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Katz - Left Traumatized - JCRT 3.2
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The failure on 9/11 was almost entirely one of doctrine_ 'a policy on how to deal with hijackers that was taught to pilots, flight attendants and the public for forty years._

What's amazing is that [the doctrine] changed within an hour of the first plane's takeover...

The doctrinal transformation took place swiftly and decisively... Three average men changed it, almost immediately upon hearing the news via their independent 'intelligence network'... cell phones.

It's called initiative, a civic virtue, part of our national character that doesn't get enough attention. Not from our leaders and certainly not from our enemies

'David Brin, "Some Notes About Calamity... and Opportunity."

Due to our Hellenic traditions, we in the West call the few casualties we suffer from terrorism and surprise 'cowardly,' the frightful losses we inflict through direct assault 'fair.' The real atrocity for the Westerner is not the number of corpses, but the manner in which soldiers died and the protocols under which they are killed. We can comprehend the insanity of a Verdun or Omaha Beach, but never accept the logic of far fewer killed through ambush, terrorism, or the execution of prisoners and noncombatants. Incinerating thousands of Japanese civilians on March 11, 1945, is seen by Westerners as not nearly so gruesome an act as beheading on capture parachuting B-29 fliers.

'Victor Davis Hanson,

Why the West Has Won: Carnage and Culture from Salamis to Vietnam.

If you can't solve a problem, enlarge it.

'U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

In his "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," his essay on the 9/11 attacks, Slavoj Zizek indicts the left for a failure to address the event in an adequate way: "The predominant reaction of European, but also American Leftists was nothing less than scandalous... all imaginable stupidities were said and written" (10). Among the charges: "Schadenfreude: the US got what it deserved"; a failure to fully solidarize with the victims (not to mention 'Zizek doesn't the rescuers) "since this would mean supporting US imperialism"; "in the weeks following the bombing, it reverted to the old mantra 'Give peace a chance! War does not stop violence!' 'a true case of hysterical precipitation, reacting to something that will not even happen in the expected form." Zizek was being generous: his reference to the "petty and miserable mathematics" ("what are the 6000 dead against millions in Ruanda, Congo, etc."), for example, hardly captures the grotesque casualty watch in which once the reported Afghani casualty number went higher than the WTC number, moral "victory" could be declared.

While Zizek says that the point is not "to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle," that is exactly what he is doing. Why, after all, try to understand who (or where) Osama Bin Laden is when, after all, "the suspected mastermind behind the bombings" is "the real life counterpart of Ernst Stauro Blofeld, the mastermind in most of the James Bond films, involved in acts of global destruction" (4).

Lenin, for Žižek, signifies the “right to truth” over the “right to narrate” (10), to a “*universal truth*” that “can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan position*. (5). Žižek reiterates that

Lenin, or, rather, our experience of Lenin “as irrelevant, ‘out of sync’ with our postmodern times” (29), this “impenetrability of Lenin is a sign that there is something wrong with OUR epoch” (29). In other words, Lenin is then to be the fundamental fantasy around which a new Left subjectivity would be constellated, would reinvent its tasks, break with the “ludic ‘postmodern’ game” (30) and insist on the “impossible.” The “reference to Lenin should serve as the signifier of the effort to break the vicious circle” of the “false options” of today’s Left, its “sad predicament”: “the acceptance of the Cultural Wars... as the dominant terrain of emancipatory politics; the purely defensive stance of protecting the achievements of the Welfare State; the naïve belief in cybercommunism... and, finally, the Third Way, the capitulation itself” (29).

The lesson here is that a genuine political space is one in which even your own worst enemy, in his attempt to destroy that space, in entering it and accepting the mode and level of accountability it imposes, must nevertheless do more good than harm. But this is only possible if the level of accountability objectified in this way is matched by a commensurate authority to inspect, judge and delegate in accord with the consequences resulting from the very course of one’s actions and that necessarily exceed one’s own delegation. That is, it requires the freedom to draw firm “lines of demarcation” between the constitution under whose authority one acts and the constitution one is producing (at least in part “covertly” insofar as this production is a result of this very line drawing which is visible only in its effects) through one’s actions. This sets Lenin completely against the “enacted utopia” Žižek seeks to derive from his practices:

It would be hard to improve on this definition of what Lenin called “ultra-leftism.” The unique suspension of temporality in the political act is not an “as if” space (which aligns Žižek with the very “hysteric” ‘Badiou, Ranciere, Balibar, etc.’ he wishes to distinguish himself, via Lenin, from), but a pedagogical one, in which the material of the concrete (“the force of habit of millions and tens of millions is a most terrible force” [29]), which is brought over from present to future by the force of ideology is implicated in the abstract by way of what I will term a “delegation.”

Lincoln is here arguing against the claim that the Founders had obviously meant to approve of slavery and to exclude blacks from the promises of the Declaration of Independence based on the empirical fact that, after all, most of the founders owned slaves themselves and never freed them, twelve out of thirteen states still maintaining slavery at the time, etc. Against this historicism, Lincoln goes on to argue that

According to this strange claim, the word “slavery” was excluded from the Constitution so that the words protecting it could be written in a kind of disappearing ink: the meaning of certain words, without their “referent,” was intended to “dissolve” over time. Furthermore, of course, there is a performative contradiction in Lincoln’s assertion: he is drawing attention to the “covert meaning” of the very words he asserts were meant to become unintelligible. And, after all, won’t those “intelligent and patriotic men” wonder what those obscure clauses are all about? Perhaps the logic is as follows: it is precisely the intelligent and patriotic men who will be able to read what is written between the lines, who will be responsible for establishing a “guardrail” around the “face of the great charter of liberty” and protecting it from false and opportunistic accusations such as those of Douglas. But wouldn’t such a cover-up just make things even worse, and be even more certain to incriminate the “fathers”?

Notes

I should also mention here Judith Butler's "Guant'namo Limbo" in the April 1 issue of *The Nation*, which I saw after I wrote this essay. Here, Butler does offer a theoretical accounting. Drawing upon an argument she borrowed from Giorgio Agamben in her *Excitable Speech* to the effect that "states of exception" are becoming the "norm" in late modern Western societies increasingly governed by "bio-power," she inquires into the "undecided" (but really undecidable?) legal status of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda prisoners held by the U.S. Prisoner of war? Unlawful combatant? Subject to a duly constituted international tribunal? Ad hoc U.S. military tribunal? This is what has become of a deconstructive politics of the performative: legalistic haggling. Meanwhile, Butler notes-pointing to the seriousness of this issue-that "the war is not over; it appears that it will now be continued in such places as Indonesia, Iraq, North Korea, Iran Pakistan and the Philippines" (23). No need to comment on that! Unless we take her entire essay as a comment: U.S. goals and actions in the war are beneath contempt, only worth mentioning so as to expose their patent cynicism and absurdity. Meanwhile, those for whom this is axiomatic should contribute to the inevitable unraveling of this latest application of bio-power, which is sure to produce new sites of counter-power. Then it will be possible to return to the more serious business of generating new and ever more ethereal "rights." Of course, the question of the Al-Qaeda prisoners can be settled rather easily: release any who will sign a-carefully prepared, yet easily modified for specific cases-confession and/or statement denouncing, in requisite detail, Bin Laden, his followers and doctrines. Those who refuse provide evidence that they are unlawful combatants who cannot safely be guaranteed the rights and protections of prisoners of war. Of course, this assumes the hegemony of the civilized/barbaric binary (Butler's real complaint, as she argues for hyper-civilized treatment for the prisoners): "civilization" is where explicit political actions (a public position-taking) can resolve the inevitable undecidable areas of the law. * * *

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3. One thing, above all, as Zizek points out, has been missing in left discourses (in *The Nation*, on *Znet*, *Counter-Punch*, *In These Times*, *The Village Voice*, etc.): "a concrete analysis of the new situation after the bombings, of the chances it gives to the left to propose its own interpretation of events." Zizek fails here to make full use of the powers of Lacanian psychoanalysis, because what one finds on the left is a bizarre repetition-compulsion behavior, in which a whole range of historical narratives'Vietnam, McCarthyism, the Cold War, the Gulf War, colonialism, the detention of Japanese Americans during WW II'and "issues," large and small, that have occupied the left press and movements for the past few years'racial profiling, expanded police powers, censorship, multicultural respect for the other'are simply pasted on current events in an incoherent and irresponsible pastiche (irresponsible, for example, insofar as one feels perfectly free to declare Taliban guerilla resistance unbeatable one day, and then denounce the next day the "excessive" force which would clearly be necessary to address such formidable resistance).¹

¹Blackburn's "Terror and Empire," published on the *Counter-Punch* website in November is an exception, providing a strong analysis, most importantly insisting that "If all movements of political or social liberation were induced to abandon terrorist methods there would be a gain and more space would be created for mass opposition to injustice" (Chapter 7, 10). I know, "everyone" on the Left would agree with this: but, even if it will take the US to do the "inducing"?

4. The grammar of today's left is provided by the reduction of the principle of "speaking truth to power" to its logical conclusion. Power is antithetical to truth; truth is itself in direct proportion to its distance from power; it acquires this distance by exposing those falsehoods-by-definition that protect the most concentrated and visible power. Each side of the equation perfectly complements and reproduces the other. This rhetorical procedure depends upon the fiction of a world of formally equal subjects (subjects of truth), who are not substantively equal only by accident and malice (victims of power): hence, the favored trope, the analogy proving the *double standard*, which is of course inexhaustible because the further one's distance from power the more the consequences of actions appear insidiously inscribed with the ultimate intention to further aggregate that power.
5. Above all, what cannot be maintained, even mentioned, is the hypothesis (which would have been strikingly obvious to, say, Lenin) that precisely the most thoroughgoing US response (one, e.g., that goes on to attack Iraq and place pressure on regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt to cease using Islamism as a safety valve) might provide the most favorable conditions for democratic, even revolutionary transformation. Why the following scenario—a decent regime in Afghanistan that respects women's rights; the foundation of the first secular democracy in the region in Iraq following Saddam Hussein's removal; a big boost for reform movements in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran; a marginalization of Islamism throughout the region—is not just as likely as the dire predictions coming out of the left is not addressed, let alone explained. In other words, the left's "unconditional demands" "remain" within the confines of the hysterical provocation aimed at the Master, testing the limits of his ability" (*Ticklish Subject* 257-8).
6. Left critical theory has been performing no better. I am looking at the recent special issue on 9/11 of the on-line journal of political theory, *theory & event*, with contributions from leading post-structuralist political thinkers like Judith Butler, James Der Derian, Michael Hardt, Michael Shapiro, and David Campbell. To take just the most prominent example, Judith Butler doesn't take up the question of how performative politics predicated upon the undoing of stable identities might appropriate present conditions—instead, she offers a banal lecture on the importance of listening to other voices and marginal perspectives, and on the legitimacy of examining the conditions that made the attack possible. That is, a completely defensive position that is more interested in the rights of and lack of respect given to left intellectuals than on anything actually happening, gesturing pathetically toward "an international community based on a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation" (11). The other essays merely repeat with little more sophistication the gestures I have been discussing (every statement in every essay can be read as an attempt, or rather a simulation of what such an attempt might look like, to paralyze everyone involved, i.e., the essays are all little more than long lists of qualifications that prepare one to say "I told you so!"), made even weaker by the universal fear among the theory left of binary oppositions.²
7. Under such conditions, the constitutive trauma that Slavoj Žižek has been trying to inflict upon the left (activist and theoretical) since at least the publication of *The Ticklish Subject* is particularly compelling. The name Žižek has been giving to this trauma, over and above "Eurocentrism," "the Cartesian subject," "universalism," "the Christian legacy," "Medea", etc.,

²Michael Feher's "Robert Fisk's Newspapers," a very instructive elaboration of the "post-colonial" thesis that the attacks were meant as a "trap for the Saudi elite, and to a lesser extent for the other so-called moderate regimes in the Islamic world," by intensifying both their dependence on the US and the repugnance with which this dependence will be viewed in the region, is a big exception to this claim.

is “Lenin.” Taking responses to 9/11 as a test case for the viability of theoretical understandings, I will examine this recent project of Žižek’s, which he has been disseminating and insisting upon with admirable “missionary” zeal, with a special focus on his “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” (the third and final version) and his “Repeating Lenin,” two texts recently posted on the Internet (a shorter version of the Lenin text was just published in *Critical Inquiry*).

8. What makes the 9/11 attacks a test case is that it was a genuinely singular event, in a rather easily identified sense: *it couldn't ever happen again*. Never again will passengers aboard a plane sit passively while hijackers carry out a suicide mission—as is indicated by the fact that the passengers aboard Flight 93 resisted once they heard (via cell phones) that planes had already crashed into the World Trade Center—and without such passivity such an attack could not be carried out. In other words, this was an anti-act to the extent that it was so self-canceling that it couldn't even be completed.
9. What this signifies is the end of a kind of implicit “contract” which has enabled terrorist tactics to have a limited effectivity since the late 1960s, a “contract” itself predicated upon the understanding that terrorism was an albeit deplorable “weapon of the weak” which victimized peoples had no choice but to resort to, but which also had certain built-in limitations: the point was to “send a message,” to implicate the passive supporters of the oppressors, but always in such a way that the asymmetry of the contending forces was simultaneously acknowledged, regardless of the “war”-like rhetoric that might accompany the attacks. Once the “privileged” victims are expected to participate, even passively, in the violence against them and others, this contract is broken.
10. This has one extremely significant political and intellectual consequence: this “contract” rested upon the assumption that political action or analysis can best be justified by or comprised of the delineation of a structure of oppression/resistance or powerful/powerless. That is, terrorism, on one level, simply stretched to its limits the modern assumption that the resources of political agency and legitimacy lie in the production of subjectivity through the resistance to victimization. This does not mean, of course, that the pursuit of justice does not depend upon the defense of victims. The point, rather, is to distinguish in each case between pre-political violence (the Fanonian direct confrontation between oppressor and oppressed) and anti-political violence aimed at destroying the space of action itself by implicating everyone. Legitimate political action articulates this distinction, or, to put it in another register, the distinction between subjectivity and accountability, and thereby resists anti-political violence. I would ask the reader to think for a moment of how many of the current analytical and activist Left frameworks (whether it be an obtuse Chomskyian literalism or the subtleties of Foucauldian power analysis) can survive the loss of the a priori analytical and political legitimacy of foregrounding structures of victimization.
11. This crisis of emancipatory thought involves postmodern political thought as well. The disinterested spectator was the common ground of ancient and modern thought: the common ground on which the contemplative stance of the ancients could be dramatically transformed into the interventionist view of knowledge characteristic of modernity. This common ground was consolidated by Stoicism, linking the spectator to sovereignty, i.e. the ascendancy of reason over the passions. This hierarchy remains even when reason becomes, as in Hobbes’ foundational account, the servant of the passions—reason can only be a useful servant if scientific method can be separated from the passions and grounded in knowledge of the

permanent, yielding the same results regardless of the inquirer.³

12. Postmodern thought undermines the disinterested spectator via a fairly simple but crucial move: pointing out that the spectator is in fact also an actor, constituting the space of surveillance and inquiry, rather than simply deriving this space out of the spectacle itself. But this recognition gains widespread acceptance in the wake of the Holocaust, which destroyed the link between victimization and agency, and the response to which therefore installed the perpetrator-victim-bystander scene as the model for understanding social relations. The spectator becomes a bystander, and the bystander becomes complicit. Universal complicity and general powerlessness becomes the global condition'this is the postmodern view of society and culture, in which "testimony" (the victim affecting the bystander) becomes the paradigm of legitimate discourse. The whole series of concepts'border crossing, queer, mimicry, hybridity, etc.'predicated upon the radical democratic character of destabilization and the subversion of normativity reiterate this structure.
13. Neither modern nor postmodern emancipatory thought, then, is particularly well equipped to address conditions in which resistance to militarized resentment of "global reach" is a precondition of any other change. Postmodern political thought is disabled here insofar as it has not sufficiently liberated itself from the modern. The closure of modern emancipatory thought is implicit in the fact that the "explanation" of conditions producing resentment has become part of the ideological engineering of that resentment: this is why leftist accounts of events, regardless of the explicit and no doubt sincere rejections of Al-Qaeda doctrine and practice, over time tend to converge with those of Al-Qaeda supporters and sympathizers: the use of power by the U.S. is defined as the production of victimization, which will be replicated (yet again) in the power resistance to that victimization will produce. The only difference is that the Al-Qaeda supporters and sympathizers still believe in the reciprocal determination between explanation and empowerment in the formation of a resistant identity. And the (perhaps deliberate) absurdity and inconsistency of the explanations given by the sympathizers, at least (it was the Mossad, the CIA, Muslims couldn't have done it, Osama Bin Laden is a hero for doing it, etc.), demonstrates how well this logic has been assimilated: ultimately, "knowledge" is defined by how impenetrably it constructs the resistant subject.
14. The implication of the bystander, the postmodern innovation, introduced in order to bring the conditions of "bystanderdom" (depoliticized, First World, consumerist, etc., privilege) to the surface actually has the opposite effect of becoming a mechanism providing flexibility and stability to present arrangements. This is because the quintessential postmodern gesture, the attempt to advance the aims of liberation by transposing the perpetrator-victim model on all modes of signification merely enhances the sacrality of that model. In other words, the modern narrative of liberation still provides the unthought, sacred figure constitutive of the complicity of the postmodern bystander. That figure is now (in a sense, more consistently) simply rendered "impossible," a condition of thinking the ever-receding horizon of a "democracy-to-come."
15. If the bystander were actually to be eliminated as a figure of thought as a consequence of its actual political disappearance, i.e., if, in cultural theory, the tension between sovereignty and maintenance of the world were to replace the assumption of the violence/instability of normalization in the articulation of norm and system, responsibility for the consequences of action and power could be thought more productively: power, as a generative scene, is

³See Ankersmit on the importance of Stoicism to the development of modern political thought

legitimate insofar as it produces its own disinterested spectator, capable of articulating one doubled scene with another. To put it in (very) contemporary terms, if we accept the charge that 9/11 represents “blowback” (at the very least a stimulating charge to take up), i.e., is a result of conditions produced by U.S. power, then the answer is both to render those conditions (the U.S. as an “experimental” and hence exemplary nation, whose founding hypothesis is always already set to work in the world) more explicit and effective; and to correct everything (in particular, traditional notions of national interest, spheres of influence, sovereignty) hindering that task by interfering with the universalizable interplay of delegated powers and thereby making violent resistance a more viable response than imitating, re-directing, re-generating and reformulating the American “hypothesis.”

16. For Žižek, the singularity of 9/11 can be articulated, consistent with his project of retrieving universalism, as follows: “the US, which, till now, perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence... is now directly involved. So the alternative is: will Americans decide to further fortify their ‘sphere’ or risk stepping out of it” (9). This leads him to the following suggestions: for example, the “ethical stance proper” is “the unconditional solidarity with all victims” (10); for President Bush, “as for all Americans today, ‘Love thy neighbor’ means ‘Love the Muslims!’ Or it means nothing at all.” (12); he urges America to break with the “fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival in the Real World, making the long-overdue move from ‘A thing like this should not happen *here*’ to ‘A thing like this should not happen *anywhere*” (9). And, he cites the “passengers who, in a model of a rational ethical act, overtook the kidnappers and provoked the early crash of the plane” as a standard against which “the Left should provide a better analysis” (8).
17. But what if all these slogans don’t add up? The passengers who downed the last plane shifted their position from passive victims (or, really, bystanders, as victims of a “normal” hijacking could reasonably expect, ultimately, to be) to active defenders of human life—this is indeed a model ethical, but not a political act (given their announcement of the commencement of this act, and the reverberations of that announcement, an argument could be made that it was quite significant politically—but this touches on precisely the point on which I differ from Žižek). Unconditional solidarity with the victims *qua* victims is a pre-political act, and therefore becomes incoherent as soon as any concrete conclusions are drawn (since any conclusions will be likely to at least risk producing more victims). “Love the Muslims” likewise raises more questions than it can answer—for the Left so far this has meant rushing to protect American Muslims from stereotyping and profiling, i.e., making sure the prevailing simulacrum of multicultural sensitivity is not shattered.⁴ Might this not mean, for example, taking Muslim citizens and residents seriously enough to ask that they denounce (in their organizational forms, of course) unequivocally, and in theological terms that will be universally understood among Muslims, the ideology and practices of Al-Qaeda and sympathizers? (And, yes, in the process perhaps producing new modes of discourse that produce not “guilt by association” but “accountability by association,” rather than the liberal and legalistic ban on “stereotyping” in its contradictory dependence upon an “openness” to “differences”).
18. Such inconsistencies and incoherencies don’t generally pose much of a problem for Žižek’s dialectical politics of subjectivity and truth. What is important, at least when Žižek is “surfing” contemporary culture (movies, psychology experiments, virtual reality simulations, movies)

⁴Žižek rightly excoriates this aspect of Left politics, “the contemporary stale Political Correctness, in which every authentic encounter with another human being is denounced as a victimizing experience” (“Repeating Lenin” 25], see also *On Belief* 124.

for symptoms, is that such claims be appropriable by the split subject as objective manifestations of that “something to which we are unconditionally attached regardless of its positive qualities” (“Repeating Lenin” 10). That is, the logic of Žižek’s theoretical discourse is that of the more fundamental subject of drive grounded in a “constitutive *surplus*” that is to say, in the excessive presence of some thing that is inherently ‘impossible’ and should not be here, in our present reality the Thing, of course, which is ultimately *the subject itself*” (*Ticklish Subject*, 304).

19. This is why Žižek’s theoretical subjectivity necessarily finds itself everywhere, locating topoi in symptomatic pieces of the real. Anything can serve as an example of the disavowed obscene supplement upon which subjectivity is predicated. And, of course, this means that “Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence” (5). Such calls for courage, for a more profound level of self-recognition, etc., uncannily become formulaic in their very utterance, at least in this case. The issue, for example, of whether “Every feature attributed to the Other is already present in the very heart of the US” (7), e.g., religious fanaticism, fits the requirement for symmetry of Žižek’s Hegelian argumentative procedure, but is irrelevant to the question he has raised: what, exactly, would it mean for Americans to “risk stepping out”? Žižek in effect mimics the very process by which, in his view, the initial American response to the WTC attacks accelerated the cultural process of de-realization resulting from the twentieth century’s “passion for the real”:

One should therefore turn around the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite on the contrary, it is prior to the WTC collapse that we lived our reality, perceiving the Third World horrors as something which is not effectively part of our social reality, as something that exists as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen and what happened on September 11 is that this screen fantasmatic apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e., the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality). (4)

20. Of course, I realize that I’m missing Žižek’s point here, which is that the “ideological and fantasmatic coordinates” structuring American responses not only produce the global reality in a way unthinkable for any other country but is crucial to the U.S.’s fantasy of innocence and separateness, and that it therefore makes sense that uncompromising political opposition to the US would aim at “(re)introduc[ing] the dimension of absolute negativity into our daily lives” (13), at “reading back” to the US, in the most literal terms possible, its own escape into a self-enclosed and morally autistic virtual reality. But my point is that emancipatory theory need not be complicit in this dynamic, for example by calling upon Americans to “render thematic our own (fantasmatic libinal) investment and engagement with those fantasies” (13). There is something very useful here in Michael Feher’s analysis contending that the 9/11 attacks were more about Bin Laden’s attempts to maneuver the Saudi rulers into an untenable position than any “hatred” for the US the possibility that the overwhelming preponderance of US power on the world scene has the effect of displacing US centrality, i.e., that the U.S. is capable of initiating far more than it is capable of completing or controlling, might enable a step into the Real more effectively than Ahabian pursuits of our “distilled essence.”
21. Part of Žižek’s argument in defense of his Lacanian appropriation of the Christian and Leninist legacy is that these traditions insist upon the possibility that the “act” is capable of restructuring

social reality at the level of the symbolic, i.e., the most basic level of social and ideological cohesion: “an authentic *act* occurs only when the subject risks a gesture that is no longer ‘covered up’ by the big Other” (*Ticklish Subject* 264). His contrast between a politics of the act and the repressions of both multicultural liberalism and the ultimately anti-political (“clean hands”) “pure act” of Alain Badiou (along with similar critiques of Etienne Balibar, Jacques Ranciere and others) are extremely valuable for saying what virtually no one is saying today: that a principled, revolutionary politics must be equipped to engage its “Other” polemically across the entire social field without allowing the liberal rules of the game or systemic “imperatives” to exercise the ultimate veto.⁵ And that, furthermore, hysterical denunciations of the multifarious crimes of the Master (and each list of crimes, if examined closely, includes a great deal that is inseparable from any acting in the world supported by power) simply mask a rejection of both action and real thinking.

22. And yet the “act,” in his account, through which one moves beyond the (reformist) field of desire to directly access and thoroughly work through the (death) drive, is invariably self-enclosed: “drive involves a kind of self-reflexive turn... into the more ambiguous middle way of *se faire voir*, of making oneself seen” (*Ticklish Subject* 298). Žizek, though, understands this self-reflexivity as “‘making-onself-chosen’, as in predestination” (299), rather than as the appropriation of the spectatorial view and theoretical “hypothesis” already implicit in the act so as to render the act a “generative” one, productive of other acts. This is what makes it possible for Žizek to say that, unlike the “banality” of the Nazis’ evil, the terrorists of 9/11 “fully assumed the horror of their acts,” the terrorists “heroically display the spectacle of their act” (12). Here, we “confront the ultimate abyss of the free will, the imponderable fact of ‘I did it because I did it’ which resists any explanation with psychological, social, ideological, etc., causes” (13). It is not clear that he has the theoretical means for distinguishing this act from genuine ethical (much less political) ones. There is a lot at stake in whether we see action as bound up in the singular completion of a particular state of drive, or as only unfolding its genuine meaning in the future acts (and interpretations) for which it serves as a “precedent,” “example,” etc.
23. Žizek’s Lenin, as I suggested earlier, is meant to operationalize his critical project as a trauma on the Left: that is, a “shocking encounter which, precisely, *disturbs* this immersion in one’s life-world, a violent intrusion of something which doesn’t fit in... one actually starts to speak, one enters the symbolic universe, only in reacting to a traumatic jolt” (*On Belief* 47). “Lenin” is to, first of all, destroy the reigning anti-“totalitarian” fundamental fantasy of the Left.⁶ The greatness of Lenin,” according to Žizek, “is that he *wasn’t afraid to succeed*” (“Repeating Lenin” 30) ‘as opposed to all hysterical left practices today, located on the field of “desire,” which prepare the ground for noble failures: left liberals today “like to evoke racism, ecology, workers’ grievances, etc., to score points over the conservatives *without endangering the system.*”’ (23). For Žizek,

“Lenin” is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite on the contrary, to put it in Kierkegaard’s terms, THE Lenin which we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless, and who was thus compelled to *reinvent* Marxism. (14)

⁵The most helpful discussions on the act can be found in *The Ticklish Subject*, 260-9, 290-306, and 369-392. For Žizek’s critique of Badiou, Ranciere, Balibar and Ernesto Laclau, see Chapter 4, “Political Subjectivization and its Vicissitudes.”

⁶For Žizek’s discussion of the “fundamental fantasy” as a site of revolutionary politics, see *The Ticklish Subject*, 265-9.

to *repeat* Lenin does NOT mean a *return* to Lenin'to repeat Lenin is to accept that "Lenin is dead," that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving... To repeat Lenin is to repeat not what Lenin *did*, but what he *failed to do*, his *missed* opportunities. (29)

24. Such a de-substantialized, even tokenized Lenin, who essentially functions as the "impossible thing" of subjectivity, necessarily excludes Lenin the pedagogue, who argued for "patiently explaining" to the workers the party's position on the war and the Provisional Government after the February Revolution. This is the Lenin who ridiculed the ultra-leftist rejection of "compromise" in the name of the sharp and perpetually reiterated and re-enacted distinction/articulation between "different forms of the movement'legal and illegal, peaceful and stormy, underground and open, circles and mass movements, parliamentary and terrorist" (12)... "sanguinary and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative" (29)'the point being that revolutionary politics shows itself in the constitution of binaries as sites of pedagogical accountability: most elementarily, the distinction between what must be visible to everyone and (thereby includes the script for how to speak about) what must not. While Lenin never actually provides the "few fundamental rules for analyzing concrete compromises" (23) that he promises, he does provide a kind of test, implicit in his discussion of the agent-provocateur Malinovsky:

As a member of the Central Committee of the Party and a deputy in the Duma, Malinovsky was forced, in order to gain our confidence, to aid us in establishing legal daily papers, which even under tsardom were able to wage a struggle against the opportunism of the Mensheviks and to preach the fundamentals of Bolshevism in a suitably disguised form. While Malinovsky with one hand sent scores and scores of the best Bolsheviks to penal servitude and to death, he was obliged with the other to assist in the education of scores and scores of thousands of new Bolsheviks through the medium of the legal press. (30)

The only criterion [of the political act] is the absolutely *inherent* one: that of the *enacted utopia*. In a proper revolutionary breakthrough, the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise which justifies present violence'it is rather as if, in a unique suspension of temporality, in the short-circuit between the present and the future, we are'as if by Grace'for a brief time allowed to act *as if* the utopian future is (not fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed... *we already are free, we already are happy while fighting for happiness..* (23)

25. "Delegation," as I will explain it in a moment, relies upon a politics of plurality and scenicity, as opposed to Žižek's politics of truth and subjectivity. By "scenicity," I mean what Eric Gans calls "originary thinking," which is grounded in his hypothesis regarding the generation of language out of "mimetic rivalry." According to Gans, the sign first emerges out of the "mimetic crisis" that erupts among proto'i.e., pre-linguistic'humans when the paradox of mimetic rivalry (imitation leads increasingly toward a focus on the same object and hence potentially violent resentment) threatens to destroy the proto-community. The first ("ostensive") sign, constituting the "originary scene," designates the renunciation of the appropriation of the (now sacred) object.⁷

⁷See Gans' most recent book, *Signs of Paradox*, and, just as importantly, his *Anthropoetics* website, including the journal

26. I haven't the space here to address the complexities of Gans' theory and its implications for culture, religion and politics. For my purposes here, it is enough to point out that originary thinking breaks the deadlock in post-metaphysical thought (the same deadlock Žižek is ultimately attacking) brought about by the prohibition on examining origins and foundations and positing universals and binary oppositions. And it does so without recourse to a violent, founding obscene supplement (in this regard, Žižek is much closer to René Girard, from whose thinking Gans departs, very prominently on the issue of the primacy of either violence i.e., scapegoating, lynching and sacrifice or peace). A different theory of the act follows from scenic thinking than that available to Žižek: the act seizes and innovates one of the elements of the scene (actor, spectator, plot, prop, etc.) and thereby liberates those elements from sovereignty and opens them up for reconstitution.
27. A politics of plurality and scenicity might best be clarified by repeating Lincoln (another revolutionary who both wasn't afraid to win, and who retrieved, in a time of crisis, the foundational principles enabling his own practices). Lincoln's thought and practice is an antidote to the revival of anti-federalist and popular sovereignty heresies in postmodern political theory (a prominent recent example is, of course, Hardt and Negri's *Empire*). Lincoln's retrieval of the founding is at the same time a subtle, mostly implicit critique of the founding's implication in the heresies that become the (historicist, empiricist, "radical democratic") ideology of the slave power. As Lincoln noted in his final debate with Stephen Douglas,

The institution of slavery is only mentioned in the Constitution of the United States two or three times, and in neither of these cases does the word "slavery" or "negro race" occur; but covert language is used each time, and for a purpose full of significance. (1965 310)

The purpose was that in our constitution, which it was hoped as is still hoped will endure forever when it should be read by intelligent and patriotic men, after the institution of slavery had passed from among us there should be nothing on the face of the great charter of liberty suggesting that such a thing as negro slavery had ever existed among us. This is part of the evidence that the fathers of the government expected and intended the institution of slavery to come to an end. (1965 311)

28. Lincoln's performative contradiction also serves "a purpose full of significance": teaching us how to read the Constitution performatively, i.e., as the very act of articulating and defending it. Slavery is indeed ob-scene, in its necessary rejection of any scenic articulation, but it is not a "disavowed obscene supplement" or a "contingent stain" that is actually constitutive. Rather, slavery is explicitly contained and marginalized within the very document which authorizes those powers it constitutes to set slavery on the road to "ultimate extinction": slavery is protected where it already exists, but is given no principled sanction, the passages dealing with it are, as Lincoln suggests, narrowly empirical and hence out of place amongst the broader distribution of powers characteristic of the document. The Constitution's writing between the lines,⁸ appropriated by Lincoln, further suggests that the way to augment the

he edits and his periodical "Chronicles of Love and Resentment." I want to note that my analysis of the importance of what Gans calls "victimary" discourse has significant parallels (but also some significant differences) with Gans' own concerns. Also, I want to note that Gans takes his "originary hypothesis" in a dramatically different political direction than I am about to.

⁸Support for Lincoln's reading can be found in *Federalist* 54, the only paper to address the representation and taxation arrangements for the slave states. Madison, after acknowledging the force of the objection to this concession, goes on to

constituted powers and eliminate slavery (and, by implication, other evils temporarily beyond the reach of the founding principles) is to surround it just as the Constitution does rhetorically by enhancing the allergy of the founding principles to slavery's existence. The clauses on slavery will be rendered unintelligible to the precise extent that the Constitutional powers are augmented; those powers will be augmented to the extent that those clauses are rendered intelligible as boundary markers to all those "retrieving" the Constitution polemically; such a retrieval, in activating the resources of self-reflexivity built into the text, would finally, decisively, separate the historical fact of slavery (which, of course, Lincoln doesn't imply should be forgotten) from the "face," i.e., the mechanisms for (re)reading, of the Constitution.

29. It is this retrieval that enables Lincoln to pursue a politics leading to the abolition of slavery in a largely covert manner, under the banner of "Union." "Union," I would suggest, represents, among many other things, the assertion that rights do not pre-exist the founding that explicitly recognizes them, that human equality as the basis of self-government is a "proposition" to which political action is "dedicated": the Jeffersonian assumption of natural rights was the "germ" that later flourished in the Southern doctrine of "popular sovereignty." This has nothing to do with legal positivism: rights are not created by the state since the government founded itself presupposes and articulates a necessary distribution and interplay of powers that represent "constitutionalized" social capacities. None of this, then, denies the source of rights in the people, i.e., the right to revolution; it just means that a revolution against one constitution can only acquire legitimacy in another constitutionalization of the plurality of social capacities.
30. It is within the space opened by the polemic for "Union" that the slavery issue as the real issue of the war could appear not as a moral, economic, or social issue, but as a properly political one issuing in contending doctrines, principles and forces. The "particular evil" of slavery becomes a "generalized evil" once its obscenity demands recognition on the public scene, becomes a localized site of resentment transforming all claims into equivalent such sites, and becomes a cynical, corrosive logic of settling those claims in accord with shifting relations of force. And it is certain that Lincoln "covertly" knew all this, even as he was protesting his innocence of any designs on interfering with slavery where it already existed, even while he enacted abolition incrementally, with seemingly petty legalistic measures, always tied to strategic military necessities. Just as the Constitution enacted the dissolution of the meaning of the passages on slavery as an effect of the performativity of the rest of the document, Lincoln enacts the abolition of slavery as that performativity, rendering abolition legible in the perfectly ordinary legal and institutional functions of the executive branch.⁹
31. More broadly, Lincoln is situated in what Hannah Arendt designated as the paradox of the American founding, between "the human capacity for beginning" (what Arendt called "action") and "the stability and durability of the new structure" (223), or what she called "work": "in this republic... there was no space reserved, no room left for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building it" (232). These qualities—the combination of a boldly experimental scientific politics, the courage to initiate and innovate,

state "the reasoning, which may be offered by the other side," **not** in his own voice, but in the hypothetical words of "one of our Southern brethren" (336), clearly dissociating the arguments in favor of the Constitution from **this** argument while nevertheless, of course, providing the argument.

⁹I have been guided in my reading of Lincoln by Paul Rahe's *Republics Ancient and Modern*, especially Volume 3, *Constituting the American Republic*, and George Anastaplo's *Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography*.

along with the eventual authority to institute'are structurally excluded from the political order they established.

32. This was Lincoln's concern in one of his earliest public statements, his "Speech Before the Young Man's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," when he suggested that once "the experiment [of self-government] is successful" (1993 14), there will be no constructive role for "men of ambition and talent" (15). He ends that speech by accepting, in a rather melancholy tone, his status as latecomer: "Reason'cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason'must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense" (17). And yet things are complicated by Lincoln's call for "support of the Constitution" to become "the political religion of the nation." On the one hand, the paradox of the founding is intensified rather than performatively rearticulated'it leads Lincoln to what Žižek might call a "superegoish" insistence on "religiously observing" even bad laws, leaving no place, say, for civil disobedience as a retrieval of the founding through the testing of the Constitutionality of the law and hence the appropriation of executive capacities.
33. Still, a careful reading of Lincoln's presidency might suggest that he articulates the self-reflexivity of the Constitution (the articulation of the paradox of "beginning" and "durability") in a rather rigorous way, implying that the function of the president is to clarify, perfect and exemplify the capacities concentrated in the executive office in accord with its logic within the Constitutional order. Would not a reunderstanding of citizenship (and not merely office holding) along these lines, imply the appropriation and formalization of constitutionalized capacities, "surrounding" and marginalizing evils by constituting boundaries rendering their ob-scenity visible? Action, in this case, would be at the same time delegation of the other "functions" constitutive of the scene: that is, for example, in exercising the judicial function of judgment, I call upon actors to augment the scene by testing the limits of my own function in the executive and legislative realms. One acts and simultaneously calls forth "constitutional" accountings of that act'in this way, the paradox of the founding is set to work.
34. If Marxism means anything, it is that wage-labor "constitutes a peculiar and powerful interest" that "all [know]" is "somehow the cause" (1993 330, from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) of all questions and conflicts that "de-face" the articulation of constitutionalized capacities (including new capacities, calling forth new constitutions). Wage labor, that is, is ob-scene: what "great charter of liberty" would not be defaced by explicitly recognizing its justice and permanence (in seeking to regulate it)? And yet, what such charter would be worth the paper it is written on without'under present conditions'the, strictly speaking, anomalous, recognition of "workers' rights"? The analogy with slavery is of course very inexact'for example, rather than stopping wage-labor's spread, one encourages (within the existing regime) it. But what remains true is that what "all know" "somehow" can only appear as a result of scenic articulations of constitutionalized capacities. Such appearances can only result from the "covert" action on the part of those who know that they know, drawing lines of demarcation that displace the doctrinal, political, metaphysical, etc., concentrations of force that attach legitimacy to and hence generalize "particular evils." In this case, any socio-political development that augments means and modes of visibility and accountability'means and modes that expose justifications of the existing that should only be referred to "covertly," i.e., that are allergic to the transparent self-reflexivity and pedagogical accountability constitutive of all genuinely post-modern activities'should be seen as felicitous.