

Interpreting the world

September 11, cultural criticism and the intellectual Left

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'Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.' How many times during the heyday of socialist activism in the 1970s was Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach rolled out to put overly reflective comrades back in their place? In fact, of course, even then one would have been hard-pressed to find a thinker – on the Left or elsewhere – brash enough to engage in anything so immodest as 'interpreting the world' under the auspices of philosophy. Interpreting the world is too tied up with politics and the arts and the contingencies of life – too tangled up in the world itself – to be considered a respectable activity by most Anglophone philosophers. Since 11 September 2001, however, the imperative to 'interpret the world' as a *condition* of changing it has reasserted itself with renewed clarity and vigour on the Left. Interpreting the world after September 11 (moving backwards through Thesis 11) promises a revival of an international political discourse of the Left.¹ But what is the philosophical shape of such world-interpretation to be? More broadly, is there a specifically philosophical contribution to be made to the interpretation of geopolitical events – in terms of world history, perhaps?

At one level, the question appears otiose. After all, do we really need sophisticated theory to detect in the response of the US state to September 11 the rapid seizure of an opportunity for the deepening and further expansion of US hegemony over the international system of states? Keeping an eye on the broadsheets and an ear out for the broadcast media will generally be enough for that. Yet recourse to a common-sense empiricism about the interests of states will not take us very far towards the deeper historical and political meanings and implications of such hegemony; nor, indeed, will even a more theoretically elaborated objective analysis of strategic goals and practices – for all its indispensability – if it abstracts wholly from the political discourses and cultural representations through which such events are lived, not only by strategic planners, but by publics of all kinds.² Rather, something more like a new *kind* of philosophical discourse of modernity would appear to be required, in Foucault's general (and, ironically, at least quasi-Hegelian) sense of an 'ontology of the present'; provided that we understand this present in a properly historical manner – that is, as the unity of a complex set of temporalizations differentiating geopolitical space.³

Yet this is very far from being the conceptual form of those interpretations of the present which currently capture the imagination of the cultural Left. The publication by Verso of three short books of cultural-philosophical commentary on September 11, to mark the first anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, provides an occasion to reflect upon what currently passes on the intellectual Left for philosophical diagnoses of the meaning of the present.*

Baudrillard, Virilio and Žižek are totems of the tribes of cultural commentators that have formed in the wake of the institutionalization of cultural studies. They are also brands which have been central to Verso's repositioning of itself in the intellectual marketplace since the late 1980s, after its retreat from the publishing project laid down by its parent, *New Left Review*: to seed and foster an indigenous, yet internationally savvy, intellectual culture of Marxism. Since the end of the 1980s, the leading edge of Verso's list has combined political journalism with post-Situationist French cultural theory. For all Žižek's carefully cultivated idiosyncrasies, this is a genre into which he slots comfortably, with his theoretical background in Lacan's surrealist Hegelianism, his political background in the auto-critique of Praxis School Marxism, and his tireless personal pursuit of publicity through provocation.⁴ Such work has proffered handy compensation for the philosophical deficit of Anglophone cultural studies and the cultural deficit of *NLR*-style Marxism alike, as it has for the political deficit of a domestic 'continental philosophy'. Yet the conception of culture with which it operates is largely pre-critical, in the sense of falling behind that intense, conjointly political, historical and conceptual interrogation of the term which formed the background to the emergence of cultural studies.

It is an irony of New Left thought about culture in Britain that, in the wake of the institutionalization of cultural studies, an imported pre-critical form of cultural critique should have become the stand-in for the philosophical dimension that it ignored.⁵ As we shall see, this has consequences for the politics of these texts. However, these are to a large extent concealed by the performative character of the texts' radicalism, which displaces the political burden from the content of their analyses onto their mode of address: an enactment of conceptual opposition to each and every status quo. Let us begin with Baudrillard, the acknowledged master of the genre, 'whose temper, for better or worse, is incapable of assent to any notion with collective acceptance'.⁶

Philosophy of the non-event

Baudrillard is notorious politically for his pronouncement that 'the Gulf War did not take place'. Yet in its popular reception this statement is somewhat misunderstood. In its leading formulation at least, it was emphatically *not* a straightforward application of Baudrillard's ontology of hyperreality, to the effect that the simulacral quality of the media transmission of the war cast doubt on the 'reality' of the events depicted (although, as a title, it was no doubt designed to be thus misunderstood). Rather, more simply, it was a contestation of the appropriateness of the application of the concept of war. Baudrillard's opening point in 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place' is that a war that is 'won in advance' by technological means, a war that is a one-sided annihilation, a war that is as much about control of the images of destruction as it is about the control of territory – such a 'war' can no longer be considered a war in the traditional agonistic sense. It has more of the character of a medical procedure.⁷ Is the surgeon at war with the body? At this level of description, this is not a particularly radical hypothesis, philosophically or otherwise. Indeed, it is in line with a number of accounts of the changing character of US military operations and the development of a concept of policing appropriate to the internationalization of Gramsci's theory of hegemony. It has subsequently received a form of empirical verification in the 'non-combatant' status

* Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London and New York, 2002, 52 pp., £8.00 pb., 1 85984 411 1; Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero*, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London and New York, 2002, 82 pp., £8.00 pb., 1 85984 416 2; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, Verso, London and New York, 2002, 154 pp., £8.00 pb., 1 85984 421 9. Henceforth *SoT*, *GZ*, and *WDR*, respectively. The series announces itself as an attempt 'to comprehend the philosophical meaning of September 11 ... [that] will leave untouched none of the prevailing views'.

attributed by the US government to the prisoners in Guatánamo Bay. If the Gulf War was not really a 'war', how much less so is the 'war on terrorism'.

But this is only one level of Baudrillard's analysis. Conjoined to it are two more characteristic theses concerning the impact of information technologies upon politics and the nature of historical events – characteristic, that is, in their technological reductionism. These are the theses of: (1) 'the degradation of the event' by its 'involution and encrustation by information'; (2) the corresponding collapse of the ontological form of place supporting the old types of political power and historical event – a collapse of places into 'places of collapse'.⁸ This is the familiar Baudrillardian evacuation of the terrain of social ontology and its transposition into a generalized and virtual 'hyperreality' (which does not involve denial of the empirical reality of events, but contests the modalities of their possible experience – the outrage of a common-sense realism is, as usual, misplaced). It announces the domain of the non-event: deferral of the passage of practice from virtuality to actuality by entrapment in images. (Philosophically, the framework here is thoroughly, if wildly, Kantian.) At the ontological level at which the thesis is pitched, empirical occurrences lose the possibility of acquiring the more fundamental, one might say 'socio-existential', character of historical events. In this sense, strictly speaking, *nothing* (not the Gulf War or anything else) 'takes place' (*a lieu*). In this context, the idea that 'the Gulf war did not take place' is thus thoroughly unexceptional. Indeed, it is redundant; and hence its proclamation is in a certain sense contradictory, since in ostentatiously declaring the failure of the '(non-)war' to take place, it picks it out from the domain of non-events, giving it a privileged, event-like status. (The problem for Baudrillard here is that 'event' is primarily a *narrative* category – its ontological significance derives from that – and narrative is rather less easy to abolish than Baudrillard appears to think.) The interpretation of the Gulf War as a paradigmatic non-event is thus dependent on the conflation of two quite different levels of analysis: war/non-war and event/non-event.

The general account of the involution of the event and the evacuation of the place of power combines, syllogistically, with the more prosaic account of 'non-war' to produce Baudrillard's concluding *détournement* of Clausewitz (which reappears, modified, in his analysis of September 11): '*non-war is the absence of politics pursued by other means*'. This is not an uninteresting proposition – although its interest pales somewhat on its strictly Baudrillardian interpretation. Moreover, crucially, it should be noted that Baudrillard's sense of a remainder, of those residual 'uncontrollable forces' operating outside of hyperreality, which are the objects of non-war, is exclusively *cultural*: the 'real stake' is 'the challenge of Islam and behind it that of all forms of culture refractory to the occidental world'.⁹ At the end of the day, then, all this virtuality is just another (techno) version of Huntington's clash of civilizations: the West is virtual, the East is real – and the South, presumably, is just hungry. The culturally coded West/East divide is the dominant imaginary here, suppressing the economically coded division between North and South, along with all other, more differentiated geopolitical forms. All manner of levels and types of analysis are conflated and homogenized in order to map the philosophy of hyperreality onto a simple bipolar interpretation of world events, the political content of which remains that of the most hackneyed civilizational conservatism. This is a philosophical discourse of modernity in the worst sense, failing utterly to mediate its concepts with anything like a plausible global history, opportunistically seizing upon events merely in order to publicize itself. The only twist in the tail is that the civilizational content of 'the West' here has been reduced to the prison-house of images: the Old World is preserved as lost, all the better to be romantically mourned. Nevertheless, with this analysis of the Gulf War as a paradigmatic 'non-event', the stage is set for Baudrillard's account of September 11 as the eruption of an 'absolute event'.

Romanticism of death

Much has been made of the dreamlike cinematic quality of the television images of the attack on the World Trade Center. And it comes as no surprise to find Baudrillard rhetorically absolutizing this affect: ‘everyone without exception has dreamt of [this event] ...they *did it*, but we *wished for it*.’ (*SoT*, 5) Žižek offers a similar, if more psychoanalytically elaborate, account (*WDR*, 17ff.). What is more distinctive, as Baudrillard ratchets up the rhetoric in a desperate attempt to produce ‘an analysis that might possibly be as unacceptable as the event’ itself (*SoT*, 41), is the extension of this speculative thesis of repressed psychological complicity to the level of agency.

When the two towers collapsed, you had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-planes with their own suicides.... [The West] has become suicidal, and declared war on itself. (*SoT*, 7–8)

In a system of absolute immanence (hyperreality), any disruptive event can only have been produced from within; and in the immanence of a system of non-events, the event can return only ‘absolutely’, as pure interruption. Hence the thesis of a ‘terroristic situational transfer’ according to which ‘Terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange’ (*SoT*, 9). ‘Terrorism’ is thus at once wholly outside of the system and yet (inscribed within the system’s suicidal desire for its own collapse) wholly within. The ‘fundamental antagonism’ here is ‘triumphant globalization battling against itself’ (*SoT*, 11).¹⁰

This is a neat – and thoroughly Hegelian – conceptual dialectic, in which the logical structure that Marx took to be specific to the ontological peculiarities of the value-form (and hence complexly mediated with historical societies) once again achieves, simultaneously, both independence and actualization. And, as with Hegel’s, Baudrillard’s version of absolute idealism is equally falsely positivistic, since empirical figures must be found to represent logical moments in the development of the idea (‘globalization’). The agent of negativity here is ‘the spirit of terrorism’; its act the ‘gift’ of ‘a death that is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute and irrevocable event’. ‘The terrorist hypothesis is that the system itself will commit suicide’ in the face of such ‘an excess of reality’, because, ‘having erased [death] from its own culture’, it can no longer deal with its idea (*SoT*, 15–18). The romanticism of the event in the era of its passing is the romanticism of death. We have been here before in Europe, in the period between the two World Wars (with a rather more cogent analysis of the metaphysics of death); but no one suggested it was a contribution to the intellectual culture of the Left.

Furthermore, for Baudrillard, the events in New York ‘have radicalized the relation of the image to reality ... resuscitat[ing] both images and events’. Now ‘the image consumes the event’, giving it ‘unprecedented impact as image-event’ (*SoT*, 27). The deaths of the attackers have breathed life back into the Old World and Baudrillard’s ontology of hyperreality has been given an axial turn. It is hard to see this as much more than a game internal to the logic of justification of Baudrillard’s theory of symbolic exchange: another ad hoc modification, this time trading on the meaning of ‘collapse’. ‘Were the Twin Towers destroyed or did they collapse?’ (*SoT*, 47). If the latter, ‘places of collapse’ themselves appear as sites of a new involuted, suicidal form of systemic agency.

This is not to say that ‘the image’ is not a relevant site for political analysis. It is the privileging of the image of the attack on the towers that is the mistake. The fixation on this one set of images *conceals* both the more complex meanings of the event it embodies and, importantly, the role of images in its aetiology. If we want to understand the significance of images to the attack, and related events, we should look not to the images of the attacks, but rather, as Stuart Hall has argued, to ‘the spectacle of wealth on the one hand and destitution on the other [that] drives people crazy.... This is the

new reality of the world as a whole':¹¹ the sheer visibility of widening extremes of wealth and power on the one side, and poverty, exclusion and oppression on the other.

In writing on the Gulf War, Baudrillard was careful to present his analysis of 'indefinite virtuality' as 'diametrically opposed [to the] opinions of Paul Virilio ... on [the] apocalyptic escalation' of conflict. For Baudrillard, programmed escalation was the means of non-occurrence.¹² Escalation was only rhetorical and Baudrillard was more than happy to play his part in the build-up. With the attack on the Twin Towers, however, the fantasy scenarios of the two great fugeys of French culturalism begin to converge. Baudrillard's is a Franco-Hollywood co-production (*Suicide of the Towers*); Virilio's is more of a French arthouse version of a Bond film, the plot 'global takeover of humanity by totalitarian multimedia powers' (GZ, 26). The point of identity between the two scripts: 'A *global suicide state* ... united beyond good and evil' in which 'advertising in all its forms aspires to provide the entire terrain of social reality' (GZ, 37, 29; cf. *SoT*, 13). The difference is that while Baudrillard, by and large, maintains the analytical stance of structuralist anti-humanism, Virilio's technophobia is grounded in a sentimental humanism with its roots in a religious naturalism of sexual difference.

Technophobia/sexophobia

Virilio's imaginary is dominated by twin fears: depopulation and the transgression of sexual difference. The agent of doom is, predictably, 'science' in its technical application – in particular, genetics. Technology is considered here not merely in abstraction from differences between contexts of social use, but, quite explicitly, as politically indifferent to them. Thus, we find an innocuous quotation from the current chair of the European Group on Ethics in Sciences and New Technologies directly compared to one glossed as a 'directive of the "Final Solution"', from the *Handbook of the Hitler Youth* (GZ, 4–5). No political difference can escape the reductive power of this mother of all metanarratives of decline:

After the murder of the *Creator* (the death of God foretold in the nineteenth century) and that of the *procreator* in the following century, it was inevitable that this system of retrogression would end in the demand for a spermless genesis.

We are witnessing the technologically based 'abolition of *human beings as such*' (GZ, 2, 80). Summon the priest!

Science is the virus. The delivery system is the media. Their principles are the same, 'the prohibition to prohibit'. 'Eluding any precautionary principle, the systems of information have become bombs which keep on exploding in people's minds.' The result: 'the immense misery of mass ego-sexuality ... women now equipped with penises ... men would marry men ... underage girls no longer need to have their parents' permission to have abortions ... compulsory sex education in schools' (GZ, 25, 22, 28–30, 71). Horrors indeed. Western capitalist democracies present themselves to Virilio like a painting of Dante's inferno by Hieronymus Bosch. But ours is a hell of sexuality and advertising. (According to Virilio, the world is 'united beyond *good* and *evil* by the inauthenticity now shared by broadcasters in East and West, and by those watched by Muslim TV viewers', GZ, 37.) There is no reference to systems of production, political rights, the treatment of immigrant populations or even the commodity form.

And what, you might ask, of September 11? Is this not a book published to mark its anniversary, which 'will leave untouched none of the prevailing views'? It turns out that 'Ground Zero' is just a metaphor for Virilio's view of the world in general, or rather 'European culture', since he continues, charmingly, to confuse the two. The book should be consulted by readers curious to know just how easily Virilio is shocked ('on the eve of the Christian festival of All Saints, Halloween is celebrated in our schools!' GZ, 63); or those seeking a case study in bad montage – the instrumental technique of

substituting sequences of only loosely associated quotations for determinate connections between ideas. It would be nice to believe that all this is a satire of cultural reaction. For Virilio, it is a satirical presentation of the age. As for the concluding page on September 11, the analysis is the same as that of President Bush: it was an 'act of total war' heralding the rise of a 'global covert state'.

Reading Baudrillard and Virilio today, one is led to wonder just how long it is going to take for their intellectual milieu to work through the trauma of the invention of television, or come to terms with the impact and implications of the sexual emancipation of women.¹³ In the meantime, perhaps the Anglophone cultural Left should attend a little more closely to the politics of these writings and place them where they belong, on the groaning shelves of reactionary Romanticism, alongside Carlyle, Ruskin and their ilk.

The bait of 'the real'

Or is reaction the new progress? It is easy to imagine Žižek defending this thesis, vigorously. Just as it is easy to imagine him denouncing it as sophistry, equally vigorously; perhaps in the course of the same talk or piece of writing; perhaps deliberately, perhaps not. There is a voluptuousness to the outpouring of Žižek's prose that shames the very idea of critical regulation or judgement, a will to power as prose that scorns all but its own productivity. A joke must be repeated, a received idea confounded, a recent movie cited – whatever the weather.¹⁴ But this is no mere showmanship (although at times it teeters on the brink). There is a political purpose to Žižek's writings that distinguishes them, decisively, from those of Baudrillard and Virilio: the promotion of an absolute Leftism which, bereft of power, scorns the compromises of the actual, thereby legitimating something close to pure pragmatism, on the grounds of a metaphysical conception of truth. Hence the affinity with Alain Badiou that has led Žižek to an identification with Lenin (contra Leninism) as the existential model for a form of political engagement that associates ethics with the necessity of violence. Yet the concrete political meanings and implications of this identification are so densely mediated by different kinds and levels of theory as to risk (or does he seek?) obfuscation.

There is a cynicism about Žižek's pyrotechnics – the cynicism of the magician – but there is also a *jouissance* and hence a lack of control. However, it is precisely this lack of control which it is the (Lacanian) purpose of his discourse to promote. The slogan: 'Be true to your desire!' There is thus a sublime consistency at the very heart of the instability, excesses and inconsistencies in Žižek's discourse – a psychoanalytic ruse of reason by which the acceptance of inconsistency becomes a royal road to making theoretical discourse consistent with the structure of the psyche itself. Dialectics is the instrument of this operation; identity of opposites, and hence inversion, its principal effect. Yet is the contradictory structure of the human psyche the appropriate measure for the adequacy of theory? How can Lacan and Lenin cohabit so cosily? And what can such a stance contribute to conjunctural and longer term, historical analyses of geopolitical events? *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* provides a way in to these issues via, first, its dialectic of semblance and the real; second, its call to 'orthodoxy', against the 'liberalism' and 'postmodernism' of the Anglophone academic Left; and, finally, its more concretely political remarks about the implications of September 11.

Like Baudrillard, Žižek trades on stock misunderstandings of his position, positively provoking them in order to draw readers in, and then using them as fodder for dialectical inversions. And just as in Baudrillard's writings on the Gulf War (which seem to be something of a model for Žižek here – an exemplar in the generation of controversy), so once again it is the wretched question of 'the real' that serves as bait. Žižek's opening essay, 'Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance', takes the reader on a phenomenological journey from (1) a naive view of 'reality' (in opposition to 'appearance'), via (2) its inversion ("real reality" itself as a virtual entity), to (3) the resolution of the

contradiction in the standpoint that it is the symbolic coordinates of *fantasy alone* that gives consistency to what we call 'reality', in opposition to mere appearance and the underlying, unknowable 'Real' alike. This is Hegel's *Phenomen-ology of Spirit* rewritten by Lacan: reconciliation to misrecognition.

The 'real' of Žižek's title, to which he welcomes us on behalf of the events of September 11, thus only appears to be that of a fundamental ontological realm, the Lacanian equivalent to Baudrillard's 'absolute event'. It is, rather, to the barrenness of the fantasy that we could have access to such a realm that we are welcomed: the fantasy of a pure or excessive reality beyond the symbolic forms of a constitutive fantasy. And because it is only a fantasy, this "passion for the real" ... culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle' (WDR, 9). The spectacularization of the events of September 11 thus registers both our desire for the real and the impossibility of its fulfilment. The necessarily 'unReal' character of the object of desire (consequent upon the symbolic structure of desire itself) makes the real we desire into a 'desert', however spectacularly it is (mis)represented. This is a Lacanian phenomenology of the reception of the events of September 11, masquerading as an interpretative account of the events themselves. It moves back and forth between several different sense of 'the real' in order to dissolve the events as a discrete object of interpretation and analysis and replace them with the 'set of obscene unwritten rules' that underlie the symbolic construction of reality in general (WDR, 32).

What Žižek offers is thus actually very similar to Baudrillard's account of the status of the real within the image-event.

[W]e thought we had seen (perhaps with a certain relief) a resurgence of the real ... [but] reality is a principle ... that is lost. ... the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror, like an additional *frisson* ... [s]omething like an additional fiction, a fiction surpassing fiction ... the ultimate and most redoubtable fiction.

The terrorist violence ... is not 'real'. In a sense it is worse: it is symbolic.... Only symbolic violence is generative of singularity. (SoT, 28–9)

For Baudrillard, the absolute event is *not* 'real', it is pure interruption. The event is ontologically more fundamental than the real. Baudrillard is more consistent than Žižek here, whose attempt to incorporate Badiou's notion of the event into a Lacanian framework – equating the Real with the event – leads only to bald, undialectical contradictions. Thus, Žižek's opening, Badiou-inspired claim – 'The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence ...' (WDR, 5) – contradicts the whole theoretical edifice of fantasy, reality and the Real that is subsequently elaborated. The same thing happens in such descriptions as that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as 'the Real' of the Middle Eastern crisis (WDR, 126). The fantasy of Badiou is too strong for Žižek in these instances; he is overcome.

One feels almost intrusive witnessing these increasingly blatant moments of self-contradiction in Žižek's writings. There is something private about the great showman's public struggle with himself, in which the desire to outdo all competitors by delivering the decisive formulation does battle with the requirement to continue making some kind of theoretical sense. After all, if the only way of '*breaking out* of th[e] vicious cycle of the System' is 'the "impossible" act' of a 'revolutionary violence which no longer relies on the superego obscenity' – as Žižek argues (WDR, 27) – why does he not follow Baudrillard in recognizing such an act in the 'absolute event' of September 11 itself? In fact, he comes close in his conclusion when he describes the 'ultimate aim' of the attacks as being 'to (re)introduce the dimension of absolute negativity into our daily lives' (WDR, 142). Seduced by the intransigence of Badiou (the oldest trick in the book), Žižek is left defenceless before Baudrillard. His only chance is to change the subject and begin again with a completely different analytical framework. Which is precisely what he proceeds to do.

The second essay in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* abandons all talk about reality, the image, the symbolic and the Real, and suggests that we consider what happened on September 11 in ‘the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism’. This is a more promising approach. Unfortunately, however, there is no progress beyond the suggestion itself, for two main reasons. The first is that just as Baudrillard’s conception of extra-systemic forces is exclusively cultural, so Žižek’s conception of anti-capitalist forces is exclusively ideological. The second is that the purpose of the change of focus is to prepare the ground for the actual topic of the essay: namely, ‘Leftist follies’. And

Žižek is not thinking of Badiou.

Žižek maintains that global capitalism is a totality – ‘the dialectical unity of itself and its other’ – but he takes this other to be ‘the forces that resist it on “fundamentalist” ideological grounds’. And this despite his own insistence that ‘Muslim fundamentalists ... stand for the way the Arab world strives to accommodate itself to global capitalism’ (*WDR*, 51–2). Ideological counter-position is judged more important than practical tendency.

Two years ago he offered us the



radical legacy of Christianity as an oppositional source.¹⁵ Currently, it is the memory of Lenin. In the meantime, Žižek’s notion of ‘global capitalism’ has remained as abstract and ahistorical as ever, equated, at the level of form, with capital itself. But surely, strictly speaking, it is capital, not capitalism, that is the dialectical totality: the ‘other’ through which it unifies itself is the labour that it subsumes as variable capital. All manner of other social forms are caught up in this process, in all manner of ways, as conditions of its reproduction on a global scale. And global capitalism has certainly been posited, politically, as a national–imperial project along the way. But history is too open a process to be appropriated by a dialectical totality in Hegel’s logical sense and ‘fundamentalist ideological resistance’ is too crude a tool by which to measure political progressiveness within its mêlée; not least because it contains no historical index of its relationship to capitalism itself.

When Žižek writes of ‘Leftist follies’, he is thinking of the anti-war movement and the ‘obscene mathematics of guilt’ of the ‘scandalous’ relativizing anti-Americanism of Western European Leftists. The anti-war movement is said to have shown less ‘power of reflection’ than George W. Bush, since Bush at least recognizes that ‘this is not a war like others’ – a facile and dubious debating point in this context, if ever there was one. Meanwhile the ethical stance of a redeeming violence is turned on its head: ‘the only appropriate stance is unconditional solidarity with *all* victims’ (*WDR*, 51–4). This ethical circle is subsequently squared by the principle: ‘The true ethical test is not only the readiness to save victims, but also – even more, perhaps – the ruthless dedication to annihilating those who made them victims’ (*WDR*, 68). Bush would doubtless agree with this too. For this ethical discourse of victims and violence is wholly politically indeterminate, at this level of abstraction. More precisely, it is ideological, in its misrepresentation of the ‘antagonisms of global capitalism’ as amenable to a purely ethical determination.

There is a tinge of self-hatred mixed in with the provocation of Žižek’s contempt for ‘Leftists’ other than Lenin and Alain Badiou: ‘the repellent figure of the comfortable, well-paid English or French [or Slovenian?] “radical Leftist”’ (*WDR*, 75). However

much one may agree (or disagree) with particular arguments against particular positions, the level of bombast certainly conveys the impression of the strengthening of an identification that Žižek is quick to attribute to others on the Left: identification with 'the dirty obscene underside of Power' (WDR, 30). This increasingly prominent aspect of Žižek's thought achieves its most direct expression in his advocacy of orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy

Žižek does not argue that reaction is the new progress, but he comes pretty close. 'Orthodoxy is the new criticism' would be a fair summary of his position, although 'criticism' is not part of his vocabulary, for reasons that will shortly become clear. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* takes G.K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* as its text: 'the struggle for freedom needs a reference to some unquestionable dogma' (WDR, 3). The main target here is the naivety of 'postmodern liberal democrats'. Postmodern liberal democrats are ontologically naive because they believe in 'the irreducible plurality of particular constellations, each of them multiple and displaced in itself' (WDR, 65). And they are politically naive because they fail to recognize that democracy is part of capitalism. Both points would be unobjectionable were it not for the slippage between 'postmodern liberal democrats' and foolhardy non-Badiouian 'Leftists', on the one hand, and the imputation of a *strict* identity between capitalism and democracy, on the other. As a result of the latter, anti-capitalism is taken to require the abandonment of democracy. Democrats cannot be true Leftists. The dogma of the anti-democratic act is all well and good, for Žižek, but dogmatic democrats must find 'the courage to question' their own position (WDR, 75). So much for the unquestionable dogma.

The problem, of course, is that a philosophical advocacy of orthodoxy per se, irrespective of its socio-political content, isn't worth any more than its opposite. Žižek's dialectic tends to terminate on the first negation. When Chesterton wrote about orthodoxy, no one was in doubt about what orthodoxy he meant. The formally suppressed presupposition of Žižek's defence of orthodoxy is the model of Lenin – the existence of Lenin, contra Leninism. But this attempt to separate out the politics of an individual from both historical situation and organizational form (orthodoxy!) is hardly a convincing basis for a new orthodoxy – even one as indeterminate as an orthodoxy of 'the act'. This is especially so when the history of the orthodoxy on offer is one that the anti-capitalist Left is still stutteringly working through, most notably, in the West, via a reactive libertarianism with a primarily oppositional bent.¹⁶

The Hegelian point about the unquestionable is surely that while each act may need a 'dogmatic' presupposition, such presuppositions become open to question in the aftermath of the act, by virtue of precisely that 'excess' of the act over its conception that Žižek fetishizes as the basis for his philosophy of the act. (The term opposed to 'dogmatism' in Enlightenment thought is not 'liberalism', but 'criticism'.) Such is the dialectical constitution of a critical political community. Žižek's imperative 'to invent a new collectivity' as 'a Leftist alternative to democracy' (WDR, 85, 79), on the other hand, is devoid of both content and process. For a philosophy of the act risks short-circuiting politics altogether, without the mediations of a historical theory of political subjectivization. Yet this conceptual space is already occupied by Žižek's unmediated and overgeneralized application of Lacanian theory to the interpretation of social events.

Žižek is most interesting in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* in his passing, more concretely political remarks about the legal-political paradoxes of the 'war on terrorism', the international situation and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular. Yet these are largely unrelated to his theoretical positions about fantasy, orthodoxy and the radical act. And where they do stray onto the same ground they are often in contra-

diction – or at least, unresolved tension – with a previously stated position. Thus, for example, criticism of the anti-Americanism of Western European Leftists is matched by the proposal that ‘The Left should unashamedly appropriate the slogan of a unified Europe as a counterweight to Americanized globalism.’ ‘[T]he real politico-ideological catastrophe of September 11’, Žižek concludes, was that ‘Europe succumbed to a kind of ideologico-political blackmail by the USA’ (*WDR*, 144–5).

So where does all this leave ‘the philosophical meaning of September 11’ and of the present? Or rather, where does this leave the attempt to construct such meanings?

To be done

Clearly, the attempt to totalize solely from the standpoint of the cultural/ideological reception of events both constricts and reifies the domain of meaning. The difference between Baudrillard and Žižek here is a difference internal to theories of the symbolic: Maussian versus Lacanian, sociological versus psychoanalytical, respectively. Neither is adequate to the task of interpreting geopolitical events because neither recognizes, or opens onto, the more complex nexus of mediations that give *historical* meaning to events. ‘Culture’ and ‘ideology’ are treated, not as names for the dimension of meaning in social practice, or for the semantic principle of wholeness in social life, but as designations for a self-contained realm of meaning within which political significations are produced independently of mediations with other forms of social activity. This is what I mean by a ‘pre-critical’ conception of culture. It attributes meaning to events independently of a broader historical understanding of the societal contexts and political conflicts that constitute them as ‘events’ for a variety of social subjects.¹⁷ It ‘interprets the world’ in a way that is detached from the possibility of changing it.

The first thing to be said about the events of September 11, in this regard, is that they are still happening. An ontology of the historical present that constructs events from the standpoint of the political struggles at stake in them, in their broadest geopolitical scope, must recognize their durational (rather than merely punctual) temporality, as a variable of the rhythm of these struggles themselves. In this respect, September 11 has become the nodal point of an extended historical present in which, and through which, a variety of political agents and constituencies are forming and reforming their projects: principally, the US state apparatus, al-Qaeda, Israel, the UN Security Council, the EU and the states of the ‘Islamic world’. Several of these agents, although fiercely antagonistic, share an interest in extending this moment of redefinition that has suspended or suppressed various other antagonisms. In particular, the US state apparatus has an interest in extending it indefinitely as the occasion for the legitimation of the geographical extension of its military-juridical power to vast new areas of the globe. Sustaining the infinite possibility of ‘a’ September 11 sustains and legitimates the US imperial project of an ‘Americanization’ of the world. This is the main symbolic function of the images of the attacks on the towers: a certain freezing of historical time in the moment of the legitimation of a military-political project that almost immediately far exceeded any determinate relation to the events themselves.

Yet, none of this yet makes September 11 an epochal event in the sense in which some commentators have claimed. It makes it a crucial moment in the practical articulation of a process that was already well under way. In this respect, the recent event to which it is perhaps most suitably compared is the Sixteenth Congress of the Communist Party of China (8–15 November 2002). In the long term, though, the latter may well turn out to be of far greater world-historical significance. US hegemony in the aftermath of September 11 derives a large part of its historical meaning from that.

Notes

1. Susan Buck-Morss, 'A Global Public Sphere?', *Radical Philosophy* 111, January/February 2002, pp. 2–10.
2. This is the characteristic flaw in Perry Anderson's otherwise powerful application of Gramsci's conception of hegemony to the current international situation in 'Force and Consent', *New Left Review* 17, September/October 2002, pp. 5–30: it reduces the practical function of political discourse to 'the spray of rhetoric'. But what is a theory of hegemony without a place for the 'subjective moment'?
3. That is to say, a philosophical discourse of modernity needs to be mediated with a social history of states which is reducible to neither a Hegelian conception of worldspirit nor a positive 'theory' of nationalism, nor some merely syncretic combination of these two – such as Anderson's version of Gramscianism, in which historical particularities appear as manifestations of 'exceptionalism'. See 'Force and Consent', p. 21.
4. For a critique of Žižek's claim on Hegel, see Peter Dews, 'The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian Dialectics', *Radical Philosophy* 72, July/August 1995, pp. 17–29. For a critique of Žižek's Marxism, see Sean Homer, 'It's the Political Economy, Stupid! On Žižek's Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 108, July/August 2001, pp. 7–16.
5. As Stuart Hall has put it: 'What was there as philosophy [at the time] wasn't of any help to us in a pragmatic sense.' 'Culture and Power: An Interview with Stuart Hall', *Radical Philosophy* 86, November–December 1997, p. 27.
6. Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, p. 52.
7. Jean Baudrillard, 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place', in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), trans. Paul Patton, Power Publications, Sydney, 1995, pp. 61–87; 61–2. It is important to distinguish the analysis in this essay (first published version, 29 March 1991) from that of the preceding two (from January and February 1991, respectively) published together with it in book form: 'The Gulf War Will Not Take Place' and 'The Gulf War is Not Taking Place'. The character of the claim is different in each instance, as Baudrillard scurries to render his account consistent with events, while maintaining a rhetorical continuity of address. The famous speculative thesis, 'the Gulf War did not take place', is thus actually the result of a sophistical form of ad hoc modification.
8. Ibid., pp. 48, 70. The thesis of the evacuation of the place of power has something in common with Hardt and Negri's account of a new form of sovereignty supposedly characteristic of 'empire'. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2000.
9. Ibid., pp. 30, 83, 86. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996. The *détournement* of Clausewitz first appears in the second – most 'ontological' – of the three essays.
10. Once again, one is reminded of Hardt and Negri: the homology of empire and multitude. Given the structure of the analysis of *Empire*, it is hard to see how they can avoid the conclusion that the acts of September 11 were a manifestation of the multitude. Yet this would appear not to tell us anything more about them, or the multitude.
11. Stuart Hall, 'Out of a Clear Blue Sky', *Soundings* 19, Winter 2001/2, pp. 9–15; 13–14.
12. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, p. 49.
13. Baudrillard's initial way of ridiculing the 'de-intensified' state of a UN-sanctioned war in the Gulf was to describe it as 'the bellicose equivalent of safe sex: make war like love with a condom! On the Richter scale the Gulf War would not even reach two or three.' Later, extending the metaphor of the surgical strike, he switched to the image of *in vitro* fertilization. This, apparently, 'produces a living being but ... is not sufficient to produce a child ... a child issues from sexual copulation.' Ibid., pp. 26, 61–2.
14. This voluptuousness has long defeated his publishers. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* contains passages – in one instance about five thousand words in length – that also appear, word for word, without acknowledgement, in the Afterword to Žižek's selection of Lenin's writings, *Revolution at the Gates*, published by Verso on the same day.
15. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, Verso, London and New York, 2000.
16. See Martin Ryle, 'Oppositional Mentalities: Intellectuals, Protest and the Left', *Radical Philosophy* 114, July/August 2002, pp. 2–6.
17. Cf. Stuart Hall's delimitation of the field of cultural studies as 'combining the study of symbolic forms and meanings with the study of power ... asking questions about the insertion of symbolic processes into societal contexts and their imbrication with power.' 'Culture and Power', pp. 24–5.