that political movements can gain their identity only through some one of the particular or 'partial' identities that combine to make up a 'movement'. Thus, for example, the identity of anti-tsarist forces in Russia could come only from some sub-group in the struggle; for example, the workers who struck, demanding higher wages. The 'name' and 'content' of the movement would then derive from the 'hegemonization' produced by this group (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 302–3).

There is nothing *necessary* about the assumption of this identity, nor will this identity necessarily affect future identities or ones constructed in other contexts. Since there is no utopian 'end of history', we must get beyond the illusion that political movements tend logically toward the realization of a single, universal vision. Such a transcendence of traditional essentialism precisely leaves room to imagine the efficacy of the disparate and often unrelated 'identity' movements of the 'new left'. In other words, the pluralizing response to our query about the radical democratic imaginary is absolutely vital to Laclau and Mouffe's defense of such movements.

But, at a second moment, things are not as simple as this 'pluralization' of the universal – its dependence upon 'particular' articulations – would lead us to believe; for both Mouffe and Laclau immediately articulate *quasi-transcendental conditions* for these very pluralizing operations to take place, for the left to form new visions: and the transparency of these conditions to a given society begins to reimport something like a utopian *telos* into the discourse of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and later texts. We could explain the first of these conditions with regard to the example of anti-tsarism cited above: the passage by Laclau in which this discussion is embedded includes an intermediary

step which Laclau claims is 'the very condition of the universalization of' the particular struggles of various groups. What makes possible the 'articulation' of an 'equivalence' between otherwise unrelated struggles is the 'presence of a frontier separating . . . [the tsar's] regime from the rest of society' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 302). In other words, the possession of a common 'enemy' serves as condition for the possibility for the joining of various groups to create a movement.

This positing of enmity as transcendental is particularly apparent in Chantal Mouffe's appropriation of a key term in *Hegemony* – 'antagonism'. This concept is in fact derived from the political philosophy of the German political philosopher Karl Schmitt, who intends the term to mean that every collective identity implies an opposed other (the 'antagonist'). For Mouffe, such a 'politicized' conception of the social is an irreducible element in the formation of the 'radical democratic imaginary'; for it is only through the formation of such *concrete* antagonism that social movements can gain the rhetorical appeal to *become* mass movements. As Mouffe translates this insight, she tells us that

Political life concerns collective, public action; it aims at the construction of a 'we' in a context of diversity and conflict. But to construct a 'we' it must be distinguished from the 'them,' and that means establishing a frontier, defining an 'enemy'. (Mouffe, 1993: 69)

Now, while this Schmittian conception of antagonism is useful for resisting various contemporary efforts to underwrite a politics of the 'transparent society' (Habermas comes to mind), we must be careful not to transform it from an implicit precondition for democratic vision into the vision itself. Laclau and Mouffe (though, as will be seen, they may have erred to flirt with Schmitt at all) cannot be taken to embrace a new fascism of struggle. At the very most, they will argue that struggle (and only non-violent struggle at that) is not to be avoided. They will never idealize it.

The same should not be said, however, of another implicit precondition of the 'radical democratic imaginary' – the openness of identity itself. If the fundamental insight underlying the fall of Marxism is the lack of a universal identity and end of history, this insight, when applied also to individual and society, serves as more than historical precondition for the emergence of a new theory. More strongly, the impossibility of closing social identity (the identity of a person, a people, a group or a nation) justifies asserting the ultimately *political* nature of all societies. Neither can I ever finally know who I am nor we ever finally know who we are: indeed, the reason for this impossibility is that identity is indeterminate. There is *no* complete identity either for individual, group or society. Politics takes place in the undetermined interstices of social

identity. To say that society is structurally prevented from knowing or being itself *is* just to say that identity is a matter of political struggle rather than of some kind of deduction. And that assertion of openness, in turn, serves as another condition for the possibility of the formation of particular 'social imaginaries' today.

This transcendental can and does become at least part (the general form?) of the 'radical democratic imaginary'. In effect, the 'democratic revolution' that Laclau and Mouffe (following Claude Lefort) identify with modernity itself involves a self-realization of the 'truth' of society's lack of truth. In a sense the historical particularity of the 'radical democratic imaginary' just refers to the various guises in which the ideal of a society (and an individuality marked by such a society) radically open to ceaseless redefinition can emerge. As Laclau puts it, a consciousness of the impossibility of identity can be 'important for democratic politics' in that it 'involves the institutionalization of [a society's] own openness and, in that sense, the injunction to identify with its own impossibility' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 199). Laclau calls for democratic societies to construct an ideal or 'imaginary' identity of precisely that indeterminateness that opens the space of the political.

II With friends like this, who needs enemies? Žižek on antagonism

In several texts written in and after 1987, Žižek has developed a critique of Laclau and Mouffe's work that calls into question their very project. The key here is Žižek's appropriation of a term we have already seen from *Hegemony* – 'antagonism'. While this concept is derived from Schmitt, who intends the term to mean that every collective identity implies an opposed other (the 'antagonist'), within both *Hegemony* and Žižek's writing, the term takes on a very different meaning: the antagonistic Other also names the absence or void that emerges where we expect to find the term completing any identity. Understood in this way, 'antagonism' does not point to the 'inevitability of struggle' in a fashion pushing us in the proto-fascist direction of Schmitt and social Darwinists but to a radical heterogeneity. The Other can never be reduced to an other, can never be only a particular being. Being itself is punctured by non-being and it is this 'punctuation' at the location of the term representing the whole that is the true 'antagonist' both in *Hegemony* and in Žižek's understanding. In other words, the *truth* of society is that its identity *does not exist*. As Laclau himself puts it, the point of antagonism is the 'impossibility of Society'.⁸

Žižek's critique of Laclau and Mouffe is that the profound insight represented by 'antagonism' entirely subverts the anti-essentialism and

conventionalist historicism of *Hegemony* and subsequent texts. In a critical essay about *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 'Beyond Discourse Analysis',⁹ Žižek leads us to this conclusion through a consideration of the apparently innocent question of the relationship between antagonism and the theory of the subject in Laclau and Mouffe's book.¹⁰ The argument is that antagonism undercuts the text's insufficiently radicalized vision of the subject of the political. *Hegemony* remains beholden, argues Žižek, to an Althusserian vision of the subject, one which conceives of society as constructed of various 'subject-positions' each of which brings its own 'point of view' on political matters. Such a vision of the political, however, implicitly already *substantializes* society – suggesting a master 'viewpoint' of the social itself, a viewpoint from which all the discourses of the 'subject-positions' are exposed as limited and ideological. Antagonism, on the other hand, disallows the constitution of society as substantial.

In order to see the devastating nature of Žižek's apparently 'friendly' critique, it is vital to understand that the problem with 'subject-positions' is by no means accidental to the approach of *Hegemony* as a whole: or, to put the same point in different words, one has to understand the bond between antagonism and that *truth* that *Hegemony* would otherwise conventionalize. The thought experiment in 'Beyond Discourse Analysis' is simple and effective: Žižek asks us to consider the effect that the insight of antagonism might itself have upon the field of political action. With the *knowledge* that 'to construct a "we" it must be distinguished from the "them"', the political agent is freed from *more than* the illusion that her or his society might achieve a final or utopian identity: rather, we know that *even if* the concrete 'other' facing me (the capitalist if I am a worker, the lord if I am a slave, etc.) were to disappear, another would take his or her place. As a result, Žižek writes: 'to grasp the notion of antagonism in its most radical dimension, we should *invert* the relationship between the two terms: it is not the external enemy who is preventing me from achieving identity with myself, but every identity is already in itself blocked, marked by an impossibility' (Laclau, 1990: 251–2).

Strangely enough, antagonism – as Žižek interprets it – actually judges *this other* (the capitalist, the lord, etc.) innocent; for he or she is a mere token or representative of *the Other*. In truth, even were she or he not there, we would fail to achieve identity with ourselves. Another 'other' would take her or his place. That impossibility is inscribed in the very structure of self-representation, wherein every identity remains insufficient to the subject it masks. That is, when we decide that 'we really are Jews (Nazis, etc.)' or even that 'we really are contingent, open beings', we refuse the practical imperative implicit in antagonism – an imperative to refuse the independence and finality of any substantial

identity. The 'truth' of antagonism can therefore be translated into an assertion that 'the socio-symbolic field is . . . structured around a certain traumatic impossibility, around a fissure which *cannot* be symbolized' (Laclau, 1990: 249).

Because it posits as an ideal the identity of openness, identity politics, even and especially an identity politics valorizing open identification, necessarily does violence to the truth of antagonism, to antagonism as *truth*. To the extent that the openness that is its precondition gives content to the 'radical democratic imaginary', the politics that emerges from it will miss out on the radically critical nature of antagonism.

II: 1

Wherein does this critical potential reside? It is important to start here with Žižek's sustained polemic directed at the various kinds of historicism popular within the academic world today – and reflected, as well, in Laclau and Mouffe's 'anti-essentialism'. Far from encouraging the conventionalism of Laclau and Mouffe's poststructuralist polemics, antagonism amounts to a concrete and even practical experience of a certain universal *truth*, a truth unlimited by the conventions of any particular culture: at the core of *all* social systems producing identities is a certain structure, a structure that alone makes possible the formation of diacritical or articulated identities. But this 'truth' will be of such a nature as always to refuse any *usefulness*, always to evade projection within an imaginary structure. As Žižek articulates his own position (through that of Lacan) in another context, he 'accepts the "deconstructionist" motif of radical contingency, but turns this motif against itself, using it to assert his commitment to Truth as *contingent*'.¹¹

These last words are vital, though, as they indicate the essential difference not only between Žižek and other 'radical democratic theorists' but also between Žižek and traditional 'universalists' or 'structuralists'. Laclau and Mouffe themselves will embrace the universality of antagonism (precisely as a defense of their anti-essentialism). What differentiates Žižek's approach from theirs is the fact that the universal or structure discovered by Žižek's analyses will always contain the paradox of its own impossibility (truth/necessity as contingent, etc.) within itself.

Such ironic or even aporetic writing will never morph into a conventionalist position; for such a position formalizes (and, thus, totalizes) the content of its own assertions precisely in *denying all totality and all truth*. In effect, it is inevitable that conventionalist 'anti-essentialism' ends up eliding the *risk* of antagonism. Žižek's political theory is first of all inspired by the necessity of protecting/exposing this 'contingency' at the basis of the social. As he writes, 'the impossibility at work in Laclau's

notion of antagonism is *double*: not only does 'radical antagonism' mean that it is impossible adequately to represent/articulate the *fullness* of society – on an even more radical level, *it is also impossible adequately to represent/articulate this very antagonism/negativity that prevents Society from achieving its full ontological realization*' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 100).

As to how to project a contingency so radical that it refuses to be hypostatized as content *or* form, Žižek's answer, repeated throughout his work, marries the Hegelian notion of a 'concrete universal' with the Lacanian notion of 'the Real'. Antagonism punctures the very rift between form and content by simultaneously appearing at both levels. Paradoxically, truth always emerges both as a particular content – the problematic site of social definition/exclusion, the defining historical moment, etc. – and as the universal form/horizon for making possible all those particular contents. In this peculiar double function, antagonism challenges all 'pictures' of society, including the one produced in asserting that *there is no picture of society*; for it insists on re-binding the form with the particular content that produces it. More systematically, the point will always be *both* that the particular content is universal (that it is not merely some particular and limited point of view) *and* that the universal form is particular (that it is not simply a 'neutral' universality but one embraced from a particular social/political world). The structuration of society by antagonism refers to this fundamental and also impossible instability of historical/social truth with regard to its own status. As Žižek likes to put it, every particular 'viewpoint' brings with it its own universal: 'each particular position, in order to articulate itself, involves the (implicit or explicit) assertion of its own mode of universality' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 315).

Herein lies the debt of Žižek's political thought to his psychoanalytic 'master', Lacan:

Lacan's final lesson is not the relativity and plurality of truths but the hard, traumatic fact that in every concrete constellation truth is bound to emerge in some contingent detail. In other words, although truth is context-dependent – although there is no truth in general, but always the truth of some situation – there is none the less in every plural field a particular point which articulates its truth and as such cannot be relativized; in this precise sense, truth is always One. (Žižek, 1991: 196)

II: 2

What is most compelling in Žižek's critique of 'anti-essentialism' is the way that it allows him an entree into concrete social phenomena that now appear as *symptoms* of a truth repressed by the over-certainty of conventionalism. In effect, Žižek re-engages a kind of 'ideology' critique

with regard to contemporary social and political formations. According to Žižek, projecting open identity as social ideal and thereby suppressing antagonism leads to conceiving the concrete 'other' of openness – the nationalist, the fundamentalist, the fascist – as a traditional political enemy, one who could be finitely overcome. The passionate battle against various forms of nationalism or fundamentalism that characterizes so much of 'Left' thought today amounts to a blindness about the *bond* between modern society and its anti-modern other (Žižek, 1994: 222). To see this bond, raise the question again: 'What would happen if the antagonistic other [in this case, fundamentalism or nationalism] were to be defeated?' The hidden assumption of such battles is that the 'open society' which those on the left defend could survive unchanged the vanquishment of all 'closed' identities. The society that provides the horizon for a kind of subjectivity whose highest value is 'radically open, contingent, and incomplete' identity thus *imagines itself* as free of the limitation imposed by antagonism. No Other limits this society's choice of identity.

For Žižek, this self-contradiction manifests itself, not in some kind of formalistic or theoretical *cul de sac*, but rather in the peculiar vehemence within the postmodern world of precisely those terroristic *fundamentalisms* that mark the global political landscape. They are, as it were, symptomatic formations indicating the *contradiction* between liberal/left pluralism (the belief in the impossibility of utopian totality, the necessity of 'different perspectives', etc.) and the hidden belief that *they have found* (in the fundamentalist, anti-modernist) *the true enemy*, the other who is really the Other, so as to be able to project precisely such utopian closure through that other's negation. And, as a result, it is the universalist illusion, an illusion in which Laclau and Mouffe's 'radical democratic imaginary' necessarily, despite all protests to the contrary, takes part, that spawns the 'return of the repressed' of fascism, nationalism, etc. The price of reviving even a limited utopianism – as not only Laclau and Mouffe's theory but the predominant liberal discourses of today all implicitly do – is a stoking of the fires that Laclau and Mouffe seem most bent upon extinguishing. The 'ideal' of the 'democratic imaginary' is directly (if inversely) related to the peculiar virulence of all the contemporary 'terrorist' identities resisting this vision.

Moreover, it is not simply at the level of society that the repressed return: for Žižek, the hypocrisy of a kind of 'relativist universalism' at work in today's left spawns symptomatic behavior patterns on the part of the 'leftists' themselves. Here Žižek zeros in on the kind of symptomatic puritanical behavior we associate with the 'culture wars' in the USA in the 1980s and 1990s. Žižek forces us to see that the kind of 'pc' politics radical democratic theory implies suffers from its own significant

chauvinism. The symptom of the Other's repression behind the screen of the 'other' is the constant discovery by contemporary leftists of *new* forms of discrimination. Such discovery is in fact necessary to maintain the apparent 'naturalness' or 'reality' of the open ideal. That is, the utopianism of the critic can be supported only so long as (1) the factual opposition between the idealized identity and a concrete 'other' and (2) the illusion that this other *could be* defeated (since otherwise we are confronted with the indestructible Other) are both present. And this is precisely what 'political correctness' accomplishes, with its ever advancing battles for more minuscule forms of identity and against ever more subtle forms of discrimination. With pc, there will always be another hyphen to add to dead-white-heterosexual-male, etc., in order to maintain the battle against discrimination. But, also, this battle will always *appear to be* winnable: 'one more hidden form of discrimination and, maybe we'll have licked the problem'. Thus, for Žižek, 'the pc attitude is an exemplary case of the Sartrean *mauvaise foi* of the intellectuals: it provides new and newer answers *in order to keep the problem alive*' (Žižek, 1994: 214).

II: 3

Within Marxism, ideology is not simply false consciousness nor even false consciousness accompanied by symptoms of its falsity; the full effect of ideology demands a false consciousness that *masks social reality*. And that is exactly what Žižek proposes that the 'anti-essentialism' of Laclau and Mouffe does.

Recall that *Hegemony* marks the climax of an ongoing historical critique of Marxist essentialism on the left. Laclau and Mouffe's work is typical of this critical tendency opposing traditional leftism by rejecting the economism of rigid Marxist theory; Laclau and Mouffe firmly reject the reduction of social change to the 'material' dimension of the economy. Reductivist theory – whether of the later Engels or of Lenin and the Soviets – always crashes up against the problem of subjective intervention, always reduces social change to a predetermined unfolding of historical forces that only problematically leaves room for even revolutionary intervention. Reacting against this kind of Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe embrace Gramsci's 'hegemony' as alternative. Hegemony, at least when taken as an anti-realism, suggests a vision of society in which *any* and *all* explanations of social change theoretically enjoy equal privilege when considered independently of the intervention of social/political discourses. Thus, precisely their opposition to a reductive materialism leads the authors of *Hegemony* to substitute for it a kind of anti-essentialist vision of society as pastiche of viewpoints and identities – to propose the multiculturalist picture.

At least at a first pass, Žižek's project seems much closer to reductivist Marxism in its insistence upon the priority of capitalist economics in explaining the constitution of the contemporary social world. This is, indeed, where Žižek's underscoring of the 'concrete universal' really comes into focus; for precisely the problem with the multiculturalist picture is that it suggests that no factor in social development has explanatory priority. The 'concrete universal', on the contrary, suggests that it is precisely through the priority of a particular element that the universal is formed and emerges. And, it suggests such a priority in a way that in fact avoids the determinism of Marxist orthodoxy – for the 'element' prioritized, swinging between form and content, universal and particular, lacks the ontological consistency of a reductivist materialism. Žižek thus writes in response to Laclau's work:

My point of contention with Laclau . . . is that I do not accept that all elements which enter into hegemonic struggle are in principle equal: in the series of struggles (economic, political, feminist, ecological, ethnic, etc.) there is always one which, while it is part of the chain, secretly overdetermines its very horizon. This contamination of the universal by the particular is 'stronger' than the struggle for hegemony (i.e. for which particular content will hegemonize the universality in question): it structures in advance the very terrain on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony. (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 320)

And, of course, it is the *economic* element that will enjoy this priority for Žižek. Žižek's deduction of this priority for the 'material' derives from his observation of what the multiculturalist picture of society excludes. For all the thinkers' efforts to pose as radicals, the thought of today's 'radical democratic theorists' lacks radicalism and testifies to this lack; for the implicit initial gesture of this thought, no less than traditional 'liberal' ideologies, is 'a certain renunciation and acceptance'. It is, namely, the renunciation of 'the idea of a global change in the fundamental relations in our society'. One could almost add as a preamble to every 'radical' democratic intervention today: 'given that we can't and won't change the economic system that defines social relationships, this is the most that we can do . . .' Thus, as Žižek writes, 'the acceptance of the liberal democratic capitalist framework . . . remains the same, the unquestioned background, in all the proliferation of new (postmodern) subjectivities' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 321).

Effectively, today's theoretical anti-essentialism is nothing less than a mode of such renunciation, a mask for the sublime operations of techno-capitalism. Žižek's theoretical position gains its saliency by condemning the oft-observed tendency of contemporary social and political thought to eschew (or, to eschew even the *possibility of*) grappling with the broadest forces determining life-worlds. In this sense, Žižek's theory

amounts to an attempt to rescue political thought from the obscurantism and abstraction that have marked so much of contemporary academic discourse.

The end of the path Žižek opens in 'Beyond Discourse Analysis', then, seems to be a broad and devastating rejection of both the causes (the 'new social movements') and the theoretical position embraced by *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau and Mouffe stand accused (albeit gently, indirectly) of being ideologues. One must, on this basis, wonder what kind of alliance is really possible between Laclau and Mouffe on the one hand and Žižek on the other or between 'discourse analysis' and Lacanian political theory in general. A careful reading of the texts involved seems to indicate that, in truth, the 'friends' here are really 'enemies' – or should be.

III Chiasmus: utopia vs. ideology critique

Ideology is not only a utopian project of social transformation with no realistic chance of actualization; no less ideological is the anti-utopian stance of those who 'realistically' devalue every global project of social transformation as 'utopian', that is, as unrealistic dreaming and/or harbouring 'totalitarian' potential: today's predominant form of ideological 'closure' takes the precise form of mental block which prevents us from imagining fundamental social change, in the interests of an allegedly 'realistic' and 'mature' attitude.¹²

One might say, at a first pass, that between Mouffe and Laclau on the one hand and Žižek on the other hand we see a sharing out of the shards of Marxist critical theory. At its fullest, say in the hands of a thinker like Herbert Marcuse or Jürgen Habermas, critical Marxism historically combines a vision of a transformed society with the exposure and criticism of ideology (the falsity of truth-claims distorted by social position). Indeed, utopia, within this tradition, could be said to be nothing other than attainment of a social state where the contradictions productive of ideology would no longer exist. Now we find the 'radical democratic theory' of Laclau and Mouffe inheriting the utopian moment and the psychoanalytic theory of Žižek taking up ideology critique.

But such a position would seem to imply a kind of political pessimism or even quietism on Žižek's part. His 'half' of critical theory demands sacrifice of precisely the residual utopianism that can 'inspire coordinated political action', to use Habermas's phrase. Read in that way, Žižek's work would be continuous with the position of the late Adorno – a reasoned pessimism about the contemporary possibility of transformative practice combined with a retrieval of the *knowledge* generated by critique.

Interestingly, however, Žižek anticipates such a reading of his work and, particularly in his more recent writings, has been at some pains to *refute* it. He casts considerable derision at those who engage in the ‘masochistic ritual of denouncing the “totalitarian potential” of [the left’s] past’ arguing that such a theoretical position simply works to the benefit of ‘conformist dwarfs whose self-complacency triumphs in today’s scoundrel time over Leftist “utopianism”’ (1991: 270). And while before the past couple of years one could maintain that the lack of any sustained political directives within Žižek’s work argued for the impossibility of constructing any substitute ‘utopia’, given his insight, the appearance in 1999 of *The Ticklish Subject* disallows such a view. As Žižek himself writes, *The Ticklish Subject* is – beneath its philosophical surface as a defense of a radicalized Cartesianism – ‘first and foremost an engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism’ (Žižek, 1999: 4).

In this spirit, but as an *extension* of what he is really committed to, Žižek even goes so far as to endorse Laclau and Mouffe’s call for a new ‘radical democratic imaginary’.¹³ In other words, despite the link that he himself has revealed between the ‘imaginary’ projection of utopian contents and ideology, Žižek underwrites the need for *some* new impulse toward radical social change.

III: 1

To understand why Žižek does not consider himself a pessimist, we must consider *his* fragment of critical theory (ideology critique) to be more than a shard. Žižek, in fact, returns to a revised version of Marx’s own theory of history. Beginning with the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 and continuing through the *Anti-Dühring*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels explained the program of Marxist communism in contrast to the ‘utopian socialism’ of their predecessors. While the earlier socialists invariably depended upon a ‘utopian’ or abstract negation of present conditions to provide content to their vision of a transformed society, Marx and Engels questioned precisely the efficacy of such an image. Above all, what they called into question was the radicality of such utopianism: in effect any vision of a transformed world produced from *within* such a society necessarily carries within itself the limited historical situation of the visionary. Thus, for Marx and Engels, no ‘radical democratic imaginary’ (to use the term favored by Laclau and Mouffe) is possible at present. But this assertion is, of course, not meant to forswear the possibility of revolutionary transformation. Quite the contrary, the impossibility of ‘utopia’ is embraced precisely in order to

make room for the possibility of revolution. The impossibility of a 'utopia' is the potential for radical critique and radical change.

Žižek revives the argument form introduced by Marx and Engels in their critique of their socialist predecessors. Effectively, Žižek's response to Laclau, Mouffe and other 'postmodern' political theorists is to deny the coherence of a political thought predicated upon the possibility of projecting a 'utopia' unclouded by the prejudices of the society occupied by the theorist. But, like Marx and Engels too, this critique is not meant to forswear the possibility of a revolutionary transformation. Quite the contrary, the impossibility of 'utopia' is embraced in both cases precisely in order to make room for the possibility of radical social transformation. Seen in parallel to the Marxist condemnation of parochial socialism, Žižek's anti-utopianism is in kind fundamentally different from the form of it constructed against the foil of an ever threatening 'totalitarianism', the form that animates the 'renunciation' of radicalism in contemporary political thought.¹⁴

But, while Žižek's Marx, we must recall, is not the Marx of the Second International it is also not the Marx of May '68, the 'utopian' Marx revived in the light of the Paris Manuscripts. The 'fact' of contemporary experience from which Žižek's political analyses take flight is the constriction of the political *imagination* that differentiates our era from previous ones. Whether we speak of the 'radical' theorists of academe or of liberal politicians, today's public discourse is unique in modern history in its inability to make the determining conditions under which we live *worthy of question*. But this withering of the 'imaginary' is not simply a *mistake* or even avoidable. In a moment of brutal honesty, Žižek admits in *The Ticklish Subject* that 'maybe it is not really possible, at least not in the foreseeable future' to 'undermine the global capitalist system' because we cannot imagine any alternative to it (Žižek, 1999: 352).

What is possible, as it was possible for Marx and Engels, is to project, from a position *immanent* to the society of global capitalism, the emergence of concrete contradictions. And that is precisely what Žižek, at least in recent texts, offers us as partial replacement of such a 'democratic imaginary'. Global capitalism is sliding into the crisis that Marx and Engels predicted for its industrial forebear. Thus, Žižek writes,

... far from accepting the New World Order as an inexorable process which allows only for moderate palliative measures, I continue to think, in the 'old' Marxist vein, that today's capitalism, in its very triumph, is breeding new 'contradictions' which are potentially even more explosive than those of standard industrial capitalism. A series of 'irrationalities' immediately comes to mind: the result of the breathtaking growth of productivity in the last few decades is rising unemployment, with the productivity the long-term perspective that developed societies will need

only 20 per cent of their workforce to reproduce themselves, with the remaining 80 per cent reduced to the status of a surplus from a purely economic point of view; the result of decolonization is that multinationals treat even their own country of origin as just another colony; the result of globalization and the rise of the 'global village' is the ghettoization of whole strata of the population; the result of the much-praised 'disappearance of the working class' is the emergence of millions of manual workers labouring in the Third World sweatshops, out of our delicate Western sight. . . . The capitalist system is thus approaching its inherent limit and self-cancellation: for the majority of the population, the dream of the virtual 'frictionless capitalism' (Bill Gates) is turning into a nightmare in which the fate of millions is decided in hyper-reflexive speculation on futures. (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 322)

While Žižek will refrain from constructing a determinist theory of history predicting the inevitable downfall of the capitalist system, he does find a crisis immanent within the apparently smooth workings of the new capitalism. As I write these words, the United States has just been disturbed by the events of 11 September 2001 and declared a 'war on terrorism' – a war that, in its ambition to 'wipe out' the very threat of terror, promises precisely the kind of crisis that is implied by the 'contradictions' Žižek points out. The 'hope' implicit in Žižek's writing, like the hope locked into Marxist 'dialectical materialism', is that the crisis implicit in capital's 'contradictions' will broadly reveal the essential *questionability* of social forms that otherwise appear to be inevitable within available political discourses. Only as the result of such a revelation can there be a real shift in the very terrain of politics. But today such a shift does, suddenly, appear as at least *possible* in ways that even in August of 2001 it did not seem to be. In this shifting of the landscape, we detect which remains of optimism can survive the demise of the 'radical democratic imaginary'.

III: 2

The bond that I am implying between Žižek and the Marxist critique of utopian socialism might be extended still further. Recall how the rejection of Marxism in post '68 European thought went hand in hand with a new language of political revolution, a language that conceived it in terms of the radical contingency of the present. Typically, the 'hope' for a transformed society was conceived by radically rethinking historicity, wrenching it away from the teleologies of historical reason popular since Hegel. Symptomatic in this regard was *The Mirror of Production*, Jean Baudrillard's 1972 *Auseinandersetzung* with Marxism. In that text, Baudrillard criticized Marx and Engels's polemic against 'utopian socialism', claiming that precisely as 'unscientific' the utopians

(and not the Marxists) represented what (in 1972) remained viable in radical political discourse:

The cursed poet, non-official art, and utopian writings in general, by giving a current and immediate content to man's liberation, should be the very speech of communism, its direct prophecy. They are only its bad conscience precisely because in them something of man is immediately realized, because they object without pity to the 'political' dimension of the revolution, which is merely the dimension of its final postponement. They are the equivalent, at the level of discourse, of the savage social movements that were born in a symbolic situation of rupture (symbolic, which means non-universalized, non-dialectical, non-rationalized in the mirror of an imaginary objective history). This is why poetry (not Art) was fundamentally connected only with the utopian socialist movements, with 'revolutionary romanticism,' and never with Marxism as such. It is because the content of liberated man is, at bottom, of less importance than the abolition of the separation of the present and the future. The abolition of this form of time, the dimension of sublimation, makes it impossible to pardon the idealists of the dialectic, who are at the same time the realists of politics.¹⁵

What remains of utopia here in Baudrillard is a contentless expansion of the present into the future, an expansion which is conceived as 'poetic'. Utopian thought is poetic (i.e. 'symbolic' in the sense introduced by Mauss and Bataille) insofar as it can never be drained of the symbolic material by which it is articulated (the discourses, stories, experiments, etc.) and reduced to abstract meaning. In this way it substitutes a 'hope' beyond hopes or ideals (conceived as meanings), thus challenging precisely the means-ends structure of rationalist discourse. Utopian discourse does not simply place an 'ideal' at another time or place like a carrot dangling from a stick. Rather for Baudrillard utopianism – the utopianism of the 'non-scientific' ones – 'abolishes' 'the separation of the present and the future' precisely by making the proposed future *present* in its discourse. To the extent that utopian writing aims to inspire or to make vivid its vision it is more than 'science'.

This expanded present underwritten by the materiality of discourse is, of course, precisely not 'political' in the traditional sense implying concrete and specific institutions, etc. Baudrillard calls his residual utopianism 'poetic' in contrasting it with the "political" dimension of the revolution'. That is, this utopian vision cannot be conceived as a political *end*, since it is precisely such teleological historicity that the 'poetic' resists. As a result, then, Baudrillard's utopianism is only 'utopian' (in the tradition of Plato and Thomas More) in a vestigial sense: it refuses to project a 'state' that could act as the goal of political life but attempts instead to recast such life from within. No state is hoped for but rather the stateless between of all states.

III: 3

What is interesting about Žižek's work is that it *both* accepts this anti-teleological recasting of utopia *and* refuses Baudrillard's rehabilitation of utopian socialism. Žižek can take such a position because he applauds the desubstantialization of utopia implied by its interpretation as 'present' while refusing the *immanence* inherent in the 'utopian' ideal embraced by Baudrillard and numerous other French thinkers since 1968.¹⁶ What he accepts is that, as an event, 'utopia' is neither an idea nor even a substance but rather the momentary rupture of systematicity itself. For Žižek, the problem with the discourse of revolutionary event is its tendency – despite the critique of teleology that it implies – to *fetishize* the present, to recast it, precisely as Baudrillard intends, as *aesthetic object*. Such a fetishization, however, exactly defeats the very virtue of the critique of utopian teleology. That about revolution which makes it through the filter of 'the present' is precisely what suits the commodification of everyday life, what seems to blunt the harrow of radical transformation into an instrument of pleasure. The revolutionary event is reduced to a non-threatening 'happening' – to an invigorating life 'experience' (in German an *Erlebnis*) that can be packaged and repeated in various forms. One need hardly tell again here the familiar story of the fate of the 1960s in the 1970s – when the sexual revolution became the promise of promiscuity, when ecological consciousness became 'Earth Day', and when the projects of political liberation became 'consciousness-raising'. What survives when the revolution becomes aestheticized is precisely what suits such contemporary filmic visions of the 1960s as *Austin Powers* or *That Thing You Do* – what can be easily packaged as commodity.

What allows the utopia of the present to be thus fetishized? Effectively, the falsity of the position it implies. In *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek argues that the 'moment' of transition between symbolic systems, the moment constitutive of the system from 'without', does not really *exist* – in the sense of a possible appearance – at all; or, it exists *only* as it operates *within* the constituted system. Žižek uses the Freudian/Lacanian idea of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) to explain this, reminding us of Freud's case of the 'Wolfman' for whom the trauma of witnessing as infant a parental *coitus a tergo* is at first no trauma at all. There was simply no symbolic system, no language which it could disrupt. Žižek reminds us that 'it was only years later, with the further elaboration of the child's sexual "theories", that it acquired its traumatic status: only at this later stage did it become possible for the child to "do something with it", to fit it into a symbolic frame in the form of a traumatic wound' (1991: 222).

Now, precisely because of deferred action, the model presented by the political theorists of the event proves wrong: Žižek suggests that we

must reverse the 'common-sense' idea of a spontaneous and free present opposed to the omnipotent backward gaze of the historian. This, because

the logic of Freud's 'deferred action' does not consist in the subsequent 'gentrification' of a traumatic encounter by means of its transformation into a normal component of our symbolic universe, but in the almost exact opposite of it – something that was *at first* perceived as a meaningless, neutral event changes *retroactively*, after the advent of a new symbolic network determines the subject's place of enunciation, into a trauma that cannot be integrated into this network. (1991: 221)

Deferred action thereby allows Žižek to redefine the utopian moment in his own thought. Having apparently ascribed to a utopia of the event as embraced by many of his generation, Žižek subtracts out from that utopia the theory of historicity that usually lends allure to such a vision. Žižek aims his political theory directly away from *experience of the present*. The 'hope' in Žižek is not that individuals will be able to 'live more fully' by remaining in the immediacy of present life. As we have seen, *that hope* is precisely the 'lure' fed to us by late capitalism – the wish that the 'radical democratic imaginary' of Laclau and Mouffe ideologizes. Under the lens of *Nachträglichkeit*, we are forced to revise our understanding of 'present' and 'event', to de-substantialize them and redefine them *relationally*. That is, the event gains its importance only in the way that it refashions past and future, that it ruptures the certainties of systematized understanding.

The uncovering of the primordial trauma ready to transform history is the genuinely revolutionary possibility, what Žižek refers to as the 'act' by which the universality of the symbolic system is forced open to allow freedom.¹⁷ If we can speak of a utopian 'ideal' or 'purpose' here it is precisely *not* the presence of the present but rather the 'moment' of critical labor, the act by which traumatic 'primary repression' is made/allowed to transform a social/political world. If the 'moment' survives as something upon which to set our hopes, it is only as an eccentric site for a kind of *work* – only, first, as pointing beyond itself to an origin to which, second, the critic must rebind it. Doubly armored against reduction to a fetish, the revolutionary moment escapes the reliability of the image.

Indeed, in its goal of metamorphosing historical understanding, the labor of the 'act' is closer to a retrospective *knowledge* than a 'happening', a knowledge which uncovers the contingency of decisions already made and thus *produces* a revolution. This, no doubt, allows a certain inspirational function to Žižek's discourse: indeed, one can even say that he does *encourage* something like a revolutionary moment. But the justification for such encouragement lies not in any *experience* but

rather in the *transformation* one hopes to generate – to such an extent that we must value equally ‘non-revolutionary’ situations that nonetheless expose the truth of identity. Žižek’s work aims at the fullest possible exposure of the self-deceptions by which every society, every culture, constitutes itself as such. Especially at moments of crisis and change, both past and future can be pushed to deliver up the *freedom* they hide.

Thus, the transcendental priority of the ‘gap’ of subjectivity, its revolutionary constitution of all that is, does not imply the possibility that such a gap might stand by itself as image of a transformed world. Indeed, it is such a way of putting the limitation of utopia in Žižek that points us toward what I take to be the *unacknowledged* fulcrum of his overall critical position: his political theory can protect a certain hope for radical change – indeed, depending upon how one uses that word, a ‘vision’ of such transformation – but its precise limit is the *imaginary* that Mouffe and Laclau and even Žižek himself at unguarded moments use to name it. We may entertain hope, but it is precisely *not* a new imaginary, radically democratic or otherwise.

I should emphasize here that Žižek himself does not make this distinction, that, at this point, I turn from explication to critique of his work. My argument, moreover, pertains to more than a couple of passages where Žižek (wrongly, from my point of view) endorses Laclau and Mouffe’s assignment to contemporary political theory of the task of formulating precisely such an ‘imaginary’. Žižek’s ambition in *The Ticklish Subject* and more recent texts of ‘reformulating’ a ‘leftist, anti-capitalist political project’ (Žižek, 1999: 4) is clearly at the least programmatic and even apparently systematic. But political programs, systems and manifestoes inevitably cross over into the sphere of the ‘imaginary’. If such is the case and if I am right about the implications of Žižek’s critique, then such ambitions transgress the limits that Žižek’s own thought imposes. ‘The imaginary’ is a boundary, I would suggest, that forbids precisely the discursive forms that we usually associate with the ‘visionary’ aspect of political theory. When it is forbidden, no longer can theory generate the certainties of the ‘program’ or ‘manifesto’.

To understand this limitation requires expounding more precisely the connotations of the term ‘imaginary’ as it was first formulated in contemporary thought and as Žižek wields it – in Lacan’s psychoanalytic usage.¹⁸ Recall that, for Lacan, the limiting nature of imaginary life derives from its false claim to binary closure. The infant before the mirror in the famous ‘mirror stage’ is able first to control its motions because the image offered to it seems finitely graspable.¹⁹ On the other hand, however, precisely the falsity of this self-sufficiency, this closure of the image, leads Lacan to locate the origins of aggression in the infant’s relationship to the very image that empowers it. That is, the

imaginary is *apparently* structured in the manner of *gestalt* diagrams – by simple oppositions like that between ‘figure’ and ‘field’. What can be *imagined* is precisely limited (as it is inspired) by the illusion of closure that such binarism grants the person.

To recall the Lacanian understanding of the imaginary is to understand the severe limits that Žižek’s thought imposes upon that ‘visionary’ function named both in Lefort and in Laclau and Mouffe by that term. Political inspiration is possible, indeed vital, but it can only be the inspiration of the critical act – the act by which the ‘event’ is put to work in transforming the symbolic totality. The limit to Žižek’s thought that I am suggesting here is *not* that it places too heavy a burden upon the shoulders of abstract theorists – as though criticism were only accomplished by Žižek and his scholarly colleagues. In one of Žižek’s most powerful analyses of recent political events, he embraces the position of the ‘alternative’ left in the German revolution of 1989, the *Neues Forum*. Here Žižek praises the group for its search for a ‘third way’ between ‘really existing socialism’ and capitalism. It turns out that there was *no* such alternative, that the ‘truth’ of the *Neues Forum* was precisely not what they thought it to be: nonetheless, claims Žižek, the projection of such an alternative amounted to an insistence upon that ‘trauma’ in social identity that otherwise disappeared. As Žižek puts it, ‘*the fiction of a “third way” was the only point at which social antagonism was not obliterated*’ (Žižek, 1994: 229).

The peculiarity of the German left in and after 1989 – that it was able to transform society only to the extent that it held onto an actually false hope – indicates both the political effectiveness of Žižek’s version of critique and its limitations. On the one hand, within the sphere of political action itself, the radicals in *Neues Forum* effected precisely the kind of revolutionary criticism that Žižek embraces. Critique is not only (or even primarily) the work of academics. On the other hand, the very distortion imposed upon this critique (that it could discover the truth of the political only through factual falsity) emblemizes the limitations of a utopianism shorn of the imaginary. Utopia without the power of the image: surely this is a thought entirely unable to achieve the ‘mobilizing’ effects that Habermas has rightly sought in utopianism. Thus, while we can certainly agree with Žižek that his work provides an alternative to the anti-utopianism so universal in today’s political theory, we must also insist that the strictures we must place on utopia here also prevent it from being very *effective*. And perhaps that is why the reader is frustrated in efforts to find the ‘program’ *announced* by Žižek in *The Ticklish Subject*. The elliptical debates and readings that make up *The Ticklish Subject* may help us to construct Žižek’s position, but they hardly offer the ‘radical democratic imaginary’ whose construction he seems to promise.

I would give the last word here to none other than Ernesto Laclau, who in a dialogue with Žižek printed in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* responds to Žižek's attack on his theory. He argues that Žižek's own position cannot really produce a coherent politics. Žižek's attacks on capitalism, Laclau claims, 'amount to empty talk' without a vision of an alternative to capitalism (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 206). This is particularly the case for Laclau in the light of the historical failure of the Marxist alternative: clearly Žižek does not mean what Marx and Engels meant by the 'end of capitalism', neither the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' nor the 'abolition' of 'market mechanisms'. But without his meaning *that* or something equivalently imaginable, Žižek's position remains purely negative, purely a way of registering a *discomfort* with the world as it is. Such a registration, however, cannot provide more than a kind of 'voice in the wilderness'. What, after all, does it mean to be 'against' capitalism if that suggests nothing about what one would change in it or substitute for it? A theory unable to offer such a substitution will be unable to connect with or articulate the concrete struggles of oppressed individuals. The thing that empowers concrete struggles, that allows them to grow and join with the political efforts of others, is precisely a *program*, a vision of the future. Indeed, there is, Laclau might well say, something *narcissistic* about the purity of the intellectual position Žižek stakes out – classically unable to escape from academic analysis to engage at a level of genuine solidarity with social movements. This is not to reject Žižek's critical position – which may provide the most trenchant analysis available today of the reasons for the failure of contemporary Leftist politics – but it is to insist that, Žižek's protests to the contrary, no clear path to the future emerges from it.

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Notes

- 1 Much more common have been readings within the field of 'Cultural Studies'. While many of these readings are quite interesting, they have largely evaded the broader question of what Žižek has to say about the political and about political theory, remaining instead largely bound up with matters of film theory or, at broadest, questions about Lacan and feminism.
- 2 This association can be traced back to Žižek's review of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985 ('*La société n'existe pas*', *L'Age*, Paris, October–December 1985), but its most visible fruits would have to be Laclau's preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

- published in a series edited by himself and Mouffe (London and New York: Verso, 1989) and the inclusion of an essay of Žižek's in Laclau's *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990). On this piece by Žižek, which is, in fact, a radical critique of *Hegemony*, see my discussion below.
- 3 See, for example, the introduction to *Sublime*, where Žižek praises *Hegemony* (and Mouffe and Laclau's work in general) as having produced a political theory that is adequate to the challenge posed by totalitarianism: 'It is the merit of Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that they have, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, developed a theory of the social field founded on such a notion of antagonism – on an acknowledgement of an original "trauma", an impossible kernel which resists symbolization, totalization, symbolic integration' (Laclau, 1989: 5–6).
 - 4 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985).
 - 5 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 219–21, Dominick LaCapra, *History, Theory, Trauma: Representing the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 206 and Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe: the Radical Democratic Imaginary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 75–9.
 - 6 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (1993).
 - 7 Ernesto Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political', in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 2000: 211.
 - 8 This phrase is first used in *Hegemony* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 125) and becomes the title of a brief but important essay in Laclau, 1990: 89–92.
 - 9 The text, 'Beyond Discourse Analysis', was originally delivered at a conference in 1987 at which Laclau and Mouffe were present. It is reprinted as an appendix in Laclau, 1990.
 - 10 'Whenever we use the category of "subject" in this text, we will do so in the sense of "subject positions" within a discursive structure' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 115).
 - 11 Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (1994: 4).
 - 12 Slavoj Žižek, 'Holding the Place' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 324).
 - 13 *ibid.*: 325. The passage is worth quoting at some length: 'Today, in the face of this Leftist knavery, it is more important than ever to hold this utopian place of the global alternative open, even if it remains empty, living on borrowed time, awaiting the content to fill it in. I fully agree with Laclau that after the exhaustion of both the social democratic welfare state imaginary and the "really-existing-Socialist" imaginary, the Left does need a new imaginary (a new mobilizing global vision). Today, however, the outdatedness of the welfare state and socialist imaginaries is a cliché – the real dilemma is what to do with – how the Left is to relate to – the predominant liberal democratic imaginary. It is my contention that Laclau's and Mouffe's "radical democracy" comes all too close to merely "radicalizing" this liberal democratic imaginary, while remaining within its horizon.'
 - 14 We have already seen how the structure Žižek indicates through both the Lacanian 'Real' and the Hegelian 'concrete universal' prevents any reduction of Žižek's Marx to the 'dumb' coordinates of 'scientific socialism', to that 'economic essentialism' thoroughly repudiated by history. While this is not

the place to develop such an insight in any depth, it may be that *the* most valuable service offered by Žižek's political thought is a radical reinterpretation of 'dialectical materialism', one that saves it from the sclerosis that had been threatening it. There are numerous places in Žižek's *oeuvre* where he develops, at least provisionally, such a reading of the Marxist theory of history. See, in particular, Žižek, 1991: 250–70 (where dialectical materialism is interpreted in terms of Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*), and *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism* (2001: 190–3), where the status of economic 'materiality' is compared with the unconscious wish in Freud's *Traumdeutung*.

- 15 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. with Introduction by Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1975), p. 164.
- 16 If one begins from the language of the 'expanded present' or of the 'event' as substitute for a realist utopianism, one must see a broad stream of European thought reaching back (before May 1968, to be sure) to Walter Benjamin and forward to such contemporary thinkers as Alain Badiou, Andrew Benjamin, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy.
- 17 See, for example, Chapter 4 of Žižek, 2001: 'Melancholy and the Act'.
- 18 While the 'imaginary' invoked by Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek derives originally from Lacan, it stems more directly from Claude Lefort, who sometimes uses it to mean simply the remainder of utopian vision after utopia's critique – the inspirational or visionary element of political life. Lefort, however, in admitting the provenance of such language in psychoanalysis, also confesses to a 'loose' appropriation of it. His 'imaginary' is not Lacan's imaginary – a sphere largely of paralysis and narcissism. See, for example, his conflation of 'imaginary' and 'symbolic' in his discussion of Marx, 'The Genesis of Ideology in Modern Societies', in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. and intro. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 195.
- 19 See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' and 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis', both reprinted in *Écrits: a Selection*, trans. (from the French) by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton, 1977).

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