



# CHILDREN OF LIGHT

## NEO-PAULINISM AND THE CATHEXIS OF DIFFERENCE (PART I)

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This essay investigates Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou's investment in the thought of Saint Paul as part of an ongoing revision of the modern notion of the subject of the political. I call their attempt 'neo-Paulinism', and I find a limit in the fact that neo-Paulinism is unable to account for the ubiquitous presence, in the political, of the non-subject of the political. If all politics are theological that posit as their primary referent the search for a subject of the political, is it possible to move towards a de-theologisation of politics through thinking the non-subject? Such a thought would call for a dissolution of the presumed unity of thinking and being, of deliberation and action – but a dissolution beyond the possibility of mediation by regulative ideas.

Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me; and where I am, thither ye cannot come (John 7:36).

Toutefois le réel reste une catégorie du sujet (Badiou 1988 p. 11).

### I. GRACE AND THE POLITICAL

I will juxtapose two images – not just any images. The first was given by Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, his journalistic memoir of the Vietnam War. Herr says about a particular place in the Vietnam Highlands: 'You were there in a place where you didn't belong, where things were glimpsed for which you would have to pay and where things went unglimped for which you would also have to pay, a place where they didn't play with the mystery but killed you straight off for trespassing' (Herr 1998 p. 630). The second image is taken from a conversation between Jacques Derrida and Daniel Bensaid. Derrida says:

I believe it is indeed the question of the link and of the distinction between politics and statics. And the question of that which at the same time transgresses the singular Nation-State and remains under the authority of the figure of the State. It is perhaps a matter of thinking the event, that which arrives, that which comes, the 'arrivant', in its singularity. Whoever or whatever comes is not necessarily, as the one that arrives and thus calls for hospitality, a citizen or a political subject. It is therefore at the limit of the cosmopolitical that the question of the event is posited. I believe it is possible to read in Marx... a thinking of the limits of the political (of the political-statical) from the irruption of that which arrives absolutely. The messianic is not necessarily limited to the messi-

anic in its Judaic or Christian figure. It opens to whoever arrives there where she or he is not expected, who may come or not come: a visitor rather than a guest (Derrida 1999 p. 122).

The juxtaposition brings to the fore the impression of a hard-to-grasp figure: a figure that remains uninterpellated, indeed beyond interpellation, not because interpellation never reaches it, but rather because it marks the very limit of interpellation. In the first image, it is the figure that must live, within the place, in fear and trembling – in fear and trembling of interpellation, because it knows that interpellation spells its death: the instant its interpellation happens is also the instant where it itself ceases to exist. In the second image, it is the figure that absolutely arrives, regardless of expectations, a visitor rather than a guest, an event that may or may not produce fear and trembling, may or may not produce interpellation, but whose condition of possibility, whose immanence, is precisely a displacement from interpellation, an excess of it.

These two images are the two sides, or rather two of the sides, of a figure which is many figures, a figure that, precisely, will not be counted as one: the figure that I would call the non-subject of the political, not yet the stranger, neither an enemy nor a friend, rather an absolute non-friend, an uncanny and disturbing form of political presence to the extent that it remains, in and through its arrival, a hard memory, a hard reminder of that which has always already been there, beyond subjection, beyond grasp, beyond retrieval, not even obscene, not even abjected, rather simply there, a tenuous facticity beyond facticity, an invisible *punctum* of ineluctable, intractable materiality, always on the other side of belonging, of any belonging.

This figure, or rather this de-figure, of the non-subject of the political can be brought to bear on the current political uses of Saint Paul in Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek because they are essentially a revision of the modern notion of the subject of the political.<sup>1</sup> The revision does not go far enough – and it does not go far enough because it does not account, and it does not attempt to account, for the non-subject of the political. As a result, the revision remains caught in the idealism against which it purports to move – or against which it moves, but not radically enough. Badiou and Žižek's neo-Paulinist positions offer themselves as forms of post-hegemonic thinking, attempts at transcending the systemics of hegemony/counter-hegemony as the ultimate horizon of the political. If globalisation is the name for the waning of all structural antagonisms to the reality of the social as presently constituted (i.e., the tendentially full constitution of a subject of the social, without remainder, or without a remainder that is not immediately abjected as such, and becomes then, as an abject remainder, not an enemy within the political field but rather the enemy of humanity, and therefore beyond politics), neo-Paulinist revisions mark the will for a reinvention of the political through a new cathexis of the social: a change in the very coordinates of the real. This change in the real is purportedly no longer a hegemonic change, that is, a hegemonic rearticulation of the social, but rather its radicalisation into revolutionary change. Saint Paul becomes exemplary of a theoretical practice of the outside of hegemony, the embodiment of a revolutionary truth procedure, the faithful witness to an event whose repetition might occasion a new cathexis or radical seizure of the social totality. But Saint Paul is said to operationalise his truth procedure through an intervention *in* the subject of the political: Saint Paul changes the subject. But can a change in the subject of the political truly effect anything other than hegemonic change? Are politics necessarily always and in every case a politics of the subject?

Any attempt to settle the score of the ongoing dispute between Žižek and Badiou regarding the proper materialist conceptualisation of the subject of the political for our times is probably premature.<sup>2</sup> At a minimum one should wait until the publication of Badiou's *Logic of Worlds*, as well as Žižek's likely rejoinder. But there is also work to be done at the level of understanding the increasing diachronic complexity of both Badiou's and Žižek's thought, a complexity that overdetermines their points of disagreement, themselves caught in a density of genealogical allusions that includes but is not limited to Kant, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Lacan, and Althusser. A determination of points of disagreement should also make reference to Badiou and Žižek's respective and diverging positions vis-à-vis the events of May 1968 (in what we could call a biographical tonality) as well as massively different stands regarding the symbolic heritage of Judaism, Christianity, Western science, capitalism, and formerly actually-existing Marxist regimes of the social. In any case, as one awaits final clarification beyond a number of what sometimes appear as – but are not only – mutual misunderstandings, one is perhaps permitted the tenuously glib gesture of referring to Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'The Theologians' – a gesture that Badiou and Žižek themselves seem to ask for as one of the essential moments in their disputation has to do with the theoretical interpretation of the contributions of Saint Paul to the emancipatory thinking of humankind.

'The Theologians' tells the story of the relationship between Aurelian and John of Pannonia: 'The two men were soldiers in the same army, strove for the same prize, fought against the same enemy' (Borges 1998 p. 203). They are prelates of the church devoted to fighting heretical deviations from doctrinal orthodoxy. Nevertheless, 'a secret battle' rages between them (p. 203). John beats Aurelian to the denunciation of the abomination of the Monotoni or Annulari, partisans of the Eternal Return. Later, Aurelian successfully refutes the horror of the Histrioni, who sustain that 'there can be no repetitions' (p. 205). The refutation mentions John as having indulged 'with more levity than blameworthiness' in a similar confusion of the faith while condemning the Annulari. As a result John is burned at the stake. Many obsessive years later, Aurelian dies by fire, after a brief glimpse of Return. As he makes it to heaven a distracted divinity takes him for John.

This essay provisionally situates itself somewhere in that Borgesian story. The point is to question a particular aspect of both Badiou's and Žižek's 'political theology' following a certain attunement to the position of the narrator of the tale. It is the story-teller's privilege to claim an externality regarding the characters in the story – but we know that the externality is itself a theoretical fiction whose truth is better understood following the Lacanian concept of extimacy. Subjective extimacy, that is, extimacy *tout court*, as extimacy is nothing but the necessary distance of the subject from itself, the constitutive gap that makes a relationship to the object possible in the first place, is also what makes it possible for me to ask a simple question: Is the non-subject of the political not ... political?

This question mimics the question about the limits of theology. Every question of theology, including negative theology, as a question of knowledge, can be seen as a version of the Freudian motto that Jacques Lacan placed at the foundation of a possible psychoanalytical ethics: the motto is 'Wo es war, soll ich werden', where it was, I must come to being.<sup>3</sup> Is the question about the limits of theology also a theological question? Ontotheological? Let us imagine that the question about the limits of theology takes its clue, not from Saint Paul, but from the Evangelist

that Badiou considers furthest removed from Pauline thinking, namely Saint John, who says: 'You shall seek me and shall not find me; and where I am, there you cannot come' (John 7:36). Let us imagine that God, the subject of the statement, can be transposed into the subject of the political: 'Where I am, there you cannot come.' Where the subject of the political is, there the non-subject of the political cannot make it. What does this do to political theology, if we were to imagine that all politics are theological that posit as their primary referent the search for a subject of the political? I am ready to make such a claim, and to take it as a presupposition for what follows.

Carl Schmitt's notion of political theology famously explains that 'the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology' given the fact that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts' (Schmitt 1985 p. 36). Schmitt is concerned with a notion of sovereignty that he wants to wrest from the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which 'rejected the exception in every form' (p. 37) by positing an identification between the lawfulness of nature and normative lawfulness on the model of the natural sciences. Liberal democracy, in the path of secularisation, becomes 'the expression of a political relativism and a scientific orientation that are liberated from miracles and dogmas and based on human understanding and critical doubt' (p. 42). When 'the general will of Rousseau [becomes] identical with the will of the sovereign', the concept of the general will develops 'a quantitative determination with regard to its subject'. As a result, 'the decisionistic and personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty' is lost (p. 48). An increasingly radical immanentisation of legitimacy takes place in the nineteenth century: it coincides with the democratic notion of constituent power and the identity of the ruler and the ruled. Schmitt's crucial point is not that by the nineteenth century the process of secularisation has finally put to rest the theological adscription of political authority: on the contrary, the 'metaphysical kernel of all politics' still obtains, although repressed, in the democratic theory of the state (p. 51). Only counterrevolutionary thinkers (Bonald, De Maistre, Donoso Cortés, Stahl) or revolutionary thinkers such as Marx and Engels, Proudhon or Bakunin were able to understand the liberal pretence that the decision could be suspended 'by denying that there was at all something to be decided upon', since every possible object of decision was always already fundamentally pre-decided upon by the system of norms, as little more than 'a strange pantheistic confusion' (Schmitt 1985 p. 62). The other side of this claim is of course what we could call the monotheism of power, which Schmitt freely assumes for his own position as a Catholic thinker but of which he thinks neither the counterrevolutionary nor the revolutionary thinkers are themselves free. Perhaps neo-Paulinist political thinking counter-intentionally substitutes a re-theologisation of the political for the strange pantheism of radical democracy.<sup>4</sup>

The subject decides. The subject of political sovereignty is the subject of the decision, which within a democratic regime is in principle the hegemonic decision of the people. But the metaphysical kernel of all politics, revealed historically, determines that the subject of the political decision cannot abandon its theological determination. If 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception' (Schmitt 1985 p. 5), then the subject of the political is sovereign, and only sovereignty is political subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> And sovereignty, thought from the decision, is by definition transcendent or miraculous: 'The decision on the exception is a decision in the true sense of the word. Because a general norm ... can never encompass a total exception, the decision that a real exception exists

cannot therefore be entirely derived from this norm' (p. 6). If the decision is not derived from the norm, only two conclusions are possible: either the exception thoroughly constitutes the decision, which means that there is no decision, only exception, or the exception elicits an always already transcendent subjectivity, ie., a subjectivity rooted in divine power, which, as donated to the human, is *charisma* or grace. Does grace constitute the subject of the decision? Badiou affirms this explicitly, and it is probably fair to say that Žižek posits it implicitly.

In their post-humanist and post-Althusserian way, Žižek and Badiou's search for a subject of the political radicalises the Gramscian notion of hegemony and pushes it against its limit. Their main concern is not ultimately the production of a subject of hegemony, as it might sometimes seem, but on the contrary the alternative production of a post-hegemonic subject: a subject against hegemony, or a pure subject of the political. In Schmittian terms, 'the connection of actual power [and all power is the power of decision regarding the exception] with the legally highest power is the fundamental problem of the concept of sovereignty' (Schmitt 1985 p. 18). In democracy, hegemonic power embodies the gap of sovereignty in the sense that hegemony does not resolve, but only suspends, the difference between actual power and legal power. If hegemony is what we could call the democratic kernel of domination, Žižek and Badiou's political quest, provided that it points towards a closing of the gap of sovereignty, refers to the vexing question of the possible end of subalternity in a radicalised democracy or post-democratic regime. An end to subalternity would presuppose the possibility of a political regime of rule where the gap of sovereignty has been fundamentally closed: in other words, a regime where the difference between deliberation (thinking) and action (being) is absolutely reduced both in the absolute reduction of the difference between those who rule and those who obey and in the absolute reduction of the difference between thinking and acting for any given political subject. This of course comes very close to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's theorisation of the multitude as the new political subject.<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of hegemony theory, and here one must mention the work of Ernesto Laclau, the end of subalternity is an aporetic or undecidable notion, although it remains as the regulative idea or the Jamesonian utopian moment of its project.<sup>7</sup> Against the undecidability of the end of subalternity in hegemony theory, both Žižek and Badiou investigate the revolutionary emergence of the subaltern subject as such: that is, the conditions under which a shedding of subalternity might produce the revolutionary emergence of a pure subject of the political. Their theological joint, that which might have led the Borgesian god to refuse a minimal relational difference to them, is what I would like to call the cathexis of difference: the overdetermination by universality of the subject of hegemony. The subject of subalternity emerges in their text as the subject of a universal cathexis of difference against hegemony. If hegemony is always particular, that is, if the very universality of any hegemonic project is always a projection of particularity, the key to Žižek and Badiou's stand against hegemony is their conception of the subject as the radical interruption of particularity. The subject of the political is, precisely, not particular, but rather always already universal. For Žižek, as he puts it in *The Ticklish Subject*,

'Subject' does not open a hole in the full order of Being: 'subject' is the contingent-excessive gesture that constitutes the very universal order of Being. The opposition between the subject *qua* ontological foundation of the order of Being and the subject *qua* contingent particular emergence is therefore false: the subject

is the contingent emergence/act that sustains the very universal order of Being. The subject is not simply the excessive *hubris* through which a particular element disturbs the global order of Being by positing itself – a particular element – at its centre; the subject is, rather, the paradox of a particular element that sustains the very universal frame (Žižek 1999 p. 160).

And for Badiou, the subject is nothing but fidelity to the event of truth, that is, precisely a fidelity to the dissolution of every particular order of Being, to the dissolution of the law, or of the state of a situation, though an ongoing or procedural appeal to universality itself. The subject is the local configuration of the universal. In Bruno Bosteels' explanation:

In normal circumstances, the structural impasse that is intrinsic to the state of the situation remains invisible, so that the void that is its foundation appears to be foreclosed. This foreclosure is the very operation that allows the smooth functioning of the established order of things – when everyone does what comes naturally because the state of the situation in effect appears to be second nature. Exceptionally, however, an event can bring the excess out into the open, expose the void as the foundation of all being, and mark the possible onset of a generic procedure of truth. As Badiou observes, 'What makes that a genuine event can be at the origin of a truth, which is the only thing that is eternal and for all, is precisely the fact that it relates to the particularity of a situation from the point of its void'. An event is always an anomaly for the discourse of pure ontology, insofar as its irruption attests to a breakdown in the count of the count and thus brings out the real of the science of being (Bosteels 2001b p. 195).

The subject decides, but what it decides is fidelity to the event. The subject is fidelity to the event. Hence the notion that the subject is rare, in the same way that the political is rare too. Indeed, for both Žižek and Badiou, the subject is coextensive with the political, and both the subject and the political are defined as eventful interventions in the very order of the real. And the corollary is: there is no such thing as a non-political subject, which means that there is no such thing as a non-subjective politics. Any conception of a hegemonic politics in Žižek and Badiou, while still placing it within the horizon of the subjective, would have to be intra-horizonal. For them, hegemonic politics is possible but derivative, that is, it would be in every case a regional determination within a conception of the political that privileges a trans-hegemonic moment: the accomplishment of the authentic act in Žižek or the establishment and sustaining of a procedure of truth in Badiou. This is the reason why Žižek says that it was Martin Heidegger (in the second part of *Being and Time*) who offered 'the definitive description of an authentic political act' (Žižek 1999 p. 143) for our century, a statement consistent with Badiou's approach to the determination of politics as universalism in *Saint Paul*. Politics is historicity, in Heidegger's sense, that is, it is always already the establishment of an epochal horizon, within which there can be hegemony, but that is not itself conditioned by hegemony. The truth of the political in every age is its particular enframing of every possibility of a hegemonic articulation.

## II. BIO- ŽIŽEK

The very notion of a radically transforming cathexis of the social, explicitly modelled by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on the seizure of the Roman Empire by Christianity, has everything to do with Louis Althusser's theory of structural causality and its attendant notion of historical event.<sup>8</sup> As Bosteels has explained, using the very *futur antérieur* in his own grammatical construction, 'the theory of structural causality ... is already an attempt to think through the problem of how the structure of a given situation, in the effective process of becoming historical, will have been transformed as the result of an unforeseeable event' (Bosteels 2001a p. 213). Bosteels quotes Badiou saying that 'overdetermination is the place of politics' because it is the notion of overdetermination that permits us to understand 'how a structure takes hold of the actual moment, how isolated facts are literally thrown together to form a specific conjuncture and, thus, how necessity, far from realizing or expressing itself in history, actually emerges out of contingency' (p. 212). This contingency requires the absolute presence of the subject of the political: it is in fact nothing but 'the site of a subjective wager, irreducible to the way individuals function ideologically in the normal state of the situation' (p. 212). Over-determined contingency will have become, Bosteels says in Badiou's terms (but they are compatible in this case with terms that Lenin, Althusser, Žižek, or Saint Paul himself might have used), 'the point where the structure of a situation suddenly becomes indiscernible, or newly discernible only through an intervention faithful to the event ... that will have changed the very parameters of what counts or not as discernible in the language of the situation' (p. 212). The event becomes, through a future anterior temporality, undistinguishable from the subjective intervention that determines and that is itself determined by it. It is an event beyond hegemony in the precise sense that it cannot be foreseen by any concrete hegemonic articulation, and its effect is to change the conditions of hegemony – as opposed to changing the conditions within hegemony.

A historical conjuncture, in order to be the place of the political, embodies, or rather, essentially is, an interval or a void of being, an empty set that the subject seizes upon or cathects as much as it will have been cathected by it. As an interval of being it is also a crisis in being, a structural fissure or split which organises the conditions for any possible suture as much as it disorganises them.

In the *Grundrisse* Karl Marx talks about the totality of the field that the bourgeois mode of production constitutes as an organic totality that is however internally fissured. Because the totality is internally fissured, it can produce a crisis, in a strong sense, precisely at the moment of its peak or highest development, at the moment of its maximum constitutive tension, or at the moment of its final articulation and conversion into a work – a historical work. Marx never mentions globalisation. For him the crucial term is 'world market'. The constitution of the world market is the moment in which 'production is posited as a totality together with all its moments, but within which, at the same time, all contradictions come into play' (Marx 1993 p. 227). As a result of this maximum stress in the structure of contradictions, crises ensue. 'Crises', Marx says, 'are ... the general intimation which points beyond the presupposition, and the urge which drives towards the adoption of a new historic form' (p. 228). A general intimation, an urge: crises interpellate. A crisis is, for Marx, the event that might summon a new historical subject into existence. This new subject, the subject of the future, communal mode of production, is a consequence of the liberation of the 'penurious subjectivity' of the worker (p. 455), this penury which

is in fact ‘living labour capacity’s sole possession’ (p. 461) – a matter of removing the bridle, so to speak, or external barrier that keeps that subjective penury in place as such, and precisely the bridle that it shares with capitalist production. For the bridle that capitalism, in one of its faces, imposes on production is also responsible for keeping the worker’s subjectivity in a state of penury and deprivation. The more capital advances, the more penurious the subjectivity of the worker. In one crucial passage Marx says:

surplus capital is itself at the same time the real possibility of new surplus labour and of new surplus capital. It ... becomes evident that labour itself progressively extends and gives an ever wider and fuller existence to the objective world of wealth as a power alien to labour, so that, relative to the values created or to the real conditions of value-creation, the penurious subjectivity of living labour capacity forms an ever more glaring contrast. The greater the extent to which labour objectifies itself, the greater becomes the objective world of values, which stands opposite it as alien – alien property (Marx 1993 p. 455).

This ‘ever more glaring contrast’ determines that, at its moment of maximum tension, that is, in postmodernity or in the state of globalization as such, the penury of the subject shows up at its most extreme. But this is then, dialectically, also the moment where an inversion is intimated: the liberation of the subjectivity of living labour into the ‘general intellect’ of the communal mode of production will only happen as a consequence of the transformation of the mode of production as such. In another crucial passage about the primary phenomenon that determines both the penurious subjectivity of living labour and its tendential transformation into a new subject of the political, Marx says:

There is a limit, not inherent to production generally, but to production founded on capital. This limit is double, or rather the same regarded from two directions. It is enough here to demonstrate that capital contains a *particular* restriction of production – which contradicts its general tendency to drive beyond every barrier to production – in order to have uncovered the foundation of *overproduction*, the fundamental contradiction of developed capital; in order to have uncovered, more generally, the fact that capital is not, as the economists believe, the *absolute* form for the development of the forces of production – not the absolute form for that, nor the form of wealth which absolutely coincides with the development of the forces of production. The stages of production which precede capital appear, regarded from this standpoint, as so many fetters upon the productive forces. It itself, however, correctly understood, appears as the condition of the development of the forces of production as long as they require an external spur, which appears at the same time as their bridle. It is a discipline over them, which becomes superfluous and burdensome at a certain level of their development (Marx 1993 p. 415).

The external spur for the development of the forces of production, that is, capital itself, under the concrete form of surplus capital, is also a bridle, a limit, an inherent limit in production founded on capital. But this limit, Marx says, can and will be removed.



It is precisely at this point that Žižek interjects his critique of Marx. For Žižek the postulation of communism as the new, communal mode of production that will be the consequence of the removal of the limit inherent to production, which is also the bar that determines the subjectivity of the worker as penurious, is a fantasy: it is in fact the fantasy of capitalism itself, since capitalism must dream of the removal of the limit in order to pursue its own project of capital accumulation: ‘Marxian communism, this notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity *outside* the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, the capitalist inherent transgression at its purest, a strictly *ideological* fantasy of maintaining the thrust towards productivity generated by capitalism, while getting rid of the ‘obstacles’ and antagonisms that were ... the only possible framework of the actual material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity’ (Žižek 2000 p. 18).<sup>9</sup>

So, paradoxically for a great Lenin supporter, Žižek’s version of communism is not very Leninist or not Leninist enough: actual communism was for Žižek necessarily Soviets *without* electrification. This Žižekian critique sets the ground for Žižek’s inversion into neo-Paulinism. It happens subtly, almost secretly within *The Fragile Absolute*: it is many pages later in the book that we are given an argument for Saint Paul that will emerge as the symmetrical opposite of the argument against Marx. And it is the argument for Saint Paul that allows us to see, retrospectively, how Marx was still caught in a quasi-Judaic, masculine formula of experience. But, for Saint Paul, there are of course neither men nor women, neither Jews nor Greeks. Pauline Christianity ‘endeavour[s] to break the vicious cycle of prohibition that generates the desire to transgress it, the cycle described in ... *Romans 7.7*’ (Žižek 2000 p. 135).<sup>10</sup>

For Žižek communism was still caught in the vicious circle of the law that is the spectre of Judaism – capitalism, the limit inherent to production that capitalism embodies (and, from a certain perspective, capitalism is nothing but that limit), generates the inherent fantasy of removing the limit as its own constitutive possibility, just as, for Saint Paul, the condition of the law is the possibility of its transgression. Capitalism generates the fantasy of engaging in a limit-less ontology of production: a production without lack. But, against it, Saint Paul’s lesson:

the vicious dialectic of Law and its transgression elaborated by Saint Paul is the invisible third term, the ‘vanishing mediator’ between the Jewish religion and Christianity – its spectre haunts both of them, although neither of the two religious positions actually occupies its place: on the one hand, the Jews are not yet there, that is, they treat the Law as the written Real which does not engage them in the vicious cycle of guilt; on the other, as Saint Paul makes clear, the basic point of Christianity proper is precisely to break out of the vicious superego cycle of the law and its transgression’ (Žižek 2000 p. 145).

Against Marx, then, ‘in order effectively to liberate oneself from the grip of existing social reality, one should first renounce the transgressive fantasmatic supplement that attaches us to it’ (Žižek 2000 p. 149). This act of renunciation, which Žižek will go on to describe as both the authentic psychoanalytic act and the authentic ethical act, is an anti- or post-hegemonic act: the eventful act of the subject of the political that ‘changes the co-ordinates of the situation in which the subject finds himself: by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check the subject gains the space of free action’ (p. 150), and thus

forfeits his own penurious subjectivity. One could say that, for Žižek, it is not just Marxism that is a form of Christianity but, more radically, Christianity is a form, a more revolutionary form, of Marxism – which is, in a sense, what neo-Paulinism generally claims.

Consistent with his critique of Marx and endorsement of Saint Paul, Žižek understands the subject of the political as essentially feminine. The feminine subject has always already abandoned the vicious superego cycle of the law and its transgression and moved towards a different dimension of experience. In the same way, ‘the passage from Judaism to Christianity ultimately obeys the matrix of the passage from the ‘masculine’ to the ‘feminine’ formulae of sexuation’ (Žižek 2000 p. 143); ‘Lacan’s extensive discussion of love in *Encore* should thus be read in the Pauline sense, as opposed to the dialectic of the law and its transgression: this second dialectic is clearly ‘masculine’/phallic; it involves the tension between the All (the universal law) and its constitutive exception; while love is ‘feminine’, it involves the paradoxes of the non-All’ (p. 147). This logic of the not-All, or of the universalized symptom or *sinthome*, absolutely rules over the possibility of revolutionary subject formation for Žižek. It is this logic that leads to the discovery that there is no Big Other, whether capitalist or communist – that the Big Other is always an ideological formation. If there *is* no Big Other, neither its destruction nor its construction can *be* revolutionary acts. What we are left with is a paradoxical identification with the symptom in subjective de-constitution. This renunciation of the dissolution of the symptom is love proper, and through it the possibility of a properly political act is announced:

In the traditional (premodern) act, the subject sacrifices everything (all ‘pathological’ things) for the Cause-Thing that matters to him more than life itself: Antigone, condemned to death, enumerates all the things she will *not* be able to experience because of her premature death ... This is the ‘bad infinity’ one sacrifices through the Exception (the Thing for which one acts, and which, precisely, is *not* sacrificed) ... So Antigone is sublime in her sad enumeration of what she is sacrificing—this list, in its enormity, indicates the transcendent contours of the Thing to which she retains her unconditional fidelity. Is it necessary to add that *this* Antigone is a *masculine* fantasy *par excellence*? ... In the modern ethical constellation, on the contrary, one suspends this exception of the Thing: one bears witness to one’s fidelity to the Thing by sacrificing (also) the Thing itself ... Without this proper suspension, there is no ethical act proper ... [the ethical act] takes place in the *intersection* of ethics and politics, in the uncanny domain in which ethics is ‘politicized’ in its innermost nature, an affair of radically contingent decisions, a gesture that can no longer be accounted for in terms of fidelity to some pre-existing Cause, since it redefines the very terms of this Cause (Žižek 2000 pp. 154-155).

The model for this is the crucifixion understood as a happy event, a sacrifice that sublates the very structure of sacrifice and that, by so doing, can no longer be understood as an act that sustains the state of the situation, not even in an inverted form. It is a radically positive act through which ‘Another Space’ opens up, Žižek says, ‘which can no longer be dismissed as a fantasmatic supplement to social reality’ (Žižek 2000 p. 58). The possibility of an alternative community, which is a revolutionary community because it sets itself up radically beyond hege-

mony, that is, beyond current hegemony, is thus opened up: 'The Christian unplugging is *not* an inner contemplative stance, but the active *work* of love which necessarily leads to the creation of an alternative community' (p. 138).

Robert Miklitsch has referred to the 'radical negativity at the heart of Žižek's project' on the basis of the latter's endorsement of the Lacanian concept of the Real as pure antagonism (Miklitsch 1998 p. 486). Žižek's theorisation of the revolutionary act as the renunciation of the dissolution of the symptom is not a theorisation of abstinence or separation from the Real. On the contrary, Žižek theorises a process of intense psychic violence, to be understood as a counter-violence to the violence of fantasy. Thus, the recognition of the ultimate absence of the Big Other, with the consequent necessity of identification with the universal symptom, goes through a moment of radical madness to which Žižek sometimes refers as the Hegelian 'night of the world', but for which he has also used a more provocative theoretical analogy: Martin Heidegger's notion of truth. The analogy itself, by establishing an equivalence between the revolutionary act and Heidegger's description of a post-metaphysical 'stepping into the essential unfolding of truth' as *aletheia*, suggests that the identification with the *sinthome* goes beyond fantasy, even if through fantasy, and reaches a horizon where 'the transformation of the being of man in the sense of a *derangement* of his position among beings' (Heidegger, quoted in Žižek 2000 p. 82) unfolds beyond the very foundation of subjectivity into a form of accord with the Being of beings that is no longer determined by subjective agency. The ethical event in Žižek is connected to the Heideggerian conceptualization of *Ereignis*. But if, as Žižek says quoting William Richardson, the Heideggerian *lethe* is the Lacanian Real (p. 81), and if 'in the opposition between fantasy and reality, the Real is on the side of fantasy' (p. 67), then to step into the essential unfolding of truth is not simply to embrace fantasy; it is not only to traverse 'the *phenomenon* itself at its most radical, that is, the schema which determines how things appear to us' (p. 85). 'Identifying with the symptom', 'stepping into the essential unfolding of truth' are approximating names to what the later Heidegger will term the interval of Being, understanding it no longer as crisis, but rather as the passage of the gods, that is, the radical breakdown of human subjectifying into an appropriation onto Being: the epoch of the history of Being marked by humanist agency – the epoch of production, the epoch of technology, the epoch of biopolitics – would thus have come to an end. And with it the epoch of the subject of the political.<sup>11</sup>

Of course Žižek does not say as much. He prefers to arrest his determination of the ethico-political act at the level of subjective constitution/deconstitution. The renunciation of the dissolution of the symptom acquires thus a double characteristic: as *renunciation* to the dissolution of the symptom the subject strikes a blow at himself, through a sacrifice that, as we saw in the example of the Crucifixion, sublates sacrifice itself and opens onto the advent of an alternative community. According to this characteristic, the revolutionary act does not suture the new subject – it rather deconstitutes the old one. But, as renunciation to the *dissolution* of the symptom, the act is constitutive and suturing. Žižek cites the film *Speed*, directed by Jan de Bont,<sup>12</sup> where the hero 'shoots not the blackmailer, but his own partner in the leg' (Žižek 2000 p. 149), as an example of the first characteristic. *Twister*,<sup>13</sup> from the same director, could exemplify the second: the protagonists find the final viability of their love in the eye of the tornado itself, that is, through a thorough identification with the traumatic thing that had eluded them throughout the film but comes to them at the end as reward for their heroic efforts. *Twister* scenifies not the act of renun-

ciation but rather its after-effect, that is, its future anterior suturing. It allegorises, not the possibility of a post-traumatic utopian community, the way *Speed* does, but rather the accomplishment of the community in the post-traumatic taming of trauma itself (the passage into full subjectivity of the heroes is also the subjection of nature to science, even if postmodern or fractal science).<sup>14</sup>

Žižek's notion of the new subject of the political places it beyond both the capitalist subject and his communist 'obscene' supplement, following Saint Paul's model. Žižek's critical machine aims at undoing the idealist residue in Marxian thought, which for him materialises in the presupposed ground of biopolitics. The final coincidence of unfettered productivity and the communal subject of humanity, understood as the utopian horizon of communist politics, spells the priority of the signifier. Marxian politics, from this perspective, through the notion of an objective/subjective intervention meant to remove the limit in order to accomplish 'the absolute movement of becoming', is always already pre-ordained, programmatic, the development of a symbolic order essentially set up in advance. As Žižek puts it, 'what comes first, the signifier or some deadlock in the Real? ... [I]t is here ... that the line runs which separates materialism from idealism: the primacy of the symbolic Order is clearly idealist; it is ultimately a new version of Divine intervention in the natural order; while the second version – the emergence of the symbolic Order as the answer to some monstrous excess in the Real – is the only proper materialist solution' (Žižek 2000 p. 92).

But the question emerges as to whether the Žižekian materialist critique of Marxian biopolitics is itself biopolitical in excess. Badiou (1988 p. 11) says: 'the real remains a category of the subject'. Subjective suture, that is, the emergence of that new symbolic order, whether it follows the Marxian model, the Pauline model, or a combination of the two, is an affirmative response to some of the questions asked above. Yes, for Marx the revolutionary event, the event that brings about a change in the mode of production, does effectively seize the social in such a manner that a new suture in and of the subject of the political accounts for a new dispensation of experience. And, for Marx, that alternative dispensation of experience – 'the absolute working-out of creative potentialities' – produces a tendentially absolute reduction of the non-subject of the political. Žižek's materialist inversion ends up offering an equally affirmative if different answer. For Žižek the new dispensation of experience is no longer the result of the working-out of a presupposed, merely repressed ontology: it is rather the result of a new alliance with the Real that determines the possibility of a changed ontology. But the Real remains a category of the subject. The identification of the political horizon with subjective constitution is biopolitics proper: it cannot account for that which biopolitics excludes, namely, beyond the Real, the pressure of the non-subject of the political, of whatever remains beyond interpellation, not as the support of interpellation, but rather as the blind and mute witness of the hard materiality of that which has always already been there, beyond subjection, beyond grasp, beyond retrieval, not even obscene, not even abjected, rather simply there, a tenuous facticity beyond facticity, an invisible *punctum* of ineluctable, intractable embodiment, always on the other side of belonging, of any belonging: that is, subalternity.

(To be continued in the next issue of *The Bible and Critical Theory*)

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A proper engagement with contemporary neo-Paulinism would have to take *Il tempo che resta: Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Agamben 2000) into consideration. But Agamben's reflection on nihilistic messianicity is heterogeneous to Žižek and Badiou's project regarding the constitution of a (new) subject of the political. I will leave Agamben's book aside for another time.
- <sup>2</sup> Žižek has engaged with Badiou's work in at least three pieces: 'Psychoanalysis' (Žižek 1998), *Ticklish Subject* (Žižek 1999), and 'Is There a Politics of Subtraction?' (Žižek 2002). On the Žižek/Badiou engagement see the splendid long essay 'Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject' (Bosteels 2001a; Bosteels 2001b). Bosteels critiques Žižek's rendering and quasi-appropriation of Badiou's theory in Part I, 220–227, and Part II, 202. And see the critique of Žižek's position concerning Badiou in the also splendid *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, by Hallward (2003). On Pauline materialism Hallward comments: 'It is indeed because Žižek's own perspective is so close to Badiou's that their differences emerge with such striking and suggestive clarity' (p. 150). I would like to express my admiration both for Bosteels and Hallward's work on Badiou, which of course extends way beyond the limits of Badiou's particular conception of the subject of the political. Bosteels and Hallward, in different ways, offer two highly distinguished models of philosophical explication and deep critical engagement. If this paper aspires to a dialogue with its object, my primary interlocutors are Bosteels and Hallward even more than Žižek and Badiou.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Wo Es War, Soll Ich Werden. This *Es*, take it as the letter *S*. It is there, it is always there. It is the subject. He knows himself or he doesn't know himself. That isn't even the most important thing – he speaks or he doesn't speak. At the end of the analysis, it is him who must be called on to speak, and to enter into relation with the real Others. Where the *S* was, there the *Ich* should be' (Lacan 1991 p. 246).
- <sup>4</sup> Jan-Werner Müller summarizes Reinhardt Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis* with words that might be applicable to the radically Enlightened turn in Badiou and Žižek's notion of the subject of the political. Koselleck, in Müller's interpretation, is developing a Schmittian insight: 'Some of the *philosophes* even deceived *themselves* about the claim to power that they were mounting for seemingly apolitical reasons. They were acting *indirectly* from within the moral inner space which the Hobbesian state had left to the individual and they now sought to abolish the state altogether. This cover-up of the cover-up infinitely radicalized the politics of the Enlightenment and led directly to the crisis which then unfolded as a bloody civil war. The strict dualism between politics and morality, which was the Enlightenment's sharpest weapon, was in fact not a dualism, but a dialectic: morality turned out to be the most potent political claim' (Müller 2003 p. 107). Morality directs the reasons both for the ethical act in Žižek and for fidelity to the truth event in Badiou, but it is a morality disavowed as such, and presented as something else, in both cases.
- <sup>5</sup> I would like to indicate here an altogether different path for thinking the subject, and one, precisely, open to the non-subject, namely, Derrida's. In particular, I will quote from the second English edition of 'Force of Law', where a paragraph has been inserted that is not to be found in the first edition: 'In a way, and at the risk of shocking, one could even say that a subject can never decide anything: a subject is even that to *which* a decision cannot come or happen otherwise than as a marginal accident that does not affect the essential identity and the substantial presence-to-self that make a subject what it is – if the choice of the word *subject* is not arbitrary, at least, and if one trusts in what is in fact always required, in our culture, of a subject' (Derrida 2002 p. 253). Derrida is orienting his remarks against, precisely, the politico-theological understanding of the subject of the decision. In another essay Derrida makes of this heterogeneity between the subject and the decision a condition of democracy as such: '[The] authorization to say everything (which goes together with democracy, as the apparent hyper-responsibility of a 'subject') acknowledges a right to absolute non-response, just where there can be no question of responding, of being able to or having to respond. This non-response is more original

and more secret than the modalities of power and duty because it is fundamentally heterogeneous to them. We find there a hyperbolic condition of democracy which seems to contradict a certain determined and historically limited concept of such a democracy, a concept which links it to the concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable, and responsible, a subject having-to-respond, having-to-tell the truth, having to testify according to the sworn word ... before the law, having to reveal the secret, with the exception of certain situations that are determinable and regulated by law (confession, the professional secrets of the doctor, ... , secrets of national defense or state secrets in general...). This contradiction also indicates the task (task of thought, also theoretico-practical task) for any democracy to come' (Derrida 1992 p. 29). Something remains beyond the subject, a remainder or a rest, that will not respond. It is not a part of the subject, not a passive part. Derrida calls it passion, and mentions 'the absolute solitude of a passion without martyrdom' (1992 p. 31), an excess of the subject: 'It does not exceed it in the direction of some ideal community, rather towards a solitude without any measure common to that of an isolated subject, a solipsism of the ego whose sphere of belonging would give rise to some analogical appresentation of the alter ego and to some genesis constitutive of intersubjectivity (Husserl), or with that of a *Jemeinigkeit* of *Dasein* whose solitude, Heidegger tells us, is still a modality of *Mitsein*. Solitude, the other name of the secret ... is neither of consciousness, nor of the subject, nor of *Dasein*, not even of *Dasein* in its authentic being-able .... It makes them possible, but what it makes possible does not put an end to the secret. The secret never allows itself to be captured or covered over by the relation to the other, by being-with or by any form of 'social bond'. Even if it makes them possible, it does not answer to them, it is what does not answer. No responsiveness. Shall we call this death? Death dealt? Death dealing? I see no reason not to call that life, existence, trace. And it is not the contrary' (1992 pp. 30–31).

6 The multitude is explicitly understood as 'the self-production of the subject' in *Empire* (Hardt et al. 2000 p. 63). This act of immanent self-positing (but from where?) establishes 'a new position of being' – a 'materialist teleology' (p. 66) which is also a (not so) new ontotheology. The multitude closes the gap of sovereignty to the very extent that it is negated by modern sovereignty, in their conceptualisation (See pp. 79, 82, 87, 97).

7 I understand Laclau's theory of hegemony, by itself in *Emancipation(s)* (Laclau 1996) and *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (Laclau 1990) and in the work done with Chantal Mouffe (Laclau et al. 1985), to be the most powerful reworking of the notion in contemporary times. However, I do not believe Laclau's theory deals adequately enough with the question of the end of subalternity. Is subalternity the very condition of production of hegemonic subjectivation? Or can subalternity be dealt with, evacuated, eliminated from the social without remainder? Hegemony theory must respond that no answer to those questions is logically possible, and that those questions are supplementarily subjected to a political indictment: any answer to them must be withheld, lest we end politics. Why is that? As to the logical impossibility: if we respond 'yes, subalternity can be eliminated', we will have to base our response on the notion that subalternity is an historical accident, in other words, that there is no transcendental or structural condition that bars its elimination. Negating the transcendental of subalternity is, however, necessarily to assume a transcendental position. Thus, our position regarding the radical historicity of subalternity must disappear as such in order to open the way for a full de-transcendentalisation of subalternity. This position is therefore untenable. And, if we respond 'no, subalternity is a necessary condition of historicity', the same reasoning applies: our position would have to disappear in order to grant historicity its full rights; otherwise, the notion of historicity would be internally split by its posited originating and transcendental necessity. This is equally untenable. As to the political supplement that bars an answer: to respond yes means opting for political paralysis to the extent that any political action aims at altering an actually existing hegemonic relation; therefore, it seeks the relative subalternisation of the antagonistic holders of actual power at any given point. Hence, a politics that aims at the evacuation of subalternity from the political and social realms would have no recourse to political action. And to respond no also means

to touch upon the limit of the political, and to embrace its death, because, once the universality of political action is renounced, then the specificity of the political is removed and action becomes simply war without remainder.

8 'Allow us... one... analogy that refers to the birth of Christianity in Europe and its expansion during the decline of the Roman Empire. In this process an enormous potential of subjectivity was constructed and consolidated in terms of the prophecy of a world to come, a chiliastic project. This new subjectivity offered an absolute alternative to the spirit of imperial right – a new ontological basis. From this perspective, Empire was accepted as the 'maturity of the times' and the unity of the entire known civilization, but it was challenged in its totality by a completely different ethical and ontological axis. In the same way today, given that the limits and unresolvable problems of the new imperial right are fixed, theory and practice can go beyond them, finding once again an ontological basis of antagonism – within Empire, but also against and beyond Empire, at the same level of totality' (Hardt et al. 2000: p. 21).

9 Cf. also: 'Marx's fundamental mistake was to conclude...that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible, an order that would not only maintain but even raise to a higher degree, and effectively fully release, the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which, in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle/contradiction, is thwarted again and again by socially destructive economic crises. In short, what Marx overlooked is that...if we abolish the obstacle, the inherent contradiction of capitalism, we do not get the fully unleashed drive to productivity finally delivered of its impediment, we lose precisely this productivity that seemed to be generated and simultaneously thwarted by capitalism' (Žižek 2000: pp. 17–18).

10 Žižek's Pauline materialism, which I am renaming neo-Paulinism, is first developed in *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (Žižek 2000) and then continued in *The Puppet and the Dwarf. The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Žižek 2003). This paper will engage only with the first of those two books, where I believe the essential lines of that Žižekian project are drawn.

11 A further engagement with Heidegger takes place in one of the first footnotes to *The Puppet and the Dwarf*: 'Perhaps the link between Christianity and atheism becomes somewhat clearer if we take into account the surprising fact that the turn of Heidegger's *Being and Time* – that radical attempt to render thematic the unsurpassable finitude of the human condition – from the "reified" ontological approach to reality ("subject" perceiving "objects") toward the active engagement of being-in-the-world is grounded in his reading of Saint Paul in the early 1920s. An unexpected additional link between Heidegger and Badiou is discernible here: they both refer to Paul in the same ambiguous way. For Heidegger, Paul's turn from abstract philosophical contemplation to the committed existence of a believer indicates care and being-in-the-world, albeit only as an ontic model of what *Being and Time* deploys as the basic transcendental-ontological structure; in the same way, Badiou reads Paul as the first to deploy the formal structure of the Event and truth-procedure, although, for him, religion is not a proper domain of truth. In both cases, the Pauline experience thus plays the same ex-timate role: it is the best exemplification ("formal indication") of the ontological structure of the Event – albeit, in terms of its positive content, a "false" example, foreign to it' (Žižek 2003 pp. 173–174). But I think it is fair to say that Žižek not just reproduces but also appropriates the very ambiguity of both Heidegger and Badiou's Pauline references – adding or continuing to add an equally ambiguous appropriation of Heidegger (an appropriation at a distance, an avowed disavowal).

12 *Speed*, directed by Jan de Bont: 20th Century Fox; 1994.

13 *Twister*, directed by Jan de Bont: Warner Brothers; 1996.

14 The question in *Speed* is how not to die when one is riding a bus containing a bomb that will explode the second the bus slows down below a certain threshold. In *Twister* the question is how not to die when one is already dead, symbolically dead, in the traumatic *confrontation* with an unleashed real

under the guise of an absolutely wild and untamable atmospheric phenomenon. What is at stake in both films is the redemption of the subject, and even the construction of a subject as living – a live subject, or a subject alive. But a subject alive is not to be taken for granted in the present.

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Cite this article as: Moreiras, Alberto. 'Children of light'. *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 1, DOI: 10.2104/bc040003