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Why Žižek for Political Theory?

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Introduction *Why Žižek?*

I was tempted to answer this question with an inversion—why *not* Žižek? My answer would have relied on warnings and rhetorical questions: why should anyone take seriously a philosopher resolute in his critique of multiculturalism, rejection of democracy, and ability to see the upside of Stalinism? What sort of philosopher appeals to a singular Act that disrupts the contours of a given situation and cannot be understood as determined by the conditions into which it intervenes? And who today can accept the idea of a universal Truth?

Why, in another words, should we risk thinking outside the confines of Left political theory? Such thought is clearly too dangerous, too likely to fall in with the extremist conviction characteristic of right-wing demagogues and fundamentalists and too likely to call us to task for accepting the comforts of academic life in late capitalism. Better to work on micropolitical struggles, to resist and resignify, to interject, interrogate, critique, and ask for more information.

Why not Žižek? is thus a much easier question to answer than why Žižek? *Why not Žižek?*— because the political tasks and alternatives are clear: more inclusion, more democracy, more participation. *Why not Žižek?*—because he inverts the world, showing the unity of opposites, the identity of the highest and lowest, the complicity of our actions in the systems they seemingly strive to contest. So those afraid to consider what's left of democracy and what's left of capitalism should look elsewhere—*not* to Žižek.

But, those convinced we must confront the current political-economic deadlock head-on cannot avoid undertaking the hard question, *why Žižek?* So, here I consider why Žižek for political theory.

Finding Enjoyment in Political Theory

Slavoj Žižek's work is indispensable to any effort to break out of the present political impasse, an impasse in which not only English speaking and European countries are caught but which threatens the entire world (not least because of the English speaking countries' global war on/of terror). Žižek's version of dialectical materialism (a combination of Hegel, Marx, and Lacan) enables political theorists to think better about passionate attachments to domination and anxiety in the face of freedom. I begin by approaching this impasse as a barrier to thought, particularly Left thought as it remains unable to think through or out of the current hegemony.

Contemporary Left theorists worry about dogmatism and fundamentalism. That is, they see fundamentalism as the primary political problem today. In response, some emphasize diversity and tolerance. They may approach diversity from the perspective of democratic debate, presenting a conception of politics premised on ideals of participation, inclusion, equality, and mutual respect. Others emphasize the multiplicity of ways of being in the world and the importance of an ethos of generosity towards those ways that may differ, radically, from our own.

None provides an adequate response to right wing fundamentalists, nationalist ideologues, and neoliberal capitalist globalizers. This motley crew of bad guys eschews debate and respect. It throws generosity back up against the generous, forever accusing them of not being respectful and generous enough. Its capitalist wing finds ever more creative and ingenious ways to profit. Diversity becomes multiculturalism™: parents can buy colorful multilingual dolls; producers can make action films with global appeal; educators can buy multicultural teaching kits designed to insure that their students are well-prepared to compete in a global economy. Likewise, democratic debate is easily capitalized: citizens seeking information are ready eyeballs for advertisers; politicians can champion the role of the Internet in keeping their constituencies connected, while telecoms, ISPs, chip, hardware, and software providers wisely nod their heads and pocket their vastly increased revenues. Against, this motley crew, generosity and tolerance won't work. More precisely, as long as left intellectuals reject anything that smacks of dogmatism, as long as we reject a politics of conviction, as long as we refuse to draw a line in the sand and say enough is enough, the right will continue its exploitation and repression of most of the world's peoples.

The problem of Left political thought, then, is trying to theorize a politics that includes everything and everyone. But this isn't politics. Politics involves division, saying "yes" to some options and "no" to others. A willingness to take responsibility for the divisions inseparable from politics seems to have been lost, or relegated to small, local, struggles. Particularly odd in radical pluralists' and deliberative democrats' focus on fundamentalism is

its alliance with the central tenets of the bad guys themselves. Neoconservatives and neoliberals agree that fundamentalism is the most important political problem. Fundamentalism, they chorus, opposes the unfolding of freedom in the world.

Žižek's political theory both demonstrates this willingness and shows why it is necessary today. His central concept is enjoyment (*jouissance*). With this concept, Žižek breaks with the dominant consensus regarding the central challenge of contemporary politics, namely, the problem of dogmatism. His emphasis on enjoyment shifts the problem from fundamentalism to capitalism: precisely because the present unfolding of freedom in the world is tied to the expansions of global capital, it relies on enjoyment and thus reintroduces sites and objects of fixity. The central political problem, then, is how we are to relate to enjoyment, how we can escape ("traverse") the fantasies that provide it, even as we acknowledge enjoyment as an irreducible component of what it is to be human.

In what follows, I highlight three themes in Žižek's political thought that demonstrate the importance of his work for confronting the traps of the current political impasse—his account of fantasy (particularly as it explains ethnic nationalism), his account of the fixity of the subject (particularly as it explains the relation of capitalism to unfreedom) and his account of the society of enjoyment (particularly in its relation to the decline of symbolic efficiency).

Fantasy

Fantasy answers the question of what I am to the other. It is the framework through which some empirical content, an object, person, experience, or practice comes to function for us as 'it,' as what we desire. Fantasy provides a screen that covers over the lack in the other and a frame or set of coordinates for our desire. In so doing, it tells us how to desire (Žižek 1989: 118).

Although we are accustomed to thinking about fantasies as the stories we tell ourselves about getting what we want, having it all, say, or achieving our goals, Žižek follows Lacan in emphasizing the operation of fantasy at a more fundamental level. This more fundamental fantasy keeps our desire alive, unfulfilled, intact as *desire*. It explains why our enjoyment is missing, how we would have, could have, really enjoyed *if only* . . . Such fantasmic explanations may posit another who has stolen our enjoyment or who has concentrated all the enjoyment in his hands, preventing the rest of us from enjoying (as in Freud's account of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo*). What is crucial, though, is the way that the fantasy keeps open the possibility of enjoyment by telling us why we aren't really enjoying.

For example, in *Leviathan*, Hobbes suggests the possibility of complete freedom in the state of nature were it not for all those insecure others worried about their self-preservation and having a right to all things, including my body. Hobbesian subjects renounce this complete freedom, and the war of all against all that it generates by concentrating power in an absolute sovereign. The fantasy of complete freedom, then, thus binds subjects to a certain set of relations. It structures and confines thinking and acting such that desires attach subjects to hierarchical relations of domination. The possibility of acknowledging that complete freedom was lacking from the outset is foreclosed.

Žižek's account of the fantasmic organization of enjoyment provides a compelling explanation for ethnic nationalism. Since at least the nineteen eighties, questions of race and ethnicity have coalesced into two opposing approaches. On one side are appeals to ethnic and racial identity. Groups argue for rights, such as rights to self-determination or for the preservation of their linguistic and cultural heritage, on the basis of a certain essential difference. Even as race has been exposed for its lack of a scientific or biological foundation, people who have been discriminated against on the basis of race find categories of racial and ethnic identity useful as grounds for claims for inclusion, recognition, and redress. For some, particularly those endeavoring to establish or maintain ethnically pure homelands, these efforts at ethnic preservation lead to ethnic cleansing and genocide. On the other side, many, particularly among left activists and academics, rightly reject racial essentialism, precisely because race has no biological basis (Appiah 1993). From this side, arguments that rely on the reassertion of race risk reinstalling precisely the racial logic that anti-racism contests.

Considering ethnic nationalism in terms of enjoyment provides a way to escape this stand-off. Žižek argues that enjoyment is what holds a community together. Following Lacan, he refers to this shared enjoyment as the Thing (Žižek 1993: 201). The national Thing is not simply a collection of features, our specific traditions, foods, or myths, say (it is not simply the elements of a set). Rather, our Thing is our belief that these features make us who we are. And, even more powerfully, this Thing is more than an effect of the practices carried out in its name: it is the added enjoyment that results from these practices. "A nation exists," Žižek writes, "only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths or fantasies that secure these practices." (Žižek 1993: 202) The Thing is contingent, but real.

This idea of enjoyment enables us to distinguish between countries recognized as nation states that don't actually work as nations or that are traversed and ruptured by different nationalities (differing organization of enjoyment). Similarly, we are well-placed to consider the collapse, disintegration, or transformation of nations in terms of changes in

their enjoyment. A community may no longer be a community when there is no belief in a shared enjoyment, whether shared in a fantasmic past or an idealized future.

Since a community's enjoyment consists in no positive attribute, it comes to the fore in myths and fantasies, myths that generally explain the ways our enjoyment is threatened by others who want to steal it, who want to ruin our way of life by corrupting it with their own peculiar enjoyment. In turn, we find enjoyment in fantasizing about *their* enjoyment, in positing an enjoyment beyond what we imagine for ourselves. So, we don't like the excess of others' ways of life (their music, the way they smell, their relation to their bodies). Their way of life seems immediately intrusive, an assault, like they are flaunting it, daring us, blatantly refusing to sacrifice their enjoyment and come under a common symbolic order. Why do their lives seem so authentic, so real? Why are they so much more in tune with their sexuality, able to eat and drink and live while I am hard at work? The very excessiveness of their enjoyment makes them "them," other, foreign.

Yet, we are also captivated by their excesses, hating the others' for enjoying in ways barred to us. In a sense, when we hate them, we hate our own excess enjoyment, whether it is the enjoyment we presuppose that we have sacrificed (but actually never had) or whether it is enjoyment that we can't escape, that stains our endeavors despite (because of) our best efforts (Žižek 1993: 206). We hate their enjoyment, see them as foreign and threatening, and so acquire a sense of the special quality of *our* way of life. Our enjoyment becomes real to us as ours to the extent that we are already deprived of it, that it is threatened or stolen.^[1] Examples include the eternal feminine stolen by the Catholic Church in the best-seller, *The DaVinci Code*, or the powerful maternal, feminine essence appropriated by patriarchy in some versions of cultural feminism; the anti-Semitic vision of wealth to be had if not for the Jews; the sexual access to white women posited by white American racism toward black men; the fulfillment and sanctity that straight marriage would provide were it not under threat by same-sex couples; the prosperity, security, and freedom Americans would be enjoying had it not been stolen by fanatical Islamic fundamentalists according to the terms of the war on terror.

These examples highlight the way that the fantasy organization of desire underpins the ideological formation of a community. An ideological formation is more than a set of meanings or images and more than the accumulated effects of dispersed practices. Rather, ideology takes hold of the subject at the point of the irrational excess outside the meaning or significance the ideological formation provides. This excess, nugget, or remainder marks the incompleteness of the formation and of the interpellated subject. It's that extra sticking point, a point of fixation and enjoyment (*objet petit a*). Fantasies organize and explain these sticking points. They cover over the gaps in the ideological formation as they promise

enjoyment (the enjoyment that has been stolen, sacrificed, or barred to the subject) and in so doing attach the subject to the group or community supposed by the ideology.

The case of ethnic nationalism points to an additional aspect of enjoyment, namely, that enjoyment pertains not to relations between subjects but to something stranger, more disturbing: others are objects for us. Fantasies about the enjoyment of others provide us with ways to organize our own enjoyment. Additionally, within our libidinal economies, others may function as objects for us, objects onto which we can displace our enjoyment. Enjoyment thus explains how relations with others may not be intersubjective relations between subjects but relations between subjects and objects.

For Žižek, the externalization of enjoyment in another is a necessary feature of subjectivity: “in order to be an active subject, I have to get rid of—to transpose on to the other—the inert passivity which contains the density of my substantial being.” (Žižek 1997: 116) Actually encountering the other enjoying for us can be nearly unbearable insofar as it confronts us with our own passivity. The enjoying other is holding, is the location of, the enjoyment we have deferred to it. Our encounter with this other thus involves an encounter with the object in ourselves, with our absorption in enjoyment, with “the passive kernel” of our being. “I see *myself* in the guise of a suffering object: what reduces me to a fascinated passive observer is the scene of *myself* passively enduring it.” (Žižek 1997: 116) There is a kind of transfixed repulsion (when we come upon the other to whom we have transferred our *jouissance* enjoying in our stead. We confront our own ultimate passivity, the enjoyment that fixes us in our place.

By highlighting the fact of this confrontation, this transfixed horror and fascination before the enjoyment of the other (which we also saw in the discussion of racism and ethnic nationalism), Žižek’s approach clarifies the way that our encounters with others are not necessarily encounters with other subjects, other people. The other who gives body to excessive enjoyment is not located within the field of intersubjectivity (Žižek 1997: 10). Hence, grappling with hatred involves confronting the fundamental fantasies organizing our enjoyment, a confrontation that inevitably and necessarily destroys who we are. Differently put, we cannot dislodge the contingent nugget around which our subjectivity is organized without destroying this very subjectivity, becoming someone or some we different from whom we were before. Of course, we can disavow it, displacing it onto the other, and carry on, our activity held in place by this ultimate passivity.

Fixity and Circulation

A number of compelling theories of the circulation and migration of people, information, capital, and opportunity characteristic of contemporary communicative capitalism emphasize notions of speed, flow, and mobility. For some, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the key challenge of contemporary life arises from institutions or formations that endeavor to stop, contain, or territorialize these flows. Žižek's approach differs insofar as where they see movement, he finds fixity, which he understands in terms of enjoyment. Enjoyment is what fixes the subject in its place.

According to the basic psychoanalytic story of the infant's primary attachment to the mother, enjoyment is not a rich positive interiority, but the remainder of impossible fullness the desire for which animates the subject's fundamental fantasy and persists in the incommunicable excess of drive. The little remainder/reminder of enjoyment is the nugget, the object (*objet petit a*), that guarantees the consistency of the subject's being (Žižek 1989: 69,72). This nugget of enjoyment is thus strictly correlative to the subject.^[2] In Žižek's words, enjoyment is the "place of the subject, his impossible Being-there." (Žižek 1997: 49) It's why the symbolic order isn't whole or complete, why the subject is split, not-self-identical. We might think of this place of the subject, then, as a limit point, a point of impossibility (insofar as it marks the lack in the other that the subject tries to make into its own). And, we might think of it as what sticks to the subject, as what the subject can never shake or escape. In both respects, enjoyment is a kind of fixity, something that holds the subject together, that provides it with a place. And, this place is not the same as a subject position or place in the symbolic order of language. Rather, it is the incommunicable nugget or excess which prevents the subject from ever fully occupying the place provided for it, which provides it, we might say, with another place.

We can approach this sense of the place or fixity enjoyment provides by considering the homology between surplus enjoyment and Marx's account of surplus value. As Žižek points out, Lacan models the notion of surplus enjoyment on Marx's surplus value (Žižek 1989: 50, Žižek 2000: 22-24). The capitalist mode of production relies on excess; the capitalist gets back from the production process more than he puts into it. And, as the well-known passages from *Capital* explain, this excess seems somehow magical, an extra arising as an alchemical remainder of an exchange of equivalents. The worker produces an excess not his own, one that circulates in the other. So even as he loses the surplus of his labor insofar as it is enjoyed by the capitalist, the worker depends for his survival on continued production; he is trapped in, exists within the terms established by, the circulation of this leftover that embodies limit and excess, lack and surplus (Žižek 1989: 53). The circulation of the surplus provides him with his place. What this homology brings home is the

way that under capitalism, circulation and fixity are not opposed, but on the contrary, circulation itself introduces a certain fixity. To the extent that contemporary flows are flows of capital, immobility is necessary, unavoidable. The circulation of capital requires a leftover that fixes the subject.

The homology between surplus value and surplus enjoyment isn't complete, however. Whereas surplus value goes to the capitalist, surplus enjoyment returns to the subject. That is, the subject gets back some of the *jouissance* he sacrifices in order to enter the symbolic (Žižek 1997: 48). He may get this back in the form of little transgressions, say, as well as in the form of obedience, submission. So, actually, with respect to surplus enjoyment, the subject gets something for nothing; the impossible enjoyment he initially sacrificed returns to him as a little nugget of enjoyment. This something, then, attaches the subject to capitalism; it's the pay-off for playing the game. Or, better, it's the promise of a pay-off, the promise of an excess, that capitalism holds out.

As it emphasizes the object conditioning the subject, Žižek's discussion of enjoyment as a political factor draws our attention to a certain fixity on the part of the subject. Far from the malleable self-creating subject championed by consumer capital, the Žižekian subject finds itself in a place not of its choosing, attached to fantasies of which it remains unaware that nevertheless structure its relation to enjoyment thereby fastening it to the existing framework of domination. Žižek often develops this last point via examples of the forced choice, such as "your money or your life!" In such a choice, each side precludes the other. If we choose money, we actually don't get to live. If we choose to live, we actually don't even get the security of living because we can't trust the person who just forced us to choose. To the extent that we accept the terms of a forced choice, then, we remain trapped, confined, fixed by a fundamental loss (Žižek 1996: 211). At the same time, refusing the forced choice is, for Žižek, a choice for the worst, a choice for unclarity, uncertainty, the unknown, indeed a choice for subjective destitution in the sense that the subject has to give up the very symbolic coordinates that tell it who it is.

At any rate, for Žižek fixity ruptures the ideal of a self-aware, transparent subject even as it enables action. When we act, we never do so with full knowledge of the consequences, of our motives, of how others understand the situation. Rather, we simply have to choose. We have to accept this lack of certainty and act without the security of some kind of imaginary cover or back up (Žižek 1996: 212).

Thus, Žižek holds that in a liberal political culture the very sense of an active free agent relies on a primary dependency: "utter passivity is the foreclosed fantasy that sustains our conscious experience as active, self-positing subjects."^[3] It is the foreclosed fantasy in the sense that it is the excluded opposite conditioning the liberal ideal of freedom. This

passivity is what has to be supposed and negated for the notion of liberal freedom to make sense. The fantasy prevents us from confronting the trap of the forced choice. For example, we might imagine a being completely determined by natural laws or laws of reason—as Kant does—and recognize, with Kant, that such a being would be incapable of agency. There would be nothing to decide, no capacity for decision insofar as all would be already determined. Or we might consider how arguments about nature and nurture both threaten liberal ideas of autonomy insofar as each, in a different way, renders the person a kind of inert substance, an object of either natural or social systems. The idea of utter passivity, of being a plaything of alien forces, works as a foreclosed fantasy of liberal freedom in another sense as well, a sense that provides relief from the demands of freedom. Fantasies of victimization, of irresponsibility (it's not my fault!), and of instrumentality (I had no choice!) protect the fragile agent from a confrontation with its accountability. They provide the imaginary cover for a more fundamental deadlock.

I have read Žižek's notion of enjoyment as the impossible being-there of the subject in terms of fixity, that is, as that which holds the subject in place. And, I've emphasized how this fixity not only persists in capitalism but is necessary to the circulation of capital. Capitalism relies on the production of excesses, on intensifications and expansions that always exceed their initial conditions. Accordingly, the account of fixity differentiates Žižek's approach to the subject from other approaches in political theory. For Žižek, the subject persists within the setting or structure in which it finds itself, a persistence we can understand through the idea of the "forced choice:" no matter what the subject chooses, something is lost; yet, breaking out of the confines of this choice means changing the very conditions that make one a subject. We can also understand these confines in terms of the fantasy of passivity that accompanies the idea of liberal freedom. What provides the subject with its sense of agency is a not full knowledge of the circumstances (an impossibility) but a more fundamental fantasy that covers over the deadlock of the forced choice.

The society of enjoyment

Žižek's emphasis on enjoyment provides a powerful way to understand and critique the contemporary political-economic formation of communicative capitalism. It helps us grasp why global flows of capital and information, the digital era's seemingly endless capacity for accessing, distributing, and producing ideas and opportunities, have not resulted in anything like a democratic "globalization from below" but instead result in new forms of inequality, exploitation, and enslavement. To make this point, I turn now to Žižek's account of the present in terms of the generalized perversity of the society of enjoyment.

Žižek argues that the crucial feature of late capitalist societies is the way that transgression has been normalized (Žižek 2003: 56). Rather than conforming to stereotypes of responsible men in the public sphere and caring women in the private, contemporary subjects are encouraged to challenge gender norms and boundaries. Men and women alike are enjoined to succeed in the work force and in their family lives, to find fulfilling careers and spend quality time with their children. Networked communication technologies (high speed internet, cell phones) enable parents to work harder even as they attend to familial relationships. Similarly, emphases on the value of diverse cultural and ethnic traditions have replaced earlier injunctions to assimilate. These emphases find material support in consumer goods ranging from clothing and accessories targeted to specific demographic groups, to film, television, and print media, to, more recently, drugs and health plans designed for particular populations. What is now quite clear is a shift in the understanding of social membership away from the worker/citizen and toward the consumer.^[4] Thus, what disciplinary society prohibited, contemporary consumerism encourages, indeed, demands.

Contemporary consumer culture relies on excess, on a general principle that more is better.^[5] Excess drives the economy: super-sized meals at McDonalds and Burger King, gargantuan SUVs, fashion magazines urging shoppers to pick up “armloads” of the newest items, extreme sports, extreme makeovers, and, at the same time, bigger closets, the production of all sorts of organizing, filing, and containing systems, and a booming business in mini-storage units all of which are supposed to help Americans deal with their excess stuff. These makeovers, these fashions and accessories, provide material support for injunctions to be oneself, to create and express one’s free individuality, to become the unique and valuable person one already is, to break the bounds of conformity. Excess also appears in other aspects of life under communicative capitalism: 24/7 news, 800 channel television, blockbuster films, television shows advertised as the “most unbelievable moment of the season” and the “unforgettable series finale.” Self-help books tell us not just *how to achieve* sexual ecstasy, spiritual fulfillment, and a purpose-driven life—they tell us *to achieve* sexual ecstasy, spiritual fulfillment, and a purpose-driven life. Exaggeration is part of the very air we breathe. We are daily enjoined to enjoy. Ours is a society of the superego.

One might object at this point that Žižek’s emphases on contemporary injunctions to enjoy is misplaced. Does not the rise of religious fundamentalism, for example, suggest just the opposite, that is, a return to old sexual prohibitions? And, what about persistent warnings around health—don’t smoke, just say no to drugs, watch your weight, cut down on fat and carbohydrates—what are these if not new forms of discipline? Žižek’s response is, first, that one should not confuse regulations with symbolic prohibitions, and, second, that so-called fundamentalism also relies on an injunction to enjoy (Žižek 2003: 56).

The regulations we encounter everyday, the guidance we come under as we navigate late capitalism, are not symbolic norms. They are regulations that lack a claim to normative authority, but are instead installed by committees, by experts and pundits. Everyone knows they are ultimately contestable, carrying no symbolic weight. Experts argue over all the time over proper diets, the necessary amount of exercise, the benefits of red wine. In Žižek's terms, these regulations, then, are regulations of the very mode of transgression (Žižek 2003: 56). This makes sense when we recognize the way that these regulations fail to provide any real breathing space, any relief from the injunction to enjoy. In fact, they function much more perversely insofar as they never fail to remind us that we really aren't enjoying properly, we really aren't doing anything right. Thus, they reinforce the malevolent superego, empowering it to torment us all the more.

Žižek argues, moreover, that contemporary fundamentalisms also enjoy *jouissance*. Their seeming adherence to law is driven by a superego injunction to transgress contemporary regulations. I think of this in terms of a culture of cruelty. Opponents of gay marriage, in the name of family values, free their congregations to hate; indeed, they organize themselves via a fascination with the sexual enjoyment of same sex couplings, thereby providing enjoyment. Opposition to gay marriage gives opponents permission, in fact it encourages them, to find and weed out homosexual attraction. Might a boy be too artistic, too gentle? Might a girl be too aggressive? Christian fundamentalists opposing gay marriage urge that ambiguous behavior be identified and corrected before it's too late. If necessary, of course, they can provide retraining, that is, they can install young people in camps and programs that will "turn them straight."

The preoccupation with excess also characterizes the multiculturalism and political correctness associated with Left and liberal politics. Žižek argues liberal tolerance is in fact a "zero tolerance" of the other in the excess of the other's enjoyment (Žižek 2002: 174). If the other remains *too* tied to particular religious practices, say those that involve the subordination of women, the denial of medical treatment to children, the rejection of scientific findings regarding evolution and global warming, well, this other cannot be tolerated. This other is incompatible with liberal pluralism; differently put, liberalism wants another deprived of its otherness (Žižek 2003: 96, Žižek 2002: 11). White Leftist multiculturalists, even as they encourage the flourishing of multiple modes of becoming, find themselves in a similar bind (one in which class difference is inscribed): their support of differentiated cultural traditions means that they oppose the racism, sexism, and religiosity that bind together some poor whites. Just as the superego imperative operates in conservatism to encourage hate, so can it be found in liberalism and Left multiculturalism as well.

Correlative to the pervasive intrusion of superego enjoyment is a decline in the efficiency of symbolic norms, what Žižek refers to as the “collapse of the big Other.”^[6] The decline of symbolic efficiency refers to a fundamental uncertainty in our relation to the world, to the absence of a principle of charity that pertains across and through disagreement. We don’t know on whom or what to rely, whom or what to trust. Arguments and pervasive in one context carry little weight in another. In short, although the symbolic order is always and necessarily lacking, ruptured, today this lack is directly assumed. We no longer posit an overarching symbolic. We are so attuned to pretense and manipulation, “spin,” that we reject the very possibility of a truth beneath the lie or of a truth that cuts through the assortment of lies and injunctions to enjoy constitutive of the present ideological formation.

What we presume instead are a variety of partial fillers, partial substitutes. Thus, in place of symbolically anchored identities (structured in terms of conventions of gender, race, work, and national citizenship), we encounter imaginary injunctions to develop our creative potential and cultivate our individuality, injunctions supported by capital’s provisions of the ever new experiences and accessories we use to perform this self-fashioning (what Žižek refers to as the direct super-egoization of the imaginary ideal). (Žižek 1999: 368) In place of norms grounded in claims to universal validity, we have rules and regulations that are clearly the result of compromises among competing parties or the contingent and fallible conclusions of committees of experts. And, in place of the norms that relieve us of the duty to enjoy, that provide the prohibitions that sustain desire, we find ourselves at the mercy of the superego’s injunction. We are expected to have a good time, to have it all, to be happy, fit and fulfilled.

This compulsion results in overwhelming guilt and anxiety. On one hand, we are guilty both when we fail to live up to the superego’s injunction and when we follow it. On another, we are anxious before the enjoyment of the other. Given our inabilities to enjoy, the enjoyment of the other seems all the more powerful, all the more threatening. The other all too easily threatens our imaginary balance. An ever present reminder that someone else has more, is more fulfilled, more successful, more attractive, more spiritual, the other makes our own lack all the more present to us. That the fragility of contemporary subjects means others are experienced as threats helps make sense of the ready availability of the imaginary identity of the victim—one of the few positions from which one can speak. When others smoke, I am at risk. When others over-eat, make noise, flaunt their sexuality, then my *American way of life, my values*, are under attack. Indeed, in the terms provided by the war on terror, to be “civilized” today is to be a victim—a victim of fear of terrorism, a victim that has to be surveilled, searched, guarded, and protected from unpredictable violence. In all these cases, the imaginary identity of the victim authorizes the subject to speak even as it shields it from responsibility toward another (Žižek 2003: 166-168). The victim role, in

other words, is one wherein the subject who speaks relies on and presupposes the other as an object enjoying in its stead, and, moreover, as threatening, even unbearable, in that enjoyment.

One might have thought that the disintegration of restrictive symbolic norms, especially in the context of the speed and flows of communicative capitalism, would have ushered in a time of remarkable freedom. People in pluralist and pluralizing societies would be free to make the choices about who they want to be and how they want to live unhindered by racist and patriarchal conventions. Žižek's thesis, however, is that the decline of symbolic efficiency has introduced new opportunities for guilt and anxiety, new forms of submission, dependence, and domination. His account of the fixity of enjoyment explains why. Given that activity depends on passivity, that the very capacity to act relies on a nugget of enjoyment, the emergence of new opportunities for domination makes sense. In the face of injunctions to freedom, compulsions to individual self-creation, demands to choose and decide even when there are no reliable grounds for a decision, subjects will cling all the more desperately to the objects that sustain them, whether these objects are the myriad available momentary enjoyments provided by capital or the others as objects enjoying in our stead. We depend on these contingent enjoyments to be at all.

Indeed, Žižek argues that contemporary imperatives to freedom produce even more radical attachments to domination and submission. This attachment repeats the simple dynamic of transgression. If authorities say don't do X, then doing X will provide enjoyment (because prohibition relies on the fantasy that were it not for the prohibited object, one would enjoy). Conversely, if authorities say, do X, then not doing X provides enjoyment. Thus, Žižek insists that contemporary subjectivities confront an "obscene need for domination and submission" and he defends his point with reference to "the growth of sado-masochistic lesbian couples." (Žižek 1999: 360, 344) I think this example is absurd (and likely an instance of where Žižek's own enjoyment irrupts in the text). We can find much more powerful and widespread examples of contemporary attachments to domination in enthusiasm for coercive law, strict sentencing, the death penalty, and zero tolerance toward law-breakers. And, we can better account for impulses to submission, for the surprising willingness of many to accept even the most unconvincing pronouncements in a time of fear, uncertainty, and insecurity, by emphasizing, again, not sexual anecdotes but the need for relief from the injunction to decide for oneself when one has no grounds for choosing. Submission enables someone else to do what needs to be done for us, to be the object or instrument of our will—and, precisely because we don't even know what to will, we don't even have to will—we escape from the pressures of guilt and responsibility.

Conclusion: That's Why

Why should political theorists read Žižek? Because Žižek use of the concept of enjoyment provides a compelling way to grasp the political impasses of the present moment.

Endnotes

1. Žižek writes, "What we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*: the lack ('castration') is originary, enjoyment constitutes itself as 'stolen' . . . *Tarrying with the Negative*, 203-204.
2. Žižek writes, "there is a subject only in so far as there is some material/stain leftover that *resists* subjectivization, a surplus in which, precisely, the subject *cannot* recognize itself," Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), 28.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) 96. Žižek writes, "The 'totalitarian' notion of the 'administered world,' in which the very experience of subjective freedom is the form of appearance of subjection to disciplinary mechanisms, is ultimately the obscene fantasmatic underside of the 'official' public ideology (and practice) of individual autonomy and freedom: the first has to accompany the second, supplementing it as its obscene shadowy double . . ."
4. For a thorough, and more properly complex account of the relation of the figures of consumer and citizen, see Lizabeth's Cohen excellent history, *A Consumer's Republic* (New York: Knopf, 2003).
5. See Žižek's discussion in "Lenin's Choice," his afterward to *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917, V.I Lenin*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (2002) London: Verso, 277.
6. Žižek, Slavoj (1999), *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 322-334. See also my discussion in *Publicity's Secret* (2002) Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 131-138.

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