Do we need “identity politics”?  
Postmarxism and the critique of “pure particularism”

Simon Tormey*

School of Politics, University of Nottingham  
Nottingham UK, NG7 2RD

simon.tormey@nottingham.ac.uk  
tel. +44 (0)115 951 4871  
fax. +44 (0)115 951 4859

Paper to be presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions workshop on ‘Identity Politics’  
to be held in Grenoble, France, 6-11 April 2001.

* Dr Simon Tormey is Senior Lecturer in Politics and Critical Theory at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is the author of numerous books and articles including Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism (Manchester University Press, 1995), Politics at the Edge (co-edited with Chris Pierson) (Macmillan, 2000) and Agnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern (Manchester University Press, 2001). He would like to acknowledge the financial support of the British Academy and the Research Committee of the University of Nottingham for his work on contemporary Marxist and Post-Marxist theory.
In his recent paper, ‘Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism’ Slavoj Žižek argues that multiculturalism and, by extension, much of what comes under the rubric of ‘identity politics’ is no less than a new strain of ‘fascism’. Žižek’s principal point is that multiculturalism enacts a form of postmodern ‘racism’ in which cultures and practices are sanctified insofar as they do not challenge or confront the authority of the Gaze. In this sense the multiculturalists’ ‘neutrality’ stands for his or her superiority over the very forms of life with which he or she is concerned to document and protect. It is a patronising gaze related to, if not the same as, that of the imperialist in his or her relations to the ‘poor bloody natives’. Žižek’s point concerns, however, not merely the character of multiculturalism, but also its political effects. In his view the domination of multiculturalism is at the same time the domination of the particular over the universal, of the fragment over the totality, of surface appearance over ‘essentialist’ critique. The result has been disastrous for emancipatory theory, indeed for any attempt at maintaining a critical distance from the status quo. Žižek’s claim is that multiculturalism has inured the left to the promise of emancipation by as it were ‘rainbow coalition’ (Žižek, 1997, p. 47). In his view however, far from presaging a ‘new politics’ of the subject and a new politics of emancipation or universalism as its supporters claim, multiculturalism’s true raison d’être is the papering over the further extension of ‘globalisation’. Multiculturalism is as it were globalisation’s human ‘face’; it speaks to us as concerned citizens of the world, as post-political, post-class bearers of ‘new’, ‘diffuse’ identities whilst at the same time erasing difference in the course its unfolding. The celebration of difference and diversity associated with multiculturalism and identity politics more generally is false: lurking within is a barely concealed will-to-mastery whose realisation involves the subjection and subordination most obviously of the global South and ultimately of all those subject to and oppressed by the logic of capital (Žižek 1997, p. 46; Žižek 1999, pp. 208 ff.). Identity politics (of which multiculturalism is but one expression) is therefore equivalent to the end of politics, or rather it is the ‘post-politics’ of dispossession, not this ‘time’ by nation states, but by multinational corporations. ‘In the long term’, as he mordantly notes, ‘we shall not only wear Banana Republic shirts but also live in banana republics’ (Žižek 1999, p. 216). Žižek should be so lucky: some of us are consigned to live in banana monarchies.

As is all too evident, Žižek’s critique comes as a slap in the face to the postmarxian left, most
obviously Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Judith Butler with whom Žižek ‘enjoys’ an on-going ‘war of position’(see in particular Butler et al 2000). It also challenges the notion more generally shared with those documenting the emergence of ‘postmodern’ politics such as Agnes Heller, Jean-François Lyotard and Claude Lefort that the fracturing and diffuseness of identity under contemporary conditions is a correlate of increased personal freedom and hence that a properly emancipatory politics is one built on an ‘absent centre’ of ontology as Žižek puts it in the sub-title to The Ticklish Subject. Finally, it challenges the view associated with contemporary left commentary that the domain of emancipatory politics is no longer that of the economic (as long argued by Marxists), but rather of ‘culture’. In short, an emancipatory politics should abandon the idea that the expression or realisation of identities - however constituted - requires fundamental social transformation, and seek instead to support and sustain the necessarily fragmented struggles of particular identities in the hope that universal goals and aspirations can be advanced alongside them. If Žižek is right many of these assumptions will have to be rejected if the much vaunted and repeatedly heralded ‘rebuilding of the left’ is not immediately to run onto the buffers. If he is wrong then it seems we still need to clarify what it is that we are hoping to gain from the celebration of identity in terms of confronting the issues that Žižek raises, in particular how it is that fundamental issues concerning global inequality and powerlessness can be meaningfully confronted in a context where the battles for particularistic recognition absorbs whatever negative or radical energies can be found under post-industrial conditions. The aim of this paper is thus to assess Žižek’s intervention in the light of Postmarxian claims concerning the future of emancipatory critique, and by extension to establish how and under what conditions identity politics can form the basis for an emancipatory or universal politics as opposed to a politics orientated to the advancement of any given group.

**Post-Marxism and the defence of univeralist particularity**

Žižek’s critique is a subtle yet nonetheless brutal one. His claim is essentially that in celebrating the diffuse, contingent, dispersed identities thrown up under contemporary conditions the radical left has allowed itself to be seduced by the emancipatory promise of those new social movements that in the standard ‘left’ telling of the tale displaced class politics in the wake of 1968. Although Žižek does not himself go into the matter, it is perhaps worth rehearsing at this point the reasons why much of the left might have taken the turn that it has because it illustrates the postmarxian understanding of modernity more generally to which - as will become clear - Žižek also objects. We need to start therefore with an account of how it is that left politics came to see in identity politics the key to the realisation of its universalist goals and ambitions.

As its name suggests Post-Marxism is a theoretical development of Marxism rather than a

---

1 The fascism claim is made on the front cover of the journal where the paper appears.
wholesale rejection of it, though there are those such as Norman Geras who would argue that even this overstates the connection (Geras, 1987). What is clear, however, is that Postmarxists see themselves as in crucial sense radicalising Marx’s account of modernity and thus remaining within his iconoclastic idiom. Put simply, for them the problem with the classical Marxian account of the forces unleashed by capitalism is that Marx did not go far enough in his appreciation of the effects unleashed by it. This is particularly so when it comes to an evaluation of subjectivisation. Just at the moment when Marx celebrates the dawn of radical contingency and historicity he immediately qualifies and undermines the deconstruction of identity and social life by developing a reconstructive account of identity formation on the back of it. The ‘masterless man’ so feared under the feudal order finds himself recast as proletarian and with it whatever particularity he had won as a result of the thaw in ‘fixed and fast frozen relations’ solidifies into the new meta-identity of social class. Like Stirner whose account of the modern was of course savagely attacked by Marx in The German Ideology, Postmarxists regard Modernity’s main tendency as the erasure of all collective identity, that of class included. This is not to say that ‘class’ is an unimportant category of analysis. It is that since identity-formation per se subject to the deeper disruptive elements in modernity, class must itself be regarded as a contingent sociological descriptor.

Far from class antagonism becoming the primary form of struggle, as industrial society becomes post-industrial class thus becomes progressively less important for understanding the construction of political identities. Working class struggle becomes at best one form of struggle in amongst a proliferation of other ‘localised’ struggles for women’s liberation, gay and lesbian equality, for minority rights of every shape and form. In this sense the relationship between the law of capital and the forms of subjectivity and identity thrown up in the course of capital’s unfolding are, according to Postmarxists exactly the opposite of what Marx had imagined. Instead of the coalescence of identity around the pole of ‘Capital’, we see the increasing fragmentation of identity to the point where collective sociological categories become ever more abstracted from daily existence and thus ever more removed as a legitimate basis for social critique and explanation. The individual becomes, according to Laclau and Mouffe, an ensemble of ‘subject positions’ rather than one moment or instance of some larger collective identity. Ultimately, as Heller puts it, the individual under ‘postmodern political conditions’ is the bearer of his or her own ‘energeia’, his or her own being; a fully self-constituted agent able in large measure to choose his or her subjectivity (Heller, 1990, p. 6; Heller and Fehér, 1988, ch.1). Thus unlike under feudal conditions the subject not only ‘chooses’ what it is he or she will become (dentist, philosopher etc), but even what kind of person he or she will become (in the terms of moral philosophy, ‘good’ or ‘bad’). It also follows that the coalescence of struggle around capital similarly diminishes to the extent that the capital-labour ‘antagonism’ comes to be of comparatively minor significance compared with the struggle for recognition of an ever-growing plethora of new or reformulated identities. The image of donkey jacketed white males
warming their hands on braziers outside some crumbling industrial combine develops an antique patina in the new world of post-industrial displacement.

It is view of this tale of the recasting of the subject that for Post-Marxists it is meaningless to describe the capital-labour nexus as ‘contradictory’ in the fashion implied by Marx, that is as a set of relations unable to sustain itself over the longer term. If the working class is in a position of absolute or even relative decline, this hardly points towards the necessity for the overcoming of capitalism. Clinging to the idea that there is a fundamental contradiction within capitalism is therefore to cling to an ‘essentialist’ analysis whose validity, certainly for the most advanced industrial societies, diminishes by the day.\textsuperscript{2} Thus in political terms Marxism’s own relevance has to be questioned. Based as it is on a thesis of increasing polarisation of classes and the immiseration of the vast majority, the assumption that the working class bears within itself the seeds of universality, that merely by abolishing itself it abolishes all forms of antagonism and contestation is barely credible. This of course still leaves the question of where the new universalism is to be found. If capital and labour are not in contradiction (but only ‘antagonism’), if identity is not coalescing around two poles as Marx insisted it would, where is the universal subject and what is the universalist project?

The answer should already be apparent and lies with the tale just told about the growth of identities or ‘particularities’. For Laclau for example there are two kinds of particularity and thus two kinds of identity politics, one as it were ‘negative’ and the other ‘positive’. The negative form of identity politics is what might be termed ‘pure particularism’, that is a politics which aims self-consciously at achieving a position of superiority over other particularities and which therefore regards the subordination of others as intrinsic to its self-realisation.\textsuperscript{3} Extreme forms would inevitably include apartheid, national socialism and most recently Serb nationalism. Similarly, Heller and Feher describe the particularistic characteristics of what they term ‘biopolitics’, the politics of race, gender, ethnicity, animal rights etc. With few exceptions (for example liberal feminism) such forms of politics are anti-universalistic, anti-egalitarian and in favour of the elevation of their own group over others.

Other struggles, however, can be regarded as potentially emancipatory, not merely for those who are the subjects of the particularistic struggle, but also for those whose own struggles have a similar basis or which share similar demands. The demand for racial equality (for example) can be read as a demand for the extension or radicalising of the concept of equality. Whereas, formerly

\textsuperscript{2} See for example Laclau’s restatement of his earlier argument that class struggle is ‘an antagonism without a contradiction’ in Butler et al 2000, p. 202. The ‘non-contradictory’ nature of class struggle is of course a persistent theme in Laclau and Mouffe’s writing since \textit{Hegemony and Socialist Strategy}.

\textsuperscript{3} Laclau actually questions the notion of a ‘politics of pure particularity’ because even such a politics resorts to universalist language to justify its position (‘freedom’, ‘equality’). A politics of pure particularism is thus internally contradictory in the same sense that Wittgenstein posits a ‘private’ language to be internally incoherent. Just as language is inherently social so a politics is inherently universalist.
equality applied to one particular race or group so this demand pushes us to reconsider the term equality in a universalist dimension. Thus the raising of a particular demand by a particular group should not in Laclau’s or Heller’s view be read as particularistic or ‘selfish’, but one by invoking a universal normative ideal (freedom and equality for all) has relevance for all concurrent demands and struggles. The universal manifests itself here as an ‘absence’, a ‘lack’ that demands filling. The universal is not, that is, invoked as a concrete determination, a blueprint for the Good Life, but rather as a set of universal values requiring filling out, actualisation or realisation. Of course with the satisfaction of the particular demand the universalist element shifts position, being taken up by those minorities or groups which themselves lack equality. Identity politics as the proliferation of particular demands should not therefore be seen as necessarily self-absorbed or irrelevant to the wider struggle for human emancipation - as of course Marx argues in *On the Jewish Question*. Rather they should be seen as the expression of an absent universalism, of the demand for ever greater equality and freedom for all.

Here then is the dynamic driving contemporary struggles: particular groups and movements come forward with their demands, joining other demands as a ‘chain of equivalence’. As equivalent, no particular identity attains the privileged status which Marx of course accorded the proletariat. In other words, no identity may claim that its own particularity is ‘identical with’ or ‘expressive of’ the universal, or that its emancipation is the necessary or sufficient condition for the emancipation of all others. All identities are in this sense posited as equal or ‘equivalent’ and the chain linking them is thus circular rather than linear. To take an example, black identity is ‘equivalent’ to gay identity in the sense that both blacks and gays suffer oppression and hence have an interest in the expansion of the realms of freedom and equality, in other words the realm of universality. Given that expansion in the realm of universality is by definition not bought at the cost of the interests of any particular group or any emancipatory particularism (pure particularisms will always view the expansion of freedom for any out-group as a loss of its own power); these particularities therefore have an interest in supporting each other’s efforts at overcoming oppression. The logical form identity politics takes is thus alliance and coalition to break down existing barriers to otherwise particularistic self-realisation. Your struggle becomes my struggle and my emancipation becomes the basis for your/our emancipation. By invoking a ‘lack’ in the given we provoke a new crisis, a new space for action which changes the nature of that given. The status quo is challenged and a new horizon of possibility is invoked through ‘agonal contestation’ and through the continuous questioning of the values and practices that sustain contemporary society. By appeal to a common universalism and in particular to the values of equality and freedom new demands can be raised, fought for (and achieved), leading to the raising of yet newer demands and on *ad infinitum*.

---

4 Laclau gives a useful summary of the idea of particularities within ‘chains of equivalence’ in Butler et al 2000, pp. 302-6.
What Laclau, Mouffe, Heller et al are offering is thus a non-teleological universalism, which is to say a universalism that leaves open the possibility of new articulations within the given, new identities and thus the need for new reformulations of those very values. As such it is a non-essentialist and non-‘totalitarian’ universalism leaving spaces open to reformulation, negotiation and contestation. It is thus the idea of the universal as the space of the political, of the radical democratic ‘imaginary’. It is the space of unknowability, undecidability and thus of *praxis*, not one of totalisation based on insight into ‘true needs’, the ‘historical process’, ‘human nature’ etc. How then could this reading of identity and identity politics be read as a new fascism, as Žižek insists it must?

**Žižek’s critique**

We earlier invoked Stirner to illustrate the point Post-Marxists wish to make in relation to the character of subjectivity and identity under modern conditions. Žižek’s critique of this position is in turn reminiscent of Marx’s response to Stirner in *The German Ideology*, though happily it is considerably more articulate and compelling than the snorting indignation that characterised Marx’s flailing of ‘Sancho’ or ‘Saint Max’. Marx’s objection is based on the fundamental idealism underpinning Striner’s position. For Stirner our liberation is a liberation from the tryanny of concepts and ‘essentialisms’ (to put a post-structuralist spin on his reading). This is to say that Stirner rejects the notion that language is determined by Being and thus that it has any hold over the subject. On the contrary liberation requires us to exorcise possession by language, to turf out those ‘spooks’ or ‘bats in the belfry’ which in turn are used to tyrannise us into conformity with the given. We have, in short, to escape from the ‘prison house of language’ if we wished to take control over our own existence. ‘*Die Freie*’ are those who rebel against the very conceptual understanding of the world handed down in the process of socialisation. In a justly better known section of *The German Ideology* Marx insists, however, that it is not ‘life that is determined by consciousness’, but rather ‘consciousness that is determined by life’ (Marx [1845], p. 47). In turn Stirner’s hope that by escaping from language and the conceptual apparatus of the mind that he could free himself is ultimately a vain one. It is the freedom of the teenage rebel who imagines that merely by challenging the authority of his parents he gains independence and power over his own existence. In fact, the teenage rebel remains within the economy of the parental household and thus ultimately unfree ‘in the last instance’. Similarly those who think that changing the concepts we use to describe the world changes the world itself, that, for example, substituting the meaning of ‘scarcity’ so that it becomes ‘abundance’ will somehow get rid of unsatisfied need will (once their stomachs start rumbling) be only too aware of the priority of being over consciousness, of materiality over ideality.

For Žižek the manoeuvres of those in the vanguard of identity politics demonstrate a similar denial of the capitalist Real, of materiality, of Being (Žižek 1999, pp. 235-6). Post-Marxists see in the
disintegration of the sociological validity of the category of the working class evidence for assuming that capitalism as a set of relations, as a mode of production, as the fundamental organising principle of social life must itself be invalid - a ‘spook’ or ‘bat in the belfry’. And, as Žižek admits, it is easy to see their point: the subject of capital is the working class, the working class is in the process of ‘disappearing’ (certainly in the most advanced industrial economies), and so this must in turn mean that capitalism is in the process of its own transcendence. If, as Heller puts it, ‘there is no capitalist society’, if in other words class ceases to be a meaningful descriptor for sociological analysis, what is the validity of talking about the existence of a capitalist system? (Heller, 1999, p.85). If there are no lords and serfs there is no feudalism; similarly, if there is no proletariat and bourgeoisie then surely it is meaningless to talk about capitalism?

This, however, is not good enough for Žižek whose critique reiterates the Humean critique of the relation between causes and their effects, or in current lingo between surfaces and their essences. In his view the fact that under capitalist conditions classes do not behave like classes in the Marxian sense does not necessarily mean that the relations of production have changed, but that people have either ceased to identify themselves in terms of those relations or they have yet to be confronted with compelling reasons why they should do so. All of which is of course perfectly consistent with Marx’s own analysis which stresses the distinction to be made between the class ‘in itself’ and the class ‘for itself’, between, that is, a class that lacks consciousness of itself as a class and one that does. The mistake many Marxists as well as Postmarxists make is to assume that the struggles within contemporary society are either equivalent to class struggle in the sense that since they too address ‘oppression’ and ‘domination’ they must be addressing the same forms of oppression and domination. Or, they assume that by showing solidarity with such struggles they will be able to radicalise them and thus address the ‘deeper’ or more fundamental sources of oppression which Marxists see lurking in capitalist society. In both readings left radicalism is best advanced by supporting the particularistic struggles of any and all marginalised or excluded groups in society and knit them into some sort of rainbow coalition. In Žižek’s view, however, this is exactly the trap of ‘identity politics’. Precisely because identity politics has enjoyed ‘success’ it gives the left the impression of fundamental change and therefore sustains the belief that only through the further expansion of the rights and opportunities enjoyed by distinct particularities that the universal, the ‘absent present’ be meaningfully and successfully pursued. In Žižek’s view, however, every move in the direction of particularity is a move away from a fundamental confrontation with the Real, with the Order of Capital and thus away from a True politics of Universality (Žižek 1999, p. 276). The absence of class struggle is in this sense to be read as a denial of the Real, its repression through domination. The absence of class struggle does not in this sense point to aufhebung, to the fundamental transformation of the capitalist system, but to the success of those defending the status quo in convincing us that it has been transformed. The ‘absence’ is a lack carefully negotiated and managed by those who have an interest in maintaining it
that way. Thus, as he puts it in a Marcusean moment, ‘the very absence of struggle and resistance -
the fact that both sides involved in relations accept them without resistance - is already the index of
the victory of one side of the struggle.’ (Butler et al, 2000, p. 320).

It is the very success, then, of identity politics, of the politics of ‘equivalent’ particularities
that appals Žižek and makes him critical of the Postmarxian left which in his view has invested so
much energy intellectually and morally in support of it. Their success ‘renaturalises’ capitalism in the
sense that capitalism and the framework of capitalist relations slip quietly into the background whilst
the ‘real’ battles are fought on the political stage (Butler et al 2000, p. 95; p. 108). Capitalism
becomes the unmentionable or obscene Other. Indeed as he notes within identity politics and cultural
politics more generally even to utter the word ‘capitalism’ is to expose oneself as an ‘essentialist’,
‘fundamentalist’ or worse. Every advance made by every discrete particularism is not in this sense
one more step in the direction of universalism, but one more obstacle to the development of a genuine
politics of universalism. His point is that every new opportunity won, every new right established
represents in a very direct sense a loss of self-ownership for those at the sharp end of capital’s
imperium for every new ‘concession’ rendered by Capital staves off the day when people are forced to
question the basis upon which their existences depend. The efforts of those who seek to enlarge the
sphere of opportunity, equality and liberty should therefore be recognised for what they are: merely
the ‘caring’ face of multinational capital. The hope of Postmarxists that the continuous
universalisation of universal values, in particular of equality and liberty, will result in the overcoming
of capitalist relations of production is therefore a vain one. The politics of multiculturalism and
minoritarianism is a politics of catch-up, not of fundamental transformation; it is a politics that
promises an ever-expanding equality of opportunity rather than more radical forms of equality which
presuppose meaningful control over global resources; of ever expanding rights, rather than the
freedom to control the conditions of our individual and collective existences. Above all it is a politics
of victimhood, a politics for those who feel that they have not received their fair share from the social
pot, rather than a politics which fundamentally questions where the social pot came from, who
controls it and how it is kept in being. This is not a politics of universality, but rather one of pure
particularity dressed in the clothes of the universal.

The Postmarxist Response

Žižek’s analysis is undoubtedly a shocking one and thus it should hardly be surprising that it has
drawn a highly critical response not least from those at the sharp end of his critique. Ernesto Laclau
and Judith Butler, for example, have both replied at length and in no uncertain terms to his analysis.
Laclau accuses him among other charges of political irresponsibility and a Leninist disdain for the
achievements of those many millions of activists who have struggled on behalf of oppressed
minorities and groups within liberal-capitalism. More generally there is a brooding suspicion of Žižek’s messianic tone which insists on the availability not only of ‘the Real’ (with the ‘Lacanian’ capital retained), but also, and even less fashionably, of ‘the Truth’. Laclau seems to have a point. After all, responding to the latter’s accusation that he is offering a quasi-fundamentalist, or totalitarian essentialism, Žižek hardly helps by commenting that if his position can be equated to a new ‘Linksfaschismus’ then ‘so be it!’ (Butler et al 2000, p. 326). Are, however, these charges enough on their own to persuade us that Žižek’s critique should be ignored or in some other manner put to one side?

Firstly, it is true that in the light of his comments concerning the priorities of the left Žižek is not prepared to concur with those like Laclau, Cohen, Lefort, Heller etc. that left radicals should act within the confines of the institutional and structural given if they wish to remain politically relevant. This is of concern to the above (among others) who in their own work stress the necessity for forms of struggle relevant to the ‘here and now’, by which they mean struggle within existing liberal-democratic parameters for the expansion of those parameters. As such they are merely restating what has become orthodoxy on the Postmarxist left, i.e. that left radical politics is by necessity a realistic or pragmatic politics in the name of universal ideals. As Heller it is politics for the ‘present’ and ‘the future of present’, not some far off grandiose ‘Tomorrow’. In advocating such a strategy they point to the very evident success of oppressed and minority groups in getting their voice heard and in lobbying government agencies for a greater share of social resources and more generally for greater recognition. They point to the expansion of civil liberties and the existence of greater equality at work and in the home. They are also impressed by the degree to which liberal-democracy leaves ‘spaces’ for contestation and meaningful debate particularly when compared with the practices of former communist regimes and indeed by comparison with any alternative set of political arrangements hitherto developed. To Žižek, however, this merely confirms the degree to which the Postmarxist analysis is one informed by a fear of the political rather than a belief in the necessity for an expansion or transformation of the political. Underpinning their analysis is the belief that because reforms have been made to the structure and form of advanced capitalism this indicates that liberal-democratic institutions are capable of being inscribed in plural and diverse ways, of being, as Heller puts it, the ‘home of liberals and antiliberals alike’ (Heller, 1995, p. 14). It implies that there is no institutional barrier to the further and significant unfolding of the ‘democratic revolution’. Thus we should operate within the liberal-capitalist given because it represents a safe and legitimate road to further ‘universalisation’ in all spheres of life.

Such an analysis of liberal-democracy would however, seem to reinforce Žižek’s point about the focus of Post-Marxist critique particularly given the fact that if anything prospects for universalisation in the form of greater substantive equality and collective control over productive resources seem progressively less likely to be realised under present conditions, however defined. To
take the economic sphere for example, the logic of neoliberalism appears just as vigorous now as under the regimes of Thatcher and Reagan. What after all is the imperative underlying the much vaunted Third Way in politics other than the attempt to give neoliberalism a veneer of humanity by harnessing labour market reforms to promises of social justice and redistribution? Even Jospin, no friend of the neoliberals, finds himself compelled to obey its logic in the name of overcoming social sclerosis and blocage. This blocage can be read as the attempt by a wide variety of social and economic groups to resist the imperatives of the market and cling to hard won social and economic rights. In the meantime nationalisation is ‘rolled back’ and all around we see not the extension of the social of the domain of the universal, but its retreat in the name of ‘efficiency’ and ‘modernity’. Such developments representing in essence major trends of post-industrial society could hardly be read as equivalent to ‘democratisation’, involving as they do the increasing casualisation of labour, the development of new and more powerful mechanisms of surveillance and control at work, and increasing bureaucratisation as the culture of accountability infects all areas of our working lives (so much for the neoliberal concern with ‘lean’ production). Žižek seems on safe ground therefore when he argues that there are few reasons to think that an accommodation with liberal-capitalism will produce any genuine reform of liberal-capitalism and thus that Postmarxists will be vindicated in their call for political action designed to ‘universalise’ existing institutions and structures. He also seems on safe ground to assert that in its unwillingness to confront the nexus between economy and polity, and address the real world struggles that lie beyond Europe and the United States Postmarxism ignores the larger context in which the logic of neoliberalism operates. For whilst it is true that western liberal-democracies have reformed themselves in certain significant respects, it is also undeniable that attempts by radical groups both within the developed world and more especially outside it to alter in fundamental ways the patterns of ownership and possession associated with multinational capitalism have been met by a strategy of ‘containment’ in the very name of ‘defending democracy’. One does not have to go over the litany of ‘interventions’ by the United States and its allies over the past fifty years to come to the conclusion that the vaunted plurality and diversity of western liberal-democracy has effectively been bought at the cost of the political autonomy and self-determination of the poor and excluded, particularly in the developing world. Even within advanced liberal-democracies themselves it is difficult to perceive any great degree of ‘universalisation’ in for example the economic sphere. Quite the reverse: by accentuating the needs of discrete particularisms so larger issues concerning the form and function of social, economic and political relations disappear into the background.

But does Žižek’s response have any more to commend it given, as Post-Marxists would have it, the dangers lurking in his goals for a radical confrontation with the Real? To Laclau for example Žižek’s critique is hampered by the fact that it does not appear readily to connect to those groups which since the decline of the working class have been at the forefront of the reinvigoration of the
left, principally the new social movements (Butler et al 2000, pp. 201-12). In his view it is the form and nature of identity politics that should dictate the left’s views both on what to struggle for and how it should be achieved. The task of the left radical should thus be to work within the now well-established framework of minoritarian politics encouraging them to seek alliances and coalitions in the name of the ‘absent’ universal. Laclau would seem to have a point. After all is not Žižek trapped between a disdain for the efforts of those attempting to advance the identity politics agenda and the collapse of the traditional working class constituency to which his politics would seem to speak? It is not just an ‘absent ontology’ that faces Žižek as it does all theorists after post-structuralism, but an absent agent, self-constructed or otherwise. Does not left radicalism have to relate to the hopes and desires of actually existing political actors in order to be relevant?

It is certainly true that Žižek holds the entire identity politics industry in some contempt. It is also true, as he fully recognises, that the constituency charged by Marxists with the task of confronting the law of Capital, namely the working class, is in serious decline as regards those who identify with the class designation, and also as regards those who equate working class politics with a politics of confrontation as opposed to accommodation with the Real. Lacking a developed theory of (or overt faith in) the inexorability of a ‘final crisis of capitalism’ Žižek also declines to be tempted to concur with the analysis of more orthodox Marxists such as Ernest Mandel or Alex Callinicos, i.e. that a ‘new’ working class will inevitably rise up to take the place of the old once capitalism’s ‘contradictions’ begin to bite. Rather, in a novel departure Žižek’s view is that radical change is, to follow Alain Badiou, an ‘Event’ whose origins are various and unpredictable: perhaps in some subjective questioning of the system prompted by socio-political factors as in France in 1968, perhaps in economic turmoil of the sort witnessed across Asia in 1997, or perhaps, and more likely, in a combination of many elements as, indeed, in the October Revolution of 1917 (Žižek, 1999, pp. 127 ff.). Few ‘Events’, Žižek seems to be saying, have their origin in some neatly reducible schema or in some relation of strict causality driven by ‘objective’ material contradictions. They are rather the product of a combination, an unforeseeable assemblage of elements which on coming together precipitate a crisis which makes us question the validity and logic of continuing on in the ‘old way’. In short the notion that the agitation of a class conscious proletariat is a sufficient or even a necessary condition for the revolutionary overthrow of the old order would seem to be misplaced. Of greater importance on this reading is the notion of a fundamental rupture or shock to the system which in turn precipitates a questioning of the norms, values and laws of that system. This in turn may radicalise the possibilities available to historical actors and permit the supplanting of demands of social democratic movements by the ‘impossible’ demands of those driven by the desire to confront the

---

5 Žižek writes of significant ‘irrationalities’ in contemporary capitalism and the tone of his comments indicate that he does believe its continuation to be in question. He does however appear to link the growth in irrationality with the growth of a militant working class. See his comments in Butler et al 2000, pp. 321-6.
underlying Real.

To invert Laclau therefore we could say that in place of the ‘absent’ universal as Laclau and Mouffe put it, in Žižek’s critique we see rather an absent agent. Instead of the ‘universal’ being driven or ‘filled’ by the activities and demands of various particularities, it is the particular that is defined by what Žižek refers to as ‘the Truth’ lurking in the Real: capitalist exploitation and domination. Who or what stands in for the term ‘proletarian’, which is to say who or what becomes the bearer of change is determined not on *a prioi* sociological terms (‘the proletariat is the class of people who are forced to sell their own labour power’), but in terms of those individuals and groups who recognise the Truth of the Real, and who want to overturn it. This is to say that who or what the proletariat ‘is’ must ultimately be regarded as a political question rather than a question of ‘objective’ sociological categories, a question of who it is that is prepared to struggle on behalf of the poor and exploited of the world. In place of Laclau’s postmodern universalism, the universalism that, as Linda Zerilli puts it is, not One, Žižek gives us as it were a very postmodern particularism: the particular agent that is not One (Zerilli, 1998). This is to say that the term ‘proletariat’ remains ‘empty’ until and unless filled by those acting in the name of the Universal. This is the particularism that speaks not just to the traditional working class (or what is left of it), but to those who identify themselves with as Žižek puts it the irrepressible ‘symptom’ of capitalist domination, namely all those who are excluded: the homeless, the *sans papiers*, the structurally unemployed and everyone else whose suffering and displacement can be located in the Real (Žižek, 1997, p. 50-1). It is in other words to those who constitute themselves as opposed to the violence of the given, which *may* of course include members of the traditional working class, but which need not necessarily be itself composed *of* them (Žižek 1999, pp. 226-7). A glance at the various initiatives and struggles of the contemporary anti-capitalist movement confirms that this new de-centred ‘agent’ conforms under present conditions to the kind of politics Žižek is keen to promote, even it lacks the heroic spontaneity of the earlier battles with capitalism which are of necessity the mainstay of his analysis. To paraphrase Marx ‘the movement is everything’, all other details including who or what constitutes the movement must be regarded as just that: details.

Laclau’s worries about the angle of Žižek’s approach does not turn just on the issue of how change is to come about, but also about what change is intended to achieve. In Laclau’s view Žižek’s refusal to engage in debate concerning the ‘how and why’ of politics, of how his goals can be advanced within the given, and more generally about form of society he wishes to see developed demonstrate a quasi-totalitarian propensity to seek the elimination of the domain of the political in favour of some form of as yet unspecified redemptive moment (Butler et al 2000, pp. 288-96). Worse, his defence of Lenin as a role model for political radicals shows his utilitarian disregard for those hard won rights and liberties which are also part of the liberal-democratic tradition. Žižek’s radicalism is thus an extreme form of voluntarism in which all action falling short of revolutionary
transformation is regarded with disdain. It is an impossibilist’s scenario and as such hardly the basis for a consistent or attractive universalism.

Žižek’s response to these issues in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* and *The Ticklish Subject* are at least consistent with the ‘spontaneist’ approach he takes to the issue of social transformation. In view of the always-existent possibility of transformation the proper stance of the left radical is not to comply with or support the given, but rather to ‘refuse’ it in the name of the Truth. As Žižek puts it, authentic politics is not the ‘art of the possible’ as post-Machiavellian thought has long insisted, but rather ‘the exact opposite, that is, the art of the impossible’ (Žižek 1999, p. 199). This refusal extends too to the discourse on what should be and how what should be should be realised. Laclau is thus right when he accuses Žižek of vagueness when it comes to suggesting alternatives to what already exists. The charge is, however, an odd one coming from a theorist who is otherwise so suspicious of political ‘constructivism’, and who remains convinced on post-structuralist grounds that the sphere of the universal must remain open and undefined if a radical democratic politics is to be sustained. Žižek’s refusal is after all in the same spirit of Marx himself who in order to avoid the charge of utopianism refused to spell out in all but the vaguest of terms how and under what terms communism and the transition were to be effected. It is a refusal to dictate to others how to develop those institutions and practices by which the Real may be transformed. It is thus surely at the same time an acknowledgement that the role of the left radical is not to dictate solutions, to develop blueprints and plans for universal contentment but rather to support their efforts to achieve genuine and deep-rooted autonomy. In a move that is reminiscent of the work of Castoriadis, Žižek’s concern is with the transformation of the ground of decision so that decision becomes the province of the collective and the individual working within the collective. It is thus by definition for that body to determine outcomes, not the political theorist. Žižek’s vagueness as to concrete post-transformational specifics should thus surely be of comfort rather than concern to the anti-essentialist, post-structuralist inspired theorist such as Laclau. It should be read as a sign that Žižek’s commitment to universalisation is at the same time protective of political, economic and social autonomy - of égaliberté, the impossible Other or Ideal Universal opposed to the Real (Žižek, 1997, p. 40). As Žižek himself suggests, the fact that he is not read on these terms should perhaps be taken as symptomatic of the reformist’s mistrust of the ‘totalitarian’ revolutionary (Žižek, 2001). Laclau cannot permit Žižek to appear reasonable in his ‘unreasonableness’, in his refusal to play the game, because this would undermine the Postmarxist strategy to operate within the liberal-capitalist given to which Laclau in turn is resigned. It reflects poorly on Laclau, however, when as here Žižek’s desire to leave the space of the political open is read as a weakness, for is this not exactly what Laclau and Mouffe are themselves arguing for when they invoke the ‘absent universal’?

And what finally of Žižek’s ‘self-confessed’ Leninism? Is his admiration of Lenin not evidence enough of his complicity in totalitarian schemes for the overthrow of legitimate institutions
in the name of the Truth? Again, for those raised on a diet of Cold War homilies to the effect that everything to do with communism as it ‘actually existed’ was bad, Žižek’s choice of role models comes as a shock. Yet, as becomes obvious in the course of The Ticklish Subject, Žižek’s ‘Leninism’ is less substantive than formal, less that is about the concrete specifics of the Bolshevik project than with their attitude to the relationship between praxis and power (Žižek 1999, pp. 236-7). What intrigues Žižek is that by contrast with virtually every other revolutionary movement the Bolsheviks were ‘successful’ in taking and retaining state power against apparently insurmountable odds. They, that is, did not succumb to the common failing of insurrectionists and revolutionaries the world over, which is to assume that their ideological adversaries would come to accept the legitimacy of their cause and thus the legitimacy of their actions and institutions. Nor did they see a contradiction in pursuing universalist goals through partialist, instrumental measures. Because they did not do so, they maintained their vigilance against all those who were or might become enemies of the regime and as a result were able to maintain their regime in the face of violent opposition from within and without. Yet Žižek’s point is that in doing so the Bolsheviks were only imitating the way that liberals and conservatives have acted in the contemporary world, which is to say that they were able to effect ‘a political suspension of the ethical’ (Žižek, 1997, p. 50; Žižek 1999, p. 223; p. 226-7). They were able to act against their enemies because they were prepared to become utilitarians: to act in the name of what they believed to be in the name of the Universal.

To Žižek such a stance contrasts starkly with the neo-Kantian admonitions of contemporary left radicals such as Laclau and Heller who stand at the end of a long line of those who have erected theoretically compelling but politically redundant socialisms. as Žižek reads it, for the latter politics cannot be allowed to carry costs; it cannot regard some as a ‘mere means’ for the satisfaction of some other end; it cannot contemplate action that will fundamentally rupture the status quo for fear that some will get hurt. This ultimately for Žižek is the failing of the contemporary left and the problem with its support for a mobile army of particularities: it is unwilling to see that the liberal-capitalist form of life is one ultimately sustained by an army of Oliver Norths who are more than happy to suspend the ethical in the name of protecting ‘our’ way of life. In such a context it is the stance of the ethical Kantian rather than the cynical utilitarian that is irresponsible, for it is a stance whose effect is a political immobilism that directly sustains the global New World Order (Žižek 1999, pp. 222-3). Žižek’s politics of ‘refusal’ is, by contrast, intended to be positive as well as a negative - in ‘Hegelese’ a negation of the negation. It is negative insofar as it indicates an unwillingness to do or say anything that legitimises the existing state of affairs; yet this negative is the condition for the positive: the emergence of alternative ideals, alternative visions, alternative ways of living. ‘Refusal’ for Žižek is thus the prelude, not to resignation and despair, but of praxis. It is the moment where, to invert Heller, the individual decides in favour of Tomorrow rather than the ‘future of present’.
Concluding remarks

Žižek’s critique is surely a sobering one for the contemporary left, all the more so when his own position avoids the sort of ready type-casting which might allow his critics to consign him unproblematically to some ‘lunatic fringe’ of true believers. As if it were not enough to accuse Postmarxists of wasting their time and energies on the celebration of contingent identity, he implicates them in the very reproductive logic of the system. Postmarxians are not merely pawns in the power games, he seems to be saying, they are themselves players: self-conscious anti-radicals allied to those forces seeking to maintain the status quo. And yet there is also an undeniable arrogance to Žižek’s critique which will no doubt sustain his critics over the years to come and form the basis of a fightback for those wishing to defend the ‘culturalisation’ of the political. Žižek is after all a self-declared ‘essentialist’ writing at a point in time when such declarations are, as he points out, tantamount to confessing to a crime (Žižek 1997, p. 48). He has little time for the theoretical and methodological niceties which have formed the anti-foundational foundation for all ‘postmodern’ politics. This in turn means that he leaves himself open to those now familiar charges of theoretical totalisation and imperialism which are heaped on any theorist foolish enough to claim that they are in possession of the truth no matter how small or inconsequential their ‘discovery’ might be. No doubt then there will be those who view Žižek’s enterprise as merely the last gasp of the pan-Hegelian ambition to grasp the Real, and will be happy to reject him on those terms alone. After all, in a world that has rejected the Truth there is little room for Truth-tellers.

For those less inured of the postmodern obsession with the status of truth claims and more interested in the suggestiveness of what is being argued, Žižek’s argument may appear unsettling for other reasons. Firstly, even for those who share Žižek’s concern about the postmodern turn in left radical theory it is nonetheless tempting to see worrying signs in his lack of desire to counter the charge offered by Laclau in particular that his own politics is unconnected to the struggles and demands of existing groups and movements. This leaves him exposed to Laclau’s criticism that it is Žižek rather than Postmarxists like himself who is unprepared to leave the terrain of haute théorie - to connect to the world and the problems real people raise. Given his unwillingness to counter the charge and his readiness to retreat to his ‘impossibilist’ position, it is undeniable that it is sometimes Žižek rather than Laclau and Butler who seems like the Ivory Tower philosopher. This is puzzling for of course there is an anti-capitalist movement, there are initiatives and groups with whom Žižek could easily connect and which would therefore give his argument a base in the real world. That he rarely seems to connect his argument to the arguments of such groups seems unnecessarily to weaken his case and by extension allows his opponents to claim the space of political activism and relevance for themselves. It also suggests that far from offering an enabling or empowering politics of confrontation with the Real, it is his stance that can be read as a recipe for political immobilism. After all, what is the politics of refusal? If an authentic politics is the ‘politics of the impossible’ what exactly is it that
left radicals are supposed to do? Sit idly by waiting for an ‘Event’ to happen? This is hardly a formula for an effective politics of resistance to the given, however defined. Despite his declamatory style Žižek’s politics can come across as reminiscent of the analysis of Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* which is to say that it can, paradoxically, be read as a defeatist or pessimistic paean to a lost radicalism, to lost utopian energies. Yet at a time when anti-capitalist initiatives appear if anything to be growing in strength and influence it is curious to adopt what can sometimes come across as a nostalgia for the vigour and single-mindedness of a figure like Lenin. It is in the ‘here and now’ that Žižek’s critique has relevance, not Yesterday or Tomorrow. This I think is a pity because Žižek does arguably offer the theoretical dimension required to transform the growing anti-corporatist and anti-capitalist movement from something diffuse and decentered into a force with greater vision and focus. In short, such movements need a politically engaged or ‘concrete’ Žižek, even if he does not ‘need’ them.

To return to the positive, however, Žižek’s critique is also disturbing because in his own ‘totalising’ way he invokes a dimension all too frequently ignored on the Postmarxian left: that of global justice as opposed to the forms of justice obtaining in advanced ‘post-industrial’ societies with their declining working classes and proliferation of diffuse identities. What Žižek asks us to think is the globe, the system of interconnections and interrelations by which all of our fates are tied together. The phrase a ‘global village’ is such a tired cliché that one hesitates to deploy it for serious theoretical purposes; and yet it does capture the sense in which Žižek’s thought is relevant. What he wants us seriously to entertain is the thought that we are all as one; that the livelihoods and well-being of everyone is directly dependent on everyone else, and thus, by extension, that a politics that does not explicitly and self-consciously attend to these relations cannot by definition be concerned with the universal. At the same time a politics of the universal cannot afford to be ‘empty’; it must be theorised and spoken of - if only in ethical terms. A politics that refuses the universal will inevitably see a politics of particularisms, ‘identity politics’ as attractive, indeed, as the only option for the left to pursue. The difficulty is, as Žižek implies, that the contemporary world is in practice a world of grand visions, only they are the false universalisms of the neoliberal and conservative right who dream of Free Trade, the New World Order, the Lonely Superpower etc. They at least have understood the importance of the political Big Idea when it comes to mobilising power in the name of cherished ideals. The novelty of Žižek’s political thought is thus that it requires those who wish to develop a radical universalism to take the leap, to think the totality, the globe, and to put to one side our obsession with the *differend*, the diffuse, the contingent. *Contra* Laclau and Mouffe, Heller, Lyotard *et al* it is a politics that requires us to think the ‘break’, the rupture in the name of a New Beginning. It requires us to put to one side the cosy certainties of liberal-democratic existence, of minor victories for oppressed minorities. And of course it requires the left to readopt a stance that for some time it has had difficulty in sustaining: that of being unreasonable, extreme and one-sided in its ‘universalism’.
Are we ready?
REFERENCES


Žižek, Slavoj (1997), ‘Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism’, *New Left Review*, no. 225 (September/October), pp. 28-51.
