

Zizek's Revolutionary Act

Chair: TBA

Bartleby; or, the Politics of Refusal and the Search for a Space “Outside”

- Andrew Shmuely (Geography, University of Toronto)

Those familiar with the details of Herman Melville's classic tale will know that Bartleby would, in fact, “prefer not to.” But who, exactly, is Bartleby? More importantly, why has his unfathomable gesture of absolute refusal become of such great interest to some of the most brilliant and prolific critical thinkers of our time?

This paper will attempt to illuminate a constellation of theoretical activity that has emerged around the figure of Bartleby from Melville's 1853 short story of the same name. It will endeavor to unfold the significance of Bartleby's unsettling formula to the very notion of “resistance” in two (categorically intertwined) arenas: the realm of ontology, and the world of politics.

After a short synopsis of the novella itself, this essay will firstly delve into an ontological problematic—one framed by Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze—that revolves around the key theme(s) of potentiality, indeterminacy, and (non)particularity. Following this, it will move to consider two divergent attempts—the first by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the second by Slavoj Zizek—that aim to appropriate Bartleby's gesture for (decidedly radical) political purposes.

It will be asserted that, while Hardt and Negri can ultimately be seen to abandon the negative in favour of affirmation by utilizing Bartleby's gesture in a temporally limited fashion—as a way to “clear the ground,” as it were, to open up a new space for the coming community of the “multitude”—Zizek would instead have us preserve negativity indefinitely, infusing the significance of Bartleby's great refusal into the very composition of the counter-hegemonic subject to come.

The Radical Universal: Particularity, Demand and Revolution

- Gregory C. Flemming (Social and Political Thought, York University)

A demand and that which is given to satisfy that demand do not stand as a finished equation, but the opening of desire. A demand is always for something that the person to whom it is addressed can never adequately give. This is to say that the demand for any particular thing is actually a demand for something greater, something that cannot be given – love. Slovenian philosopher and political theorist Slavoj Zizek takes this formulation of desire and applies it to the idea of revolution: a demand for political recognition and legitimation is actually a demand for something greater that cannot be given – complete political and social change. Revolution, then, is not guaranteed, only wagered, and disparate demands brought under the rubric of the ‘proletariat’. This universal unifier, as expanded in its meaning by Zizek, is taken up and thought in its relation to ‘acting out’ and the act proper.

Resistance as Fantasy: Zizek's Theory of Ideology and the Impossible 'Act'

- Matthew Flisfeder (Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture, Ryerson University and York University)

According to Slavoj Zizek, a revolutionary 'act' is the only alternative form of resistance capable of altering the coordinates of real oppression and exploitation. In traditional ideological critique, everyday experience is considered as a measurement against which dominant ideology can be resisted. However, for Zizek, the reality of everyday experience is supported by an ideological fantasy. If resistance against an ideology is possible, according to Zizek, it has not really grasped the subject – it has not taken hold. According to him, an ideology only really takes hold of subjects when they do not perceive any opposition between it and reality. This paper aims to consider Zizek's notion of ideological fantasy in relation to his conception of the revolutionary 'act' in order to highlight its sheer impossibility. The relation between ideological fantasy and revolutionary 'act' is presented as a non-resolvable antagonism. References are made to two recent films, which present depictions of leftist struggle: Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), and James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* (2006). These examples are used to illustrate the function of ideological fantasy in its antagonism with the revolutionary 'act'.

Traversing the Fantasy of Resistance: An Attempt to Articulate Zizek's Act of Revolution

- Charles Wells (Social and Political Thought, York University)

Slavoj Zizek, like a number of other contemporary theorists, is interested in the notion that acts of resistance against an enemy secretly authorize and support that enemy. He observes that, in order to identify oneself as a resistor, one must rely on the continued presence of that which is to be resisted. As an "impossible" third alternative to compliance and resistance, which appear from this perspective equally to perpetuate the existing situation, Zizek proposes an "act of revolution" which alters the coordinates of the situation itself. This paper proposes to develop a particular articulation of what Zizek might mean by "act of revolution", using a number of key concepts from his own work, as well as that of Jean Laplanche, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. It will suggest that, whereas resistance involves misrecognizing the enemy as in some way insensible, unambivalent, complete, omnipotent, or inhuman, an act of revolution involves recognizing the enemy as another conflicted, decentred, desiring human subject. While valorizing the notion of a risky act of symbolic communication conceptually linked to passive resistance, this paper will none the less examine the possibilities of ethical or revolutionary violence.