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# The Menon-Žižek Debate: “The Tale of the (Never-marked) (But secretly coded) Universal and the (Always marked) Particular . . .”

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# The Menon-Žižek Debate: “The Tale of the (Never-marked) (But secretly coded) Universal and the (Always marked) Particular . . .”

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Slavoj Žižek’s first visit to India in 2010 saw a lively public debate between the Slovene philosopher and Nivedita Menon, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University’s Centre for Comparative Politics and Political Theory and a leading scholar in the field of postcolonial studies and feminism.<sup>1</sup> Though Žižek’s debates with Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, David Horowitz, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and, most recently, Noam Chomsky are well known, few outside India are aware of the Menon-Žižek debate. This little known exchange provides the opportunity to consider how colonial-era Eurocentrism is returning today, again, in the guise of the most radical criticisms of global capitalism. I say “again” since it was Gayatri Spivak who, in the mid-1980s, first drew our attention to the underlying presence of Eurocentrism in twentieth-century leftist western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Today, after almost three decades (and the post-colonial and posthumanist revolutions in the academy), any form of Eurocentrism in western thought may appear as farce. But the presence (and the defense) of Eurocentrism in the writings of a western leftist intellectual such as Žižek is more like tragedy, for it indicates that we are yet to be completely rid of Eurocentrism. Menon’s critique of Žižek offers yet another opportunity to analyze and to deconstruct the longstanding credo-narrative of (Europe as) the Universal and (or, versus) the Other-as-particular.

My aim here is not to review the Menon-Žižek debate beyond acquainting my readers with its most salient arguments. I will not take up each and every one of Menon’s contentions to demonstrate how these measure up vis-à-vis the vast corpus of Žižek’s writing. Instead, the framework of complaints Menon raises offer points of departure for examining a few key symptomatic

The subtitle is taken from Nivedita Menon’s comment made in her blog post titled “The Two Zizeks.” A version of this paper was presented at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in Seattle on 7 January 2012. I want to thank Mark D. Steinberg, Dušan Bjelić, Jessie Labov, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions during the revision process. I specially want to thank Jane T. Hedges for her meticulous reading of my manuscript. I remain indebted as well to Reshmi Mukherjee for her critical insights on my section on subalternity and to Meghant Sudan and Ralph Clare for being patient listeners.

1. The publication house Navayana invited Žižek as the chief speaker at its first Annual Lecture Series. Founded by Ravikumar and S. Anand in 2003, Navayana is “India’s first and only publishing house to exclusively focus on the issue of caste from anticaste perspective.” As part of its commitment to the public intellectual sphere in India, the Annual Lecture Series invites international scholars and philosophers to address issues such as “struggles for justice, equality and freedom.” Žižek gave four lectures on this tour: two in New Delhi, and one each at Hyderabad and Kochi.

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 271–313.

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Eurocentric moments in Žižek's work, especially in his essay "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism.'"<sup>3</sup> In opting to critically investigate a few select texts and moments (including short passages, asides, and elisions) from Žižek's long writing career, this article therefore does not aim to do anything more than mark out the contours of Eurocentrism in Žižek's works. This is not because an exhaustive study of Eurocentric dispensations of Žižek's philosophy is impossible to pursue, but rather because I am unwilling to constitutively delimit Žižek's extensive and myriad thoughts on the relation between late capitalism and subjectivity as merely a product of Eurocentrism. In fact, it is not difficult to see the intersections between Žižek's critical methodology and that of post-colonial studies, and this alone problematizes any overarching denomination of Žižek as a puerile Eurocentric thinker.<sup>4</sup> Instead of constructing a grand narrative about Žižek's Eurocentrism, then, I have opted to identify and gloss an assortment of segregated moments in his works that excise the particular in favor of the universal, that is, Europe. Moving from one textual site to another, I aim to arrest these sudden, subtle ruptures only to explode them further by, at times, drawing connections between these and traditional Eurocentric discourses and, at other times, by bringing them in dialogue with postcolonial criticism and the postcolonial critic.

To what purpose, one may ask? I am not interested in contesting either Žižek's claim that he is Eurocentric or that his Eurocentrism is latent and thus in need of Freudian excavation. Instead, I agree with Hamid Dabashi's recent reminder that "the question of Eurocentricism is now entirely blasé. Of course Europeans are Eurocentric and see the world from their vantage point." What I want to emphasize in particular is how Žižek's readings of the non-west truncate "the manner in which non-European thinking can [offer] alternative (complementary or contradictory) visions of reality more rooted in the lived experiences of people in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America."<sup>5</sup> It is this excision of the non-European's lived reality, thinking, and being that also situates Žižek's views on postcolonial studies, which for him is nothing more than a contemporary fad for feel-good multicultural identity politics, in the tradition of Eurocentric thinking.<sup>6</sup>

3. Slavoj Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 988–1009.

4. Ian Almond, "Anti-Capitalist Objections to the Postcolonial: Some Conciliatory Remarks on Žižek and Context," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 43, no. 1 (January 2012): 1–21.

5. Hamid Dabashi, "Can Non-Europeans Think? What Happens with Thinkers Who Operate outside the European Philosophical 'Pedigree?'" *Al Jazeera*, 15 January 2013, at [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013114142638797542.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013114142638797542.html) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

6. See, for example, his interview with Katie Engelhart, "Slavoj Žižek: I Am Not the World's Hippest Philosopher!" *Salon*, 29 December 2012, at [www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj\\_zizek\\_i\\_am\\_not\\_the\\_worlds\\_hippest\\_philosopher/](http://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher/) (last accessed 19 July 2013). For Žižek's take on postcolonialism as "feel-good multicultural identity politics," see Sandro Mezzadra and Federico Rahola, "The Postcolonial Condition: A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present," *Postcolonial Text* 2, no. 1 (2006), at [www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/393/819](http://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/393/819) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

## The Menon-Žižek Debate

The elements of the debate included Menon's official response to Žižek's lecture in New Delhi titled "Tragedy and Farce" and Žižek's lengthy rejoinder to Menon at the same venue. Discussions about this exchange subsequently gathered steam in the blogosphere after Menon posted an essay-length entry in *Kafila*, a scholarly blog, detailing her objections to Žižek's work.<sup>7</sup> Titled "The Two Zizeks," her blog post contends that Žižek's emphasis on European, Christian universalism as the most proactive model for countering global capitalism is dangerously ignorant of the heteroglossiac postcolonial histories of South Asia. This, in turn, leads Menon to characterize Žižek's discourse as part of that European intellectual tradition, which, while claiming to privilege *all*, reconstructs the (old) narrative of "the (Never-marked) (But secretly coded) Universal and the (Always marked) [, and as such, *always failing to accede to the Universal*] Particular."<sup>8</sup>

Menon's critique of Žižek consists of five points: Christianity, feminism, colonialism, the state, and universalism.

**Christianity:** Menon finds Žižek's introduction of Christianity into a leftist revolutionary politics and rhetoric problematic. She neither agrees with Žižek's theory that the "singular universalism of communism" is "necessarily Christian" nor with his claim that Christianity is free from the restrictive cultural particularities of other religions. Such claims, she notes, see the Kantian Enlightenment project as universal by ignoring postcolonial reservations about its universality.

**Feminism:** For Menon, Žižek's critique of contemporary (American) feminism as merely identity politics seems ignorant of the various Third World feminist movements. She argues that the characters and dispensations of these other feminist movements are very different from the white, elitist, upper-class American feminism that Žižek criticizes. Consequently, she condemns Žižek's clubbing of different feminisms and feminist movements into one singular set as yet another universalizing gesture on his part.

**Colonialism:** Žižek's insistence on reading colonialism as progressive is, in Menon's view, nothing short of appalling. She loathes the argument that colonialism was responsible for rescuing non-European societies from "repressive traditions" through the introduction of modernity (and modernization).<sup>9</sup> For

7. Nivedita Menon, "The Two Zizeks" (7 January 2010), *Kafila*, at [kafila.org/2010/01/07/the-two-zizeks/](http://kafila.org/2010/01/07/the-two-zizeks/) (last accessed 19 July 2013). *Kafila* is a blog site with difference. Theirs is a "collaborative practice . . . of concerned individuals—scholars, activists, writers, journalists—to create a space for critical engagement on a wide range of issues of the contemporary world" separate and free from the "mediatized" spaces of public discourse.

8. Emphasis added. We do not have the text of Žižek's talk available to us. Currently some videos of the lecture are available for viewing on YouTube. This paper relies primarily on Menon's written text and, to a lesser extent, on the videos. While reading Menon's piece, it is helpful to keep in mind that her response is not just based on Žižek's talk (or his book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* [London, 2009]) but offers a general reaction to his writings overall.

9. Menon is referring to Žižek's argument in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* that "British colonization of India created the conditions for the double liberation of India: from the constraints of its own tradition as well as from colonization itself" (116). For Žižek's opti-

her, this view is devoid of any substantial analysis of the complex problems of colonialism and postcolonial modernity. In turn, she emphasizes another set of postcolonial responses that reject the *entire* western tradition as “not just contingently flawed, but constitutively flawed.”<sup>10</sup>

The State: Menon has a foundational disagreement with Žižek’s argument that the ultimate goal of revolutionary politics is the usurpation of state power. She finds the theory of assuming state power in order to make the state function in a “non-statal” way thoroughly impractical. For her, the “state is fully integrated into the network of capitalist social relations, which is why every Marxist revolutionary take-over of the state in the 20th century eventually ended up building capitalism.”<sup>11</sup>

Universalism: In Menon’s view, all the above difficulties emerge from Žižek’s Eurocentrism, where “Kant is forever the pure philosopher of universality” and all particularities resistant to or critical of Eurocentric, Christian universalism deviants interpellated by the poisonous logic of global capital.<sup>12</sup>

We should keep in mind, however, that Žižek’s Eurocentrism is “only the most stark symptom of a wider syndrome” besetting the western philosopher for whom, as Aditya Nigam recently observed, philosophy is “always-already Western.”<sup>13</sup> Or, as Spivak famously noted in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” western episteme is driven by a “desire to conserve the subject of the West [and the] West as subject.”<sup>14</sup> Though it is beyond the scope of this article to address the “wider syndrome,” my argument can be also read as unraveling the general Eurocentric structure of western epistemology through an examination of its most recent, most complex, and most vituperative manifestation in Žižek’s writings.

## The Tale of Two Žižeks

What plagues Žižek, as Menon sees it, is his fantasy of *Žižek*. Žižek wants to be *Žižek*, and we are caught unawares in the middle of this drama of “having” and “becoming”: “There’s the Žižek whose analysis and critique of capitalism,

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mistic view of colonialism, see Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 116–18. To the story of Margaret Thatcher’s reception by the Chinese premier in 1985, as given by Žižek in the book, one should counterpose the story of David Cameron’s visit to China in 2010 where he and members of his delegation wore Remembrance Day poppies in their jacket lapels! When the “Chinese officials asked that they remove them, since they considered these poppies “inappropriate,” Cameron “refused to back down [and] followed this refusal with a lecture on human rights.” As Robert Young puts it, if Cameron’s refusal echoed the “famous incident when the British ambassador Earl McCartney refused to kowtow before the Emperor in 1793,” then his violent defense of human rights was the “historical irony [that] was apparent to all but himself.” See Robert Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 19–42.

10. Menon, “The Two Zizeks.” Emphasis in the original.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Aditya Nigam, “End of Postcolonialism and the Challenge for ‘Non-European’ Thought,” *Critical Encounters: A Forum of Critical Thought from the Global South*, 19 May 2013, at [www.criticalencounters.net/2013/05/19/end-of-postcolonialism-and-the-challenge-for-non-european-thought/](http://www.criticalencounters.net/2013/05/19/end-of-postcolonialism-and-the-challenge-for-non-european-thought/) (last accessed 7 August 2013).

14. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 271.

free market logic, capitalist media, and American imperialism, are dazzling and exhilarating. . . . Beguiled by this . . . you don't notice that you're being led deeper and deeper into a dark alley, till you realize with a sudden shock, that waiting with a smug smile at the end of it, twirling his mustachios, casually tapping his bludgeon against a beefy palm, is that tough guy—20th century Marxism."<sup>15</sup> Captivated by the first we overlook another Žižek—the one who “proceeds to spell out a radical Left politics constituted explicitly by . . . a Universalism that is surreptitiously coded as European and Christian,” resurrecting in the process the strong-arm of twentieth-century Marxism.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to Menon, however, I do not think that there are *two* Žižeks. The exhilarating critiques of capitalism and the promise of a “heterogeneous communism located in and arising from the experiences of different kinds of communities all over the world” articulated by the first Žižek are, in my opinion, conditional upon the rules laid out by the pronouncements of the second Žižek.<sup>17</sup> As such, the apparent opposition between the two Žižeks identified by Menon must be dissolved in favor of a Žižek whose critical evaluation of global capitalism needs to be read alongside his Eurocentrism, and vice versa. For, as Dabashi notes, the notion that “European” philosophy as opposed to “ethnophilosophies of the East” is most equipped to interrogate the phenomena of globalism arises from the “phantom memories of the time” when “‘the West’ had . . . a sense of its own universalism and globality. . . . There is thus a direct and unmitigated structural link between an empire, or an imperial frame of reference, and the presumed universality of a thinker thinking in the bosoms of that empire.”<sup>18</sup> As far as Žižek is a universal (read European) thinker, he too is deeply imbricated in that imperial frame of mind that makes his “particular thinking” universal and transforms “his philosophy” into *the* “Philosophy.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus for me Žižek's views on “communism” do not merely articulate the specter of twentieth-century Marxism but also of European colonialism. Considering that Žižek holds European modernity as a norm that must be universally accepted and colonialism as the progressive historical vector that “brought this modernity to benighted and backward societies”—liberated south Asia “from the constraints of its own tradition as well as from colonization itself”—the specter materializing for me at the end of a seductive journey with Žižek is of Thomas Babington Macaulay and his ilk.<sup>20</sup> In Žižek's pronouncements, one hears an echo of Macaulay's patronizing declaration: “a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”<sup>21</sup> Macaulay believed in the unquestionable superiority of west European/British modernity and considered it a duty to civilize the brutes: “The languages of Western Europe civilized Russia, I cannot doubt

15. Menon, “The Two Zizeks.”

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. Dabashi, “Can Non-Europeans Think?”

19. *Ibid.*

20. See, Menon, “The Two Zizeks”; Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 116.

21. Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Indian Education, The Minute of the 2nd of February, 1835,” in *Macaulay: Prose and Poetry*, selected by G. M. Young (London, 1952), 722.

that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar.”<sup>22</sup> Whether we contemplate the dangers of twentieth-century Marxism or nineteenth-century colonialism, the route from “civilizing the brutes” to exterminating them is a short one.<sup>23</sup> This can happen, and has happened—in the ghettos and the gulags, in fiction and edicts of law, as well as in colonial institutions of higher learning.

Yet the similarity between the colonial bureaucrat and the twenty-first century European philosopher does not end here. Nor is the association a whim. For both Macaulay and Žižek have their list of “good” books to aid their definition of the universal and facilitate their dismissal of the provincial. Armed with his set of “good” European books of morals, literature, and sciences, Macaulay dismissed the entire vernacular production of India and Arabia.<sup>24</sup> Surely, at least for some of us, memories of this attitude are revived when Žižek lists the subject matter of his good books (including but not limited to Greek democracy, the French Revolution, Robespierre and the Reign of Terror, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and St. Paul)—books that foreground and defend a “European legacy” for one and all. Consider for instance Žižek’s passionate take on the death of Europe:

One often hears that the true message of the Eurozone crisis is that not only the Euro, but the project of the united Europe itself is dead. But before endorsing this general statement, one should add a Leninist twist to it: Europe is dead—OK, but *which* Europe? The answer is: the post-political Europe of accommodation to the world market, the Europe which was repeatedly rejected at referendums, the Brussels technocratic-expert Europe. The Europe that presents itself as standing for cold European reason against Greek passion and corruption, for mathematics against pathetics. But, utopian as it may appear, the space is still open for another Europe: a re-politicized Europe, founded on a shared emancipatory project; the Europe that gave birth to ancient Greek democracy, to the French and October Revolutions. This is why one should avoid the temptation to react to the ongoing financial crisis with a retreat to fully sovereign nation-states, easy prey for free-floating international capital, which can play one state against the other. More than ever, the reply to every crisis should be *more* internationalist and universalist than the universality of global capital.<sup>25</sup>

22. *Ibid.*, 724.

23. Here I am referring to the document prepared by Mr. Kurtz on behalf of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. The document ends with the words: *exterminate all the brutes*. See Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Paul Armstrong (New York, 2006 [1899]).

24. Macaulay, “Indian Education,” 729. European books, Homi Bhabha tells us, served a slew of critical functions in the colonial world. On the one hand, books worked alongside brute force as central ideological signifiers in the constitution of docile colonized subjects. On the other hand, books, especially *The Book*, reasserted control over the volatile Other space through the repetition of textual authority as the sign and support of European authority. See Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” *The Location of Culture* (London, 2004), 145–74. For a detailed analysis of the British colonial project of introducing English in India, see Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York, 1989).

25. Slavoj Žižek, “Permanent Economic Emergency,” *New Left Review* 64 (July–August 2010), 86.

This has been one of Žižek's long-standing arguments—defend the “European Legacy” through a *reinvention* of Europe. In *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, “Permanent Economic Emergency,” and “Defenders of the Faith,” to name a few instances, he variously voices this demand that Europe reinvent itself through a marriage between Marxism (revised for the twenty-first century) and the Europe that “gave birth to ancient Greek democracy, to the French and October Revolutions” and atheism.<sup>26</sup> For what reason, one may ask? Žižek himself offers a most pointed answer to this in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*:

For many years, I have pleaded for a renewed “leftist Eurocentrism.” To put it bluntly: do we want to live in a world in which the only choice is between the American civilization and the emerging Chinese authoritarian-capitalist one? If the answer is no, then the true alternative is Europe. The Third World cannot generate a strong enough resistance to the ideology of the American Dream; in the present constellation, only Europe can do that. The true opposition today is not between the First and Third World, but between the ensemble of First and Third Worlds (the American global Empire and its colonies) and the remaining Second World (Europe).<sup>27</sup>

While it is true that many of us would not want to choose between living under an American empire or a Chinese one, it is equally true that many of us would also not choose Europe. If we overlook for the moment Žižek's claims that Europe is the *true* alternative or that the Third World is incapable of resisting the American dream, the question remains: what is this Europe that Žižek is talking about? It is not surprising that discerning minds find Žižek's reinvented, (*re*)*imagined* Europe thoroughly fanciful. Nikolay Karkov, among others, has recently questioned this idea of “Europe.” Writing in response to Žižek's prioritization of a symbolic Europe over the real(ity) of the Balkans, Karkov draws on the works of Martin Bernal, Henry Orla, and Enrique Dussel, to deconstruct the myth of a unified Europe. From the very beginning, this idea of Europe has been “a liberal mixture [of] fact and fiction,” he notes.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, and to expand Karkov's argument, others might equally object to the evacuation of global historical memory from the symbolic space of Europe in this process of reinventing Europe as the cradle of civilization. Evidently geopolitical spaces are symbolic universes encoded with imaginary signifiers of belonging, dispossession, and sacrifice. Even then, is such a radical erasing of global memory possible? Can it be expected of the peoples of the erstwhile colonized countries to welcome this *new* Europe—a Europe that does not count among its long-lasting legacies the history of colonization (and its continued persecution of immigrant minorities from the global south)? Or, worse still, can we really accept a Europe that claims colonial-

26. See Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London, 2004), 35–36; Žižek, “Permanent Economic Emergency,” 85; Žižek, “Defenders of the Faith,” *New York Times*, 12 March 2006, at [www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/opinion/12zizek.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/opinion/12zizek.html?_r=0) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

27. Žižek, *Iraq*, 32–33.

28. Nikolay Karkov, “Balkan Ghosts, Western Specters, and the Politics of Location: The Case of Slavoj Žižek,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (September 2011): 291–98.



ism is progressive and reparative!/? My argument is not just that Žižek fails to consider the non-European character of the ancient Greek civilizations or the contributions of Muslim Spain to the Enlightenment, but that *his* Europe is a violent creation. Like Mohandas Gandhi whom Žižek chastises for unleashing structural violence on the colonized populace of India (a point Rabindranath Tagore noted long before Žižek), Žižek's Europe violates the history and cultural memories of postcolonial nations as well as many nations within Europe.<sup>29</sup> In "Defenders of the Faith," Žižek pleads for "restoring the dignity of atheism, one of Europe's greatest legacies" as "our only chance for peace." But is peace possible unless advocates of this *new* Europe are also willing to include colonialism in the list of Europe's lasting criminal legacies?<sup>30</sup> The story of European modernity is incomplete unless the predicament of the enslaved colonized living at the mercy of the so-called bliss of Greek/European democracy is narrated. Similarly, the narratives celebrating the universal emancipatory disposition of Marxism-Leninism are inadequate unless, to give one example, the struggles of South Asian communists who fought tooth and nail with Vladimir Lenin during the Second Congress to articulate a "communist position vis-à-vis colonialism" are chronicled.<sup>31</sup> Retrieving the hidden and silenced histories of the non-European is one of the primary tasks undertaken by postcolonial studies. This is done, however, not just to claim recognition, but also to restore the true character of European modernity—modernity "to which the 'excluded barbarians' have contributed, although their contribution has not been acknowledged."<sup>32</sup>

An interesting case in point is the debate between M. N. Roy and Lenin at the Second World Congress of the Communist International. Roy, an Indian-Bengali with ties to the extremist revolutionary movement in colonial Bengal, objected to Lenin's position on the relationship between the communist move-

29. For Žižek on Gandhi, see *The Universal Exception* (New York, 2006), 222–23. See also, Adam Kirsch, "Žižek Strikes Again," *New Republic*, 26 July 2010, at [www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/76531/slavoj-zzek-philosophy-gandhi#](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/76531/slavoj-zzek-philosophy-gandhi#) (last accessed 19 July 2013), and Shobhan Saxena, "First They Called Me a Joker, Now I Am a Dangerous Thinker," *Times of India*, 10 January 2010, at [articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-01-10/all-that-matters/28120874\\_1\\_buddhism-political-violence-philosopher](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-01-10/all-that-matters/28120874_1_buddhism-political-violence-philosopher) (last accessed 19 July 2013). For Tagore on Gandhi, see *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–1941*, comp. and ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (New Delhi, 1997).

30. Žižek "Defenders of the Faith."

31. See Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2001).

32. I am inferring this definition of modernity from Enrique Dussel's argument that modernity must be reconceptualized as transmodernity, that is, not strictly a "European but a planetary phenomenon, to which the 'excluded barbarians' have contributed, although their contribution has not been acknowledged." See Walter Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," in Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham, 2008), 225–26. Put differently, the move toward modernity as inclusive rather than exclusive can be rephrased in the words of Edward Said as moving from a unitary, singular identity of the Self (as opposed to the Other) to an identity that includes the Other "without suppressing the difference[s]" particular to the Other. See Said, "On Orientalism," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdE18HdfanI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdE18HdfanI&feature=related) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

ment and nationalist movements in colonial countries. The primary points of contention revolved around two major issues: first, whether revolutionary movements in the colonies should align with the bourgeois-nationalist anti-colonial movements (the movement led by Gandhi in India, for example); second, whether communist movements in Asian colonies should be allowed to lead the worldwide revolution. Lenin was in favor of the first and opposed to the second. Roy, distrustful of the bourgeois leaders of the Indian National Congress, opposed Lenin on both counts. He advocated against forming alliances with the colonial bourgeois-nationalists while emphasizing the need to give the colonies the lead in the revolutionary movement. The stalemate ended only when he and Lenin agreed to a compromise, leading to the writing of the “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions” by Lenin and the “Supplementary Theses” by Roy.<sup>33</sup>

This debate is ample proof of the role that “Third World” intellectuals have historically played in shaping European modernity and thus a reason for not abandoning hope in the “Third World’s” potential to mount a challenge against global capitalism today. It is also important to note that Žižek’s plea for retrieving “the Lenin-in-becoming,” that is, “the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless and who was thus compelled to reinvent Marxism,” stands affirmed rather than compromised through the inclusion of this history of the non-European’s contribution to Lenin’s thought. The excision of this history, however, whether by ignorance or design, is symptomatic of a desire to overlook historical facts in order to construct and claim a myth of European modernity as essentially “European” in provenance.<sup>34</sup> When speaking of *origins*, it is imperative that we focus on documenting, accentuating, and reviving the role played by the non-European Other in both constituting and challenging European modernity. Put differently, the non-European has exerted and continues to exert a constitutive presence in the cultural and ideological map of Europe. And this Other’s inextricable presence is best evidenced in the need to reassert the privilege of Europe over the provincial Other.

### Who’s Afraid of Eurocentrism? Žižek Writes Back

Žižek is not unaware of the problems that the use of words such as *Eurocentrism* and *Eurocentric* raise today. In “A Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” he writes: “When one says *Eurocentrism*, every self-respecting postmodern leftist intellectual has as violent a reaction as Joseph Goebbels had to culture—to reach for a gun, hurling accusations of protofascist Eurocentrist cultural imperialism.”<sup>35</sup> Yet this canny circumspection makes way for a more self-righteous voice in his debate with William David Hart, who in his “Slavoj Žižek and the Imperial/Colonial Model of Religion” accuses Žižek of being

33. See Young, *Postcolonialism*, 131–34.

34. Slavoj Žižek, “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, No. 2 (Winter 2002): 553.

35. Žižek, “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” 988.

incorrigibly Eurocentric. Žižek's response to Hart was published in the same issue of *Nepantla*. Hart's counterresponse appeared in the following issue.<sup>36</sup> A detailed discussion of Hart and Žižek's arguments, responses, and counterarguments is not possible here. But parts of their exchange, especially from Žižek's response to Hart, are worth citing at length.

Žižek begins his rebuff by saying: "[Hart is] knocking on an open door: I directly and openly claim what he is trying to unearth through a critical analysis. I who openly designate myself as 'Eurocentrist,' who explicitly argue for the unique position of the Judeo-Christian tradition, am reproached—for what? For my 'Eurocentrism' and for privileging the Judeo-Christian tradition." He continues,

To put it quite brutally: Does Hart really think I am not acquainted with every line of his argumentation? What he does is simply retell the old story of how the Hegelian narrative of the dialectical progress of religious consciousness, which culminates in Christianity, the only true religion of freedom, served as the ideological legitimization of Western colonialism. What is missing in Hart's story is Hegel himself, what already Marx referred to as the revolutionary kernel of Hegel's dialectics. That is to say, if Hart's story were the whole story, then Hegel would be just a racist ideologue of capitalist colonialism. And, if this is all Hart sees in Hegel, then one cannot but apply to him Hegel's dictum on how Evil resides in the very gaze which perceives Evil everywhere: it is Hart himself whose gaze is constrained to the colonialist lenses, and is thus unable to discern the tremendous emancipatory potential of Hegel's thought. That Hegel's philosophy is part of modern Western history, inclusive of colonialism, is, of course, a commonplace barely worth mentioning. What is much more difficult to grasp is how this same "Eurocentric colonialist" philosophy provided the ultimate subversive intellectual tools that allow us to discern and question this very "Eurocentric colonialist" bias.<sup>37</sup>

As I read it, Žižek's defense/counterargument is built around three salient moments: (1) Hart is "knocking on an open door"—Žižek is openly declaring himself Eurocentric. (2) If Hart is correct, then Hegel is "just a racist ideologue of capitalist colonialism" and not a foundational figure of European modernity. (3) How, then, does Hart explain that the "same 'Eurocentric colonialist' philosophy" that he criticizes also provides him and others like him with "the ultimate subversive intellectual tools . . . to discern and question this very 'Eurocentric colonialist' bias" in European writings (beginning with Hegel and culminating, at this stage, in Žižek)? Simply put, is not "the 'postcolonial' critique of Eurocentrism[,] in its intellectual background and the tools it mobilizes, a 'Eurocentric' endeavor par excellence"?<sup>38</sup>

Each point and question raised by Žižek is important and valid; but these have been already raised, debated, and, more or less, put to rest in last few

36. See William David Hart, "Slavoj Žižek and the Imperial/Colonial Model of Religion," *Nepantla: Views from South* 3, no. 3 (2002): 553–78; Slavoj Žižek, "I Plead Guilty—But Where Is the Judgment?," *Nepantla: Views from South* 3, no. 3 (2002): 579–83; William David Hart, "Can a Judgment Be Read? A Response to Slavoj Žižek," *Nepantla: Views from South* 4, no. 1 (2003): 191–94.

37. Žižek, "I Plead Guilty," 579–80.

38. *Ibid.*, 580.

decades of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> Although there is no harm in bringing these questions back, it is nothing if not a tragedy bordering on farce that postcolonial critics are called on, again and again, to explain what they do. In any case, let me attempt to give brief answers to Žižek's arguments above.

Žižek says Hart is knocking on an open door since he has openly declared himself to be Eurocentric. That is, as Žižek sees it, should this *confession* not be enough to stop people from pointing the finger at Žižek? Hart disagrees: "A forthright acknowledgment that one is a Eurocentrist is hardly an argument for Eurocentrism. It is merely a confession. This confession may be good for Žižek's soul. It may be a way for him to hold his ethical-political commitments and the remnants of his religious commitments in a unified vision. Whether it is good for 'us,' however, is an ethical and political question, which has to be put to a historical, empirical, and theoretical test."<sup>40</sup> Risking abstraction, I would like to add another point to Hart's reply. Namely, which "door" is Žižek is talking about? Is not the problem with Eurocentrism (and colonial discourse) precisely in its attribution of meaning and sovereignty to objects, bodies, and systems of thought in complete ignorance of the colonized's/non-European's symbolic systems?

Žižek's second point is about Hegel's place in modernity. The question is whether postcolonial critics are denying Hegel his due. Or, for that matter, if they are asking to do away with European philosophy completely. Indeed some are. Walter D. Mignolo and Aditya Nigam, for instance, are against relying on the "guiding lights" of western philosophy. As Nigam observes, "a contemporary non-European thinker or scholar might prefer to engage with her own times . . . without the necessary mediation of Western philosophy or thought; she might find, as many indeed do, the elaborate invocation of the (Western) philosophical pantheon before embarking on any journey of thought, irrelevant if not positively irritating. S/he may not find discourses on 'communism' and the 'truth of the proletariat'—as in the thought of a Slavoj Žižek or an Alain Badiou—relevant at all to her condition." Nigam advocates instead a "withdrawal, a stepping back, from entering into 'a dialogue' with Western philosophers, the terms for which are always-already set for us."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Mignolo, responding to the recent exchanges between Santiago Zabala and Hamid Dabashi in *Al Jazeera*, notes, "*My readings of continental philosophy are not in search of guiding lights to deal with issues of non-European histories. . . . I spend most of my time engaged with non-European thinkers. It is from the light and guidance I've found in non-European thinkers that, when necessary, I engage with European philosophers.*"<sup>42</sup> Others, like Spivak, urge a more comprehensive engagement with European philosophy to fully excavate its foundations, however. For this latter group the task is that of under-

39. For a recent "postcolonial" reading of this postcolonial conundrum, see Nigam, "End of Postcolonialism."

40. Hart, "Can a Judgment Be Read?," 191.

41. Nigam "End of Postcolonialism."

42. Walter Mignolo, "Yes, We Can: Non-European Thinkers and Philosophers." *Al Jazeera*, 19 February 2013, at [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132672747320891.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132672747320891.html) (last accessed 30 August 2013). Emphasis added.

lining what remains undocumented in western discourses of European philosophy where discussions of Kant as the “pure philosopher of universality” remains conveniently divorced from discussions of Kant as the anthropologist, with his pseudo-scientific theories about “racial difference.”<sup>43</sup> This other Kant stands a better chance of being discovered (as has indeed been the case) through the writings of postcolonial scholars. As Spivak notes in response to critics who found fault with her treatment of Kant in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*:

I am not looking at Kant writing about perpetual peace, about the ethical state . . . not when he gives us *cosmopolitheia*, but rather where he is teaching us how to solve the most central problem of philosophy and in description of philosophizing shows an extraordinary disrespect for the Fourth World, the Aboriginal. That is the way I read as a literary critic. I look at the “marginal” moment that unravels the text; paradoxically, it gives us a sense of what is “normal” for the text, what norms the text.<sup>44</sup>

Postcolonial critics are therefore focusing on Hegel or Kant’s racism not simply to prove that they were racist ideologues who should thus be banished from the course of study. On the contrary, these critics are insisting on a more rigorous examination of European philosophy and modernity in relation to colonialism and imperialism. The point variously made by Spivak or Mignolo is that European modernity is inseparable from European colonialism: “Coloniality [is] constitutive of [Enlightenment European] modernity.”<sup>45</sup> Consequently there are not two Kants, two Hegels, and two Žižeks, but *Øne*. As long as modernity remains a purely European phenomenon, there is only *Øne* philosopher, the western philosopher, and *One* philosophy—that is, western philosophy.<sup>46</sup> Yes, we know that Žižek knows about the ideological collusion between Hegel’s Spirit (of History) and colonial discourse. What is being questioned instead is the foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) of the possibility of reconceptualizing modernity as transmodernity, that is, modernity not as a “European but a planetary phenomenon,” and European modernity as rooted in colonialism.<sup>47</sup>

But what of Žižek’s claim that evil resides in the eye of the beholder? That

43. Menon, “The Two Zizeks.”

44. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In Response: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Reflections on the History of an Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak?* (New York, 2010), 228–29.

45. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Knowledge,” 229.

46. My use of the barred *One* here refers to Lacan’s theory of the barred Other, which designates the symbolic order as barred, incomplete, or inconsistent. If western European philosophy is an impermeable symbolic order, a totality, an absolute, then Žižek is correct: one is either with it or opposed to it. My point here is to argue against such biased, fundamentalist notions privileging the fantasy of Europe as a totality.

47. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Knowledge,” 225–26. I use the Freudian term *Verwerfung* to define foreclosure in the terms delineated by Lacan in his Seminars, that is, as the refusing or repudiation of a significant signifier along with its affects from the symbolic order. In the specific context of Eurocentrism, what is being categorically rejected from constructions of a European symbolic order is the idea that the non-west may have contributed to European modernity or that the west has been built on the slave labor of the non-west.

it is “us” who are guilty of feeding off European intellectual traditions and then turning around to criticize those very traditions? This accusation, again, is not new. Third World postcolonial critics in the United States are always charged with defending their literal and intellectual positions—they speak from the so-called academic center and in European languages.<sup>48</sup> But does this situation not illustrate the impossibility of transcending the structures of global capitalism that were first put in place during the European colonization of the global south? The irony lies in how the invitation to identity that was first extended by the likes of Macaulay is now being rephrased to ask: what are you doing in my home? Why are you using my language? To these questions I respond with the words of Chinua Achebe: “I have been given this language and I intend to use it.”<sup>49</sup> I will confess as well that I intend to use this language to interrogate Europe, but this act is not tantamount to, as Veena Das once observed, a “rejection of western categories.” Rather it signals “the beginning of a new and autonomous relation” between Europe and its Other(s).<sup>50</sup> Let me also add a caveat here by noting that *my use of “your” language is different from your use of “your” language as far as you did not teach me to challenge you in your language*. To presume that the European intellectual tradition has *allowed* us to deconstruct the very structures of Eurocentric discourses is a self-serving fallacy. Quite the contrary, “we” have used the inherited language to illuminate the structural inconsistencies and violent dispensations of Europe’s language—its textualizations of the colony as well as the postcolony—via a wide array of reading strategies including but not limited to deliberate misreadings and by accentuating what remains veiled in Eurocentric presentations of an exclusive “European” modernity. Postcolonial scholars openly acknowledge these strategies. Consider for instance Spivak’s announcement in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* prior to her (mis) reading of Kant that,

I will call my reading of Kant “mistaken.” I believe there are just disciplinary grounds for irritation at my introduction of “the empirical and the anthropological” into a philosophical text that slowly leads us toward the rational study of morals as such. I rehearse it in the hope that such a reading might take into account that philosophy has been and continues to be travestied in the service of the narrativization of history. My exercise may be called a scrupulous travesty in the interest of producing a counternarrative that will make visible the foreclosure of the subject whose lack of access to the position of narrator is the condition of possibility of the consolidation of Kant’s position.<sup>51</sup>

48. See, for example, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “The Third World Academic in Other Places; Or, the Postcolonial Intellectual Revisited,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 596–616.

49. See Chinua Achebe’s essay “The African Writer and the English Language,” *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York, 1975). Spivak has also said on a number of occasions that to question why postcolonial critics write and speak in Europe’s “languages” is to deny the historical role of colonialism on postcolonial consciousness.

50. Veena Das, “Subaltern as Perspective,” in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies* (New Delhi, 1989), 6:310.

51. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (London, 1999), 9.

And what stands articulated at the end of this valuable and carefully crafted misreading? It is the figure of the otherwise excised racialized other in Kant—the *other* whose deletion in Kant operates to define the figure of the rational (Kantian) subject.<sup>52</sup>

### Žižek’s “Plea” and the Question of the Subaltern

“A Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism’” authorizes a theory of universal sociopolitical identity by ignoring and overwriting the plurality of the *Other*. Reading this essay as Spivak reads Kant, that is, by focusing on the marginal, the absences that constitute and unravel the text while dispensing a sense of the “normal” or the norm, my aim is to draw out the limitations of Žižek’s universal qua the question of the subaltern. Žižek’s theory of “politics proper” in the essay presents politics as a conflict between aristocracy or oligarchy and the subordinate social other. He defines “politics proper” as “a phenomenon that appeared for the first time in ancient Greece when the members of the demos (those with no firmly determined place in the hierarchical social edifice) *presented themselves as the representatives*, the stand-ins, for the whole of society, for the true universality.”<sup>53</sup> A part of the nonpart stood up against the ruling aristocracy or oligarchy to demand recognition as the true representatives of society. According to Žižek, this conscious articulation of representation constitutes the “elementary gesture of politicization,” and “the struggle for one’s voice to be heard and recognized as that of a legitimate partner” is “politics proper.”<sup>54</sup> My question is how his template of “politics proper” presumes to *represent* the subalterns from the global south or those who have a position but no identity in society?

I am zeroing in on the subaltern as this is the nodal point of the particular Other and as such most completely grounds the central premise of postcolonial studies, that is, reviewing coloniality via the Other’s identity-in-difference. In the immediate context of this essay, the category of the subaltern is also of utmost importance since it forces us to “think anew the relation between” Europe and the rest of the world “from a point of view that displaces the central position of [Europe] as the subject of discourse and [the Other] as its object.”<sup>55</sup>

The subaltern, Spivak explains, is best identified by its *position without identity* in society. That is to say, the subaltern has a position in society—it votes, figures in the census, and so on—but has no identity. Access to identity is barred because the foundational act of proclaiming identity, that is, asserting sovereignty through participation in the processes of signification or *othering* of the Other, remains absent. Any discussion of “what does the subaltern want?” is therefore complicit in putting *subalternity to crisis*—the question cannot be answered without speaking for or on behalf of the subaltern. Constituted by an “immense discontinuous network of political ideology,

52. Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London, 2002), 114.

53. Žižek, “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” 988. Emphasis added.

54. *Ibid.*, 989.

55. Das, “Subaltern as Perspective,” 310.

economics, history, sexuality, language and so on,” the subaltern remains outside and/or indifferent to the mainstream.<sup>56</sup> The social identity of the *singulier universel* authored in Žižek’s essay totally fails to consider the multi-form plurality of this *Other’s* being and becoming.<sup>57</sup> His universal is founded on a particular *seeing* of the Other and as such elides the very possibility of the Other’s plurality—the particular may exist adjacent to yet different from the universal.<sup>58</sup>

To return to Žižek’s definition, the “nothing” who can conceive, command, and represent both their desired position (“we are the universal”) and the identity they demand (“we stand in as part of the no-part for true universality”) is not the true subaltern. The true subaltern’s position (without identity) in society is a result of a lack of access to class consciousness and the absence of “institutional validation” of this subaltern position—“subalterns remain in subalternity, unable to represent themselves”; incapable of making their *speech* “count” or “hold.”<sup>59</sup> By contrast, Žižek’s “nothing” is conversant with and recognized by the axiomatic structures of institutional politics. Consequently, the subaltern as the *real* no-part is always represented by somebody or something else—those claiming to stand in for the whole of the nonpart; that is, a new political party, the idea of class struggle, a western philosopher, and so on. Thus represented, the subaltern is always excised from representation.

Žižek’s characterization of “politics proper” as political conflict between “the structured social body, where each part has its place, and the part of the no-part, which unsettles this order on account of . . . the principled equality of *all men*” is guilty of rehearsing the same excision.<sup>60</sup> His reading of political conflict as a moment of transition, of shifting registers—the particular moves from its earmarked subordinate locus to the center whereby a part of the nonpart identifies with the whole of society—is dependent on a series of gestures made by the dissenting Other. Significantly, this Other feels the *need* to “present itself” as a representative of the entire society, “*demands* to be heard,” and finally *desires* to “be recognized as a partner in political dialogue.” These conscious articulations of self-representation (for survival, love, and recognition) constitute the “elementary gesture of politicization”—the assertion of the part of the nonpart as the universal against the “particular power interests of aristocracy or oligarchy.” Political struggle is therefore “the struggle for one’s voice to be heard and recognized as that of a legitimate partner.”<sup>61</sup> It is in effect a struggle for (self-)representation ordered around specific modes of engagement and a symbolic system guiding demands for recognition as *legitimate*. Žižek’s argument, then, rests squarely on the existence of a big

56. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1998), 281.

57. Žižek, “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” 989, 991.

58. See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” See also, Michèle Barrett, “‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ New York, February 2004,” *History Workshop Journal* 58 (Autumn 2004), 359.

59. Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 308; Spivak, “In Response,” 232–33.

60. Žižek, “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” 988. Emphasis added.

61. *Ibid.*, 989. Emphasis added.



Other and an acknowledgement of this Other by both the parties. Is it difficult to locate the excision of the subaltern in this nod to the Other? The appearance of this Other at the horizon of a political struggle between the particular (as universal) and the universal (as particular) points rigorously toward Spivak's contention regarding the inability of elite discourses to comprehend the subaltern's speech. Žižek's view that "politics proper" lays out the exact coordinates for the struggle leaves no space for the particular. Unnerving is the implication that revolutionary politics irrespective of their social and historical contexts must conform to certain (read, "European" universalist) directions. And equally offensive is the suggestion that all revolutionary movements must gain accreditation from this designated Other.

At this point I find myself confronted with a series of questions. Who decides what is legitimate? On what basis does the part of the nonpart claim to represent, first, the whole of the nonpart and, then, the whole of society? And, what if the revolutionary goal of the nonpart lies not in claiming the universal but rather the particular, the local, the provincial? What if the subaltern participates in a revolution against the "ruling oligarchy or aristocracy" but its vision is opposed to the universal except when encoded as such by those in positions of power (the colonizer, the colonial elite, the decolonized national bourgeois, and so on)? The point I am trying to make is this: it is impossible to understand and map the subaltern. It is impossible to situate subalterns through a universally valid template without first peeling off their particularities; that is, without judging their actions vis-à-vis a symbolic order that is not theirs to begin with. Žižek's theoretical model for understanding "politics proper" is problematic because his ground rules deny the subaltern *Other*. (Or, does the subaltern refuse these rules?)

There is yet more proof for reading Žižek's "plea" as a Eurocentric template that evaluates, assesses, and, if found wanting, excises the particular. Consider for example his sweeping indictment of the whole of Japanese society as "nonpolitical":

Let us take an example from the opposite part of the world, from Japan, where the caste of the untouchables is called the *burakumin*: those who have contact with dead flesh (butchers, leatherworkers, gravediggers), who are sometimes even referred to as *eta*, "much filth." Even now, in the supposedly enlightened present, when they are no longer openly despised, they are silently ignored. Not only do companies still avoid hiring them and parents refuse to allow their children to marry them but, under the "politically correct" pretense of not offending them, ignoring the issue is the preferred course. The recently deceased author Sue Sumii, in her great series of novels, *The River with No Bridge*, used a reference to the *burakumin* to expose the meaninglessness of the entire Japanese caste hierarchy. Significantly, her primordial traumatic experience was a shock that occurred when, as a child, she witnessed how, in order to honor the emperor, one of her relatives scratched the toilet he used to preserve a piece of his shit as a sacred relic. This excremental identification of the *burakumin* is crucial: when Sumii saw her relative cherishing the emperor's excrement, her conclusion was that, following the tradition of the king's two bodies, in which the king's body stands for the social body as such, the *burakumin* as the excrement of the social body should also be cherished in the same way. In other words, Sumii

took the structural homology between the emperor's two bodies more literally and further than usual: even the lowest part, the excrement, of the emperor's body has to be reduplicated in his other, sublime body, which stands for the body of society. Her predicament was similar to that of Plato, who in *Parmenides* bravely confronts the embarrassing problem of the exact scope of the relationship between eternal forms/ideas and their material copies: Which material objects are ontologically covered by eternal ideas as their models? Is there also an eternal idea of so-called low objects such as mud, filth, or excrement? However, the crucial point and the proof of the non-political, corporate functioning of Japanese society is the fact that, although voices like that of Sumii are heard on their behalf, the *burakumin* did not actively politicize their destiny, did not constitute their position as that of *singulier universel*, claiming that, precisely as the part of no-part, they stand for the true universality of Japanese society.<sup>62</sup>

For me, this passage raises more questions than it answers. What is the reason for the thorough dismissal of the burakumin? What is the proof of the nonpolitical character of Japanese society as a whole? Just that that the burakumin did not actively politicize their destiny! Why is the onus always on the *Other* to perform, to accept the invitation to identity, to do the right thing! Is the burakumin designated to the rubbish bin of history simply because Žižek's example from "the opposite part of the world" does not fit his thesis of what is "politics proper"? Or was this example from the opposite camp chosen deliberately to authenticate the claim made soon after: "politics proper is thus something specifically 'European'"?<sup>63</sup> There is yet another important question, namely, how does Žižek know what the burakumin want? If the very axiomatic structures from within which the burakumin operate are closed to these subalterns, if there is no space in that system for subalterns to articulate their desire, and if, more pertinently, subalterns are indifferent to or even dismissive of that system which Žižek claims to be the definitive system of "politics proper," then, is it possible to make overarching generalizations such as "the *burakumin* did not actively politicize their destiny"? I do not hear the subaltern any more or less than Žižek does, yet Žižek displays a sense of entitlement when speaking about them. Would it be wrong to identify this sense of entitlement as a sign par excellence of Eurocentrism?

### The Repeated Invitation

The most problematic assertion in Žižek's talk in Delhi was his invitation to the Other to embrace the universal. Those acquainted with his book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, will recall a similar invitation that is extended at the conclusion of the work to all anticommunists: *return to the faith*, you are all pardoned and reminded that it is time to "get serious again."<sup>64</sup> But the invitation extended in Delhi is far more disturbing because of the identity position Žižek claims in his address to the Indian audience: a European Lacanian-Marxist seeking to revive the "legacy" of Europe and instruct and initiate the

62. *Ibid.*, 990–91.

63. *Ibid.*, 991.

64. Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 157.

wayward multitude of the Third World into a European universal. No wonder Menon found this gesture offensive. For Žižek's call to reject "the politics of identity" and his invitation to enter the universal is just a rephrasing of European priority and privilege. As Menon puts it, "to insist that you cannot enter my drawing room at all *and* to insist that you are welcome to enter if you are civilized, wear a suit, know how to use a knife and fork" are of the same stock.<sup>65</sup> Such an invitation functions by articulating an essential difference ("You've had your particularist stint, now is the time to return to the universal fold!") by passing a sweeping judgment that the Other has failed to realize its potential (that is, to "actively politicize" its destiny). One cannot also miss the shared values between Macaulay's invitation and Žižek's. What is no less interesting is the repetition of the invitation—from Macaulay to Žižek (and from Žižek to the Balkans to Žižek to India). It is in this repetition that one must identify the essence of European discourse as it beholds the *Other* as well as the ambivalence underlying the authority of the European subject of enunciation qua his/her identity as the Subject. Homi Bhabha describes this duality thus: "[The] presence [of the Master's discourse] is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference."<sup>66</sup> In other words, Žižek's discourse in Delhi, and his invitation to the particular to join the universal, is neither original—its precedents pepper almost the entirety of European colonial discourse—nor is it authoritative, since the very fact of repetition dissolves authority by binding it to a *compulsion to repeat*. Repetition attests to the fact that the Other "which has not been understood . . . reappears."<sup>67</sup> Repetition is symptomatic of the failure to grasp the Other in its multiform plurality. The Other remains neither buried nor erased, "never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional," but always as "a pressure, and a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization" compelling the Subject in effect to repeat invitations.<sup>68</sup>

This pattern and habit of thought is evident when we compare Žižek's views on India with his pronouncements on the Balkans. I will not undertake an extensive review of Žižek's views on the Balkans, but the contours of his beliefs can be easily ascertained from the work done by Dušan Bjelić, Tomislav Longinović, and Nataša Kovačević.<sup>69</sup> As a comparatist, I find their writings most interesting, especially in relation to Menon's views on Žižek. Bjelić, for instance, contends that Žižek's careful construction of an image of Balkan-Europe, or the Balkans as Europe, reflects an attempt to dissolve and

65. Menon, "The Two Zizeks."

66. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," 153.

67. Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy" (1909), in J. Strachey, ed., *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1955), 10:122.

68. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," 156.

69. I thank the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to these works. I am by no stretch of the imagination a scholar of Balkan history and culture, so I will merely highlight what more established scholars in the field have observed and what most readers of *Slavic Review* are well aware of. For a recent collection of essays examining Žižek's representation of the Balkans, see the "special section" in *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (September 2011): 276–323.

disidentify the essential cultural plurality of the region.<sup>70</sup> Žižek, Bjelić notes elsewhere, “discursively links the Balkans to global capitalism and multicultural democracy and thus circumvents Balkan exceptionalism” while advocating a decoupling from particular “Balkan” local mores in favor of symbolically assuming a European identity.<sup>71</sup> It is precisely this failure to account for, theorize, and further problematize the subaltern or particular experience that I have been elaborating in my current exegesis of Žižek’s text(s) on universalism. Reading these critiques, I am continually reminded of Spivak’s gloss that Europe’s “occasional interest in touching the *other* of the West, of metaphysics of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we (not), how are we (not)?”<sup>72</sup> Or, as Su-Lin Yu puts it, Europe’s *othering* of its Other *only makes* the west’s “subjectivity possible.”<sup>73</sup> Admittedly this brief comparison between the representations of the Balkans and the representations of South Asia in western epistemology is not enough to establish their respective conditions of otherness qua Europe. Yet it is exciting to note that sincere initiatives are underway to build a more comprehensive ground for comparing these two geopolitical others.<sup>74</sup> And as similar efforts gather strength, we should be able to comparatively examine questions of modernity, Europe, and otherness more conclusively in the near future.

### Conclusion: Žižek and the Future of Postcolonial Studies

Žižek is not alone in finding fault with the current directions and dispensations of postcolonial studies. Arif Dirlik, Aijaz Ahmad, and Ania Loomba have all variously drawn attention to the need for postcolonial studies to be re-envisioned in the present.<sup>75</sup> In fact, the “death” of postcolonial studies has

70. Dušan Bjelić, “The Balkans: Radical Conservatism and Desire,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 286.

71. Dušan Bjelić, “Is the Balkans the Unconscious of Europe,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (September 2011): 315, 321–22.

72. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 188–89.

73. Su-Lin Yu, “Reconstructing Western Female Subjectivity: Between Orientalism and Feminism in Julia Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women*,” *Jouvert* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 2002), at [english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/slyu.htm](http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/slyu.htm) (last accessed 19 July 2013). Emphasis in the original.

74. The department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures at Ohio State University is organizing the 2013–2014 Sawyer Seminar on the topic of “Language, Politics, and Human Expression in South Asia and the Balkans: Comparative Perspectives.” This “year-long Sawyer Seminar will focus on the intersection of language, politics, and human expression in two geopolitically key regions of the world—the Balkans and South Asia. The *unique yet similar* interplay of language, nationalism, ideology, and religion with literature, film, and other forms of expression within each of these regions compels us toward a comparative approach. The juxtaposition of the Balkans and South Asia, we suggest, will offer academics and policy-makers a transnational perspective on the relationships between culture and politics.” Emphasis added. See [slavic.osu.edu/sawyer-seminar](http://slavic.osu.edu/sawyer-seminar) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

75. Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, Colo., 1997), and Dirlik, *Postmodernity’s Histories: The Past as Legacy*

also been announced.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Partha Chatterjee struck the death knell for subaltern studies in his 2012 essay “After Subaltern Studies.”<sup>77</sup> Yet none except Žižek has moved over the years from critiquing postcolonial studies to unequivocally abusing the field as well as those working in it. In his 2002 essay “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” Žižek offers a thought-provoking assessment of postcolonial studies as “culture studies chic.” Admitting that the issues raised by postcolonialism are “undoubtedly crucial,” he goes on to say that “postcolonial studies tends to” gravitate toward emphasizing

the colonized minorities’ right to narrate their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms that repress otherness, so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance toward the Other and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance toward the “Stranger in Ourselves,” in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves. Thus the politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudopsychanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas.<sup>78</sup>

In the course of a decade, Žižek has unfortunately veered from logically evaluating postcolonial studies to stating: “If you mention the phrase ‘postcolonialism,’ I say, ‘Fuck it!’ Postcolonialism is the invention of some rich guys from India who saw that they could make a good career in top Western universities by playing on the guilt of white liberals.”<sup>79</sup> One wonders what could have led him to this. (I am, however, happy to see Žižek acknowledge race as crucial for understanding the dispensations of global capitalism in the era of the postcolonial critic).<sup>80</sup> In any case, I prefer Žižek’s 2002 critique as important for the future of postcolonial studies and for the work that postcolonial scholars do and ought to do in the era of globalization and American multiculturalism. For this reason I prefer to identify Žižek as an intellectual interlocutor whose criticism might allow postcolonialists to find better traction

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*and Project* (Lanham, Md., 2000); Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London, 1992); Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, 1998).

76. Editor’s Column, “‘The End of Postcolonial Theory?’ A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel,” *PMLA* 122, no. 3 (May 2007): 633–51. Cited in Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” 19–42.

77. Partha Chatterjee, “After Subaltern Studies,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47, no. 35, (September 2012): 44–49.

78. Žižek, “Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” 545–46.

79. See Engelhart, “Slavoj Žižek.”

80. Critics of postcolonial studies can also be critics of Eurocentrism. Rajiv Malhotra, for instance, has this to say about Homi Bhabha: “Harvard University’s Homi Bhabha is a role model hoisted by the American establishment for young Indian-Americans in English Departments and Postcolonial Studies to emulate. He has proven himself as having the ‘white gaze.’ This is the liberal path to becoming white.” A vocal critic of Eurocentrism and an avid advocate of Hindu-Indian identity, Malhotra should rightly be at the crosshairs of Žižek’s critique. But he shares with Žižek the latter’s distrust of postcolonial studies. Speak of unequal partners! See Rajiv Malhotra, “The Whitewashing of Bobby Jindal,” *Huffington Post*, 31 January 2013, at [www.huffingtonpost.com/rajiv-malhotra/bobby-jindal-race\\_b\\_2588700.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rajiv-malhotra/bobby-jindal-race_b_2588700.html) (last accessed 19 July 2013).

in their examinations of the current conditions of globality. While agreeing with Sandro Mezzadra and Federico Rahola that Žižek appears to understand postcolonialism as “merely the global projections of multiculturalism” and identity politics, I also find similarities between his methodology for studying culture and the framework employed by postcolonial studies to unravel excised histories, voices, and subjectivities.<sup>81</sup> In this context, the postcolonial framework of analysis is far from obsolete in today’s era of multiculturalism. Confronted with rehearsals of the conditions of postcolonial time (marked by Fanonian binarism) in the era of global time (marked by multiculturalism)—a phenomena to which Žižek has often drawn our attention—postcolonial studies retains the methodological acumen to continue examining the politics of invisibility, unreadability, and revisionism in the logic and structure of twenty-first-century discourses.<sup>82</sup>

The final point that needs to be clarified here is that the postcolonial emphasis on the “ethics of alterity” is not equivalent to participating in identity politics, as Žižek has most often accused postcolonial critics of doing. An “ethics of alterity” serves instead to expose the processes through which “Europe” constitutes its imaginary sovereign subjectivity by defining the non-west as lacking.<sup>83</sup> I have no hesitation in accepting Žižek’s point that “identity politics involves the logic of *ressentiment*, of proclaiming oneself a victim and expecting the dominant social Other to pay for the damage.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, such a gesture keeps alive the sovereign Subject of the west by imagining it as the symbolic Other. Put differently, whether the west represents the non-west or the non-west asserts its identity against the west, the west as the fulcrum of discourse is never compromised. In the end, therefore, irrespective of whether the west stands at the opening of a narration or at the (receiving) end, it is always in the position of the S/subject of the narrative. The real task consequently is to focus on the predicate in order to analyze the structure of the subject through examinations of the continuous “worldling” of the “non-west” as contiguous to assertions and reinventions of Europe’s (universal) sovereignty, and the resistant character of the particular, or that particular which falls off the map of discourse, thus constituting itself as an aporia in narratives of subjectivity or identity. The particular is that *hole* in the symbolic text of Europe’s self-narrative which Europe cannot be rid of so easily.

81. On the question of the rejection of multiculturalism and identity politics, see Mezzadra Rahola, “Postcolonial Condition,” as well as Menon, “The Two Zizeks.” On the similarities between Žižek and postcolonial studies, see Almond, “Anti-Capitalist Objections to the Postcolonial.”

82. Mezzadra Rahola, “Postcolonial Condition”; Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” 22.

83. Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, x, 199.

84. Žižek, “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” 1006.