

Article

Revolutionary Hope in Dark Times: Zizek on Faith in the Future

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Abstract: In this article, I interpret Zizek’s recent call to “abandon hope” and embrace the “courage of hopelessness,” as a provocation to articulate a new kind of utopia, rather than an endorsement of despair. On Zizek’s analysis, progressive hopes are currently directed towards fixing the existing situation, rather than accepting that the things that we hope will not happen are, in fact, about to happen—unless individuals, at last, summon the political resolution to act decisively. In a context of the “privatisation of hope,” however, where social despair has already been weaponised by the alt-Right, it is crucial to grasp Zizek’s intervention not as the expression of a tragic existential attitude of resignation to disaster, but as an effort to articulate the formal coordinates of a radical alternative. I interpret Zizek’s commentary, in the context of his overall theory of ideology, as an effort to articulate the “hope of the hopeless,” involving a kind of faith (in the future) without belief (in miracles), which requires the formulation of a new social principle that does not rely on the deceptive promise of a guaranteed positive outcome.

Keywords: Zizek; ideology; revolution; hope

In a crucial passage from his recent book, Zizek states that “the solution [to looming ecological disaster and the threat of world war] is to become fully aware of the explosive set of interconnections that makes the entire situation dangerous. Once we do this . . . we embrace the courage that comes with hopelessness” (Zizek 2018, p. 298). What I am tempted to describe as Zizek’s most Marxist book yet devotes six chapters to sketching the desolate conjuncture of corporate globalisation, environmental devastation and preparations for world war. There follows a scathing analysis of the Left’s timid tinkering, based on its underlying acceptance of the world capitalist system, which stands in stark contrast to the Right’s bold reactionary vision of identitarian neo-fascism, based on its complete rejection of the international legal order. Zizek closes with what seems like a statement of bleak pessimism—that “the light at the end of the tunnel is probably an approaching train”—that is linked to the call to the Left to, at last, abandon the logics of protest and postponement, and to act “without guarantees”. In this article, I interpret Zizek’s call to “abandon hope” and embrace the “courage of hopelessness”—in confronting the linked problems of social inequality, looming war and ecological crisis—as a provocation to articulate a new kind of utopia, rather than an endorsement of despair.

So much has changed since Zizek wrote *The Courage of Hopelessness*, and yet, nothing has changed. As I write, I am under quarantine, waiting to learn from my body and the bodies of those around me, what my fate is. At this moment, the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly escalating around the world, buoying a foam of corpses as it rises—our beloved dead. It reminds us that hope, and hopelessness, are not just social. They also relate to existential concerns, to life and death, and to our imbrication in the natural world, as mortal animals. We hope not to die—not yet. We hope that our loved ones do not die. Who does not? There is desperate courage here: that of the frontline health workers and the vulnerable carers, tending the sick even at the potential cost of their own lives. At the same time, there is also, without question, hope, especially amongst those who may live because others take this

risk. But even though the reminder that the existential dimension is crucial, hope for oneself and significant others is not really what Žižek is talking about.

The hope that Žižek discusses relates to the fact that, despite the pandemic, everything remains the same. The same multinational corporate capitalism, the same global state system, the same neoliberal economic policies, the same worldwide social inequalities. I am not here advocating a reactive libertarianism that defies the science, to propose that the pandemic is providing an opportunity for states to extend the state of exception into totalitarian forms of biopolitical control. No. A green socialist global federation, of the sort advocated by Žižek, and also by me, would also impose restrictions on movement to limit the spread of a pandemic. This is because that is what the science advises, and it is consistent with protecting the naturally vulnerable or the socially exposed: the aged, the infirm, those whose biology, for whatever reason, exposes them to extra risk; those whose social location leaves them unprotected or fragile. What I am speaking about is the fact that after decades of the neoliberal disintegration of the welfare state and the drastic polarisation between global North and global South, there is virtually no health system in the world capable of a full response to this crisis. The fact is that the emergence of this disease, and others like it, is intimately linked to environmental destruction, driven by the free market's irrational spiral, which has forced the opening of land to farming and settlement.

In 1998, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Laurie Garrett interviewed WHO officials, health workers, medical researchers and disease control specialists to write *The Coming Plague*, a prescient warning about the links between ecocide, capitalism and epidemics. The book “looks at the means by which humans are actually abetting and aiding the microbes through ill-planned development schemes, misguided medicine, errant public health and shortsighted political inaction” (Garrett 1998, p. 11). She identifies the health problems of the planet of slums that exist because an agrarian world has become an urbanised one within a century, under conditions of extreme inequality. She also points to the monocultural landscape that has resulted from the industrialisation of agriculture and the deregulation of the global economy. “Both deforestation and reforestation could give rise to microbial emergence. If an ecology were completely devastated, and its eventual replacement species were of inadequate diversity to ensure a proper balance among the flora, fauna and microbes, new disease phenomena might emerge” (Garrett 1998, p. 553). But equally, microbial evolution within human communities—studied experimentally in the context of virulent strains of *E. coli*—involves “jumping genes” that generate major directed mutations, so that lethal diseases in crowded conditions can quite suddenly emerge from a human reservoir (Garrett 1998, p. 586). It is too soon to say what is involved in the case of COVID-19, beyond its probable origin in bats. But it is certainly the case that human populations exist around bat caves, in various locations around the world, that have been exposed to novel coronaviruses, and that deforestation plays a significant role in this exposure (Afelt et al. 2018).

The complex of problems that Žižek investigates remains, therefore, the same. On Žižek's analysis, progressive hopes are currently directed towards fixing the existing situation, rather than accepting that the things that we hope will not happen are, in fact, about to happen—unless individuals, at last, summon the political resolution to act decisively. The problem is that “we *know* the (ecological, etc.) catastrophe is possible, probable even, and yet we do not *believe* it will really happen” (Žižek 2018, p. 296), so we retain the hope that it can all be resolved without fundamental social change. For Žižek, this characteristic attitude of “perverse disavowal” raises the fundamental problem to do with hope and belief, namely, that they are not rationally grounded. Žižek's addressee is, of course, a progressive readership whose hopes are, he thinks, irrationally misdirected towards amelioration. But the dark hopes of the alt-Right, directed towards apocalyptic visions of political violence and the restoration of social hierarchies, are no more rational. Nor are the hopes of the world's current neoconservative leadership, directed as they are to trading lives for money, in the context of exchanging pandemic for recession.

Hope and belief, in other words, belong to the field of ideology—provided that we understand *that* term as a neutral, descriptive category, designating the lived experience of a form of social existence

combined with a relation to the natural world (including the human body). Just as there is no such thing as an opposition between ideological false consciousness and scientific true consciousness, only false or verified scientific hypotheses, there is no such thing as “false hope” or “delusional belief”. Hope is always positive, just as belief always speculates. There are, however, hopes for things that are worthless. That is what is generally meant by saying that a hope is deceptive or illusory. And there are beliefs whose speculations are based, not on ideas, but on myths. These beliefs are mythological, that is, they consist in enigmatic symbol complexes, yet to be actually deciphered. I shall more fully explain this approach to hope and belief shortly.

In the overall context of his theory of ideology, meanwhile, Žizek’s commentary should be interpreted as an effort to articulate the “hope of the hopeless,” involving a kind of faith (in the future) without belief (in miracles). I reconstruct Žizek’s views on the formation of the ego to propose that he is talking about the socialisation of individuals into a radically democratic personality structure as the key to a new (non-deceptive) hope. This will require the formulation of a new social principle that does not rely on the deceptive promise of a guaranteed positive outcome, but instead solicits an embrace of provisionality and experimentation. Nonetheless, it will be necessary to read Žizek against the grain at certain points, because *The Courage of Hopelessness* does indeed contain rhetorical formulations that suggest the abandonment, not just of reformist hopes, but of hope in general. I suggest that the rejection of hope as a political passion not only deprives progressive thinking of a key motivational resource, but is also, in a context marked by what has been called the “privatisation of hope,” a strategic mistake. In a context of the “privatisation of hope,” where social despair has already been weaponised by the alt-Right, it is crucial to orient Žizek’s intervention away from the idea of a tragic existential attitude of resignation to disaster.

Two considerations probably inform Žizek’s rhetoric: the philosophical tradition, which is suspicious of hope; and, the Marxist tradition, which privileges scientific consciousness. But reading more widely in Žizek’s work, it becomes clear that the theoretical resources to inflect his intervention towards the articulation of a new hope certainly exist. Žizek’s theory of ideology shifts the notion of ideology away from “false ideological illusions versus scientific theoretical cognition,” towards the idea of ideology as embedded in forms of subjectivity. Meanwhile, Lacanian psychoanalysis rethinks the philosophical tradition on the question of the relation between hope, belief and desire, suggesting that everything depends on the subject’s existential attitude towards the object of belief. Accordingly, I present an interpretation of Žizek’s “courage of hopelessness” as an effort to articulate the formal coordinates of a revolutionary hope for a radical alternative. I propose that this kind of revolutionary hope can be further clarified with reference to Bloch’s idea of the difference between “abstract” (i.e., metaphysical, transcendent or otherworldly) utopia and “concrete” (i.e., plausible, emergent and historical) utopia.

1. The Privatisation of Hope

I begin by pointing to the importance of hope as a political motivation in light of philosophical and psychological discussion of the topic, before turning to the catastrophic potential of the current conjuncture. Here, the most important problem is the “privatisation of hope,” with a correlative “waning of utopian energies,” which belongs to the present situation.

The psychological literature on hope as both an individual inspiration and a social passion, especially in extreme situations, indicates that hope is a crucial political motivation and that protracted hopelessness (i.e., despair) leads to conformity, not rebellion. Erik Erikson showed that the foundation of a hopeful disposition in childhood is crucial to the development of self-confidence and mutual recognition, as well as willpower and purposefulness (Erikson 1963). Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* is an exhaustive documentation of the cultural and historical manifestations of hope as a positive political motivation supporting resistance against domination (Bloch 1995). The *locus classicus* of the negation of hope as a political motivation is Bruno Bettelheim’s “Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations,” which documents the identification with the aggressor that happens with despair (Bettelheim 1943).

This is supported by current empirical psychological research, which amply attests to the benefits of hope. It promotes agency and supports resilience (Ong et al. 2006) while providing a foundation for the communication of pro-social motivations and empathic orientations (Godman et al. 2014). Social practices of hope can be contrasted with the politics of fear (Skrimshire 2008), especially in the contexts of activism versus authoritarianism (Feldman and Hart 2016) and, more generally, in contexts of social change (Greenaway et al. 2016). There is no such thing as false hope because hope always motivates the development of creativity, confidence and trustiness, irrespective of the scientific assessment of the probability of the hoped-for outcome (Snyder 2000; Snyder et al. 2018).

It is true, however, that people typically experience a sort of transitory and intermediate “zero point of temporary hopelessness,” in-between two different hopes (actually-existing hope and transformative-future hope). Individuals and groups who abandon one hope for another one pass dangerously close to the nadir of despair, but if this is successfully resolved, it characteristically results in a burst of energy as their entire lives are transformed (Lopez 2014, pp. 15–32). The key to this is the abandonment of one belief for another belief, about what is possible or impossible, something which is of course connected to a shift in the state of affairs that is wanted by the individual or group (Scioli and Biller 2009, pp. 62–92). What the individual or collective wants is described by the new definition of the better world/life, and what the individual or collective now believes is that a sudden turn to this is remotely possible. It is worth noticing that this “revolution of hope,” which is what I interpret Zizek as advocating, is entirely different to the “radical hope” discussed by Jonathan Lear, which involves a retrenchment of identity around existing beliefs (Lear 2006, pp. 55–102).

In light of this rich documentation of the importance of hope, it is striking that the philosophical tradition is highly suspicious about hope, as a potentially illusory consolation linked to traditional ideas and accepted dogmas (Bloesser 2017). Why would anyone reject hope? The answer is: classical philosophy regarded hope as based in a cognitive illusion that led to faith in the supernatural, or at least, the improbable or implausible. This was held by ancient philosophers (with the possible exception of Aristotle) to prevent a realistic estimation of the actual conditions of human existence. And I might remark that just this characteristic of being a consolatory illusion was probably the underlying reason why medieval theology strongly endorsed hope! Enlightenment philosophy, however, realised that hope is a non-cognitive practical attitude (i.e., it is not theoretical, but practical, affecting normative conceptions of right conduct rather than scientific estimations of cognitive accuracy), one based in the passions. Nonetheless, Enlightenment philosophy divides sharply on the question of whether hope is rational or irrational. For Hobbes (and Descartes), hope motivates rational behaviour because it is part of the testing mechanism whereby individuals, through the alternation of hope and fear in relation to appetite and aversion, arrive at rational decisions about political community (Hobbes 1968, pp. 39–43, 72–90, 248–51). This dialectic of hope and fear is doubled by religious belief, which ensures that individuals who cannot arrive at a correct judgment of matters nonetheless desire and dread the supernatural rewards and sanctions that supplement the political community (Hobbes 1968, pp. 248–51). For Spinoza, by contrast, hope and fear are the main passions of politics, but they are irrational, because, by definition, they suppose anxious decisions between various possibilities, whereas nature is, in fact, ruled by necessity (Spinoza 1955, pp. 505, 521). He proposes that this situation is reflected in the superstitious beliefs that inspire hope and fear, and which make masses governable, but which cannot govern good conduct because these beliefs are irrational (Spinoza 1955, p. 573). For Spinoza, hope (the things might improve) and its opposite, fear (that things might get worse), are not only intertwined, but unavoidable, because human beings can neither exist socially without the illusion of agency, nor existentially endure the radical absence of hope and fear (hopelessness) (Steinberg 2018, pp. 81–100). Here, the Spinozist inspiration for Althusser’s theory of ideology (Montag 1989, pp. 89–103), according to which there is no practical subjectivity without ideological interpellation, should be noted, because of its importance for Zizek.

Kant holds a highly complex position on hope, the topic of his third fundamental question stimulating the development of the critical philosophy: “What may I hope for?” (Kant 1993, A804/B832).

Although the details of Kant's answer are not generally accepted, today, both the philosophical and the psychological literature broadly accepts the Kantian definition of hope. In the *Anthropology*, Kant defines it as the "unexpected offering of the prospect of immeasurable good fortune" (Kant 2006, p. 153), i.e., a sudden and improbable turn towards a better world or better life. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant combines the passionate and practical aspects of hope to resolve the antinomy of theoretical and practical reason (that humanity is both free and unfree). Nature causes humanity to hope for happiness, but morality commands individuals to desire to be virtuous—this circle can only be squared through the belief that the immortal soul and an infinite progress towards perfection are true. In turn, the existence of God makes possible the hope for the unity of virtue and happiness, because this entails "a highest reason, which commands in accordance with moral laws, as . . . the cause of nature" (Kant 1993, A810/B838). We may hope, in other words, for the unity of virtue and happiness, but only on the condition that we believe in the existence of the postulates of practical reason—God, the soul and freedom. "I must assume that God exists because the apodictic necessity of the moral law entails that I must hope that it is possible that I (all) will receive happiness in proportion to my (their) virtue, and God's existence is necessary for this hope to be realistic" (Beyleveld and Ziche 2015, p. 932).

"Tricky," you are probably thinking, "a philosophical sleight of hand designed to square away faith and reason, at the cost of a postponement of any hope for justice onto an infinite spiritual progress". Perhaps. But the implication of the Kantian position is that the hope for the unity of virtue and happiness springs eternal, as a primary datum of the human condition. As Herbert Marcuse notes, in a quasi-Kantian moment, the instinctually-driven demand for happiness is intrinsically linked to the phenomenon of desire, that is, the existence of the unconscious, and is something that cannot be extirpated, short of radical states of material deprivation or psychological depression (Marcuse 1966, p. 81). As for the immortal soul and belief in the gods, historical communism, and the hope it inspired (Chomsky and Doyle 2001), demonstrated that it is quite possible to have a secular set of objects of belief (albeit ones that were equally metaphysical and structurally identical to their religious homologues).

In light of the potential circularity of this reasoning, together with its traditional reliance on supernatural beliefs, it is not surprising that classical psychoanalysis regarded hope as irrational. Freud's basic position is outlined in *The Future of an Illusion*, around the infantile helplessness/paternal protection theory of religious belief, according to which the deity is a projection of an infantile wish for the alleviation of helpless anxiety. Freud states that "we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification" (Freud [1927] 1961, p. 31). But such beliefs can be practical fictions even when they are theoretical falsehoods, and here, it is not entirely clear that Freud disagrees with Kant's analysis (as opposed to his evaluation).

Classical Marxism, too, is resolutely hostile towards hope, because of the latter's traditional connection to supernatural belief. Žižek's *Courage of Hopelessness*, in its denunciations of hope, resonates rhetorically with Marx's and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*: "All that is holy is profaned, and [hu]man[ity] is at last compelled to face with sober senses the real conditions of life". Žižek writes:

One thing is sure: an extraordinary social and psychological change is taking place right in front of our eyes—the impossible is becoming possible . . . : we know the (ecological) catastrophe is possible, probable even, and yet we do not believe it will really happen. . . . [This results in a] passage from impossibility to normalisation. . . . The very same politicians and managers who until recently dismissed fears of global warming as the apocalyptic scare-mongering of ex-communists . . . now are all of a sudden treating global warming as a simple fact, as part of the way things are "going on as usual". . . . We have to finish with such games. . . . How to stop our slide into this vortex? In both cases, the threat of ecological catastrophe as well as the risk of global war, the first step is to leave behind all of the pseudo-rational talk about "strategic risks" that we have to assume, . . . where . . . we have to choose between different courses of action. We have to accept the threat as our fate.

It is not just a question of avoiding risks and making the right choices. The true threat resides in the global situation in its entirety, in our “fate”—if we continue to “roll on” the way we do now, we are doomed, no matter how carefully we proceed. So the solution is not to be careful and avoid risky acts—in acting like this, we fully participate in the logic that leads to catastrophe. The solution is to become fully aware of the explosive set of interconnections that makes the entire situation dangerous. Once we do this, once we embrace the courage that comes with hopelessness, we embark on the long and difficult work of changing the coordinates of the entire situation. Nothing less will do. (Zizek 2018, pp. 296–98)

Zizek seems, on a superficial reading, to advocate a politics of realistic despair: “the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, it functions as a fetish which prevents us to think to the end the deadlock of our predicament” (Zizek 2017). His call to abandon hope is framed in terms that rhetorically, at least, echo the *Communist Manifesto*, in opposing scientific consciousness to ideological (i.e., illusory) hopes (by “becom[ing] fully aware of the explosive set of interconnections”). Sober up! Get real. Abandon illusions!

Unfortunately, this has never worked in political history and is unlikely to work in any politics of the future. In this connection, it is worth noticing that a Zizekian rejoinder to Zizek would be that the real question here is not the abandonment of hope in general, or of revolutionary social alternatives. Instead, it is the specifically ameliorative hope for an “alternative” that is mere tinkering with global capitalism that has to be rejected. After all, the *Communist Manifesto*, despite its rhetoric of scientific consciousness, evoked utopian expectations that depended on revolutionary hopes and the belief that a better world was possible; that is, it proposed socialist–humanist (practical) ideology as an alternative to the then-dominant liberal–capitalist (practical) ideology. Hope is intrinsically bound to ideology, in a complex that includes beliefs and desires (i.e., utopias), and so it is not a question of ideology in general, but rather, the rejection of *this particular* ideology, which might involve the replacement of one set of beliefs with another set of beliefs. Extended theoretical reflections on why in just a moment. Meanwhile, the immediate problem with Zizek’s formulation of the politics of hope is that, in the absence of the demand for collective happiness that animates radical hope, the only political passion that can be mobilised in the present is hatred. And that passion is most definitely being activated in today’s reactionary political landscape of authoritarian populism and neo-fascist mobilisation.

The notion of the privatisation of hope describes the widespread abandonment of collective projects, following the collapse of historical communism and the triumph of capitalism. It is this phenomenon that clarifies how the perennial demand for human happiness has gone to ground in personal rather than social articulations of the desire for utopia to belief in the possibility of a better world or better life. The privatisation of hope is not the same as the pacification of desire through system-conforming satisfactions, linked to the aestheticisation of the commodity form, predicted by Marcuse under the banner of “repressive desublimation” (Marcuse 1964, pp. 77–78). Instead, as the contributions to a recent collection on the topic indicate, it is what happens when dissatisfaction with contemporary society is blocked from social expression by the prevalent belief that “there is no alternative” to multinational capitalism and environmental degradation (Thompson and Zizek 2013, pp. iv–v). The idea that no alternative is possible has led to the rearticulation of hope for a better world onto hope for a better life, as opposed to atomised political mobilisations based on resentment. The personal hope for a better life is a “defectors’ stance” in the prisoners’ dilemma of multinational corporate capitalism, something which makes it seem virtually impossible to generate mass social movements around positive collective projects.

Nonetheless, the emergence of authoritarian populism and the resurgence of fundamentalism indicates that the potential for social mobilisation does exist, and it is crucial to inquire into the energies and contexts that inform these movements, before advocating the abandonment of hope as a political passion. As I think Angela Nagle makes clear, the motivational passion sustaining alt-Right activation is personally-inflected resentment, linked to the thrill of deliberate transgression, rather than (a rightwing articulation of) the hope for a better world (Nagle 2017). These passions, linked to the belief in natural

hierarchies and the desire to dominate that belongs to the authoritarian personality, supported the Trump ascendancy, for instance (Dean 2017; Gordon 2018; MacWilliams 2016). The empirical sociological evidence points to cultural backlash—that is, fury towards the impact of cultural liberalisation on traditional prejudices—as the main catalyst for rightwing populist support (Inglehart and Norris 2017). The authoritarian populist mobilisation in the USA, in other words, leavened by alt-Right activation, is not based on hope, but on despair, and on an aggressive response to desperation that is best described as *ressentiment* (Hawley 2017). For this reason, interpretations of authoritarian populism in terms of “repressive desublimation” (Brown 2018) completely misunderstand both the social phenomenon and the descriptive category. Desublimation, as described by Marcuse, involved the desublimation of art into commodity aesthetics, linked to a pervasive sexualisation of culture, which provides substitute gratifications through the manipulation of false needs (i.e., consumer society). What is going on in the alt-Right is something different: the celebration of transgression through the expression of repressed ideas, twisted, through the admixture of aggression, into cruel perversions, in a redirection of superego guilt that punishes vulnerable groups for the (rightwing) individual’s loss of hope.

Against the background of the politics of hate and the weaponisation of despair, it is more important than ever not to abandon hope. I do not mean by this comment to fall into the sentimental naivety of assuming that hope is always for something pro-social, or that utopias are always progressive. There are, indeed, hopes for the worthless goals constituted by reactionary utopias. And these reactionary utopias exist—albeit, not amongst the populist recruits of alt-Right propaganda. Neo-fascist intellectuals, such as Rudolph Bahro, Alain de Benoist and Richard Spencer, have articulated these reactionary utopias in terms of “civilizational” superiority (i.e., racial hierarchy), patriarchal protest, regional domination, and neo-pagan religion (Hermansson et al. 2020). Make no mistake—the alt-Right position is counter-*revolutionary* because it involves a new identitarian politics (as opposed to liberal identity politics) that is grounded in authoritarian forms of social subjectivity. What makes it so destructive is that its liberation of aggression, linked to a rehabilitation of authoritarianism, is explicitly connected to social exclusions. The passion of despair, linked to the loss of privatised hope, has a nihilistic dynamic that is socially corrosive. But it is also calculated to dissolve existing personality structures and refashion them around unquestioning submission to authority and the “kiss-up, kick-down” mentality of the authoritarian personality. Certainly, a thinker such as de Benoist hopes for his “European Renaissance” (i.e., the return of an ethno-nationalist state in the centre of Europe as a regional world power). But it is not this hope that is catalysing recruitment into the movement. Instead, it is the withering of the privatised hopes of the aristocracy of labour, amidst the greatest income polarisation since the industrial revolution, and the entry of underprivileged groups into the structure of rights and esteem from which they were formerly excluded.

2. From Waiting for Rescue to Revolutionary Hope

In this context, it is clear that Zizek’s alarm is caused by what he regards as a subterranean connection between the leftwing endorsement of struggles for recognition and a vain hope for the structural reform of global capitalism. Sometimes Zizek fails to grasp the strategic importance of *defending* struggles for recognition—a.k.a., identity politics—from rightwing attack. Too often, Zizek drifts from a critique of the reformist implications of identity politics into a metapolitics of the revolutionary ultimatum. But this does not detract from Zizek’s fundamental point that “the political problem with political correctness is, to paraphrase Robespierre, that it admits the injustices of actual life, but it wants to cure them with a ‘revolution without revolution’: it wants social change with no actual change” (Zizek 2018, p. 193). For Zizek, then, the Left’s secret resignation to the permanence of capitalism informs its failure to articulate a robust new form of the democratic personality, linked to an agenda for egalitarian redistribution. Instead, the Left promotes a dissolution of identity—the flipside of which is populism—that must, Zizek argues, amount to a refusal to challenge the reigning “social fantasy” of the modern epoch—nationalism. This hidden link between a strategy of the dissolution of identity and the Left’s resignation to the liberal-capitalist, i.e., national, forms of the political

community, explains Žižek's suspicion concerning the articulation of utopian hopes that are not anchored in a robust critique of society.

It is certainly the case that the democratic personality, as theorised by Harold Laswell and others, is the polar opposite to the authoritarian personality (Braun 2013; Greenstein 1968; Lasswell 1951). However, the openness of the democratic personality is anchored in a strong identification with democratic values, rather than a dissolution of identity. This is a point that Žižek has repeatedly made in relation to the theory of "dispersed multiple subject-positions," which informs the discourse-theoretical wing of identity politics (Žižek 1999, 2000a, 2002). There is nothing radical about the dissolution of that master signifier, which sutures together dispersed subject-positions, or even its corrosive relativisation within a "politics of contingency," because what this really means is an individual who lacks all convictions (Žižek 2000c). Žižek has often criticised this as nothing more than a left-of-centre version of the *current, actually existing* individual of the consumer society created by multinational corporate capitalism (Žižek 2000b). In his critiques of populism, Žižek points out that the dissolution of identity is the inverse of populist politics, as an identification built on atomisation that substitutes the populist leader for a strong ego-ideal (Žižek 2006; Žižek 2008, pp. 264–333). The radical democratic fascination with both identity politics and progressive populism does not challenge the underlying nationalist framework of the political community. Rather than relying on a dissolved identity that can be articulated onto populist projects, then, Žižek proposes a radical universalist, "revolutionary-proletarian" subjectivity connected to a revolutionary politics that rejects nationalism completely (Žižek 2008, pp. 414–15).

Žižek's theory of ideology proposes that the democratic personality is based on identification with egalitarian values, based on the installation of a new "master signifier," that is, ego-ideal or superego, in the subjective structure of individuals. I would argue that this forms a personality with moral autonomy, whose orientation to social justice and social solidarity is connected to the hope that self-determination leads to a better world. The proposed new political program of pro-environmental transformation and revolutionary redistribution provides a social narrative sustaining revolutionary hopes. Žižek argues that this can be achieved through identification with a strongly universalistic morality, the foundation for what he describes as "strict egalitarian justice" and a green socialist state (Žižek 2008, pp. 452–61).

Žižek's proposals are articulated through his Lacanian theory of ideology, which returns us to the theme of hope, via the theoretical homology between religion and ideology, and the questions about hope and belief that flow from this. From the Althusserian perspective that Žižek adopts (Žižek 1989, pp. 30–50), religion is paradigmatic for ideology (Althusser 1971), which leads Žižek to propose that "belief . . . is always materialised in our effective social activity: belief supports the fantasy which regulates social reality" (Žižek 1989, p. 36). But what is this belief? According to Žižek, the "Imaginary/Symbolic" dimension of identity formation through identification with authority figures needs to be supplemented with the "Symbolic/Real" dimension of unconscious fantasy and libidinal investments (Žižek 1989, pp. 98–124). That hypothesis can be explicated in terms of Freud's psychic agencies as the claim that the relation between ego and superego needs to be supplemented by an understanding of the relationship between superego and id. Part of what is distinctly Lacanian here is the claim that the key to this theoretical supplementation lies in a structuralist understanding of the superego. The superego, as a representation of social ideals, holds the place of a missing, totalising signifier—call it a signifier of totality and potency, or "master signifier"—that would provide both subject and society with a complete identity. Žižek describes this as both a metaphysical guarantee and as belief in the "existence of the big Other," the locus of an ultimate signifier whose proxies have included God, History and the Nation.

Ultimately, for Žižek, the question of belief in the "existence of the big Other" has to do with the human encounter with radical finitude, the contingency of human "thrownness" into history, and, therefore, into society and identity (Johnston 2008, pp. 32–44; Pound 2008, pp. 124–130). From the Lacanian perspective, in the unconscious, the subject lacks a signifier of totality and potency, which condemns the subject to quest after the illusory prelapsarian condition of plenitude supposed to have

been lost, now that this master signifier is “missing”. This is equivalent to stating that the moment that the speaking being enters the “defiles of the signifier,” their “ineffable stupid existence,” as a corporeal entity consisting of drive energies, “fades” into the play of differences, absences, that is language. In a theological register, the implication is that the human being is incapable of confronting their “fallenness,” the condition of “original sin,” which is what locks the subject into the conventional dialectics of law and sin, or superego and transgression (Zizek 2003, p. 103). According to Zizek, the role of unconscious fantasy is that it is a defense against the confrontation with radical finitude (i.e., the void of lack and loss; the condition of abandonment), functioning as a screen concealing the “non-existence of the big Other” (Zizek 1989, pp. 124–26). Ideologies articulate fantasy by means of the transposition, projection, of the impasse at the heart of the subject, its constitutive impossibility, onto a figure supposed to have prevented the subject from attaining a complete identity within a harmonious society. In line with this position, Zizek states that the figure of the Jew in anti-Semitic ideology is paradigmatic for every conventional ideological field (Zizek 1989, pp. 125–26). The anti-Semitic figure represents, materialises, the division of the subject and the impossibility of (social and personal) completeness as a threatening alien force. As Zizek notes, structural homologues for the figure of the Jew can be found everywhere, for instance, in the figure of the “Trotskyite saboteurs” supposed to be conspiring against the Soviet Union, under historical Communism (Zizek 2001, p. 118).

The implication of these reflections is to return the discussion to the Spinozist lineage of ideology critique, and, specifically, to Althusser. Hope and fear are *ideological*, grounded on belief in the existence of the big Other, and sustained by fantasies about lost utopias and threatening figures. Hope, in the final analysis, is the hope for the recovery of a lost utopia, just as fear is the fear of a threatening intruder: ideological belief articulates desire, structured by fantasy, onto socio-political hopes and fears. But this should not mislead us into thinking that it is possible to do without ideology, for ideology is the practical equivalent of a necessary illusion in the theoretical sphere: there is no subject without ideology.

Let me try to exhibit the stakes in this by looking at the “minus” and “plus” sides of the ledger in relation to secular ideology and political theology, respectively.

On the “minus” side, Zizek argues that unconscious attachments and social fantasies sustain ideological identification, both secular and religious. Zizek’s most accessible introduction to this conception of subject formation concerned the relationship between democratic identification and repressed nationalist mythologies. This was vividly illustrated in the transition from Communism to democratic capitalism in former Yugoslavia, illustrating the potential dangers and political problems connected with ideological transformations. The replacement of “communism” with “democracy” as a master signifier in the countries that emerged from former Yugoslavia by no means entailed the dissolution of the repressed nationalist fantasy that had subtended Tito’s national communism (Zizek 1993, pp. 200–37). The result was ethnic warfare, which was, psychologically speaking, an acting out of the unconscious fantasy rather than its conscious traversal.

According to Zizek, the key to the unconscious fantasy is the “inconsistency,” or “non-existence” of the big Other—fantasy is a screen concealing the fact that there is no metaphysical, cosmological or religious guarantee of completeness, meaningfulness or identity (Zizek 1989, pp. 118–21). The desire for wholeness, articulated through fantasy scenes (e.g., prelapsarian imagery), supports belief in the existence of the big Other, sustaining hope for a meaningful totality and a completed identity (Zizek 1989, pp. 122–23; Zizek 2002, pp. 99–109). The difficulty here is not that the repressed social fantasy is somehow permanent and indestructible, for Zizek describes a process of “traversal of the fantasy,” where individuals exit from the current belief system (Zizek 1989, pp. 124–26; Zizek 2002, p. 189). This would correspond to what the psychological literature identifies as the transitory loss of hope before the discovery of a new hope.

At this stage, an urgent question arises regarding egalitarian justice and ecological socialism: If ideology interpellates human beings as socio-political subjects, then must revolutionary hope involve ideological belief? The problem is that the shift from consolatory hope to revolutionary hope does not appear to be able to dispense with a belief in the existence of the big Other. In light of Zizek’s analysis

of the totalitarian potential of *any* ideology—irrespective of whether the belief is in the Nation, History, or God (Zizek 2001)—it is difficult to see how this “revolutionary” hope is emancipatory. Does the egalitarian ideology that Zizek proposes offer revolutionary hope, but only on the condition that we also accept ideological fears? Are we back, once again, not only at the historical necessity of communist abundance, but also at the police-state hunt for counter-revolutionary spies and foreign agents?

Generally speaking, then, Zizek maintains that identification with democratic values is potentially supported by nationalist rituals, which indicates repressed national mythologies that are the antithesis of democratic egalitarianism. Yet, while Zizek’s analysis provides a powerful critique of the repressed contents of ideological formations, including democratic ideologies, it does not lead to optimistic conclusions because its implication is that every new master signifier implies a new set of ideological exclusions. The theoretical difficulty that this position encounters is that identification without repression seems to be impossible, which means that solidarity seems to depend on fantasy scenarios that provide the collective coordinates for individual identity.

Two shifts have been necessary for Zizek to articulate a new hope that is not just a rotation of positions in a cycle of domination. This opens the “plus” side of the ledger, with his discussion of political theology.

The first is that Zizek now thinks that it is possible to “traverse the fantasy” of nationalist mythologies (for instance) and arrive at a symbolic identification grounded in the historical contingency of the political community. The second is that this new form of symbolic identification involves a subject-position based around a fundamental existential attitude of the acceptance of provisionality. In Zizek’s rhetoric, which often *seems like* a regression to doctrines of tragic fate, devoid of “false hopes,” it is actually an effort to clarify how hope after metaphysics might look.

According to Zizek, the fundamental existential attitude that he calls “perverse self-instrumentalisation” is the typical posture of the true believer. The typical believer—for instance, the Stalinist cadre—adopts a posture of submission to the inscrutable will of the big Other and then seeks to become the instrument for the imposition of this design on others. But how then does Zizek think that there can be historical revolutions and religious transformations that do not automatically lead to this sort of self-instrumentalisation? Zizek wanders back and forth between diametrically opposed evaluations of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution, in relation to his discussions of exactly this problem. Was Lenin the first of the true believers, forerunner of Stalin (Zizek 2001), or the last of the revolutionaries engaged in a provisional and experimental transformation of society (Zizek 2013)? Was Robespierre? Was Mao? I suggest that we are unlikely to find a consistent line of argumentation here because the historical examples are themselves inconclusive—or dispiriting.

By contrast, in Zizek’s explorations of political theology, he provides a very clear answer to the question of whether it is possible to have a religious reformation rather than simply the replacement of one supernatural belief by another one that is structurally identical. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Zizek proposes that conventional Christianity is based on the supernatural belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God that involves an economy of sacrifice (human sinfulness, Christ’s redemption) (Zizek 2003, pp. 106–09). This is linked to the fantasy of paradise, whose “perverse enactment” in fundamentalist Christianity involves the punishment of excluded groups. But Zizek also indicates a “death of God” interpretation of Christian theology in which supernatural belief is replaced by faith in the community through the process of the “sacrifice of sacrifice,” the relinquishment of hope based on a guarantee of salvation and investment in hope grounded in the solidarity of the all-too-human (Zizek 2003, p. 91). The political translation of these theological propositions is provided by Zizek’s argument that Marxism was structured like a religion, with belief in History as the analogue of belief in God. According to Zizek, then, the alternative to belief in History and hope for Utopia is confidence in the political community based on acceptance of contingency rather than reliance on necessity, which leads to an embrace of provisional experimentation, rather than longing for a metaphysical guarantee (Zizek 2003, pp. 130–31).

I suggest that Ernst Bloch's notion of concrete utopia clarifies how hope can coexist with non-metaphysical faith. According to the classical work of the Marxist theorist, *The Principle of Hope*, the perennial phenomenon of hope springs from the permanent (indestructible) human demand for happiness, combined with a belief in the possibility of utopia. *The Principle of Hope* is best grasped as a phenomenology of hope modelled on Hegel's phenomenology of spirit, tracing the manifestations and development of hope throughout culture and within history (Moylan 1990). Hope ascends, like spirit, from "abstract utopias" to "concrete utopia," that is, from beliefs in otherworldly salvation towards this-worldly anticipations of possible futures (Bloch 1995, pp. 144–45). Unlike Hegelian logic, in which the distinction between abstraction and concretion depends on knowledge of causal determinants in an over-determined phenomenon, the difference between abstract and concrete utopias is temporal.

The anticipation of a future as (ultimately) possible empowers agents, in a probabilistic world, to alter the world within which what is and what is not, regarded as possible, can happen. It is a misconception to imagine that this represents a "verificationist" conception of hope as grounded in cognitively true beliefs about states of affairs. Rather, hope is grounded in beliefs that are ultimately normative, refined through practical application within social struggles (Levitas 1990). Furthermore, because the anticipation of future norms in practical conduct brings about the very change that the belief speculated about, there is a temporal loop involved in hope that belongs to the notion of a "future anterior" (Geoghegan 1990). Abstract utopias depend on the temporality of an infinite deferment, whereas concrete utopias do not involve postponement, but enactment. Hope alters the future, thus retroactively redefining whether a belief has been rational or irrational, so that only the hope for something logically impossible is truly illusory (Levy 1990). From the perspective of Bloch, there is no false hope, only the hope for things that are worthwhile and things that are worthless.

We can get a sense of how Bloch's utopian hope, as an anticipation of possible futures, fits (or not) with Žižek's radical proposal for a transition from reformist to revolutionary hope, by looking at Žižek's response to Fredric Jameson's Bloch-inspired concept of the "dialectic of ideology and utopia". In his major work on science fiction as a utopian genre, Jameson proposes that "it is precisely the category of totality that presides over the forms of Utopian realization" (Jameson 2005, p. 5). This is because the utopia is *another* totality whose difference from the present opens a space of negation. "The Utopian form is itself an answer to the universal ideological conviction that there is no alternative, that there is no alternative to the system" (Jameson 2005, p. 232). In fairness to Jameson, it is important to notice that he envisages Utopia as a process of working through repressed desires rather than a condition caused by wish-fulfilment (Buchanan 1998, p. 21). Nonetheless, Jameson's presentation of utopian hope deserves to be described as imaginary, radically different from Žižek's insistence that dialectical totalisation involves incompleteness and that revolutionary hope must pass through subjective destitution. The Jameson that Žižek prefers is the thinker of "the moment of world reduction" as the essential precondition for "the invention of a new life" (Žižek 2008, p. 196, Jameson cited). That is where, I suggest, Bloch's reflections on hope rejoin Žižek's universalistic subjectivity, for Bloch's utopian anticipation of a possible future is not a probabilistic calculation, but a practical mobilisation, without guarantees, a "real movement" that "abolishes the present state of things" (Marx).

3. Coda

Despite the fact that my reading of Žižek reads him against himself, and pushes his thought perhaps beyond where he himself might go, I would nonetheless like to think that Žižek's new book, *Pandemic* (2020), which arrived in my mail just now, provides some support for the thesis of this article. The book is dedicated to exploring the question of "what is wrong with our system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years?" (Žižek 2020, p. 4). The answers that he provides, ranging from neoliberal governance, through global inequality, to climate change wrought by capitalist economics, all centre on one thing: the ideological conviction that there is no social alternative (Žižek 2020, p. 39). "Maybe," he speculates, "another and more

beneficent ideological virus will spread and hopefully infect us: the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation" (Zizek 2020, p. 39). This invocation of "hope" is more than just a synonym for "perhaps," and it is different from reformist hope, or "bargaining," which involves a failure to accept change (Zizek 2020, p. 49). Zizek hopes that global lockdown will result in deep political reflection by the world's citizens (57), he is "surprised" by the fortunate opportunity to celebrate intimacy with others, even in their physical absence (2, 117), and he celebrates the "unexpected" forms of solidarity emerging worldwide (114). There are more than twenty occurrences of the word "hope," and its cognates, in the book, all of them positive, and only one mention of hopelessness or abandonment that operates in the register of despair or desolation. And speaking of a "new stance towards daily life" that rejects economic growth, frantic work and furious consumption, Zizek closes out on this note, literally the last words of the book. "I cannot imagine a better description of what one should shamelessly call a non-alienated, decent life, and I hope that something of this attitude will survive when the pandemic passes" (Zizek 2020, p. 136). That is something worth hoping for.

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