

The Concrete Universal in Žižek and Hegel

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Given the preponderance of the criticism launched at Hegel for allegedly subsuming difference and otherness under an all-encompassing absolute spirit, a criticism that goes back at least to Heidegger's lecture course on Hegel¹ and is no doubt exacerbated by the interpretations put forward by Bradley and McTaggart (and later by Charles Taylor and David Inwood²) which seemed to embrace such a view, the interpretative approach offered by Slavoj Žižek, in spite of his reliance upon Taylor's interpretation in other respects, is both refreshing and interesting for its disavowal of that view. Broadly speaking, there are at least two ways one might counter the above critique. One way is to argue that, properly understood, the Hegelian text does not and never did indicate anything like such a view, and it does indeed articulate something like an inassimilable otherness. Another way would be to counter that the very reasons for regarding the subsumption of alterity to be a bad thing in the first place are themselves not only problematic but actually presuppose conceptual determinacies that are already critiqued in the Hegelian text. The first approach says that Hegel can meet the objections of his postmodern critics; the second says that the postmodern criticism is itself based on erroneous reasons. Whereas the first approach accepts the terms of the critique of Hegel, the second does not. In general Žižek adopts the first approach although, as we will see, there are moments in his treatment that might suggest an alternative reading. Unfortunately, for the most part that alternative remains undeveloped in Žižek's own text.

If we're looking for a point of entry into the Hegelian text that might tell us something about assimilation, subsumption, etc., the classic distinction between universality and particularity seems to readily offer itself as a likely candidate, and especially Hegel's well-known distinction

between "concrete" and "abstract" universality. Žižek follows this lead, providing what is perhaps his most sustained attempt to articulate what Hegel meant by a "concrete universal" in the second chapter of his book *The Ticklish Subject*.³ Žižek begins with a rearticulation of the standard pseudo-Hegelian cliché "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" in the context of the popular "New Age" notion that ancient wisdom was holistic and at one with nature whereas the modern human being is blighted with an exploitative attitude toward nature and a concomitant alienation from it.⁴ According to this story there once existed a holistic unity that was subsequently fractured by modern dualism in which return to the former is impossible and persistence in the latter is fatal. But rather than appeal to a "pseudo-Hegelian" higher synthesis in which these two opposing orientations might find their higher unity, Žižek argues that the truly Hegelian insight is to discover that the supposed "fall itself, the fateful forgetting of the ancient wisdom which enabled us to maintain a direct contact with the 'dance of life' [...] is already in itself its own self-sublation; the wound is already in itself its own healing" (Žižek 1999: 71). Hence the way out of the fall from natural unity and bliss is already implicitly found, not beyond the fall, but in the fall itself. This is what Žižek takes to be the meaning of the Hegelian "negation of negation" or the celebrated *Aufhebung* that negates and preserves self-contradiction in conceptual/ontological determinacies.⁵ He writes, "The inner logic of the movement from one stage to another is not that from one extreme, to the opposite extreme, and then to their higher unity; the second passage is, rather, simply the radicalization of the first" (Žižek 1999: 71). All that is required is a shift in perspective.

Such an "inner logic of the movement" makes recourse to the primary Hegelian text that deals with "logic" per se unavoidable, viz., the greater *Science of Logic* itself. However, Žižek postpones any substantial engagement with this text, beginning as he does with the *Phenomenology* and then only sporadically referring to the *Logic* at a level of generality that for the most part avoids a detailed analysis of the arguments. This beginning gets Žižek off on the wrong track (as will be more fully explained below) and leads him to regard reflection as a grounding category. But, regardless of how we might organize the *Logic*,⁵ he does realize that the "inner logic" he attempts to formalize and rescue from the pseudo-Hegelian cliché must have recourse to the categories of universality, particularity, and individuality that are first outlined in the *Logic's* final section, the "logic of the concept."

As is well known, Hegel's tripartite division of the *Logic* into a logic of "being," of "essence," and finally of "the concept" indicates specific spheres or modes of conceptual/ontological determinacy. The sphere of "being" is marked by immediate determinations that cannot remain what they are but must pass over into something other, the sphere of "essence" is marked by determinations that mediate or ground the immediate determinations of being but remain immediate themselves, and the sphere of the concept is marked by determinations that remain themselves in becoming other and are thereby self-

determining. It is to the latter sphere that the concept of universality belongs insofar as the "universal" first appears as a structure that remains itself in otherness. That is, rather than dissolve determinacies back into a ground that constitutes their essence (the logic of essence), and rather than merely becoming something else (the logic of being), the universal is that which must relate to an otherness - the particulars whose universality it is - and yet at the same time maintain its determinacy as universal in and through those particulars.

However, if the particulars fall outside the universal determinacy that they hold in common, then the form of universality is other than its content, which are the particulars. But this means two things for Hegel: on the one hand the very *particularity* that is supposed to be accounted for by the universal falls outside the latter, and on the other hand insofar as the universal stands over and against the particulars subsumed under it, it too can only be something particular, making it a "particularized" or abstract universal. Hegel's methodology in the *Logic* demands that one avoid merely opposing the conception of a concrete universal to this abstract one, and instead actually show how the former can be immanently derived from the latter. Žižek is well aware that the common critique of the Hegelian system that sees it as a totalizing subsumption of particulars under an all-encompassing universal spirit itself naïvely presupposes the determinacy of abstract universality, failing to conceive of the concrete universal that Hegel claims to be the explicit determinacy into which the former develops when its own implicit logic is spelled out. It is to Žižek's explicit account of the latter that I now turn.

The first approach to the concrete universal

Žižek initially characterizes the difference between abstract and concrete universality in terms of the "primary identifications" with one's natural relationships (e.g. family membership) as opposed to secondary identifications with one's "artificial" or conventionally mediated relationships (e.g. national citizenship) (Žižek 1999: 90). Insofar as the universality of national citizenship is opposed to the natural relationships (e.g. by requiring the renunciation of the latter) it is an abstract universal that does not include this particular content. Though Žižek doesn't call attention to it, we can see this opposition in Plato's *Euthyphro* when the young Euthyphro brings his father before a court of law to prosecute him for causing the death of a servant through negligence, thereby renouncing his familial obligations in favour of the universality of justice before the law. Hegel's own well-known example is that of Antigone, who takes the opposite path of renouncing civic obligation in favour of familial duty.

According to Žižek, however, it is only when such civic obligations can in some way appropriate the familial ones, such that the state is served in and through one's familial duties, that concrete universality is achieved. In Žižek's terms, the "universal secondary identification" only becomes concrete "when it reintegrates primary identifications, transforming them into the modes of appearance of the secondary identification" (Žižek 1999: 90). To put it in more formal

Hegelian terms, an initial immediacy (the set of primary identifications) is overcome in mediation (the set of secondary identifications), but that moment of mediation only breaks with immediacy in an immediate way itself, merely standing over and against it as something opposed. It is only when the previous immediacy is shown to be a necessary structure *within* the mediated structure that its immediacy is truly shown to be mediated. Otherwise it merely falls outside the process of mediation and remains untouched by the latter, leaving us two sides that are mutually opposed or subsisting indifferently alongside each other - and each side thereby remaining immediate. Žižek's gloss here actually characterizes the general move from determinacies of being to those of essence, in which we move from the sphere of immediate transitions that simply become something other to transitions that reveal mediating structures underlying those immediate determinacies. But insofar as this is a formal characterization of the difference between two sections of the *Logic*, each of which contains a whole host of more specific versions of this generality, not only does Žižek's account here fail to get at the *specificity* of the category of universality per se, including the distinction between abstract and concrete universality that emerges within it, but it even employs a determinacy more appropriate to the sphere of essence than to the sphere of concept where "universality" first explicitly emerges for analysis in the *Logic*.⁷

However, Žižek himself does not remain content with the definition he provides here either. It is as if, eschewing the more systematic approach to category derivation exemplified by Hegel, he prefers to gradually work his way toward a more specified account of concrete universality in a (at least seemingly) haphazard way, drawing here and there upon empirical examples, historical developments, etc., and then setting up a mutual interplay between these privileged selections and the categories he wants to see either reflected in them or developed and established by them - or, perhaps better, both reflected and established in a mutual interplay. So in order to better understand what Žižek means by "concrete universality," we have to follow the twists and turns of his full account, an account which is carried out through several approaches, as it were. What we have just seen is the first approach.

The second approach to the concrete universal

The fact that the first approach is inadequate can be seen in Žižek's example of Christianity, according to which "you could participate in social life, occupy your determinate place in it (as a servant, peasant, artisan, feudal lord...) and remain a good Christian - accomplishing your determinate social role was not only seen as compatible with being Christian, it was even perceived as a specific way of fulfilling the universal duty of being a Christian" (Žižek 1999: 91). We know from Hegel's own account of this, however, that the deficiency of such freedom lay precisely in the fact that it was only an *inner* principle that had not yet become objectified in the structures of the state, a development that would have to wait for Martin Luther and modern

liberal democracies. *In Christ* there is "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female," (NASB 1997: Galatians 3:28) but *out there* in the actual world a woman is not allowed "to teach or exercise authority over a man" but "must remain quiet" (NASB 1997: Timothy 2:12) and runaway slaves are returned to their masters (NASB 1997: Philemon 10-18). We get to the second approach by way of the radicalized individuality that "comes into existence in the guise of the individual's absolute egotist self-contraction, his negation of all determinate content" (Žižek 1999: 92). It is only through such a radical negation of all particular content that the universal is established as actual. This of course echoes the familiar beginning of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in which the abstract self-identity of the 'I' asserts itself as free by rejecting any and every limitation and thereby also negating all particular content (insofar as the latter would limit it to being or pursuing one thing and not another). In Žižek's analysis, this can also be seen as a response to the merely "inner" universality, noted above with respect to Christianity, that leaves oppressive structures of domination intact. The choice of "a particular ethical life-world," as exemplified by the Christian acceptance of one's socially determined place in life⁸, "can end only in a regression to premodern organic society which denies the infinite right of subjectivity as the fundamental feature of modernity" (Žižek 1999: 93)⁹. So the "choice" here is a "forced choice" - that is, "one has to choose" the destructive and violent break with the established order that is "the very opposite of the peaceful neutral medium of all particular content" (Žižek 1999: 94).¹⁰

Žižek suggests here that this is not the final shape of concrete universality but only the first step toward it. Anticipating a further development, he also notes that in order for universality to become concrete, it not only cannot remain merely "a neutral-abstract medium of its particular content" but in addition it has to "*include itself among its particular subspecies*" (Žižek 1999: 92, Žižek's emphasis). The unity that emerges out of the "explosion" of the previous organic unity will be "a *substantially different* Unity, a Unity grounded on the disruptive power of negativity, a Unity in which *this negativity itself assumes positive existence*" (Žižek 1999: 96). We will have to attend carefully to the way in which Žižek understands this new unity to be "grounded on" negativity and look to see if he follows through with the implications of his suggestion here or if he abandons the latter in favour of a foundational conception. But for now let's take as our guiding criterion Žižek's own assertion that in order for universality to become concrete, it cannot remain aloof or indifferent with respect to its particular content but must include itself among its particulars. This might at least provide us with a kind of benchmark against which to measure whether or not concrete universality has been adequately conceived.

Immediately following this discussion is the subsection of the chapter called "'Concrete Universality'," thus promising the arrival of the concretion we've been waiting for. Žižek begins this section by first presenting what he calls the "three main versions of the relationship between the Universal and its particular content" (Žižek 1999: 100). The first is the "neutral universality"

exemplified by the Cartesian *cogito* which is alike in all individual subjects, indifferent to ethnicity, gender, etc. Against the postmodern rejection of it for this reason, however, this perspective sees such universality as "the philosophical foundation of the political equality of the sexes" (Žižek 1999: 100), a foundation that may have been distorted due to historical contingencies like "the prejudices of the social reality" within which its initial theorists (Descartes, Kant, Hegel, etc.) lived but which is not intrinsically tied to these contingencies. But if we evaluate this version according to Žižek's benchmark noted above, we cannot fail to notice that this is not a universality that includes itself among its particulars, but rather is one that remains indifferent to its (non-neutral) content, and so accordingly it does not constitute a viable candidate for concrete universality.

The second is what Žižek calls the "symptomatic" reading of the previous neutral universality. This perspective finds hidden in neutral universality a particular content that undermines it, e.g. the particularity of white male property owners beneath the supposed universality of the modern rights-bearing individual. Its strongest version indicts the very concept of universality per se as an implicit act that "obliterates" particular differences and as such is not gender neutral but inherently masculine (or, we might add, is not ethnically neutral but is inherently white, European, etc.) (Žižek 1999: 100). This "symptomatic" interpretation sees universality as a symptom of a form of domination that has an interest in downplaying or erasing particular differences behind the façade of an illusory neutrality that is actually loaded in favour of a particular party. Although universality per se has been impugned this way, Žižek specifies it as a critique of abstract universality rather than of universality pure and simple, thereby introducing a distinction that may not always be made or even conceived in this kind of critique.¹¹ At any rate, since this version conceives universality as an ideological falsehood that is undermined by the particular content it conceals, universality per se is not included in its particulars but merely falls away as illusory and so fails to meet Žižek's benchmark for concrete universality. This version more or less loses universality in particularity.

The third version, exemplified by Ernesto Laclau, is what we might call the "hegemonized universal." In this interpretation the universal itself is purely formal and empty, standing in need of some particular content to fill it. Since it has no determinacy in itself that would specify its content, however, it can only be "hegemonized by some particular content that acts as its stand-in." Universality in this sense is a kind of "battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony" (Žižek 1999: 100-101). This battle can only be temporarily resolved - it is never resolved once and for all - and each time it is, a particular content in effect says "I am the true universal." Once this is normalized (which we might regard as the *sine qua non* of winning the battle), a particular content comes to be seen as the default universal. A major difference between this reading and the symptomatic one is that, while the latter tends to regard universality as at best illusory and at worst a form of domination and so cannot develop a positive conception of it, the hegemonized universal is always open-ended, subject to challenge and re-

hegemonization by a different content. Thus, as Žižek notes, "If *cogito* silently privileges men as opposed to women, this is not an eternal fact inscribed in its very nature, but something that can be changed through hegemonic struggle" (Žižek 1999: 101). This interpretation does, however, rejoin the symptomatic one in the rejection of neutrality. Moreover, this version is the one that, at least initially, seems to line up with what Žižek conceives as a concrete universality, and is even perhaps reflected in what he will later call a "struggling universality" (Žižek 2003: 109).

But even though Žižek does not call attention to it, one cannot help but notice that since the hegemonized universal is one in which "all positive content of the Universal is the contingent result of hegemonic struggle - in itself, the Universal is absolutely empty" (Žižek 1999: 101), in this empty formality it actually rejoins the very neutrality of the first "neutral" version. One might even say that this version achieves a real neutrality through its utter formality, and that what the first version lacked was precisely the thorough-going formality necessary in order to prevent its neutrality from becoming a mere façade behind which particular interests lurk. So if it can be said that this version rejoins the symptomatic one in the rejection of neutrality, this would have to be more precisely conceived as a rejection of *that particular* neutrality that serves as an ideological veil concealing particular interests, substituting for it a more thoroughgoing neutrality that is utterly devoid of content and is thereby "up for grabs," as it were, for hegemonization. In other words, what it rejects is a kind of particularity in favour of a formal abstraction from all particular content.

Now Žižek himself at times seems to embrace the hegemonized universal as the true, concrete universality. Indeed, he will repeatedly refer back to it as if its legitimacy has been established and it requires no further argument or clarification, in subsequent chapters casually referring to the "fact" that "each apparently universal ideological notion is always hegemonized by some particular content which colours its very universality" (Žižek 1999:175)¹² or asserting that "a situation becomes 'politicized' when a particular demand starts to function as a stand-in for the impossible universal" (Žižek 1999: 233), etc. Žižek even explicitly identifies this with Hegel when, immediately after first articulating it, he claims that "the paradox of the proper Hegelian notion of the Universal is that it is not the neutral frame of the multitude of particular contents, but inherently divisive, splitting up its particular content: the Universal always asserts itself in the guise of some particular content which claims to embody it directly, excluding all other content as merely particular" (Žižek 1999: 101).¹³

Now if we evaluate this version of universality by Žižek's own benchmark it can immediately be seen that the universal, insofar as it is an empty formality, not only cannot include itself among its particulars but cannot include any particulars at all. Thus far from being "concrete," the universal in this view is actually "impossible,"¹⁴ and hence some particular content must be *substituted* for it. If a particular content hegemonizes the universal by "standing-in" for it, then it is not clear how on this basis one can then claim, as Žižek does, that "the Universal always asserts itself in the guise of some particular content which claims to embody it directly,

excluding all other content as merely particular" (Žižek 1999: 101). In point of fact, the only thing that "asserts itself" is *some particular stand-in*, not the universal itself which as such remains an empty impossibility. Thus in the end we only wind up with particularity, not universality at all, and so the "guise" here would seem to be not universality in the guise of particularity but rather the other way around - a particular content in the guise of universality. Far from being included in its particular content, in this view universality as such is precisely *excluded* and *replaced* by a substitute.

Furthermore, insofar as the particular hegemon that stands in for universality excludes "all other content as merely particular," it can only assert itself as this stand-in *over and against* the other excluded particulars, and therefore can only be itself something *particular*. As we will see, this is merely what Hegel would call a "particularized universal" which, as such, remains abstract. As such a particularity, its mere assertion of itself as "the" universal only signifies its power to do so over other contenders in the field, and as such a particular power over and against those others, it remains merely a false universal, a pretender. In this sense the hegemonized universal fails to get past the symptomatic one - the ideological illusion of the latter is just as easily replaceable by another ideological illusion as one hegemonic particularity is replaceable by any other hegemonic particularity that can successfully substitute itself for the empty universal.¹⁵ A further damaging point can be made here - one that spells out some of the pragmatic consequences of the abstract formality with which this conception rests content. If "in itself, the Universal is absolutely empty" (Žižek 1999: 101), then one particular stand-in is just as good as any other. In other words, there is no basis for asserting the normative or ontological privilege of any one hegemonized universal over another - the "white male property owner" as hegemon is just as "legitimate" (or equally "illegitimate," if indeed any notion of legitimacy can be applied here at all) as, say, a conception of gender equality. Any result of the battle for hegemony is purely contingent and carries no normative weight. Furthermore, we cannot even assert that one is "better" than another because it is more "inclusive" without justifying the universality of "inclusion" as a normative criterion, which means that we will have to appeal to a universality that is *not* merely a result of contingent hegemony. The same goes for any other normative criterion one wishes to smuggle in. So although this conception might at first seem to assert a positive notion of universality, in fact it merely collapses into a form of cultural or political relativism that may indeed be motivated by a laudable desire to overcome forms of domination but, precisely because of the way it conceives of cultural/political practice as a pre-given foundation for normativity, cannot justify its own normative criterion and thereby renders its own desire impotent.

As Richard Winfield has persuasively argued, any assumption of a pre-given foundation for normativity is saddled with "the dilemmas of foundationalism," which "afflict justification so long as what allegedly possesses validity remains distinguished from what confers validity. This distinction leaves the privileged foundation of justification always suspect, insofar as it can never

meet its own standard of legitimation" (Winfield 2007: 8-9). In other words, insofar as any ground of normativity is given in advance of that which it is supposed to render morally legitimate, it cannot justify itself by its own criterion. This of course repeats the age-old problem of grounds or foundational justifications - no matter what is posited as ground or foundational principle, the question will always remain as to what grounds the ground, leading either to infinite regress or dogmatic assertion. The "conundrum of normativity" lies in the fact that "value cannot rest upon antecedent value without begging the question, yet value can no more rest upon what has no value" (Winfield 2005: 44).

Thus postmodern relativism, which often sees itself as anti-foundationalist insofar as it claims to unmask the merely contingent character of what has been asserted to be normatively universal (as Žižek's symptomatic and hegemonized versions of universality do), undermines its own ability to make any normative evaluations at all - not only with respect to the now-common pretence that all universal claims (that is, *universally*) conceal a particular content (or constitute a hegemonic stand-in) but even with respect to the very forms of domination it otherwise wishes to criticize. As Winfield puts it, "not only do these would-be anti-foundationalists fail to uphold their claims, but by embracing the hegemony of contingent foundations over all normative argument, they advance privileged terms of their own" (Winfield 2005: 46). Postmodern relativism therefore is itself merely a naïve form of foundationalism insofar as it will always posit a privileged determiner without being able to justify that privilege. Hence, given such a conceptual frame, "values are forwarded ultimately because their advocate chooses to foist them upon others in what amounts to a play for power. Value positing is a grab for power precisely because values lay claim to universal validity, yet on this diagnosis have no other basis than the choice of whoever affirms them. They presume to bind all, but only serve the particular will that arbitrarily advances them" (Winfield 2007: 8-9).

Along Hegelian lines Winfield argues that, given the intractable problems of foundationalism, the domain of normativity can only be legitimately claimed by a concept of freedom as *self-determination* that does not look to an extrinsic foundation for its legitimacy, thereby avoiding the problem of grounding that has been with us at least since Thales posited "water" as the ground of everything (and prompted the simple rejoinder from Aristotle: "Where, then, did the water come from?"). Insofar as the culture or tradition one happens to be born into is a contingently pregiven factor, it is not a matter of one's own choosing or a result of freedom. To the degree that one's culture or tradition is given in advance of one's activity within it and prescribes what the character of that activity must be, it does not and cannot constitute a self-determining structure but can only be a pregiven foundation for any further determinacy. As such a contingently pregiven foundation it cannot constitute anything normatively binding. Self-determination then appears as a necessarily trans-cultural universal, even if it must nonetheless come into being within the context of a particular culture somewhere and so "will first appear in a

regional guise, clothed with some contingent features that are not endemic to the universal structures of freedom but reflect residual elements of its birth" (Winfield 2005: 398).

But rather than pursuing such a strictly Hegelian line of thought, Žižek's main defense of Hegel often seems to amount to the still Hegelian but more general claim that Hegel does not regard the violent disruption of primal unity as a detour after which we can then safely return to the original lost neutral unity, but rather as a necessary step towards a new universality that lies on the other side of it. At times Žižek genuinely envisions the possibility of this new universality, but then he immediately slips back into the abstraction of a formal universality which must be hegemonized by a particularity that falls outside it and therefore can only serve as its "stand-in." But there may be another path to concrete universality which, though perhaps only vaguely conceived or hinted at by Žižek himself and even then only sporadically and incompletely, we might nonetheless be able to articulate as a distinct conception of universality that is not merely a hegemonized formality. This is what I will call the "third approach."

The third approach to the concrete universal

Although it may seem that Laclau's hegemonized universal is the one that Žižek adopts as the final exemplification of concrete universality, there is a further nuance that Žižek indicates and which requires development before we can say that we have seen everything Žižek has to say about the matter. We might call this version the "constitutive exception," a Lacanian phrase Žižek will employ in this context. Although Žižek does approach this version by way of Laclau and it is not always clear from his account whether or not he conflates it with the hegemonized universal, I think that it is more promising to treat it as a distinct conception if we are looking for a true concrete universality that is neither an abstract neutrality, nor a façade concealing particular interests, nor an empty formality that as such is impossible and so must be hegemonized by some particular substitute that cannot claim normative validity. My interpretation of the constitutive exception as a distinct conception not to be merely conflated with the hegemonized universal is given support by Žižek's own suggestion that "it is not enough to claim that concrete universality is articulated into a texture of particular constellations, of situations in which a specific content hegemonizes the universal notion; one should also bear in mind that all these particular exemplifications of the universality in question are branded by the sign of their ultimate failure" (Žižek 1999: 103). If the particular exemplifications that hegemonize universality are marked by their ultimate failure, this leaves open the possibility of a universality that might not be such a failure.

Žižek opens up this third approach with a musical analogy in which the general concept of a "violin concerto" functions as the universal and the actual violin concertos that were written and performed throughout its varied history count as the particulars. Here the particulars are not

instances of a universal that is pre-given, but rather serve to actualize what the universal itself is, viz. they successively determine what counts as a successful violin concerto and thereby determine what the universal is. The important point for our purposes here is Žižek's concluding statement: "Here we have an example of Hegelian 'concrete universality': a process or a sequence of particular attempts that do not simply exemplify the neutral universal notion but struggle with it, give a specific twist to it - the universal is thus fully engaged in the process of its particular exemplification; that is to say, these particular cases in a way, decide the fate of the universal notion itself" (Žižek 1999: 102).

The upshot here is that Žižek wants to see the particular cases as actually *determining* what the universal *is* above and beyond being a mere passive exemplification of a neutral universality. If this process of determining is externally imposed - as, say, in the conception of a contingent particular content hegemonizing an empty universality - then the only "universality" present would merely be the power of asserting hegemony over others in the field which, as a mere particular power over and against those others, remains a false universal. On the other hand, if this process of determining necessarily follows in some way from the universal itself, or if the universal is determined by the particular cases in such a way that it remains a *universal* rather than a substitute, then the universal would indeed assert itself as its particular content and we would have a concrete universality by our benchmark, a universal in which universality and particularity are no longer at odds. So also such a universal, insofar as the process of determining is not externally imposed, would constitute a process of *self-determination* and thereby embody what Hegel takes the structure of a concept determination to be as well as satisfying Winfield's above-mentioned criterion for normative validity.

However, Žižek does not get to a substantive articulation of this distinct conception of concrete universality above and beyond Laclau until two chapters later, after an extended critique of Badiou and presented in the context of an interpretation of the latter along with Ranciere and Balibar. The argument proceeds by way of a rather opaque analysis of the Marxian notion of exploitation which we must unpack. In this process, we will have to develop the logic of Žižek's analysis further than Žižek himself explicitly does. Doing so, however, will bring us to a notion of concrete universality that is perhaps closer to Hegel than Žižek himself realizes (at least judging by his text). The first point Žižek makes with respect to the notion of exploitation is that it is not simply opposed to the idea of just and equitable exchange - one cannot eliminate exploitation by ensuring that workers are paid the full value of their labour. Rather, its exploitive character lies in the commodification of workers themselves. When labour power itself becomes a commodity that is exchanged on the market along with other commodities, exploitation comes into being - regardless of how well the workers are paid. In the midst of all the commodities exchanged on the market, one commodity stands out as an exception that doesn't belong with the rest - the human being who works. The exploitive relationship comes to light when the exception is made to

function within an exchange system as if it were nothing more than another commodity alongside others.

This emergence of exploitation through the exception in turn coincides with "the universalization of the exchange function: the moment the exchange function is universalized - that is, the moment it becomes the structuring principle of the whole of economic life - the exception emerges, since at this point the workforce itself becomes a commodity exchanged on the market" (Žižek 1999: 180). Žižek's point is that the process of universalization here (viz., that of the exchange function) actually *hinges* on the exception, making it a "constitutive exception." The exception thus constitutes the rule rather than merely falling outside it. If the exception were an exception in the everyday sense - that is, if it merely fell outside the rule of universal exchange - then the rule would not be universal. Its universality here consists in the inclusion under it of the exception, and hence it is only through the exception that it becomes the rule, that is, a universalized function. Invoking the symptomatic version of universality, however, Žižek asserts that the excessive element actually undermines universality: "the symptom is an example which subverts the Universal whose example it is" (Žižek 1999: 180). But before we simply give up on universality, we have to consider whether it is universality *per se* that is undermined or merely the *abstract form* of universality whose neutrality conceals the particularity underlying it. If the latter, then there may still be room for a better conception of universality that is *not* so undermined.

At this point Žižek indicates a shift that has occurred in the analysis: whereas previously there emerged a gap between the universal itself (as an ideological illusion in the symptomatic universal or as empty formality in the hegemonic universal) on the one hand and the particular content on the other hand, now that gap has emerged within the particular content itself, viz., between the particular as assertion of universality and the excess within that very particular content that subverts the universality it claims to be. Žižek keeps to his example here - the universality of justice is an empty formality whose content is hegemonized by the bourgeois notion of a just and equivalent exchange, but this particular stand-in for the empty universal necessarily includes the exploitive commodification of human labour that undermines its pretension to universal justice. To put it another way, the gap between universal and particular now emerges within the particular itself - between the universal the particular claims to be and the excessive element within it that undermines that claim. To be sure, this universal is still seen to be undermined or "subverted." But nevertheless - even as such a subverted universal - it now appears *within* the particular rather than being set off *against* it, and this does bring us one step closer to the idea of a universality that includes itself among its particular contents. This is something neither the symptomatic nor the hegemonic universal could do insofar as in these conceptions universality was always set off against the particular and so could not appear within it as universal.

It is in and through this development that Žižek finally arrives at the "individual" or singularity, the third moment in the Hegelian triad of universality-particularity-singularity. The constitutive exception is singular in its exceptive character - it stands alone among the other particulars, not as a particular kind over and against them (which would only make it particular) but as an exception to the very idea that it is a "kind" at all. In other words, its exceptive character is the same thing as its subversion of the universality it is supposed to be, and it thereby stands out as singular.

But is the universality that is present in the singular exception really subverted? Is that all there is to the story? The problem is that the universality that appears within the particular here is subverted precisely because it fails to be truly universal. The gap between universality and particularity does now appear in the particular, but in such a way that it undermines the universal. However, if we piece together this analysis with a comment Žižek subsequently makes near the chapter's conclusion,¹⁶ we may discover the possibility of a universality that determines itself within particularity as a singular exception and in such a way that its universal character is expressed rather than subverted. In the symptomatic version, universality is a cloak for the ideologically rationalized privilege of a particular interest, whereas in the hegemonized universal it is an empty formality for which a particular content substitutes itself. In neither of these cases can the particularity that asserts itself *as* universal actually *be* universal. Neither any given particular interest nor any given hegemonized universal can be more or less valid than any other - each is a contingent assertion of dominance that will hold no normative weight for any other party.

How do things stand with the constitutive exception? Žižek's (implied) answer is that things stand differently with the constitutive exception precisely because it is included within the universal and yet has no place within it, a contradiction evident in the very (oxymoronic) phrase "constitutive exception." It cannot be merely excluded from the universal because the universal is constituted through it, and yet at the same time it cannot be included within the universal because of its very exceptive character. The reason why the universal is subverted turns out to be the reason why the constitutive exception can lay claim to universality in the first place: "the space for the political Truth-Event is opened up by the symptomatic void in the order of Being, by the necessary inconsistency in its structural order, by the constitutive presence of a *surnuméraire*, of an element which is included in the totality of Order, although there is no proper place for it in this totality, and which, *for this very reason - since it is an element without further particular specifications* - professes to be the immediate embodiment of the Whole" (Žižek 1999: 233, emphasis mine). He gives voice to the same point a few years later in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, there calling it a "radical universality" in relation to the constitutive exception as the "remainder": "Radical universality 'covers all its particular content' precisely insofar as it is linked through a kind of umbilical cord to the Remainder - its logic is: 'it is those who are excluded, with no proper place within the global order, who directly embody the true universality, who represent the Whole

in contrast to all others who stand only for particular interests.' Lacking any specific difference, such a paradoxical element stands for absolute difference, for pure Difference as such" (Žižek 2003: 109).

Žižek then endorses the "procedure of *identifying with the symptom*," that is, with the constitutive exception, which he takes to be the "leftist political gesture par excellence," a procedure which he claims is "the exact and necessary obverse of the standard critico-ideological move of recognizing a particular content behind some abstract universal notion, that is, of denouncing neutral universality as false ('the "man" of human rights is actually the white male property-owner...'): one pathetically asserts (and identifies with) *the point of inherent exception/exclusion, the 'abject', of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality*" (Žižek 1999: 224, Žižek's emphasis). Now if the constitutive exception can *legitimately* lay claim to "true universality" precisely due to its singular exceptive character insofar as the latter prevents it from being reduced to one particular content over and against other particular contents - that is, insofar as its exclusion puts it in a position to legitimately say "'we - the "nothing", not counted in the order - are the people, we are All against others who stand only for their particular privileged interest'" (Žižek 1999: 188) - then the universality to which it lays claim is neither an ideological illusion nor an empty formality, and the gap between the universal and particular is overcome. Universality and particularity come together in a particular content which, as such, must appear as a singular exception and so not merely another particular content vying with others to see who will become the next contingently determined stand-in for a universal that is, *qua* universal, impossible.¹⁷

This is a possibility opened up by Žižek's text that Žižek himself may not always clearly see, as evidenced by his own immediate assertion that "the individual is the dialectical unity of Universal and Particular" only in the sense that "the individual (the symptomatic excess) bears witness to the gap between the Universal and Particular: the fact that the Universal is always 'false' in its concrete existence (hegemonized by some particular content which involves a series of exclusions)" (Žižek 1999: 181). This negativity is indeed a necessary moment in the development. All that is needed is to employ what Žižek himself takes to be the Hegelian strategy of "shifting perspective" - the exceptive character that undermines universality and makes the gap between the universal and particular explicit by "bearing witness" to it *is the same thing as* the true concrete universal in which the gap is "sublated" (*aufgehoben*) insofar as, lacking a particular character that would set it off as a particularity over and against other particulars in the field, it is uniquely suited to serve as the universal - no longer as mere "stand in" but as the universal itself.

If the constitutive exception is to embody a true universality, then it must make explicit a content within universality itself that it does not merely impose upon it. There has to be some sense in which it can say, "The former universal (e.g. the *cogito* that silently privileged Western white male property owners) is a false universal, not because it excludes us and we demand

recognition, but because by excluding us it fails to be truly universal." In other words, the constitutive exception must bring to light the hidden contradiction in the form of abstract universality itself. This it does by bearing witness to the aforementioned gap. However, in doing this it shows itself to be the true universal. Only in this sense can the constitutive exception then become the "metaphoric condensation" for humanity itself (Žižek 1999: 208), revealing as it does the abstract character of the former universal. In this way the constitutive exception is not a mere stand-in for an empty universality, but rather is - ontologically and normatively - a determinate form of universality itself.¹⁸ By further specifying the *universal* character of universality above and beyond merely asserting its particularity *as* universal, the constitutive exception is the singularity within which and as which the universal determines itself as particular and thereby, according to our benchmark, includes itself among its particulars. As Žižek puts it with respect to the demand of popular protest, "the situation becomes politicized when this particular demand starts to function as a metaphoric condensation" such that "the protest is no longer actually just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand" (Žižek 1999: 204).

But this is a positive step that is at best merely implicit in Žižek's own treatment which, at the explicit level, repeatedly falls back to the assertion of the disruptive power of negativity and too quickly relegates universality to an impossibility. On the one hand Žižek will seemingly endorse the "true universality" of the constitutive exception, but then he will turn around and apparently take it back, approaching the brink of a positive conception, as it were, only to immediately fall back upon negative impossibility again, thereby repeating the very kind of Kantian formalism he elsewhere rejects. He goes to the trouble to even reiterate this in a footnote lest there be any misunderstanding: "The universality we are speaking about is thus not a positive universality with a determinate content but an empty universality ... every translation of this 'empty universality' into some determinate positive content already betrays its radical character" (Žižek 1999: 244, fn 51). As noted above, Žižek readily admits that the hegemonized universal is a failure to adequately universalize. The problem is that he immediately takes this failure to be the final word on the matter: "The Hegelian 'concrete universality' thus involves the Real of some central impossibility: universality is 'concrete', structured as a texture of particular figurations, precisely because it is forever prevented from acquiring a figure that would be adequate to its notion" (Žižek 1999: 103).¹⁹ Now, as will become clear in the treatment of Hegel below, this is certainly *not* Hegel's position - Hegel can hardly be said to rest content with the abstract negativity of an impossible formality as the final word on universality. Indeed, even without turning to Hegel's text it is not too difficult to see that insofar as a universal *fails* to be adequately actualized in its particulars it can hardly count as a concrete *universal*. Its universal character is precisely negated by the particular content that fails to adequately express it.

Žižek is right, however, to assert the necessity of the moment of negativity - this will show up in the Hegelian dialectic as a self-contradiction within universality itself that is necessary in order for universality to be universal and which at the same time prevents it from adequately achieving that very universality. It is this negativity that will make explicit the determinacy within the universal that in turn will enable it to be adequately conceived as universal, viz. in such a way that its particular content no longer falls outside it. But for this Žižek needs the positive moment of development beyond the abstract negativity at which he stops short. Indeed, from a Hegelian perspective one might venture to say that Žižek's biggest mistake is to take negativity as *foundational* rather than as a *beginning* that will be transformed in the process of its dialectical development. In other words, in spite of all his appeals to the Hegelian "dialectic" Žižek *does not understand negativity dialectically but foundationally*, a mistake evident when he claims that "for Hegel ... this monstrous moment of absolute abstract negativity, this self-destructive fury which washes away every positive Order, has *always-already happened*, since it is the very foundation of the positive rational order of human society" (Žižek 1999: 238, Žižek's emphasis). Quite often in Žižek's text one encounters such a truncated treatment in which he stops short of full development; he repeatedly returns to the notion of Hegelian concrete universality in order to assert an irreducible negativity, correctly (from a Hegelian perspective) indicating the necessity of the negative moment but incorrectly (from a Hegelian perspective) attributing to it an ultimate and final character: "Hegelian 'concrete universality' is thus much more paradoxical than it may appear: it has nothing whatsoever to do with any kind of aesthetic organic totality, since it reflexively 'includes out' the very excess and/or gap that forever spoils such a totality - the irreducible and ultimately unaccountable gap between a series and its excess, between the Whole and the One of its exception, is the very *terrain* of 'concrete universality'" (Žižek 1999: 113). That Žižek can only conceive of such an "aesthetic organic totality" as a reactionary *return* to some *previous* determination of universality, thereby precluding his own earlier suggestion of a "new 'mediated' Unity" or "newly reinstated 'mediated' totality" that "in no way signals a return 'at a higher level' to the lost initial Unity" (Žižek 1999: 96) and instead now denying *any* kind of "aesthetic organic totality," is shown in the remark immediately following the above citation: "For this reason, the true politico-philosophical heirs of Hegel are not authors who endeavor to rectify the excesses of modernity via the return to some new form of organic substantial Order (like the communitarians) but, rather, authors who fully endorse the political logic of the excess constitutive of every established Order" (Žižek 1999: 113).

Whereas from a Hegelian perspective one can fully agree with the necessity of this negative moment and even with the implied critique of communitarianism²⁰ the problem is that, despite his valorization of "the political logic of the excess constitutive of every established Order," by regarding the negative moment as foundational Žižek is prevented from developing a political *logic* at all. Rather, any universal determinacy that appears (e.g. the constitutive

exception) must be brought back to the foundational terrain and grounded there, thereby precluding any real development beyond that ground insofar as the latter must remain intact in order to serve as a foundation. Another way we might put it is that, rather than following a *political* logic, Žižek follows a logic of *grounding* - the very kind of reflective logic Hegel critiques in the *Science of Logic*.²¹ Thus oddly enough, although Žižek wants to radicalize the break with established order, he fails to radicalize the break with the very kind of foundational logic that would preserve such established order against its ruptures. In other words, he rejects the content of a certain foundationalism only to embrace *the very form of foundationalism itself*.²²

Although from a Hegelian perspective Žižek is correct to emphasize that in order for universality to become concrete it cannot remain aloof or indifferent with respect to its particular content but must include itself among its particulars (Žižek 1999: 92), and even if we affirm that the account of the constitutive exception indicates a concrete universality that is neither merely impossible nor undermined by its particular content, what he still lacks is a *development* that actually leads us from one version of universality to the next. In other words, Žižek lacks a logic of development, and what he winds up with instead are several juxtaposed versions of universality between which a choice might be suggested but none of which can be the "forced choice" that he wants to see. Although Žižek wants his account to be aligned with Hegel in some way, a more Hegelian procedure would be to follow an immanent logic of development rather than to present given alternatives in juxtaposition which are then evaluated in some way by a reflection that remains external to them. Here let us briefly turn to Hegel's own derivation of the concrete from the abstract universal to see if this development might throw any light on universality as Žižek attempts to conceive it.

Hegel's concrete universal

In Hegel's *Logic*, universality as an explicit conceptual determinacy is first shown to be necessary as a result of deficiencies found in the categories of substance and causality. Substance appears at the apex of what Hegel calls "reflection" or the "logic of essence" insofar as it *returns to itself* out of its determinacy, i.e. its "accidents." That is, the determinacy of substance lies in its accidents, but substance only thereby remains the *same* determinacy and so through its accidents it only "returns to itself," as Hegel likes to say. Insofar as this "return to self" maintains the same determinacy, it does not develop into a *further* determinacy or into something that would be more than the mere determinacy of substance again. In other words, it is not self-determining in the sense that it cannot determine itself further through a development that would lead to something other than the mere category of substance. This then defines the reflective return to self - it is a movement that returns to the same determinacy. The Nietzschean concept of becoming, for instance, for all its celebrated Dionysian flux and denial of ontological fixity, nonetheless invariably returns to the same determinacy of flux, play of forces, etc. (Nietzsche

1968: §1067) and so does not really *become* at all insofar as it remains the *same*. When it becomes apparent, according to Hegel's development of the category of substance, that it can only be substance by positing the accidents through which alone it can be what it is, we have passed over onto the causal relation. Substance, as the determining power that posits the determinacy through which it is what it is, is the cause that can only be a cause through positing an effect.

Causality gets closer to self-determination, but it does so by a cancellation of the difference between cause and effect, and so it again returns to itself in the "substantial" manner indicated above. The effect is either not really an other, and so again we have a return to the same, or the cause is cancelled as cause in the effect, and we have no posited determinacy of the cause. But as soon as the cause maintains its identity in the effect in such a way that the latter is the explicit positing of the former, we have a self-determining process. That is, the cause is only shown to be a cause at all in the effect, and so the effect in turn "causes" the cause to be a cause. The determinacy of "cause" thereby continues itself in the effect and in such a way that it determines itself to be cause. This process that remains itself in and through becoming other is *universality* - the "other" that the universal becomes is its particular content through which alone it can be universal - and here begins the sphere of "the concept" proper in Hegel's treatment. To put it in Hegelese, in the "logic of the concept" - as opposed to the logic of being (the sphere of immediacy) and the logic of essence (the sphere of mediation) - the "in itself" becomes what it is, viz. *in itself*, only through its being-for-other. Only through the other is it "for itself" or explicit as "in itself." That is, only in and through the *particular* is the universal a *universal* at all.

Insofar as the concept establishes its identity not by holding itself apart from mediation but by becoming self-mediating or self-determining, it cannot remain behind as an identity that underlies or that is prior to its mediating movement, nor can it be a ground to which the mediating movement returns. This means that the concept has to *lose itself to be itself* - it cannot just remain an "itself" that is formally distinct from its own self-determining. But neither is it lost in otherness as in the sphere of being. Rather, it is the identity that it is only in and through its own self-loss. To put it another way, conceptual determinacy itself is a process of becoming other, where the "itself" *is* the becoming other. Thus contrary to what we may often take to be meant by the term, "the concept" is not a mental representation. It is not a quasi-Kantian formal structure of the understanding which subsumes an externally given content. It is not a unity *back into which* differences disappear. All such notions uncritically rely upon essentialist structures and relations, like a form that subsumes a given content, a ground that serves as a basis for what it grounds, a condition that conditions something else, etc. Rather, "the concept" names a kind of *movement* that manifests identity in and as the continuity of its differences.

Now this kind of unity that *is* its differences is precisely what is meant by *universality*, so the initial determination of the concept is the universal. The universal is the concept as a self-

determining activity that contains its determinacy within itself, and so is not something that is opposed to an externally given content. If we think of the universal as *subsuming* a content that is other than it, according to Hegel, we are not conceiving of universality at all. Indeed, we are thinking the substantial relation in which an active substance exerts power over a passive substance in a relation of violence: "Violence is the manifestation of power, or power as external" (Hegel 1969: 567). This is a twofold violence that on the one hand acts on an external passivity and on the other hand reduces that externality back to itself - it is a power whose violence consists in seemingly acting on an other but really only acting on the other that it has itself presupposed, and hence never really dealing with an other at all. Here we might locate the kinds of violences that, in relating to otherness, first replace the other with a *posited* other that is then presupposed - the other as racial stereotype, as constructed negative image, the colonized other, etc. - and then seek to negate that posited other in order to return to the security of the same.

More in keeping with the previous discussion, however, this may well also characterize the kind of seemingly neutral universality that conceals a particular interest insofar as the "other" present is really a posited otherness that reduces to the same (e.g. a universal "humanity" that ostensibly includes women and other ethnicities but which actually replaces them with the prevailing model of the white male property owner, etc.). The symptomatic version of universality rightly exposes this as a false universal, but for Hegel that's not the end of the story. In contrast to this substantive return to self that violently acts on external passivity, the relation of universality to its determinacy in and through otherness is characterized by Hegel as "free love" - that is, a "freedom" in the sense of self-determination finds itself in an other that is not reduced back to the same of a prior determinacy, and "love" in the sense of letting go of that prior determinacy in self-loss through the other rather than holding on to it against the threat of loss in otherness.

What Hegel proposes to do at this point in the *Logic* is think the concept of universality without externally introducing any observations or empirically given contingencies. To think the concept is to make explicit any determinacy that may be implicit in it. In other words the logic of implications, if there be such, must be thoroughly immanent. To put it another way, any content to be determined must be derived from the form of universality itself. From this perspective Žižek is right to suggest that the "the limitation of Kant's philosophy" may lie "in the fact that Kant was not able and/or ready to count/include the form into the content, as part of the content" (Žižek 1999: 113). What Hegel purports to show here, as he does with all the categories derived in the *Logic*, is that the form itself generates or implies a content.²³ The challenge is to think through the pure formality of universality without surreptitiously introducing a content from the outside. This is an austere task, to be sure, since it entails the suspension of all the readily available presuppositions and empirical content that so easily flood the mind when it tries to conceive the determinacy that might be latent in the pure abstractions of thought. However, according to Hegel that task is a necessary one if we are to first spell out and then be in a position to adequately critique the

determinacy implicit in the categories we employ. Therefore I ask for the reader's patience as we attempt to think through what determinate characteristics are implied in the abstract notion of universality per se, without introducing or presupposing any determinacy drawn from empirical instances or from any independently given content whatsoever.²⁴

Universality

Universality per se at first appears as an immediate indeterminacy in that it is a pure relation to self in its differences. Unlike something that can *only* be determinate against an other (e.g. the categories of reflection, prior to the logic of the concept), however, the universal contains its determinacy within itself. Insofar as any determinacy *within* the universal *is* the universal - it cannot be separated from the universal as something simply external - it too must be universal. On the other hand, insofar as the universal itself is determinate, it is determinate through otherness. The only "otherness" here however is the very determinacy of the universal itself, which determinacy is itself universal. Hence the universal is determinate against other universals.

Let's unpack this complex of implications. The determinacy of universality looks in two directions, as it were: outward and inward. Outwardly the universal is determinate against other universals. Insofar as it is set off against other universals this way, it is something particular - one particular universal among others. In other words, insofar as the very determinacy of the universal *is* the "other" *through which* the universal is universal, this other is also a universal. But insofar as this other is the universal's *own* determinacy, the reference outwards is illusory. Nonetheless, this is the conception of the universal as a genus among other genera. As such a "particular" genus among others, it would seem to be unified with the other genera under a higher universal. The same process happens with the latter higher universal, however, and so we have an infinite regress to ever higher genera.

But the genus is only the outward reference - the universal as determinate cannot be simply generic, which would make it indeterminate. For Hegel the only "pure" indeterminacy is the category of being with which the *Logic* begins - sheer "isness" with no further specification. But here we have the universal, which as such contains determinacy. Thus as a universal containing its determinacy within itself, it also refers inward to its own "inner" determinacy. This inner determinacy is also necessary insofar as the universal is not merely determinate *against* an other but is self-determining *through* the other. Hegel calls this inner determinacy its "character." Thus we have two sides to a universal determinacy: the determinacy of the universal as a genus vis-à-vis other genera by which it is itself a particular genus among others, and the determinacy of the universal as its own specific character which is contained within it without reference outwards. Hegel asserts that both of these references - outward and inward - are illusory. They are really two sides of the same coin: as determinate it is a particular genus among others, but equally as determinate it has its own specific character that is not simply determined against an other. This

two sided nature of the universal can be seen in the genera commonly entertained by ordinary reflection: e.g. *Ursus*, the genus of bears, is one particular genus as opposed to, say, members of *Canis* (the canines), yet it has its own determinate character that defines it as a class of bears irrespective of other genera.

This illusory opposition merely spells out the two sides of self-determination, depending upon the emphasis: as self-*determination* it implies an outward reference, and as *self-*determination it implies an inward reference. But since both references are the same process they are illusory when treated separately. Even though they are not really separate, however, they are nonetheless conceptually distinct - the distinction being that between universality per se on the one hand and its own determinacy on the other.

Because universality is a self-determining process, Hegel calls this process a creative power as opposed to the kind of mere transition into something else which characterized the logic of being (the sphere of immediacy) - hence the illusory character of the reference outward. As a creative power it is also distinct from the kind of self-subsistence which characterized the logic of essence (the sphere of mediation) which was undermined insofar as it could only be maintained over and against an other - hence the illusory character of the reference inward. But the real self-subsistent character of universality as a self-determining, self-mediating process means that its differences, viz. universality per se and its determinacy which are conceptually distinct, are likewise posited as self-subsistent universals in their own right, over and against which the universal itself is something *particular*. In this way the universal determines itself as *particularity*.

Particularity

Insofar as particularity is an immanent aspect of what it means to be universal, in particularity the universal does not encounter something external but rather its own determinacy. If we view the universal as a genus, then we have to say that "the species are not different from the universal but only from one another" (Hegel 1969: 606). All particulars share the same universal. The particular is the determinacy of the universal, which is its illusory relation outward through which the latter is determinate at all. So when we say that the particulars are different from each other, what other particulars are there? Hegel says that "there is no other present from which the particular could be distinguished, except the universal itself" (Hegel 1969: 606). Again, we're following the bare distinction between universality per se on the one hand and its own determinacy on the other. The particular is the difference that belongs to universality, and as such a difference it is only distinguished from the universal itself. Another way we might put it is that universality can be conceptually divided into the universal as universal (the first, indeterminate aspect we began with above) and the universal as its determinacy, i.e. as particularity. Inasmuch

as these can be distinguished at all, they both are particulars under the universal: "Therefore its species are only (a) the universal itself, and (b) the particular" (Hegel 1969: 606).

The only difference present is that between the universal and the particular, which as *different* are each particulars over and against one another. The universal per se is an "*immediate* indeterminate universality." But this means that its determinacy is its very indeterminacy: "this very indeterminateness constitutes its determinateness or makes it a particular" (Hegel 1969: 606). Insofar as the particular is determinate *over and against* the universal, the particular as well as the universal are each *one* of the opposed sides and thus *both* are particular. Not only is the universal, as conceptually distinct from its determinacy in the particular, something particular itself over and against it. In addition, particularity for its part is a universal insofar as both universal and particular are each particular and hence the determinacy of particularity is held in common by both, which thereby makes a universal with respect to that determinacy. As Winfield puts it, "Hence, not only is the universal the particular in its contrast to particularity, but the particular is universal, insofar as it encompasses the particular and the universal as its own two exemplifications" (Winfield 2006: 82). Each side contains the double determinacy of universal and particular: the universal as a determinate indeterminacy is particular; the particular for its part is nothing other than the determinacy of the universal now specified as particularity. However, insofar as both sides, the universal and the particular, appear over and against one another as particulars, universal and particular fall apart.

This is the form of abstract universality. Each side carries the determinacy of universality as being self-related in otherness and so each side is self-contained, as it were, and is thereby posited as different from the other. Ordinary reflection²⁵ takes this to be what a "concept" is - a universal abstracted from its content on the one side and a particularity abstracted from its universal context on the other side. In other words, the form of universality and the particular content as its determinacy fall apart. According to Hegel, since the only difference here is that between the concept of universality and its (dis)own(ed) determinacy, this means that the concept "is *outside itself*" (Hegel 1969: 608). This being-outside-itself of the concept is precisely what the activity of conceptual "abstraction" is. Of course, "abstraction is not empty as it is usually said to be" (Hegel 1969: 609) inasmuch as every abstraction has some determinate content - as we saw with the very determinacy of indeterminacy characteristic of the universal when it is particularized. Insofar as something is said to be *indeterminate*, this indeterminacy "is supposed to stand *opposed* to the determinate" (Hegel 1969: 609) and is thus determinate itself over and against the latter.²⁶

Ordinary reflection separates the universal from its particular content this way and opposes them in a mutually external relation, thereby achieving only an abstract universal which then provides the model for what a "concept" is supposed to be. This is the problem with both the symptomatic and hegemonic universals in Žižek's analysis - both are precisely abstract

universals in this sense, abstractions that cannot include any particular content within themselves and, in the case of the symptomatic version, merely masks a particular content or, in the case of the hegemonic universal, is a mere formal abstraction opposed to a content that has to be externally introduced and substituted for it. The symptomatic version seems to give up on universality entirely, seeing it as an ideological ploy, but this appearance is revealed to be a mere semblance as soon as any normative claims are made regarding justice or overcoming oppression, claims whose normativity it cannot justify. The hegemonic version doesn't want to give up on universality but it winds up with an abstract universal whose particular content on the one hand remains external to the formal universality it is supposed to "stand in" for, but on the other hand, if it is to be the universal it claims to be, it cannot be external to that very universal.

Singularity

It is in the abstract universal that we encounter what Hegel calls the "fixity" (*Festigkeit*) of the understanding - its ability to render a concept "unalterable." But the fault does not lie in the understanding; rather, it lies in the form of abstract universality itself as a self-related and self-enclosed totality that as such invites, as it were, its own fixation in a representation: "the universality which [concepts] possess in the understanding gives them the form of reflection-into-self by which they are freed from the relation-to-other and have become *imperishable*" (Hegel 1969: 610). Now whereas initially this appears to be merely a loss of the concept in fixated abstractions that repeat in way the "return to self" characteristic of essence, Hegel points out that this very power of abstraction is also what undermines the seeming inalterability of the fixation and brings about a transition beyond the latter: "The highest maturity, the highest stage, which anything can attain is that in which its downfall begins. The fixity of the determinateness into which the understanding seems to run, the form of the imperishable, is that of self-relating universality" (Hegel 1969: 611).

It is this very form of self-relating universality that facilitates abstract fixation in the first place. The problem thus far is that difference is posited in the universal as its particular determinacy yielding the difference between universality and particularity, each of which when regarded as such stand relative to the other as particulars. But even though difference is posited *in* the universal, difference is not yet posited as the universal. The difference posited is indeed a difference contained within universality as its determinacy, but as we've seen this has led to an illusory reference outward in which the concept and its determinacy fall apart (and thereby equally an illusory reference inward as if the determinacy is not a self-determination through otherness). But insofar as the determinacy is a determinacy *of* the universal it is self-related, and this self-relation enables the fixity in abstraction. At the same time, however, insofar as the determinacy is self-related - which means insofar as *particularity* is self-related - it is distinct from the abstract self-relation of the universality that is determinate as indeterminate. Whereas the first universal is

a self-related indeterminacy whose determinacy *as that* is merely implicit ("in itself"), particularity is *explicit* determinacy ("for itself"), and so the self-relation of *particularity* is a self-relation of *explicit determinacy*. This self-relation of an explicit determinacy is *singularity*, and it is through this category that particulars can be not only distinguished from the universal they share but also from each other.

Because its self-related determinacy is explicit, Hegel calls it the "determinate determinate" (Hegel 1969: 618) - that is, above and beyond just (immediately) being determinate, singularity is determinate *as* determinate. To put it another way, the self-determining process of conceptual development has now posited its own determinacy rather than "inheriting" it, as it were, from a previous category. This is a more explicitly self-determining movement insofar as it has engendered further determinacy through itself, thereby remaining itself in becoming other. With this development the abstract universal has become concrete in its particularity as something singular. It is the self-determination of the concept of universality itself - its own implicit determinacy rendered explicit - that has led to its particularization and finally to its singularization. We might say that the particularization of the universal led to abstract universality, whereas the universalization of particularity (as a self-related universality in its own right) led to singularity. Or we might view it as a process of further self-determination through self-differentiation: first an immediate universality, then as determinate something particular, then a particularity shared by both universal and particular and so universal itself, and finally as such a particularity-become-universal it is distinct from both the previous universality as well as the previous particularity, and so is something unique and differentiated within the particular itself and thereby singular. In this connection Žižek may be right to invoke Badiou's "passionate defense of St. Paul as the one who articulated the Christian Truth-Event - Christ's Resurrection - as the 'universal singular' (a singular event that interpellates individuals into subjects universally, irrespective of their race, sex, social class...)" (Žižek 1999: 142). Christ, as the singularity that particularizes a universal humanity, is precisely such a concrete universal.²⁷

This singularity as it appears in the *Logic* is hardly the end point, however - it too contains implicit determinacy that renders it abstract - it is indeed the posited abstraction of the abstracting movement that generated the abstract universal in the first place (Hegel 1969: 621). But rather than an abstract universal determined as indeterminate, it is a concrete self-relating universality whose determinacy is its content. Nonetheless, precisely what is posited thereby is the abstraction itself - the self-relating universality that as such abstracts itself from all relation. The singular is therefore a "this," a "one" reflected into itself without reference.

From here the logical development enters the sphere first of judgment and then of inferential movement (e.g. the "syllogism") in which each of the "moments" or determinate aspects of conceptual determinacy developed thus far in Hegel's treatment - universality, particularity, and singularity - take on the characteristic of self-contained singularity and then are

mutually related through the mediation of the other moments (universality connected to singularity through the mediation of particularity, etc., yielding the various syllogistic forms). These three moments cannot be merely counted up as a sum or aggregate unless they are abstracted from the conceptual movement that gives them their determinacy. Together they make up a process in which each "loses itself" in its other and thereby maintains its identity, but because at the same time each is in itself a self-relation, the understanding through abstraction can isolate them and make of them a collection of particulars that can be counted up.

Concrete universality in the political space

One might now read the course of Žižek's development of concrete universality in terms of the logic that Hegel spells out. The abstraction of a neutral medium is indeterminate neutrality over and against the non-neutral particulars whose universality it is supposed to be. But insofar as this abstract neutrality is itself a certain determinacy, it does particularize itself as this determinacy. As such a particular determinacy, it now stands as a particular opposed to its other side of immediate abstract neutrality. The neutral universality cannot include its non-neutral particulars, but its very character as neutral universality is its determinate content and so is its particularity. Thus the neutral universality determines itself as one of its particular contents: the symptom that reveals it as a particular interest, a fact that remained hidden from view so long as we stopped short at the sheer abstraction of neutrality.

But insofar as each side, viz. the neutral neutrality (now seen as ideological illusion) and the symptom (the particular interest now unmasked), is a self-relating universal that is self-enclosed without outward reference, both sides - neutral universality and its determinacy as such, i.e. particularity - fall apart from each other. At this point the abstraction of universality fails to include any particularity at all - it is an abstract universal as the empty formality that can only be hegemonized by a content that is other than it. This negativity at first appears to be all the universal is or can be, but closer inspection reveals the necessity of an exception that emerges among its particulars that is not included among them. The abstract universal is closed off from its particular content - its form as universal is at odds with its content as particular determinacy. But insofar as the abstract universal stands over and against its particularity, it too is something particular. As self-relating particularity, the abstract universal passes over into particularity - the universal has become the particular. But insofar as particularity is the self-relating determinacy of universality, or insofar as we now have a particularity that has become more determinate as universal itself, it is a singularity whose determinate content is rendered concrete as this particular individual. *What manifests this singularity is the "constitutive exception," not the mere particularity of "particular interests."* It is precisely this further development of a particularity-become-universal and thereby singular that prevents its reduction back to particular or "special" interests, a reduction that stops short at the determinacy of abstract universality. To this degree

Žižek will correctly assert that "the true Hegelian "concrete universality" is the very movement of negativity which splits universality *from within*, reducing it to one of its particular elements, one of its own species. It is only at this moment, when universality, as it were, loses the distance of an abstract container, and *enters its own frame*, that it becomes truly *concrete*" (Žižek 2003: 87).

Thus it is through the concrete universal as singularity that we might think Žižek's constitutive exception, conceiving it under the two aspects of negative abstraction and positive determinacy. The aforementioned shift here occurs: whereas universality was formerly seen as standing over and against the particular and so as something particular itself, this split between universal and particular now appears within particularity itself in and as these two aspects.²⁸ With respect to the negative side, the constitutive exception is the self-relating particularity-become-universal that as such is not included in the abstract universal that separates form from content. This abstract universality can now be seen as the common determinacy running through all three of the versions Žižek explicitly lists, viz., the neutral, the symptomatic, as well as the hegemonic versions. With respect to the positive side - the side Žižek neglects - the constitutive exception is the singularity which, as self-relating universality, is the concrete universal that can inaugurate a new beginning. Rather than falling back to prior determinacy in a reactionary way (or, in terms of Hegel's system, in a way that is only appropriate in the sphere of essence), as self-determining it can engender new determinacy. Indeed, in this way we might also be able to distinguish between reactionary pretenders to new beginnings, as in the particularly odious example of fascism, and genuinely new beginnings. It is in the sense of concrete universality developed here that we can say the constitutive exception is not the pretender to a merely false universality through hegemonization, but rather is the true universal that can stand for the "all" insofar as it is not reducible to a particular interest among others: "it is those who are excluded, with no proper place within the global order, who directly embody the true universality, who represent the Whole in contrast to all others who stand only for particular interests" (Žižek 2003: 109).

Now if we fast-forward to Hegel's political philosophy, this self-contained universality that has particularized itself as singularity shows up as the abstract ego devoid of content - the now-familiar abstractive move making itself known again. This further determinacy of the universal within the political sphere is the initially abstract 'I' that negates all limitation but nonetheless is determinate as that very abstraction - much as the initial form of universality in the *Logic* is determinate in its indeterminacy. As Hegel puts it already in the latter work, in the introductory remarks to the logic of the concept:

The concept, when it has developed into a *concrete existence* that is itself free, is none other than the *I* or pure self-consciousness [...] the *I* is, *first*, this pure self-related unity, and it is so not immediately but only as making abstraction from all determinateness and content and withdrawing into the freedom of unrestricted equality with itself. As such it is *universality*; a unity that is unity with itself only through its negative attitude, which appears as a process of abstraction [...]
Secondly, the *I* as self-related negativity is no less immediately *singularity* or is

absolutely determined, opposing itself to all that is other and excluding it - *individual personality* (Hegel 1969: 583).²⁹

Hegel does regard this conception as inadequate, but rather than simply rejecting it by opposing to it other conceptions deemed to be more adequate, he demonstrates its inadequacy by spelling out its own implicit logic, thereby showing it to be self-undermining rather than merely rejected by a reflection external to it.³⁰ Certainly the "I" or ego here has been abstracted from any content: it is the sheer vacuity of thought thinking itself in its pure universality. This is the pure ego divested of the socially constructed self with all of its attendant determinacies - e.g. determinacies such as those belonging to a particular social class, gender, ethnicity, culture, psychological history, and all the other empirical variables that form the constellation of any particular personality. Rather, it is the abstraction from all such determinacy. Insofar as it is an abstraction from determinate content, it cannot be dismissed by reducing it to any particular variant of the latter and thereby positing a privileged contingent determiner that would undermine it. And therefore it is also abstraction from the symptomatic version of universality - abstraction is made from "white male property owner" as much as from every other determinate characteristic. It is the negativity that radically breaks with the existing determinate order, Žižek's "forced choice" of the destructive and violent break with established determinacy that is "the very opposite of the peaceful neutral medium of all particular content" (Žižek 1999: 94).³¹ As such a break with pregiven content, for Hegel this abstraction is the beginning of freedom in the political sphere, albeit freedom in its most abstract form or what he calls "negative freedom." The key element that Žižek brings to light here is the rupture - contrary to the symptomatic interpretation of universality, the "I" as abstract universal is a break with the predetermined order rather than a mere clandestine form and sedimentation of it. In this sense Žižek is right to defend the subject as a beginning for modernity that should not be cast aside.

On the other hand, for Hegel this abstraction is not a ground or foundation; rather, as we saw with the concept of abstract universality, it is merely a beginning that will be transformed through its own immanent logic, positing further determinacy through its own process of self-determination. Thus politics neither remains at this abstract level nor do we need to assume a priori that it must perpetually return to it. As a radical break with the existing order, it clears away the determinacy of particular content in order that no given determinacy be surreptitiously imposed - whether the latter be the privilege of white male property owners or any other determinacy given in advance by tradition, culture, or community. As such a break, it cannot be justifiably criticized for being an ideological veneer concealing the assumption of something *given*, which is what the latter determinacies would be; rather, it breaks with any and every givenness. Were this move not made, then there would be some externally given factor that would determine the development from the outside, some privileged determiner that acts as foundation for determinacy, and this external determination would undermine the self-

determination that is crucial here - or, to put it negatively, any such external determination would compromise the break with preestablished order.

Insofar as this abstract "I" is a further determination of the very universalizing character of thought, a form in which this universalizing character as such is made explicit, its universality will contain the implications drawn out above in the development from abstract to concrete universality. The difference will be that this development now takes place at a greater level of determinacy or, conversely put, at a less abstract level than the derivation of the logical categories. But it is not a matter of merely "applying" the categories to empirical content either - that too would be to assume an externally given content to which the categories are then applied, reducing the latter to mere abstract universals. Rather, the "I" is to be conceived as a *further determinacy of* the very logical movement we followed above in the treatment of universality as a category per se, rather than as an independently given content *to which* that logical movement is subsequently "applied." Hegel's argument here is that this break with preestablished order is not merely a contingent fluke that arbitrarily happens once in a while, but rather that it is necessitated by the very self-determining development of thought. That self-determining development can be truncated or it can be abandoned in favour of regression - these always remain contingent possibilities in empirical existence - but, in Hegel's view, it will always at least *imply* the break with predetermined givens and its further development insofar as it contains an immanent logic that *can* be so developed. Thus it is neither determined by pre-given determinacies nor is it a merely a contingent Badiouian "Truth-Event" that happens out of the blue.³²

As with the universal whose indeterminacy is its determinacy, the abstraction from all content in the "I" *is* its content. Alternatively put, its very character as negation of limits is itself its limit. But this means that in its negation of every content, it must also negate the content that it itself is in this abstraction, and so is self-negating. It is the *self-negation* implied here that according to Hegel renders this form of universality unsustainable and self-undermining, a self-contradiction that is overcome only in the full recognition that such "negative freedom" must give itself its own limits - since it does so in any case insofar as its very negation of limits is itself a limit that it imposes on itself - and thereby become explicitly self-determining. This development is brought about as soon as we "shift perspective" and see that indeterminacy is itself a certain kind of determinacy, or that the negation of content is, after all, a certain content. But this is the recognition that often seems absent in Žižek's treatment, enabling him to rest content with the abstraction of an empty formal universality on the one hand and the negativity of rupture with preestablished order on the other hand.

The development Hegel indicates leads to a greater degree of concreteness over the merely abstract universality characterizing a will that, in rejecting all limitation, winds up being an empty formality devoid of content. Once we take the step to a freedom that has itself for its content, then we have a concrete universal, which in this case means that the form of freedom is

the same thing as its content. What freedom henceforth must do in order to be free is to determine *itself* above and beyond the mere negation of pre-given determinacy. This in turn entails the recognition of itself as a self-imposed limit and willing of that limit, which in turn is its content - a content determined by it rather than externally given, thereby rendering its universality concrete. Such a self-determining concrete universal in the political sphere (which for Hegel is the sphere of explicit self-determination, i.e. freedom) is what Hegel calls a "right." The minimal structure of right is this universal willing of freedom where freedom, in giving itself its content or limit, wills itself. Initially it's just the minimal right to be free, but Hegel will then attempt to draw out further determinacies such as property, morality, ethical life and, at the macro-level, civil society and the political order of the state.³³ The universality of freedom then will not be an abstract universal that subsumes particular content given to it externally, but rather will be the concrete universal that determines itself further and thereby gains particular content through that self-determination.

Conclusion

Because Žižek regards the negativity of the total abstraction from content to be foundational, he can only admit that the constitutive exception is a legitimate concrete universal when it asserts itself *against* the false universal, and that as soon as it takes over state power it ceases to be the concrete universal and again becomes a particular content that bases itself on a series of exclusions: "the moment a political movement pretends fully to realize Justice, to translate it into an actual state of things, to pass from the spectral *démocratie à venir* to 'actual democracy', we are in totalitarian catastrophe" (Žižek 1999: 233). On the foundational terrain of contentless abstraction, any positive development into actual justice can only be seen as at best a pretense and at worst a "totalitarian catastrophe." Insofar as Žižek claims to be "dealing with a logic which includes its own failure in advance, which considers its full success its ultimate failure, which sticks to its marginal character as the ultimate sign of its authenticity" (Žižek 1999: 233), this would seem to place Žižek in the camp of the deconstructionists for whom failure is the only inevitability.

But if we avoid the foundationalist thinking here and follow Hegel by treating the abstractive move as a beginning rather than as a ground or terrain that remains behind regardless of what emerges from it, then we are in a better position to at least envisage other possibilities. Whether those possibilities are precisely the ones Hegel develops in his *Philosophy of Right* remains to be seen and is certainly not decided here in advance. However, one such possibility may be the one Žižek announces but from which he immediately shrinks back - the constitutive exception. As an element that has no proper place within the established order, it is in a unique position to make the abstractive move that breaks with preestablished order and assert the first negative moment of freedom, and to do so as a unique singularity that includes the

determinacy of universality within itself and as such cannot be reduced back to being merely one particular interest among others. Insofar as its indeterminacy *is* its determinacy and its abstraction from content *is* its content, however, it cannot remain in that abstract negativity but must develop its own implicit logic. As a self-determining movement, however, that development, is not the reactionary return to a previously determined organic order which Žižek sometimes imagines to be the only alternative to the abstraction of a perpetual impossibility. Indeed, we might even say with Nietzsche that such development is active self affirmation as opposed to the reactive identity that can only affirm itself by denying the other, the marginal selfhood that needs "the big enemy ('Power') which must be there in order for us to engage in our marginal/subversive activity" (Žižek 1999: 234). Such Hegelian positive development or Nietzschean affirmation may bring us closer to the hope announced in the World Social Forums: "Another world is possible."

Notes

¹ For more up-to-date versions, see Gasché (1986: 13-78) and Taminiaux (1977).

² For a critical account of these interpretations, see Kolb (1986: 43ff).

³ To be sure, in both *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek engaged in sustained attempts to interpret parts of Hegel's greater *Science of Logic*. However, the focus in both of these works remains centred upon the "Logic of Essence," the second main section of Hegel's *Logic*, and to that degree is not directly relevant to the universality addressed in *The Ticklish Subject* insofar as, for Hegel, universality is a *concept* determinacy rather than an *essentialist* determinacy (or what Hegel will also call a "reflective determination") and as such involves a degree of development not yet conceivable in terms of essentialist or reflective categories alone. Thus a preoccupation with the purely reflective categories of the logic of essence will not shed much light on the category of universality which appears in the logic of the concept, even though at times in *Tarrying with the Negative* Žižek seems to conflate the two by appealing to universality as a determinacy that explains categories in the logic of essence. For instance, Žižek attributes the logic of "oppositional determination," a determination that constitutes one of the most prominent features of the logic of essence as a whole, to a transition that takes place "when the universal, common ground of the two opposites 'encounters itself' in its oppositional determination" (Žižek 1993: 132). This kind of explanation would be strictly forbidden by Hegel's methodology, which demands a rigorous refusal to introduce determinacies that have not yet been derived.

⁴ Žižek specifically draws on a book by Colin Wilson here (Žižek 1999: 70).

⁵ Following Houlgate (2006), Winfield (1989), and others, I take the "logical" determinations spelled out in Hegel's *Logic* to articulate a "logos of being," and hence to be ontological as well as epistemological, insofar as the project of the *Logic* is to derive every determinacy without presupposing any underived levels of determinacy, and to read these determinacies as strictly belonging to thought or to a conscious "subject" would be precisely to introduce underived determinacy - not the least of which is the very "opposition of consciousness" that the *Phenomenology* purports to suspend.

⁶ E.g. whether into Hegel's tripartite or Žižek's recommended quaternary divisions. Indeed, by fixating at length upon what the over-arching divisions of the logical movement should be (cf. Žižek 1999: 80ff.), Žižek allows himself to be distracted from the specificity of the logical development itself. Any over-arching division should *at most* be something derived from that logical development rather than a predetermined structure that is imposed on it. Even still, its value remains merely that of a shorthand index. Thus if Hegel characterizes the beginning of the logic of the concept as the "subjective logic," this characterization should not be given any weight in the interpretation of the logical development itself insofar as that characterization does not and cannot belong to the logic proper. To read it into the logic, as Žižek seems to do, is to introduce an unwarranted determinacy by a reflection external to the logical development. Here we need to carefully discern between what belongs to the immanent development of logical determinacy on the one hand and Hegel's own reflections *about* that development on the other hand. That is, we have to actually do philosophy rather than be told about it - even by Hegel.

⁷ This makes it doubly interesting that in the two earlier works mentioned above, *Tarrying with the Negative* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek devotes so much attention to the logic of essence and its account of "reflective" determinations or essentialist categories and there reads the more developed concept determinacy of universality back into the reflective category of opposition (see footnote 3 above). One wonders if this exclusive attention to what for Hegel is a deficient or one-sided sphere of determinacy led him to read the more developed conceptual determinacies in terms of essentialist categories and thereby wind up positing "impossibilities" that more appropriately characterize the latter.

⁸ We should note in passing that this characteristic "premodern" attribute finds analogues in other religions as well, not the least of which is the place of women in Islam vis-à-vis Sharia law.

⁹ Žižek's use of the phrase "concrete universality" is ambiguous here insofar as he applies it to this premodern organic unity, albeit with scare quotes. Hegel, however, would not see it as a concrete universality at all but rather as an abstract universal that is still at odds with its particular content insofar as the particulars contained in such a neutral medium do not further specify that

medium but fall outside its determinacy. At times one wonders if Žižek may fall into the habit of conflating the "concrete" with the merely empirical.

¹⁰ Of course the irony here - an irony that Žižek does not seem to notice - is the fact that this "forced choice" of the abstract freedom of the individual against the collective order is the modern notion of freedom defined as the freedom to choose.

¹¹ See for instance Virginia Held (1987).

¹² As can be seen from the citation, he will also later slide from the idea of a concrete universality per se to what he will call a "universal ideological notion," as if we're still discussing the same thing, e.g., "The same goes for every universal ideological notion: one always has to look for the particular content which accounts for the specific efficiency of an ideological notion" (Žižek 1999: 175).

¹³ Such "splitting" was also invoked in the earlier *Tarrying with the Negative*, in which Žižek approvingly cites a purported Lacanian "reading of Hegel which locates the 'reconciliation' of the Universal and the Particular into the very splitting which cuts through them and thus unites them" (Žižek 1993: 30).

¹⁴ Given his exclusive earlier attention in *Tarrying with the Negative* to the reflective determinations of the logic of essence and the fact that the latter are marked by forms of mediation that are always undermined in various ways, it's hardly surprising that Žižek will reveal an ongoing tendency to regard the universal as impossible and to posit an unbridgeable gap between universal and particular, e.g. there referring to "the Lacanian Real" as "the gap which separates the Particular from the Universal, the gap which prevents us from completing the gesture of universalization" (Žižek 1993: 129).

¹⁵ We might add, however, that from the Marxist perspective something crucial is lost in the hegemonic universal, viz. the tie to class and the concomitant material relations that determine which particular content can assert itself as the universal. A model in which we have on the one hand a merely empty formal universal and on the other hand a plurality of various particular contents vying for hegemony with respect to it doesn't tell us why we would have such a formal universality in the first place. In the symptomatic version we can see that the ideological illusion of neutral universality is necessary for a particular interest to gain supremacy and assert itself over others in the field within an overall structure of domination. And although Žižek appeals to Laclau's notion of "readability" as answering the question as to *how* a particular content becomes successful in displacing another as universal stand in (Žižek 1999: 179), it's still not clear exactly *why* there should be a struggle to stand-in for an empty universal in the first place.

¹⁶ Žižek's writing often must be pieced together this way as his presentation is not always as systematic as it might be. To be sure, this also raises the question as to whether or not Žižek himself would recognize an interpretation so pieced together as his own, and so one must remain content merely to present such interpretations as possibilities within the text that may or may not be explicitly recognized or endorsed by its author. But, as with all philosophical writing, one does not have to wait for permission from the author to articulate possibilities within it.

¹⁷ Žižek also points out that the false universal of secretly privileged particular interests reasserts itself against the constitutive exception's claim to universality precisely by reducing the latter back to the status of being merely one particular "special interest" competing with other particulars in the field and so carrying no normative legitimacy for anyone outside that interest (cf. Žižek 1999: 204).

¹⁸ A possibility precluded by Laclau who, according to Žižek, can only claim that "features that we (mis)perceive as ontologically positive rely on an ethico-political decision that sustains the prevailing hegemony" (Žižek 1999: 174) - and which as such would carry no normative weight.

¹⁹ Here again, unlike either the symptomatic interpretation or the neutral version, Žižek fails to provide a reason either why such an impossible universality would exert any claim on us or why particular contents would seek to stand in for it.

²⁰ For a critique of communitarianism that, in my view, adopts a truly Hegelian perspective and which, in so doing, provides a more thorough-going critique than Žižek's while agreeing with his central tenet that communitarianism amounts to a reduction of the political to a form of pre-political ethics (Žižek 1999: 171), see Richard Winfield (1996).

²¹ Again lending the impression that, with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek got stuck in the logic of essence.

²² Again, closer attention to the logic of the concept over and above the logic of essence might have prevented this.

²³ This is the meaning of the much-celebrated "for itself/in itself" distinction that Žižek invokes here and elsewhere: "for itself" (*für sich*) means that an implicit determinacy that had been merely "in itself" (*an sich*) is rendered explicit, viz., is explicitly posited as such in the logical development.

²⁴ For an interpretation that differs somewhat from my own both in terms of scope and aim, see Richard Winfield (2006: 78ff).

²⁵ By "ordinary reflection" I am following Hegel designating that form of non-philosophical thought that holds on to its representations without conceiving of their implicit determinacy and thereby precludes the articulation of their immanent logic.

²⁶ This is exactly why, in Hegel's attempt to begin philosophy in the *Science of Logic* with the thought of sheer indeterminacy and thereby secure a presuppositionless beginning, he could not begin with the thought of "indeterminacy." Since "indeterminacy" is implicitly determinate over and against "determinacy," the project of the *Logic* can only begin with the thought (or *Meinung*, bare gesture) of "being" abstracted from all determinate content.

²⁷ In this connection also we can formulate what would no doubt be Hegel's response to Nietzsche's valorization of the ancient Greek religion for inventing gods who are more human than Christianity is capable of coming up with - viz., Hegel would maintain that it is Christ who is more human insofar as, unlike the Greek gods, he was a singular historical individual who actually lived and died.

²⁸ However, the split does not appear merely within the particular as Žižek has it - but then he tends to waffle between regarding the constitutive exception as singularity (a.k.a. individuality) and as particularity.

²⁹ I have slightly modified Miller's translation by rendering *Begriff* as "concept" rather than as "notion," and *Einzelheit* as "singularity" rather than "individuality."

³⁰ By showing it to be self-undermining *in its own terms*, this is a more thoroughgoing critique than, say, the standard feminist/Marxist critique that dismisses it as a cloak for "white male property owner" and then looks elsewhere for better conceptions.

³¹ Of course the irony here - an irony that Žižek does not seem to notice - is the fact that this "forced choice" of the abstract freedom of the individual against the collective order turns out to be the modern notion of freedom defined as the freedom to choose.

³² As noted above its character as self-determination as opposed to an essentialist return to a prior determinacy differentiates it from reactionary movements like fascism. It's not altogether clear that we can make this differentiation with respect to Badiou's "truth event" insofar as a return to prior determinacy of the magnitude or intensity of fascism, especially given the often fictive character of the "beginning" purportedly recovered in the latter, may not be foreseeable from within the state of the situation, and this unforeseeability (or "indiscernibility") appears to be his criterion for something to constitute a genuine "event."

³³ Of course the question as to whether or not Hegel convincingly and justifiably derives these further determinacies is one that lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

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