

The Step Outside: The Act, Democracy, and Its Discontents

Slavoj Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, (London: Verso 2004).

Zizek's *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* picks up the thread from his previous book focused on the war on terror, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, somewhere between the months leading up to the war in Iraq and the exposure of torture at Abu Ghraib. So, while we miss an encounter between Zizek and the torture scandal—which unfortunately, in the minds of many Americans, is just another scandal—he has nonetheless been constant in criticizing all “musings” about whether torture should be used in the war on terror as a soft step to its legitimation. And who knew—legitimate torture and you too could become Attorney General! Thus in the end Zizek was proved correct. However, the timing of the book is not crucial. While the book appears to be about the war in Iraq, it is really about “what kind of society is emerging *here and now* as the result of the ‘war on terror’” (in the text, Zizek’s focus is clearly Europe and North America).¹ According to Zizek, the “true ideological and political targets” of the ‘war on terror’ are—*us!*

Zizek divides the book into three parts: the first, he promises, is “the author’s immediate impressions and reactions to the unfolding story of the U.S. attack on Iraq,” while the two appendices provide Lacanian-Marxist supplements.² Between the introduction and the main text, we learn the reason for the reference to the borrowed kettle. The kettle refers to a joke mentioned by Freud in talking about the logic of dreams. Zizek sums it up on the first page:

- (1) I never borrowed a kettle from you

- (2) I returned it to you unbroken
- (3) The kettle was already broken when I got it from you

As Zizek quickly points out, these inconsistent arguments can only confirm that, in fact, I returned a broken kettle to you. And while this seems to be a strange departure point for the book, it is only too appropriate when Colin Powell's strongest argument against this war to President Bush alludes to Pottery Barn.³ In a nutshell, all the arguments for invading Iraq, from weapons of mass destruction, to democracy and freedom, to oil, to 'he tried to kill my daddy!'—however inconsistent they may be—can only confirm that it was really about the role of the U.S. in the 'New World Order.'

The first part of the book contains mostly commentary on the global situation, revolving around the war on terror, and is the kind of work we are familiar with from Zizek: provocative writing and entertaining examples slowly introducing some of the material that Zizek will return to in his two appendices. I would like to focus on Zizek's argument about "democracy and its discontents" in order to pinpoint an interesting development within Zizek's work, while leaving out most of the commentary on Iraq. What is interesting is how Zizek elaborates on the Lacanian notion of the act, while arguing against the theorists of radical democracy. However, he begins with a customary target in order to get to these theorists: the liberal-democratic order.

To show how liberal-democratic politics are business as usual, Zizek begins with an exception to their normal functioning, when Le Pen made it to the second round of the French presidential elections, in place of the "logical" candidate, Lionel Jospin in 2002. All of the sudden, Le Pen was a viable candidate, and the mainstream of France set out to defeat him. But, Zizek asks, was he defeated? Or, was it the case that after the expected denunciations, "the outraged liberals proceed to act like Le Pen with a human face?"⁴ In this case, even though Le Pen was defeated, several of his positions, such as regulating the status of immigrants, quietly entered into the mainstream consensus. As

Zizek notes, French socialist Laurent Fabius stated that Le Pen asked the right questions, but gave the wrong answers. What happened in this movement between the repudiation of Le Pen and the integration of his message into the mainstream was that “the *entire field* of background ‘unwritten rules’ has already changed so much that no one ever notices, and everyone is simply relieved that the anti-democratic threat is over.”⁵

What is consistent in this movement is that the Left continues to give way to its opponents, up to the point that the “new” Democrats in the U.S., such as Clinton, were instrumental in both dismantling key sectors of the welfare state and in mustering support for the U.S. Patriot Act and the war in Iraq. This leads straight to Zizek’s point: even if Bush had been defeated in 2004, the true danger was that “‘extremists’ such as John Ashcroft would be discredited, but their legacy would remain imperceptibly woven into the invisible ethical fabric of our societies.”⁶

Of course, Bush was re-elected, but it is interesting that Ashcroft was one of the Cabinet members who first stepped down. In this respect, Zizek was right: Ashcroft’s work had already been completed, and thus he need not have remained in the Cabinet. That is, the extensive intrusion of the logic of “security” continues to define much of the political debate, as the unwritten rules of electoral politics.⁷

The point here is not to hope for a populist movement that is the opposite of Le Pen, but to take a step outside, where the unwritten rules become apparent: that in liberal democracies there is a limit to who is electable, and that all must abide by all electoral results. The step outside, which is where Zizek places the political act, is always accompanied by the “inevitable blackmail”: that outside the liberal-democratic order is only totalitarianism.

The question is then, what is this “inevitable blackmail?” Or perhaps, who is afraid of the political act? Zizek has two targets, with very different intentions and points of reference: contemporary liberal-democratic politics and postmodern philosophy. The former reference should be obvious. We

should all be familiar with the criticism of the "step outside" democracy: this outside is either totalitarian or fascist. However, it is more difficult to link this to postmodern philosophy. This time however, Žižek targets the Lacanian-deconstructivist framework of Yannis Stavrakakis. For Stavrakakis, the act would be accused of committing violence against the Other. This violence would be understood as committed by some dogmatic political form (Marxism, etc.) ignoring the particularities of difference, or, it takes the form of reactionary violence. Either way, this criticism collapses the difference between Marxist "totalitarianism" and fascism. Therefore, even if the liberal-democratic perspective and the postmodern perspective use different terminology, they have a target in common: opposition to any act that challenges democratic hegemony.

But what then is the act? The act changes the very coordinates of what is possible. The most apparent example is that of revolution. It is a revolutionary act that changes the coordinates of the possible, or in other words, it is the transgression of the impossible. It is the act that interrupts the consistency of the situation; it is, precisely, the step outside.

At this point we can see the (Lacanian-)deconstructivist criticism. Žižek quotes Stavrakakis: "fidelity to an event can flourish and avoid absolutization only as an infidel fidelity, only within the framework of another fidelity, fidelity to the openness of the political space and to the awareness of the constitutive impossibility of a final suture of the social."⁸ In other words, the act can never suspend the difference (the lack in the Other) that would prevent the act from accomplishing its realization, and if the act tries anyway, it leads to concrete violence against the Other (the "absolutization"). To this, Žižek replies, "it is only through an act that I effectively assume the big Other's non-existence, that is, I enact the impossible: namely, what appears as impossible within the co-ordinates of the existing socio-symbolic order."⁹ That is, the act can occur precisely because the symbolic order does not have complete consistency, or in other words, the act can make the impossible possible because the apparent

impossibility was never really there. Yet, in this regard, acts are few and far between. In this case we can see why Žižek shows some contempt for what would typically be called direct action: most of these actions appeal directly to the symbolic order, or, the big Other. That is, they do something so that nothing changes. Instead of this, Žižek makes an appeal to “do nothing.” He asks, “What if it is only the full acceptance of the desperate closure of the present global situation that can push us towards actual change?”¹⁰

Of course, to do nothing sounds if not cynical, then preposterous. However, it might just signal the inverse: the amount of expenditure necessary to interrupt the order of global capitalism. For this expenditure, according to Žižek, it is not enough to advocate a more radical democracy, but something more like a Russian revolution. As Žižek is fond of pointing out, it is instructive to look at Lenin’s example because Lenin transformed the indecisive nature of the revolution into a simple yes or no decision.

The inevitable criticism is, however, that Žižek would have to acknowledge that September 11 constituted an act and that there is no way to distinguish between properly leftist acts and reactionary acts. But for Žižek, as far as I can tell, the difference is in the implications for the symbolic order. It is clear that the intent of the acts of September 11 were not to interrupt the symbolic order, but to appeal to this order, to the war that apparently both sides were waiting for. We might say the war had already started (such as the attacks on military targets in the Middle East), but it needed a formal “declaration.”

The notion of the act takes on a new dimension when opposed to the theorists of the radical democratic multitude. That is, through Žižek’s criticisms, a divide opens between the two sides: Žižek and the theorists of the act (including, I think, Alain Badiou and Alenka Župancic) on one, and the theorists of multitude on the other. We have already explicated the act above as the transgression of the impossible, but for some, the act is not as primary as the importance of radical democratic subjectivity

(the multitude, in Hardt and Negri's sense).¹¹ The basic hypothesis of Hardt and Negri is that a radically democratic subject is emerging, and when there are acts, they can be guaranteed by this form of subjectivity. This is the reverse of Žižek, where the act engenders its own subject because the act has no guarantee (it is assumed by the subject that arises in the act). In fact, the act is possible because the big Other of the symbolic order can neither guarantee it nor prevent it (which is why, strictly speaking, the act was never impossible).

Žižek also supplies an additional criticism towards those who advocate a more radical democracy. Their position hinges on the idea that radical democracy can inspire its own desirability, a leftist passion to counter rightist ideology. However, for Žižek, the problem is not a lack of passion but a structural problem of administrative democracy. For Žižek, the democratic subject is what Lacanians would call the "barred subject," symbolized as $\$$. He quotes Jacques-Alain Miller:

democracy as empty place means: the subject of democracy is a barred subject. Our limited algebra enables us to grasp immediately that this leaves out the small *a* [the *object a*, the object of desire]. That is to say: everything that hinges on the particularity of enjoyment. We are told: once the empty place is there, everybody, if he respects the law, can bring in his traditions and his values. However, what we know is that, in actual fact, the more democracy is empty, the more it is a desert of enjoyment.¹²

In other words, the subject of democracy, that is, the empty space of democracy prevents passionate engagement within the democratic frame, *and* it structurally produces apparently "pathological" fundamentalisms."¹³ Because of this, for Žižek, radical democrats are wrong in attributing the lack of passion to an uninspired left. It is a structural feature of democracy itself.

Therefore, the emphasis on a new form of subjectivity (the multitude) that could take the helm of production is flawed. An

increase in the quantity of participants guarantees neither the new form, nor the structural transformations that, according to Zizek, are necessary. I might add that this can be seen in Hardt and Negri's theoretical division between biopower and the biopolitical, the former being the power over production, the latter the creative potential of the multitude (this interpretation of the two terms does not have a basis in Michel Foucault's work).¹⁴ Hardt and Negri are free to innovate, but this reveals a fundamental ambiguity: are they saying that the multitude should take the helm of biopower for its own ends (re-territorialize biopolitical production) or bring the structural change that ends biopolitical production (this seems closer to Giorgio Agamben)?¹⁵ To return to Zizek, this problem is mirrored in the conception of the multitude. As he states,

The fashionable notion of the "multitude" is insufficient precisely in so far as it cuts across this divide: there is a multitude within the system and a multitude of those excluded, and simply to encompass them both within the scope of the same notion amounts to the same obscenity as equating starvation with dieting.¹⁶

The fundamental choice that Zizek would put to the theorists of the multitude is this: either quantity (the de- and re-territorialization of capital or democracy) or quality (a new form of de- and re-territorialization.)¹⁷

While these criticisms of the theorists of a more radical democracy are pertinent, this book is ambiguous in what could take place after the act (this is their primary accusation against Zizek as well).¹⁸ However, I find that the only way Zizek can be consistent is by maintaining this ambiguity. It would be strange indeed if Zizek argued as he did, and then in the end stated that we must rely on democratic means. Instead, Zizek gives an answer that many would rather not hear: democracy is only one means in the struggle against capitalism, and he does not shy away from the suggestion of "ethical violence" (while this category is

rather broad, we can see why Lenin remains one of Zizek's examples).

However, another important question is, can democracy be, in Lacanian terms, encapsulated by the "barred subject," the \$ in Lacanian symbolization? As Lacanians know, the \$ in itself can take on various meanings, but it typically represents the human subject "crossed (out)" by the symbolic order (language). That is, the subject finds itself already constituted by the symbolic order. Therefore the "barred subject" is one of the basic elements of Lacanian theory, often utilized in more complex mathemes to account for various structural features of the symbolic order (for instance, Appendix II talks about some of these in Lacan's "four discourses"). In turn, while the criticisms of the notions of the multitude and democracy are definitely relevant, I think it takes more conceptually than just the "barred subject" to account for the problems of democracy. In a way, it is correct to account for the "empty democratic subject" with \$, but we still must tie it to its structural counterparts: enjoyment, the reactionary fundamentalisms, and the unwritten rules that prevent any radical change.

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Notes

¹ Slavoj Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), 19.

² Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 7.

³ Apparently, Powell provided an analogy between Iraq and Pottery Barn: "You break it, you own it." A quick search on the Internet reveals that Pottery Barn lacks such a rule. "This is very, very far from a policy of ours," said Leigh Oshirak, public relations director for the brand. "In the rare instance that something is broken in the store, it's written off

as a loss.” In this case, the analogy is even more pertinent: “Well you Americans did break it, but we will absorb the loss.” Quoted in Helen Huntley, “Rule that isn’t its Rule Upsets Pottery Barn,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 April 2004, available online at http://www.sptimes.com/2004/04/20/Business/Rule_that_isn_t_its_r.shtml (last accessed April 2005).

⁴ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 68.

⁵ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 69.

⁶ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 69. It is worth pointing out that Zizek’s book was published before the election in November 2004.

⁷ Interestingly enough, this continues to play to the Republicans. The public at large just seems to be noticing that this “new era” of the war on terror can be used to curtail all sorts of civil liberties, except those “granted” by the Second Amendment. Again, the point around election time isn’t what the particular politician *has* done, but what it *appears* they have done.

⁸ Quoted in Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 79.

⁹ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 80.

¹⁰ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 114.

¹¹ Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). It is worth noting that Zizek spends most of his time criticizing Laclau, but I think that in many cases Hardt and Negri can also be seen as a potential target.

¹² Quoted in Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 111.

¹³ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 111.

¹⁴ Hardt and Negri tell us: “Biopower stands above society, transcendent, as a sovereign authority and imposes its order. Biopolitical production, in contrast, is immanent to society and creates social relationships and forms through collaborative forms of labor” (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 94–95).

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181–88.

¹⁶ Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 86.

¹⁷ Cf. Zizek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 72–74.

¹⁸ Hardt and Negri resort to a footnote: “It is unclear in Slavoj Zizek’s provocative book *Repeating Lenin* whether he is advocating repeating, as we are, the democratic goals of Lenin’s project without the vanguard leadership of the Bolshevik Party or whether he is, on the contrary, advocating just such an elitist form of political leadership” (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 404, n. 132).