
Did Somebody Evade Totalitarianism? On the Intellectual Escapism of Slavoj Žižek

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For those who admire Slavoj Žižek, his work represents a liberation from ideas and practices that control and manipulate us. To those put off by his presentation and skeptical of his claims, on the contrary, Žižek is not associated with any advance in knowledge, and, if anything, he illustrates the problems with intellectual faddishness and academics who cling to it. This author belongs to the second group. I contend that Žižek does not deliver the insights that he repeatedly promises. I propose to subject one of his works *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* to close examination. I see value in such effort not because of the specific content of any argument that Žižek makes about totalitarianism, for Žižek adopts strategies that prevent him from really addressing the topic. Rather, the book deserves attention because an interesting cautionary tale emerges from his basic stance toward his readers, his material, and himself. His presumed break with the supposedly befogged and enchained world of “standard” academia reveals a certain kind of conceit. The latter is not only inappropriate, but it also serves to isolate Žižek, keeping him from the intellectual engagement and self-awareness that philosophical liberation requires. This article is about how Žižek distorts his material and misrepresents himself.

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Its goal is to understand the logic of a kind of pseudo engagement and reflect on the implications of work such as this for understanding totalitarianism and our culture of learning in general.

Introduction

Slavoj Žižek occupies a dual world. He is liberated and imprisoned at the same time.¹ On the one hand, for those involved in cultural studies and “theory”—broadly defined to mean a meta-critical commentary on all significant aspects of human life from philosophy and mass media to politics and pop culture—Žižek is an astounding phenomenon. A Slovene, born in 1949 in the former Yugoslavia, Žižek went from the obscurity of being an unknown left-leaning scholar interested in Lacanian psychoanalysis to being the celebrated author of numerous books in English (and other languages) about a dizzying range of provocative intellectual themes. The prestige this has brought has won him appointment as the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in London and visiting positions at the University of Chicago, Columbia, Princeton and more. Žižek, the celebrity, seems to be the very model of an engaged intellectual. Eschewing the stuffiness and pedantry of the academic ivory tower, he takes up major issues of our day, proudly proclaiming that his philosophical approach enables him to shed light on the unexamined links, nodes and nexuses of our ultramodern world.

The contrast between Žižek and other philosophical figures should be emphasized. Žižek does not appear constrained by the cautious and professionalized timorousness that can blunt the work of many scholarly authors. But at the same time—adding to his popularity—Žižek continually refers to an array of formi-

¹ The impetus for this essay comes from an exchange found in the pages of the Spring 2003 issue of *Critical Inquiry*. Responding to a criticism made by Geoffrey Galt Harpham that he was a “symptom of the academic West” (p. 485), Žižek was not satisfied and demanded further to know of what he was a symptom. The rather heated exchange between them raised many discussion-worthy ideas. However, I felt Žižek’s question could have been answered more directly: Žižek may not be a symptom of anything, but the defensiveness he displayed in the face of such an admiring critic—Harpham had called him “the most extraordinary scholarly mind of his generation” (p. 468)—showed a timidity on his part that led me to try to state more directly the objections to Žižek. See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Doing the Impossible: Slavoj Žižek and the End of Knowledge,” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2003), 453-85, Žižek’s rejoinder, “A Symptom—of What?” 486-503, and Harpham’s “Response to Slavoj Žižek,” 504-07.

dable and rigorous thinkers. (Hegel, Marx and Lacan are only the top of the list.) He also writes for a wide audience and fully displays his humor. As his expositor Tony Myers puts it, Žižek is “no ordinary philosopher, for he thinks and writes in such a recklessly entertaining fashion, he constantly risks making philosophy enjoyable.” Thus, “swiveling on his heels, he berates the political apathy of contemporary life in one moment, jokes about the man who thinks he will be eaten by a chicken in the next, then explains the philosophical realism of Keanu Reeves in *Speed*, exposes the philosophical basis of Viagra, and finishes up with a disclosure of the paradoxical value of Christianity to Marxism.”² Such high-spirited philosophizing has earned Žižek much fame and perhaps envy from those more inhibited and constrained.

On the other hand—and this is the crux of this essay—we should not assess a person on the basis of how he presents himself or how he is portrayed by others. There is little reason to call Žižek an engaged intellectual, if by “engaged” we mean someone who challenges his audience with uncomfortable truths and urgently needed insights. Indeed, one who takes the trouble to wade through the verbiage finds that there is about Žižek’s work something bland and undemanding. He squanders the opportunities for radical transformation that he purportedly desires. To support this thesis and argue that that he propounds a series of timid evasions, I will examine a single volume by Žižek: *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion*.³

Promises Made But Not Kept

Focusing on this particular work is a helpful way to begin a critical discussion of Žižek, because the volume on *Totalitarianism* exemplifies the kind of heady promises that Žižek makes.⁴ An

² Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* in the series, *Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis) Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), henceforth referred to as “*Totalitarianism*.” It should be noted that in his *Critical Inquiry* article (p. 473), Harpham called this work a “remarkable tour de force.”

⁴ Žižek first came to attention with his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). Since then he has published prolifically, whole books as well as journalistic essays. Although some primary themes and topics are visited and revisited throughout Žižek’s work, he does not present a “system,” and his *Totalitarianism* can be read on its own. For general overviews of Žižek, see Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*

iconoclastic intellectual like Žižek is right to take up the subject. The idea of totalitarianism deserves a fresh consideration by thinking people who free us of the deformations of slogans or dogma. Moreover, as Žižek himself rightly points out, our understanding of totalitarianism colors much more than our views of the Hitler and Stalin era. This “notion” not only shapes but also potentially damages our approach to social and political engagement in the present. Žižek, as a purportedly autonomous, free-standing thinker, worries about the misuse of the idea of totalitarianism both on the right and the left and announces that “the contention of this book is . . . that the notion of ‘totalitarianism,’ far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking.”⁵ The italics in the preceding quote are Žižek’s own, and they show the extent of his ambition. He will “intervene” in the current climate of opinion and restore to us the necessary practice of thinking.

Understanding of totalitarianism shapes social and political engagement.

These words deserve to be taken at face value. Žižek asserts that currently “reference to the ‘totalitarian’ threat sustains a kind of *Denkverbot* (prohibition against thinking).” The prohibition imposed by invoking the specter of totalitarianism is not only employed by the right against those who would “seriously challenge the existing order,” but also, according to Žižek, by the “postmodern deconstructionist Left.” Hence, if Žižek were to succeed in his argument, his autonomous critique would deserve the highest praise. If, however, we discover that, despite his claims, he does not show what is wrong with the idea of totalitarianism, the problem is not simply that he is mistaken, wrongheaded, or under the influence of a false ideology. It is that he runs away from his own claims, which means that his work exhibits escapism.

To put this observation in another way: Žižek not only promises to liberate our thought; his uninhibited and unconventional writing style is also meant to demonstrate of what one is capable if one studies totalitarianism from a position above the complacencies and conformities that confine so many others. Even the name *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* has an impish ring. It is derived from

in the *Routledge Critical Thinkers Series* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁵ *Totalitarianism*, 3.

a TV commercial and applied to a serious topic. In his opening gambit, Žižek uses a statement from a tea package to derive a lesson about political theory, and for all the two hundred fifty some pages that follow, the reader is exposed to Žižek's "pyrotechnics," as he combines high and popular cultures, seriousness and humor. If it could be shown that this un-academic style did in fact lead to intellectual breakthroughs, Žižek would have to be commended for his bravery. It is daring to speak to scholars in language they deem improper. However, if his style actually impedes any understanding of his ostensible meaning—that it is hardly the "joyful science" whereby an intellectual maestro deftly and lightly takes us from breathtaking insight to breathtaking insight—then Žižek deserves a look for a different reason, namely that his style is of a piece with his substance. Both work to obviate a confrontation with realities that matter.

The most pressing issue is not that of reputation, but that of standards in scholarly argument. My main claim is that Žižek's escapism is appealing (to those who like it) because it masquerades as boldness and depth. I do not base this claim on psychological speculation about Žižek's presumed motivations or on criticism of him as a person. It is based on taking him at his own word as someone ready and able to voice uncomfortable truths about the use and misuse of the concept of totalitarianism. If it can be shown that he uses evasive strategies to avoid any substantive confrontation with his chosen topic, it is fair to claim that the thesis does not reflect a bias against Žižek, but a concern for the dangers of intellectual escapism. If someone as seemingly intrepid as Žižek can "wall himself off," it is instructive for all of us to reflect on why this should be. To this end, I will turn to the first stratagem of Žižek's discussion of totalitarianism, the dubious use of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Interdisciplinary or Undisciplined?

One of the superlatives that Žižek has attracted is to be the "most interdisciplinary thinker to emerge in recent years."⁶ Thinking about "interdisciplinarity" is a good place to begin a critique of *Totalitarianism*, for one of its salient features is that it does not confine itself to the topics and themes normally associated with to-

⁶ Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press: 2003), 1.

talitarianism. It alludes to a wide variety of broad issues from the humanities, social sciences and elsewhere. The opening fifty-page chapter is called “The Myth and its Vicissitudes.” It is not entirely clear whether the “myth” does or does not refer to totalitarianism, since the chapter treats the issue of representation—itsself very broadly defined—and includes some disquisitions on Hamlet, Christ, and Oedipus.

Someone might protest that a discussion of totalitarianism requires a sharper focus or simply ask how these wide-ranging discussions illuminate the concept of a “prohibition against thinking,” but from the start Žižek insulates himself from any criticism of his chosen methodology:

This book does not aim to provide yet another systematic exposition of the notion of totalitarianism. Rather, it tries to follow the dialectical movement from one particular content of the universal notion to another, the movement constitutive of what Hegel called concrete universality.⁷

Here we begin to notice Žižek’s evasiveness and timidity. His book is anything but Hegelian in that Hegel tries (perhaps to a fault) to demonstrate why one idea necessarily follows from a careful consideration of the limitations of another. Hegel’s conception of “dialectical movement” as well as concepts like “universal notion” or “concrete universality” all presuppose a willingness to examine a notion or idea in depth: that is, until it shows a limitation that requires the introduction of another concept, and so on. Hegel’s greatness (or notoriety) as a philosopher lies in his unswerving willingness to examine concepts like “being,” “force,” “consciousness,” “civil society,” etc., until reaching (what he considered to be) their logical conclusion, at which time they must be dialectically transcended (*aufgehoben*) into another, more encompassing and “universal” concept.⁸ If Žižek wanted to “follow the dialectal content” of the idea of totalitarianism, he would have to provide “yet another” systematic exposition of the notion, if only to guide the reader to its constructive “abolition.”

Misappropriating Hegel.

To be sure, Žižek could say that he is not *that* kind of Hegelian, and no one should deplore the fact that he does not slavishly imitate Hegel’s style. However, it needs to be recognized that

⁷ *Totalitarianism*, 4.

⁸ A good exposition of Hegel in this regard is Walter Kaufmann’s *Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), especially 188-97.

*Arbitrariness
as guiding
method.*

instead of being an “interdisciplinary philosopher” or “playfully Hegelian,” Žižek elevates the most un-Hegelian idea of all, arbitrariness, to be his guiding method. Throughout a long book he brings up dozens of topics without providing any coherent explanation of why he chooses to discuss one topic rather than another. Thus, even someone sympathetic to a specific opinion can never be entirely sure whether Žižek will stand by his own case, or will simply drop it as he flits to another topic. In addition, though he quotes and makes allusions and references to a wide variety of well-known authors and canonical works, he does not provide reasons for his views of the cited texts. Rather, he makes highly tendentious assertions and expects his readers to submit to what are supposed to be apodictic statements. Should they be skeptical, they can be told that Žižek is above “standard” treatments and that he is following a dialectic.⁹

Avoiding Engagement with Evidence

As an example of the method of arbitrariness, consider Žižek’s discussion of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. There is no clear reason why Žižek had to take up this topic, but he does so in a few scattered paragraphs at the end of his book. His treatment of this issue here is characteristic of the way in which he approached what came before, illustrating how “following dialectical movement” works to avoid engagement. The specific material at issue is a television debate between a Serb and an Albanian, moderated by an Austrian pacifist. Although the Serb and Albanian engaged in verbal battle, the bulk of Žižek’s criticism is directed against the moderator, who is upbraided for taking “all too seriously the babble about hundred-year-old ethnic myths and passions.” He “did not see that the Serbs and the Albanians themselves, far from

⁹ If pressed on Hegel, Žižek tends to claim that he draws on the provenance of Jacques Lacan. Even this can be disputed (see the work of Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* [London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 2004]), but since Hegel and Lacan, as well as a battery of other writers invoked by Žižek as forerunners, typically have so many ambiguous and obscure passages in their work that it is always possible to claim some level of affinity with them, it rapidly becomes apparent that Žižek is only interested in these writers to the extent that he can use them for his own ends. Therefore, instead of debating the question of whether we can “only approach” Žižek via Hegel or Lacan or anyone else, what really needs to be done is to consider whether this endless invocation adds anything to the discussion. My sense is that it does not.

being 'caught' in these myths, manipulate them."¹⁰ Žižek goes on to declare that a look exchanged between the Serb and the Albanian as the Austrian was talking showed that they viewed him as a racist. And, indeed, he was a racist, according to Žižek. To support this assertion, Žižek brings up an instance in which Robespierre declared to the National Assembly that anyone who showed fear at being denounced as a traitor must, therefore, be one. Then, without explaining why this statement is relevant, Žižek writes:

Mutatis Mutandis, I am tempted to claim: if anyone who reads was just a tiny little bit embarrassed about my thesis that the exchange of glances between the Serb and the Kosovar offers a glimmer of hope, if he is just a tiny little bit uneasy about my apparent mocking of the poor benevolent pacifist, *this uneasiness is an irrefutable proof that he is a racist.*¹¹

It would be insulting to anyone's intelligence to go into why Žižek's claim does not constitute "irrefutable proof." Immediately upon making this accusation Žižek writes, "This conveniently brings us to Austria," whereupon he launches into another topic. The entire book follows this pattern. When Žižek should make himself clear, he almost always "conveniently" starts talking about something else.

*Flitting
conveniently
from topic to
topic.*

There is no shortage in academia of writers who go to the opposite extreme, compiling large amounts of minutiae but without offering any definite interpretation. Žižek treats the reader very differently. When he labels a glib assertion "a thesis" and uses unsupported personal invective, he makes it impossible to think along with him or learn from him. Readers who resist the flow of what is being presented and try to think seriously about the validity of Žižek's statements find themselves in something of a trap. If they agree with him, they accept doubtful and sometimes demeaning claims. If they disagree, they do not have any clear thread of evidence against which to protest. They could try to follow all of Žižek's leaps as he moves from one assertion to another, but even if someone were to demonstrate that something is wrong with every paragraph of *Totalitarianism*, Žižek, or a defender, could always claim that the real key to what he is saying lies elsewhere, in another book or another theoretical perspective. A reader must either submit, accepting what Žižek says uncritically, or give up

¹⁰ *Totalitarianism*, 235.

¹¹ *Totalitarianism*, 236.

seeking any engagement with the book.

What accounts for Žižek's unusual writing method? Interestingly, those in the publicity department at his publishers took up this very question, and the answer they provided points at the very least to some version of timidity on Žižek's part. Perhaps fearing that the invocation of Hegel would not spark sufficient sales, the team responsible for putting together the book's jacket cover sought to link Žižek's method of treating totalitarianism to that of another philosophical authority, namely Wittgenstein. On the inside cover we read that, "instead of providing yet another systematic exposition of the history of this notion . . . Slavoj Žižek here addresses totalitarianism in a Wittgensteinian way, as a cobweb of family resemblances." If "copy" such as this helps to sell books, we can see why it was written. Even publishers on the left must respond to the market. Yet it is wrong to say that Žižek explores totalitarianism in a "Wittgensteinian" way. Wittgenstein hated thinking in terms of labels. One can imagine him finding much that is unsound in the academic use of "totalitarianism," but it defies credibility to think that Wittgenstein would consider Žižek's prose an advance in lucidity and aptness or a liberation from the bewitchment of language.¹² Žižek associates himself with one famous figure after another, continually distracting attention from what he is actually saying

Let us think back to what started the charge of racism: Žižek's assertion that the Austrian pacifist did not understand that Serbs and Albanians manipulate nationalist myths rather than being caught in them. If we step step away from Žižek for a moment and think about how the complex and violent conflicts in former Yugoslavia have been typically understood, particularly by scholars, we see that there is nothing new or fresh in the suggestion that national myths are manipulated. It is a commonplace.¹³ There is a challenging debate on when and how these myths have been

¹² For a good account of Wittgenstein and why Žižek's language games are quite different from his, see William Warren Bartley III, *Wittgenstein* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1973), 136-80. For an account of Wittgenstein's passion for exactitude, see David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten Minute Argument between Two Great Philosophers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 198-201.

¹³ The bibliography in Carole Rogel's *The Breakup of Yugoslavia and its Aftermath* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press: 2004, 2nd ed.) lists a large number of works that document the manipulation of political myth.

manipulated, but Žižek adds no evidence or argument to the debate. The notion that there was some hope in the glance between the Serb and Albanian only deflects attention from the paucity of Žižek's insight. Calling the Austrian and the reader racist only serves to conceal the shallowness of Žižek's point. Why should someone manipulating myths not be caught in them as well and vice versa? Here we can state the main claim: someone confident in his insights would not need to write so vaguely and obscurely or jump so erratically among topics. It is not a bold, but a timid, writer who takes refuge in such evasions.

If what I have just argued is in fact true, we may ask if it makes sense to proceed any further. After all, adherents of Žižek are unlikely to concede to any criticism against him, and those who are already impatient with Žižek probably do not need to hear any more about the shortcomings of his approach. However, there are at least two good reasons for taking a closer look at *Totalitarianism*. First, it is not fair simply to assert that a few examples stand for the whole. It needs to be shown that when Žižek discusses totalitarianism his specific arguments do not rise above arbitrariness and banality. In addition, Žižek likes to treat themes of current interest and wide debate, and totalitarianism is one. If he did not attract overflow audiences to his lectures, have movies made about him, etc., little would be gained from taking issue with him. But Žižek has energy, ambition, flamboyance, and drive, and what he says makes a difference. Just how and why he makes a difference concerning the subject of totalitarianism merits further examination.

As might be expected, Žižek treats totalitarianism by linking political phenomena to philosophical and literary texts, and, as might also be expected, he allows himself the liberty (or caprice) to combine and reconfigure all of these at will. A specific message does emerge from his exposition, albeit one not really commensurate with an "intervention" against misuse of the term "totalitarianism." Žižek borrows the idea of "intervention" from psychoanalysis, alluding to the process whereby the analyst interrupts the patient's stream of associations in order to draw attention to what is considered an unconscious or unacknowledged pattern. It is invigorating to think that someone could do the same to our public political discourse: stop us and make us think more carefully and reflectively. Had Žižek intervened in this fashion he would have performed quite a service, whether his political and social views

were comforting to his broader readership or not. However, what Žižek presents as interventions can more accurately be labeled “interdictions,” and as authoritarian ones at that. Think what you may about Freudianism, the therapist is not supposed to shut patients up, compelling them to accept given interpretations without an opportunity to object or reflect further. Yet this is what Žižek does. Offering little argument or evidence, he demands that readers accept his point of view.

An example will illustrate. One of Žižek’s points is that Sophocles’ protagonist Antigone illuminates his own ideas about totalitarianism. She is a “proto-totalitarian” figure, even though most people tend not to think of her that way. The context is as follows. As part of an extended discussion of “melancholy and the act,” Žižek introduces Antigone and asks whether she can be considered a “proto-totalitarian figure.”¹⁴ The fact that the issue is phrased as a question is something of a dodge because, while Žižek may not wish to be pinned down in the affirmative, he presents no arguments against this claim and several explicit statements to the effect that he does incline to this point of view. The gist of the matter is that he regards Antigone as exemplifying “unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice.”¹⁵ Žižek seems to mean that Antigone does not justify her disobedience by invoking the collective good of the polis. Instead of making her a “proto-libertarian,” or something similar, Žižek appears to conclude that Antigone cannot justify her disruptive behavior in any way at all. In a rhetorical question, he asks:

To put it in slightly ironic terms—is not Antigone the anti-Habermasian *par excellence*? No dialogue, no attempt to convince Creon of the good reasons for her acts through rational arguments, just blind insistence on her rights. . . . If anything, the so-called ‘arguments’ are on Creon’s side (the burial of Polynices would stir up public unrest, etc.), while Antigone’s counterpoint is ultimately the tautological insistence: ‘Ok, you can say whatever you like, it won’t change anything. I’m sticking to my decision!’¹⁶

Moving briefly away from Žižek and thinking about Antigone, we note that Žižek’s authoritarianism presents a sadly missed op-

¹⁴ *Totalitarianism*, 157.

¹⁵ *Totalitarianism*, 157.

¹⁶ *Totalitarianism*, 158. The ellipsis in this quote is Žižek’s. Also, he makes frequent use of italics and inverted commas in his writing. Every time these appear, they are Žižek’s, never mine.

portunity. Sophocles' character continues to fascinate, not least because there is something troublingly opaque about the "love" and "justice" and "glory" she presents as her motivations.¹⁷ If Žižek had wanted to say that there is an inveterate hostility to clarity and disclosure in the practice of totalitarianism, though this would not be a particularly original idea,¹⁸ it would be interesting to consider reversing the picture of Antigone as an early proponent of individual right against the power of the state, and to see her as covertly akin to Medea, terrifying in her unwillingness to compromise. But this is not what Žižek proposes. Rather, he presents a caricature of Antigone's self-conception that is wholly implausible. Sophocles went to some length to show that Antigone *did* care what others think, but that her conception of higher duty compelled her to act otherwise. If Žižek wants us to see the value in understanding Antigone as the "anti-Habermasian *par excellence*," he should have explained why a tragedy about irreconcilable conflict should be viewed through the lens of Habermas's communicative ethics. That would have enabled others to discuss the issue. If Žižek had given some reason for saying that Antigone responds to Creon with "tautological insistence" rather than arguments, the reader would have some grounds for reconsidering the matter. But Žižek appears to want the reader to take his word for it. Again a timid insecurity is visible beneath the aggression. Žižek cannot justify his using the term "totalitarianism" in one way rather than another, so he presents the readers with discussion-closing bombast and bluster.

*Insecurity
masked by
bombast and
bluster.*

¹⁷ A key passage is Antigone's speech to Creon in lines 567-75. However, the opening discussion between Antigone and Ismene gives a full picture of her articulateness and concern for communicating her motivations. None of this, of course, is to say that Antigone should be held up as a model of thoughtful and rational discussion. In an article for *Humanitas*, Patricia M. Lines points out that presuming that Antigone has "won" her arguments prevents us from fully confronting the indictment of intellectual hubris in the play. This particular argument is certainly worth discussing. However, Žižek does not really make this case, and draws no solid connection between Sophocles and totalitarianism. See Patricia M. Lines, "Antigone's Flaw" in *Humanitas*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1999.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt elaborated upon it in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1951), and other scholars in the 1930s and 1940s noticed it as well.

Politics and Dictators

Žižek's evasive tactic does have a political edge. He openly, and this time clearly, advocates a view popular with thinkers on the left.

The 'return to ethics' in today's political philosophy shamefully exploits the horrors of Gulag or Holocaust as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious engagement. In this way, conformist liberal scoundrels can find hypocritical satisfaction in their defense of the existing order: they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of 'totalitarianism.'¹⁹

Probably for the reason that he has set up a straw man, Žižek does not specify any individuals who denounce *every* attempt to "change things" as resulting in totalitarianism. Moreover, he makes his task quite easy by putting the word totalitarianism in quotes, dodging the question of whether today totalitarianism is in fact only a "ghost." Nevertheless, the sentence in question is one of the most interesting in the book. It shows that Žižek has some ambition to do what an iconoclastic thinker is supposed to do: make people uncomfortable with their definition of reality.

Yet of all the targets delineated in this book—ranging from those seeing the Holocaust as the "ultimate, absolute crime, which cannot be analyzed in terms of concrete political analysis"²⁰ to postmodernists who see totalitarianism as "grounded in phallogocentric metaphysical closure"²¹—none is likely to feel touched by Žižek's critique, let alone be made uncomfortable by it. This is not due to their stubbornness, or conformism, but to Žižek's being unable to identify actual political and intellectual opponents. The imprecision of his assault on "scoundrels" characterizes his arguments in general. As a result, his assertions about Hitler, Stalin, et al. have a solipsistic quality that expresses Žižek's own resentment and wishful thinking more than a new approach to totalitarianism or the undoing of *Denkverbot*.

To show that this is the case, I consider Žižek's treatment of Hitler and Stalin. In a section called "Hitler as Ironist?" Žižek promises to illustrate "*what was in Adolph Hitler's mind when he was plan-*

¹⁹ *Totalitarianism*, 61.

²⁰ *Totalitarianism*, 4.

²¹ *Totalitarianism*, 5.

ning and committing his heinous crimes.”²² In doing so, he also reveals how he differs from others who study Hitler and the Holocaust, a difference that has little to do with what he wants to show. Again, Žižek’s main conclusion is a repetition of a commonplace, namely the contention found in some left-wing circles that the Holocaust’s “elevation into the abysmal absolute Evil . . . is the political pact of aggressive Zionists and Western Rightist anti-Semites at the expense of today’s radical political possibilities.”²³ Exhibiting the same timidity as before, Žižek does not provide any specific evidence of this pact and what radical possibilities it suppressed. Thus, it is impossible to know what he really means by this claim. What we can discern is that Žižek does not see much of value in the work of those who advance historical interpretations of Hitler and the Holocaust. The manner in which he here treats other writers’ ideas is distinctively his.

All historical interpretations of Hitler discounted.

In effect, this means that Žižek assails anyone who proposes and defends any hypothesis about Hitler. Although willing to list what he calls a few “naive hypotheses” about Hitler’s motivation, he never explains how these general statements add to the vast literature on the Nazis. Others might call this hedging or evasiveness, but Žižek presents the omission as an intellectual virtue. Rather than make good on his promise to explain the impetus behind Nazism and the Holocaust, he suggests that efforts of this sort are illegitimate and that a refusal to engage in them should be considered virtuous. Although Žižek has a reputation for making jokes, this particular *volte-face* does not seem to be one of them. Instead, he solemnly declares that the “danger of playing such games of ‘what was going on in Hitler’s mind’ . . . is that they come dangerously close to what Lacan called the ‘temptation of the sacrifice’—nowhere is it more urgent to resist this temptation than apropos of the Holocaust.”²⁴ He then explains what he takes this sacrifice to be. What he writes is unclear, but the invitation to look down on others who have made the “sacrificial gesture” is manifest:

The sacrificial gesture does not simply aim at some profitable exchange with the Other to whom we sacrifice: its more basic aim is, rather, to ascertain that there is some Other out there who is able to reply (or not) to our sacrificial entries. Even if the Other does not grant my wish, I can at least be sure that there is an Other who next

²² *Totalitarianism*, 61 (italics in the original).

²³ *Totalitarianism*, 68 (italics in the original).

²⁴ *Totalitarianism*., 64.

time, maybe, will respond differently.²⁵

In other words, writers who stand by their evidence and are not evasive are, in actuality, motivated by a psychological fantasy.

Lest someone think that this characterization is unfair to Žižek, it is best to quote him, as he goes on to scorn anyone who has tried to write the history of this matter:

It is against this background that one should read the desperate need of the Holocaust historians to isolate a determinate cause, or read some meaning into the Holocaust: when they seek some 'perverse' pathology in Hitler's pathology, what they are actually afraid of is that they will find nothing—that Hitler on the private, intimate level, was a person just like any other—such a result makes his monstrous crimes even more horrifying and uncanny. And, along these lines, when researchers desperately seek a secret meaning of the Holocaust, anything (including heretically asserting that God himself is diabolical) is better than acknowledging that an ethical catastrophe of such proportions could have occurred without a purpose, just as a blind effect.²⁶

Failure "lied into something meritorious."

Even if we were to regard as a new insight the familiar observation that domestically Hitler often behaved normally, we would be left with the problem of why these historians are "desperate" and why they "desperately seek a secret meaning of the Holocaust." Clearly, some sort of psychological or philosophical explanation is necessary, but since Žižek provides no evidence at all for what he asserts, such an analysis may be more fruitfully applied to Žižek himself. He seems to have a "desperate" need to depreciate the efforts of those who accomplished something that he did not. Žižek asks us to understand not doing something as a virtue. He is resentful in the way that Nietzsche used the term: is an ungenerous reactor to the strength of others, the weakness of not accomplishing something being "lied into something meritorious."²⁷

It is hardly plausible that historians would agree that they are looking for single, determinate causes in the way that Žižek asserts. They would also reject the notion that, if a historical horror did not have a single cause, it must, therefore, have occurred as a "blind effect" and that the only ones who won't admit to this are the desperate and fearful. Yet this is how Žižek tries to justify his own

²⁵ *Totalitarianism*, 64-65.

²⁶ *Totalitarianism*, 65.

²⁷ The phrases are taken from the first essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, sections 10 and 14, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989, first published in 1967), 37 and 47.

conclusions. If there is something illegitimate about efforts to find historical meaning in the Holocaust, Žižek need not go further in his inquiries about the meaning of totalitarianism. His assertions can stand without establishing their soundness. Should he be challenged, he can repeat damning speculations about the motivations of people he criticizes without asking whether he has presented the issue fairly. In sum, Žižek presents his unwillingness to make and defend a sustained argument of his own as a kind of strength. Only a person lacking confidence in his capacity to persuade would need to “debate” in this way. A secure writer, even if inveterately hostile to reigning views, does not need to deny or distort the achievements of others.

The Retreat to Wishes

As the avowed purpose of Žižek’s book is to intervene against misuse of the term “totalitarianism,” it may be objected that, despite the criticism leveled at him, he is achieving his goal. So what if Žižek does not really engage his subject matter, if what he says jars us into thinking more critically about totalitarianism? However, if we consider the cumulative impact of Žižek’s attempts at addressing totalitarianism, we discover that even this generous assessment lacks support. Žižek mottles our understanding of what totalitarianism has been in the past and how we might understand it in the present. Explaining why this is so—and why Žižek’s approach cannot help but produce garbled and tendentious political analysis—is the last issue to be taken up.

Žižek does have a discernible political stance toward one of the major controversies regarding totalitarianism, namely that the term should not be applied to Lenin’s revolution, even if, later, Stalin was a criminal. Once again, there is little new in Žižek’s understanding of the Soviet Union, just as his charge that “liberal democracy’s” real agenda in talking about totalitarianism is ideological anti-radicalism is frequently made by writers on the left. What deserves attention is Žižek’s version of this position. In a chapter on Stalinism called “When the Party Commits Suicide,” Žižek demonstrates “why even the darkest Stalinism harbours a redemptive dimension.”²⁸ It should be noted immediately that

*Locating
Stalinism’s
“redemptive
dimension.”*

²⁸ *Totalitarianism*, 88. Žižek draws his historical evidence about the impact of Stalinism almost exclusively from J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov’s volume, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-39* (New Haven:

in making this claim Žižek plays it very safe. Despite his stated disdain for public opinion, he takes pains to distance himself from the traditional left. He lambastes those who “pursue their well-paid academic careers in the West, while using the idealized Other (Cuba, Nicaragua, Tito’s Yugoslavia) as the stuff of their ideological dreams.”²⁹ In fact, Žižek spends so much time recounting the cruel effects on the Party of the 1937 “Great Purge” that one wonders why he opposes standard definitions of totalitarianism in the first place. (He mentions little of other Stalinist crimes, except to give a brief unanalyzed account of the death by freezing of 3,000 prisoners who mutinied while being transported on the steamship *Kim* in 1947.) This seems the right place to apply the standard definitions. Nevertheless, after a number of pages in which he provides a selective account of Stalin and Stalinist crimes, Žižek does get around to showing how he is different from other critics by explaining the “redemptive dimension” of Lenin’s revolution.

It turns out that this dimension exists less in the historical record than in the mind of the beholder. His ultimate conclusion about the whole matter is that, “precisely as Marxists we should have no fear in acknowledging that the purges under Stalinism were in a way more ‘irrational’ than Fascist violence: paradoxically, this very excess is an unmistakable sign that Stalinism, in contrast to Fascism, was the case of a perverted authentic revolution. In Fascism, even in Nazi Germany, it was possible to survive, to maintain the appearance of a ‘normal’ everyday life . . . while in the Stalinism of the late 1930’s no one was safe, *everyone* could be unexpectedly denounced, arrested and shot as a traitor.”³⁰ This last point is not news to anyone who has studied the regime. But Žižek senses that the first point, that this terror was an “unmistakable sign” that an authentic revolution had been accomplished earlier, requires at least some proof. He acknowledges that the “difficult task is to confront the radical ambiguity of Stalinist ideology which, even at its most ‘totalitarian,’ still exudes an emancipatory potential.”³¹ It seems as if, at last, he will confront his own “big Other” and try to

Yale University Press, 1999). This book narrows the perspective from a consideration of the Soviet Union to a consideration of the Party. Moreover, it is not a criticism of Getty and Naumov to say that this book should not be the only one relied upon concerning such a difficult subject.

²⁹ *Totalitarianism*, 95.

³⁰ *Totalitarianism*, 128.

³¹ *Totalitarianism*, 131.

persuade someone who might disagree with him.

But he does nothing of the sort. He solves his own problem by stopping any discussion of the Soviet history that he seemed about to analyze. He launches instead an account of a “memorable scene from a Soviet film about the civil war in 1919” that he had viewed when he was young.³² In the movie, a woman with a small child is put on trial by some Bolshevik fighters for being a spy. An old Bolshevik then says, “the sentence must be severe but just,” and when the woman and her son are sentenced to be “fully integrated into the Socialist collective” on account of their being “socially disadvantaged,” the old fighter agrees that the sentence is severe and just.³³ Žižek then adds the following very revealing commentary:

It is easy to claim, in a quick pseudo-Marxist way, that such scenes were simply the ideological legitimization of the most brutal terror. However, no matter how manipulative the scene is, no matter how contradicted it was by the arbitrary harshness of actual ‘revolutionary justice,’ it nonetheless provided the spectators with new ethical standards by which reality was to be measured—the shocking outcome of this exercise of the revolutionary justice, the unexpected rechanneling of ‘severity’ into severity toward social circumstances, and *generosity* toward people, cannot fail to produce a sublime effect.³⁴

It is actually easy to imagine many ways in which this scene fails to achieve a sublime effect. To label it propaganda is not necessarily “pseudo-Marxist” (and, even if it were, it would hardly prove the intended point wrong).

There is nothing new in Žižek’s resorting to *ad hominem* arguments against potential critics. What matters here is what is most important to him in critiquing the concept of totalitarianism. He builds what he considers a desirable radicalism on a retreat from the world about which one should be radical. He is angry at anyone, of whatever political stripe, whose notion of totalitarianism is not subject to his fantasy. In the case of Stalin, the “redemptive dimension” of the purges is found in the fact that Žižek wishes for such a redemption. This observation is not idle speculation. Here is how Žižek explains the true meaning of the movie scene that makes his case about the Soviet Union:

In short, what we have here is an exemplary case of what Lacan

³² *Totalitarianism*, 131.

³³ *Totalitarianism*, 131-32.

³⁴ *Totalitarianism*, 132.

*“More truth
in . . . appearance
than in
. . . reality.”*

called the ‘quilting point [point de caption], of an intervention that changes the coordinates of the very field of meaning: instead of pleading for generous tolerance against severe justice, the old Bolshevik *redefines the meaning of ‘severe justice’ in terms of excessive forgiveness and generosity.* Even if this appearance is deceptive, there is in a sense more truth in this appearance than in the harsh social reality that generated it.³⁵

This is a Žižekian way of saying “I once saw a movie. My interpretation of it confirmed what I wanted to believe in the first place. Therefore, I used my method of deploying obscure and contextless concepts to maintain (in a slippery way) that there is a ‘sense’ in which my claims contain ‘more truth’ than any view I oppose. Having settled the matter, I moved on.” This passage is emblematic because, for Žižek, the tendentious interpretation of a scene in a movie somehow trumps all the evidence that speaks against his wishes. He does not make any other attempt to defend his case. Remaining difficult questions about totalitarianism are simply left unengaged. Žižek retreats from the subject matter to his wishes. He makes much of his political and philosophical radicalism, but he flees from engagement with anyone else’s experience, seeking confirmation in nothing other than his own isolated, regressive and willful self.

Conclusion

We return to the question, “why bother?” Given that so much of Žižek’s writing does not acknowledge criticism, much less answer it, it is reasonable to assume that those favorable to Žižek will respond that his message is at a higher level than any argument leveled against him, and those who cannot or will not appreciate this larger message are incapable of judging its individual parts.³⁶ In

³⁵ *Totalitarianism*, 132.

³⁶ For this reason, I think that the favorable expository literature on Žižek deepens his isolation. Consider the way Terry Eagleton quotes Žižek in discussing how the idea of “destiny” can trivialize the understanding of tragedy: “Does not the term ‘tragedy,’ Žižek asks, “at least in its classical sense, still imply the logic of Fate, which is rendered ridiculous apropos the Holocaust? To say that the annihilation of the Jews obeyed a hidden Necessity of Fate is already to gentrify it.” Eagleton then adds, “Žižek is mistaken to assume that tragedy, even classical tragedy, invariably involves fate; but he is right to see that the notion can actually sanitize suffering, and Euripides is unlikely to have demurred.” Why credit Žižek with an insight at all, if one admits that he is wrong in his claim? Who has ever seriously tried to “gentrify” the Holocaust by saying that it probably has to do with one of the gods

other words, since the only ones likely to listen to the criticism are those already fed up with Žižek, why spend any time setting the critics straight? If Žižek had openly adopted the strategy of saying that his work is an occult science, inaccessible to the blind, there would be little point in taking issue with him, but this is not at all the way Žižek approaches his readers. Rather, his constant invocation of well-known thinkers and pressing themes sends the message that the scholarly public needs him. Žižek claims that his goal is to show how the concept of totalitarianism serves as a “stopgap” to thinking. If he does not keep this promise, it is worthwhile to inquire into the immediate and wider reasons for this failure. Žižek’s example raises the question of what a critical, engaged, and unconventional discussion of totalitarianism would actually entail.

To begin, it is hard to see how the arcane references to Sophocles, Lacan, Hegel, et al. add to the discussion. It would be valuable if Žižek or one of his defenders would explain. Also we have seen that the substance of Žižek’s political argument turns out to be a commonplace, a cliché, a propagandistic assertion. An engagement with Žižek might become interesting if he or someone else would show that indeed he is offering more than the shopworn notions that national identity in former Yugoslavia has been manipulated by politicians, that the “right” has misused the Holocaust to distract attention from the Palestinian situation, that Lenin was a genuine revolutionary, and so forth.

Yet all of this would be preliminary to considering the issue of intellectual escapism. Žižek’s star may already be fading in academia.³⁷ Criticism is coming even from left-leaning and/or “critical theory” circles. This criticism goes beyond taking issue with Žižek’s stance on particular subjects. It is common in what is said about Žižek the person to be deliberately wounding. Nevertheless—and he might appreciate this point—there is a sense in which Žižek is not the issue. Žižek might fall out of fashion only to be replaced by another writer who displays a similar escapist combination of timidity, resentment, and a solipsistic refusal to subject his wishes to the test of reality. In the end, it is most important to confront dubious intellectual needs to which Žižek is catering—

Critical confrontation with escapism needed.

being offended and that it goes to show that we should not try to evade the words of the oracle? Giving Žižek credit for victory over a straw man prevents engagement with the actual content of his words. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 126.

³⁷ See Assaf Sagiv, “The Magician of Ljubljana” in *Azure*, Autumn 2005, 114-54.

this in order to exorcize their escapism. Two such needs deserve particular mention:

Avoiding the unpleasant. There is no end of abstract talk about facing up to totalitarianism and thinking about the unthinkable, but actually confronting totalitarianism is difficult and painful. There is a strong temptation to escape real engagement. One reason is the horror of thinking concretely about the historical record of totalitarian regimes. Another reason is the awareness that misapplying the term today could do genuine harm in the real world. What to do then? One basic and elementary step would be to avoid glibness. Nothing that Žižek writes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* challenges the reader to think about the real terrors and dangers of the subject. People predisposed to believing that the true problem with totalitarianism is the misuse that “they” have made of the notion would be confirmed in this cheap and easy hypothesis by Žižek’s writing. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that part of Žižek’s appeal is that he only pretends to take up formidable subjects. Those shying away from really confronting totalitarianism may find Žižek pleasantly anodyne and reassuring. This avoidance is dangerous whoever the writer and whatever the form.

Avoiding sustained concentration. Žižek’s iconoclasm is not really at issue. If he had engaged any given subject matter long enough to do it justice, it would not have mattered that he refuses to identify with any single discipline, or that he fills his writing with jocular asides that other scholars will not, cannot, or dare not put in their work. One finds here a pattern of interlocking prejudices. Žižek breathes contempt for purveyors of “standard” academic discussion, but he excuses himself from providing real arguments. This stance makes it possible for scholars prone to pedantry or pettifoggery to claim that scholarship that avoids big questions but is marked by some stylistic innovation is superior to conventional scholarship. Yet Žižek’s flamboyance and ambition may potentially be his best characteristic. Would that he were flamboyant and ambitious enough to develop a thorough, sustained, and unconventional argument. It is not crotchety or ungenerous to expect a writer to stick to his own stated topic. It needs to be said that changing the subject before adequately addressing a question is a poisonous form of passive aggression. Žižek’s philosophical standards are very lax. He shows scant respect for the intellectual capacity of his readers. Academic iconoclasts who really want to overcome “stop-

gaps” in our thinking need to challenge us as readers. They cannot do so by emulating Žižek’s scattershot approach.

Appearances are often deceiving. People who make a big deal of their humility are sometimes anything but modest, and those who boast of their kindness are sometimes quite inconsiderate. Žižek promises “serious engagement” with the concept of totalitarianism, but he really avoids the subject.