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From Communist Ideology to the Idea of Communism: Transformations in Žižek's Notion of Communism[1]

Keywords
Žižek, communism, Idea, Kant, Hegel

Abstract
This article approaches a potential tension in the work of Slavoj Žižek between his critique of communist ideology and his endorsement of the communist idea. The aim is to show how this endorsement, in effect, emerged out of Žižek's sustained engagement with communist ideology. The article captures this transformation by focusing on his understanding of the notion of the idea and the ways in which ideology can be transgressed. The conclusion drawn is that in moving from a Kantian to a Hegelian notion of the idea, Žižek also leaves behind his initial Beckettian Leninism in favor of an understanding of revolution that no longer depends on the heroic act of a subject, but on the immanent logic of the communist idea.

Od komunistične ideologije k ideji komunizma: transformacije Žižkovega pojma komunizma

Ključne besede
Žižek, komunizem, Ideja, Kant, Hegel

Povzetek
Članek obravnava potencialno napetost v delu Slavoja Žižka med njegovo kritiko komunistične ideologije in njegovim zavzemanjem za komunistično idejo. Cilj je pokazati, kako je ta podpora dejansko nastala iz Žižkovega nenehnega ukvarjanja s komunistič-

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no ideologijo. Članek to preobrazbo zajame tako, da se osredotoči na Žižkovo razumevanje pojma ideje in na načine, na katere je mogoče ideologijo preseči. Sklepna ugotovitev je, da Žižek s prehodom od kantovskega k heglovskemu pojmu ideje zapusti tudi svoj začetni beckettovski leninizem v korist razumevanja revolucije, ki ni več odvisno od herojskega dejanja subjekta, temveč od imanentne logike same komunistične ideje.

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At the heart of communism today lies what might appear to be an oxymoron, something that we could call the post-communist communist, an attempt to present a critique of historically existing communism while still remaining a communist. The question confronting communism is, in other words, if one can separate the proper from the improper actualization of the idea, making it possible to subscribe to the communist idea that initiated revolutions while nevertheless dismissing (at least parts of) its tragic consequences. Today, this position is often deemed impossible, forcing many to draw the conclusion that the idea of communism is dead. Within the work of Slavoj Žižek, this tension could be located in the opposition between his analysis of communist ideology and his attempt to think the emancipatory potential of the communist idea. Therefore, when treating Žižek's work on communism, many have chosen to completely disregard one of these aspects, either claiming that his endorsement of communism is just another example of his performative provocations, or that he, behind a veil of feigned criticism, is merely promoting a return to totalitarianism.[2]

Among scholars who have taken the post-communist communism of Žižek seriously, many have claimed that he has been furthering a notion of revolutionary

[2] Cf. Yannis Stavrakakis, "On Acts, Pure and Impure," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4, no. 2 (2010), http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/301/301; Reinhard Heil, *Zur Aktualität von Slavoj Žižek: Einleitung in sein Werk* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 62; Thomas Brockelman, *Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism* (London: Continuum, 2008), 71–74; Dominik Finkelde, *Slavoj Žižek zwischen Lacan und Hegel: Politische Philosophie—Metapsychologie—Ethik* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2009); Matthew Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 195; Ola Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11.

communism throughout his entire work in English.[3] However, this article will try to show how the idea of communism emerged and evolved in and through his many attempts to understand the horrific failures of twentieth-century communist ideology. This aim of not only distinguishing between the analysis of communist ideology and the development of an idea of communism, but also to show how the latter emerged through sustained engagement with the former, will also serve as a point of separation from those who only read Žižek's notion of communism as another word for critical philosophy or *Ideologiekritik*.[4] To achieve this, the present article will focus on Žižek's understanding of the idea, how it relates to politics and ethics, as well as how this notion has transformed through his sustained engagement with the ideology and the philosophy of communism.

Communism, Ethics, and Kant

In what is perhaps his first most sustained engagements with communism in English, found in the 2001 book *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*,[5] Žižek offers a depiction of the multiple layers and functions of this belief system: from the ideology of the official party line, via the everyday approach to the world that characterizes both the average citizen and the dissident, to the perspective of Western Marxists who, while remaining communists, wanted to avoid defending Soviet communism. At this point in his work, Žižek almost exclusively uses the term communism to denote what we might call "actually existing communism," as he attempts to explain its ideological system. Already in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek had highlighted the importance of empty rituals as the glue holding together the Stalinist community,[6] a point which he now, just over a dec-

3 Cf. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), 9; Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2012), 21.

4 Cf. Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 117; Robert Ruehl, "Žižek's Communist Theology: A Revolutionary Challenge to America's Capitalist God," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011), http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/295/295; Cindy Zeiher, "And What of the Left? Žižek's Refusal of the Current Leftist Parable," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 10, no. 2 (2016), http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/955/958.

5 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2011).

6 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 162–63.

ade later, expanded upon in order to show how these ideological practices were enacted not only by the party apparatchiks and the nomenklatura, but also by the average Soviet citizen. Against the then prevalent idea that in particular the West had reached the pinnacle of the post-ideological age, Žižek here developed a concept of ideology in which even cynical acceptance (the supposedly non-ideological position *par excellence*) includes a certain form of ideological belief. Žižek's more specific points concerning communist ideology, which toward the final days of the Soviet Union also showed clear cynical tendencies, urges us to avoid describing the cynical stance as a way for ordinary people to adopt an ironic (non-believer's) distance to official dogma. Instead, this stance of disinterested cynicism was not only demanded from above by ideology itself, but it was even necessary for the survival of the system. Since cynicism was imposed on the citizen, Žižek concludes that the ironic rebel, maintaining a dissident mindset while simultaneously adhering to the official party line, never posed any threat to sustained communist rule. Instead, the real peril could be found in the honest believer with a true commitment to the communist cause. As noted, this cynical belief structure is not specific to late communist ideology. Rather, Žižek has continuously shown how this subjective position can be found everywhere today. Taken in this sense, cynicism allows for an ideological subject to be quite aware of the impossibilities and instabilities plaguing the utopian vision of society purported by the ruling ideology, all the while continuing to reproduce the very same ideology in and through action. Thus, Žižek's analysis of communist ideology in the late Soviet Union and Yugoslavia undermines the hope of locating a disruptive *kynicism* in the people's rejection of official dogma. Rather, this rejection is already included in its functioning as an ideology.

Since we should not ascribe any disruptive potentiality to this supposedly disillusioned stance, the cynicism of late communist ideology can no longer be read as a reaction to the "ruthless, self-obliterating dedication to the Communist cause" supposedly defining Stalinist terror and repression.[7] Instead, Žižek writes, "the problem with the Stalinist Communists was that they were *not* 'pure' enough, and got caught up in the *perverse* economy of duty: 'I know this is heavy and can be painful, but what can I do? This is my duty . . .'"[8] The reference to duty, which Žižek goes on to develop in its Kantian context, becomes a key component to un-

7 Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 111.

8 Žižek, 111.

derstanding his analysis of communist ideology. As we will see, it also explains why the label communism is deceptive when discussing Žižek's understanding of revolutionary politics during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Žižek's reading of a Kantian notion of duty, which relies heavily on Alenka Zupančič's understanding of an "ethics of the real," places the horrors of twentieth-century communism in an ethical context.[9] This does not, however, mean that ideology becomes an ethical concept. At least not if we by this assume that it offers some way of distinguishing between good and evil (placing ideology on the latter side). Instead, the Kantian ethics developed by Zupančič should be read as an injunction to act "in conformity with duty and strictly for the sake of duty."[10] By urging us to act in accordance with our duty, Kant, in this reading, offers an attempt to escape the issues that plague any ethics intended to separate good from evil, since such a distinction either requires a universal ground in something like God or Nature, or it risks getting stuck in the minutiae of practical life when trying to work out what is good for whom, in what situation, etc. The important caveat here is that we cannot motivate our dutiful acts by referencing anything but duty itself, which is where Žižek's analysis of communism comes in. The issue, as he points out regarding Stalin's terrors, was not that its perpetrators believed too much in the cause, that they in every single situation followed their duty to the end, convinced that they were doing the right thing. Rather, the issue is, as is illustrated in the quote above, that they referred to their duty as a painful injunction forcing them to carry out atrocities despite their personal moral objections. Although there is an obvious kind of perversity in the hypocritical reference to duty, what remains for us to show is how this understanding of Kantian ethics underlies Žižek's entire analysis of communist ideology in much of his work during the 1990s and early 2000s.

At first, it may seem counterintuitive that not only a sincere believer in any ideological credo, but also a subject appearing to be cynically detached, retains a reference to duty. But if we read Žižek's depiction of what we might call cynical and Stalinist communism as two versions of the same ethical failure, it might help to shed some light on this notion of duty. But before that, let us try to work

9 Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2011).

10 Zupančič, 53.

out the details of how a Kantian ethic of the act provides the framework for the analysis. Regarding the ethical act, Zupančič writes:

> "Act so that the maxim of your will can always hold at the same time as the principle giving universal law"—what is the paradox implicit in this formulation of the categorial imperative? The paradox is that, despite its "categorical" character, it somehow leaves everything wide open. For how am I to decide if (the maxim of) my action can hold as a principle providing a universal law, if I do not accept the presupposition that I am originally guided by some notion of the good (i.e., some notion of what is universally acceptable)? In other words, there is no a priori criterion of universality. [. . .] *Anything can be transformed into a universal claim; nothing is* a priori *excluded from ethics*.[11]

The truly ethical act is therefore not one in which the subject acts in accordance with a previously given notion of the good, but rather one in which the entire world of this subject is risked in order to follow a sense of duty. This act is one wherein all the existing coordinates of the subject's life are eradicated and, potentially, laid out anew. Only when following a sense of duty beyond the limits of one's subjective world is it possible to act in accordance with duty alone, meaning that the ethical act can be accomplished without the disturbance of subjective perversions. An initial distinction must here be made between the ethical act and its ideological counterpart; the latter aimed at retaining perversions belonging to a specific world rather than acting to eradicate this foundation. It is, however, not just the failure to perform this destructive act that brings together the false suffering of the ruthlessly efficient Stalinist bureaucrat and the cynical citizens not taking official decrees seriously. Instead, it is the very attempt to establish a distance between themselves and the act that constitutes their ethical failure (leaving them stuck in ideology). In other words: they do know very well what they are doing, but they nevertheless do it. While following official decrees, the cynical subject knows very well that the big Other is non-existent and shot through with inconsistencies. But in practice, this subject still acts as if the big Other is omnipotent. This is precisely what makes the cynical approach into a truly modern ideological configuration. Zupančič illustrates this by pointing to the role of knowledge in the act as the line separating classical heroic ethics and modern cynicism. What a classical hero, exemplified

[11] Zupančič, 92–93.

by Oedipus in Zupančič's analysis, shares with a modern cynic is the position in which the subject identifies itself with the symptom. Both Oedipus and the cynic reduce themselves to the object as it appears in the eyes of the big Other. They perform all the tasks required by the big Other, turning into "the pure instrument of the big Other's will."[12] However, for the cynic, this relationship is tainted by a certain perversity dependent on the awareness of the big Other's impotence. Oedipus, on the other hand, is turned into the instrument of the big Other's will against his own explicit attempt to avoid it. Nevertheless, it is first when he acknowledges his role, and gauges out his eyes rather than committing suicide, that Oedipus becomes a true classical hero. Hence, the cynic and the hero structurally occupy the same position, but in choosing blindness over suicide, Oedipus sends a message to the big Other that he refuses to pay the price of the debt that he was ascribed already from the outset. Only by renouncing his expected position as a tragic hero (which would entail killing himself after learning of the atrocities he had committed in his blindness) does Oedipus turn himself into a classical hero, a reminder of the structural need for blindness that allows the system to sustain itself.[13]

When observing the cynic, we can identify a similar attempt at reducing subjectivity to an object. Just as was the case with Oedipus, when realizing the inescapable nature of ideology, the cynic chooses to accept the role of the big Other's object of desire rather than trying to escape this fate. This structural position also characterizes the sentimental Stalinist bureaucrat as he is cursing his lot of having to carry out the atrocities that duty demands of him. However, unlike Oedipus, who in his act of blinding himself becomes a "true tragic hero," there is no ethical heroism to be found in these modern-day equivalents. Neither the cynic nor the pathetic bureaucrat can achieve such a status since heroism can no longer be achieved simply by becoming aware of the structural necessity of one's guilt (the fact that our own activity is the prerequisite for the fulfilment of the big Other's prophecy). The difference here, as Zupančič shows, is thus not dependent on the subject, but the status of the big Other. With the rift opened up by modernity, all the big Other's inconsistencies became an object of public knowledge. The big Other's impotence was openly admitted. Turning oneself into the object of this big Other, which for Oedipus was a scandalous act (secur-

12 Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 112.

13 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 175–99.

ing his role as a tragic hero battling against his position in a given world), can, therefore, no longer constitute an act of transgression (even though the cynic often experiences his or her ironies as affronts to the big Other). If we already from the outset are aware that the big Other's inconsistencies require the subject's action in order to function, the inconsistencies exploited by the ironic distance in the end amounts to nothing. In a modern ethics, the subject instead "finds herself in a situation where she has to take the decision to act in spite of this knowledge, and to commit the very act that this knowledge makes 'impossible.'"[14]

To return to Žižek's analysis of communist ideology, he identifies, even in its dissident voices, a failure to act in accordance with duty. In a comment on the work of Soviet composer Shostakovich, Žižek points out how his symphonies allegedly allowed for two readings: one which remained in accordance with the official ideology and one which ironically mocked it, potentially transgressing the given order. Žižek's claim is that the second reading cannot have been exclusively accessible to other dissidents, meaning that a distinction could not be made between those stuck in ideology (reading his symphonies as lauding Soviet communism) and the non-believers, who, through their distance, could enjoy the ironies and inconsistencies of the ruling ideology. Instead, a more probable scenario is that both readings could be enjoyed by one and the same person. Žižek continues:

> So it is Shostakovich's very inner distance towards the "official" Socialist reading of his symphonies that makes him a prototypical Soviet composer—this distance is constitutive of ideology, while authors who fully (over)identified with the official ideology, like Alexandr Medvedkin, the Soviet filmmaker portrayed in Chris Marker's documentary *The Last Bolshevik*, run into trouble. Every Party functionary, right up to Stalin himself, was in a way a "closet dissident," talking privately about themes prohibited in public.[15]

Hence, the issue with the dual message in Shostakovich's symphonies is how this split allows for his personal desires to return, tainting his duty to resist what he saw as a despicable regime. Regardless of if he exploited this duality as a way to protect himself from persecution, or if the ironic theme was just a way for him

14 Zupančič, 256.

15 Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 125.

to enjoy an imagined intellectual superiority, it provided him with a reason to follow a sense of duty not grounded in duty itself but rather in self-preservation or intellectual vanity. Thus, Shostakovich could make use of the officially admitted inconsistencies of the big Other without sacrificing his symbolic identity, since his very existence did not point out anything in this big Other that everyone was not already enjoying. This issue is also why Žižek, in the quote above, highlights film director Alexandr Medvedkin as a much more troublesome figure for the ruling elite: his point here is that Medvedkin's overidentification with the communist cause offered a much larger threat to official dogma since he, through overidentification, threatened to destroy the system from within. Here, we find a form of "traversing the fantasy," wherein an act of genuine belief becomes capable of initiating a move from desire to drive, from a perverted duty to a duty for duty's sake. In other words, it opens up "the possibility of undermining the hold a fantasy exerts over us through the very overidentification with it, i.e., by way of embracing simultaneously, within the same space, the multitude of inconsistent fantasmatic elements."[16] But is it, following Žižek, enough to simply believe in ideology too much to open up a space for traversing it? To understand this, it can be helpful to counterpose the notion of ideology with that of the idea.

The Kantian Idea and Traversing the Fantasy

If an ideology exists to account for the subject's failure to adhere to the ethical act, this act itself must be understood in relation to the idea. More specifically, we should here employ a term which, although rarely used by Žižek, is central to Zupančič's reading of Kant's ethics, namely the "transcendental idea." She writes: "The transcendental idea articulates the relationship between the understanding and reason. As we have already said, it is the way the understanding sees itself by reason. It is interesting to observe that Kant always conceives transcendental ideas through the image of the 'standpoint of an observer.'"[17]

The transcendental idea is that which makes ethics possible by bringing together the understanding's work of creating concepts on the basis of objects of experience and reason's creation of ideas separate from any direct ties to these

16 Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 364.

17 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 73.

objects.[18] Without this connection, we will only end up with either a myriad of concepts relating to experience (lacking reason's ability to unify them into a greater whole), or empty ideas bereft of any connection to the real world (thus making the ethical act impossible). Therefore, the transcendental idea must offer "a *concept* that embodies a *unity* that seems *as if* it really exists in the world of what is (being)."[19] Here, two Lacanian concepts of great importance seem to collapse into each other: the Master Signifier and the quilting point. On the one hand, the transcendental idea seems to represent that which retroactively quilts the entire field of concepts belonging to understanding, that which "stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification"[20] by unifying that which initially appeared in the form of pure multiplicity and difference. But on the other, if we are to avoid the risk of getting caught in a traditional Marxist understanding of ideology as that which simply hides the truth of material relations behind a veil of ideas, the transcendental idea must also function as a Master Signifier, that which "not only induces but determines castration,"[21] i.e., the signifier responsible for initiating the work of the understanding. This is why, as Zupančič puts it, we must conceive of the transcendental idea as "the *way* the *understanding sees itself being seen by reason*,"[22] meaning that we are not dealing with two different levels, i.e., understanding (dealing with things) and free thought in the form of reason (dealing only with itself), but an immanent split or parallax in the perspective which, at the same time, makes a world possible while also making the final unity of this world impossible. This is what both Žižek and Zupančič are aiming at with the claim that the ethical act is set out to "traverse the fantasy." Since the fantasy of the subject is that which holds together the world, making sure this subject never comes too close to the fundamental lack at its center, it is, simultaneously, this lack that an idea must cover up. The difference between ideology and the ethical act comes down to how this act relates to the transcendental idea. In an analysis of Stalin and Lenin, Žižek illustrates this by taking up the old Marxist question regarding the necessity of a bourgeois revo-

18 Zupančič, 65.

19 Zupančič, 69.

20 Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 681.

21 Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 89.

22 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 71.

lution foregoing its communist counterpart. Although the Russian bourgeoisie of the early twentieth century was not ready for the purported first step towards communism, Lenin nonetheless decided to intervene. What Žižek describes as Lenin's "wager that *this very 'premature' intervention would radically change the 'objective' relationship*"[23] is, in other words, an attempt to act beyond the confines of a given transcendental idea. Only by confronting the non-existence of the big Other could Lenin's act change the actual "objective" situation, retroactively making something new (a communist revolution) always-already possible. Thus, the transcendental idea is not ideological in itself. It is rather a necessary prerequisite for the subject's world, but as soon as this idea is treated as given from beyond (as in the case with the conception of history's necessary progress) it turns into ideology.

It is at this point that one could claim that Žižek's development of "Lenin's wager" shows how, in his philosophy, "communism [is] a contemporary name for emancipatory, egalitarian politics."[24] But that would be to overstretch his notion of the ethical act at this point in time. Rather, in Žižek's writings from the 1990s and early 2000s, communism is mainly treated as a form of ideology, as the belief in the "necessity of history" which, with history as the given transcendental idea, acted to preserve the existing order. Although driven by the idea or perhaps the ideal of communism, Lenin's success should be located in his fidelity to duty alone, i.e., to his ethical act which made it possible to traverse the given situation. The worldview that came with the communist idea appears, in Žižek's reading, more as the source of future problems than the liberating spark: the only communist idea possible would be one steeped in communist ideology, including the notion of the "necessity of history," an idea intended to bring together and supplement objective knowledge and, simultaneously, make it both incomplete and whole. What we need to highlight here is how this issue is in no way specific to a potential communist idea, but to ideas in general as Žižek here defines them. At least the ones taking on the function of a "transcendental idea," since they offer the point through which a subject must pass in order to achieve the ethical act and are not ideas instigating this act. We can see this point in how Žižek, in what is often referred to as his theological trilogy published at the beginning of this millennium, criticizes Marx's notion of com-

[23] Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 114.

[24] Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 9.

munism. After a discussion of Marx's understanding of the role of contradiction as the driving-force behind capitalist expansion, Žižek writes:

> Marx's fundamental mistake was to conclude, from these insights, that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible, an order that would not only maintain but even raise to a higher degree, and effectively fully release, the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle/contradiction, is thwarted again and again by socially destructive economic crises. [. . .] So, in a way, the critics of Communism were right when they claimed that Marxian Communism is an impossible fantasy—what they did not perceive is that Marxian Communism, this notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity *outside* the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself.[25]

Hence, it was not only on the everyday level that communist ideology offered a fantasy protecting the subject and the world that it inhabits. Even for Marx himself, communism seems to have been a transcendental idea offering a fantasmatic image of a capitalist production free of contradiction. The ethical act, on the other hand, one capable of liberating us from both communist and capitalist ideology by destroying the present world, is at this point in Žižek's work a religious act. In the appendix to *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek writes:

> The point of this book is that, at the very core of Christianity, there is another dimension. When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?": the hope that there is a father who has abandoned me. The "Holy Spirit" is the community deprived of its support in the big Other. The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is [that] [. . .] it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the "big Other" that decides on the "objective meaning" of our deeds. [. . .] The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form but loses the essence. That is the ultimate

[25] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2008), 14.

> heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge.[26]

In a similar vein, it is possible to see how Žižek at this point would claim that the only way to save the revolutionary legacy of Lenin is to sacrifice its communist ideology and to act in accordance with duty alone. Only then might the subject give up whatever notion of the big Other that controls the transcendental idea. This is also why Žižek, when examining communism, expends much effort on describing the failures of its historical actualization, never really touching explicitly on its potentially liberating qualities. An illustrative example of this lack can be found in the afterword to Žižek's first edited collection of texts by Lenin, published in 2002. Here he explicitly asks the question whether "it [is] still possible to imagine Communism (or another form of post-capitalist society) as a formation which liberates the de-territorializing dynamic of capitalism." But instead of an answer to this question, he begins by returning to the critique of Marx's communist fantasy as a vision of capitalism without its inherent contradiction, before moving on to a critique of the nostalgia for communist revolution found in both Cuba and Eastern Europe.[27] So how come Žižek, just a few years later, started to explicitly endorse the "communist idea"?

The Hegelian Idea of Communism

Although it has been shown to play an important role in what was to become Žižek's conceptualization of communism, the ethical act capable of traversing the fantasy cannot in itself explain his turn to the communist idea.[28] Rather, Žižek maintains his critical focus on communism as an ideology throughout the period during which he develops a new understanding of the act. It is only with the publication of *In Defense of Lost Causes* in 2008 that Žižek shows the initial signs of revising his earlier position on communism: first through the claim that the notion of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" offers the best available weapon against what he describes as the ruling logic of bio-politics,[29] and later the

[26] Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 171.

[27] Slavoj Žižek, "Lenin's Choice," afterword to *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings from February to October 1917*, by V. I. Lenin, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2004), 274–76.

[28] See Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism* (London: Verso, 2014), 166–219.

[29] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 412–19.

same year by promising to stake out "the hard road to dialectical materialism."[30] However, the most notable difference shows itself a year later, in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, as he develops his thoughts on the "communist hypothesis" by drawing on the work of Alain Badiou. After presenting the reader with a long quote from Badiou, in which it is claimed that the only thing of interest to a philosopher is the idea, Žižek adds the following caveat:

> One should be careful not to read these lines in a Kantian way, conceiving communism as a "regulative idea," thereby resuscitating the specter of an "ethical socialism" taking equality as its *a priori* norm-axiom. One should rather maintain the precise reference to a set of actual social antagonisms which generates the need for communism—Marx's notion of communism not as an ideal, but as a movement which reacts to such antagonisms, is still fully relevant.[31]

Initially we should, once again, take a note from Alenka Zupančič by equating the regulative idea and the transcendental idea.[32] Hence, what Žižek seems to be claiming here is that communism should not be understood as a form of a quilting point capable of bringing together different actual events under a specific understanding of equality, since such an understanding would only open this idea up to a perverted sense of duty. Instead, Žižek claims that communism's actuality is derived from its capability to survive "the failures of its realization as a specter which returns again and again, in endless persistence best captured in the already-quoted words from Beckett's *Worstward Ho*: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'"[33] In this Beckettian Leninism, Žižek's communist idea[34] appears to be split: it acts both as a name for a specific set of antagonisms immanent to contemporary capitalism and as a spectral promise echoing from the disastrous revolutions of the past, urging us to repeat their inevitable failure. Although a definite transformation has taken place in how Žižek, at this point, speaks about the revolutionary potential of communism, this evental idea also seems

30 Slavoj Žižek, "Enjoyment within the Limits of Reason Alone," foreword to the second edition of *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), xi–xii.

31 Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 87–88.

32 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 64.

33 Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 125.

34 For a similar depiction, see also Slavoj Žižek, "How to Begin from the Beginning," in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), 217.

to share many similarities with Kantian spurious infinity: the communist idea is doomed to fail, but we should nevertheless try to implement it since next time we might get a little bit closer to realizing its full potential. Thus, despite his own explicit warning, the communist idea still appears to be haunted by Kant. One might, however, argue that there is a difference of psychoanalytical importance between Žižek's "beginning from the beginning" and Kant's "process of gradual approximation": while the latter remains focused on the object of desire (even though it is impossible), the former implies, as it seems, a change in perspective, offering us a process no longer focused on the impossible object, but on the process itself, i.e., on the drive as that which *fait le tour*, that which moves around and therefore tricks the object. But, as we will see, although Žižek here has explicitly introduced the notion of communism with a move "from Kant to Hegel," some necessary steps on this path remain, at least when it comes to the development of his understanding of the idea.[35]

The attempt at working through the Kantian undertones plaguing the notion of the idea as an "unfinished project" is perhaps best illustrated by a repetition of a paragraph on Kant's ethical and Mao's political failures appearing first in *In Defense of Lost Causes* and then, four years later, in *Less Than Nothing*. In the first instance, Žižek refers to Beckett's formula as he discusses Kant and Mao, pointing out how the latter's failed Cultural Revolution and the explosion of capitalist development in China during the last thirty years are "a sign that Mao retreated from drawing *all* the consequences of the Cultural Revolution."[36] Hence, on the one hand, Žižek seems to be claiming that one should avoid making compromises with the transformative idea, while, simultaneously, holding on to the notion that the failure of the idea is inevitable. In other words, if the idea cannot be compromised with, but its proper actualization remains impossible (making some form of compromise inevitable), we are forced to draw the conclusion that

[35] This is missed, for instance, by Agon Hamza, when focusing only on the Kantian aspects of Žižek's call for communism. See Agon Hamza, "A Plea for Žižekian Politics," in *Repeating Žižek*, ed. Agon Hamza (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 235–36. By taking Žižek's claims of Hegelian fidelity at face value, as does Lorenzo Chiesa, one risks overlooking how Žižek developed his notion of the idea of communism in tandem with certain adjustments in his readings of Hegel. See Lorenzo Chiesa, "Christianity or Communism? Žižek's Marxian Hegelianism and Hegelian Marxism," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 66, no. 3 (2012): 399–420.

[36] Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 210; italics added.

what we might call a noumenal antagonism always remains beyond our grasp. What remains beyond is the idea itself in its full actualization, showing us how Žižek here hinted at an understanding of the idea that retains a reference to a Kantian ethics. A further issue with this depiction of the idea as plagued by an inescapable compromise is that it erases any ultimate distinction between the communist idea and its ideology. If both Lenin's and Mao's respective revolutionary acts, in Žižek's depiction, represent the truth of the communist idea as a name for the desire to overcome a number of deadlocks inherent in capitalism, and what followed after these revolutions must be understood as the effect of their unavoidable compromise with this idea, it becomes impossible to draw a demarcating line between the ideology—which through, for instance, extreme brutality attempts to save its own system—and the idea which points beyond this system. Or rather, the idea is always turned into ideology as soon as someone attempts (and fails) to actualize it in the world. However, when repeating the paragraph in *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek drops the final reference to Beckett, instead highlighting how this "pseudo-Kantian Levinasian" understanding of "a regulative Idea which is 'forever to come,'" fails to properly express the Hegelian insight concerning the actualization of the idea before he ends the section by asking for another solution.[37]

Since then, Žižek has continuously returned to this problem in connection with the communist idea in what seems like an attempt to go beyond his Beckettian Leninism. First, in his 2016 book *Disparities*, he returns to his often-repeated critique of Marx, but this time with a crucial addition at the end:

> Is not the Idea of communism also such a lie (a false utopian notion) which enables us to see the truth about the existing capitalist system and its antagonisms? Yes, but in a very specific way. The traditional Marxist notion of communism is false in the sense that it remains immanent to the capitalist universe. Every historical situation contains its own unique utopian perspective, an immanent vision of what is wrong with it, an ideal representation of how, with some changes, the situation could be made much better. When the desire for a radical social change emerges, it is thus logical that it first endeavours to actualize this immanent utopian vision—and this endeavour is what characterizes every authentic

[37] Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 819.

> emancipatory struggle. So the critics of communism were in a way right when they claimed that the Marxian communism is an impossible fantasy; what they did not perceive is that the Marxian communism, this notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity outside the frame of capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, the capitalist inherent transgression at its purest, a strictly ideological fantasy of maintaining the thrust to productivity generated by capitalism, while getting rid of the "obstacles" and antagonisms that were—as the sad experience of the "really existing capitalism" demonstrates—the only possible framework of the effective material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity. This, however, should not seduce us into abandoning the very idea of communism—on the contrary, this idea should be conceived in a strict Hegelian sense, as a notion which transforms itself in the course of its actualization.[38]

At this point, Žižek has completely abandoned the idea of "fail again, fail better" (and its unavoidable Kantian undertones) in favor of a notion of the idea that no longer measures its success against how well its actualization corresponds to an imagined ideal (to which it will always come up short). Instead, the utopian ideal will be transformed through the process of actualization, not because it comes up short when measured against the physical world, but because both the utopia and the actual world are caught up in their own immanent antagonisms. Here, as tensions rise within the antagonisms of the present system, a communist idea, struggling directly with the contradictory core of capitalism, might begin to unfold even though it is not explicitly presented as the idea of communism (something we, according to Žižek, saw happening during the Covid-19 pandemic).[39] However, it is only as an *après-coup*, in the aftermath of its implementation, that it becomes possible to see how the idea, from the outset, was inevitably transforming the original ideals in the process of giving birth to new antagonisms. In other words, the original utopia appears as such only after its idea has been actualized, meaning that this utopia only appears to us in the light of a failure. Understanding the idea in this way offers the only possible escape from Kantian spurious infinity, since we are no longer, already from the outset, doomed to fail. Instead, although inevitable, failure only becomes discernible after the idea has been actualized, as historical contingency retroactively is turned into necessity, revealing why failure was present already from

38 Žižek, *Disparities*, 300.

39 Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 104.

the beginning. We can also here get a glimpse of what Žižek refers to as his dialectical materialism as one "in which substantial 'matter' disappears in a network of purely formal/ideal relations,"[40] namely that it is in these cracks that material antagonisms can appear as a retroactively appearing cause. Recently, Žižek seems to claim that the Kantian remains plaguing his understanding of the communist idea arose out of an implicit analogy between the unconscious (as the place of antagonisms that underlie the individual subject) and capitalism (as the place of social antagonisms producing a revolutionary subject). While the antagonisms of the unconscious constitute the prerequisite for the subject's very possibility, implying that abolishing these antagonisms would mean eliminating human subjectivity as we know it, the antagonisms of capitalism are not what make society possible *tout court*. They just constitute the ground for our current society. That is why Žižek now, in stark contrast to his earlier position, claims that

> Communism is not an endless process of overcoming capitalism, in the same way as psychoanalysis never abolishes the Unconscious: Communism, of course, will not be a perfect state of human fulfilment, it will generate its own antagonisms, but they will be qualitatively different from capitalist antagonisms. Plus they will not mean that Communism is an endless unfinished project, a goal we will never reach: Communism will be defined by these new antagonisms in exactly the same way as capitalism is defined by its own specific antagonisms.[41]

Conclusion

We have now seen how Žižek's explicit goal of following the arduous road from Kant to Hegel has impacted his notion of the communist idea. But it is not only a notion of the idea that Žižek had to reimagine in order to move from a critique of communist ideology to an endorsement of the communist idea. In his already quoted return to the critique of Marx's notion of communism, we can also discern a reassessment of another important notion in this reading: fantasy. Instead of focusing on fantasy as that which must be traversed in order to instigate the creation of a new world, the utopian ideal (in the form of an impossible

40 Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), 5.

41 Slavoj Žižek, *Hegel in a Wired Brain* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 168.

fantasy) constitutes a prerequisite for the transformation as such. Thus, the risk is no longer to remain stuck in a false fantasy, making the subject incapable of following duty to the end. Such a notion of fantasy does, to a large extent, share many of its limitations with a traditional Marxist understanding of ideology, most notably the distinction between a true and a false way to relate to the antagonisms of a given society.[42] We can thus see how Žižek's development of his Hegelian dialectical materialism shows itself in the communist idea: gone are depictions of the utopia of the idea as an impossible beyond that urges us to act. Gone, it seems, is also the importance of the liberating act itself. Instead, the revolutionary subject seems to have been demoted to a secondary position, allowing the system itself, through its effects (such as the pandemic), to create the fantasy of its own utopia (true freedom instead of the false freedom to sell one's labor). Hence, a communist idea can begin to actualize itself without the need for a heroic deed of attempting (and failing) to do the impossible. As Žižek notes apropos the pandemic, when the barbarism immanent in the system becomes too overbearing, a field for utopic communist measures previously unimaginable is opened. This, however, does not mean that while the appearance of a communist idea is necessary within capitalism (since its antagonisms will always give birth to an impossible fantasy of transgression), the actual communist revolution is its unavoidable outcome. Rather, every attempt to get rid of capitalism's antagonism can always be reintegrated into the very system that it fights against. Here, the difference between communist ideology and the communist idea once again shows itself: an ideology is the belief that a system can go on indefinitely. Regardless of whether it is Soviet communism or contemporary neo-liberalism, ideology always offers a solution which proposes to remove the disastrous effects while keeping the system intact. Against this, the idea arises directly out of the antagonisms that brought about these problems, forcing us to make a choice between business as usual (and its inevitable failure) and the struggle "over what social form will replace the liberal-capitalist New World Order."[43]

[42] Žižek, *First as Tragedy*, 95.

[43] Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 127.

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