

21 pieces on Žižek and Hegel

Bart Nooteboom, 11 February 2018

335. Understanding Žižek: Psychotherapy of politics published 30-9-2017

Here I start a series of items in which I seek to understand Slavoj Žižek, and to engage in comments. Žižek is original, entertaining, humorous, and provocative, but to me also difficult to understand. He makes interesting, challenging observations and then, in the fragmented, lapidary manner of his presentation, veers off in different directions, and I get lost. With his terminology, he indulges in outrageous hyperbole that rattles my inclination to nuance. Žižek uses concepts from Lacan, and those I find even more difficult to understand. Meanings seem to shift from one setting to another. However, Žižek is addressing important, fundamental issues, so I keep on trying. My understanding is so limited and dubious that I will not claim to explain Žižek and Lacan. I use their ideas to develop ideas of my own, and they may well be in conflict with what Žižek and Lacan intended to say.

I need help to understand Žižek, and I found some in a presentation, on YouTube, by Marcus Poundⁱ, and in a study of Žižek's thought by Frank Vande Veireⁱⁱ

Žižek is inspired by the psychotherapy of Lacan, and applies it to politics. What is this about? The point, Pound tells us, is that both the self and social order are hidden, fantasized, idealized objects (called 'objet-a' by Lacan) that guide our conduct but remain subconscious, in the dark, dodging the agenda of debate. That connection was an eye-opener to me.

For Lacan, the subject, the self is not a given, but forms itself in interaction with the Other. That is also my view.

The meaning of the 'objet-a' varies. It is an idealized, fantasized, subconscious object, dreamed up to give some illusory identity or unity to a thing, a self, or the social order. Lacan presented it in analogy to an algebraic symbol that can take on different numerical values. Different images can fill in the objet-a, depending on the circumstances. It can be 'scopic', visualizing the object, or 'invocatory', invoking authority or conformance. A monarch stands for the social, legal order. One 'master signifier' is attempted to represent all other signifiers, but this never covers all.

The 'objet-a' is also presented as an object and cause of desire; of what the Other wants from us that we should rejoice in, in what is called 'jouissance', in a desire that can never be fully fulfilled. There is always an 'excess' or 'surplus' that cannot be caught. Thus, it is not so much an object of desire that might be reached as the lack of something that could completely satisfy desire.

A good example, I think, is trust. It is elusive, mercurial, difficult to grasp, and impossible to fully achieve. When we think we have it, distrust slits in. It is symbolized by a national flag or anthem, wedding rings, and as simple a thing as a handshake. We grab what is up for grabs.

For the social order, Žižek uses the notion of the *symbolic order*, derived from Lacan, and used also by Henry Bourdieu. It is taken as an 'objet-a'. The visible, rationalized order of established, dominant powers of vision and discourse manages to avoid discussion of its often dubious tacit, taken for granted origins, assumptions, principles, concepts and meanings that

are not and cannot be fully specified, always remain hidden to some extent. It cannot function otherwise.

A similar idea arises in the works of Michel Foucault, with his notion of ‘regimes of truth’. I compared Žižek and Foucault on this point in item 244 of this blog. There, and in item 226, I also considered the possibility for the individual to escape from the clutches of that order and develop an authentic identity, which remained an unsolved problem for Foucault.

The symbolic order is dressed up and veiled in ideology. A current example is market ideology. It lured socialism into ‘shedding its ideological feathers’ of ideals of equality, solidarity, care and social justice. While condemning socialist ideology, neo-liberal market ideology projected itself as being free from ideology, and to be of obvious and universal validity, that all reasonable people should see and acknowledge. ‘It’s the economy, stupid’, Bill Clinton said in the 1992 presidential campaign, and that slogan has spread across the capitalist world. If you did not go along, you were backward and dumb, behind the times, not to be taken seriously.

That neo-liberal market ideology has been supported by established economic dogma. Economists claim that they are value-free scientists, while in fact economics is based on a utility ethics that rules out considerations of intention, motive, morality and virtue. Individuality is abstracted in some universal, autonomous, anonymous voter, void of features. With market ideology hidden and other ideologies dropping out, politics fades into bureaucratic technocracy. From that, the present populist revolt has been born, reviving old seemingly forgotten ideologies of race and nation.

Žižek castigates the fake freedom of choice professed by capitalism, with advertising and internet manipulating choice. This is well-trodden ground in the literature, but Žižek uses, here also, categories derived from Lacan: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. According to liberal lore, the autonomous, rational economic agent should base its choice on the utility of the real. In fact, he/she has been guided to choose on the basis of the symbolic: depending on your life style, and the image you want to project, you choose one brand or the other. An example Žižek uses is that of the four-wheel drive Range Rover, the pioneering master of rough terrain, used for the trivial urban commute. Now, Žižek, claims, the emphasis is shifting to the imaginary, the experience one has, with the product offering authentic experience.

So, while Foucault struggled with the capture in the symbolic order that prevents the individual from achieving authenticity, now that order wins the ultimate victory of crafting the experience of authenticity.

336. Hidden things and selves

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Žižek departs from Kant’s philosophy, in his first Critique, of Pure Reason, and modifies it, using views from Hegel and Lacan. While Kant proposed that we cannot know reality (‘the Thing’) as it is ‘in itself’, Žižek follows Hegel’s view that this ‘Thing’ is ‘empty’ or ‘non-existent’. This transforms an epistemological void (we don’t know it) into an ontological one (it does not exist).

Let me note, in passing, that I disagree. Here, I remain a Kantian: we don’t know, but we cannot but believe that ‘it’ exists, even if in some objectively unknowable way. This is

important for my evolutionary argument, stated in this blog, that thought has developed from interaction with the world, and therefore in some way, for some prolonged time, must have had some adequacy concerning the world, or else it would not have survived.

While I am primarily a nominalist, some vestige of realism remains. I can clarify this with the multiple causality of Aristotle that I have used several times in this blog. Concepts and meanings in language are shaped according to the final cause of interest, the formal cause of mental construction, the conditional cause of context, the exemplary cause of mimicry and culture, but also the material cause of reality. From reality we mentally craft perceptions and ideas that suit us, in interaction with others in a culture.

It is difficult to accept that things in the world, selves, and social order do not really exist, are not some substance, do not have determinate, consistent, stable properties. Žižek claims that for all three, people adopt an illusory notion of a phantasized, thing, called 'objet-a' in the terminology of Lacan, and we lustfully cling to it, in 'jouissance'.

I am tempted to connect this notion of the 'objet-a' with my notion of an 'object bias', according to which we conceptualize according to a metaphor of objects in time and space.

Kant postulated that we cannot know the self. Žižek agrees with this, and so do I. The self is not accessible to itself. We cannot step outside ourselves to inspect ourselves. The self cannot know itself, in the same way that the eye cannot see itself. We do not have ideas, as things we can look at, handle, and turn around to inspect. We do not *have* ideas, we *are* them. The self is not an objective, outside bystander in the world, as implied in Descartes' notion of the self, but involved, immersed in it, constituted from interaction with it.

This idea has been adopted more widely. According to Heidegger, the self is not a being in the sense of an object but in the sense of a verb, being constituted by acting in the world. Deleuze and Guattari also saw thought as a force field in which we participate. Thought is not in us, we live in thought. 'The self is not an objectifiable thing that could be the substantial bearer of the origin of meaning' (Vande Veire, p. 49).

Here also, Žižek goes further, over the top, in my view, as he so often does, and posits that the self is 'empty' or non-existent. Here, he follows David Hume's denial that there is a self with any identifiable identity. The self is just a flux of perceptions and thoughts.

I disagree with that. Not being able to know or observe the self does not mean that there is no self, or that we cannot experience it in any way. Earlier in this blog, I argued that there is some coherence in the body, in the buzz of neuronal and endocrinal activity that regulate body and mind. Without that the body would not survive. While we cannot see how it all ties together, and cannot survey it, we do experience it. We cannot see the eye, but we experience seeing.

Here also, Žižek postulates that we grasp a mythical, non-existent self as an entity, an 'objet-a'. I agree. We have an urge towards an identity, even if we can only get it as a make-belief. It is difficult not to think of a self in such a manner. Again, we exercise an object bias in seeing the self as an object in time and space, and we attach some essence to it that constitutes its identity.

Third, the social order of laws, regulations and customs also is grasped, intuited as some object. That is the subject for the next item.

337. Hidden social orderⁱⁱⁱ

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Next to knowledge of the world, concerning ethics Žižek also starts with Kant, with his second Critique, of Practical Reason. Let me say from the start that here I deviate almost totally from Kant and Žižek. In epistemology I am a Kantian but in ethics I am not. There, I am an Aristotelian, going for a virtue ethics rather than a duty ethics.

According to Kant, the human being has a natural urge towards survival, in drives for food, sex, and protection, as well as a natural urge towards social recognition and respect. Beyond that, it also has a potential for a rational, unconditional commitment to a universal moral law, in particular the Kantian categorical imperative. That commitment must be unconditional, going against natural urges, desire and self-interest. One obeys the law not because one supports it or believes in it, or out of a mutual interest in a 'social contract', but because it is the law.

I am not throwing this out. Democracy requires acceptance of the law as an outcome of political contestation and compromise, even if it does not suit one.

Kant recognized that the law in place is often the outcome of a usurpation of power, and may not conform to considerations of justice. One may then criticise the law, but only while obeying it. He therefore condemned the French revolution, in particular the execution of Louis XVI. But once the revolution has established a new order one must obey that unconditionally.

Kant calls this freedom: freedom not to follow the impulse of natural urges, emotions, or self-interest. At the same time, it is odd to call the unconditional conformance to the law a form of freedom, since it constrains action, which is a form of unfreedom.

God gave Adam and Eve the freedom to sin, Kant gave humanity the freedom not to sin.

In my treatment of freedom, in this blog, I distinguished between negative freedom, in constraints upon actions, and positive freedom, which gives access to the good life, and I distinguished several levels of the latter freedom. The first level is oriented not to what one wants, but towards what one would want to want. That would include a Kant-like orientation, in a turn from impulse towards duty. However, there I would connect it to virtues, such as the virtue of justice, and I would not rule out satisfaction of natural urges as part of the good life. I find it highly perverse to define morality in terms of a denial of human nature. Kantian duty ethics has caused manifold harms of hypocrisy and suppressed feelings.

Kant recognized forms of evil, in the difficulty to adhere to the law unconditionally, in suppression of impulse and self-interest. One evil is hypocrisy, in pretending to follow the law while going against it, hiding the self-interest involved. An extreme form is to reject the legitimacy of the law, as in a revolutionary movement. The most extreme is to not accept any law, in the moral duty to reject any and all moral duty, as in the work of de Sade. As Žižek formulated it: there are ways of 'doing the right thing for the wrong reasons', and 'doing the wrong thing for the right reasons'.

According to Žižek, obedience to the law cannot be based only on rational acceptance and discipline or punishment of transgression, and must entail belief in some non-existent, fantasized, well-funded, just law, Lacan's 'objet-a', with a perverse 'lust going beyond lust', 'jouissance', in following the law while knowing that its demands can never be fully satisfied, and feeling lust even in that failure. Ideology hides the arbitrary nature and violent origins of the law. Rationally, consciously, people know it is not real but emotionally, tacitly, they grasp the phantom.

Žižek goes further. The 'jouissance' includes some surreptitious deviation from the social order that is publicly acknowledged, such as acceptance of homosexuality or denunciation of misogyny, but with shared guilty pleasures, pursued in complicit secrecy, like intimations and occasional practice of homosexuality in the army, and misogynist jokes in a locker room.

Žižek also refers to Blaise Pascal, who proposed that conformance to the law, and religious ritual, arises not from rational understanding and consent or belief but from habit, social inculcation, and from that habit produces belief. Ritual is the vehicle for this. It is not that one kneels because of faith but one acquires faith from kneeling. Rituals in organizations, and rituals of elections and voting are not conducted from belief in justice and democracy, but serve to turn make-believe into belief.

Here, Pascal was surprisingly close to modern insights from brain science that deny the presence of free will. We act from social habits that breed unconscious drives determining choice and producing acts, which we rationalize afterwards with pious intent.

I am closer here to Pascal than to Žižek. I think that the more or less automatic conformance to established order is not produced by some hidden lust, but from assimilation of social practices one needs to conform to for reasons and instincts of social survival and acceptance. Is that in any way similar to Žižek's 'jouissance'? I do agree with Žižek that there is a hidden bad consciousness involved, of the arbitrariness and injustices of the established order, which needs to be buried in the rationalizations of ideology.

Bankers rationalize their perverse behaviour with market ideology.

338. The Other as threat or opportunity?

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Here I continue my attempts to understand Žižek.

As discussed in item 336 in this blog, according to Žižek the self is hidden, or 'empty' or 'nonexistent' in his parlance, but people adopt the 'phantasmatic' illusion of an identifiable self, the Lacanian 'objet-a'.

Following Althusser, Žižek claims that to become a subject one needs to be addressed by an other. I agree, from my perspective that the self is constructed from interaction in the world, in particular with other people. However, Lacan, and with him Žižek, does not think the subject is constituted by the address from the other, as Althusser thinks, but that this address contributes to the subjects *illusion* of having an objectifiable self, in and of itself, prior to the address.

Now even if that is an illusion, this leaves open the possibility that in fact the subject is constituted by the address of the other, among other forms of interaction between people. And that is my position: the self is in fact constituted by interaction, but thinks he/she already had this self, and that it is the reason he/she is addressed.

Now, the point here is that Žižek also follows Althusser in seeing this address by the other as a threat: ‘what does he/she want from me?’ or ‘Che vuoi?’, as Žižek says. Why assume this as a threat? It is, in my view, to be seen as an opportunity, indeed as necessary to have a self. And why is the address seen as a threat if it is seen as being motivated by the prior identity that the subject (erroneously) thinks it already had? Is it not more plausibly seen as a recognition, even appreciation, an expression of interest?

In this blog, and more extensively in an earlier book^{iv}, I argued that to have any idea of a self one needs to look at oneself from the perspective of an other. I used the insight from Maxine Sheets-Johnstone^v that being suckled by a mother, in spurts of sucking and resting, exchanging coos and gurgles, babies lay the basis for the alternation, give and take, enunciation and assimilation, of conversation. Babies have an apparently instinctive inclination towards being positively open and expectant towards a stranger, as well as an instinct towards suspicion and aversion. It depends on experience which is confirmed as a more enduring trait. Children jostling and cavorting in the school yard are exploring the boundaries of pain and body, as part of developing a sense of self, and a basis for empathy and morality. This contributes to the development of mirror neurons. In a further development, I used the philosophy of Levinas extensively, also in this blog, to argue that we need the other to have a chance of achieving some of the highest possible form of freedom, namely that of freedom from prejudice.

Indeed, as Althusser and Žižek claim, there is radical uncertainty concerning what the other wants or will do. To take the opportunity of being inspired by the other, one needs the courage to take the risk involved. That is also indispensable for trust. That, in my view, is the most fundamental reason to consider courage a virtue. It is wise, then, not to fall into blind trust. Trust entails giving room for action to another, but when duped, one can reign in this room. Taking inevitable risk, to grasp the opportunity presented by the other, one is also wise to develop resilience to setbacks, and to maintain some reserve to fall back on in case of loss.

I do admit that this is fraught with obstacle and difficulty. I have argued that there is ‘cognitive distance’ between people, which includes intellectual distance, in understanding and meanings, as well as moral distance, in different ethical beliefs and moral impulses.

Now, Žižek conducts his analysis of the subject for his investigation of ideology, and I find that important. If I understand correctly, the argument is as follows. The fearful address by the other needs to be pacified by ascribing some meaning to it that one shares. In fact, as also argued earlier in this blog, actions are largely determined by subconscious impulse, and reasons are mostly rationalizations post hoc. In human interaction, in society, this rationalization takes the form of ideology. We claim reasons for conduct while in fact choice and action is determined by hidden prejudice and impulse. Now, again if I understand correctly, to pacify the threat of the address by the other, one needs to have a shared ideology.

Here, I agree: to cross distance, in particular moral distance, one needs some shared ideology. In terms of Wittgenstein’s language games: one must share the appropriate game, depending on the context. The rules of the game have the same role as ideology. They are arbitrary, and

could well be different, in a different game, but they must be observed for this particular game to be played.

Now, what if ideologies are in conflict? If address by the other is seen as a threat, then something that does not fit into one's own rationalization of conduct is castigated. When the address is seen as an opportunity, on the other hand, one may receive it to question one's ideology, a possible opening to a new game. But that also requires that one rids oneself of the illusion that the adopted ideology is somehow objectively valid and true, and not the dubious rationalisation that in fact it is.

339. Authoritarianism or democracy

published 28-10-2017

A leading question for Žižek has been: why would people obey 'the law?' The Law here is the whole of laws, rules, regulations and habits that form the 'symbolic order'.

As I discussed in item 337 of this blog, for Žižek obedience requires some 'obscene lust', called 'jouissance' (adopted from Lacan), lust even in knowing that one will never be able to obey completely, always feeling guilty, as Kant recognized, of not having obeyed 'purely', acting on hidden motives of pleasure, self-interest and hypocrisy.

I wonder. Isn't there more pleasure in breaking the rules, in a romantic urge of transgression, in self-manifestation or 'thymos'? Perhaps one could even say that rules are needed to enable the pleasure in breaking them.

I see neither the actual presence nor the philosophical need of a masochistic pleasure of obedience, and I would stay with the simpler explanation that disobedience is punished by isolation or ostracism. On a deeper level, my argument would be, as I have argued extensively in this blog, that selves are developed in interaction with others, and perhaps some awareness or even pleasure in this is built into human instinct.

To me, Žižek becomes more interesting when he claims that it is unclear what, precisely, is demanded by the 'big Other' of the Law. As Kant already recognized, the symbolic order in place has no clear, consistent, objective foundation. It is an outcome of historical process, in clashes of interest and grabs of power. That order is not only impossible to state coherently and fully, but has no foundation in logic, rationality or ethics, and is a scandal that needs to remain hidden. This is difficult to accept, and people grasp at some 'fantasmatic' non-existent ideal, called 'objet-a' (a term taken from Lacan).

Here emerges the problem of liberal democracy: decision making arises from a clash of special interests that, like bumper cars in a fancy fair, yield outcomes no-one could predict and perhaps no-one really intended, with unforeseen casualties. It yields an often incoherent, even self-contradictory tangle of rules and regulations.

Žižek now argues, convincingly in my view, that this needs to be hidden in the phantasm of an order that is not to be questioned. This imagined order used to be embodied in some unquestioned authority, in the form of a monarch with divine investiture. The question is: When that disappeared, what was to come in its place?

The iconic historical case is that of the French revolution. The aim was to eliminate all special interests, of the king, the clergy and the nobility, and to institute the 'general will' of the people. But who was to represent that? Any claim to representation would be suspect, hiding special interest, and so the revolution ended in slaughtering itself, in a 'virtuous terror'.

What is needed, Žižek claims, is some other idealized ('phantasmatic') something, an 'objet-a', that is not questioned, and is dressed up in ideology. He argues that this requires some leading 'master-signifier', to symbolize this object, providing a focus to effectuate blind, willing, even eager conformance. That can be a national flag, national anthem, the glitter and soap of royalty, or hero entrepreneurs that symbolize the glory of capitalism and the wonders of the market.

Žižek offers the example of the Rumanian revolution against Ceausescu, where protesters waved the national flag with the central red star cut out of it, with the resulting hole demonstrating the elimination of the master signifier.

When the emperor was seen not to wear any clothes, and now in politics the democratic order is unmasked as yielding arbitrary and often partially unjust and even at times irrational, or counter-productive results, there is a call for just and rational government, without the recognition that this cannot in fact be achieved. Political parties that claim to offer representation only represent partial interests, waving rival ideologies.

This frightening void, Žižek argues, is now filled by populist claims to yield the desired, unified society, in a unity of the people, embodied in an authoritarian leader with unquestionable authority, with master-signifiers dug up from national history, and polished into appealing myths. This hides the fact that here also not everyone can be satisfied, promises will not be kept, and outcomes will again be partially unjust, incoherent, irrational, and so on. In authoritarian regimes, the blame for this is shifted onto some scapegoat that carries the blame of failure. For the Nazis it was the Jews, for Stalinism the revisionists betraying socialist purity. For present populists it is the refugees, non-western immigrants, or some guilty conspiratorial 'elite'. The scapegoating of refugees feeds on what earlier in this blog I discussed as 'parochial altruism'.

In the end, Žižek winds up in seeking freedom in breaking out of the ruling symbolic order by grasping a new mastery for itself, with some new master signifier that gives no quarter to demands for rational and ethical justification. But that just yields a continuation of the exercise of blind power.

There is, in my view, no alternative to dealing with democracy as best we can. That is the subject for a later item.

340. Levels of freedom revisited

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Here I revisit the different levels of freedom that I discussed earlier in this blog (item 49), to make a connection with the discussion of Kant and Žižek in the preceding items.

On the lowest level is the freedom as usually seen in ordinary language: the freedom from constraint or interference. One can do what one likes. This is also called *negative freedom*. God gave Adam and Eve the freedom to sin.

Beyond that there are freedoms in the form of access to sources of ‘the good life’. First, there, comes the *freedom of Kant*: freedom in the form of being freed from the impulses of lust, desire, addiction or self-interest, in unconditional obedience to ‘the Law’, the symbolic order, of what it is ‘right’ to do, untainted by personal urges or interest. I characterized this as follows: not following what one wants but what one thinks one should want. Kant gave humanity the freedom not to sin.

This leads to the problems identified by Kant and discussed at length by Žižek, that such Law is arbitrary, unclear, ambiguous, indeterminate, and contradictory, depending on contexts of action, and therefore cannot be justified in terms of justice and rationality. Also, it originates from grabs of political power, and therefore needs to be hidden. As a result, according to Žižek some illusory, non-existent ideal ‘objet-a’, is taken to stand in for it, absconded and dressed up in ideology. The *freedom of Žižek* now is to break free from it. Since Kant defined deviation from the Law as evil, Žižek accepts that this freedom is evil, and most evil, or ‘diabolically’ evil, as he calls it, when it is not motivated by desire or self-interest, but as a matter of principle, in pursuit of a new symbolic order. I characterized this as a change of what one thinks one should want.

Beyond that, I claimed, on the highest level there is freedom in the form of ability not to exercise one’s views and convictions about the good but to change them; not to change or replace the Law, but one’s thinking about it. By many, this change of oneself is held to be impossible. I argued that it is possible but for it one needs the opposition from others with their views and convictions. I was inspired to this by Levinas’ ‘philosophy of the other’, so I now call it the *freedom of Levinas*.

My point now is that this latter freedom is the freedom needed to make democracy work.

There still is the issue, a recurrent theme in this blog, how to escape from the symbolic order. For Foucault: how to achieve an authentic life, and he had no answer. For Žižek, a break with it is evil, even ‘diabolically’ so. I think there is way out.

In my discussions of meaning, I used the difference, proposed by de Saussure, between the established, synchronic order of ‘langue’, and the creative, open-ended, diachronic process of ‘parole’, living language use, which yields openness of meaning. I tried to formulate that also in terms of the *hermeneutic circle*.

I now propose that something similar applies more widely, in the ‘excess’ or ‘surplus’ that Žižek claimed for the ‘objet-a’. If the order cannot be fully specified, it is open, and this yields a possible escape. The indeterminacy of the ‘objet-a’ is not to be deplored but to be celebrated, whether it concerns our view of objects in the world, our self, or the symbolic order. Imperfection on the move. If this is accepted, exit from the existing order may be odd, quaint, and will certainly cause some isolation, lack of recognition, and loneliness, but it is not diabolical. People should read poetry more.

341. Dealing with democracy

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In item 339 of this blog, I discussed Žižek’s diagnosis of the problem of liberal democracy as being unable to provide a shared ‘ideal object’, ‘objet-a’, of a good ‘symbolic order’ that

appeals to society as a whole, and is universally recognized and seen as the Law, to be obeyed unconditionally. Representation of the people in terms of a God-appointed monarch has been lost, and in democracy society is broken up into partial interests represented in rival political parties. This yields an inconsistent, messy, tangle of laws and regulations that do not and cannot satisfy everyone, and is seen as arbitrary, at best a result of political incompetence, and at worst as a conspiracy of a devious elite.

If I follow Žižek's thought, people still have an urge towards some idealized order that does not exist, and is dressed up in ideology, symbolized with salient 'master signifiers'. In a democracy this would yield rival ideologies, which then provide an obstacle for the compromises that need to be achieved in coalition governments. This is perceived as betrayal to the ideology. As a result, democracies have gravitated towards a neglect of ideology, particularly in the loss of socialist ideology, which results in a bureaucratic technocracy, and further betrayal and loss of the 'objet-a'.

Disenchanted with this, people are now seduced by populism, instigated by a leader who claims to represent the people as a whole, as the embodiment of the people or of a shared 'objet-a' with appealing 'master signifiers'. The problem with this, as identified by Žižek, is that this authoritarian leader also cannot make good on his promises of cohesion and successful representation of all, and to hide that, any failure to do so is attributed to some scapegoat, such as the Jews for the Nazi's, and refugees or 'the ruling elite' for current populists.

The only alternative, I think, is to muddle through with democracy but somehow improve it and make it more acceptable.

For this, one possibility is for political parties re-adopt ideologies, to avoid technocracy, and offer alternative 'objets-a', even if the clashes between them complicate the political compromises needed for coalition governments.

I see this presently happening in the Netherlands, in a record breaking length of an attempt to form a coalition government after the election in 2017. Sensing the hot breath in their necks from populism they re-enact ideologies that either pacify populist instincts or re-establish liberalist lore.

Another possibility is for people to wake up and renounce their aspiration towards an objet-a with an exclusive ideology and the illusory ideal of universal, equal outcomes of justice and fully rational and coherent policies.

Conceptually, perhaps the most fundamental requirement is that of dropping the illusion of a universal order, to appreciate diversity and to accept that justice varies across individuals and the conditions they are in. Even more fundamentally, I think, is the need to shed what I have called the 'object bias', in seeing the symbolic order as a thing with a clear identity, and then to see it, rather, as a process of development, in deliberation and conflict, regulated in debate. To aim not for full and complete substantive justice that is equal for all, but the best possible procedural justice. Imperfection on the move.

I have been pleading to replace the utility ethics underlying liberalism with a form of virtue ethics, with virtues defined as competencies for achieving the good life. I showed that I was aware of the problem that this might yield a new paternalism, prescribing how to achieve the

good life, and that I want to maintain the liberal idea of freedom for people to decide for themselves what constitutes the good life.

For that, I proposed a distinction between procedural virtues, needed for a just conduct of deliberation and political compromise making, and more substantive virtues that support individual choice of the content of the good life. The first is a public matter, the second is not. I also noted that in fact the traditional, 'cardinal' virtues of reason(ability), courage, moderation and justice have that nature of procedural virtues.

That is also in agreement with my stance towards markets. We need them but we also need to curtail them in their limits and failures. They need to be formed and informed by virtues of reasonableness (which includes openness), courage (to be responsible to society and to counteract perverse interests and incentives), moderation (in remuneration and profit), and justice (fairness, equitability).

Above all, an awareness is needed, and commitment, to what in the preceding item in this blog I called Levinassian freedom: the highest level of freedom from prejudice that arises from opposition by the other, which is to be sought and valued as an opportunity rather than avoided as a threat.

Another conceivable fundamental reconceptualization might be to no longer see democracy in terms of representation in parties with their political programmes and corresponding ideologies, in which voters can periodically position themselves, but as a process of policy formation and execution in which people participate, in some 'commons'. Instead of a clash between party ideologies there then is a clash in debate between people and their views and convictions.

Some combination is also conceivable, of political parties for some areas of policy, on the national and supranational level (such as the EU), and local commons for local provision of amenities and services.

342. Process philosophy

published 15-11-2017

According to Kant, we can know neither the 'thing in itself', out in the world, nor ourselves. Hegel turned this epistemological gap: we don't know, into an ontological one; it does not exist. Žižek went along with Hegel, and, following Lacan, proposed that people craft an illusory 'object-a', for things and selves, as discussed in the foregoing items in this blog.

This objet-a is part, I propose, of what I have called an 'object bias': the irresistible urge to see the world and ideas, concepts, meanings in terms of objects.

Here I propose an alternative: let us shift the focus of our understanding of the world from object to process. I have argued for that in several places in this blog, concerning being, identity, cognition, truth, meaning, and democracy. I summarize this below.

I have referred to Heidegger's view of '*being*' not as a noun but as a verb. I deny *identity* as some fixed given, with some enduring essence, and presented it as a process of emergence in acting in the world. As an alternative to the idea of identity as an object I proposed the idea of identity as a position in developing networks of contacts with people. Inspired by Levinas'

philosophy of the other, I proposed that identity is developed in interaction with others, and that intellectual and spiritual progress requires openness to opposition by the other.

In all this, I use the view from pragmatic philosophy (Peirce, James, Dewey) that *cognition* is developed from interaction with the physical and social world. Instead of *truth* as some ‘thing to be found’, I employ the idea from pragmatist philosophy of truth as ‘warranted assertibility’, in a process of debate, and ethics not as a fixed order but as ‘debatable’, in Aristotelian ‘*phronesis*’ or practical wisdom, where ethical judgements depend on context.

I also use the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone that *feelings, ethics and morality* arise from interaction in movement and bodily interaction with others. This yields a ‘dynamic congruency’ between emotions and movement that is not a given but is ongoing. Among other things, this yields mirror neurons.

Mirror neurons are not present at birth and are not genetically determined in later development. Like other mental constructions they arise from networks of neuronal connections that emerge and develop in time, ‘sprout’ and are ‘pruned’ depending on how often they are activated and how productive they are. It is no coincidence that they arise in the motor regions in the brain, which govern movement.^{vi}

I present *meaning* not as some fixed reference, with a word as a label attached to a thing it refers to or ‘denotes’, but as a process of sense-making, of how to identify whether something belongs to some class, or whether something is true. This is done on the basis of connotations one attaches to things. I adopt the distinction between *reference* and *sense* from the logician/philosopher Frege. Reference concerns something as ‘given’, sense concerns ‘the way in which it is given’, as Frege put it, which I turned into ‘the way in which we identify something, an X as an Y’.

Sense depends on experience: connotations are collected along the course of one’s life, in a culture, in a series of contexts. A life course is unique to a person, and hence sense varies between people, yielding ‘cognitive distance’.

Reference can be undetermined, with uncertainty, or difference of opinion, whether some object belongs to a class or not. It can also change. I used the example of a stuffed cow used as a chair. New connotations emerge from action in the world, and they may remain idiosyncratic or become publicly adopted. I used the ‘hermeneutic circle’ as a model of meaning change.

Perhaps the distinction between sense and reference can also be used to clarify Žižek’s notion of ‘master signifiers’ attached to the idealized ‘object-a’. He uses the example of the monarch as the master identifier of the social order. Here, the ‘object-a’ is the intended reference, and the ‘master signifier’ is a leading sense maker for identifying it.

The peculiarity here is that what is referred to does not in fact exist, is a ‘phantasm’, as Žižek calls it, but people believe, or make believe, that it does exist. In other words, the reference has no ontological anchor, so that the sense of the signifier cannot be tested, and master signifiers can be manipulated, and become an instrument of ideology.

Žižek used the example of ‘professor’. Other scholars may have the same degree of knowledge, talents, and scientific achievements as the professor, but are not professors. Thus,

Žižek claims, the term ‘professor’ is ‘empty’. It is not. It has sense, in helping to identify someone as a professor, also to people who cannot judge his/her qualities. It brings in a link with official standards, procedures and authorities appointed to appoint professors.

Thus, a master signifier yields institutionalized sense. Is it thereby indoctrination? It certainly is, but it is also a pragmatic necessity to avoid endless debate between different senses of scholarship, in order to get on with the job of appointing professors.

For *democracy*, I proposed to replace the current perspective of positioning, in voting for a political party and its programme, once in four or five years, by an ongoing process of being involved in making and implementing policy, in a ‘commons’, at least on a local level, in citizens councils.

To summarize all this, I used the motto of ‘imperfection on the move’.

344. Žižek: Beyond Lacan

published 2-12-2017

Here I continue with a series of items on Žižek. Like many others I am amused by his style, but also detest the hyperbole, provocation, bluff, outrageous statements later retracted with the excuse that he did not mean them in that way, and so on, but he does have interesting or at least challenging things to say that call for response. I cannot read all the 50 books or so that he published, which anyway are said to include many repetitions. The sources I use are mostly the interviews and debates posted on YouTube. I am not everywhere sure that I understand or interpret him correctly, which also is difficult because he regularly seems to contradict himself. He endorsed Donald Trump but also rejected him. He favoured Jeremy Corbyn but rejected his socialism. He pleaded for bureaucratic socialism but also rejected it. And so on. I am doing my best to make sense of it all. I begin with a discussion of his use of Lacan.

If I understand correctly, Žižek is inspired first of all by Hegel, and second by psychoanalysis, in particular Lacan. What those have in common is interest in paradoxes, tensions, between ideas, in conduct, and in social systems. The difference between the two is, I heard Žižek say, is that with Hegel the tensions are resolved in a dialectic that raises the issues to a higher level of synthesis (called ‘aufhebung’, in German), while in psychoanalysis the tensions remain unresolved and hidden, with mental trauma’s, mostly from infancy, buried in the unconscious, but with conduct or expressions or dreams sometimes revealing them in ‘Freudian slips’.

Here I want to look a little further at what Lacan called *jouissance*, enjoyment with an ‘excess’ that goes beyond enjoyment, with some paradoxical twists. Sex is the more appealing when it is more or less illicit, or submissive, or repressive. More sexual freedom and permissiveness have made it less enticing, has bred more frigidity. Fraternities, at universities and in armies, are aimed at brotherhood, mutual loyalty and support, but engage in hazing practices that are demeaning, suppressive, assaulting at times. Movies condemn violence while relishing it.

I am interested here, in particular, in celebrity worship. People with simple lives, perceived (by themselves or supposedly by others) as insignificant, pedestrian, compared to the lives of public figures, celebrities, crave for some vicarious enjoyment from reflection of their

glamour and fame. People enjoy it the more when there is some deviance, something illicit in the celebrity's conduct.

I wonder where this comes from. Is it 'just there', in the human being? Is it a romantic relish of transgression? Is it a consolation for their own mediocrity: the idols may be glamorous, but they are also bad, unlike us decent people.

Žižek used the example of Donald Trump. A striking phenomenon is that his adherents celebrate him not in spite but partly because of his vulgarity, lies, provocation, aggression, bigotry and hypocrisy. Why?

Žižek says that this is because his followers are secretly like him, and Trump gives them a feeling of legitimation. Also, they feel victimized by globalization and a political elite, and relish Trump's rebellion, and his politically incorrect scorn and defamation of that elite.

I think Žižek himself is an example. He gathered fame with interesting views but also by provocation, bluff, political incorrectness, and humour.

If these insights are due to Lacan, that is to be applauded.

However, Žižek seems to surreptitiously apply this insight from psychoanalysis to the level of social systems: capitalism and politics. That is a category mistake. It helps to explain the Trump phenomenon, but does it explain the present crisis of capitalism that Žižek considers to be of critical importance (along with many others, including myself)?

To some extent perhaps it can. Capitalism is indeed full of paradox. Its virtues of yielding material prosperity, dynamism and freedom of enterprise are tainted by perversities of exclusion, exploitation, and injustice, which are relished and at the same time denied and justified by the logic of markets.

So, Lacanian insight does seem to apply, but there is more, which lies on the system level, not in psychoanalysis. Like many other systems, social systems have 'emergent properties' that are lacking in the individuals that make up the system.

In particular there is what in this blog I have called 'system tragedy'. People in banks, other business, government and politics are ensnared in positions and roles in organizations and networks of interests and dependencies that coerce them to go along with processes and outcomes that are at odds with their ethics, which then is hidden, tucked away, in buried shame. This is not *jouissance*, I think.

What mostly plays a role, is the logic of prisoners' dilemma's, as I have discussed earlier in this blog. Some people may secretly cherish to perversion of the game, but others would like to exercise their ethics and turn things around, but can afford to do so only if others do so as well, and since everyone argues like this, no-one does, and perversities of the system remain.

The classic solution is for governments to intervene and impose a way out of the dilemma, but now, and that, in particular, is the feature of present capitalism, governments are themselves engaged in prisoners' dilemma's that force them into a 'race to the bottom' in facilitating the interests of multinational corporations, to the detriment of citizens. Anger about this is one of the feeds of populism.

Žižek claimed that Stalinism was fundamentally more evil than Nazism. While in Nazism the victim was clear (Jews, Roma, the mentally ill), in Stalinism it was totally unpredictable who would suffer elimination, and the chance of it was higher the higher up one was in the hierarchy of the communist nomenclatura. The revolution devoured its children. Žižek is at a loss to explain this, he said.

Here is an explanation. It goes back to Rousseau's 'general will', from his book on the 'Social contract' (1762). There, every individual has to surrender its natural liberty and submit to the indivisible collective taken as sovereign, representing the interest of the united people, devoid of any particular partial interest. If there is a clash between individual perception, opinion, interest and the general will, the latter is always right, and the individual has to submit to it willingly.

He wrote, literally: '.. when the collective opinion contrary to mine wins (in the determination of the general will), that proves nothing else than that I was mistaken, and that what I estimated as being the general will wasn't'^{vii}

Rousseau could not stand the messiness, the erraticism of democracy, where people may submit to what is democratically decided, but still stick to their conviction and strive to amend the decision. He wrote, literally: '.. the long debates, the discussions, announce the emergence of particular interests and the decline of the state'.^{viii}

What is still, or again, the relevance of this? Populists on the right also demand conformance to the general will of the people, or else be excluded or cut loose from the law. And the leader next claims that he is the unique voice of the general will.

But who are the leaders? Who is the true interpreter of the general will, untainted by particular position, interest or opinion? Anyone claiming leadership or aspiring to it can rightly be accused not being able to satisfy such purity, because no one is.

Hence the trials and tribulations of the 'virtuous' Jacobine terror of the French revolution, which arose against the established interests and position of the king, nobility and clergy. No new special interest could be permitted to raise its head, which was cut off when it did.

There is a 'Catch 22' at play here. To recall: In the novel 'Catch 22', by Joseph Heller, a soldier at war has the right to be sent home when mentally unstable. But when you apply for it, you prove you are rational, not mentally unstable. So, no-one gets sent home for mental instability. In the present context: the wrong people rise to the top. The top requires people who set aside their personal ambition but when you do that you do not aspire to the top. So, people at the top are prone to be purged.

That, I think was what was also going on in Stalinism, though intensified by Stalin's paranoia. It explains the arbitrariness of elimination, and the trials in which perpetrators had to admit guilt and submit to judgement. That also happened under Mao, and Pol Pot.

Behind this also lay, I think, the Hegelian notion of an inexorable march of history towards the realization of the absolute spirit, at the ever receding horizon, in comparison to which human life here and now is insignificant and to be sacrificed when opportune.

Like Kantian ethics, like the categorical imperative, this general will is to be free from personal interest or satisfaction, is abstracted from human nature and worldly contingency, hanging in the cold stratosphere, far from life on earth. I quote Rousseau again: ‘The law considers the subjects ... as abstract, never a human being as individual, nor as a certain particular’.^{ix}

346. Žižek: The crisis of capitalism

published 16-12-2017

Žižek tells us that he appreciates capitalism, as even Marx and Stalin did, as ‘the most productive, welfare producing, dynamic force in human history’. However, as Marx did in his way, and many others do now, Žižek sees a looming crisis of capitalism.

Some people see light at the end of the tunnel, in some correction on capitalism, but Žižek joked that this light may be an oncoming train.

Multinational corporations pressure governments to provide tax breaks, allow for deteriorating conditions of labour, and give subsidies for settling in a country and for cheap energy. This is yielding a ‘race to the bottom’, with governments competing among each other to attract or keep multinationals.

Banks were bailed out after incurring excessive risks, hiving the losses off onto the public, leading to the 2008 crisis. Measures were taken to re-regulate banking to prevent such crises from occurring again, but in the US those are being abolished again by president Trump, and the next crisis is brewing.

These developments have been accompanied by the emergence of what is called a ‘precarariat’ (a contraction of ‘precarious’ and ‘proletariat’). There, workers have no lasting jobs, hop from one project or temporary employment to another, often with bad labour conditions, poor perspectives for housing, proper health care and pension. This is not only undermining their economic position, but is eating away their self-respect and hope.

Extremes occur, for example, in mines in Congo, factories in Bangladesh, services in India, and building projects in Arab gulf states, just to name a few. In China, many millions have been uprooted from their rural communities, to migrate to factories in the large cities, dumped in poor and filthy housing, meeting discrimination from the settled middle class that enjoys rising prosperity and cultural facilities.

In Western countries conditions are less dire, but serious enough to breed discontent and resentment, yielding political upheaval in populist movements in the US and Europe.

Žižek said, in one of those one-liners he throws out, that he supported Trump. When challenged on this, he said that what he ‘really meant’ was that Trump helps to carry the system to a crisis, unearthing the ugly truths of neoconservatism.

What will the precariat do when they find out that the populists also have no adequate answer, giving promises they cannot keep?

Marx predicted that the proletariat would form a class and would grab political power in a revolutionary overthrow, which they did. What will the present precariat do? An obstacle here is that the workers compete with each other in getting work, and do not have a shared workplace as a platform for banding together. Or will the new media offer the means to do so?

In one of his lectures, Žižek recalled how communism and Nazism also had guilty dreams of the submission of labour to higher purposes. In late capitalism that higher purpose lies in the supremacy of markets. An end of human submission in labour may lie in the emergence of androids, robots, who will not clamour for food, freedom or happiness.

Karl Polanyi, in his *Great transformation* (1944) proposed that unchecked markets lead to fascism. That happened in the rise of Hitler and is happening now.

Žižek offers the Hegelian thought that every system contains its contradictions and anomalies. Capitalism inevitably entails unemployment, exclusion. Poverty of the drop-outs is the price to be paid for prosperity. Means to a declared aim become aims for themselves. In capitalism markets and production systems were aims for prosperity, but now they have become aims in themselves.

A case in point is Chili, which under Pinochet was the pioneer of extreme neoliberalism. It wins in both the best and the worst. After some years it had the highest rate of investment, economic growth and per capita income in Latin America, and the lowest murder rate. The inequality of capital ownership is among the highest in the world: the top 1% owns 1/3. Among the rest of the population 3/4 has debts, one third of which is behind in payment. The depression rate is the highest in the world, suicide rates are among the highest in the world, and next to North Korea it is the only country with rising suicide among minors. Only the rich can afford good health care and education.^x

Then, for another dimension, Žižek also notes, like many others, that the emerging ‘platforms’ such as those of Google, Facebook, Amazon and Uber, with their use of algorithms that employ ‘big data’ on choices of consumers and voters are now getting to know them ‘better than they know themselves’, manipulate their subconscious choices and thereby dehumanize them.

As Žižek says, this is privatization and monopolization of intellectual capital, yielding rent, not profit as a margin on costs, but as unrelated to costs, thus going against the main argument of market efficiency and liberty that capitalism proclaims.

This is one of the cases of ideology that Žižek loves to expose, where dark reality is hidden behind the shining official lore.

Capitalism still legitimizes itself as being based on liberal democracy, but it is presently in important ways becoming similar to the authoritarianism that it condemns. How different will authoritarian capitalism of present China, Russia, Malaysia, etc. be from the new-capitalist monopolies and manipulations of economic, social, intellectual and symbolic capital?

Žižek claims that, even more deeply dark, capitalist competition is not only joy in winning but also, but hidden, joy at others losing, which is now increasingly becoming manifest in indifference to the increasing exclusion of the losers from employment. I am not yet sure what to think of this.

This is one of the cases Žižek exposes of excess enjoyment, or 'jouissance', in transgression of morals. Also, feelings of guilt about consumerism, global injustice and ruin of nature, are assuaged, paid off, by firms (Žižek gives Starbucks as an example) that include in the high price of a product percentages they transfer for protection of the destitute, the suppressed, and nature. One can also think of airlines giving the opportunity to plant trees to fight pollution. Commodification of conscience.

347. Žižek: Between capitalism and centralized bureaucracy published 23-12-2017

Is there a way out of the capitalist crisis discussed in the preceding item? Žižek says that he is a Marxist in his criticism of capitalism, but recognizes that communism as a centralized bureaucracy without private property and markets has irrevocably failed. Yet he called himself a communist, but when challenged on this explained that what he meant was that he was concerned about the loss of the global commons, of nature, culture, intellectual capital, and biogenetics, which capitalism causes and cannot cure. He thinks that social democracy has also failed, in bending to neoliberal capitalism, and he has himself difficulty in finding a solution between capitalism and communist centralized bureaucracy.

Žižek does not have any faith in some new, historically necessary utopia. He sees no universal, clear, all-encompassing alternative. He is wary of utopian designs, and more in favour, like Karl Popper, of what the latter called 'piecemeal engineering'.^{xi}

I agree that it is not easy to offer a grand design of how to proceed. The whole, coherent capitalist system of consumerism, advertising, profit making, competition, and financial markets, is difficult to change effectively in isolated bits by bits, and impossible to change in one coherent sweep.

I would not want to abolish markets. I still accept Hayek's notion that the market is unparalleled in its use of local knowledge and room for initiative, which a central bureaucracy could never match. However, I disagree with Hayek that markets work well and need to be left alone. I wrote a book on this.^{xii} In some areas markets should not be allowed, and where they are allowed they are often imperfect and need to be regulated. As Karl Polanyi said: markets need to be 'embedded' in society.

One proposal has been that of local 'commons'. There, choices concerning local facilities and services (schools, playgrounds, bridges, traffic, health care, parks, ...) are no longer made on the basis of political parties, in representative democracy, but on the basis of 'direct' democracy with citizens councils to which willing citizens are elected or selected by lottery.

Žižek rejected such what he called 'reversion to pre-modern times'. It is blinded, he claims, by some naïve faith in unification of honest people in multicultural harmony. It would get mired down in endless and fruitless deliberation, erratic policies, and lack of reliability and continuity of services. It cannot solve problems of cultural mixing with immigrants. He would himself not like to take part in it, and prefers some impersonal, 'alienating' bureaucracy, to

take care of things so he would not have to be bothered with it. No doubt many other people would agree.

Žižek is half wrong and half right.

He is right that on many other issues, policy making is not to be decentralized to local communities, but, on the contrary, to be raised to a higher, supranational level. That is needed to block the perversities of power play and blackmail for advantages by multinational corporations. It is needed, in the EU, for effective military defence, foreign policy, the refugee crisis, and fighting terrorism. It is needed, in particular, for rescuing the environment, enforcing a long term perspective on investment and finance, a circular economy and abolition of pollution.

Alas: Re-emerging nationalism is blocking expansion of the EU.

My main point here is that Žižek is wrong concerning the local commons. Rousseau already recognized the problems of central government at a distance from communities: then one cannot meet the requirements of diversity in local conditions and customs, the contact between those who govern and those who are governed is impersonal, and the citizens involved are strangers to each other.^{xiii} The law is still a matter of the state, and can be since it is impersonal and applies equally to all everywhere, but government should be proximate to the people.

Žižek himself says that culture is needed to structure daily life, and that in finding ways to deal with problems of immigration we should involve the immigrants. That is precisely what would happen in local commons: dialogue concerning how to approach daily matters. The best path for integration of migrants is for them to do things together with locals, in shared projects. I will elaborate on that in a future item in this blog.

If you say no to this, what is your answer to the legitimate grievance of populists that government has alienated itself too much from citizens?

The downside that Žižek notes is valid, but it can be resolved. Of course on the local level one would still need a professional, bureaucratic organization to provide the requisite expertise, continuity and reliability for the provision of public services. But what is the essential difference, in that respect, between a council with members from elected political parties and a council with directly elected or randomly selected willing citizens? One would still need an (elected) mayor and aldermen, elected by the council, to direct the running of the system.

There would remain issues that go beyond local communities, such as inter-local transport, a legal system, crime fighting, environmental issues that go beyond locality, and so on.

Also, I am under no illusion that on the local level there will not be minorities left out. Elimination of exclusion is not that simple. There will remain a predominance of influence, in city councils, of the higher educated and socially skilled. However, the local issues at play are concrete, not abstract, and easy to grasp and handle for many. Political ability and skill is not primarily a matter of education. Some possibility of appeal would still need to be available for those who remain excluded.

A further issue is this. Room for locally embedded choices inevitably yields differences between localities in the amount, kind and quality of public services. That may threaten old ideals of equality. An answer perhaps is the following. There may be equality of process that yields differences in outcome, depending on local conditions. Perhaps there still is a task on the national level to guarantee equality of conditions and process.

In sum, the national level would shrink, surrendering some authority to the supranational level, and some to the local level, but in sleeker form it would still remain.

Would all this qualify as Popperian ‘piecemeal engineering’?

348. Double negation of the market

published 30-12-2017

In the preceding items of this blog I proposed that the market should not be abolished but reformed. That presupposes knowledge of what is good about it and what not, and how to separate the two. I discussed that more pragmatically in a book^{xiv}, but here I want to look at it more philosophically. For that, I employ the Hegelian notion of the ‘negation of a negation’.

In sum, what I want to say is this. The ideal of the market presented in traditional economics is that of ‘perfect competition’, and that is still the lore in economics, the pedestal of neo-liberal ideology. In Žižek/Lacan parlance, the ideal market is the *master signifier* that covers and hides the reality of markets. In fact, the actual working of markets is very different from the ideal, is in fact, in Hegelian parlance, its negation. The problem with the market is not that the idea is wrong but that it is never fully or even adequately realised.

So, here comes the negation of the negation: reject markets where they do not approach the ideal, try to reform them so that they do, and halt them when that cannot be done.

The irony of all this is another negation of a negation, as follows. The crux of markets is competition, as opposed to state planning, but in fact so-called competition takes the form of the avoidance of competition. There are many ways to do this, but here I do not have the space to elaborate. I will do that in future items in this blog. The upshot is that limits are needed to the market as it works in reality, to preserve competition, striving for markets as they should ideally work, in so far as possible, and this is the job of state competition authorities.

Now, the big twist that occurs in present capitalism is that states are sidetracked by multinationals threatening to move their business elsewhere, so that regulation is foiled and even reversed into favours for predation, as I indicated in preceding items in this blog.

But there is an even more fundamental problem of time. In the ideal, markets are driven by demand, by the needs of people. Supposedly, an assessment of future needs, such as preservation of nature, leads to present investment. In fact, consumers and shareholders give precedence to present consumption and wealth.

Consumers are not willing to pay extra for environmentally sound products and services, or to reduce their consumption. An increasing number of idealistic producers try to develop such products that can compete, but there are obstacles to this. Novelty at first is always expensive, due to imperfections that need time and application to iron out, and small scale due to lack of

widespread use. And they run up against powerful established interests that protect themselves. That requires state intervention, which is politically not viable under neo-liberalism.

When firms invest for the future, that takes money away from present profit, which shareholders do not accept. Private equity firms, or ‘hedge funds’ incur loans to buy firms and then act as locusts, grazing them bare, financing the loan from reducing investments for the future, in research and development, increasing present profits by cutting labour costs, and then cash in on the resulting rise of share value. This is done for the sake of ‘efficiency’, which here means the grasping of opportunities for present profit to the detriment of the future. Again, states see themselves as unable to change the global financial markets involved and renounce themselves to this reality.

The utilitarian ethic of liberalism was collectivist, aiming for the greatest good for the largest number of people. The pursuit of private interest is taken to promote public interest. Present reality is a travesty of that, with the richest 1 % in the US owning almost half (47%) of national income, and in Europe more than a third (37%). The utilitarian ethic has fallen into a hedonistic, individualistic ideology of instant gratification and wealth. Adam Smith, the godfather of market economics, said that ‘moral sentiments’ should correct private interests when they do not serve the public interest. But that has been ‘lost in translation’, the translation of market ideology.

So, what to do now? First of all, continue the unmasking of the master signifier: show how markets really work, how the ideal market is a fata morgana in the heat of the capitalist desert.

Next, it is up to philosophers rather than economists. The economy is too important to be left to economists. That is why I turned from economics to philosophy. The utilitarian ethic underlying economics and liberalism has to be reformed or, as I argued in my book on markets, and in preceding items in this blog, replaced by a virtue ethic. This may sound utopian or revolutionary, but to put it more modestly: I am merely trying to make good on Adam Smith’s promise of moral virtues in the economy.

349. Democracy and market: are they compatible? published 6-1-2018

In Hegelian dialectics, in opposition between A and B a third element is needed to mediate between them. Here I try to apply that idea to tensions between democracy and market.

In democracy, collective choices are made in deliberation and voting by individuals. In markets, individuals make individual choices for themselves. The two are clearly incompatible, in the sense that you cannot have both at the same time in the same place. You can combine them in assigning some choices to the one and others to the other, but this is full of tensions. How is the choice between the two made?

In the recent past, there has been a shift, in neoliberal policy, from democracy towards markets, in privatization and liberalization. What, if anything, is the mediating third here? For a thought experiment I propose that it is authority, in two forms.

First, there is authority in the form of managerial discretion, in organizations public and private, such as firms. This has expanded its reach and power due to increase of scale and concentration of firms (and governmental authorities), in waves of mergers and acquisitions.

It is leading to organizations that are internally dysfunctional, in not fitting with present conditions of work, and dysfunctional in relations between firms. In globalization, it is leading to power play by multinationals imposing their will on national governments, under the threat to move their business elsewhere.

Second, there is a re-emergence of authoritarian politics, in countries such as China, Russia, Turkey, Malaysia, Hungary, Poland, pushing aside constitutional democracy, but often in combination with capitalist markets. Here the ideology is that of the will of the people, going back to Rousseau, under the wings of the populist leader who stands up to protect national culture, identity and prosperity. Here, as Žižek noted, a third element between the people and the leader is the scapegoat, that carries the blame as promises of the leader cannot be kept, such as the Jews under the Nazis, and now the refugees (or the lazy Greeks).

And now the question, discussed in preceding items in this blog, is: 'what to do?' As indicated there, I want to do away with neither democracy nor markets. But, to quote Žižek, the shift to markets is endangering the commons of various forms, the worst of which is increasing exclusion of unemployables, refugees, and the poor and suppressed. Would it help to have an alternative third element, replacing authority? Isn't it especially authority that excludes?

The alternative, I venture, might be collaboration. The basic underlying idea is that technology and knowledge have become so far advanced, with rising complexity of processes of production, and social systems in general, that it has become an illusion to think that management or political leadership can supervise and direct labour or citizens. Authoritarianism is not only unjust, in creating exclusion, but now simply does not work anymore.

There is a parallel here with the dialectic involved in the 'Liberty, equality and brotherhood' of the French revolution.^{xv} Liberty is associated with the market, equality with democracy, and brotherhood with collaboration, solidarity, balance of power and dependence.

Here also, collaboration applies on different levels. On the local level it entails more involvement of citizens in local commons, as argued in item 347 of this blog. Within organizations it entails a shift from authoritarian to inspirational and enabling leadership, and between organizations a shift from mergers and acquisitions to cooperation in alliances, as I have argued for a great part of my career. In outside relations with society it entails a shift from catering to the exclusive interests of shareholders to attention to the combined interests of shareholders and other *stakeholders*, such as employees, customers, suppliers and the environment. In public supervision of organizations (firms and public bodies) horizontal control is needed, to replace the traditional top-down control, as I argued in item 75. At the supranational level, collaboration between nations is needed to curtail excesses of globalized capitalism.

In all this, are the liberty of markets and the equality of democracy still there? Yes: next to collaboration there will remain competition and rivalry, and collective choices for collective resources, such as the commons of the environment, health care, security, justice, and information. Also, the striving for a balance of power, of mutual dependence, in relations of labour and ownership that are sufficiently durable to yield quality and justice, and sufficiently flexible to avoid stagnation. All this I have studied extensively, as discussed also in his blog.

All this requires the art of trust, not as ‘being nice’ to each other, but to extend the benefit of the doubt, to craft and manage the balances of power and dependence, with the art of empathy in the sense of understanding how other people think and feel, and the contingencies they face, in Aristotelian *phronesis*, practical wisdom, with the exercise of the classical virtues of reason, courage, restraint and justice, as I have also extensively studied and discussed, also in this blog.

Here, counter to the pristine model of libertarianism, markets are not simple, do not work everywhere and where they do work need more or less regulation, and require different forms and combinations of competition and collaboration, depending on the industry involved. I will elaborate on that in a future series of items on the economy and markets.

350. Žižek and Devisch: Understanding empathy published 13-1-2018

In my work on trust, also in this blog, I argued that empathy is needed for trust (items 21, 171, 319). Now I read how empathy is criticized, by Žižek, and by Ignaas Devisch^{xvi}, with several authors that the latter adduces. Am I mistaken?

Žižek criticizes empathy in two ways. First, he claims that the idea that we can fully understand people is an illusion: we cannot even clearly know ourselves. He disabuses the notion that psycho-analysis unearths, clears up, and mends, cures trauma’s, repressions and tensions that lurk in the dark of the self. The best psycho-analysis can do is to help a patient to learn to live with them. The self remains an abyss, as Žižek calls it.

Second, Žižek claims that empathy undermines justice, because it is partial, personal and prejudiced by feeling and impulse, while justice should be universal, applied to all anonymously, with indifference, based on reason. Worse: empathy can be and is being used to divert attention from a crumbling of justice. Devisch shares this objection.

Devisch also noted that empathy requires effort and personal contact, which have their limits, and can apply only to small numbers. There lies the lie of having hundreds of Facebook ‘friends’.

Empathy purportedly, according to Devisch, settles on kin or the loved, or beyond that on the personalized, innocent and cuddly (babies, children and Panda bears are best), not on the bad and ugly, and not on the anonymous. Charities use that, appealing for donations with pictures of a drowned boy on the beach, or a crying girl that will not get the medicine she needs unless you contribute.

Currently in the Netherlands, under the motto of ‘participative society’, austerity is imposed on different forms of care, of the ill, old, lonely, mentally ill (now called ‘confused’), lost, destitute, raped, battered, and so on. They are thrown back on the mercy of empathy on the part of family, friends, or neighbours.

When empathy turns into benevolence, it can overshoot and obligate the recipient to be thankful and submissive, not to blemish the moral superiority of the giver with ungrateful criticism. Victims should behave. Nietzsche showed how benevolence and pity become an exercise of the will to power.

I agree with all this. However, there is an underlying misunderstanding. Devisch defines empathy not only as understanding how another thinks or feels, but also to ‘feel along’. That comes close to what I call ‘identification’. As I put it in my work on trust, empathy is understanding what ‘makes someone tick’, while identification is ‘ticking in the same way’, with a feeling of sharing a destiny.

The misunderstanding is that empathy is always, by definition, benevolent, loving, and helping. It is not. Empathy should not be confused with sympathy, identification or altruism. It does not demand benevolent help. It does require openness and receptiveness, taking into account someone’s circumstances, the contingencies of conduct, extending the benefit of the doubt, engaging in ‘voice’. But doubt can go two ways: acceptance, even identification, but also refusal and ‘exit’.

Empathy is needed for identification, and for sympathy and altruism, but does not imply them. It is needed also to rationally assess reliability, or trustworthiness, and may lead to the conclusion they are lacking, and then it produces distancing, not approach, prudence that may lead to distrust.

A psychopath usually has great empathy, with an acute understanding of hidden fears, hang-ups, weaknesses, or longings of his victims, to harm them more effectively.

It remains true that empathy, also when it does not lead to altruism or identification, is necessarily selective, reserved only for a limited number of personal relationships. It cannot replace justice but can supplement it. A tuft of whipped cream on the dry cake of justice.

I haven’t yet adequately answered Žižek’s claim that we cannot fully understand the other. Indeed: not fully, but surely to some extent we can, with a certain ability and experience. I grant that the self remains an abyss. I refer also to the increasingly accepted (though not new) insight that there is limited free will: our choices are largely made subconsciously, and the reasons we give for actions are largely rationalizations post hoc. David Hume already recognized that there is no single, univocal, stable identity lying there to be found.

In my studies of trust I deal with this as follows. The actions of others are not just risky, but uncertain. With risk you don’t know what will happen but you do know what *can* happen, so you can attach probabilities, but with uncertainty you don’t even know that. Actions of people regularly go beyond what one would have considered possible. Well-behaved husbands suddenly kill atrociously. A friendly neighbour kicks your dog. Since uncertainty is not calculable, trust becomes a leap of faith.

In the end, there still is what I now will call ‘the problem of Levinas’. Empathy may lead to identification, in awe of the ‘visage’ of the other, in a personal relationship.^{xvii} But how do we go from there to justice, as a universal that applies to all anonymous others, and how in that can the personal, the empathic, survive? Levinas recognized this problem, as I discussed in item 224 of this blog.

I will not attempt to answer that question here, but my hunch is as follows. As Hegel recognized, and in his footsteps Žižek, the universal allows, indeed needs, its differentiation in particulars. That then must also apply to justice.

A final question is this. Is empathy a virtue? In preceding items in this blog I went back to the classical ‘cardinal’ virtues of reason, courage, moderation and justice. Empathy should be virtuous in that sense. It should be thinking, prudent, using reason for assessing trustworthiness. It should be courageous, in accepting the uncertainty of conduct. It should engage in moderation, in not demanding the impossible, of oneself and the other. And, as indicated above, it should not break down justice.

351. When is tolerance tolerable?

published 16-1-2018

Tolerance can be a sham, as indicated by Žižek. It then falls into politically correct gestures and intimations of respect towards the excluded (immigrants, Muslims, Jews, blacks, ...), not with corresponding actions of acceptance and solidarity, but rather as a front to hide indifference, and the will to keep them at distance, or even to surreptitiously dominate or suppress them. That is the false gloss of multiculturalism.

That fits in the present politics of identity, of who you are, and what you think, rather than what you do, while justice is about what you do.

Žižek gives the example of colonialists who expressed respect, even awe, for indigenous cultures, as a cloak to cover exploitation and lack of rights. He also relates it to the rhetoric of ‘opening our hearts’ to refugees, instead of recognizing their rights, regardless of your feelings for them.

Yet tolerance is needed as indispensable for a just society, because modern societies are multi-cultural, as a matter of fact. But it should then be a solidarity that yields actions of justice and solidarity.

There is a connection here with the discussion of empathy, in the preceding item in this blog. You don’t have to love the refugees or have the same views, but you should try to understand them, for a workable society.

What does all this do to the universality of, in particular, human rights? Should tolerance include tolerance of violations of such rights? Honour killings? Clitorectomy? Enforcement of chadors? Of bourka’s? Arranged marriages? If not, where, precisely, does tolerance end?

Žižek adopts the Hegelian view of the ‘concrete universal’, that a universal allows for variety of its particulars, according to which one should allow for variety in the adoption and practice of universal rights. He mentioned the example of the autonomous Kurdish Rojava region in North-Eastern Syria, which should be allowed to ‘do it their way’.

That seems an easy case. Their constitution is in accordance with international laws of human rights, including equal rights for women, freedom of religion, equality of all ethnic groups, and a ban on the death penalty and torture. However, they do engage in child labour and military conscription of children. Is that tolerable?

So, what is ‘sufficient’, tolerable accordance with human rights? I do not think that there is some single, context-independent essence here, anymore than anywhere else. What then? Can we fall back, perhaps, on Wittgenstein’s *family resemblance*? There, things belong to the same class if they resemble each other in a sufficient number of features from one member of

the family to the other, even without having a single feature in common for all? Or can tolerance depend on circumstance, of history, education, religion, economy? Then the questions till remains: how far can that go?

However that may be, it seems simple to say that within a democratic nation tolerance concerns obedience to the laws of the land, not on ideas, feelings, thoughts or inclinations. But how about things not covered by laws? There, people have to deal with it together, in discourse and activities. And that, again, requires empathy in the sense of understanding how people think and feel, as a basis for trying to work things out, without necessarily sharing those thoughts and feelings.

As argued before in his blog (item 35), the notion of *scripts* may help to bridge the gap between ideas and actions: what does an idea or concept entail in terms of underlying elements and their connections, logically, causally or sequentially? Mapping that helps to pinpoint, identify and understand differences, depending on how fundamental they are. Variety of how nodes in a script are filled in are easier to accept than a difference in the structure or logic of the script.

352. Žižek: What does he want?

published 20-1-2018

Žižek lambasts and lampoons much of what he comes across but rarely offers alternatives. That is not the task of philosophy, he claims. This is vintage Hegel: philosophy can and should only try to understand and clarify what happens, and can do this only when it has already passed, after the sun has set. That is the meaning of the famous dictum that 'Minerva's owl spreads its wings only at dusk'.

To me, this is a cop-out. At the basis of present problems lie philosophical issues, and philosophy should learn from this not only to clarify but also to contribute to ideas for improvement. Such as the crisis of capitalism, discussed in preceding items in this blog. It is a matter of elementary intellectual decency, in my view, that when you criticize something you must give some indication of at least the direction for an alternative.

In fact, Žižek does make suggestions. In a debate with Will Self, the latter gave up on solving problems and advocated a withdrawal into the comfort of one's private bubble, closing the curtains. During and after the debate, Žižek quite rightly burst out in indignation at this. An example of his suggestions is how one should deal with the refugee problem.

For Žižek, true faith is not based on logical or empirical reason, but is a commitment regardless of that, going back to the old motto 'I believe because it is absurd', in a leap of faith. Here, he admits to being a fan of Kierkegaard. He also remains a revolutionary, and does not exclude violence. Peaceful attempts to change the existing order by argument are lost in advance, in concession to the established symbolic order of 'reasonable discourse'. It is a weakness of leftists to say that yes, radical change is needed, but the time is not ripe. The time is never ripe.

On the other hand, Žižek calls for patience, for not rushing in, for having trust, and taking time, and being self-critical. Perhaps one can have both: belief as an unreasonable leap, action in prudence and patience. But how can that still be revolutionary?

Žižek picked up Kant's distinction between the private and the public use of intellect. The first is aimed at answering practical questions raised by private concerns. The second stays away from that, and this is needed to maintain intellectual independence. Žižek claims, and I agree, that in recent years there has been an increasing pressure on academia to develop useful knowledge. In the Netherlands the motto for that is 'valorization'.

I agree that this has adverse effects, of two kinds. First, it indeed jeopardizes the independence and intellectual integrity of science. Second, it is myopic: independent, fundamental research uninformed by practical interests has proven to be the most productive.

How far the perversity of private reason can go is illustrated in the following case in my own experience. When working at a semi-public institute for research I produced a report that did not sit well with established policy, and I was asked, or rather muscled, to align the report more with it. I was told that next to scientific rationality there was something called 'policy-oriented' rationality ('beleidsmatige rationaliteit' in Dutch). That should take into account the costs sunk in the political decision process, and corresponding political commitments crafted with much effort. Many similar cases of pressure have been reported. It is disastrous for trust in science.

However, on the other hand the essence of science is testing, and application is a form of testing. At some places, Žižek himself admits that for ideas the proof of the pudding lies in its eating. I can even put this in the Hegelian parlance that Žižek covets: the real is the rational and vice versa. The rational gets embodied in the real, and the real reflects the rational.

My argument is that of pragmatist philosophy: one develops new ideas by using and rejecting them. That also is vintage Hegel. It is connected to the issue of the universal in relation to its particulars, which I will discuss in a later item in this blog: practical use of reason is attention to particulars that will shift or topple the universal. And how, in the manifestation of absolute spirit through the working of individual spirits, can this be if those spirits only reflect and do not contribute to action?

So, how to proceed? One can engage in practical reason while not being diverted by private reason. The difference is that one does not adopt the problem as formulated by private interest, but as formulated by oneself after thorough familiarization with the practice and one's analysis of it, preserving one's intellectual autonomy. This ethic should be defended in academic teaching and research.

The risk is, of course, that when defending such integrity one no longer gets the commissions for research that bring in the money one is expected to chase. The answer to that is to become one's own principal, taking the initiative of initiating and applying one's research according to one's independent formulation of the problem. Again from my own experience: when I did that in a project for the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, I became a *persona non grata* there. The money then should come from state institutions such as science foundations. The problem there is that they also begin to give in to the demands of 'valorization'.

353. Žižek and Basic Income

published 24-1-2018

It can be difficult to find coherence in Žižek's oracular utterances. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are beautiful, and I have learned a lot from them, but they do not seem to fit together.

Here I give an example from a lecture and subsequent questions on ‘The courage of hopelessness’ at the Schauspielhaus In Hamburg, in 2017, available on YouTube. In the process I contest Žižek’s arguments against a Basic Income (BI), for which I have been an advocate since the 1980’s (see also items 154 and 226 in this blog). I think a BI would fit in what he pleads for.

As I discussed in a preceding item in this blog (item 346), I go along fully with Žižek’s diagnosis of a crisis in capitalism.

Strikingly, and interestingly, Žižek came up with a defence of Ayn Rand’s^{xviii} claim that the use of money in capitalism, in payment for labour, is the only alternative to direct domination and exploitation. But later he also railed against monetization, commodification, of clean air, water and soil. I don’t know how to reconcile these two things.

On the question what to do in the face of capitalist crisis, Žižek does not see any utopian model to replace capitalism, but something needs to be done because present representative democracy proves unable to curtail capitalism. He is against evasion, a passive flight into hedonism, and pleads for ‘doing something revolutionary, dialectical ... to develop a new solidarity’ in ‘full ethical engagement’.

In question time, one question was ‘how to do revolution right this time ... avoiding a fall into fascism’. Žižek replies that there is no answer, but we are moving towards fascism anyway, so let us Let us do what? He doesn’t say.

In another question, someone from Iran asked what Žižek would think of a revolution in Iran. Žižek put her down, saying that the notion of revolution is too abstract. She should be more concrete. ‘What would you do about the economy’, he asked.

In another question, Žižek was asked how he would reconcile his plea for revolution with his plea for modesty concerning big ideas. He answered that one should look for something simple that could still fit in the capitalist system but would operate as a kernel of radical change from within. One might call this the Trojan horse approach to revolution (my words, not his). For an example he mentioned Obama’s health bill.

He was also asked about his view on the idea of a BI. He answered that he was somewhat sympathetic to it, but rejected it because ‘people should work and contribute to society’. Here, he goes along with the view of economists, the neo-liberal view, that without wage as reward for labour people will do nothing. In fact, all the available evidence from experiments points the other way.

I propose that a BI is a good case of the ‘something simple’ that can be introduced into the capitalist system to develop a revolution from within. The radical thing about a BI is that it enables people to choose their own activity, and reinforces the bargaining position of employees (‘Treat me better or I will exit and fall back on a BI’). At some point elsewhere in his voluminous work, Žižek defines liberty as room to follow ‘inner necessity’. A BI gives that room.

Žižek next says that if there were a BI, people would have to be forced to work, in jobs assigned to them for the public good. So, while first he defended wage labour as freedom

form direct domination he now pleads for such domination in assignment of jobs without wage.

So, again, as I asked in the preceding item in this blog: what does Žižek want? I appreciate the Hegelian virtue of seeing something good in the bad and something bad in the good, but with that, how can one avoid paralysis? Next to all the critical rejection, does he have any positive proposal? He makes far-ranging statements and when challenged retracts, twists or dodges them. The problem is not that he wants to have his cake and eat it too, but that he wants his cake but does not dare to eat it. Without thinking them through, he rejects suggestions for the simple trojan horses that he recommends. He did that in rejecting the local ‘commons’ as a form of direct democracy, as I argued in item 347 in this blog. He does it also to the idea of a BI.

He recommends strategic thinking in the design of Trojan horses: they should plausibly fit in the ruling capitalist order. With the BI, the strategic twist is that it appeals to the libertarian drive for deregulation: many elements of social security can be abolished when people have a BI to fall back on. The arch-libertarian economist Milton Friedman was an advocate of a BI.

Another objection of Žižek to the introduction of a BI in a well-developed country is that it would enlarge the gap with the poor elsewhere in the world. In other words: you may only introduce something if it solves problems everywhere. How can this be reconciled with his gradualist view of bringing in a Trojan horse somewhere? And in any case, a BI could well, perhaps especially, be introduced in poor countries. Successful experiments were conducted in India^{xix} and Namibia.

354. Reading Hegel

published 27-1-2018

I read Hegel long ago (in the late 1960’s), and I remember being highly impressed with some of his work and disgusted with another part. I let myself be diverted from Hegel by Popper’s attack on his historicism and his groundwork for totalitarianism^{xx}. Žižek is an admirer of Hegel, and studying Žižek I wondered if I had missed something. So I started re-reading Hegel.

I was, and still am, immensely impressed by Hegel’s dedication to dynamics, of ideas and social structure, in the form of structural change arising from oppositions or what Hegel called contradictions, in *dialectical* change, notably in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. That was a welcome change with respect to earlier Western philosophy, which I read as being almost exclusively preoccupied with substance and permanence.

Thinking back, I now see that it may be largely due to inspiration from Hegel that I dedicated myself professionally to innovation. But why stick to Hegel? Surely, there has been development of thought on dynamics since Hegel, certainly in the self-manifestation of the absolute spirit that Hegel proclaimed.

In Hegel’s *Logic*, which is not a logic in the usual sense, but a metaphysics, the prime category is *Being*, and to Hegel being is not like some fixed object but a process of becoming, in the dialectical process. That sits well with my process view of philosophy, and of knowledge, meaning, etc., as discussed in this blog (item 342).

On the other hand, what I abhorred, and still do, is the idea that history is a progressive, teleological, process of self-realization of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit. Here one recognizes the notion of an Aristotelian final cause that in my view is a mistaken way of looking at history and society. It even seems contradictory in Hegel's own thought, which I read as pointing to non-linear transformations that may not be progressive, may embark on a *cul de sac*, and may be degressive.

I do recognize the philosophical significance of the attempt to bring together the infinite and the finite, with the absolute spirit replacing God, in its self-realization through the actions of the finite spirit of mankind. But politically that has inspired a communist ideology of a march towards utopia in which human sacrifice and suffering are of negligible significance. Of course this is an anachronism: Hegel could not foresee such perversion of his ideas. But Hegel did also see war as an inevitable clearing of what exists, to make room for the next transformative step in the march, which I find hard to stomach but do recognize as possibly true, harsh as it may seem.

Žižek offers an alternative reading of Hegel. I am not sure I fully understand it, so I give a direct quote: ‘.. what gets lost in it (the usual reading) is the interaction between the epistemological and ontological aspects, the way ‘reality’ itself is caught in the movement of our knowing it (or, vice versa, how our knowing of reality is embedded in reality itself’ (*Parallax view* p. 30). That may approach my approach, as set out in this blog. I would add language as an intermediary between epistemology and ontology.

Also, I detested what I thought was Hegel's agreement with Rousseau's view of the general will of the people to which the individual should surrender his own opinion or interest. There is too much of a platform for totalitarianism there. A platform on which populists are now eager to dance their folk dances. But re-reading Hegel (and reading Rebecca Comay's *Mourning sickness*), I now see that while Hegel was thrilled by the French revolution as a necessary step in the march of the absolute spirit, he in fact opposed Rousseau's absolute *general will* in which individuals should be eager to dissolve themselves, for the same reason that he rejected Kant's duty ethics for its demand to transcend individual interests and contingencies.

That fits with Hegel's view of any universal, including that of the state as the universal will of the people, as a ‘concrete universal’, though that sounds like a contradiction in terms. What this means is that the universal is not homogeneous, but includes a variety of particulars some of which may even be at odds, in some partial way, with the universal. Indeed, according to Žižek's reading of Hegel the essence of the universal is the strife between its particulars. Hegel insisted that the state must allow for the free development of individual personality, and should respect the rights of individuals, existing in and through its particular citizens.

What, then, is democracy? As I noted earlier in this blog, what I can make of it is the following. In a democracy one has to accept what has been democratically debated and decided, but that does not require that one drop one's conviction, saying and testifying that one must have been wrong.

The issue concerning the universal and its particulars is important, but I take a somewhat different view of it, as I will discuss in the next item in this blog. The challenge there is to show how there can be space for deviance of particulars, and how that can shift or topple the universal, doing what Hegel seems to have left undone.

Žižek adopts Hegel's view of the 'concrete universal': the universal should be seen as incorporating all its particulars, which may be in conflict with each other, and inevitably there are anomalies that do not quite fit the universal.

Repetition, in the manifestation of the universal in its particulars, is never quite repetition, duplication, but always differentiation. And this may erode or explode the universal, in what Hegel called 'aufhebung'.^{xxi} Žižek suggests (in his *Parallax view*) that such dynamics forms the essence of the universal. I will return to the issue of essences in a later item in this blog.

The philosophical significance of this is that it deviates from the Platonic idea of the universal as transcending the messy world of particulars, and being fixed.

That is also of significance for politics, where the totality of the state should leave room for variety of individuals in the state as well as a variety of states.

Žižek also reminds us that Christ is the personification, particularization, of God the universal.

I now want to compare the Hegelian view with the view of the universal and its particulars presented in this blog (in items 16, 17, 135).

In my view, the universal is not the totality of its particulars, but an abstraction from them, from the rich variety of contexts where the particulars reside. This is in contrast with the Hegelian view that the particulars 'fall' from the universal. In my view they 'feed' it, form its roots. In its use, to become real, the abstract universal needs to be re-embedded in the richness of the particular context at hand. With a flourish, I would say: the abstract is a hermaphrodite, inserting itself in the context and being impregnated by a host of particulars that may give birth to a novel abstraction.

For sceptical David Hume the abstract, the universal, is a fiction. I think it is a little more than that. It is rooted in the reality of its particulars, and is a wager on what is invariable across contexts, but this is open since there is no end to possible contexts. Unforeseeable contexts may arise.

An abstraction is itself a universal, an abstraction from varieties of abstraction. The abstraction of abstraction is, as I would now formulate it, that one drops features that do not systematically return in different contexts, in search for what seems essential, though that will never be found. It falls under what in this blog I have called 'imperfection on the move'. The terms of the abstraction are ambiguous and themselves variable. What, precisely, is a context; is that notion liable to shift? What is essential: does that not imply some judgement of relevance, and how fixed is that? And other criteria may arise: some form that a formalization should have, perhaps.

The universal is often supported by a prototype that yields an exemplar, that guides identification of particulars as belonging to the universal. I read somewhere that for the English the robin is the exemplar of 'bird', while for the Dutch it is the sparrow.

From Lacan, Žižek adopts the notion of a ‘master signifier’ that symbolizes the universal. It is not necessarily an adequate characterization and often serves to bend thought in a certain direction, or hide incongruity, as a support of ideology. For an example, in item 348 of this blog I used the idealized model of perfect competition, as the master signifier of market ideology, while in fact it is never achieved and the endeavour of firms as market participants is to block competition.

The implication of this view of universals is that typically one cannot give necessary and sufficient features for something to belong to a category. For an example, I have used the example of ‘chair’. Once, in a newspaper I saw a man in a stuffed cow with a dent for the seat, with the caption ‘watch me sitting in my cow’. After that, when walking past a field with a cow one might say ‘look what a beautiful chair’.

For further analysis, I used the notion of the *hermeneutic circle*, in item 36, as Heidegger also did. Words for concepts, abstractions, along the *paradigmatic axis*, are inserted into sentences, along the *syntagmatic axis*, and there are connected with other concepts, and this unique configuration may yield a novel perspective on the concept.

The variation is one of both context and people. In my discussion of meaning (item 32) I used the distinction, going back to Frege, between denotation/reference and connotation/sense. For Frege, sense was ‘the way in which something is given’: how does an object present itself? I reconstruct it as the way in which reference is established: how does one recognize or select something as a chair? That, I propose, happens on the basis of associations that one has with the concept, collected along a path of life, by which one recognizes something as belonging to the concept. Which connotation is picked out, or triggered, depends on the context. And then, misfits will appear, anomalies, which may occasion a shift of the universal, or a split, or absorption in a novel one. This yields a constitutive role for the individual, not as subjugated to the universal but as feeding it.

How, next, does dialectical change work? That is the topic for the next item.

356. Dialectics on the move

published 10-2-2018

Žižek tells us^{xxiii} that Hegel’s dialectics has been falsely interpreted as a closed circle: he intended the end as a new beginning.^{xxiii} This goes beyond the old Aristotelian idea that things have a potential that is realized in the end. With Hegel, on the path to realization of potential a new potential is created. The question now is how this works. Unless I missed something in Hegel, he gives no explanation how, by what logic, dialectics works, produces novelty, from opposition or tension.

In a later item in this blog I will discuss ontology: the philosophy of being, of things in the world. There, I will use the idea, shared by Graham Harman and Tristan Garcia, that there are two dimensions to objects in the world: first, how they are composed, ‘what is in them’ and second their position in their environment, ‘what they are in’^{xxiv}.

The first is the analytic view of science, breaking things down into their components, the second is the phenomenological view, considering the lived experience of things. The latter connects with philosophical pragmatism and Wittgenstein’s notions of ‘meaning as use’. I

will now claim that the two arise from each other: how something is composed determines, in part, how it exists in its context, and that, in turn, affects how it is composed. How does that work?

For transformation, in this blog (item 31), and in a book published in 2000), I proposed a ‘cycle’ of discovery or invention. I did not develop it with Hegel in mind, at least not consciously, but was perhaps fed by prior readings of Hegel. I was inspired, more explicitly, by the theory of the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget concerning the development of intelligence in children. The basic idea there is that when one is confronted with new experience, the attempt is made to *assimilate* it in existing mental frames, and when that fails such frames are *accommodated*. I now wonder if it can be seen as a further development of Hegelian thought. In a later item in this blog I will propose that it clarifies ontology, in what I call *dynamic ontology*.

To recall, I proposed that the cycle of change starts with *generalization*, defined as application of a practice in novel contexts. In the novel context, the practice is challenged by new conditions of survival. What had been adopted as a universal is confronted with novel particulars.

Note the link with evolution here, with the idea that novelty, in *speciation*, arises from challenges in a new *selection environment*. The classic example is the emergence of new species after the disastrous crash of a meteor on earth, which made the dinosaurs and other species extinct. In innovation policy some firms now actively seek novel markets to find out limitations by identifying failures, as a source of innovation.

Faced with failure in a novel context, the first step, which stays as close as possible to the existing frame, is to ‘tweak’ that frame, in *differentiation*, in trying out different variants of the same, with recollection of earlier forms that were at play in the emergence of the present practice.

This may not suffice for survival in the new context. Here is where Hegelian opposition or contradiction kicks in. In the failure of the practice one gets to really know it, with its limitations that call for renewal.

From the conflict between practice and the novel context, experiments arise, in what (adopting the terminology of Piaget) I call *reciprocation*, inserting elements from practices met in the novel context that seem to succeed where the old practice fails, into the logic of the old practice. This yields misfits between the old and the new, novelties that conflict with existing logic.

This, I think, is the fundamental step in dialectics: experimenting with hybrids of the old and the new, to discover ways of relieving the tension between them. It allows for the exploration of the potential of novel elements, and of the limitations of the old logic that obstruct the realization of the new potential, which gives hints in what directions a novel logic might be explored.

Necessity is both the mother and the midwife of invention.

Novelty, as it emerges in a new basic logic, is hesitant at first, labouring with inconsistencies or frictions that remain, with fall-backs into the old, requiring further adjustments in the

constellation of the new basic logic and its elements, until it settles into what in the innovation literature is called a ‘dominant design’.

In sum: in moving to a new place or context one encounters the need and insight to open up content to new possibilities. What was taken as a universal is confronted with deviant particulars (see the preceding item in this blog). Note the similarity to the *hermeneutic circle* (item 36, 252).

Note that the cycle is in fact a spiral, not a closed loop.

Is this helpful as an elaboration, elucidation, or twist of Hegelian dialectics?

ⁱ On 30 September 2013.

ⁱⁱ Frank vande Veire, *Tussen blinde fascinatie en vrijheid; Het mensbeeld van Slavoj Žižek*, 2015, Nijmegen: Vantilt.

ⁱⁱⁱ Here also, an important source for me is: Frank vande Veire, *Tussen blinde fascinatie en vrijheid; Het mensbeeld van Slavoj Žižek*, 2015, Nijmegen: Vantilt.

^{iv} Bart Nooteboom, *Beyond humanism: The flourishing of life, self and other*, 2012, Palgrave-Macmillan.

^v Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The roots of morality*, 2008, Penn State U. Press.

^{vi} Maxine Johnstone, ‘Movement and mirror neurons: A challenging and choice conversation’, *Phenomenology and the cognitive sciences*, vol. 11/issue 3, p. 385-401.

^{vii} On the social contract, book 9, chapter 2, my translation.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid., book 2, chapter 6. Let me add that I do appreciate the principle that the law should apply equally to all, in establishing guilt, but in assigning punishment personal circumstance should be taken into account.

^x Source: NRC-Handelsblad, 16-17 december 2017.

^{xi} I love to imagine how Žižek would hate it to be included in the same category as Popper.

^{xii} Bart Nooteboom, 2014, *How markets work and fail, and what to make of them*, Cheltenham UK: Edward Elgar.

^{xiii} On the social contract, Chapter 9, book 2.

^{xiv} Bart Nooteboom, 2014, *How markets work and fail, and what to make of them*, Cheltenham UK: Edward Elgar.

^{xv} As noted by Žižek, in one of his lectures, Rebecca Comay, in her book *Mourning sickness; Hegel and the French revolution*, 2011, and Lieven de Cauter, in his book *Van de grote woorden en de kleine dingen*, discussed in ‘De Wereld van Morgen’, 2 January 2018.

^{xvi} Ignaas Devisch, 2017, *Het empathisch teveel; Op naar een werkbare onverschilligheid*, (Empathic excess; Onwards to a workable indifference), Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

^{xvii} Note, however, that Levinas resisted identification: self and other do not merge but remain radically distinct.

^{xviii} Libertarian icon, (author of *The fountainhead* and *Atlas shrugged*)

^{xix} Sarah Davala, Renana Jhabvala, Soumya Kapoor Metha, & Guy Standing, 2015, *Basic Income; A transformative policy for India*, Bloomsbury.

^{xx} In Popper’s *Poverty of historicism* and *The open society and its enemies*.

^{xxi} There is an English term for this: ‘ablation’, but I don’t like it and leave ‘aufhebung’ untranslated. It means at the same time ‘lifting up’ and ‘elimination’.

^{xxii} In his *Parallax view*.

^{xxiii} The Latin word *terminus* can mean ‘end point’ as well as ‘starting point’.

^{xxiv} Tristan Garcia, 2014, *Form and object; A treatise on things*, Edinburgh Press.