There used to be a bookstore at Cooper Square in New York City, which has since gone the way of most bookstores around the world: it turned into a Starbucks, along the way to becoming a nail salon, before it reached its telos as an Apple store. I used to pass it en route to an Afghan restaurant on St. Mark’s Place that fit my graduate student stipend. But I went into the bookstore only once, which was quite enough. The window was crammed with exactly two kinds of books: slim, high-priced volumes of literary theory, and coffee-table photo fetish books. Alongside the Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard were nestled glitzy hardcover volumes of pictures by photographers like Helmut Newton who posed anorexic models with whips and leather collars. I remember being shocked at the close conjunction of highbrow and wanker books, and wondering what it meant.

The third or fourth time I passed the place on the way to Khyber Pass, the answer came to me: These are the same kinds of books for the same kinds of people, and they serve the very same purpose. They are smut for the smart. Elaborate intellectual books that torture the mind along the way to denying that knowledge, truth, or even the act of reading really exist—and torture books that replace the act of sex for lonely, self-impoverished intellectuals. Each was designed to produce a frisson of pleasure and self-satisfaction, while remaining entirely fruitless—stimulating and frustrating both the human brain and the loins. All of it is porn, of different flavors for changing moods.

I don’t remember whether Slavoj Žižek’s philosophy books brushed lips in that store’s window with Newton’s, but they certainly belonged there. It is my melancholy task here to tell you why. First, let me explain that Žižek sets himself apart from his brain-punishing ancestors in the field of postmodern theory in two important ways: First, his writing is sometimes clear and entertaining.

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Second, he is honest about his politics. The first quality makes it much less painful for me to read and report on his work; the second makes me question the value of reading any of it—instead of casting it aside, along with Newton, as a smarmy occasion of sin.

You see, Slavoj Žižek is by his own account not merely a Marxist but a Leninist. Instead of pretending like so many Western leftists that he sees Marx merely as a useful tool of critique, Žižek admits that he admires the historic Communist project, and wants to reerect a social order using methods of terror, repression, and massive coercion. That’s what the suffix *Leninist* means—assuming, of course, that anything really “means” anything in the postmodern mental muddle.

Perhaps Lenin’s own words will provide the relevant context. As he wrote his subordinates on August 11, 1918:

Comrades! The uprising by the five kulak *volosts* [regions] must be mercilessly suppressed. The interest of the entire revolution demands this, for we are now facing everywhere the “final decisive battle” with the kulaks. We need to set an example.

1. You need to hang (hang without fail, so that the people see) no fewer than 100 of the notorious kulaks, the rich and the bloodsuckers.
2. Publish their names.
3. Take all their grain from them.
4. Appoint the hostages—in accordance with yesterday’s telegram.

This needs to be done in such a way that the people for hundreds of *versts* around will see, tremble, know and shout: they are throttling and will throttle the bloodsucking kulaks.

Telegraph us concerning receipt and implementation.

Yours, Lenin.

PS. Find tougher people.

As someone who came of age in Tito’s Yugoslavia, Žižek knows perfectly well what kind of society results from Leninist theory, as well as any German adult in 1945 knew the fruits of *Volkisch* philosophy. Yet, as Walter MacDougall reports, a majority of German voters polled by Allied authorities in November of that year declared that fascism had been a “good idea, badly implemented.”

No doubt Žižek if pressed would prove to be something of a revisionist and express regret at such subsequent “distortions” as the terror famine in Ukraine, the tens of millions who languished in the Gulag, the butchery in Cambodia’s killing fields, the forced abortion campaign in China, and the starvation and concentration camps that still prevail in North Korea. But as the brilliant student of the Holocaust Ron Rosenbaum has noted:

There are those like the Postmodern sophist Slavoj Žižek who argue that Stalin’s crimes were his aberrational distortion of an otherwise admirably utopian Marxist-Leninism whose reputation still deserves respect and maybe a Lacanian tweak in light of the genocidal reality of Marxist-Leninist regimes. But can one really separate an ideology from the genocides repeatedly committed in its name?

Yet Žižek is not one of those nostalgic Leninists who demonize Stalin as the betrayer of his predecessor’s ideals. As Marxist Terry Eagleton asked, in exasperation, “Can [Žižek] really be serious when he claims in *Trouble in Paradise* that ‘the worst of Stalinism (is better) than the best of the liberal-capitalist welfare state,’ or is he just out to scandalise the suburbs?”
Readers tempted to accuse me of playing “the Hitler Card” should know that Žižek himself likes to use it in a game of three-card monte: Žižek was the lone intellectual to appear in *Laibach: A Band from Slovenia*, a documentary about a music group that makes incessant, perhaps parodic use of Nazi and Stalinist imagery in its album art and concerts—sometimes to very entertaining effect, as when the band transformed the harmless soccer anthem “Life Is Life” and the sappy Queen power-ballad “One Vision” into creepy, Hitlerite videos that are funny to watch when you’re drunk. Žižek vigorously defended Laibach’s lighthearted use of the apparatus of genocide and terror, explaining that they employed it to highlight the implicit, and much more sinister, totalitarianism of America and the West.

That totalitarianism is much more sinister than Stalin’s because it relies on the unconscious motivations and psychological self-deceptions that Lacanians (see below) can discern beneath the surface of the apparently “free” choices of modern Westerners. You may think you are choosing and speaking freely, but you are in fact merely reciting a culturally imposed script; therefore, when the Revolutionary committee seizes your property and shutters your church, the “liberties” they are seizing are merely illusions. You are in fact, whether or not you realize it, being liberated. As Rousseau once promised, you are being forced to be free.

Žižek’s tone is ever playful, inviting the status-conscious viewer to join him in the joke, rather than languish outside among the philistines and moralists. That is Žižek’s rhetorical strategy: to serve as the jester, the knowing sophisticate who mocks the staid sensibilities of the bourgeois, while collecting large speaker’s fees, inspiring a journal of “Žižek Studies,” serving as the subject of a documentary film—and never, oddly enough, spending any significant time in Leninist countries such as Cuba or North Korea.

Žižek follows the same playbook as that of the late Edward Said, who used his expensive Western education and eminent seat at Columbia (where he boasted of teaching the Western canon the better to expose it) to justify the attitudes and activities of obscurantist militant Islam. Said’s “classic” *Orientalism* was an ugly, book-length sneer at the earnest efforts of thousands of better scholars to comprehend and preserve non-Western cultures, as Pakistani ex-Muslim Ibn Warraq documented in the indispensable *Defending the West*. Said used the dominant mode in Western discourse, handwringing (but secretly self-congratulating) multiculturalism, to give aid and comfort to the enemies of any free cultural discourse, and even of reason itself. So Žižek combines pop-culture flippancy with traditional Western erudition to generate a profound cynicism concerning free life in the West—the better to tear down our defenses against those who would...it seems so tacky and humorless to say it...build Berlin Walls and throw intellectuals into psychiatric hospitals to be tortured. I can just see Slavoj rolling his big fish eyes and waving his beefy Slavic paws at my vulgarity for mentioning it.

Let’s get into the meat of Žižek’s views. To start, you should know that he is not just Marxist-Leninist but also a devotee of Jacques Lacan—a revisionist of the theories of Sigmund Freud. It’s amazing how many discredited worldviews one can pack into a single sentence.

Marx was a failed economist, whose profound errors (such as the labor theory of value) led him to predict revolutions that never occurred. But that is merely the theory. In almost one hundred years of practice,
Marxist economics and politics have never produced a functioning economy, intellectual freedom, the abolition of the state, the disappearance of classes, or any of the other messianic promises that he made. Accepting the “Leninist” label means that Žižek must also take account of the mass executions and concentration camps his hero personally ordered.

Likewise, Freud styled as a rigorous science akin to physics his idiosyncratic anecdotal observations about the neuroses of rich Viennese women—the kind of people you see in Gustav Klimt’s paintings. In practice, Freudian analysis seems not to help patients get better, which may be the reason it is scarcely practiced by any psychologists under seventy.

And now to Lacan. Raymond Tallis calls this psychoanalyst one of the fattest spiders at the heart of the web of muddled not-quite-thinkable-thoughts and evidence-free assertions of limitless scope, which practitioners of theorrhoea have woven into their version of the humanities. Much of the dogma central to contemporary theory came from him: that the signifier dominates over the signified; that the world of words creates the world of things; that the “I” is a fiction based upon an Oedipalised negotiation of the transition from mirror to symbolic stages; and so on….

[Lacan’s] doctrines—a magpie muddle of often unacknowledged expropriations from writers whose disciplines were alien to him, cast in borrowed jargon and opaque neologisms—were Rorschach ink-blots into which anything could be read. Lacan’s ideas were insulated against critical evaluation by his writing style, in which… “a dialectic between presence and absence alternated with a logic of space and motion.”

Lacan was expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1963 for professional malpractice—to be specific, for maximizing his income by collapsing 50-minute therapy sessions into 10 minutes but charging the same inflated fee. By the last years of his life, Lacan “averaged 80 patients a day.” He was, to speak plainly, a mercenary fraud.


It is this repeated, obsessive appeal to authority and to an utterly discredited authority, rather than just his grotesque failure to understand the nature of capitalism and democracy, that in the end exposes the quality of Žižek’s thought. He does not analyze but simply moves verbal tokens around while always mentioning the right people.

Now I wonder if Modern Age would commission an article on a philosopher who admitted right off the bat that he was a devoted geocentrist and phrenologist, who interpreted those two sciences through the prism of alchemy and Scientology. (Though, come to think of it, Carl Jung’s views were just about as silly.) They might have to, if
said alchemist had attracted a substantial following of self-styled intellectuals, if only in the interests of public mental hygiene.

And Žižek is something of a superstar, in the small and strange world of postmodern public intellectuals. His incessant puckishness attracts media attention because he is willing to say what progressive liberals are unwilling to admit—some of which is actually true. For instance, he takes up the cudgels on behalf of radical nationalists, Islamic fundamentalists, and others who radically (even violently) dissent from the current liberal, post-Christian order, defending their revolts as inevitable symptoms of the collapse of Enlightenment ideals—which of course he rejects for their emphasis on individual rights, especially property rights. It is hard to argue with the contention that there was something delusional and dystopian about erasing national boundaries, filling Europe with disgruntled Muslims, and imposing on that variegated continent a single currency with a single interest rate—underwritten by a lavish welfare state funded mostly by the Germans. If that is the legacy of the Enlightenment, the project was doomed from the start.

There was a much deeper flaw in the Enlightenment project than Žižek appears to see, which you can learn about by consulting a deeper and more serious thinker about the nature and purpose of thought, Michael Allen Gillespie. In *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Gillespie explains in detail how the effects of philosophical nominalism played out again and again over six centuries in failed attempts at intellectual syntheses from thinkers ranging from William of Ockham and Martin Luther to Descartes, Hegel, and Kant. To boil a very complex argument down, Gillespie explains that nominalism rejected the “analogy of being,” which asserted that the ultimate reality (for a medieval like Ockham, this would be God) is not absolutely alien to human reason—that God’s justice is analogous to ours, His goodness in some sense akin to human goodness. Thomist scholasticism was rejected, Gillespie suggests, for a variety of reasons, and this rejection produced a wide variety of outcomes.

Experimental science was freed up when “natural philosophers” no longer had easy access to a teleology implanted by God—which means that it is quite likely that nominalism made possible the vaccines and medicines that kept many readers of this journal alive past childhood. Without the penicillin that cured my pneumonia at age two, I would not be alive to complain about nominalism. Without the economic liberty that emerged with the modern era, few people of my social class would have received the education that led us to read Gillespie or (God help us) Žižek. Without the religious liberty that emerged from the continent-wide civil war that was the Reformation, we might not have access to books that diverged from inherited understandings of the world.

But the dark side of the nominalist revolt cannot be ignored, as Pope Benedict XVI explained in his famous address at Regensburg. If the ultimate reality is not bound by anything like our human codes of ethics, what ground do those codes really have? They are arbitrary, imposed on us only by the authority of (for instance) the Bible. What happens when biblical criticism or some other intellectual fashion undermines our adherence to that authority—and the ultimate reality is no longer Luther’s God but Darwin’s remorseless survival of the fittest or Marx’s iron economic laws?

Attempts by well-meaning liberal thinkers from Kant to Habermas to create a clear, rationally defensible code of moral behavior
that will preserve the human dignity we inherited from Christian anthropology have always foundered in the face of an ultimate reality (Nature) that is completely unhinged from our aspirations and impermeable to our thought. We can have a ruthlessly self-consistent system, like Hitler’s biologism or Stalin’s Marxism, but it will not be human. Or we can have a humanistic system, like John Locke’s, and it will not be consistent. (It will depend, without any justification, on the “laws of Nature and Nature’s God.”) In a nominalistic universe, we simply can’t have both.\(^7\)

The sheer impossibility of really understanding what is real is one of Žižek’s favored themes. As he wrote in the *London Review of Books*:

The retreat of the accepted Big Other accounts for the prevalence of code-cracking in popular culture. New Age pseudo-scientific attempts to use computer technology to crack some recondite code—in the Bible, say, or the pyramids—which can reveal the future of humanity offer one example of this. Another is provided by the scene in cyberspace movies in which the hero (or often the heroine), hunched over a computer and frantically working against time, has his/her “access denied,” until he/she cracks the code and discovers that a secret government agency is involved in a plot against freedom and democracy. Believing there is a code to be cracked is of course much the same as believing in the existence of some Big Other: in every case what is wanted is an agent who will give structure to our chaotic social lives.\(^8\)

Žižek does not dwell much on the leaden authoritarianism that prevails wherever his Big Other of choice, Marxism, exercises power. Instead, he exerts his energy touting radical challenges that point up the flaws and foibles of the half-Christian, half-materialist mishmash that prevails in the liberal West. His manic glee in sticking up for fully crazed fundamentalists, while sharpening a knife in memory of Lenin, is mirrored on today’s religious far right not only by Arabs daydreaming about sharia but also by self-styled illiberal Catholics,\(^9\) who congratulate themselves on their machismo every time they disrupt a party by saying, “The Inquisition? What was wrong with it? I want an auto-da-fe every morning with my coffee.” Irresponsible posturing is entertaining for a season. But it ages very poorly.

This is not to say that reading Žižek does not have its rewards. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*,\(^10\) he takes more seriously than most writers in his political camp the challenge of Christianity and the work of writers like Chesterton; as a profoundly ironic thinker (one of his books is entitled *A Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*—excellent marketing, if nothing else) he embraces that writer’s use of paradoxes, which he compares in detail to Hegel’s. Žižek sees clearly the hypocrisy of the contemporary multicultural left, which tortures itself in attempts to respond to the rise of fundamentalism among the immigrant groups that the left welcomed in the name of radical liberalism.

He even jokes pointedly about the fact that most Western Marxists only embrace their revolutionary ideology as a lifestyle accessory, confident in the safe assurance the Revolution will never come. Indeed, if it did, it would sweep away the institutions that allow for their playful assertions of fashionable rebellion; there had never been a culture as leaden and bureaucratic as that of Eastern Bloc Europe. This is, of course, the inevitable outcome of Lenin’s ideology in action. Žižek enjoys poking fun at the
purchasers of his books, who would surely perish quickly were his ideas to prevail. Of course, so would sophists like Žižek. The avante garde poets and artists who welcomed the Russian Revolution were all, to a man or woman, devoured in its maw—and replaced by Socialist Realists who wielded kitsch in the interests of stolid conformity. The thought of Žižek perishing someday in a postmodern Marxist gulag is the only lasting reward I can take away from his books.

I do not pretend fully to understand, and will not presume to critique, the thought of Slavoj Žižek; even to comprehend the literal argument of his books one must have mastered the arcane psychoanalytic jargon of Jacques Lacan and assimilated the radical sex theories of George Bataille. The danger of reading such writers is not what a Christian might feel at the prospect of reading Nietzsche: a fear that he might be convincing, and might by brilliant arguments undermine one’s faith and leave one rudderless. No, the problem with reading Lacan (or Žižek) is the same one presented by Derrida and Heidegger: their thought does not follow the rules of logic and argument one has internalized from reading any other philosopher. You do not scan their arguments to see if you can accept their premises, or follow their chain of syllogisms (there aren’t any, but rather a wild haze of bold associative leaps, bejeweled with invented words). Instead, you puzzle over the text in the attempt to make some kind of preliminary sense of it. For instance, as with the following passage:

Deleuze characterized his reading of philosophers as guided by the tendency “to see the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery” or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too, because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed.” [2] Deleuze is here deeply Lacanian: does Lacan not do the same in his reading of “Kant with Sade”? Jacques-Alain Miller once characterized this reading with the same words as Deleuze: the aim of Lacan is “to take Kant from behind,” to produce the Sadean monster as Kant’s own offspring. (And, incidentally, does the same not go also for Heidegger’s reading of pre-Socratic fragments? Is he also not “taking from behind” Parmenides and Heraclitus? Is his extensive explanation of Parmenides’ “Being and thought are the same” not one of the greatest buggeries in the history of philosophy?) The term “immaculate conception” is to be linked to the notion, from The Logic of Sense, of the flow of sense as infertile, without a proper causal power: Deleuzian reading does not move at the level of the actual imbrication of causes and effects; it stands to “realistic” interpretations as anal penetration does with regard to “proper” vaginal penetration.11

You fail. Your brain starts to bleed. If you are healthy and self-confident, you react to such a failure as evidence that the work is incoherent and you throw it across the room. But if the work is on a reading list of a course you’re required to take, or if you crave the cultural cachet of dropping these particular names, you do something else: you surrender the healthy habits of reasoning that you steadily developed throughout your
years as a rational animal and agree to try to think in an entirely new way. You let yourself become a passive spectator. You humbly submit to re-education by the text, not simply in different ideas—any persuasive book tries to do that, and fair enough—but in a new and idiosyncratic mode of connecting ideas. The book assures you, slyly between the lines, that this new mode of thinking is a rare and privileged method, known only to the gnostic few who have dared to follow the author down his radical, brave new path.

In the end you put so much effort into making heads or tails of what the text is actually saying, that you cannot bear to admit that it’s simply nonsense, or a pernicious waste of time that addled your faculties for thinking. By the “sunk cost” fallacy, you perversely attribute importance to the text, lest you admit how foolishly you have been wasting your time. Thus the hours you poured into slogging through Žižek become like soldiers who died in Vietnam—you cannot dishonor their sacrifice by admitting that they died in vain.

I’ve decided to cut and run. I have pulled all my troops back home. I will not spend one more of the limited number of hours God allows me on this earth trying to follow the kinky gyrations of an apologist for Lenin—any more than I will slog through the Marquis de Sade, to prove to myself that his books are really wicked. No, instead I’ll say this: if you read Slavoj Žižek, you deserve him. If, knowing in advance that this man’s conclusions lead straight to the NKVD and the rest of the Red Terror, you still decide to play his sophist’s game, then you richly deserve to have your thought processes addled. Go ahead and pour sugar in your own car’s gas tank.

But don’t pretend that what you’re doing is any better than flipping slowly through Fifty Shades of Grey.

1 “Telegram to Comrades Kuraev, Bosh, Minkin, and Other Penza Communists,” www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/11c.htm.
3 “Stalin’s Cannibals,” Slate, February 27, 2011.
7 For the internal inconsistencies of Locke’s politically benevolent thought, see Edward Feser’s invaluable introduction, Locke (London: Oneworld, 2007).
8 “You May!: Slavoj Žižek Writes about the Post-Modern Superego,” London Review of Books 21, no. 6 (March 18, 1999).
9 As Gabriel Sanchez boasts in “Illiberal Catholicism: One Year On” (Front Porch Republic, January 26, 2015), Žižek’s thought is increasingly popular in illiberal Catholic circles. As if we should be surprised.