

# Subjective destitution in art and politics: From being-towards-death to undeadness

Slavoj Žižek

University of London. Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities

University of Ljubljana

bih@bbk.ac.uk



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## Abstract

Jacques Lacan coined the term “subjective destitution” to describe the concluding moment of a psychoanalytic treatment. This concept can also usefully be applied to art and to politics. In art, subjective destitution can be defined as a passage from being-towards-death to undeadness, in other words to the position of the living dead – this passage takes place between Shostakovich’s 14th symphony and his final symphony, the 15th. In politics, subjective destitution designates the passage of a political subject to a radical de-subjectivization, to becoming an object of a political cause.

**Keywords:** Lacan; Hegel; subjective destitution; undeadness; Shostakovich; political cause; nirvana

## Resum. *La destitució subjectiva en l'art i la política: de l'ésser-cap-a-la-mort a la no-mort*

Jacques Lacan va encunyar el terme *destitució subjectiva* per designar el moment final d'un tractament d'orientació psicoanalítica. Aquesta noció també pot aplicar-se de manera productiva a l'art i a la política. En l'art, la destitució subjectiva pot definir-se com el pas de l'ésser-cap-a-la-mort a la no-mort, és a dir, a la posició d'un mort vivent; cal assenyalar que aquest pas té lloc des de la 14a simfonia de Xostakóvitx fins a la seva última simfonia, la 15a. D'altra banda, en política, la destitució subjectiva pot identificar-se en el pas d'un subjecte polític a una des-subjectivació radical, és a dir, a convertir-se en objecte d'una causa política.

**Paraules clau:** Lacan; Hegel; destitució subjectiva; no-mort; Xostakóvitx; causa política; nirvana

Our starting premise is that what Heidegger designated as “being-towards-death” is not the ultimate existential experience; it is possible to pass through this (although not in Heidegger’s precise sense) into a dimension for which the best name is perhaps “undeadness”. In order to make this passage somewhat clearer, let’s turn our attention towards a perhaps unexpected topic: the symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich. The most popular of these is his fifth symphony, the fate of which was very curious. Written after the devastating critique of his opera *Lady Macbeth in Pravda*, the fifth is usually perceived as a conscious compromise, a return to more traditional music destined to ensure his political reha-

bilitation. However, long after Stalin's demise, Shostakovich's fifth remains his most popular and also his most frequently performed symphony in the West. A couple of years ago, it was selected by a critical panel as the only 20th-century work among the ten greatest symphonies of all time (which it is definitely not: in its own genre, the eighth and tenth symphonies are much better). But what interests us here are Shostakovich's final two symphonies, the 14th and 15th, which directly tackle death; or, more precisely, the passage from death to undeadness. (In this regard, the passage from the 14th to the 15th symphony is homologous to the passage from *Vertigo* to *Psycho* in Hitchcock's opus, or the passage from the third to the fourth movement in Sibelius's fourth symphony.<sup>1</sup>) Apropos the 14th symphony, Shostakovich openly declared his obsession with death:

“Death is in store for all of us and I for one do not see any good in the end of our lives. Death is terrifying. There is nothing beyond it.” Shostakovich was arguing against the view that death is some glorious beginning to the afterlife. He disagreed with all the composers who had portrayed death with music that was beautiful, radiant, and ecstatic.<sup>2</sup>

An incident at the premiere of the symphony echoes in an uncanny way this non-glorious, mischievous even, approach to death:

Shostakovich had spoken about the need for a special silence whilst listening to this work. His supporters were therefore particularly angry when, during one of the quietest moments, a huge crash was heard in the auditorium and a man made a hasty and clumsy exit. When it was revealed afterwards that this man was none other than Pavel Ivanovitch Apostolov, a party organiser and one of Shostakovich's main critics and aggressive persecutors during the late 1940s, people assumed that his protest had been carefully planned for maximum distraction. Only later did it become known that it was during this performance that Apostolov had in fact suffered a heart attack; he was dead within a month. The irony was not lost on anyone.<sup>3</sup>

No wonder Solzhenitsyn himself was horrified by the symphony's dark and irreverent tone with no hope of redemption. But was he right? The first thing to note is that the 14th “is not about death but about unnatural death; death caused by murder, oppression, and war.”<sup>4</sup> The second thing is that the 14th does not culminate in an apotheosis of a meaningless death: its climax is undoubtedly the song *O, Delvig*, the most “sincere” song in the symphony, with no irony, even optimistic in a way. The song sets to music a poem by Wilhelm Küchelbecker dedicated to the death (in 1831) of his friend Anton

1. I developed this parallel in Chapter 9 of my *Less Than Nothing*, London: Verso Books 2013.
2. Wigglesworth, Mark (1999). *Mark's notes on Shostakovich Symphony No. 14*. Mark Wigglesworth. <<https://www.markwigglesworth.com/notes/marks-notes-on-shostakovich-symphony-no-14/>>.
3. Op. cit.
4. Op. cit.

Delvig, a poet friendly with Decembrists who failed in their rebellion; the poem “is a celebration of the artists’ power and the importance of their friendship in the face of tyranny.”<sup>5</sup> (Küchelbecker himself was sent to Siberia for his part in the failed Decembrist uprising against the Tsar in 1825, where he died deaf and blind in 1846.) Significantly this lament for the death of a poet is composed in a traditional mode, in contrast to all other songs in the symphony: “Like an *idée fixe*, the twelve-note system haunts all the movements of the Fourteenth Symphony” – except *Delvig*, which is “written in a very pure major key, whereas all the others show a predominance of atonal lines, capricious, sinuous and often grotesque.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important that *Delvig* follows *Letter to Sultan*, an extraordinary song which comes closest to the domain of politics in the entire symphony; it stages a revolt against higher authority as an act of brutal obscenity. Shostakovich decided to put in musical form a crazy document from the Russian past: in 1676, Sultan Mehmed IV wrote a letter to Zaporozhian Cossacks, calling on them to submit themselves to his rule. The Cossacks’ reply came as a stream of invective and vulgar rhymes:

Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Turkish Sultan! O sultan, Turkish devil and damned devil’s kith and kin, secretary to Lucifer himself. What the devil kind of knight are thou, that canst not slay a hedgehog with your naked arse? The devil shits, and your army eats. Thou shalt not, thou son of a whore, make subjects of Christian sons. We have no fear of your army; by land and by sea we will battle with thee. Fuck thy mother. Thou Babylonian scullion, Macedonian wheelwright, brewer of Jerusalem, goat-fucker of Alexandria, swineherd of Greater and Lesser Egypt, pig of Armenia, Podolian thief, catamite of Tartary, hangman of Kamyanets, and fool of all the world and underworld, an idiot before God, grandson of the Serpent, and the crick in our dick. Pig’s snout, mare’s arse, slaughterhouse cur, unchristened brow. Screw thine own mother! So the Zaporozhians declare, you lowlife. You won’t even be herding pigs for the Christians. Now we’ll conclude, for we don’t know the date and don’t own a calendar; the moon’s in the sky, the year with the Lord. The day’s the same over here as it is over there; for this kiss our arse! *Koshovyi otaman Ivan Sirko, with the whole Zaporozhian Host.*<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, *Letter to Sultan* is preceded by *Prison* which puts to music Guillaume Apollinaire’s description of a man imprisoned alone in a cell. In the middle of this song, we get an orchestral interlude which marks a break in the subjective stance of the suffering prisoner; after this interlude, the first words are: “I am not the man I was.” So we can see the meaning of the order of these three songs: despair in the prison which makes the subject a different

5. Op. cit.

6. <<https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/AJ0378.pdf>>.

7. Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks (February 18, 2023). *Wikipedia*. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Reply\\_of\\_the\\_Zaporozhian\\_Cossacks&oldid=1140132968](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Reply_of_the_Zaporozhian_Cossacks&oldid=1140132968)>.

man and pushes him to brutal rebellion, followed by lament when the rebellion is crushed. (In a further analysis one could reconstruct the narrative line that unites all 11 songs of the symphony: the first two are the introduction and the last two the finale (which begins with the same motif as the introduction); the following songs then vary the motif of “death and the maiden” – the naughty fatal lady causes the death of her lovers, she kills herself... – with a gradual shift towards the corpses of young men on the battlefield, and then the man reduced to a number in prison which triggers the rebellion.)

But, as we have seen, *Delvig*, the emotional culmination of the symphony, cancels the premise that “death is terrifying. There is nothing beyond it.” Beyond death there is poetry which makes death in all its meaninglessness a noble event. What comes after death if we really accept that there is nothing beyond it? Shostakovich provides the answer in his 15th symphony, which was played continuously on the set of *Blue Velvet* – Lynch wanted to signal the atmosphere he wanted in the movie: “I wrote the script to Shostakovich: No. 15 in A major. I just kept playing the same part of it, over and over again.”<sup>8</sup> During filming, Lynch placed speakers on set and played the symphony in order to convey the mood he wanted. He later requested that Angelo Badalamenti compose a score for the film that was “like Shostakovich.”<sup>9</sup> Kurt Sanderling, who debuted the symphony in East Germany, considered the music to be about loneliness and death, and that no other work by Shostakovich seemed to him so “radically horrible and cruel”; others see in it playful optimism, while Shostakovich himself characterized it as a “wicked symphony.” The mixture of voices heard in it can well be read as a crazy interaction of “objects as comrades”.

We hear hospital equipment, electric shock treatment, vulgarity and satire; he brings in serialism, a vast array of quotations – everything from Rossini’s *William Tell* to Wagner’s *Tristan and Ring* – which come across like the crazy voices in your head when you are delirious.<sup>10</sup>

But this delirious interaction does not happen within a soul, its space is only opened by subjective destitution: if the 14th symphony culminates in the lyrical confession of a soul (*Delvig*), the 15th is soulless, a monstrous mix of childish playfulness and undeadness.

Here, perhaps, we could also locate Shostakovich’s limitation. As we have already seen, subjective destitution does not appear only as such a monstrous mixture. True, we are dealing here with a dimension beyond (or rather, beneath) the sphere of the reality and pleasure principles, of hedonism, as well

8. Symphony No. 15 (Shostakovich) (January 20, 2023). *Wikipedia*. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Symphony\\_No.\\_15\\_\(Shostakovich\)&oldid=1134737661](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Symphony_No._15_(Shostakovich)&oldid=1134737661)>.

9. Op. cit.

10. BBC Music Magazine (November 7, 2019). *An introduction to Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 15*. Classical Music. <<https://www.classical-music.com/features/articles/introduction-shostakovichs-symphony-no-15/>>.

as of the perfidious calculations and manipulations applied to ruthlessly reach a goal – a dimension that is also, in some sense, beyond good and evil. But this dimension can also appear in the guise of a “superficial” link of respectful friendship which cannot be reduced to egotistical calculation. Let’s take another perhaps unexpected but perfect example: In the TV series *Vikings*, the Viking king Ragnar Lothbrok tells the Seer, an old half-blind Viking who predicts the future: *“I don’t believe in the gods’ existence. Man is the master of his own fate, not the gods. The gods are man’s creation, to give answers that men are too afraid to give themselves.”* The supreme case of how Ragnar acts as a master of his own fate is his plotting of his own death, turning it into his greatest victory. In season 4, Ragnar is tired and defeated. After losing some battles in England and France, he returns home, deprived of his aura. He is despised and ignored, and even his sons no longer believe in him. He becomes obsessed by his own death. On his return, he challenges his sons to stab him to death and take over the crown from him, which they refuse to do. Later he tries to hang himself on a tree but fails (the rope is somewhat magically bitten through by a raven which lands on the tree). At this lowest point, he elaborates a complex plan to use his own death to set up his enemies for defeat, and his sons for victory and fame. Since no volunteers are ready to join him when he announces his plan to raid England again as a revenge for the Viking community being slaughtered there, he digs out his secret treasure and bribes a group of old warriors to join him, together with his crippled son Ivar the Boneless, the only volunteer. However, soon upon landing there, Ragnar and Ivar kill all the other Vikings, and Ragnar goes with Ivar to the castle (the Roman villa) of the Wessex King Ecbert, surrendering himself to him. Why?

In England, Ragnar has two main enemies, Ecbert and King Aella of Northumbria. He plundered both of their lands, but with Ecbert the situation is more complex. Ragnar made a pact with him which obliged Ecbert to give some fertile land for a Viking settlement to Northmen who wanted to farm there. But soon after Ragnar left for Norway, Ecbert organized a slaughter of all Viking settlers, making Ragnar appear to his people as an impotent ruler. So Ragnar has to take revenge. However, since he is an old and exhausted man who cannot mobilize Vikings for another invasion of England, he makes a cold calculation: the only thing that can mobilize the Vikings to take revenge is his horrible death there. So he surrenders to Ecbert with his son Ivar, knowing that he will be killed and that his crippled son will not be hurt but will report home with news of his terrible death, which will mobilize all his sons and even all Vikings to invade England. He tricks Ecbert into believing that his crime – slaughtering the Viking settlers – is forgiven, and offers him a deal: Ecbert would hand him over to Aella for execution and let Ivar go free, so that the Viking invasion will leave Wessex in peace and focus just on destroying Aella. (Since Aella really hates Ragnar, it is also clear that he will put Ragnar to death in a horrible way that will enrage the Vikings.) But when Ragnar is saying goodbye to Ivar, he whispers to him that the Vikings should take revenge not only on Aella but even more on Ecbert, which is exactly what

happens. (But there are signs that Ecbert did not really believe Ragnar's lie. He knows Vikings will take revenge on him too, which is why he awaits them alone in his villa when they arrive, ready to die like Ragnar.) The basic goal of Ragnar's death – the destruction of both Ecbert and Aella as well as the establishment of a large Viking settlement in England – is thus achieved.<sup>11</sup>

However, their similar personalities and their shared love for Athelstan, a monk torn between Viking paganism and Christianity, mean that Ragnar and Ecbert have a great deal of respect for each other. There is a bond of friendship and genuine intellectual exchange between them. After Ragnar's surrender to Ecbert, the two spend long hours drinking and engaged in existential debates where, among other things, Ragnar admits that he is an atheist. The mystery is not only why Ragnar returned to Ecbert and surrendered himself to him (this can be explained by Ragnar's plot of revenge), but why Ecbert receives him with no surprise: "*Why did it take you so long to come?*" Ecbert does not refer here to return as an act of revenge. He expected Ragnar to come back to him alone. So it is too easy to say that Ragnar just faked friendship with Ecbert to pursue his plot; the joy of their encounter is genuine.

There is another excess in Ragnar which cannot be accounted for in the terms of a cunning plot: his wish to die (he has tried to kill himself twice before). And, again, after Ragnar's death, Ecbert displays the same excess. He is present at Ragnar's final moments, anonymous in a crowd of observers, and is deeply shaken. When, after defeating and killing Aella, the Viking forces approach the Wessex seat of power (the "villa"), all residents are evacuated to a safe terrain outside the reach of the Vikings, but Ecbert remains in the palace alone, waiting for Ragnar's sons to arrive and exercise revenge on him. (As a special favour, they don't subject him to "blood eagle", as Ivar wants, but allow him to choose his own death – he cuts his wrists in his Roman pool. But in exchange, he has to designate a Viking as his royal successor.) Why did he surrender alone to the Vikings (exactly as Ragnar had surrendered alone to him) when he could have escaped with the others? While Ragnar's plot of planning his spectacular death can be read as a pagan appropriation of the Christian sacrifice, the two excesses over cunning manipulation of one's opponent point to another dimension. Although they appear not to be related to each other (what could a wish to die have to do with genuine intellectual exchange and friendship?), there is a link between the two: they are both located beyond the pleasure principle and its supplement, the reality principle. In other words, neither can be accounted for in terms of a pursuit of political or social goals of power and domination. The point is not that beyond their mutual manipulation Ragnar and Ecbert really loved each other, the point is that the very *form* of their interaction is irreducible to its content (revenge, etc.). Although for both of them their polite interaction is just a form, a mask for the ruthless realization of their interests (which include the destruction of

11. Summarised from <<https://screenrant.com/vikings-season-4-ragnar-death-revenge-explained/>>.

the other), there is more truth in this form (mask) than in the raw egotistical content beneath it.<sup>12</sup>

Did something similar not happen in Poland in 1989 when the military government negotiated with Solidarnosc? Unexpectedly, General Jaruzelski, the head of the government, and Adam Michnik, one of the main dissident figures, became personal friends, and their families regularly met until Jaruzelski's death. (On his deathbed, none other than Lech Walesa visited him). Today, with Jaroslaw Kaczynski in power, such a friendship is not imaginable. In short, we can also have polite revolutionaries – a welcome contrast to the obscene brutality of those in power.

### Revolutionary Self-Destitution

The example of Shostakovich demonstrates that, far from being constrained to the clinical experience, what Lacan called subjective destitution, the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic process, can also take place in art – to which we should add also politics. In his *Beggar's Opera*, Bertolt Brecht condenses four basic existential stances (the longing for everyday joys, the shock of brutal reality, religious feeling and cynical wisdom) into two, with joyful cynicism as the last word. However, this was not Brecht's own last word. With breath-taking consequence, in his learning plays (*Jasager*, *Die Massnahme*) Brecht added another subjective position, that of a purely formal gesture of self-sacrifice grounded in no deeper meaning or goal. The implicit logic here is that one cannot overcome cynical wisdom with some positive ethical ideal; cynicism can undermine them all, it is only a totally meaningless self-sacrificial act that undermines the cynical distance itself. The Freudian name for such an act is, of course, death-drive; its Hegelian name self-relating negativity. However, we should be very careful here. Brecht makes it clear that this act is not a kind of pure excessive suicidal gesture of stepping out of the symbolic space (something that belongs more to the theory of Bataille). In yet another case of “infinite judgment,” death-drive coincides with its opposite, with radical alienation in the symbolic order. Along these same lines, Saroj Giri described “revolutionary self-destitution, self-objectification” as a specific form of subjectivity:

A specific, individual life, a unique human being, is now an object, a mere object who can be taken down any time: The “comrade as object” is a continuation of de-classing and de-personification, now taken to the point of revolutionary destitution, involving the courage to die, death. To the extent that the comrade is a living human being, his or her objectification will and must

12. I have to ignore here the perverse repetition of the intense relationship between Ragnar and Athelstan in season 5, in the relationship of mutual fascination between Ivar the Boneless, Ragnar's brutal psychotic son, and bishop Huahmund, a fanatic proto-Jesuit figure of a warrior-monk. He, like Athelstan, is not killed but kidnapped by Ivar, who takes him home to Norway.

involve the openness to death. Life is hanging in a balance, and the vulnerability to death is a constant presence. You are never safe and the willingness to sacrifice life is best embraced graciously. (p. 11)<sup>13</sup>

Siri establishes here a double link with the past, recent and more ancient. Recent: the idea of objectification and destitution is close to the idea of Fanon's idea of declivity: "an utterly naked declivity is where an authentic upheaval is born." Or when he says, "the Negro is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly declining declivity." (p. 22) Ancient past: Buddhist revolutionary self.<sup>14</sup> The void (of destitution) "as the "path," the rupture/opening to a "new world" can be found in the Buddha's nibbana. Nibbana is often known as Awakening or Enlightenment, but actually nibbana is, in the first instance, extinction, the blowing out, the vanishing." (p. 14)

What Giri calls subjective destitution is therefore not just a new form of political subjectivity but simultaneously something that concerns our basic existential level, "a different way of being, involving a different modality of life and death" (p. 15). In his afterword to Peter Hallward's collection *Think Again*, Badiou approvingly quotes Lin Biao: "The essence of revisionism is the fear of death."<sup>15</sup> This existential radicalization of the political opposition between orthodoxy and revisionism throws new light on the old '68 motto: "The personal is political." Here, the political becomes personal; the ultimate root of political revisionism is located in the intimate experience of the fear of death. Badiou's version of it would be that, since "revisionism" is, at its most basic, the failure to subjectivize oneself, to assume fidelity to a Truth-Event, being a revisionist means remaining within the survivalist horizon of the "human animal."

There is, however, an ambiguity that clings to Lin Biao's statement. It can be read as saying that the root of political revisionism lies in human nature which makes us fear death; but it can also be read as saying that, since there is no unchangeable human nature, our very intimate fear of death is already politically overdetermined, for it arises in an individualist and egotistical society with little sense of communal solidarity; which is why, in a communist society, people would no longer fear death.

"Comrade as object" does not imply that we should observe and manipulate ourselves from a cold "objective" distance. It is to be supplemented by its inversion, "object as comrade":

Instead of going over to the fetishistic powers of the commodity, one had to go towards the "hidden" engineering/artistic powers of things, objects and

13. Saroj Giri, "Introduction," in K. Murali, *Of Concepts and Methods*, Keralam: Kanal Publishing Center 2021. Numbers in brackets refer to the pages of this book.

14. Saroj Giri, "The Buddhist Ineffable Self as a Possible Indian Political Subject," *Political Theology*, 19 (8) (2018), p. 734-750.

15. Peter Hallward, ed., *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 257.



materials: this would, as it were, allow the object to commune and speak, providing us with the first contours of the “object as comrade”. (p. 6)

This “object as comrade” displays what Giri calls idealism in the (material) thing itself, or what we may call spiritual corporeality, as opposed to the fetishist idealism which imposes on a thing from outside a social dimension as its reified property. To treat an object as “comrade” means to open oneself up to virtual potentials of an object in an intense interaction with it. Maybe a surprising link can help us understand what is meant by “object as comrade” which supplements “comrade as object”: today’s object-oriented ontology (O.O.O.). Graham Harman’s concise description of the basic stance of object-oriented ontology is the following:

The arena of the world is packed with diverse objects, their forces unleashed and mostly unloved. Red billiard ball smacks green billiard ball. Snowflakes glitter in the light that cruelly annihilates them, while damaged submarines rust along the ocean floor. As flour emerges from mills and blocks of limestone are compressed by earthquakes, gigantic mushrooms spread in the Michigan forest. While human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of “access” to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines.<sup>16</sup>

Such a way of treating object as a “comrade” also opens up a new way of being ecological: to accept our environment in all its complex mixture that includes what we perceive as trash or pollution, as well as what we cannot directly perceive since it is too large or too minuscule (Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects”). Along these lines, for Morton:

Being ecological [...] is not about spending time in a pristine nature preserve but about appreciating the weed working its way through a crack in the concrete, and then appreciating the concrete. It’s also part of the world, and part of us. [...] Reality is populated with ‘strange strangers’ - things that are ‘knowable yet uncanny.’ This strange strangeness, Morton writes, is an irreducible part of every rock, tree, terrarium, plastic Statue of Liberty, quasar, black hole, or marmoset one might encounter; by acknowledging it, we shift away from trying to master objects and toward learning to respect them in their elusiveness. Whereas the Romantic poets rhapsodized about nature’s beauty and sublimity, Morton responds to its all-pervading weirdness; they include in the category of the natural everything that is scary, ugly, artificial, harmful, and disturbing.

Is not a perfect example of such a mixture the fate of rats in Manhattan during the pandemic? Manhattan is a living system of humans, cockroaches...

16. Meis, Morgan (June 8, 2021). *Timothy Morton’s Hyper-Pandemic*. The New Yorker. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/timothy-mortons-hyper-pandemic?fbclid=IwAR0qbx2y57TIQsOloIW9MrBtqleIMIFK3SsfBQeCcWXiGIKRpnUmRAiNTk>>.

and millions of rats. Lockdown at the peak of the pandemic meant that, since all restaurants were closed, rats which lived off the trash from restaurants were deprived of the source of their food. This caused mass starvation: many rats were found eating their offspring. A closure of restaurants which changed the eating habits of humans but posed no threat to them was a catastrophe for rats, rats as comrades.

Another similar accident from recent history could be called “sparrow as comrade.” In 1958, at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese government declared that “birds are public animals of capitalism” and set in motion a large campaign to eliminate sparrows, which were suspected of consuming approximately four pounds of grain per sparrow per year. Sparrow nests were destroyed, eggs were broken and chicks were killed; millions of people organized into groups and hit noisy pots and pans to prevent sparrows from resting in their nests, with the goal of causing them to drop dead from exhaustion. These mass attacks depleted the sparrow population, pushing it to near extinction. However, by April 1960, Chinese leaders were forced to realize that sparrows also ate a large number of insects in the fields, so that, rather than being increased, rice yields after the campaign were substantially decreased. The extermination of sparrows upset the ecological balance, and insects destroyed crops as a result of the absence of natural predators. By this time, however, it was too late. With no sparrows to eat them, locust populations ballooned, swarming the country and compounding the ecological problems already caused by the Great Leap Forward, including widespread deforestation and misuse of poisons and pesticides. Ecological imbalance is credited with exacerbating the Great Chinese Famine, in which between 15 million and 45 million people died of starvation. The Chinese government eventually resorted to importing 250,000 sparrows from the Soviet Union to replenish their population.<sup>17</sup>

Three examples from the cinema of Joris Ivens perfectly exemplify this dimension of object as comrade. Is not his 1929 documentary *Regen* [Rain], a portrayal of Amsterdam during a rainfall, a portrait of rain as comrade? One should mention here Hanns Eisler’s *Fourteen Ways of Describing the Rain*, a twelve-minute exercise in dodecaphony for flute, clarinet, string trio and piano, written as a musical accompaniment to Ivens’s *Regen*. Then there is Ivens’ 1966 film *Pour le Mistral*: wind as a comrade – scenes of life and landscape in Provence, where a chilly wind called the Mistral blows down the valley of the Rhône to the Mediterranean. Plus there is another portrayal of wind as a comrade, *A Tale of the Wind* (1988), shot in China. Here, now old and ill, Ivens attempts to depict the insight that “the secret of breathing lies in the rhythm of the autumn wind.”<sup>18</sup>

17. See <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Pests\\_campaign](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Pests_campaign)>.

18. *A Tale of the Wind* (September 24, 2022). *Wikipedia*. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A\\_Tale\\_of\\_the\\_Wind&oldid=1111987537](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Tale_of_the_Wind&oldid=1111987537)>.

However, we have to bear in mind something that object-oriented ontology ignores and Giri is fully aware of: while subjective destitution (a term Giri took from Lacan), reduction to an object, does not mean de-subjectivization, it *does* mean de-humanization. After subjective destitution, a subject is no longer “human” (in the sense of the depth of personality, of “rich inner life” as opposed to external reality and similar psychic baggage). Only in and through destitution does the subject in its purity (a capitalized Subject) emerge:

The activist-comrade as object is still a Subject – a subject who perhaps speaks in the name of History and invokes the “metanarrative” of the “stages of History”, but whose self-destitution and self-objectification open up a revolutionary possibility by creating a null point, a void in History itself. (p. 13)

Through subjective destitution, we do not enter a happy interaction of “object as comrade” and “comrade as object” in which a destitute subject deals with objects that surround him as his equal interlocutors, refusing to act as their master who exploits them. In subjective destitution, the subject is not simply immersed into the flux of reality, rather he is reduced to a void, a null point, a gap in reality. It is only through this reduction to a void, from the subjective position of that void, that a subject can perceive and experience the interaction of comrade as object and object as comrade. In other words, through subjective destitution the subject is radically divided: into a pure void and the object that he is. In this way, we overcome mortality and enter undeadness; not life after death but death in life, not dis-alienation but extreme self-abolishing alienation. We leave behind the very standard by means of which we measure alienation, the notion of a normal warm daily life, of our full immersion into a safe and stable world of customs. The way to overcome a topsy-turvy world is not to return to normality but to embrace turvy without topsy.

Already from this brief description it is clear that the phenomenon of subjective destitution assumes many forms which cannot be reduced to the same inner experience. There is the Buddhist nirvana, a disconnection from external reality which enables us to acquire a distance towards our cravings and desires: I assume a kind of impersonal stance, my thoughts are thoughts without thinker. Then there are so-called mystical experiences which should not be confused with nirvana. They also involve a kind of subjective destitution, but this destitution takes the form of a direct identity between me and a higher Absolute (typical formula: the eyes through which I see god are the eyes through which god sees himself). My innermost desire gets depersonalized, it overlaps with the will of god himself, so that the big Other lives through me. In short, while in nirvana one steps out of the “wheel of desire”, the mystical experience enacts the overlapping of our enjoyment with the enjoyment of the big Other. Then there is the subjective stance described by Giri: the destitution of a revolutionary agent which reduces itself to an instrument-object of the process of radical social change – he obliterates his person-

ality, inclusive of the fear of death, so that revolution lives through him. Then there is the explosion of self-destructive social nihilism; think of *Joker*, but also of a scene in Eisenstein's *October* in which a revolutionary mob penetrates the wine cellar of the Winter Palace and engages in an orgy of massive destruction of hundreds of bottles of expensive champagne. And, last but not least, subjective destitution in its psychoanalytic (Lacanian) sense of traversing the fantasy, which is a much more radical gesture than it may appear. For Lacan, fantasy is not opposed to reality but provides the coordinates of what we experience as reality, plus the coordinates of what we desire. The two coordinates are not the same, but they are intertwined. When our fundamental fantasy dissolves, we experience the loss of reality, which also impedes our ability to desire. (We should also recall that traversing the fantasy is not Lacan's final word. In the last years of his teaching, he proposed as the final moment of the analytic process identification with the symptom, a gesture that enables us to have a moderately acceptable form of life.)

How are these versions related? They seem to form a kind of Greimasian semiotic square, since there are two axes along which they are disposed: active engagement (self-destructive social explosion; revolutionary destitution described by Giri) versus disengagement (nirvana, mystical experience); self-contraction (destructive explosion against external reality; nirvana) versus reliance on a big Other (God in mystical experience, History in revolutionary destitution). In a destructive explosion, we contract into ourselves by way of destroying our environment; in nirvana, we just withdraw into ourselves leaving reality the way it is. In mystical experience, we disengage from reality by immersing ourselves into divinity; in revolutionary destitution, we renounce our Self by engaging in the historical process of revolutionary change. (From the Lacanian standpoint, these last two stances court the danger of falling into a perverse position of conceiving oneself as an object-instrument of the big Other.)

What Lacan calls subjective destitution is the zero level, the neutral abyss in the center of this square. Here one should be very precise. What we reach in subjective destitution is not the absolute Void out of which everything springs, but the very disturbance of this Void; not the inner peace of withdrawal but the imbalance of the Void; not the fall of the Void into finite material reality but the antagonism/tension in the very heart of the Void which causes the emergence of material reality out of the Void. The other four versions of subjective destitution structurally come second, they are attempts to pacify the antagonism ("self-contradiction") of the Void.

The question that arises here is: how should destitution in its politically-engaged form avoid the fall into perversity? The answer is clear: it should suspend its reliance of the big Other (of historical necessity, etc.). Hegel constrained philosophy to grasping "what is," but for Hegel "what is" is not just a stable state of things, it is an open historical situation full of tensions and potentials. One should therefore link Hegel's insight with Saint-Just's claim: "Ceux qui font des révolutions ressemblent au premier navigateur instruit par son audace."

[Revolutionaries are akin to a first navigator guided by his audacity alone]”. Isn’t this the implication of Hegel’s confinement of the conceptual grasp to the past? As engaged subjects, we have to act with a view to the future, but for *a priori* reasons we cannot base our decisions on a rational pattern of historical progress (as Marx thought), so we have to improvise and take risks. Was this also the lesson Lenin learned from reading Hegel in 1915? The paradox is that what Lenin took from Hegel – who is usually decried as *the* philosopher of historical teleology, of inexorable and regular progress towards freedom – was the utter contingency of the historical process.

The common sense counter-argument that arises here is: subjective destitution is such a radical gesture that it is limited to an enlightened elite, and remains an impossible ethical ideal for the masses, except in rare episodes of revolutionary enthusiasm. But I think that this reproach misses the point. Giri emphasizes that subjective destitution is not an elitist stance of leaders, but, on the contrary, a stance displayed by numerous ordinary combatants, like the thousands who risked their lives in the struggle against Covid. It is crucial to note here that subjective destitution as the emergence of a radical gap in the continuity of History is here not an explosion of destructive violence which can only in a later stage be transformed into a pragmatic and realist construction of a new order. Giri describes subjective destitution as a stance which enables us to engage in a construction of a new social order. As such, revolutionary subjective destitution should be strictly separated from the outbursts of radical negativity which appear as self-destructive political nihilism.

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**Slavoj Žižek** is a Hegelian philosopher, a Lacanian psychoanalyst and a Communist politician. He has a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Ljubljana, and in Psychoanalysis from the Université de Paris 8. He is a senior researcher at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, and co-director at the International Centre for Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London. <<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4672-6942>>

**Slavoj Žižek** és un filòsof hegel·lià, un psicoanalista lacanià i un polític d’orientació comunista. És doctor en Filosofia per la Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres de Ljubljana i doctor en Psicoanàlisi per la Universitat de Paris 8. Actualment treballa com a investigador principal al Departament de Filosofia de la Universitat de Ljubljana i és codirector del Centre Internacional d’Humanitats del Birkbeck College de la Universitat de Londres. <<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4672-6942>>

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