

Žižek's Infidelity: Lenin, the National Question, and the Postcolonial Legacy of Revolutionary Internationalism

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Arguing against all unwritten discursive taboos (the *Denkverbot*) that waste no time invoking the specter of totalitarianism, its history of the gulag and Third World catastrophes, Slavoj Žižek makes the case for the need to reactualize the Leninist act of the October Revolution today (Žižek 2002: 168). Elsewhere, he calls this critical confrontation with the Leninist legacy as “retrieval-through-repetition” (*Wieder-Holung*) (Žižek 2007: 95). While Žižek is more than ready to recognize the monstrous failure of the solutions that Lenin’s legacy embodies (the one-party system and the dictatorship of the proletariat), he still believes that there is “a utopian spark in [Lenin’s legacy] worth saving.”¹ For Žižek, the Lenin to be reloaded is the “Lenin-in-becoming,” the one that has not yet become a part of the Soviet institution; this is the Lenin who is “thrown into an *open* situation” (emphasis in original; Žižek 2002: 6). As such, the Lenin to be recovered is the Lenin full of potentialities, whose language of possibilities can be located in “what he *failed to do*, his missed opportunities” which can never be predicted or foreclosed (emphasis in original; Žižek 2002: 310). To repeat Lenin is to recuperate, as Žižek memorably says, what was “in Lenin more than Lenin himself” (Žižek 2002: 310). Above all, this excess in Lenin represents for Žižek the freedom to think outside the common discursive prohibitions of the neo-colonial, global capitalist regime. This Lenin, he writes, “stands for the compelling freedom to suspend the stale existing (post) ideological coordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* in which we live – it simply means that we are allowed to think again” (Žižek 2002: 11). As Adrian Johnston succinctly puts it, repeating Lenin “broadly signifies a disruptive break that makes

it possible to imagine, once again, viable alternatives to liberal democratic capitalism by removing the various obstacles to thinking seriously about options forcefully foreclosed by today's reigning ideologies" (Johnston 2009: 115).

For Žižek, however, Lenin signifies more than just this freedom to think outside the box of the neo-colonial, global capitalist regime. For all his talk about "passive aggressivity" (Žižek 2006b: 209–26), Žižek's invocation of Lenin's name ultimately lies in his historic act, the event of the October Revolution, precisely in his call for immediate revolution.² He thus notes Lenin's anti-evolutionary conviction that there can be no waiting for the "right moment" of the revolution to mature on its own and explode, but that under certain conditions, it is legitimate, even advisable, to catalyze and force the revolution to come into existence (Žižek 2002: 8). Although he perceived the situation to be desperate, Lenin realized that it could be "creatively exploited for new political choice" (Žižek 2008: 360). In Lacanese, therefore, Lenin's revolutionary act was "not covered by the big Other" – that is, for Žižek, Lenin was neither afraid of a premature seizure of power nor did he demand full guarantees for the revolution to succeed in order for him to embark on the road to revolutionary change (Žižek 2002: 8). In short, because Lenin was capable of looking into the "abyss of the act" in the eye that he insisted that there is no right time for the revolution.

For Žižek, therefore, these completely hopeless times clear a space for enacting Lenin's freedom of experimentation and rejection of determinism, for "there is *always* a space to be made for an act" (emphasis in original; Žižek 2008: 361). In his implicit response to Žižek's claim, Fredric Jameson asserts that Lenin's significance can be located neither in politics nor in economics, but rather in the fusion of both together "in that Event-as-process and process-as-Event we call revolution" (Jameson 2007: 68). Jameson thus states: "The true meaning of Lenin is the perpetual injunction to keep the revolution alive, to keep it alive as a possibility even before it has happened, to keep it alive as a process at all those moments when it is threatened by defeat or worse yet, by routinization, compromise, or forgetfulness" (Jameson 2007: 68). As such, Žižek reappropriates Lenin to foreground the need for reenacting another revolution, although not necessarily a communist one since Marx's Communist society, in his opinion, is an "inherent capitalist fantasy" (Žižek 2000: 19), but a revolution in the abstract whose content still requires remapping and specification. In this sense, Žižek's rejection of a Communist Utopia is indeed an example of, in Johnston's words, a "Marxism

deprived of its Marxism" (Johnston 2009: 112). Nonetheless, it is precisely this weak form of "positive Marxism," embodied in his insistence on keeping the revolution alive, that constitutes the highest expression of fidelity to Marx and to the Lenin who identifies "what is decisive in Marxism" as "its revolutionary dialectics" (Lenin 1923: 476–7).

Although this exhortation to repeat Lenin has radical implications for the "gesture of reinventing the revolutionary project in the conditions of imperialism and colonialism, more precisely" (Žižek 2002: 11), Žižek's turn to Lenin is an example of the kind of repetition to salvage alternative history that Žižek claims as a critical gesture for maintaining a revolutionary stance. Yet, strangely enough, Žižek himself misses one of Lenin's most useful linkages for promoting the revolution on a global scale – the revolutionary potential of the postcolonial subject. After the 1914 crisis and his disenchantment with the Second International, I will show, Lenin's writings increasingly reinscribe the subject of the national liberation movements in the colonies, not the Western working class, as one of the fundamental articulations of the "real" revolutionary subject. It is not that Lenin disavowed the proletariat and their world-historic mission altogether or that he assigned an a priori ontological value to the postcolonial subject as the ultimate locus of revolutionary subjectivity, and Žižek is fully aware, of course, that there "*never was*" a "predestined revolutionary subject," not even the working class (Žižek 2008: 289; emphasis in original). Rather, it must be recognized that in the years leading to the Third International and until his death, Lenin's faith in the "awakening of hundreds of millions" in the colonies became more pronounced.

If Lenin is to be repeated today, I argue, postcoloniality should (retroactively) be considered one of those causal nodes around which a Leninist act is formed. Repeating Lenin, that is, will not transform the coordinates of the political, unless one recuperates and accounts for Lenin's mediation of the national question and his increasing faith in the capacity of the subjects of colonial difference to serve as the vanguard of revolutionary internationalism. In Žižek's own radical Marxist understanding of the contingency of the past and the freedom we have to "(over) determine the past which will determine us" (Žižek 2008: 314), Lenin's revolutionary politics can thus be seen as being over-determined in a retroactive endorsement of the postcolonial link that will determine the future of revolutionary internationalism. Nonetheless, Žižek has been reluctant to locate the world-historic mission of socialist internationalism in the field of possibilities and potentialities that characterizes the history

of postcoloniality, repudiating thus the capacity of the postcolonial subject to subjectivize the position of the proletariat and the revolutionary class that was envisioned by Lenin.³ In part, he represents the postcolonial as both an ideological supplement to global capitalism, specifically in the case of Tibet and Buddhism, and its excremental remainder especially, the favelas and slums of the Third World. Consequently, Žižek does not only obliterate the history of the national liberation movements in the postcolonial world, but also forecloses the possibility of the construction of the postcolonial as the subject-for-itself, or more specifically, the subject of history and revolutionary internationalism. Žižek's infidelity to this other/wise Lenin notwithstanding, a genealogy of the position of postcoloniality in Lenin's work can retroactively foreground the exclusion in Žižek's revolutionary politics, clearing a space for its politicization.

Žižek and the Postcolonial: Between a Supplement and an Excremental Remainder

The postcolonial subject of difference assumes an ambivalent position in Žižek's work, a position that evolves within the contradictions between his culturalist and political understanding of the postcolonial. On the one hand, there is a culturalist representation of the postcolonial (mostly Tibetan Buddhism) as a fetish, a fantasmatic object upon which the Western melancholic subject projects his own anxieties, embodying the lie that allows this subject to endure the unbearable truth that the source of his secret of enjoyment is to be found within, not somewhere else outside. On the other, there is a political representation that considers the postcolonial (mostly the favelas in Latin America and the slums in South East Asia) as a symptom of the logic of global capitalism, modernization, and developmentalism, which functions as the point of the return of the repressed truth of class antagonism within, in his words, the "field of global capitalist lies" (Žižek 2008: 424). In both cases, however, Žižek fails to reimagine the subject of postcolonial difference as a genuine locus of the revolutionary act, a subject-for-itself, opting instead for envisioning a true revolution emerging only from a Europe-centered "Second World," where it becomes possible to put up a resistance front to the global hegemony of the United States.

Within the current economy of exchange between Europe and Asia, Žižek postulates, the Western melancholy subject identifies Tibet and its

religious (Buddhist) traditions as its lost object-cause of desire. This idealization of Tibet, however, all too easily turns into its opposite, a through-going defilement and devaluation as an "excremental object" (Žižek 2001: 59). Indeed, Žižek points out that these contradictory Western representations of Tibet coincide all the time, noting that the natives and their capital city, Lhasa, including its central palace (Potala) always appear to Westerners as both the epitome of spirituality and the sublime AND the embodiment of filth and corruption (Žižek 2001: 64). In its fantasmatic status as both a jewel and an excremental object, Tibet constitutes a "'reflexive determination' of the split attitude of the West itself, combining violent penetration and respectful sacralization." Elsewhere, Žižek describes the fetishistic function of Tibet for Westerners as a "screen for the projection of Western ideological fantasies," a "screen concealing the liminal experience of their own impotence" (Žižek 1997: 103). Ultimately, the East is defined by its empty and illusory reality, its "positive void," impassivity, and indifference to the world through the renunciation of desire, but this East still possesses that lost object of desire that the Western subject is after and which this subject tries to claim through an arduous journey, struggle, and violent encounters.

Žižek's description of the Western subject's quest for wisdom in the East, however, is in itself a depoliticized form of Eurocentrism. For him, Eurocentrism is all about decenterment, the ex-centricity of Europeans – that is, instead of searching for the lost object in Europe itself, Europeans look for that object in the midst of the Other, outside Europe. This quest, however, took many forms of not only erotic and aesthetic investment in the Other, but most importantly economic exploitation and violent extermination from cannibalization to genocidal colonization. Strangely enough, Žižek contends that colonization was never about imposing Western values or even about economic exploitation, but about cultural envy and a false respect for the Other. His warning about obfuscating economic sources of neo-colonial capitalism notwithstanding, Žižek's seems to abandon, rather too quickly, his earlier insight into the economic exploitation of the Tibetans in the global capitalist economy that renders the Tibetan condition homologous to that of the Native Americans. Consequently, his discussion of Tibet smacks of a culturalist rhetoric that invokes the same pseudo-psychoanalytic vocabulary for which he criticizes the postmodernist trend in postcolonial theory. At stake here is Žižek's reduction of the East to some essence (Buddhism/ Emptiness) which allows, as Ananda Abeysekera claims, to produce a religio-cultural difference that can serve not only as a foil to

an alleged Christian core or legacy that one must fight for over and over again, but also as the projection screen of Europeans' worst nightmare, namely the Holocaust and its anti-Semitic subtext (Abeysekara 2008: 73–4).⁴

Žižek's reduction of the postcolonial East to a space of both emptiness and excrementality whence no true subjectivity can ensue underwrites his representation of the favelas and slums around the Third World. With the growth of the "destructured" population in the slums and shanty towns of the Third World, he contends, these forms of alternative communities, or "supernumerary" collectives, are excluded from the benefits of citizenship, existing "outside the structured social field" in extra-judicial spaces and beyond state control where the system itself is suspended (Žižek 2008: 425). In fact, according to Žižek, the state has withdrawn its power to control the slums and their dwellers, leaving them to "vegetate in the twilight zone," even though they are still subject to integration within the global capitalist economy as its "systematically generated 'living dead'" (Žižek 2008: 425). Grounded in the possibility of "self-transparent organization," nonetheless, these marginalized and dispossessed dwelling spaces have led to the construction of an emergent form of agency and social awareness. Hence, Žižek dubs these spaces "liberated territories," where the "horizon of the politics to come" is actualized (Žižek 2008: 426). To this extent, the subject of postcolonial difference in the favelas and slums subjectivizes the position of Marx's proletariat. Although the slum dwellers are defined in socio-political not economic terms like the working class, he argues that they embody, even exceed, the definition of the "free" proletarian revolutionary subject. He writes that they are "'freed' from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, beyond the police regulations of the state; they are a large collective, forcibly thrown together, 'thrown' into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of any support in traditional ways of life, in inherited religious or ethnic life-forms" (Žižek 2008: 425).

Unlike other leftists who altogether dismiss the favelas, where the valorization of both religious fundamentalism and survival strategies over political mobilization they find to be utterly objectionable, Žižek celebrates the vitality and energy of the slums and favelas, finding more in the favelas than the favelas.⁵ Nevertheless, he inevitably renounces the capacity of these Other utopian spaces to affect a subversion of the whole edifice of the system. In Žižek's analysis, these alternative spaces are typified by a limited, indeed extra-revolutionary, potentiality that may at best

allow for escaping the system, providing a temporary respite from its constraints, but they miserably fail to become truly authentic “evental sites” from which to mount the next revolutionary act against neo-liberal global capitalism and affect a total transformation of the system. The problem here is three-fold: First, Žižek is inconsistent in his representation of the precise location of these communities and spaces within the system, for he shuttles back and forth between identifying their location as existing in a space completely exterior to the system and their position “in conditions *half* outside the law” in a terrain where the state has “*partially at least*” withdrawn from the favelas and slums (Žižek 2008: 224–5). Second, Žižek seems to believe that the “improvised modes of social life” that proliferate in the slums, namely religious fundamentalist ideologies, criminal gangs, the black economy, and diverse forms of socialist solidarity and social programs, are capable of facilitating the “political mobilization of new forms of politics.”⁶ It remains unclear, however, how such forms of agency and resistance, if indeed that is what they are, can produce direct forms of democratic governance that would reinvent the function of the party and “preclude political alienation” (Žižek 2006: 51–3). He even admits that these spaces are “in terrible need of minimal forms of self-organization” (Žižek 2008: 424).

And third, Žižek seems to think that these spaces can only be embedded in negative and inhuman forms of vitality and energy, what he refers to as “divine violence.” Like the biblical locusts, Žižek surmises, the slum dwellers strike “blindly” out of nowhere, “demanding *and* enacting immediate justice/vengeance,” an act or a decision not “covered by the big Other,” and as such, without any external guarantees invoking the passion of risk of a contingent decision and requiring the suspension of the ethical (Žižek 2008: 162). Although the content of the violence of the slum dwellers (it exists outside the law within the realm of excessive inhuman terror and it disrupts the socio-symbolic field) may sound identical to that of the Jacobins or Lenin in his analysis, the form of that violence (subhuman/zoological; inhumanly blind and vengeful) dramatically and drastically varies among them. In his analysis, the violence in the favelas is exclusively directed internally, against each other, problematically invoking colonial representations of Third World barbaric thugs and hooligans who are not capable of mounting an effective act of resistance to the system itself. For Žižek, it seems, the postcolonial subject does not, even will not, have the ability to rearticulate acts of resistance in a different register beyond itself altogether, failing thus to turn these practices of resistance into an authentic revolutionary act.

“Beyond the Pale of History”: Lenin, the National Question, and the Postcolonial Legacy of Revolutionary Internationalism

By reducing postcoloniality to Tibet and the favelas, the cultural imaginary and the excremental exclusion of global capitalism, Žižek overlooks other postcolonial sites and acts, especially the national liberation movements as possible sources of revolutionary transformation. Such an approach subverts his attempt at reclaiming Lenin, because Lenin’s mediation of anti-colonialism and the national question constitutes another possible outcome that still “haunt[s] us as specters of what might have been” (Žižek 2010: 86). Accounting for Lenin’s faith in the power of the national liberation movements to lead the world revolution to come, nonetheless, has radical implications for retroactively redeeming postcoloniality, especially the constitution of the postcolonial subject as one of the main loci of the production of a revolutionary internationalist subjectivity and its world-historic mission. Lenin did not simply provide a new language and broader theoretical vocabulary for articulating the concerns of the national liberation movements in the colonies, as the standard postcolonial critiques of Lenin have it. Rather, he located the language of hope and messianism that characterizes socialist internationalism in the postcolonial field of possibilities. Although Lenin did not simply abandon the potential of the proletariat for revolution, he seems to consider the subjects of the national liberation movements in the colonies more than just “one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make an appearance on the scene.”⁷ By embracing the subject of the national liberation movements, as Kevin Anderson writes, Lenin widened “the orthodox Marxist notion of the revolutionary subject” (Anderson 2007: 143). Lenin’s position on the potential of the subject of colonial difference to assume the leadership of the revolutionary movement, I maintain, developed in dialogue and debates with many Third World Marxist activists and intellectuals most importantly, the Indian M. N. Roy and the Muslim Mir Said Sultan-Galiev.⁸

It is important first to note that Lenin’s uncompromising socialist internationalist position on the problematic of the subject of colonial difference was first articulated at the 1907 Stuttgart Congress of the Second International (1889) especially, at the 1899 Brunn Congress. At Brunn, the solidarity of the oppressed, the Western proletariat and the

subjects of colonial difference, took center stage over the preoccupation with intra-European colonialism that characterized the First International and the early congresses of the Second (Young 2001: 116). Lenin firmly rejected the pervasive conviction in the Congress that colonialism was an integral part of the socialist movement, criticizing its underlying racist bourgeois policies for “introducing virtual slavery into the colonies and subjecting the native populations to untold indignities and violence” (Young 2001: 116–17).

Lenin's understanding of this common bond of oppression between colonials and proletariat and the importance of class struggle for forging a link between them was rearticulated three years later (1910) at a world conference of colonized peoples and at the 1916 Lausanne conference. In a 1916 essay, he asserted that the struggle for national self-determination in the colonies was a leading force in the opposition to imperialist capitalism (Young 2001: 125; Anderson 2007: 129). As Kevin Anderson notes, Lenin was “the first major theorist, Marxist or non-Marxist, to grasp the importance that anti-nationalist movements would have for global politics in the twentieth century” (Anderson 2007: 128). Indeed, his references and examples in *Imperialism* (1916) and *The State and Revolution* (1917) were mostly drawn not from Russia but from anti-imperialist national liberation movements in India, Ireland, China, Turkey, and Iran. In his debates about the Irish Easter Rebellion of 1916, in particular, with leading Marxists especially, Radek and Trotsky, Lenin dissented from their Bukharinian renunciation of all forms of nationalism as obsolete, distinguishing between the chauvinist nationalism of colonial powers and the revolutionary nationalism of the national liberation movements which he described as “the dialectical opposite of global imperialism” (Anderson 2001: 131). In the years leading to the October Revolution, moreover, Lenin reconciled the claims of nationalism and national self-determination with the need for the proletariat to “fight in conjunction with it against colonial oppression,” by anticipating the dissolution and renunciation of bourgeois nationalism in favor of the establishment of proletarian internationalism (Young 2001: 121–2).

As he began considering himself a leader of international Marxism, nonetheless, Lenin viewed the production of anti-imperialist subjectivity, one constituted through the dialectics of national struggle in the colonies, as central to his vision of world revolution and communist internationalism. Indeed, in his critique of Rosa Luxemburg's Eurocentric proletarian messianism, that only the “workers of the advanced capitalist countries . . . can lead the army of the exploited and enslaved of the five

continents,” Lenin forcefully argues that “the national liberation politics of the colonies will *inevitably* be continued by national wars of the colonies *against* imperialism” (emphasis in original; Lenin 1972, 22: 307). While the First Congress of the Third International, the Communist International, or the Comintern (1919), mainly reiterated Luxemburg’s faith in the messianic powers of the Western urban proletariat to overthrow the European colonial states, so that “the workers and peasants not only of Annam, Algiers, and Bengal, but also of Persia and Armenia [may] gain their independence,” by the time of the Second Congress Lenin was becoming very skeptical about the ability of the Western proletariat to affect an immediate revolution in Europe (Young 2001: 128). With the encouragement of Sultan-Galiev, Lenin began increasingly to “identify the countries of the east as being of more potential revolutionary significance” (Young 2001: 129). In *The National Liberation-Movement in the East*, therefore, Lenin writes: “And it should be perfectly clear that in the coming decisive battles of the world revolution, this movement of the majority of the world’s population, originally aimed at national liberation, will turn against capitalism and imperialism and will, perhaps, play a more revolutionary role than we have been led to expect” (Lenin 1969: 289–90).

At and after the Second Congress, moreover, Lenin identified his critique of imperialism with that of the Indian Marxist M.N. Roy, putting thus “colonial revolution at the forefront of the priorities of the new communist government, regarding it as a central factor in the Soviet fight against capitalism” (Young 2001: 125). Indeed, Roy was instrumental in Lenin’s recognition of the subject of colonial difference as one of the main loci of revolutionary subjectivity. Drawing on and revising Marx’s analysis of Ireland in his debate with Lenin on the importance of Asia in developing world revolutions, Roy argued that “because of the economic dependency of imperialist powers on their colonial structures, ‘the fate of the revolutionary movement in Europe depends *entirely* on the course of the revolution in the East. Without the victory of the revolution in the eastern countries, the communist movement in the West would come to nothing” (emphasis added; qtd in Young 2001: 131–2). While Lenin thought that Roy’s use of the word “entirely” was hyperbolic, Lenin in his address to the Second Congress, nonetheless, announced: “World imperialism shall fall when the revolutionary onslaught of the exploited and oppressed workers in each country . . . merge with the revolutionary onslaught of hundreds of millions of people who have hitherto stood beyond the pale of history and have been regarded

merely as the objects of history" (Lenin 1972, 31: 207–8). The power of the subjects of colonial difference is thus embedded in their rejection of that status as "objects of history" and their ability to reclaim the potential for embodying the idea of revolution. Indeed, Lenin stated that "the awakening to life and struggle of the new classes in the East (Japan, India, China) . . . serves as a fresh confirmation of Marxism" (Lenin 1972, 33: 234).

Lenin's radical idea from the Second Congress until his death, then, was his ability to recodify the subjects of colonial difference into the vanguard subjects of socialist internationalism, an idea that he had preciently anticipated in a 1913 article entitled, "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia" (Lenin 1972, 19: 99–101). This idea took full form in The First Congress of the Peoples of the East, or the Baku Congress of 1920, which convened at his own instigation to underscore the revolutionary potential of the subjects of colonial difference. Lenin's understanding of the primacy of anti-colonial struggle of the national liberation movements in the march toward socialist internationalism does not thus simply mean that he bracketed the potential of the proletariat to lead the revolution, but rather the opposite, that above all Lenin was increasingly convinced that the national liberation movements in the colonies provided a new language of anti-imperial struggle and liberation with which to inject the stale legacy of socialist internationalism. Even in the last article he wrote, Lenin reiterated his faith in the future role of the subject of colonial difference in the coming world revolution, stating that the mobilization of the national liberation movements in the colonies will ensure socialist victory (Lenin 1972, 45: 416–17). Such a position would not be far from Lenin's dialectical "concrete analysis of concrete situations" which, as Etienne Balibar maintains, "assumed incorporating into the concept of revolutionary process the *plurality of forms* of proletarian political struggle ("peaceful" and "violent"), and the *transition* from one form to another (hence the question of the specific duration and successive contradictions of the revolutionary transition" (emphasis in original; Balibar 2007: 211). This is not only to acknowledge that the socialist revolution is inconceivable without a diverse and international insurgency, as Kevin Anderson argues (Anderson 1995: 135–41), but that the idea of the revolution itself will inevitably be, and will have been, "exported" to the world from without Europe. To invert Stalin's statement on "The International Significance of the October Revolution," it could be said in regards to Lenin's position on the revolutionary potential of postcolonial subjectivity that the struggle of national liberation

movements in the colonies created a “new line of revolution against world imperialism,” extending from the oppressed nations of the East, through the Russian revolution, and to the “proletarians of the West” (qtd in Young 2001: 126).

The Postcolonial Hypothesis: Two Words for Žižek

Reconfiguring this postcolonial trajectory of Lenin’s revolutionary pedagogy is in line with Žižek’s view that “while the pure past is the transcendental condition for our acts, our acts not only create an actual new reality, but also retroactively change this very condition” (Žižek 2008: 315). As such, Lenin’s October Revolution should be perceived only as “being one possible, and often even not the most probable, outcome of an ‘open’ situation” (Žižek 2010: 86), and that the postcolonial impetus of Lenin’s revolutionary politics is the specter that will continue to haunt the future of the radical left and the Western revolutionary theories and politics. This perception of an alternate postcolonial history of revolutionary internationalism does not simply amount to disavowing the October Revolution the way conservative, revisionist what-if historians do, but constitutes the site where the “felt *urgency* of the revolutionary act” unfolds in actuality (Žižek 2010: 86).

Shifting the focus from the October Revolution to the history of postcolonial revolutionary experimentation can therefore be more productive for thinking through not only the practical difficulties of constructing a revolution, but also the ultimate end of the revolution. Despite the disparity in the success of postcolonial revolutionary practices, one cannot simply overlook the record of postcolonial revolutions that were thickly invested in reimagining extra-capitalist social totalities. As one of the major repressed points of exclusion under the hegemony of global capitalism today, postcolonial spaces indeed constitute the most important locus for exacerbating the antagonisms inherent to the capitalist system, turning them into a collective evental site that even in, or precisely because of, its failures can offer a radical challenge to the totality of the liberal-capitalist socio-symbolic order and actualize the “revolutionary explosion.”

My wager then is that, especially at this juncture in the rise of mezzanine regimes that refuse to do the bidding of US imperial power, Žižek’s call for the “political mobilization of new forms of politics” must

not only be predicated upon a “practical alliance” with the “new proletarians from Africa and elsewhere,” as Alain Badiou states (Badiou 2010: 99).⁹ Rather, they must be organized from the beginning at the level of the real by those same new postcolonial proletarians who recognize themselves in the socialist revolutionary Event. Indeed, under the current hegemony of neo-colonialist global capitalism, it is the subjects of postcolonial difference that have assumed the position of and been able to “subjectivize” Marx’s “vanishing” proletariat. As Badiou correctly points out in regards to the Cultural Revolution, and by implication other postcolonial revolutionary acts, Žižek fails to understand not only the long series of postcolonial revolutionary acts that constitute the ultimate embodiment of the “principles of the Paris Commune,” but also the “element of universality in [their] terrible failure” (Badiou 2010: 274, 273). As Žižek himself recently noted, the subject’s fidelity to a cause like the revolutionary Event can be only regulated through “incessant betrayals” (Žižek 2010: xiv).

Despite the disparity in the history and practice of revolutionary ideology in the postcolonies, the postcolonial subject seems to be the one best suited these days to reinvent and stabilize a radically egalitarian politics as well as alternative forms of political organization “in the immediate” (Žižek 2008: 427). Chavez’s call for a Fifth International and the recent current revolutionary developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Libya, and the increasing signs of social upheaval and unrest that are sweeping Yemen, Jordan, and Syria, are the ultimate proof of the explosive, utopian potential of postcolonial emancipatory politics.¹⁰ In Tahrir square, that is, Žižek needs to see that we were “allowed to act as if the utopian future is . . . already at hand, there to be seized” (Žižek 2002: 260). Indeed, it is this revolutionary postcolonial moment that proves beyond the shadow of doubt that “the ‘right choice’ is only possible the second time, after the wrong one; that is, it is only the first wrong choice which literally creates the conditions for the right choice” (Žižek 2010: 88).

Notes

- 1 When Ernesto Laclau faults Žižek’s call to repeat Lenin, he is wary that such a call risks re-implementing the one-party political system and the dictatorship of the proletariat (Laclau 2000). But, as I will argue below, Žižek’s weak

- form of “positive Marxism” makes it almost impossible to tell a priori the precise substance of such a repetition. Hence, the emphasis on the Badiouian event in Žižek’s formulation of the act. For Žižek’s response to Laclau, see his “A Leninist Gesture” and *In Defense of Lost Causes*.
- 2 For a history of the October Revolution and Lenin’s surprise call for immediate revolution in October, see Rabinowitch (1976).
 - 3 Žižek calls for rehabilitating Marx’s distinction between the working class, as an “objective” social category, and the proletariat, as a certain subjective position or, in Kantian terms, the class “for itself” (Žižek 2002: 336). In response to his question as to “who occupies, who is able to subjectivize, today [the working class’s] position as proletariat,” my unequivocal answer is: the subject of postcolonial difference.
 - 4 Abeysekara is clearly offended by the way in which Žižek obsessively lays the blame of the Nazi industrial genocide on the doctrine of noninvolvement in the Bhagavad Gita; for Žižek, this principle of disinterested action “provided the justification for the burning of the Jews in the gas chambers” (qtd in Abeysekara 2008: 81).
 - 5 For a more pessimistic analysis of the revolutionary potential of the slums, see Davis who views religion in the favelas as the major reactionary political force and believes the dwellers care more about survival rather than protest. As he succinctly puts it, “making do is more conservative than revolutionary” (Davis 2006: 18, 35).
 - 6 One must here contrast Žižek’s endorsement of religious fundamentalism in the favelas with his critique of Islamic fundamentalist movements such as Hezbollah which is bound, in Badiou’s words, to their “religious particularity.” While in the former he locates a capacity for mediating direct democratic governance, in the latter he can only find the blurring of the “distinctions between capitalist neo-imperialism and secular progressive emancipation: within the Hezbollah ideological space, women’s emancipation, gay rights, etc., are nothing but the “decadent” moral aspect of Western imperialism” (Žižek, “The Palestinian”). Ironically, Hizbollah is widely recognized as a trailblazer in the emergence of “mezzanine regimes” which seem to offer precisely that for which Žižek is condemning them.
 - 7 V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), vol. 22, p. 357. All subsequent references to Lenin from this edition will be cited by volume and page numbers in the text.
 - 8 This reconstructive reading of Lenin’s position on the true subject of revolutionary internationalism draws on the work of John Riddell’s history and documentation of the Baku Conference and the Second Congress of the Third International. See also Young (2001: 115–39), and Kevin Anderson (1995; 2003) whose important work on Lenin’s position on the national question which was grounded in Hegelian dialectics has refocused attention on this neglected issue in the criticism of Lenin’s work.

- 9 For more on these mezzanine regimes, see Crawford and Miscik 2010.
- 10 Although Žižek praises the populist regimes of Hugo Chávez and Juan Evo Morales, his assessment of their regimes are framed within his debate on populism with Laclau. Given that sovereign power is always already cut through by a “totalitarian excess” (based on the recognition of the law’s “obscene unconditional self-assertion” as the obverse side of its legitimate authority), Žižek maintains, the Chávez and Morales regimes successfully tilted that totalitarian excess of power towards the dispossessed “part of no-part,” actualizing thus what he considers to be the “contemporary form of the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Žižek 2008: 379). Nonetheless, and this was the substance of his debate with Laclau, this populist commitment to the poor and the suspension of the big Other, in the guise of democratic electoral process, are invariably effective only as a “short-term pragmatic compromise.” For him, such a populism then cannot bring a radical change in the system, because not only that the big Other is still present in the form of the “People as the substantial agent legitimizing power,” but most importantly because populism can only normalize the “violent intrusion of the egalitarian logic” through democratic regulated procedures. In other words, populism fails to institutionalize itself as “revolutionary democratic terror” (Žižek 2008: 265, 266). More recently, Žižek has even condemned Chávez’s anti-American populism which like Mugabe’s failed economic policies exploit “racial divisions in order to obfuscate the class division,” by playing the race card and “place the blame on the old white colonialists” (Žižek 2010: 385n36).

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