

Anti-Capitalist Objections to the Postcolonial: Some Conciliatory Remarks on Žižek and Context

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The ambiguous place of the postcolonial in any critique of contemporary global capital is a book-length topic in itself, and an attempt to clarify some of its parameters risks a number of pitfalls. There is, first of all, the vagueness of the term postcolonial, not so much a theory as a multiply-centred field from which different structures of analysis have emerged. Disagreement in the field over central issues such as agency, national identity, and the role of capital in cultural influence, which stem from the tension between poststructuralism and Marxism, the two major influences on postcolonial thought, has internally fractured the discipline in a number of interesting ways.¹ A second danger lies in the specific response to Marxist/post-Marxist criticisms of the postcolonial—namely, the risk of a possible complicity in late capitalist/neo-imperialist ideology through such gestures as an uncritical re-affirmation of the value of difference, an ontological sense of charity towards the semantic self-determination of other cultures that bully other nations, or, most pertinent to Slavoj Žižek's case, a demand for the ethical which would wholly ignore the proximity to self-violence and prohibition a phrase such as “the ethical” has for a Freudian/Lacanian vocabulary.² In other words, a careful defense of certain postcolonial gestures in the face of charges of complicity with structures of oppression—the postcolonial as a lubricant of late capitalism or a pressure valve used to prevent the whole system from exploding—must avoid appealing to the very concepts so central to its alleged collusion.

To some degree, this defense will fail at the outset, for one of the definitions presupposed in this essay will be that of the postcolonial as an historically global analysis of modern capitalism that gives equal weight to the semantic, economic, psychological, and military op-

pression of subjects. The notion of the postcolonial as an historically inflected critique of hegemony will be unpalatable to Žižek in part because its siding with the victim of European/European settler imperialism involves a de-traumatizing “prettification” of the Other (*In Defence* 165), and mainly because, for Žižek, such side-taking misses the point of examining the colonizer/colonized conflict. His objective is not simply to take one side or the other but rather to see how their asymmetrical relationship to one another reveals an antagonism within their own identities.

The aim of this essay, therefore, is not to propose some ridiculous synonymy between the postcolonial and Žižekan critiques of capitalism but rather to suggest how both discourses might usefully interrupt one another.³ I will attempt this in three sections: an examination of a series of postcolonial moments in Žižek’s work; a consideration of some of Žižek’s objections to the “benign universe” of postcolonial studies (Žižek, “A Plea” 548); and a reflection on Žižek’s use and abuse of history, as well as a proposal for where a more nuanced reading of the postcolonial canon may be of use to him.

I. Žižek’s Postcolonial Moments: Superficial Resemblances?

If we were to pretend that Žižek is a postcolonial theorist and then go on to find moments in his vast *oeuvre* where this claim might be corroborated, where would we look? A number of possible locations stand out, but the first is the nature of Žižek’s exegesis itself. How analogous to Žižek’s Lacanian habits of interpretation is the postcolonial strategy of teasing out marginal references to the Orient in Western canonical texts in order to relocate them to the centre as the tacit ground of the work? Žižek often discovers significance in supposedly unimportant scenes in films or texts. How closely does his hermeneutical re-orientation of these works’ co-ordinates mirror, say, Edward Said’s re-designation of an Austen novel’s central significance in a side reference to a Caribbean slave plantation? (Said 59)

The Žižekan diagnosis of what he often refers to as the “hole” in the official narrative superficially resembles the postcolonialist’s identification of hegemonic gaps where the colonizer’s narrative encounters mo-

ments of unintelligibility that only the subaltern's narrative can make intelligible (Žižek, "The Counterbook" 149). As Žižek writes:

Many peace-loving Israelis confess to their perplexity: they just want peace and a shared life with Palestinians; they are ready to make concessions, but why do Palestinians hate them so much, why the brutal suicide bombings that kill innocent wives and children? The thing to do here is of course to supplement this story with its counter-story, the story of what it means to be a Palestinian in the occupied territories, subjected to hundreds of regulations in the bureaucratic microphysics of power. ("The Counterbook" 149)

The disagreement between Gayatri Spivak and the rest of the Subaltern Studies group over the ontological status of the subaltern's unearthed narrative (repressed reality or alternative fiction?⁴) is mirrored in Žižek's imagined responses to the Israeli narrative, which he views not as a "postmodern dispersal into a multitude of local narratives" but a "redoubling in a hidden narrative" (Žižek, "The Counterbook" 148). One significant difference between these two versions of unearthing lies in what happens in their aftermath: for Žižek, the Israeli exclusion of the Palestinian Real is precisely the lack through which the identity of the Israelis is constituted.⁵ In at least some versions of the postcolonial, the "counter-story" is articulated in order to enrich and diversify the official narrative rather than force it to traumatically face the antagonisms of its own ontologically split subject. For Žižek, then, postcolonial interpretation merits the same disdainful reaction as a deconstructive approach, which he views as an incomplete analysis, an exegesis which is able to locate the exotic anamorphic blot in the Western canonical text and, looking awry, understand it to be the hidden, non-Western counter-story in the narrative, but which cannot develop this recognition of the marginal into a profounder understanding of the structure's identity as a whole.⁶

A second, less philosophically complex way in which Žižek superficially displays all the symptoms of a postcolonial theorist is a certain Third World empathy in his approach that is attributable not merely

to a Marxist distrust of G-8 capitalism but also perhaps to his sense of a Slovenian/Balkan invisibility in History. Žižek rebukes Timothy Garton Ash for not including “at least one name from the Big Seven—somebody, say, like Kissinger” in his ranking of the world’s worst war criminals (*Welcome to the Desert* 47); likewise, Žižek is wonderfully eloquent in his criticism of Fortress Europe, as the enforced borders of the European Union have come to be called, and of the Italian government which wants to imprison a group of Tunisian fisherman for rescuing forty-four Algerian immigrants from drowning at sea (*First As Tragedy* 47). If Žižek shares anything with the postcolonial, it is an unwillingness to accept either the historiographical hegemony of First World power (i.e., who the “bad guys” are) or the arbitrary and racist parameters of their jurisdiction (the First World ability to illegalize on a whim).

Somewhat less frequently, Žižek sees the imposition of capitalist democratic values on non-Western countries as a form of “cultural imperialism,” a term which creates some tension with his insistence—expressed elsewhere—for Westerners not to be ashamed of the “emancipatory heritage” left behind in postcolonial countries (*First As Tragedy* 55, 117). His awareness of how contemporary feminists like Catherine Mackinnon are “always ready to legitimize U. S. Army interventions with feminist concerns” is not necessarily postcolonial in itself (Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert* 67)—one hundred and fifty years earlier, Karl Marx was already discerning similar strategies in “pan-slavic propaganda” about the Ottomans (Marx Aveling 20)—but it does resemble the analysis of “white men saving brown women from brown men” which Spivak presents (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 287), in that both Spivak and Žižek see human rights issues as coarse excuses for imperialist intervention. Perhaps a more postcolonial aspect of Žižek’s *Ideologiekritik* emerges in his criticism of Bhutan’s recently released happiness index, which has been assessed according to an imported list of United Nations criteria such as psychological well-being and health (Žižek, *First As Tragedy* 55), even if his criticism targets late capitalism’s hegemonic exportation of its own notions of happiness rather than any obliteration of “different kinds of knowledge, new epistemologies, from other cultures” (Young 15).

Finally, Žižek partially replicates the standard postcolonial observation of how the West projects the products of its own repression onto a non-Western, frequently Muslim Other: “Every feature attributed to the [Islamic] Other is already present at the heart of the USA” (*Welcome to the Desert* 43). In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, “‘normal’ outbursts of American patriotism” and right-wing Christian fundamentalists are seen by Žižek as American versions of Jihadism and the Taliban; Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson’s condemnation of liberal America is the same as “the one from the Muslim Other” (*Welcome to the Desert* 44). Both Žižek and the postcolonial theorist share an awareness of the projected constructedness of a Muslim Other; they seem to part ways, however, in their subsequent development of the idea. Following Michel Foucault, a thinker like Said attends not to whether the projection is true or false but to what practices and discourses the Othering enables and legitimizes. Žižek, although equally uninterested in questioning the truthfulness of such images, instead concentrates on how such Muslim Othering leads once more to the ontological split within each subject, and how clash-of-civilizations clichés illustrate the idea that “the true clash is the clash within each civilization” (*Welcome to the Desert* 44). Of particular significance is how a common Lacanian/Foucauldian disbelief in extra-discursive objective reality results in the same displacement of attention, albeit in fundamentally different directions: reflections on mechanisms of societal power for the postcolonialist and insights into the ontology of the subject for Žižek.

II. Žižek’s Objections to the Postcolonial

In his attack on Žižek, Jeremy Gilbert rightly asserts that Žižek makes practically no reference to any named theorist or book in his disparaging treatment of the postcolonial, a term which seems to work for Žižek as a broad lumping together of Levinasian otherness, multiculturalism, and cultural studies-style depoliticised analysis, reiterated in an international framework (Gilbert 66). Less convincing is Gilbert’s argument that “none of the key figures in the formation of [postcolonial studies][,] . . . Said, Spivak, Bhabha[,], . . . could be accused of doing [what Žižek says they do]” namely, proffering “individualist liberalism

for radical political positions” (66–67). The wonderfully free-floating hybridity of Homi K. Bhabha (which Aijaz Ahmad famously views as capitalist alienation re-packaged [18]), the hostility of both Said and Spivak to communism (and, indeed, the latter’s association of socialism with imperialism⁷), not to mention the redoubtable manner in which all three theorists have become canonized figures within academic institutions over a period coinciding with the rise of neo-liberalism, might well provide Gilbert with a tenable argument for the existence of a capital-friendly postcolonialism.

Žižek maintains three objections to the postcolonial. The first concerns an alleged postcolonial reduction of material and economic problems to issues of otherness and tolerance, a perceived psychologising of real political problems which ultimately distracts from more concrete, less palatable explanations of oppression:

The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, postcolonial studies tends to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities’ right to narrate their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms that repress otherness, so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance toward the Other and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance toward the “Stranger in Ourselves,” in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves. The politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudopschoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas. (Žižek, “A Plea” 545–46)

Žižek’s charge contains a great deal of truth. It is probably a redundant gesture to chide him for an ignorance of the bitter family quarrels within postcolonial theory over the years, which could almost merit its division into two schools of thought: one capital-friendly, the other decidedly hostile. Bringing Levinasian examinations of otherness to a situation such as the Israeli-Palestine conflict or the L.A. riots of 1993 certainly runs the risk of de-politicization, if de-politicization means the non-consideration of any material or economic factors (e.g., military superiority,

levels of unemployment) which might implicate democratic capitalism as a cause of these conflicts. Thus Žižek's 2002 argument in favour of a "proper dose of economic reductionism" in considering Islam's relations with the West is a valid response to what he perceives as the postcolonial overemphasis on the psychoanalytical/metaphysical framework of the West's discourses on the Islamic Other (*Welcome to the Desert* 44). That Žižek adopts positions in later texts (such as *On Violence*) that seriously compromise this stance will be examined in a moment. More immediately, the question arises of how Žižek, as a Lacanian political theorist, is able to evaluate the perceived postcolonial shift in emphasis from a real "politico-economic struggle" into a "pseudopschoanalytic drama." Žižek's commitment to a Lacanian perception of reality as always "over-determined by the symbolic texture within which it appears" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 220) is a central problem in his evaluation. Žižek's belief that "our knowing of reality is embedded in reality itself" (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 28) problematizes his condemnation of the postcolonial for privileging one strand of the symbolic texture over another. If our perception of "politico-economic" circumstances is every bit as embedded in the symbolic fabric of reality as "pseudopschoanalytical" explanations, then why is discussing nineteenth-century European images of the tribal any more misleading than reporting the activities of mining corporations in West Bengal?

One response to this issue might lie in the Žižekan/Lacanian tenet that, even if the Real cannot be represented (precisely because it is that which resists representation), its contours may be intuited by its effects or the resistant symbolization generated by its traumatic imminence. This faintly apophatic strategy of knowing something through its effects—of grasping what Lacan called those "points of impasse . . . which show the Real yielding to the symbolic" (Stavrakakis 288)—enables us to "encircle the Real," to use Stavrakakis' phrase (288). In other words, a curiously empirical notion of distance justifies the privileging of economic circumstances over cultural explanations as being somehow nearer the truth of the Real.⁸ This introduction of a negative intuition may help address some epistemological questions concerning the attempt to speak about the Lacanian Real, but it still does not justify why,

for Žižek, postcolonial attempts to explain phenomena should be taken less seriously than “politico-economic” approaches. The most obvious way of answering this concern is to see the Žižekan Real as being, at least in certain moments, close to the movement of capital; Žižek, in his dialogue with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, comes close to such a position himself: “insofar as we conceive of the politico-ideological resignification in the terms of the struggle for hegemony, today’s Real which sets a limit to resignification is Capital” (*Contingency* 223). If the Real is capital, then Žižek’s preference for economic analysis and condemnation of the postcolonial’s airy-fairy “pseudopschoanalyzing” becomes clearer, if somewhat more conventional.

Complicatedly, however, Žižek does not always analyse phenomena in this way: in his interpretation of the Paris riots, for example, he seems to reverse his own objection and, eschewing socio-economic explanations of the riots, opts for an answer superficially closer to “pseudopschoanalysis” than anything else:

The Paris outbursts were thus not rooted in any kind of concrete socio-economic protest, still less in an assertion of Islamic fundamentalism. . . . The riots were simply a direct effort to gain visibility. . . .

The conservatives emphasise the clash of civilizations and, predictably, law and order. . . . Meanwhile leftist liberals, no less predictably, stick to their mantra about neglected social programmes and integration efforts, which have deprived the younger generation of any clear economic and social prospects: violent outbursts are their only way to articulate their dissatisfaction. (*On Violence* 66, 68)

Borrowing a term from Roman Jakobson, Žižek argues that leftist analyses of the riots as rooted in “concrete socio-economic protest” fail to understand the “phatic” function of the protests (67), a meaningless use of language to ascertain the usefulness of a communicative code or channel—in the case of the burning cars in Clichy-sous-bois, an effort to gain visibility. Hence, “it is only psychoanalysis that can disclose the full contours of the shattering impact of modernity—that is, capitalism

combined with the hegemony of scientific discourse—on the way our identity is grounded in symbolic identifications” (*On Violence* 70). To a large degree, this is not a contradiction. The psychoanalysis Žižek has in mind, which discerns how the late capitalist subject colludes in ideology through the symbolic identification of fantasy, is hardly synonymous with the postcolonial “pseudopschoanalysis” he dismisses as distracting. And yet his pushing aside of “leftist” socio-economic explanations, his refusal to see any political purpose in the Paris riots (there certainly was some, however minimal⁹), and his turn to a Czech linguist to explain the real meaning of the riots, cast his views of postcolonial depoliticisation in a somewhat ironic light.

Žižek’s second objection to the postcolonial concerns respect for the Other which, ultimately, leads to a de-traumatization or “ethical prettification” of the Other (*In Defence* 165). Žižek foregrounds those deconstructive/Levinasian elements in postcolonial theory which insist upon a respect for a foreigner’s alterity, and he re-describes them as a vocabulary of naiveté, a “de-cafféination” of the Other, precisely because such a view overlooks “the neighbour as the bearer of a monstrous Otherness” (*On Violence* 49; *Parallax* 113). In other words, the postcolonial objection to the demonization of the Other fails to glimpse—or does not wish to face—what is radically inhuman not simply in the Other but in us all. According to Žižek, this multicultural/liberal temerity in the face of the Real allows it to be easily co-opted by the democratic capitalist symbolic order, a collusion (this postcolonial deification of Otherness) that ensures a thorough de-radicalisation of the political, emphasizes peaceful capitalist multicultural harmony instead of radical anti-colonial justice, and signals an unwillingness to contemplate the truly monstrous in the Other that will always thwart projects of radical action. In one of the few moments where Žižek demonstrates an awareness of postcolonialism’s internal tensions, he cites Frantz Fanon’s well-known affirmation of violent action as provoking “uneasiness [in] ‘radical’ post-colonialist Afro-American studies” (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 244). For Žižek, the postcolonial lubricates late capitalism not merely through its reduction of political/economic conflicts to “pseudopschoanalysis,” but also in its avoidance of the Real in the Other—ultimately,

an avoidance of Lacan's call to take on, in all its aspects, the impossible task of symbolizing the Real.

The main problem with Žižek's insistence on recognizing the "monstrous" in the Other is that such a gesture requires the same evaporation of politico-economic circumstances that Žižek deplors as "cultural studies chic" (*The Universal Exception* 239). If bringing Levinasian/post-colonial naiveté to conflicts in Palestine and the Congo depoliticizes such struggles by overlooking their material frameworks and simply concentrating on the "Stranger in Ourselves," does not an equal acknowledgment of the "monstrous" in both Israeli and Palestinian, police officer and immigrant, colonizer and colonized necessarily involve a complete de-contextualization of conflicts between the equally monstrous? In situations where the Other is already demonized—such as the Muslim or the Mexican/Latino—a call to recognize the monstrous Other not only appears redundant but, more importantly, ironically overlooks imbalances of power or income in order to make a psychoanalytical/ontological point about the "Monster in Ourselves."

This ontologizing evisceration of circumstance becomes more worrying when we see how often examples of Žižek's objections to multi-cultural tolerance lead to wholly *sequitur* associations of Muslims with Nazis, a standard neo-conservative refrain:

[A]s a partisan of Middle East dialogue puts it: "An enemy is someone whose story you have not yet heard". . . . There is, however, a clear limit to this procedure: can one imagine inviting a brutal Nazi thug to tell us his story? Is one then also ready to affirm that Hitler was an enemy only because his story had not been heard? (Žižek, *First As Tragedy* 39)

Žižek exhibits an understandable anger toward glib liberal platitudes and the accompanying liberal belief that idealization is the only response to demonization, yet it runs into trouble when a Palestinian narrative is implicitly placed alongside Hitler's. A divorce from reality takes place as the asylum-seeker's narrative or deported Algerian's testimonial is seen as susceptible to the same degree of symbolic, self-victimizing fiction as Goebbels' or Rosenberg's. Žižek's notion of the ethical as the determina-

tion to fully discern the Real in even the most uncomfortable symbolizations, such as that of an immigrant's narrative, results in a levelling of the politico-economic distinctions he justifiably discerns in postcolonial "pseudopschoanalysis."

Such constant linking together of Muslims with Nazis sits uneasily next to Žižek's wholly valid objection to the way liberals "are always ready to support the revolt of the poor and the dispossessed, so long as it is done with good manners" (Žižek, *In Defense* 177).¹⁰ Žižek proposes that we should be able to acknowledge the violent assertiveness of oppressed peoples without demonizing them, a gesture Emmanuel Levinas himself, the "poet of otherness" (*In Defense* 177), was unable to perform when he dismissed Mao's uprising as "the yellow peril" (*In Defense* 177). In a curious moment of anti-Eurocentrism, Žižek takes both Martin Heidegger and Levinas to task for their dismissive attitude towards "the Asiatic" threat to the West (177). An observer might ask the following: if Žižek objects to the prettification of the Other and wants us to face the monstrous in our neighbour, what is so wrong with Levinas' labelling of the Maoist masses as a "peril"? The answer lies not so much in the motivation of the remark—the "peril" in Levinas' Maoist Other stems from their self-empowering threat to his bourgeois Western world view rather than a profounder evaluation of the Real immanent within all of our symbolic identities—as in Levinas' inability to wholly welcome the otherness of Mao's masses unconditionally. Levinas' remark, for Žižek, reveals the precise limits late capitalist versions of otherness encounter when met with an exotic Other who wants to radically change the way we live.

The limit-encounter in Levinasian/Derridean otherness, in which the *toute autre* suddenly becomes a peril when it acquires, say, the Palestinian/Maoist dimensions of the Real (as Levinas' own infamous position on the massacres of Sabra and Shatila illustrates [Hand 292]) facilitates two observations. First, Levinas' comment exemplifies how an omission of the Lacanian Real reveals both deconstruction and historicism to be flawed—Žižekan historicity, according to a definition offered in one interview, being "historicism" plus "the unhistorical kernel of the Real" (Vighi and Feldner 18). However, if Žižek's notion of "historicity

proper” involves an inclusion of the Real as the crucial epistemological stumbling block whose (non)presence forever provokes symbolization, is there room in Žižek’s highly critical attitude towards deconstructive otherness for an inclusion of the Real which would, perhaps, provide a version of Levinasian alterity (and implicitly, a postcolonial attitude towards difference) more to his liking? In other words: can we imagine a postcolonial attitude towards the Other that Žižek might endorse?

If we recall Žižek’s notion of the “only truly ethical stance” being “to assume fully the impossible task of symbolizing the Real” (*Metastases* 199–200), then we may find similar veins of ontological authenticity in deconstructive/postcolonial thoughts on the Other. Certainly, the ethical in our attitude towards the Other begins, for Jacques Derrida, with an acknowledgement of “the absolute irreducibility of the otherness of the other” (qtd. in Midgely 13).¹¹ This notion shares common epistemological ground with Žižek insofar as it demands a delineation of the contours of unknowability of the Real. A critic may say: yes, the epistemological failure is the same, but the concept of the ethical is completely different. For Žižek, it springs out of a determination to dwell as symbolically close to the traumatic Real as possible, whereas for Derrida, it derives from a desire to avoid inflicting violence upon the Other. However, this objection would not be wholly accurate in its evaluation of how such vocabularies of otherness really talk about the Other. Far from promoting a “prettification” or “decaffeination,” Derrida insists on resisting the desire to romanticise or idealise the Other, and remaining “absolutely empty” towards the *toute autre* even when faced with the possibility of its being “radically evil” (qtd. in Midgely 15). One could cite a similar number of postcolonial moments in which the postcolonial theorist fully takes on the “impossible task” of delineating the real dimensions of the tribal/indigenous/refugee: that they defecate, hate, lie to one another, or menstruate. One of the most widespread themes in postcolonial feminist criticism is the debunking of the oppressed-woman-in-chador motif and a very Lacanian insistence on the corporality and irreducible desire of the “Third World Woman.”¹² Žižek’s frequent grouping of postcolonialism with political correctness overlooks what drives the postcolonial critique of Western-centered dis-

course: a desire to restore, as fully as possible, the dimensions of the Real to both sympathetic and hostile versions of the non-Western Other, a re-introduction of ontological complexity to idealisations/demonizations which, whilst not synonymous with Žižek's own notion of an "ethical stance," certainly come much closer than he is willing to admit.

III. Žižek and History

Žižek's third objection to the postcolonial is that, through notions of hybridity and "alternative modernities," the postcolonial enables capitalism to function under the guise of a tolerant, multiply-centred, poly-faceted ideological network and masks capitalism's true nature and essential antagonism. To some extent, this allegation of complicity shares the same ground as his objections to identity politics; he argues that debates concerning gender, race, and religion facilitate the "silent suspension of class analysis" (*Contingency* 97) insofar as they render invisible the framework of capital against which such identity debates take place, making transparent the ideology that any mention of "class" would render traumatically opaque.

Thus, the postcolonial uses a vocabulary which fundamentally avoids antagonism—not merely class antagonism (preferring to foreground the rights of this or that ethnic or regional group against a tacit backdrop of capital) but the much more fundamental ontological antagonism, the lack which enables the field of differences to emerge in the first place. Accompanying this argument is Žižek's conviction that a defence of "alternative modernities" will ultimately defend practices that come close to a pagan fascism:

Was not the basic idea of fascism that of a modernity which provides an alternative to the standard Anglo-Saxon liberal capitalist one of saving the core of capitalist modernity by casting away its "contingent" Jewish-individualist-profiteering distinction? (*Parallax* 34)

Žižek's observation springs from a passage by Jameson (which Žižek quotes at length) in which Jameson sees the "recently fashionable theories of 'alternate modernities'" as a late capitalist strategy to re-brand

“globalized, free-market modernity” as a plethora of locally-flavoured, particular modernities (an Indian modernity, an African one), in much the same way a fast food chain such as McDonalds avoids vulgar homogenization by colouring certain franchises in ways that harmonize them with their environments (a McDonalds with a Chinese roof or a medieval German facade) (Jameson 12). Žižek elaborates on Jameson’s fundamental point (the attempt by postcolonial multiculturalists to take the capital out of global capitalism by celebrating its “diversity”) and suggests an element of fetishistic disavowal as the real reason behind the postcolonial multiplication of modernities, a refusal to recognise the basic antagonism of modernity that results in a profusion of “alternative” versions.¹³

As with all of Žižek’s objections, there is certainly a degree of truth to his evaluation of global capitalism’s exploitation of a *Zeitgeist* of diversity and different temporalities in order to smoothly maintain its operations. Yet two points need to be made. The first concerns the extent to which Žižek fails to take into account the potential of “alternate modernities” to crack open global capitalism’s transparent ubiquity as “the only game in town” (*Ticklish Subject* 353). If, as Žižek claims, the triumph of contemporary capitalism lies in the disappearance of the word, in our inability to think outside Francis Fukuyama’s vision of endless capitalism, then the revelation of alternative modernities might de-universalize and re-localize capitalism, a strategy that might be termed (with apologies to Spivak) “strategic relativism.” Žižek does, in certain moments, concede the political expediency of “postcolonial nostalgia” as a Utopian dream which can be “thoroughly liberating” (“Melancholy and the Act” 659), even if the disadvantages of employing such a strategy seem to him greater than the advantages.

However, a more essential point must be made concerning History—not so much Žižek’s refusal of non-Western alternatives to modernity (or, in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, his various dismissals of non-Western spiritualities) as what Žižek’s refusal of alternative modernities says about his own thought’s relationship to History. In its perspectives on what history is, the postcolonial shares with Žižek the idea that truth is the result of a struggle, and that it is precisely through an engagement

with the particular that the colonized glimpse the agonistic possibility of their own universal. History is central to postcolonial critique because the becoming-consciousness of the colonized subject is not simply a historical process but also a process that uses History and sees the historical text as a crowbar with which to prise open the sealed door of hegemony. Hence the centrality of historiography in the postcolonial canon (Said, Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee); the violent articulation of alternative histories of unrecognised suffering that break open standard narratives of the Worthy and the Undeserved provides only the initial phase in a radical project of collective self-empowerment. The Guatemalan, the Palestinian, and the West African cannot afford the ironist's luxury of an indifference to History.

For Žižek, too, the late capitalist evaporation of history can be a lamentable phenomenon. In his comments on the film *Children of Men*, Žižek singles out as one of his favourite scenes the moment in which the protagonist enters an apartment filled with superfluous, context-less examples of classic art (Michelangelo's *David*, for example, stands on its own by a window). Žižek argues that the moment signifies how "the true infertility [in the film] is the lack of meaningful historical experience" (qtd. in Schwartzman 3). Drawing on Alain Badiou's notion of "atonal" worlds, Žižek's understanding of postmodern capitalism as constituting "the permanent dissolution of all life-forms" (*On Violence* 177) sees an ideological process which robs the world of history, transforms all moments into an eternal now, and reduces all values to past-less, endlessly fluctuating commodities, so that the colours of real historical context are replaced with the monochrome of free market economics.

Nevertheless, this world-emptying gesture of global capitalism, the "permanent dissolution" of historical context inherent in the dynamic of capital, is a movement that occasionally finds some degree of equivalence in Žižek's own attitude to history, particularly where the history of the non-Western world is concerned. In *On Violence*, his problematic reiteration of this gesture of world-emptying capitalism is seen with regard to the immediate past. As with Žižek's interpretation of the Paris riots, material explanations of the phenomena as rooted in poor economic conditions or recent massive military bombardments are not allowed

to interfere with the real, psychoanalytically-structured analysis of the event. Žižek distances himself from those “partisans of multiculturalist tolerance” (*On Violence* 91) who explain the worldwide Muslim outrage concerning the Mohammed cartoons as really being (in the wake of the 100,000 plus dead of Iraq) a consequence of “the West’s entire imperialist attitude” (*On Violence* 91). This de-prioritization of circumstantial history in deference to theoretical analysis would be problematic in itself, but in *The Puppet and The Dwarf*, Žižek’s marginalization of “the West’s entire imperialist attitude” (*On Violence* 91) becomes an attitude of absolute historical non-recognition. Citing D.T. Suzuki’s approving remarks concerning Japanese militarism in the 1930s, Žižek derides the “widespread notion that aggressive Islamic or Jewish monotheism is at the root of our predicament” (*Puppet and the Dwarf* 23–24).¹⁴ He suggests instead that our predicament is a product of uncritical capitalist multicultural tolerance. Buddhism, far from being a “gentle, balanced, holistic” religion, encourages sociopathic militarism with its world-distant void (*Puppet and the Dwarf* 26). In contrast, “true monotheists are tolerant” (26).

First, I am not taking issue with Žižek’s negative reading of the Buddhist tradition, not because it is correct, but because Žižek would pay little attention to the point.¹⁵ Nor am I levelling a charge of “Eurocentrism” at Žižek. Žižek is quite happy to call himself a leftist Eurocentrist and has articulated quite forcefully why his own views on the necessarily particular expression of all universal truth justifies this. Finally, I am not going to deny the way the most superficial aspects of Oriental spirituality (holism, serene acceptance of suffering, absolute tolerance, and inward meditation) have been cleverly co-opted into twenty-first century capitalism (see, for example, the 2001 private entrepreneur’s guide *The Monk and the Riddle: The Art of Creating a Life While Making A Living*).

From a postcolonial standpoint, the most difficult aspect of a text such as *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, even for a sympathetic reader of Žižek, lies in the tacit premise underlying its radical re-description of a tolerant monotheism and an Oriental spirituality complicit with “rapid industrialization and militarization” (26): in order to entertain this reversal of

commonly-held conceptions, the reader must join Žižek in overlooking five hundred years of history. The “widespread notion” of aggressive monotheism and peaceful Buddhism is not widespread simply because of “ideology” but because the world’s experience of imperialism over the past five centuries has been overwhelmingly at the hands of monotheistic cultures. By 1914, eighty-five percent of the planet was under either European or European-settler rule (Said 8). A refusal to historically think through the truly enormous European/settler legacy of indigenous extermination and forced assimilation is the enabling premise of the text, the supreme act of forgetting which allows the rest of the book’s theological and philosophical arguments to unfold. This is not simply to rebut Žižek’s arguments outright and crudely lump imperialism always and everywhere with monotheism but rather to highlight how such an argument can only take place after an evacuation of historical context. It is in the evaporation of history that Žižek betrays the radical energy of his own formidable thought by replicating the late-capitalist gesture of “permanent dissolution” and reiterating a neo-liberal contempt for history.

In the very last years of his life, Marx embarked upon an enormous amount of reading concerning non-Western societies; his notes from this exercise formed the so-called “ethnological notebooks.”¹⁶ The history and culture of Indians, native Americans, Algerians, not to mention the social structures of societies in Egypt and pre-colonial Indonesia, all formed part of Marx’s project to historically inform his account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Anderson 91). In many ways, one wishes for such a late phase for Žižek, a thinker who has done more than anyone else in the past twenty years to elucidate the intimacies of our collusion in late capitalism. If Žižek’s astute analysis of the multicultural proclivities of global capital can help us locate some of the subtler political naivetés within postcolonial theory, a postcolonial reminder of the valency of History can usefully “interrupt” Žižek’s more global pronouncements; the consequence does not have to be an all-levelling Badiou-esque slide into endless cultural complexities but rather a more accurate understanding of the history of anti-colonial struggle, which would usefully concretize a universal analysis of injustice.

Notes

- 1 For one of the best introductions to these debates, see Lazarus' "Introducing Postcolonial Studies" (1–17).
- 2 See Zupančič. For Lacan's own fairly cynical view of political positions, see his famous remarks on communism as "a desire of/for the Other based upon justice in the redistributive sense of the word" (Lacan 48–49).
- 3 The term is Spivak's (*In Other Worlds* 344).
- 4 See Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (*In Other Worlds* 270–304).
- 5 For a more detailed description of the process, see Žižek, *Looking Awry* 6.
- 6 For more on anamorphosis, see *Looking Awry* 90–91; Žižek's thoughts on deconstruction as an essentially incomplete project can be found in *For They Know* 37.
- 7 See Ahmad 279. For a useful account of the way the postcolonial has ascended within academia, see Parry 66–80. Gandhi, in her otherwise excellent and justly ubiquitous introduction to postcolonial theory, presents leftist critics such as Ahmad and Dirlik as useful but ultimately "polemical" voices (58).
- 8 I mean that it is curiously empirical in the sense that they reject truth claims as simply embedded in the symbolic code, and yet they still claim to be able to empirically verify how close the presence of the Real is manifesting itself within this symbolic reality. In other words: sometimes they reject epistemology wholesale, sometimes they do not.
- 9 The rioters' use of the Internet in the disturbances testifies to some element of organization, however weak. See Dufoix's "More Than Riots: A Question of Spheres."
- 10 *In Defence* 177. Dabashi is only one of many Muslims who expresses his unease with Žižek's inconsistent use of the term "Islamofascism" (Dabashi 4).
- 11 This phrase is taken from a transcript of the discussion with Alexander Garcia Duttman "Perhaps or Maybe" (qtd. in Midgley 13).
- 12 See Spivak's essay on Mahasweta Devi's short story "Stanyadani" ("Breast-Giver" by Mahasweta Devi). Such a postcolonial demand for a recognition of the Real in the Other is found in Varzi's criticisms of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a book which automatically assumes the sexual experience of the West and the sexual innocence of the Muslim East. Chatterjee's 1988 *English, August: An Indian Story* also offers a picture of the South Asian tribal which, without delegitimizing the tribals' claims, deflates some of the "innocent savage" myths circulating about them.
- 13 Or, in the words of Mezzandra and Rahola, how capitalism is able "to concede a particular synchronicity (that one of the market) to the different forms of life spreading all around the world" (22).
- 14 For Suzuki's remarks, see Victoria (50).
- 15 See Žižek's reply to Hart's criticisms of his view of Buddhism ("I Plead Guilty" 579–83).

16 A small part of these have been translated into English and published (see Krader). A comprehensive English edition is still in progress.

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