

○ CHILDREN OF LIGHT

NEO-PAULINISM AND THE CATHEXIS OF DIFFERENCE (PART II)

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

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

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

(Note: the first two sections of the article, which appeared in the first issue of *The Bible and Critical Theory*, were 'Grace and the Political' and 'Bio-Žižek'. In what follows, the author continues his argument concerning the non-subject of the political and the systematic exclusions of any political theology, especially those that are drawn from the writings of Paul.)

III. BADIOU AND RUMSFELD

If the political is the subject of a universal cathexis on the basis of a difference from hegemony, a cathexis that by definition changes the coordinates of the possible and inaugurates a new relation to the real, the question of subalternity reemerges rather stubbornly. One way of posing it is to ask: how does an event of truth relate to what it leaves behind? If politics are always necessarily eventful, what happens to the eventless, the neutral, the non-subject? In other words, what is the political price to be paid by determining all politics as politics of the subject, and by declaring the subjective constitution of the political? If the subjectivity of the subject is a function of the Pauline virtues of faith, love, and hope, if only those virtues can sustain the political decision, as Badiou says and Žižek ultimately subscribes, then subalternity emerges against the grain of Žižek and Badiou's thought as the position occupied by the faithless, the loveless, and the hopeless. Are they purely and simply the enemy? Do they simply follow the path of death? Are they those of whom John would say: 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth

in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it' (John 8:44)?

The May 17, 2004, issue of *The New Yorker* reported a dastardly ploy going on in Hermann, Missouri. According to the local newspaper, the *Hermann Advertiser-Courier*, 'police are certain that "roofers" in this area [are] posing as scam artists' (*New Yorker* p. 101). There is no question that the pull towards homeownership that spun from the international economic crisis that seems to be receding now has also increased the demand for roofers to do their necessary work as new owners move into dwellings in lamentable conditions of disrepair. Thus, it is all the more extraordinary, if we are to believe the *Advertiser-Courier*, that people should show up at your doorstep pretending to be scam artists when all they really want to do is fix your roof. They have undoubtedly been forced into stealth by unfathomable local conditions. But all's well if they may finally do their job. One is tempted to apply the same logic to Badiou's argument regarding saints and priests. For Badiou 'saints' is good and 'priests' is bad. Conventional wisdom dictates that you can expect priests to show up pretending to be saints. But what would you do if a fellow came and told you he was simply a priest out to do priestly work? If you were as sagacious as the Hermann police force, you would immediately suspect that his real goal was to engage in saintly activities (whether on your roof or elsewhere is not important). But then: would they be real or phony? Only real saints can engage in real saintliness, but everybody can do phony saintliness, particularly priests. On your feet, you would have to assess whether the rather pale visitor's conviction, certainty, and love (those are Badiou's renditions of the older faith, hope, and charity) are true, or truthful, virtues. Were you to determine that they are, it is up to you to allow your visitor access to your home, or to refuse it. Badiou would probably tell you that such a decision will have been your most important political act maybe ever: your commitment to a truthful, hence universal, procedure will put some spirit into your all-too-domestic 'earthen vessel' (Badiou 2003, p. 53). By accepting the good word from the saintly priest, or the priestly saint, you will have turned into a saint yourself, or at least a subject, by having fulfilled the formal conditions of militant subjectivation: with them, through them, you are no longer a faithless, hopeless, and loveless so-called soul. You will have fulfilled the requirements for concrete universality, and you will have created for yourself an access to the law of laws, to love, as entrance into the infinity of resurrection. And all you could think of when you heard the doorbell was how difficult it was to get through the newspaper without being bothered!

Badiou prefers saints, but it is not clear that saints can ever avoid becoming priests. His discussion of this topic, framed through an analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini's script for a film on Saint Paul he never made, concludes with the sombre thought of an 'almost necessary... internal betrayal' of the saint by the priest:

For Pasolini, reflecting on communism through Paul, the Party is what, little by little, inverts saintliness into priesthood through the narrow requirements of militantism. How does genuine saintliness (which Pasolini unhesitatingly recognizes in Paul) bear the ordeal of a History that is at once fleeting and monumental, one in which it constitutes an exception rather than an operation? It can only do so by hardening itself, by becoming authoritarian and organized. But that hardness, which is supposed to preserve it from all corruption by History, reveals itself to be an essential corruption, that of the saint by the

priest. It is the almost necessary movement of an essential betrayal (Badiou 2003, p. 38).

For Badiou ‘saintliness immersed in... actuality’ can only protect itself ‘by creating, with all requisite severity, a Church’ (Badiou 2003, p. 39). And yet, in spite of it, maybe even because of it, saintliness ‘emerges strangely victorious’ (p. 39). But does it? Perhaps Badiou has got it wrong and the problem is not that of an internal betrayal, conditioned by the ordeal of actual history. Perhaps the problem is that saintliness is always already priesthood to start with; that there is no saintliness without priesthood; that a militant saint is never not a priest; that priesthood is the true name of militantism; and that the formal conditions of the militant subject of the political are always at the same time the formal conditions of priestly politics. There is no internal betrayal of saintliness by priesthood because every concrete saint, every earthen vessel of sainthood, has always already made a pact with onto-historical priestliness.

Badiou’s *Saint Paul* finds its limit in its own betrayal of politics.¹ At the end of the book, questions arise as to the ‘almost necessary’ programatisation of the political through the universality of truth that are unsolvable within the book’s own parameters. I will prepare the way with a little fable, taking my cue from Badiou’s definition: ‘A “fable” is that part of a narrative that, so far as we are concerned, fails to touch on any Real, unless it be by virtue of that invisible and indirectly accessible residue sticking to every obvious imaginary’ (Badiou 2003, p. 4). The fabulous element in Saint Paul’s work is the statement ‘Jesus is resurrected’ (p. 4). But we can, Badiou tells us, reduce Saint Paul’s ‘fabulous forcing of the real’ for the sake of ‘restoring the universal to its pure secularity here and now’ (p. 5). Badiou’s Saint Paul investigation attempts to determine ‘which law is capable of structuring a subject devoid of all identity and suspended to an event whose only ‘proof’ lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject’ (p. 5). He thinks that the ‘paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support provides the foundation for the possibility of a universal teaching within history itself’ (p. 5). The possibility of this universal-historical teaching hangs on one question only:

[Paul] is the one who, assigning to the universal a specific connection of law and the subject, asks himself with the most extreme rigor what price is to be paid for this assignment, by the law as well as by the subject. This interrogation is precisely our own. Supposing we were able to refound the connection between truth and the subject, then what consequences must we have the strength to hold fast to, on the side of truth (evental and hazardous) as well as on the side of the subject (rare and heroic)? (Badiou 2003, p. 7).

My answer to that question is probably not different from Badiou’s, although he does not make it explicit: the fabulous forcing of the real, provided you would want to hold fast to it. Your fabulous element, whether Christian, communist, or liberal-democratic, is the price you pay for suturing the subject to truth. But what if you do not want to pay that price? What if you prefer to hold fast to a radical scepticism where questions of political or spiritual conviction, certainty, or love are concerned? Does that place you outside the political? Or does it place you into an abject, particularist, and reactionary political (or spiritual) position? Badiou’s answer to the last two questions is yes, not so paradoxically.

So, my fable: it would seem, at first sight, that Robert Kagan, in *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* places himself in a post-ideological universe, where no forcing of the real takes place. Talking about the overwhelming military power of the United States, he says: ‘If you have a hammer, all problems start to look like nails’. For the Europeans, however, the opposite is the case: ‘When you don’t have a hammer, you don’t want anything to look like a nail’ (Kagan 2003, pp. 27–28). The ideological fissure between Europe and the United States, the fact that, since the build-up for the 2003 occupation of Iraq, both geopolitical regions share less and less a ‘common “strategic culture”’ (p. 4), is a direct consequence, for Kagan, of the difference between ‘strategies of weakness’ and ‘strategies of strength’ (pp. 10–11). Europe would have no choice but to stick to strategies of weakness, whereas the United States is simply behaving ‘as powerful nations do’ (p. 11). The United States is the subject of the political decision, endowed since the event of the American Revolution with conviction, certainty, and a kind of love for universal democracy. Europe remains an obscure subject, if those are subjects, of what James Joyce would have called the jewgreek paradigm, never an event of truth, a truth procedure, but rather the precipitate of a historical situation.²

In Kagan’s analysis, Europe occupies both a reactionary *and* a subaltern position. The United States, in contrast, occupies by right a position of hegemony and a position of active progressivism. It is perhaps a measure of the changes in our conjuncture since the fall of the Soviet block that, geopolitically speaking, reactionary and subaltern seem to go together today, which means that the progressive position is held by the world masters. Kagan’s book gives us a glimpse of what is perhaps the dominant frame of mind in the contemporary American political elite, certainly on the Republican side, but not only on the Republican side. Samuel Huntington has recently provided some statistical figures to prove that Americans ‘are the most patriotic people in the world’ (Menand 2004, p. 92), which is consistent with their subject position.³

There is a remarkable historical inversion here. Europe, subaltern power or reactionary un-power, must follow in its political and strategic practice the enlightened dictates recommended by, say, Immanuel Kant in *Towards a Perpetual Peace*, whereas the United States lives, with pleasure, in a Hobbesian world of total war against absolute enemies. Enlightened liberal progressivism turns into subaltern-reactionary praxis, and the call for what the Spanish thinker Juan Donoso Cortés used to call ‘a dictatorship of the sabres’ appears as hegemonic praxis (Donoso Cortés 1985, p. 261). This is a direct consequence of the division of the world between strong nations and weak nations. Europe lives in Nietzschean *ressentiment* because it has no choice, precisely, and the United States lives in active affirmation of itself, all the way down to torture of its perceived enemies and the flaunting of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, just because it can. Or because it thinks it can, as a subject of infinite political truth. It is of course the case that contemporary American power politics are far from being what Badiou has in mind as he theorises the process of political subjectivation in the affirmation of a truth event. But, in the American case, saintliness has turned into priesthood (even as European priestliness turns toward sainthood) and it is dubious that American saintliness can still emerge strangely victorious. If the conditions of emergence of the subject of the political are also the conditions of possibility of its becoming a despot, then why should we privilege the constituent moment of militancy? The fabulous forcing of the real carries within itself the seeds of its self-poisoning.

Kagan minces no words. Forget the Bush Administration's democratic rhetoric. As a matter of historical fact, a democratic political practice today could be merely resentful reactionary-ism: 'Europeans have a deep interest in devaluing and eventually eradicating the brutal laws of an anarchic Hobbesian world where power is the ultimate determinant of national security and success. This is no reproach. It is what weaker powers have wanted from time immemorial' (Kagan 2003, p. 37). Hence, a European emphasis on multilateralism, that is, in sticking to processes of collective decision for what we could call geopolitical actions, is simply 'a substitute for the power they lack' (p. 40). This, predictably, gets Kagan into hot water, and he is quick to want to withdraw, lest the United States appears as simply a bully. But his withdrawal is not very convincing.

He says that, while it is true that the United States seeks to intensify its power practices through unilateralism, the Europeans make a mistake in trying to contain it. Why? Because, for Kagan, 'the United States is a liberal, progressive society through and through, and to the extent that Americans believe in power, they believe it must be a means of advancing the principles of a liberal civilization and a liberal world order' (p. 41). With this, American militantism hits, one could say, *aporia*, and it affects Badiou's theorisation: how does Badiou deal with despotic love? According to Kagan, the Americans practice *Machtspolitik*, a politics of brute force, without believing in it, which of course makes them disconcertingly lovable (it might be the secret behind Private First Class Lynndie England's otherwise enigmatic smile in the recent photographs we are familiar with). Americans believe in brute force, but only as a matter of power, that is, as an exceptional practice, as a matter of exception (power is nothing but the ability to decide on the exception). Whereas the Europeans, who absolutely believe in *Machtspolitik* (they invented it), renounce it as a means to secure their own power status, subaltern as it is (but still better than nothing). Notice the chiasmus: as a function of their respective positions in the current *nomos* of the earth, to use Carl Schmitt's expression, Americans practice *Machtspolitik* but they do not believe in it, they believe in liberal progressivism.⁴ Europeans believe in *Machtspolitik*, but must renounce it for the sake of *Machtspolitik*, for the weak must, of course, dissemble. The merely ostensible European goal is to offer the world 'not power but the transcendence of power' (that is, the rule of law) (Kagan 2003, p. 60) as a means of securing their power, whereas the real American goal is precisely to transcend power, since they already occupy it absolutely. With this, the rule of law appears as the weapon of reactionary subalternity, whereas hegemonic progressivism engages in a politics of brute force but only as a matter of course, to attain the law beyond the law, the law of laws. The United States appears as the embodiment of Enlightenment today, precisely through its refusal of Enlightenment politics. Torture in Iraqi prisons was, therefore, not what it seemed, but something else entirely, if one takes the proper historical perspective.

What seems extraordinary here is that the absolute occupation of power by the United States is presented as the condition of possibility for a politics of non-power, for a renunciation of power: no doubt here the United States can invoke a precedent in the position of the Christian Church over the centuries when it was dominant. The United States, precisely through its abandonment of Kantian cosmopolitanism, is closer than anybody has ever been, closer, indeed, than the Church ever was, to attaining the proper foundations for a cosmopolitan politics of non-power, of absolute respect for the law beyond the law, the law of laws, which Badiou defines as Pauline love.⁵ It is worth quoting Kagan at length at this point:

In fact, the United States solved the Kantian paradox for the Europeans. Kant had argued that the only solution to the immoral horrors of the Hobbesian world was the creation of a world government. But he also feared that the 'state of universal peace' made possible by world government would be an even greater threat to human freedom than the Hobbesian international order, inasmuch as such a government, with its monopoly of power, would become 'the most horrible despotism'. How nations could achieve perpetual peace without destroying human freedom was a problem Kant could not solve. But for Europe the problem was solved by the United States. By providing security from outside, the United States rendered it unnecessary for Europe's supranational government to provide it. Europeans did not need power to achieve peace, and they do not need power to preserve it (Kagan 2003, pp. 57–58).

As a consequence, for Kagan, 'Europe's new Kantian order could flourish only under the umbrella of American power exercised according to the rules of the old Hobbesian order' (p. 73). Which means that European ideology, to the extent that it is democratic, multilateral, and cosmopolitan, radically depends upon the United States' willingness to confront and overcome through brute force those who still believe in old-fashioned *Machtpolitik*. The United States is paying for European good consciousness. The European beautiful soul is a luxury that the United States is happy to provide. On the other hand, the cost of European reactionary subjectivity is its non-subjectivity, the radical heteronomy between European pretensions and actual realities of fact. Europe lives in false consciousness, through its disavowed dependency on practices that are quite alien to its stated ideological self-consciousness.

Kagan has put Europe in a truly abject position; or rather, he has revealed Europe's abject position – for he may, in fact, be right. Leaving aside its unbecoming aspects, and talking as it were among adult and mature relatives, when everybody knows who is paying for what, and there is no longer a reason to keep up the pretence of independence, Kagan asks: 'How does Europe protect itself without discarding the very ideals and principles that undergird its pacific system?' (Kagan 2003, p. 74). In other words, Kagan still thinks that it is okay for beautiful souls to exist. The important thing is that they do not become a pain in the arse. His solution is: 'There need be no "clash of civilizations" within what used to be called "the West." The task, for both Europeans and Americans, is to readjust to the new reality of American hegemony' (p. 97).

Kagan puts Europe in the position of an attractive but somewhat silly and certainly pretentious mistress who feels she can criticise the rude manners of her benefactor without realising that, without the kind of life the rude but loving protector – indeed, loving beyond the law, for the sake of the fulfilment of the law – has made possible, the mistress would fall into the ranks of common prostitutes. Kagan would have the United States say, 'look, I want you to keep looking pretty and posing as elegant and distinguished, but for that you must accept that you are nothing but a silly lady, a whore really, my "bitch" (to use prison-house language). Now, will you accept that? Do you really want to preserve your comfortable life, or are you ready to give it up?'

A problem, really, because if I admit that I am your bitch, then I won't be comfortable any more, I'll feel like a whore, and all my delusions will vanish. Like a saint turning into a priest, I will have given up my life, my treasure, precisely by doing what was meant to protect it. And, what is more, if I do that, then you, my powerful benefactor, will also have to give up the pretence

of having a distinguished mistress. When everybody knows you are simply maintaining concubines, and blackmailing them for kicks, well then, won't you have to give up your pretence of being, how did you put it, the "provider of universal peace," the only one capable, through conviction, perseverance, *and* tough love, of bringing out a truly liberal and progressive world-order? Your truth procedure, somewhat rusty as it was, will have come to a rather pathetic end in deconstruction.

IV. *CIRCULUS VITIOSUS DEUS*

Žižek and Badiou's understanding of the political, Pauline perhaps, even if divergently, through their shared notion of the universal cathexis of the real – 'the subjective process of a truth is one and the same thing as the love of that truth. And the militant real of that love is the universal address of what constitutes it. The materiality of universalism is the militant dimension of every truth' (Badiou 2003, p. 92) – reintroduces what Badiou calls Saint Paul's 'theoretical cesure'. Within the thought of the cesure, or of the Nietzschean splitting of history, there will be those who become children of light, of whom the Gospel according to John says: 'While you have light, believe in the light, that you may be the children of light' (John 13:36) (the Americans in the fable). And then there are those who do not have enough faith, enough love, or enough hope: those who live in obscurity (the Europeans, and not only the Europeans). It is not enough to say that the latter remain outside the political, or are in the political only insofar as they constitute the non-subjective pole of the antagonism. If this position were to be taken, then the cathexis of the children of light would have become a clear form of obscurantism. But: isn't every Leninism ultimately a form of it? Every Maoism? Every Americanism?

'Thought can be raised up from its powerlessness only through something that exceeds the order of thought. "Grace" names the event as a condition for an active thought. The condition is itself inevitably in excess of what it conditions' (Badiou 2003, pp. 84–85). The notion of a cathexis of difference hinges upon this thought. The subject in Badiou is always already seized by grace. Faith, love, and hope, as the exhausting conditions of subjective constitution, are only the modalities of its determination. And difference is their ground.

With regard to what has happened to us, to what we subjectivate through a public declaration (faith), to what we universalize through a fidelity (love), and with which we identify our subjective consistency in time (hope), differences are indifferent, and the universality of the true collapses them. With regard to the world in which truth proceeds, universality must expose itself to all differences and show... that they are capable of welcoming the truth that traverses them... differences carry the universal that arrives at them as grace' (Badiou 2003, p. 106; translation modified in the last line).

Grace is the Pauline name for the cathexis of subjectivity that founds the subject as a subject of the universal. This is what Badiou calls Saint Paul's 'theoretical cesure'. 'Theoretical' means here very precisely 'formal', in the sense that Saint Paul gives us 'the formal conditions, and the inevitable consequences, of a consciousness-of-truth rooted in a pure event, detached from every objectivist assignation to the particular laws of a world or society' (p. 107). Paul's cesure is the following: 'there is no fidelity to [the] event except in the shedding of communitarian particular-

isms and the determination of a subject-of-truth that undistinguishes the One and the For-All' (p. 108; translation modified). It is to this extent that Paul 'founds' universalism.

The key point here is the absolute reduction of exceptions from the point of view of subjective positionings. There are no exceptions, since, precisely, everything is exceptional. Paul, on founding universalism, founds the absolute subject of humanity. This is of course his political theology, even in Schmitt's sense: universalism is also a claim to sovereignty, and the sovereignty in question cannot be disentangled from an ontology of the One, that is, from a mono-onto-theology whose most clear contemporary manifestation is the present American regime: 'Paul confronts... the formidable question of the One. His genuinely revolutionary conviction is that the sign of the One is the "for all" or the "without exception"... The One is that which inscribes no difference in the subjects to which it addresses itself. The One is only insofar as it is for all: such is the maxim of universality when it has its root in the event. Monotheism can be understood only by taking into consideration the whole of humanity' (Badiou 2003, p. 76).

And, in Badiou's exegesis, the moment that monotheism transcends the particularity of a community, the moment that monotheism cathects all differences in the unconditional affirmation of the for-all, that is also the moment in which monotheism becomes fully redemptive: no one remains outside its promise of salvation (whether they want to or not). Subalternity has seemingly been transcended, or deposed, in the fully reciprocal immanentization of the event and the subject of humanity: the gap of sovereignty has been closed. This is why, for Badiou, Saint Paul understands Christ's death as the 'immanentization of the spirit' (Badiou 2003, p. 69). Christ's death is not yet the event, only the site of the event, a site of 'reconciliation' (*katallage*) between the human and the divine, or between particularity and universality, or between finitude and infinity, where the properly revolutionary cesure of the event as resurrection is prepared (p. 70).

But what is resurrection? The vanquishment of death: a final cathexis of life. Resurrection is the promise of immortality for all those that will (have) become faithful to the event. Like Christ, the faithful will be pulled 'from the dead' (*ek nekron*): 'resurrection is affirmative subtraction from the path of death' (Badiou 2003, p. 73). But the path of death is also the path of impotency and separation. In the path of death 'the subject of life is in the place of death and vice versa' (p. 83). It follows that, in this path, 'knowledge and will, on the one hand, agency and action, on the other, are entirely disconnected. This is... the essence of existence according to the law... [A] parallel can be drawn between this de-centering and the Lacanian interpretation of the cogito (there where I think, I am not, and there where I am, I do not think)' (p. 83). The man of the law, who is also the man of the path of death, is he for whom a radical separation between thinking and acting, thinking and being, obtains. If the law 'constitutes the subject as powerlessness of thought' (p. 83), then resurrection is nothing but the radical complication of being and thinking, without separation. 'There is salvation when the divided figure of the subject maintains thought in the power of doing. This is what... I call a truth procedure' (p. 84). And a truth procedure is for Badiou 'the correlate of a new type of subject, neither transcendental nor substantial, entirely defined as militant of the truth in question' (p. 109).

The unity of thinking and being, of deliberation and action, is the end of subaltern subjectivity – a promise of any truth event, as Saint Paul may have been the first to determine, and Donald Rumsfeld keeps telling us today. It is also, incidentally, the dream of all ontotheologies. But this unity presupposes the subtraction from death, the relegation or the deposition of death to eventless life, life consigned to the state of the situation or to a state under the law: dominated

life, non-sovereign life, lifeless life. What about this lifeless life? Granted that it can itself choose salvation, because salvation is now universally open, i.e., it has been made possible for all, what if it chooses not to choose? In that case, does it remain outside the political? Or does it simply constitute part of the undifferentiated pole of antagonism against which the truth event proclaims the seizure of the real? The question becomes more complicated as we realise that salvation or resurrection do not primarily constitute a division of humanity between its subject and those who fall outside proper subjectivity: subjectivity is the constant effort to maintain oneself in fidelity to the event, which implies the permanent presence of the non-subject within the subject. The non-subject is that which the subject must constantly subtract, in a sort of ongoing self-foundation through virtue (faith, love, and hope are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the absolute subject of political life). This is what Badiou refers to as the *non-mais* structure: ‘The event is at once the suspension of the path of the flesh through a problematic ‘not’, and the affirmation of the path of the spirit through a ‘but’ of exception... it is precisely this form that bears the universal’ (Badiou 2003, pp. 63–64). And it is precisely this form that dissolves the Lacanian and Žižekian distance between subject and subjectivation: ‘In this absence of a gap, which constantly activates the subject in the service of truth, forbidding him rest, the One-truth proceeds in the direction of all’ (p. 81). The subject is therefore always already factually divided: ‘In the divided subject, the part of being-toward-death is that which still says ‘no’, that which does not want to let itself be carried away by the exceptional ‘but’ of grace, of the event, of life’ (p. 73).

What is to be made of that in ourselves that is and forever remains faithless, loveless, and hopeless? Should it be subjected or reduced? Deposed or subtracted? Is it the enemy? Can we only love our immortality? Can sovereignty be exercised in a radical renunciation of those three theological virtues? Or is it then no longer sovereignty? The question becomes even more urgent politically when it is no longer a question of the non-subject within ourselves, but of the non-subject as the other: what is to be made of those who remain faithless, loveless, hopeless... and who, after the apprehension and cathected victory of the event of truth, have now become the new subaltern, those whose position is abjected from dominance because they live and choose to live in death and sin, those who belong on the wrong side of a now universalised biopolitics? It seems to me that only a certain kind of answer to this question can eventually dissolve the Schmittian notion that ‘all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state [which is also the modern theory of the political] are secularized theological concepts’. In other words, what is at stake here is the radical possibility of a de-theologised theory of the political.

Žižek has referenced Badiou’s ‘politics of subtraction’, consistent with the extra-hegemonic or emergent moment of the eventual site of the truth procedure. The politics of subtraction constitute for Badiou a particular modality of the contemporary ‘passion of the Real’: ‘The 20th century passion of the Real has two sides: that of purification and that of subtraction. In contrast to purification, which endeavours to isolate the kernel of the Real through violent peeling off, the subtraction starts from the Void, from the reduction... of all determinate content, and then tries to establish a minimal difference between this Void and an element which functions as its stand-in’ (Žižek 2002, p. 3). Badiou receives Žižek’s endorsement: the politics of subtraction are good Lacanian politics, which Žižek himself had come very close to theorising explicitly as such in *The Fragile Absolute*, also in connection with Pauline thinking. If purification is the name of

a hegemonic politics of power, say, contemporary Americanism, subtraction is the name for a politics of subalternity, to the extent that it ciphers the insurrectionary politics of the ‘part of no-part’, of the other side or the constitutive exclusion of any given hegemonic articulation or state of a situation:

Politics proper... always involves a kind of short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a *singulier universel*, of a singular which appears as the stand-in for the universal, destabilizing the ‘natural’ functional order of relation in the social body... the ‘minimal difference’ is that between the set and this surplus element which belongs to the set but lacks any differential property which would specify its place within its edifice: it is precisely this lack of specific (functional) difference which makes it an embodiment of the pure difference between the place and its elements... the non-social within the field of the social (Žižek 2002, p. 4).

But if a politics of subtraction is always necessarily a politics of the part of no-part, if it is carried out as the subjective insurrection of the non-subject of the political, to the extent that there is history, and that power and political subjectivation are not held for ever by the same group, there will necessarily come a time when a politics of subtraction will have reached its own end, which is also its goal: the accomplishment of power, the recreation of the social totality. Does it then become a politics of purification? ‘The problem is thus: how to pursue the politics of subtraction once one is in power? How to avoid the position of the Beautiful Soul stuck into the eternal role of ‘resistance’, opposing power without effectively wanting to subvert it?’ (p. 5). Badiou’s politics of truth would seem to be always already in a position to respond decisively to this question, as truth is for him ‘the work... of enforcing a new law onto the situation’, ‘a forceful transformation of the real’ (Žižek 2002, p. 6). Žižek quotes Bosteels’s formulation of Badiou’s position: ‘a subjective intervention... faithfully connects as many elements of the situation as possible to this name which is the only trace of the vanished event, and subsequently forces the extended situation from the bias of the new truth as if the latter were indeed already generally applicable’ (Bosteels quoted by Žižek, p. 7). This is then Žižek’s critique:

Can one imagine a more direct application of the Kantian distinction between constitutive principles (a priori categories which directly constitute reality) and regulative ideas, which should only be applied to reality in the ‘as if’ mode?... When Badiou asserts the ‘unnameable’ as the resisting point of the Real, the ‘indivisible remainder’ which prevents the ‘forceful transformation’ to conclude its work, this assertion is strictly correlative to the ‘as if’ mode of the post-evental work of forcing the real: it is because of this remainder that the work of truth cannot ever leave behind this conditional mode (Žižek 2002, pp. 7–8).

A regulative idea presupposes the radical separation of thinking and acting, whereby the decision comes once again to be derived from the norm. With it we return to the nineteenth-century ‘strange pantheistic confusion’ in the post-decisional identification of truth and lawfulness. The metaphysical or theological kernel of all politics is then grievously reinstalled, and the passage to despotism opens up. According to Žižek, this happens because:

In Badiou's account there is no place for the discourse of the analyst – its place is held by the mystical discourse fixated on the unnameable event, resisting its discursive elaboration as inauthentic... What Badiou precludes is the possibility to devise a discourse which has as its structuring principle the unnameable 'indivisible remainder' eluding a discursive grasp, i.e., for Badiou, when we are confronted with this remainder, we should either name it, transpose it into the master's discourse, or stare at it in mystifying awe... It is Badiou who is unable to expand the encounter of the Real into a discourse, i.e., for whom this encounter, in order to start to function as a discourse, has to be transposed into a Master's discourse (Žižek 2002, p. 10).

For Žižek the discourse of the analyst remains locked in a confrontation with the 'shattering encounter of the Real' (p. 10). Because it touches the Real, and because it affirms the radical impossibility of not doing so, it does not sublimate it into a new consistency. In fact, consistency, the ultimately senseless consistency of any new truth, is posited by the analyst as itself a dimension of the Real, which means: a dimension that the subject of the decision must also radically confront from an antagonistic perspective. Without an absolute reduction of the symbolic there can be no decision, Žižek implies: and the complication of thinking and being remains suspended in separation. A politics of subtraction can only be, for Žižek, precisely a subtraction of the symbolic or theological kernel of the political.

Does Žižek remain there? Are his politics of the minimal difference always materialist and subalternist enough? Do they move towards a thorough de-theologisation? Do they already dwell there? Or will he discover, 'in paradise', 'that in the eyes of the unfathomable deity, he and [Alain Badiou] (the orthodox and the heretic, the abominator and the abominated, the accuser and the victim) were a single person'? (Borges 1998, p. 207).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I realise this may not constitute a critique on Badiou's (or Žižek's) terms. Although the political importance of their different theoretical projects is undeniable – Žižek summarises it as a question: 'of what help is studying great philosophical and social-theoretical texts in today's struggle against the neoliberal model of globalization?' (Žižek 2002, p. 4) – it is arguable that, in both cases, they would consider the political act as an interruption of politics: their political militancy is meant to arrest the ongoing domination of the political for the sake of opening up an alternative truth, an alternative historical dispensation, which, at the moment of opening, is anything but political.
- ² 'Woman's reason. Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet. Death is the highest form of life. Ba!' (Joyce 1986, pp. 2097–2098). It just happens to be the case that Leopold Bloom embodies the encounter of the Jewish and the Greek as an example of contemporary man. Badiou, however, devotes a whole chapter to establishing a fundamental distinction between Paul's discourse and Jewish and Greek discourses: 'In reality, "Jew" and "Greek" are subjective dispositions. More precisely, they refer to what Paul considers to be the two coherent intellectual figures of the world he inhabits... Paul institutes "Christian" discourse only by distinguishing its operations from those of Jewish discourse and Greek discourse' (Badiou 2003, p. 41). Paul's discourse and perhaps even Badiou's discourse exclude Leopold Bloom from their *politicum*.
- ³ Huntington reports that 'in polls conducted during the past fifteen years, between ninety-six and ninety-eight percent of all Americans said that they were "very" proud or "quite" proud of their country. When young Americans were asked whether they wanted to do something for their country, eighty-one per cent answered yes. Ninety-two per cent of Americans reported that they believe in God. Eighty-seven per cent said that they took "a great deal" of pride in their work, and although Americans work more hours annually than do people in other industrialized countries, ninety per cent said that they would work harder if it was necessary for the success of their organization. In all these categories, few other nations of comparable size and economic development even come close' (Menand 2004, p. 92).
- ⁴ Cf. Schmitt's *Nomos* for a consideration of 'nomos' as the fundamental 'unity of order and orientation' in any geopolitical configuration (Schmitt 2003, p. 42).
- ⁵ For Badiou 'the law is what constitutes the subject as powerlessness of thought' (Badiou 2003, p. 83). But 'thought can be unseparated from doing and power. There is salvation when the divided figure of the subject maintains thought in the power of doing' (p. 84); 'Is this to say that the subject who binds himself to Christian discourse is absolutely lawless?' (p. 86) No: Badiou proceeds to determine 'the extraordinarily difficult question concerning the existence of a transliteral law, a law of the spirit' (p. 87). This is the law of love – the lawless law which is also the law of laws: 'under the condition of faith, of a declared conviction, love names a nonliteral law, one that gives to the faithful subject his consistency, and effectuates the postevental truth in the world' (p. 87). The problem appears when the law of love falls into the hands of the priests, of course: but doesn't it always?

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