

CONCRETE
EUROCENTRISM:
Universality and the
National Question
in the Politics and
Philosophy of
Slavoj Žižek

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Abstract: This article explores Slavoj Žižek’s defense of Europe through his concept of *concrete universality*, proposing it as a framework for rethinking the national question in relation to Zionism and the idea of Palestine. Žižek’s commitment to the emancipatory legacy of European modernity is rooted in his experience of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav politics, where the collapse of communism gave rise to nationalist chauvinism. This context shaped Žižek’s turn from radical democracy to communism, and his critique of historicism and populism. The article argues that true universality arises from internal contradictions within national identities and must include the subject’s engaged, partisan position. Applying this method to Israel-Palestine, it challenges both chauvinist nationalism and decolonial essentialism, advocating instead for political self-determination as the terrain of class struggle. Only by retrieving the modernist and internationalist dimensions of each national project can a renewed politics of universality and emancipation emerge.

Keywords: Concrete Universality; Europe; Historicism; Nationalism; Palestine; Populism; Zionism

Concrete Universality and Partiality

Žižek’s continued commitment to the project of European modernity and the Enlightenment stands out, particularly at a time when, as Vivek Chibber puts it, “colonialism now appears not as the consequence of developments particular to a certain era but as an expression of a deeper ontological divide between East and West,” and as “a symptom of the cultural orientation of Europe’s inhabitants.”¹ Žižek’s defence of Europe, however, is no mere anomaly for a philosopher committed to the project of *universal* emancipation. It may seem odd to simultaneously maintain a commitment to universality while also clinging to the particularity of Europe. Žižek’s defence of Europe, however, as I argue here, demonstrates his commitment to the *concreteness* of projects for universal emancipation. To grasp this, we must first distinguish, as he does, the difference between abstract and concrete universality. How, in other words, according to Žižek, can universality emerge from a *partial* position – that is, from a position embedded in the particular?

As he puts it,

Every interpretation is partial, ‘embedded’ in an interpreter’s ultimately contingent subjective position; however, far from blocking access to the universal truth of the interpreted text, full acceptance of this contingency and of the need to work through it is the only way the interpreter can access the universality of the content of the text. The interpreter’s contingent subjective position provides the *impetus, the urge or urgency*, which sustains an authentic

interpretation. If we want to attain the universality of the interpreted text directly, as it is ‘in itself’, bypassing, erasing, or abstracting from the engaged position of the interpreter, then we either have to admit defeat and accept historicist relativism, or elevate into a fixed universal In-itself what is effectively a particular and arbitrary reading of the text.²

A universal position, in other words, according to Žižek, does not *evade* the subjective position of the observer. Rather, it is the very *inclusion of the subject* within the analytical framework that creates the possibility for perceiving the concreteness of a material situation.

Subjectivity is a part of reality and must always be included in every depiction of it. Excluding the subject in the interest of maintaining some kind of neutral matrix of observation can only result in a vision of universality that remains abstract and relativist. Concrete universality demands an *engaged* subjective position, which is no less universal, but which grounds itself by taking a side. In the political realm, this means taking a side, not simply in the class struggle, but in the struggle for universal emancipation. It is only from an *engaged* subjective position that the totality of the situation becomes visible. Or, as Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda put it, “Absolute knowing is... the acknowledgement of the partisanship inherent in thought as such.” The “conceit of ‘all-sidedness’,” they write, “is a phantasm that obscures the real antagonism of historical existence.” “Thinking involves a decision.”³

Concrete universality, therefore, as opposed to an abstract universality that *excludes* the contingency of the particular, must *include* “the subjective position of its reader-interpreter as the particular and contingent point from which the universality is perceived.”⁴ To avoid confusion, it is necessary to point out that concrete universality, however, “does not concern the relationship of a particular to the wider Whole, the way it relates to others and to its context, but rather *the way it relates to itself*, the way its very particular identity is split from within.”⁵ Universality, according to Žižek, arises only at the site of a “*thwarted particularity*” – that is, from the internal division of the particular that gives a signal to the universal.⁶ Universal subjectivity, therefore, arises where a *disparity* exists between oneself and one’s particular identity. Concrete universality is, thus, not merely the choice of a subjective, partial position. It is one that involves taking the side of a particular position only to then discover the antagonism – the negativity – *internal to it*; and, through this disparity with itself, to arrive at the truth.

Politics, however, requires breaking out of this initial self-division – that is, it needs to be broken out of “the abyss of radical self-relating negativity.”⁷ This, according to Žižek, means entering the “practical domain of will and decision: the subject qua pure Notion has to freely determine itself, to posit some particular content which will count as

‘its own’.”⁸ That is, the movement from for-itself to in-itself. Such an (arbitrary) act of decision is, however, tied to truth insofar as it is only by a subjective act of choice – of positing the presuppositions – a choice that *engages* the subject – that the path of reasoning can begin (again). It is a bit like reaching the first down in a(n American) football game, or when Bastian gives the Empress a new name at the end of *The NeverEnding Story* (1984).

Starting from the framework of the concrete universal, in the following, I want to engage Žižek’s writing in a partial way. By that, I mean that my aim is, in the end, to address a concrete problem that engages me, but which I approach through a reading of the concrete analysis in Žižek’s work. The problem I want to address is the struggle, not merely between Israel and Palestine, but more specifically, between Zionism and what Edward Said called the idea of Palestine.⁹ Rather than address Žižek’s own writing on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, I would like, instead, to examine the latter via his writing on the concreteness of Europe. Not only Europe, but via the movements that have occurred in Žižek’s political philosophy, beginning with his writing on post-Yugoslav nationalism and antisemitism, and the movement from radical democracy to communism, moving then through the Yugoslav context of his youth, and the early developments and introductions of Althusser and Lacan into his thinking. In his conception of Hegelian concrete universality connected to his theorization of Europe, I hope to provide a valence through which we might go further to interpret the concreteness of the situation with Zionism and the idea of Palestine.

Ideology, as Todd McGowan has put it, “transforms contradictions into oppositions in order to give us an enemy on which to direct the aggression stemming from our own failure. Contradictions,” he writes, “undermine positions from within and reveal how they fail to attain self-identity through their own logic. Oppositions provide the subject with the image of a stable self-identity that obscures this failure.”¹⁰ Likewise, I show that such a displacement of internal contradiction onto a false opposition occurs in the relation between the idea of Europe and particular nationalist impulses, as well as between Israel and Palestine, today. Starting with Žižek’s particular defence of Europe, the point I want to stress in what follows is that the same form of concrete universality must be applied, as well, to the national question, thus, not to oppose Israel to Palestine and vice versa, but to evince the concrete universality – the disparity – internal to each.

Žižek’s Defence of Europe

Žižek, in my view, has always had a talent for reading the historical conjuncture; and, this is precisely because his has been one of an engaged subjective position in political struggle. This is something that

many of his critics fail to see – largely because they occupy the position of an abstract universality, or the position of Hegel’s law of the heart, where the heart-driven individual substitutes or imposes personal-subjective morality – akin to abstract universality – in the place of concrete universal law. What often appear to be contradictions in the positions Žižek takes in his political writing over time are, in fact, merely responses to transformations taking place in the historical situation; and, as historical materialism must do with every new historical contingency (what Sartre referred to as the *situation*), there is a need, *out of necessity*, to read the situation in its concreteness and to avoid utopian thinking. Utopian thinking tends to avoid the particularity of historical contingency via a commitment to timeless historical solutions. Žižek’s political writing is different since, with his focus on historical concreteness, he separates himself from much of what passes for materialism, today – by this I mean, on the Left, forms of abstraction and utopianism that have the potential to obscure the particularity of the historical situation.

Likely one of his most controversial positions, Žižek has remained steadfast in his strategic commitment to Eurocentrism. This, to be sure, in a period when anti-Eurocentrism and anti-Western positions occupy the moral premise of today’s Left, Žižek’s stance is one that has brought offence. However, I argue that it is precisely Žižek’s commitment to Eurocentrism that demonstrates that he is a thinker of the concrete, in opposition to much of the abstract universalism and utopianism that goes on in today’s Left.

The heart of Žižek’s defence of Europe centres on the question of whether, in the wake of the collapse of communism, it is possible to appropriate the European political tradition for universalist emancipatory projects.¹¹ He believes that this *is* still possible, but only if we “identify as the core of this tradition the unique gesture of democratic political subjectivization.”¹² The problem, however, remains that the “disintegration of communism opened up space for the emergence of nationalist obsessions, provincialism, anti-Semitism [sic], xenophobia, ideologies about national security, anti-feminism, a post-socialist Moral Majority inclusive of the pro-life movement – in short, enjoyment in its entire ‘irrationality’.”¹³ Nevertheless, Žižek’s choice of Europe is also strategic. Caught between “American-style civilization” and “the emerging Chinese authoritarian-capitalist form,” the only other alternative, according to Žižek, is Europe.¹⁴

Europe’s predicament today is that of being caught between the pincers of the United States on one side and China on the other. Metaphysically, Žižek argues, the two can be equated in the same way that Heidegger examined the threats of capitalism and communism. However, the way to perceive this in the case of Europe, today, is vastly different than the way Heidegger theorized this pincer in 1930s Germany – and goes beyond the *Volkishness* of the latter’s regard for German.

Thus, according to Žižek, to save the emancipatory core of the European idea, it is necessary to break certain taboos in critical theory. The first, and most obvious, of these is the all too facile equation of Eurocentrism with cultural imperialism and racism.¹⁵ Whereas many on the Left tend to equate “European values” with some ideological notion of cultural conservatism and colonialism, Žižek’s aim, instead, has been to preserve the emancipatory core of European ideas of freedom, democracy, and universality – ideas that, to be sure, are also at the centre of contemporary anti-colonial movements, themselves. Thus, to dismiss these ideas as ultimately Eurocentric is to abandon their very emancipatory thrust. The time, then, has come, according to Žižek, to “drop the Leftist mantra according to which our main task is the critique of Eurocentrism.”¹⁶

Part of the problem with today’s anti-Eurocentrism, as Žižek puts it, is the irony that much of the contemporary anti-colonial critique arrives at a moment when “global capitalism no longer needs Western cultural values in order to function smoothly... critics of Eurocentrism,” he writes, “are rejecting Western cultural values at the very moment when, critically interpreted, many of them – egalitarianism, fundamental human rights, the welfare state, to name a few – can serve as a weapon *against* capitalist globalization.”¹⁷ Many Left critics even forget that the idea of communism, at least as it is articulated in the dialectical vision of Marx and Engels, as opposed to its more utopian varieties, was grounded in the very Eurocentrism now being rejected.

Still, another taboo that must be broken, according to Žižek, is the one that says that attempts to preserve one’s specific way of life is inherently proto-fascist and racist. It is fundamentally important to address the concerns that ordinary people have about *threats* to their everyday way of life, not coming from refugees and immigrants, for instance, but from the tumultuous transformations taking place because of the dynamics of global capitalism.¹⁸

Today, however, Europe is split, according to Žižek, between the Anglo-Saxon model of modernization toward the new global order, and the French-German model to protect the older welfare state model as much as possible.¹⁹ The two, however, according to him, are two sides of the same coin and we should avoid the drive to choose either one. Instead, the crisis of Europe opens the opportunity to rethink *the foundations* of Europe. What is required, according to Žižek, is a kind of “retrieval-through-repetition.”²⁰ That is, a confrontation with the European tradition requires asking: what even is Europe?

According to Žižek, the crisis of Europe is typically framed as a struggle between Christian and traditional hardliners and liberal multiculturalists. The latter, according to him, is typically framed in terms of cultural-national openness. That is, the liberal multiculturalist framework is presented as one that is welcoming of other nations and

cultures. What if, he posits, the solution is, however, the opposite: of *narrowing* the field of who or what is considered European? In other words, what if the solution is, rather, the *exclusion* of Christian populist fundamentalism from the project of Europe?²¹

The problem, as we are continuing to witness it, is that, with the collapse of communism and the dissolution of Leftist utopian projects, fundamentalist populism is coming to fill the void.²² In a sense, Žižek's proposal, in other words, is that, in order to preserve the universalist and emancipatory dimensions of the European legacy against populist fundamentalists there is a need to engage in a completely sectarian split "by cutting ourselves off from the decaying corpse of old Europe." This, according to Žižek, is the only way to keep a "renewed European legacy alive."²³

Žižek's application of a partial view to the concrete situation of Europe is, thus, evident in his approach. Far from advancing a Eurocentrism bent on advocating the legacies of colonialism, racism, and populist fundamentalism, Žižek's Eurocentrism remains committed to the emancipatory core of the European project. His centring of Europe is also part of a concrete geo-political strategy of challenging the hegemonies of the United States, China, and Russia. Furthermore, as he sees it, the European political legacies of democracy, universality, welfare statism, and even up to socialism and communism, offer emancipatory possibilities when today's capitalism is much *less* "Western" and far more "multicultural." One would be very hard pressed, in other words, to propose that capitalism is today driven merely by the West, when there exists a fully functioning and competitive capitalism in China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and so on. Global capitalism is very much a multicultural phenomenon, and not simply the product of Western capitalist hegemony.

Moving on, though, considering his defence of Europe, in the next section, I want to focus on Žižek's critique of nationalism. While I agree largely with his criticism of nationalisms and national chauvinisms and populisms – a critique that I argue comes from his own engaged experience with the breakup of Yugoslavia – nationalism, still, I argue, remains a blind spot for the kind of concrete universality Žižek advances with regards to his approach to Europe. As I argue, despite the view popularized in the 1990s and for much of the 2000s, that the nation-state is dead, today the space of the nation-state is increasingly politicized beyond the conditions of "Empire."²⁴ Nationalism, therefore, needs to be grasped in the very terms of concrete universality that Žižek advocates.

Nationalism, Populism, and Antisemitism

As the late Israeli scholar of Marx and Hegel, Shlomo Avineri, once put it, dialectically, "every *Volkgeist* is... only a moment in the ever-unfolding

Weltgeist, itself an expression of Absolute Spirit.”²⁵ In this sense, I posit that there are two ways to approach the nationalist particularity. There is, on the one hand, a commitment to the particular that remains within the confines of particularity itself. That is, a view of the national community that is, itself, particularist and limited, avoiding, dismissing, and disavowing the kind of disparity that Žižek grasps as part of the self-relating negativity of every identity. The latter, on the other hand, signifies the presence of the universal *internal* to the disparity *within* every particular national identity. There is, thus, I propose below, an emancipatory dimension to a nationalism that is engaged similarly to the concrete universal that Žižek presents in the cause of Europe, and which sows the seeds of a broader *internationalism*. In other words, as Avineri puts it, “True internationalism leads through nationalism, not by overlooking it.”²⁶

The critique of nationalism, though, that Žižek produces is not, however, divorced from his own engagement in the post-Yugoslav context, which, in the wake of the collapse of communism, developed into a whole litany of narrow-minded provincialisms, xenophobia, and antisemitism. I would even argue that it is his experience with rising nationalist chauvinisms in former Yugoslav countries that impacted the theoretical-political shift that Žižek made from defending Laclau and Mouffe’s “radical democracy” to, by the end of the 1990s, a more focused turn towards Leninism and the communist idea.²⁷ This is most pronounced in Žižek’s later criticism of Laclau’s vision of Left populism.²⁸

In his book, *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau defends a notion of Left populism by which various Left social movements – from feminist and queer political movements, to environmentalism, and even the politics of labour movements – may come together as a unified body. They may do this, according to Laclau, by articulating a series of demands to a shared figure of an *enemy*. As Žižek rightly points out, however, such a form cannot but evoke the image of national chauvinism, even leading up to a form of fascism. The fascist ideology, after all, is articulated as a displacement of a real, material contradiction – i.e., class struggle – onto a figure of a false enemy, such as the antisemitic representation of Jews.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the version of Left populism Laclau advances is ultimately too Foucauldian in the sense of existing merely at the level of the micropolitical, never ready to occupy the political power of the state.²⁹ Such a position cannot but simply prop up the power that appears to be opposed in the populist struggle, and therefore falls into a kind of perverse form of rebellious enjoyment. The only result, truly, is the rhetorical figuration of the ‘other’ as an enemy. It is in his experience of witnessing of the rise of nationalist chauvinisms in ex-Yugoslavia – especially as the positions of some of the leaders of these movements earlier intersected with Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democracy – I argue, that provided part of the impetus for Žižek’s critique of nationalism.³⁰

My claim here is that what Žižek saw in the nationalist-populist turn in post-Communist Slovenia has had an impact for him, both politically *and* philosophically, and that this has influenced the way that he has criticized nationalism while defending a strategic Eurocentrism.

We can see in Žižek's description of nationalism elements of what Laclau describes in his version of populism, which depends on the externalization of some empirical enemy. Žižek has, for instance, described as part of the core of nationalism a conception of the racialized other as one who "steals" national enjoyment. As he puts it in *Tarrying with the Negative*, a book that was published amidst rising national-ethnic tensions in ex-Communist countries, nations can be understood in terms of how an ethnic community organizes a shared relation to enjoyment.³¹ The national community "imputes to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment" – that is, the 'other' "wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life)." But also, the 'other' is imputed with having "access to some secret, perverse enjoyment."³² However, Žižek argues that what this view of the 'other' conceals is the very traumatic fact that the members of the national community never possessed this allegedly stolen enjoyment in the first place.³³ The enjoyment around which the national-ethnic community is organized is one that is *constitutively* stolen and, therefore, constitutively lacking.

Of course, the model for this conception of nationalist chauvinism is that of the Lacanian conception of perversion, where a lack of enjoyment – a lack that is nevertheless constitutive of subjectivity and society – is displaced onto the figure of the other that the community, on the one hand, props up as an enemy or master, but on the other hand feels the need to transgress. It is in this way that the apparent "theft" of enjoyment helps to procure a form of perverse surplus-enjoyment that comes from the communal attacks on the racialized other. It is also this that gives impetus to the nationalist displacement of the true antagonism of the class struggle onto a false antagonism with the racialized 'other'. As Žižek puts it, the nationalist logic of the "theft of enjoyment" is set in motion, not by "immediate social reality – the reality of different ethnic communities living together closely – but the *inner antagonism inherent in these communities*."³⁴ I will return to the question of the lack of transparency regarding the true antagonism of the class struggle below.

Suffice it to say, though, that, as Žižek, again, has put it, in the wake of the demise of European communism, "the recourse to nationalism itself emerged in order to protect us from the traumatic disorientation, from the loss of the ground under our feet caused by the disintegration of the social order, of the Lacanian 'big Other' epitomized by Really Existing Socialism."³⁵ A similar turn to the particularism of nationalist chauvinism is occurring today in the context, not merely of the failures of global capitalism, but also the failure of Leftist projects of emancipation that, too, have moved away from universalist projects and towards what Todd

McGowan has referred to as the “superegoic turn of the Left” – that is, towards the particularity of populist-moralist frameworks, as opposed to projects grounded in concrete and universal emancipation.³⁶

Returning to Žižek’s critique of nationalism, it is clear that his experience with nationalist chauvinism has also been at the core of his critique of antisemitism; and, in fact, I would argue that he has, consequently, been one of the most consistent and honest critics of antisemitism on the Left – a point that receives far too little acknowledgement. As far back as *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek has written about antisemitism as racist ideology in its purest form. Antisemitism in his view is driven less by the character of empirical Jews and more by the way the Jew figures in the nationalist fantasy – i.e., the theft of enjoyment. In this way, Žižek’s critique of antisemitism resembles that of François Regnault – who has claimed that the Jew represents the *objet a* of the West – as well as Sartre’s writing on antisemitism.³⁷ The nationalist-populist, and even fascist fantasy is structured around the figure of the Jew onto whom the loss of enjoyment is displaced. It is even in the case of the fascist ideology that the social totality appears reconciled via the displacement of the class contradiction onto the antisemitic representation of Jews – i.e., the view of the fascist nationalist is that of the inverse of Laclau and Mouffe’s thesis regarding the impossibility of society. From the perspective of the nationalist-populist, society *is* possible and all that remains is the elimination of the obstacle preventing this closure. In the antisemitic fantasy-ideology, this figure of the obstacle is, of course, that of the Jew.

On the opposite side, however, Žižek is also relentless towards what he sees as the moralistic humanism of Leftist-liberal critics of nationalism. He notes, for instance, a strange kind of enjoyment procured by Leftists fascinated by nationalist movements. Liberal intellectuals, he writes, refuse and mock nationalist populism. However, at the same time, they revel in their own impotence in the face of this. As he puts it, “the intellectual pleasure procured by the denunciation of nationalism is uncannily close to the satisfaction of successfully explaining one’s own impotence and failure (which was always the speciality of Western Marxism).”³⁸ Western liberal-leftist intellectuals, he writes, are often still caught in this trap. As he puts it, “the affirmation of their own autochthonous tradition is for [Western leftists] a red-neck horror, a site of populist protofascism... whereas such intellectuals are at once ready to hail the autochthonous ethical communities of *the other*... Enjoyment is good, on condition that it not be too close to us, on condition that it remains the *other’s* enjoyment.”³⁹ Western Leftists, in this sense, operate on the obverse side of the nationalist populist. Whereas the latter imputes to the ‘other’ the *theft* of enjoyment, Western leftists engage in moralistic acts of self-flagellation that, in fact, mask their own narcissistic claims to authority, close in some sense to unconscious forms of neo-

colonialism, elitism, and white supremacy. The fantasy, here, is one of fully substantializing the racialized or indigenous ‘other’ – of “aboriginal people living in peace with their surroundings,” as McGowan puts it.⁴⁰ McGowan argues, in fact, and I agree with him, that such a substantialization “is the foundation of an oppressive relation.”⁴¹ It is a practice that ends up fetishizing the ‘other’, treating the ‘other’ as a *thing* that needs to be “saved,” in the same way that *philosemitism* towards oppressed Jews in the Holocaust turned into antisemitism (as Moishe Postone points out) once it appeared that Jews were no longer oppressed.⁴² The same occurs, today, with the fetishization of the Palestinian ‘other’ in much of the Western pro-Palestine movement, as well as in other contexts, such as in the various decolonial movements. It is, however, as McGowan puts it, only “by recognizing that the other is not a solution that one envisions a world of equality.”⁴³ As a form of abstract universalism, it is the very failure of such Leftists to acknowledge their own subjective position – caught, especially, within the concrete and material relations of production – that continues to plague Western (and largely petit bourgeois) critics of nationalism.

The problem with this criticism, however, is that, besides remaining at the level of an abstract universality, it maintains a historicist bent in the sense of failing to historicize the very position of enunciation from which the criticism is articulated. It is a position that fails to include its own subjective position of articulation; and, this is perhaps why many of these critics imagine themselves to be acting (as unconsciously Stalinist) on the “right side of history.” But, as Lenin and Hegel have pointed out, historical inevitability is only knowable in its *afterwardness*. To better articulate this position in Žižek’s concrete universality, I want to next take a brief detour to explain the way that the Yugoslav context of his youth has had an impact on the way that he develops this position philosophically through his engagement with Althusser and Lacan, and how his Hegelianism advances in a way that departs from the idealisms of (so-called) Hegelian (i.e., humanist) Marxism.⁴⁴

Historicism and the Yugoslav Context

Žižek has noted that the philosophical orientations that dominated in Yugoslavia and Slovenia during his youth in the 1960s and 1970s were by and large versions of Heideggerianism and Frankfurt School-oriented Marxism. These were the predominant versions of Marxism in “official” party circles. These orientations also paralleled the Praxis School humanist approach of central committee ideologues, especially insofar as the ideology of worker self-management and full transparency became the mantra of the leading orthodoxy.⁴⁵ It was Althusser, however, who, according to Žižek, became a kind of “symptomatic point, a name apropos of which all the ‘official’ adversaries, Heideggerians

and Frankfurt-Marxists in Slovenia, Praxis-philosophers and Central Committee ideologues in Zagreb and Belgrade, *suddenly started to speak the same language*, pronouncing the same accusations.”⁴⁶ According to Žižek, it was the very name of Althusser that triggered an uneasiness that the Slovene Lacanians tapped into. In fact, it was the ideology of full transparency, disalienation, and self-management that inspired the Slovene Lacanians to develop their own distinct framework.⁴⁷

In the guise of full transparency, the Yugoslav system, according to Žižek produced a completely non-transparent political reality:

In Yugoslavia, it was an extreme form of alienation, a totally non-transparent system that nobody, including those in the power structure, could comprehend. There were almost two million laws in operation. No one could master it. This was the paradox: this is what you get when you want total disalienation or pure transparency.⁴⁸

Thus, according to him, it was Althusserians, structuralists, and Lacanians who maintained a commitment to the fight for democracy.⁴⁹ Althusserianism, according to Žižek – often defamed as proto-Stalinist – served as a theoretical tool for undermining totalitarianism. This critique of self-transparency is key to the theory of ideology that Žižek developed in his earliest books, including *Le plus sublime des hystériques* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and it is a framework that continues to this day in his work, especially when it comes to the way he examines the concreteness of the European situation.

Žižek’s Althusserianism, despite the way he has developed a strong critique of the latter’s theory of ideological interpellation and subjectivity – not to mention Althusser’s anti-Hegelianism – comes through most forcefully via the critique of historicism. There are two ways to view this. On the one hand, historicism is expressed in the loss of subjectivity found in abstract universalist and idealist positions that forget their own subjectivity. Even Althusser may be guilty of this insofar as he views historical materialism as an objective science, unplagued by ideology and subjectivity. On the other hand, however, as Althusser explains it, historicism can be seen in the way that the Marxist humanists imagine the form of the dialectical category of the negation of the negation. In fact, it is with this aspect that there exists a coincidence between the so-called Hegelian Marxism of the humanists, and Heideggerianism. Just as the Heideggerians critique Western modernity for its forgetting of Being and its becoming “rootless,” so too do the Marxist humanists conceive the negation of the negation as some form of reconciliation between humanity and nature, and with humanity’s “species being.” It is this latter framework that Althusser referred to as historicist, and, on this front, he was also disparaging of the category of the negation of the negation, praising Stalin for his excising of this category from the laws of the dialectic

as outlined by Engels.⁵⁰ However, this also follows the Maoist line in Althusser's writing, not merely in "Contradiction and Overdetermination," but also insofar as Mao, too, rejected the category of the negation of the negation.⁵¹

Thus, in Žižek's own philosophy, his efforts have turned, on the one hand, to resuscitating subjectivity, avoiding both its idealist-humanist framing as well as that of Althusser, where subject is but a mere effect of ideology; and, on the other hand, via his Lacanian interpretation of Hegel, he has helped to resuscitate the category of the negation of the negation, especially as this category pertains to a form of subjectivity that accepts the intractability of contradiction, rather than one of its reconciliation. Or, put differently, in Žižek's hands, negation of the negation has become a category that reconciles *with* the intractability of contradiction, rather than one that seeks its elimination. The benefit of this conception is that it avoids the idealist historicist conception of a reconciled society that is fully transparent, unlike the predominant ideological framework of self-management in ex-Yugoslav Marxism. It furthermore avoids the historicism of what Althusser called the "Stalinian deviation" insofar as it grasps history only in its *afterwardness*, avoiding the ideological claim of acting on the "right side of history." But we should recognize, instead, that history is completely open, subject to the contingencies developed in the course of class struggle as the motor of history.

Negation of the negation, furthermore, applies to Žižek's conception of concrete universality: of the inclusion of the partial position of the subject in the frame of analysis. As Žižek explains, "[t]he shift from negation to the negation of negation is thus a shift from the objective to the subjective dimension: in direct negation, the subject observes a change in the object (its disintegration, its passage into its opposite), while in the negation of negation, the subject includes itself in the process, taking into account how the process it is observing affects its own position."⁵² To paraphrase Alenka Zupančič, without the presence of the subject in this way, one forgets completely the very cause underlying the pursuit of universalist and egalitarian political projects.⁵³

The point I want to get across, then, is that it is precisely within his own context of engaging with the predominant Marxist trends in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s that Žižek developed the very Althusserian, Lacanian, and Hegelian contours of his approach to concrete universality present in both his defence of Europe and his critique of nationalist-populism.⁵⁴ However, as I will argue in the next and final section of this article, I believe that a blind spot remains in Žižek's approach to the national question from the perspective of the concrete universality he advocates. This, I believe, is expressed in the opposition between Zionism and the idea of Palestine.

Israel, Palestine, and Concrete Contradiction

To go further, then, two more taboos must be broken. The first is the one that sees nationalist movements as purely a form of nationalist populist chauvinism. Instead, the national context must be seen concretely via the internal contradiction of the class struggle particular to every nation. Beginning with Lenin, it is necessary to see the nation-state as the concrete grounds, both for the political self-determination of nations, and as the terrain upon which class struggle can be fought in the direction of an *internationalist* project. As Lenin famously put it, “self-determination of nations’ in the program of the Marxists *cannot*, from a historical-economic point of view, have any other meaning than political self-determination, political independence, the formation of a national state.”⁵⁵

In today’s anti-colonialist politics, a tendency remains whereby class struggle is sidelined in favour of a more abstract framework of colonizer vs. colonized, oppressor vs. the oppressed. In some cases, the latter is erroneously grafted *onto* class struggle, displacing the materiality of the latter. This, however, conflates an oppositional framework with one centred on the concreteness of the political contradiction, even as secondary contradictions, in the Maoist sense, present themselves in non-class oriented terms. In this way, the oppositional framework that McGowan criticizes – as I’ve noted above – comes back to reinforce a particularist and anti-universalist ideology with potential to side with one nation over another (a particularist position if ever there was one), rather than aligning with universalist and internationalist projects *internal* to every national context. When nation is pitted against nation, the internal contradiction (i.e., class struggle) of each nation gets obscured. So, let’s not beat around the bush: of course, I am thinking here specifically of the case of Israel and Palestine.

To avoid the criticism that I am here ignoring or dismissing the Palestinian struggle for liberation, let me just say that the position I defend does not avoid evaluating the concrete situation in the war between Israel and Hamas, nor does it sideline the forced and violent displacement of both Gazan and West Bank Palestinians by the government of Israel, and ultimately its further annexation of West Bank territory. It is necessary and justified to criticize the immoral actions of the Netanyahu government, forced starvation of Gazan Palestinians, and the implicit support given by the government of Israel to religious extremist Jewish settlers leading pogroms against West Bank Palestinians. Nor must we ignore the violent and exterminist rhetoric deployed by reactionary right wing extremist politicians in Israel, such as Itmar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. However, neither must we ignore the violence of Hamas towards Gazan Palestinians.

Many Gazan Palestinians blame Hamas for getting them into a war they could not possibly win, and for putting them in harm’s way unnecessarily after the October 7th, 2023, attack on Israeli civilians.

Despite what some in the Western pro-Palestine movement claim, Hamas is far from an emancipatory political party. It is, rather, a right-wing reactionary extremist party. In fact, I would go so far as to say that there is more in common between Hamas and the Netanyahu government than there is between most empirical Israelis and Palestinians. Given the limited space that I have here, however, I do not aim to go further in speaking to either the histories or present realities of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and instead I would like to develop what I see as a connection between Žižek's concrete Eurocentrism and the concrete universality that inheres, nevertheless, in both Zionism and the idea of Palestine. To do this, a second taboo will have to be broken. It is necessary to abandon the political conception of "decolonization" as it has been framed by contemporary theories of settler colonialism, including in the work of contemporary decolonial critics of Zionism.⁵⁶

Much of what drives the anti-colonialist politics of today's left is a very limited conception of settler colonialism and a resulting politics of "decolonization." To cut to the chase, what I find to be problematic about these frameworks is the way that they apply an essentializing and historicist, and even Heideggerian approach to identity and "rootedness." As Richard Wolin notes, the mission of phenomenology for Heidegger was one of "restoring things to their *Bodenständigkeit* [rootedness]. Only by returning to *Bodenständigkeit*, claimed Heidegger, could philosophy reinstate the lost dimension of '*Ursprünglichkeit*', or 'primordially'." On these 'grounds', Heidegger," according to Wolin, "reformulated phenomenology as '*bodenständig abweisend forschen*': 'investigations that disclose the *bodenständig* [rooted-in-soil] character of things."⁵⁷

According to Wolin, Heidegger's discourse of rootedness-in-soil "was profoundly 'anti-Enlightenment' and 'anti-Western';" and, over time, this position "hardened into a worldview that was intolerant vis-à-vis 'otherness': especially in the case of ethnic groups such as Poles and Jews, who, purportedly, incarnated threats to *volkish* unity. On these grounds, such groups were denigrated as (racial) 'enemies' of the *Volk*."⁵⁸ It shouldn't be lost on us that, today, such a view of rootedness permeates the decolonial narrative of settler colonialism, often deployed in anti-colonial criticisms of Zionism. Giorgio Agamben expresses this perspective quite clearly.

Zionism, according to Agamben, "constitutes a double negation of the historical reality of Judaism."⁵⁹ This, for him, is so due to the fact that, on the one hand, Zionism transfers to Jews the nation-state of the Christians, but also, on the other hand, because it represents the "culmination" of the process of assimilation of Jews into the non-Jewish world that began in the 18th century, which, according to Agamben, cancels Jewish identity. At the heart of Zionist consciousness, Agamben claims, lies another negation: the negation of the Galut – the Jewish diaspora – that is, the Jew of exile, of which has constituted the common

principle of identity for all historical Judaism. Jewish identity, in other words, according to Agamben, is constituted by exile. As he puts it, “Exile is the very form of Jewish existence on Earth, and the entire Jewish tradition... was conceived and lived from the perspective of exile.”⁶⁰

In what *appears*, then, to be a sympathetic grasping of the Jewish identity, Agamben claims that the “superiority of Jews” over other religions and identities lies in its unconditional acceptance of exile and its rejection of all forms of statehood. Thus, Agamben comes to the patronizing conclusion that by denying exile in favour of the nation-state Zionism betrays the very essence of Judaism. The essence of the Jew, therefore, according to Agamben, is permanent exile – to forever be an outsider. Although some may scoff at Agamben’s obviously egregious view of the Jew as the eternal exile I want to claim, instead, that Agamben’s view is in fact one that very much expresses a contemporary version of progressive and anti-Zionist antisemitism – an antisemitism that is sometimes presented in the guise of philosemitism, and which seemingly inverts Heidegger’s antisemitism, while nevertheless maintaining Heidegger’s premise: that the Jew is a rootless being. Rather than being disparaged for their rootlessness, Agamben attacks Zionism precisely for rooting Jews.

Thus, similarly, I claim, from the perspective of settler colonial theory, the Jew is the eternal exile – the eternal outsider – without a rootedness from which to engage in its own politics of decolonization. But to see clearly the erroneous nature of the settler colonial and decolonial positions, it is necessary to view them from the perspective of the Israeli right, which sees all of the land of Judea and Samaria as the historical land of the Jews. For the extremist reactionary right wing in Israel, annexation of the West Bank is framed as its own politics of decolonization – it is the right-wing Israeli version of *Bodenständigkeit*, which coincides with the Left version of the critique of settler colonialism and the politics of decolonization. When it comes, however, to the question of *returning to rootedness*, here I agree with Žižek: it is necessary to move beyond such a politics that seeks to resuscitate some mythical pre-modern natural balance. As he puts it, “to accord with his milieu, the only thing man can do is accept fully this cleft, this fissure, this structural *rooting-out*, and to try as far as possible to patch things up afterwards; all other solutions – the illusion of a possible return to nature [i.e., rootedness], the idea of a total socialization of nature – are a direct path to totalitarianism.”⁶¹

So, what if, then, we apply to every nation what has been imputed to the Jewish nation: eternal rootlessness? What if the truth is that we are all, in fact, *universally*, rootless, and that the only way to recognize and to come to terms with this fact is by reaching it via the concreteness of the *negative* in the particularity of every contingent national state. Knowledge of rootlessness is, perhaps, the “gift” of the Jewish “*volkgeist*” to *world* spirit. But it can only be grasped through an initial movement and

externalization in the form of the nation-state before its internal divisions can come to be articulated in the universality of world spirit – world spirit, that is, not as an end but as continuity – via a determinate negation where we learn that contradiction and internal division are not merely the product of a contingent alienation, but “an internal condition of every identity.”⁶²

Of course, we must continue to be harsh critics of forced displacement of nations of people, whether through violence or other forms of coercion. The Jewish story in both Europe and in Middle Eastern countries, such as Yemen, Iraq, and Tunisia, like the story of Palestinian Arabs since the Nakba, is replete with histories of forced displacement and removal. But perhaps the solution is not simply decolonization, but – along with the project of European modernity and the Enlightenment – one of *political* self-determination in the nation-state? And, by this, I do not mean to suggest that the nation-state is an end, but it does provide the concrete space upon which internationalist class struggle can be fought (and won).

Thus, to echo Žižek’s defence of Europe, what if the time has come to drop the Leftist mantra according to which our *main* task is the critique of Zionism and settler colonialism? This, of course, does *not* mean dropping our criticism of the government of Israel and the extremism of the hardline Kahanist government. But it does mean re-orienting the way that we perceive the situation. Like Europe, the collapse of communism and the disparaging of socialism throughout the world has led to the rise of populist fundamentalism in place of the emancipatory core of the universalist and internationalist project, of which Zionism was initially engaged. Israel, today, like Europe, is split between racist, populist-fundamentalists and extremists in the Israeli government, and a democratic movement of Israeli citizens pushing back against the corruption of the government and the disgraceful path it is treading. For Israeli populist-fundamentalists, the figure of the Palestinian ‘other’ has taken the place of the Jew, as the latter is inscribed in the antisemitic fantasies and brutalities everywhere else in the world.

What if, then, just as Žižek argues about Europe, what is needed is a narrowing of the field, of what is considered “Zionist” in the Jewish struggle for political self-determination on an international scale? Just as Žižek defends the notion of a retrieval-through-repetition for the project of Europe, can we not say the same for the project of Zionism, which was, itself, grounded in the tradition of European Enlightenment and modernity? Put more directly, what if the solution is the *exclusion* of the Kahanist fundamentalists and messianics from the Zionist project – theirs, after all, is a project deeply rooted in anti-Enlightenment and anti-Western values, not unlike the *Bodenständig* politics of Heidegger and the decolonization movement. Instead, there is a need to hold onto the modern project of Jewish political self-determination (namely, Zionism) in

a world where antisemitism everywhere continues to prevail, but in a way that completely rejects the kind of rootedness we see in the essentialist particularism of decolonial movements on both the Left and the Right.⁶³

The same, then, must be said about the idea of Palestine and the building of Palestinian national political self-determination and the forming of a State of Palestine. The modernist core of this project, as even outlined by Said in his early defence of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Yaser Arafat, requires retrieval. In fact, reading Said's writing about the formation of Fatah and the P.L.O. resembles so much of what early Marxist Zionist-internationalists, like Nachman Syrkin and Ber Borochov, wrote about the building of the Poale Zion party (the early Marxist-oriented Labour Zionist party). This is what the retrieval-through-repetition of the Zionist and Palestinian projects must mean. It is only by taking sides in the *internal* struggle of each nation – the Jewish-Israeli struggle against the populist fundamentalism of the Netanyahu regime, and the Palestinian-Arab struggle against the terrorism of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even terrorist parties that travel under the monicker of Marxism, like the PFLP. This, I claim, is the way to remain committed to concrete universality in the case of Israel and Palestine, without abandoning the political self-determination of either of the two affected groups.

Rather than pitting nation against nation, a true concrete universality can only emerge by taking sides with the projects of national political self-determination of each – including the recognition of Palestinian statehood – but also with the forces of internationalism and universality on each side, as opposed to those who base their politics on the pure particularity of *Bodenständig*.

Conclusion

The concrete universality that I have in mind in the case of Zionism and Palestine develops out of Žižek's own defence of concrete Eurocentrism. As opposed to the abstract and historicist universalism (and even particularism) of much of today's left – especially as it is presented in decolonial politics – Žižek's concrete universality is one grounded in an engaged subjective stance in a political antagonism. However, such a stance must not be perceived from the perspective of a false opposition. It must, rather be viewed in terms of the internal contradictions that plague every particular identity. This, for instance, is how we may get at the heart of the class struggle, as the primary material contradiction in every national-political situation, even as it appears in the guise of secondary contradictions, such as those that pit one nation against another.

By drawing on the concrete historical contexts of Žižek's critiques of nationalism and historicism, both with regards to the real material histories of communist Yugoslavia and its post-communist breakup, resulting in the rise of new nationalist-chauvinist orientations, my aim

has been to show that his concreteness has been oriented towards the philosophical positions he has staked. It was his critique of the historicist ideology of Yugoslav Marxism that drew him in his earliest work to Althusser. Likewise, it was the rise of nationalist-chauvinism that led him to abandon the radical democracy and populist perspectives of Laclau and Mouffe.

Similar to his concrete defence of Europe, my position has been to demonstrate that the opposition between Zionism and the Palestinian idea is erroneous and must be replaced with a concrete and engaged subjective position that takes sides, not in the struggle of one nation against the other, but of the side of universality *internal* to each national context. This perspective, I claim, moves beyond the simple liberal version of the two-state solution, as well as the more utopian one of a single bi-national state.⁶⁴ Siding further with Žižek's concrete Eurocentrism, it is my view that only with the building of Palestinian *political* self-determination in the form of a State of Palestine, alongside Jewish political self-determination and the State of Israel, that the further struggle for internationalism can proceed.

Hegel puts it best when he writes:

Since states are related to one another as independent entities and so as *particular* wills on which the very validity of treaties depends, and since the particular will of the whole, as regards its content, is a will for its own *welfare* as such, it follows that welfare is the highest law governing the relation of one state to another. This is all the more the case since the Idea of the state is precisely the supersession of the opposition between right as abstract freedom and welfare as the particular content which fills it, and it is when states become *concrete* wholes that they first attain recognition.⁶⁵

Internationalism doesn't mean the withering away of states; it means their co-operation.

Outside the state form, however, it remains difficult to grasp the *internal* tension of each side in the class struggle; or, perhaps more appropriately, the struggle between, not merely universality and particularity, but between abstract and concrete universality, since the particularist position is, after all, one of *abstract* universality.⁶⁶ In the way I have described, abstract universality is particularist, relativist, historicist, and utopian insofar as it resists – via the perverse erection of external obstacles in the guise of a vilified 'other' – a concrete path towards liberation.

This is the perspective from which we should see how the European emancipatory legacy, and Žižek's concrete Eurocentrism, intersect with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Taking the side of concrete universality in the disparity internal to the particularity of each nation demands a ruthless

criticism of the chauvinisms and reactionary populist fundamentalisms – whether as right or left versions of abstraction – that present themselves in *every* national context. It is in *this* way that the concrete struggle for Palestinian liberation coincides with the concrete struggle against global antisemitism.

- 1 Chibber 2021
- 2 Žižek 2012, p. 359. Emphasis added.
- 3 Comay and Ruda 2018, pp. 7-8.
- 4 Žižek 2012, p. 359
- 5 Ibid, pp. 361-362
- 6 Ibid, p. 362
- 7 Ibid, p. 367
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Said 1979, p. 164
- 10 McGowan 2019, p. 12
- 11 Žižek 1999, p. 207
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Žižek 2006, pp. 18-19
- 14 Žižek 2010, p. 176
- 15 Žižek 2016, p. 18
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Ibid, p. 19
- 18 Ibid
- 19 Žižek 2008, p. 274
- 20 Ibid, p. 275
- 21 Ibid
- 22 Ibid
- 23 Ibid p. 276
- 24 Hardt and Negri 2000
- 25 Avineri 2017, p. 15
- 26 Ibid, p. 158
- 27 Laclau and Mouffe 2000; Žižek 2002
- 28 Žižek 2008; Laclau 2005
- 29 Laclau's pupil, Simon Critchley (2007), makes a very similar argument in his book, *Infinitely Demanding*, where he defends a political ethics of bombarding the state or authority with a constant stream of demands, without ever, itself, taking state power.
- 30 The former Prime Minister of Slovenia, Janez Janša, for instance, began, in the 1980s, as a political dissident, a democratic reformer, and a civil society activist and defender of free speech, aligned in some ways with the radical pluralism of Laclau and Mouffe's positions, but later developed into a nationalist-populist leader compared to Hungary's Victor Orbán.
- 31 Žižek's theory of nationalism, in fact, appeared a few years earlier, at the very moment of the collapse of Yugoslav communism, in his 1990 article in the *New Left Review*, "Eastern Europe's Republics of *Gilead*."
- 32 Žižek 1993, pp. 202-203
- 33 Ibid, p. 203
- 34 Ibid, p. 205
- 35 Žižek 2006, p. 30
- 36 McGowan 2022, p. 123
- 37 Regnault 2003; Sartre 1995
- 38 Žižek 2006, p. 19
- 39 Žižek 1993, p. 212
- 40 McGowan 2019, p. 199
- 41 Ibid, p. 198
- 42 Postone 1980, pp. 103-104
- 43 McGowan 2019, p. 199
- 44 In my forthcoming book, *The Hysterical Sublime*, I defend a renewed conception of dialectical humanism that contrasts with and parts ways with the idealism of Marxist humanism. Whereas the latter grasps emancipation as a process of disalienation, I argue instead that dialectical humanism requires reconciling with an alienation that is constitutive of human subjectivity.
- 45 Žižek 1993, pp. 228-229
- 46 Ibid, p. 229
- 47 For a fuller description of this period in Žižek's work, see Dolar 2025; see also Sorenson 2020a and 2020b.
- 48 Žižek and Salecl 1991, p. 26
- 49 Žižek 1993, p. 229
- 50 Althusser 2007, pp. 180-185
- 51 Zedong 2017, p. 181

52 Žižek 2012, p. 299

53 Zupančič 2017, p. 122

54 It may be worth pointing out that the Heideggerian and the Marxist humanist positions coincide in their historicism and in their desire for full transparency (and perhaps that's even why Object-Oriented theorists, like Graham Harman and Levi R. Bryant, side with Heidegger: they believe they can bypass representation and mediation and go straight toward immediacy), whereas the Frankfurt school, via Adorno's negative dialectics, for instance, always stops short of choosing a side. But we can then see why, according to Žižek (2008) Heidegger made the right choice in 1933, although in the wrong direction. Foucault, too, made the same mistake in choosing the side of the Khomeini Revolution. Unlike negative dialectics they chose a side, but they chose the side of particularity instead of that of universality, very similar to today's pro-Hamas self-styled "communists" in the Western Left, such as Jodi Dean and Andreas Malm.

55 Lenin 2004, p. 14

56 On this point, see, for instance, Veracini 2024. Zahi Zalloua (2023) succumbs to this way of examining Zionism, so much so that, for him, the form of Zionism that I here defend might amount to what is referred to as "liberal Zionism." However, it is noteworthy that the critique of liberalism he develops is, on my view, much closer to Heidegger's critique of Western modernity, particularly in the way that I present it here, even though he couches this view in Indigenous Studies, Critical Black Studies, and Afropessimism.

57 Wolin 2022, p. 255

58 Ibid, p. 252

59 Agamben 2024

60 Ibid

61 Žižek 1989, p. 5

62 Ibid, p. 6

63 I'm even tempted to say that the internal contradiction immanent to the Zionist project at a philosophical level is one that is best rendered along the lines of Jabotinsky versus the couple Syrkin-Borochoy, the former representing the line that leads towards particularist fundamentalism while the latter represents the line leading towards universalist-internationalism.

64 I, however, am in favour of the movement for a confederation of Israel and Palestine, where the two sovereign nations share natural resources and defence, and where transfer payments may help in the development of Palestinian infrastructure.

65 Hegel 2008, pp. 313-314 § 336

66 But, as Terry Eagleton (2003, p. 15) once put it, most abstract universalists reject abstract universality, regardless.

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