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That obscured subject of violence [book review]

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'That Obscured Subject Of Violence'

Review of Slavoj Žižek's *On Violence*
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That Obscured Subject Of Violence

S. Žižek, *On Violence*
Profile Books, London, 2008, (Pbk)
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In the preface to *Eclipse Of Reason*, written in 1944 as Europe was exhausting one of its greatest cycles of transformative violence, Max Horkheimer set himself in favour of thought and against any incitement to action which “obliterate[d] that very substance of reason in the name of which this progress is espoused” (Horkheimer, 2004:vi). The same sentiment animates the opening passages of *On Violence*, in which Slavoj Žižek rejects the “fake sense of urgency that pervades the left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence” (p. 5). Instead, he proposes to 'look awry' at violence, to turn contemporary delusions and certainties in such a way as to better perceive a triumvirate: not only the 'subjective' violence “performed by a clearly identifiable agent” but also the two forms of 'objective' violence: the symbolic violence of language and the systemic violence which encompasses “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (p. 1). In doing so, Žižek hopes to disentangle us from our obsession with the pornography of force, our persistent cries that 'something must be done', and our consequent distraction from “the true locus of trouble” (p. 9).

It is a common enough accusation that Žižek makes more sense out of context than in it, and it is still true that our bursts of comprehension come not from a careful delineation of thought, but from provocations, diversions and interruptions. By these standards, there is plenty of insight to *On Violence*, from the biting characterisation of 'liberal communists' like Bill Gates who peddle

both the diseases of capitalism and the putative cure of philanthropy (pp. 13-25), to the Lacanian-inspired racial 'subject supposed to loot and rape' found in media depictions of a post-Katrina New Orleans (pp. 79-85). There is a persuasive diagnosis of the Parisian *banlieue* riots of 2005 as 'zero-level' protests, as a politics consisting of the simple assertion of visibility (pp. 63-69), and of tolerance as an ideological category that *replaces* ideas of exploitation, injustice or inequality through a 'culturalisation of politics' (p. 119). Indeed, much of the book is dedicated to this now well-established critique of tolerant liberal reason which, together with arguments against the analytical neglect of objective violence by 'the left', builds towards a final consideration of the nature and promise of revolutionary violence.

But if Žižek stakes his case through such fragments, through a 'bric-a-brac of reflections', what does attention to them tell us about the argument which we are meant to be perceiving awry? Two lines of thought seem particularly promising. In the first, Žižek returns to the obstinate problem of ideology, pursued in this case as a generalised set of social rules that allows Belief without believers. These implicit codes operate as an "obscene underground" that generates behaviour in the face of official disavowal, whether in the gap between homophobia and homosexual innuendo in the military or as a 'solution' to the false choice of torture at Abu Ghraib as originating from either the highest political authorities or as the initiative of brutal entrepreneurs from the lower ranks (pp. 145-150). To see ideology in this way is to understand its capacity for generating inner distance and to hint at how objective violence is obscured by its operations.

In the second compelling theme, a kind of emancipatory potential is recovered for the notion of equality-freedom from a reconsideration of the dialectic of the universal and the particular. The tension or gap between the brute reality of inequality and formal political rights is not, for Žižek, the apparently crude one between a driving socio-economic structure and a peripheral 'echo' but a gap in which the superficial appearance has its own power to 're-articulate' relations. Symbolic fictions have efficiency (pp. 127-134). Similarly, 'abstract' notions like 'the rights of women' have a universal power in particular life-worlds, just as specific struggles intrude on our imagining of humanity as a whole, as the particular "*becomes 'for-itself', and is directly experienced as universal*" (p. 129). Consequently, it is not enough to say that the claims of universality mask specific interests, but also to examine how form has its own power in a way that ultimately undermines the particularism with which it was invested (pp. 125-128). Although the accompanying caricatures of feminists, post-modernists and post-colonialists obsessed with identity politics occasionally reads like a right-wing fantasy (as if there are legions of leftists advocating 'respect' for female genital mutilation), this way of putting the problem does escape a number of false antagonisms, transferring our attention to how we articulate the relationship between specificity and generality, between universality and difference, rather than compelling us to choose one or other side.

Other themes appear similarly promising but remain frustratingly insubstantial. One trajectory suggests that fetishistic disavowal is at the heart of any ethics. How, Žižek asks, could one continue to eat pork having seen the suffering of animals for oneself? We can only 'go on' if we choose to forget, if we accept that our ethico-political programmes must have a constituent outside, and that this forgetting is not a flaw but the positive condition of possibility for ethical thought (pp. 45-49). As usual, there is something persuasive here. But it is quickly drowned out by the unanswered questions such a position raises. For example, at least part of the argument implies that ethical commitment is a zero-sum game, so that we must accept, or rather ignore, some forms of suffering to alleviate others. Yet that a constant, real-time cognisance of all sentient misery is not possible does not exhaust the claims that ethical reasoning may make on us. After all, if to recognise suffering and not act on it is congruent with an ethical life, then what is the ethical status of the decision to become a vegetarian? If we previously thought of ethics as following through on one's convictions, even if the cost to oneself was great, should we now say that ethics is really about ignoring one's own conscience, even if the cost to others is great? And what are we do with the following paradox: the kind of position in liberal communism that Žižek lambasts is one of fetishistic disavowal – acknowledging the painful inequalities caused by capitalism but then forgetting it in favour of self-satisfaction at its own philanthropy. Can we not say that *this*, combined with the injunction to think instead of act, is precisely the mind-set best-suited to today's postmodern corporate power?

That would even seem to be an eminently Žižekian position, and there are several provocations in *On Violence* which involve not only analytical thinness, but also this kind of apparent contradiction. To take another example, it is argued that the ideological function of 'tolerance' is paralleled by the rationalistic attempt to "understand the Other from within", an attempt which actually ends up imputing the most ridiculous beliefs as the true cause of action, as in the thesis that suicide bombing is the 'rational' choice of those seeking 400 virgins in paradise (p. 71). But this tempting line of thought is somewhat undermined when we are treated to precisely such a manoeuvre by Žižek, who claims that both "thoroughly secularised writing" and Monty Python are "unimaginable in an Islamic culture" (p. 90). This view of a monolithic 'Islam' incapable of religious satire or non-metaphysical reflection is not only inaccurate, but deprives us of the kind of psychoanalytical hay that Žižek might have made of actual Islamic humour, as in the apparent wealth of jokes based on the ease with which the Arabic for 'God' can be turned into the word for 'penis'¹.

But what of revolutionary violence? Žižek casts the basic problem via the homology between Freud's dream of Irma's injection and Job's encounter with the brutal will of God. In both cases, interpreters attempt to mask the horror of the Real, "to disguise the impact of the trauma with a symbolic semblance" (p. 153). Just as Freud and Job should have refused these gestures towards intelligibility and closure, so we must refuse the temptations of deeper meaning when considering

Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. In a series of examples, Žižek makes clear that divine violence is not the will of the people, nor the necessary means adopted for a given end. It is not abstract and pure. Like the Jacobin Terror, or the Red Terror, it fits Badiou's category of an Event. It lacks any Big Other which can confer upon it an agreed meaning within the symbolic order. Neither pure violence nor the exception which founds the law, it is like the shattering of identity that goes under the name of Love, hence Žižek's invocation of Che Guevara and revolution as "the subject's *work of love*" (p. 172). It follows that divine violence cannot be the tool of a vanguard on behalf of 'the people', which is the sense in which Stalin's attempt at collectivisation, valorised here as "truly daring...try[ing] the impossible" (p. 177), was ultimately insufficient, since it turned into the 'impotent' simulacrum of cleansing that was the Purges. Instead, divine violence is "the heroic assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision...If it is extra-moral, it is not 'immoral'...When those outside the structured social field strike 'blindly', demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is divine violence" (p. 171).

An obvious immediate problem concerns Žižek's replication of the binary choice of much liberal commentary on revolution. On the one hand, the safe, 'realistic' world of inequality, consumption and false 'tolerance', run by a managerialist elite who dispense charity as they reap the rewards of the system. On the other, an authentic subaltern resentment, dreams of impossible equality and the transformative Event, necessarily horrific, which we cannot assuage with empty attempts at incremental progress, or even properly understand with our faulty ethical categories. The relevant question, so clarified, simply becomes whether to embrace or oppose such a historic moment. The foreclosure of other ways of thinking about social change is evident but the shift from a critique of *false* tolerance to a championing of true acts of revolutionary daring is somewhat obscured by the argument's under-development. We do not discover why the repudiation of all these liberal ideological vices should lead us so swiftly to an acceptance that only a true Year Zero can realise an end to objective violence.

Through all this, Žižek is certainly endorsing divine violence (p. 174), but what kind of endorsement is it? By the closing paragraphs, he is arguing that doing nothing can be the most violent choice, can cause more upheaval than the current dreams of humanitarians or the apparently insufficient violence of Mao and Stalin. 'Pseudo-activity' (academic debates, campaigns, the creation of social space for 'the multitude') only buttresses the violence of a system which thrives on co-opting its adversaries (p. 183). In the hands of a different theorist, this may have become a political programme of refusal, an active withdrawing of participation in the games of power. But Žižek's version of doing nothing is more thorough-going. Although apparently paradoxical, it can instead be read as the dialectical materialism of the pessoptimist, as a return to a Marxism dismissive of the progressive illusions of the bourgeoisie but confident that the development of capitalism itself will give birth to the divine violence of the proletariat.

Such a reading is starkly in conflict with the idea that 'super-structural' symbols have a meaningful impact on the possibilities of emancipation. But there is a deeper problem. Presumably our understanding of what constitutes 'suffering' is part of the symbolic order. The desire to alleviate suffering and the impetus to pay attention to the forms of objective violence stems from this understanding, as does the desire for revolutionary social transformation. But if we are to equate 'true' revolution with divine violence, and also to claim that divine violence is necessarily the kind of Event that remakes the entire symbolic order, then the very foundation on which the appeal to revolutionary politics is built dissolves. On what grounds can such an indeterminate re-making of the world be cast as desirable or necessary? Does doing so not simply leave us with an empty glorification of a contentless Act? Žižek does seem to intend something along these lines, but we do not discover how such problems are to be resolved, or even if they count as problems at all.

In an earlier passage, Žižek revisits anti-Semitism to demonstrate the overdetermined fantasmatic dimension of hatred, of the abstract, but libidinally-invested, 'Jew' as the true target of violence (p. 57). But it is clear that divine violence plays a similar role in *On Violence*, as a repository for charged fantasies of its transformative potential. Žižek is, of course, too sophisticated a theorist to entertain the idea of ever escaping ideology, which is something like the necessary field of human experience in his thought, but his embrace of this kind of revolutionary optimism, which passes without a serious consideration of what it entails, allows him to commit fully to the cleansing power of history. In this, he comes very close to what he once diagnosed as a kind of right-wing Lacanianism² – the kind that acknowledges the symbolic role of The Father but sees this not as subversive of authoritarianism but as its ultimate support, the required psychoanalytical justification for whatever whims are to be imposed on the family or the nation. 'Enjoy your Symptom!' indeed.

In fact, what the sections on divine violence reveal is the fetishistic disavowal at the heart of Žižek's own position – a simultaneous desire to claim that, despite its origins, the formal language of universal rights has ushered in a series of genuinely emancipatory developments *and* to see all our ways of thinking about egalitarian politics as so impoverished as to necessitate the accumulated wrath of pure resentment enacted by a coming, but obscured, revolutionary Subject. There is both an appeal for thought over action *and* an implication that the kind of reclamation of reason and enlightenment that Horkheimer demanded is illusory. And it would seem then that inner distance is not simply the mark of ideology at work in contemporary militarism *but also* an attitude towards necessary violence that we must accommodate, if not cultivate, at least in as far as we should set aside the concerns and revulsion that would otherwise form our reaction to its consequences, "crazy and tasteless as it may sound" (p. 183).

So by the end of *On Violence*, we are faced not so much with a triumvirate of violence as with a fulcrum and a strangely inverse relationship. In one scenario the two forms of objective violence

persist and grow as we devote attention to the more superficial crimes of subjective violence. In the other, the eruption of (divine) Subjective violence is the necessary cost for the possibility of eradicating objective violence, an aim that requires bloody raids on the territory of the impossible. So it is that the possibility of investing our politics with an opposition to all three forms of violence evaporates, unremarked. And if there can be no such wholeness in our thinking, and no building of the structure of the new society within the shell of the old, and if the extension of particular struggles into the realm of the universal is to be superseded by a *deus in machina*, how will we decide whether what is to come is nightmare or utopia?

Notes:

1. See Kishtainy (1985:12-13). Both of Žižek's characterisations of Islamic culture are common myths, briefly dealt with by Halliday (2005:23-25, 85-86).
2. During his 'Master Class on Jacques Lacan: A Lateral Introduction', May-June 2006, Birkbeck College, University of London

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