

Risk, Fear and Immunity: Reinventing the Political in the Age of Biopolitics*

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Abstract

As an update of his continual concern for contemporary risk society since 1980s, Ulrich Beck's latest work *World at Risk* (2009) alerts us to the deterritorializing effects of global risk on national, geographical, and disciplinary boundaries. On an increasingly global scale, risk mixes up natives and foreigners, while risk calculus connects natural, technical and social sciences, and incorporates almost all aspects of everyday life. Fear, accordingly, spreads out as a kind of carrier that binds so-called global, multicultural civil society; it even prospers as a lucrative risky business. Such an era has witnessed a structural transformation of the roles of the state and various biopolitical institutions, of life itself, of subjectivity and agency. Drawing on Žižek's theory of ideology critique and radical ethics and politics, this paper firstly presents a critical survey of contemporary biopolitics, focusing on how health needs contagion as its uncanny double to define and immunize itself, and on how new forms of biomedical experts and knowledge of life flourish with uncertainty and administer our body and life. All of these will be discussed in relation to theoretical accounts of the contemporary risk society and culture of fear to critically look at how risk and fear function as depoliticizing biopolitical instruments for disavowing social antagonism. Theorists such as Judith Butler and Roberto Esposito caution us against the (auto)immunitary biopolitical logic and call for vulnerability, precariousness and finitude to be adopted as the ethical principles for a "positive" biopolitics, while this paper will query whether human subjects are victimized and depoliticized in their discourses. The final part of this paper will turn to Žižek's recent formulation of radical ethics and politics to address the possibility of reinventing the political in contemporary biopolitics.

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In the Beginning There Was the Monster . . .

Critics of the horror genre commonly hold that monsters, especially in the postmodern horror film and Gothic metal, materialize metamorphosis, distortion, deformation, contagion, corruption, and displacement of the body. Such excessive monstrosity or body horror as dramatized by the spectacular pageant of freaks, zombies, ghouls, psychopaths, perverts, cross-breeds and serial-killers traumatizes and disrupts the subject's and the society's existence from their very intimate, substantive bases. Now, fear and panic are not necessarily harbingered by alien species or invaders from outside; rather, they have permeated whatever closely constitutes the subject's life world. More fundamentally, body horror unsettles and problematizes the epistemological as well as ontological boundaries between the human and non-human, organic and inorganic, life and death, and so on. In the light of the continuing popularity of the horror genre, as well as the persistence of various figures of the monstrous Other that have acquired the status of fetishes, cultural icons and "sublime objects" for mass consumption, we may agree with Rosi Braidotti's characterization of contemporary culture as "the postmodern Gothic" (177-79).

Accordingly, the social, political and ideological implications of monsters and body horror have been subject to many critical investigations. With a view to developing "a sociology of the modern monster," Franco Moretti, already in the early 1980s, advanced the thesis that the monster "serves to displace the antagonisms and horrors evidenced within society to outside society itself" (68), and he proposed that the literary figuration of the monster, as the return of the repressed in disguise, "expresses the unconscious content and at the same time hides it" (81). In a similar vein, Robin Wood more recently has continued the theme of ideological displacement and "the return of the repressed," in order to open up a more comprehensive view of the monster, one that focuses on the concept of Otherness. For Wood, the monster qua the Other functions as "what is repressed . . . in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned" (27) and expands over a wide spectrum of sexual, ethnic and national politics (27-29). Such understanding also underlies most of the articles in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (Barker et al., eds): the monster as a scapegoated, demonized figure—the Jew, the East, the Black, and so on—invokes fears, at both the individual and collective level, of invasion, contamination, impurity, degeneration or corruption of the body. Taking up a strong feminist position, Barbara Creed in her seminal *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) critically examines a

wide variety of monstrous female figures from the horror genre. For Creed, the horror film functions as the defilement rite which registers the abject and “separate[s] out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularity the mother and all that her universe signifies” (14). In spite of their epochal contributions, these criticisms fail to consider how, in the manner of commodity fetishism, the monster and the body horror it plagues—hence also our susceptibility to fears of contagion—are openly staged, recognized, celebrated, if not enjoyed, as the points of departure for breaching both individual and collective identities and hegemonic biopolitical, instrumental normativity. Such a critical stance is perfectly manifested by Margrit Shildrick’s attempt to develop an ethics of risk from the contagious monster body to “challenge the parameters of the subject as defined within logocentric discourse” (3).

Our reading of the monster and body horror, their social, biopolitical implications—namely, our susceptibility to body horror, risks of contagion, deterioration of individual and collective health—should, therefore, take its ground in a more sophisticated conceptualization of the Other than is the case in the accounts referred to above; which is to say our conceptualization of the Other should extend beyond the logic of imaginary projection and abjection. At this point, it is helpful to bear in mind Žižek’s explication of the Lacanian notion of the Borromean knot that unites the three dimensions of the Other: besides *the imaginary other*, our human counterpart, with whom we are engaged in the mirror-like relationships involving competition or mutual recognition, there are also *the symbolic big Other* (“the substance of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence”) and *the Other qua Real*, “the impossible Thing, the ‘inhuman partner,’ which is the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Other, is possible” (“Neighbors” 143). This monstrous, inhuman radical Otherness beyond imaginary identification and intersubjective, symbolic mediation explains why the monster horrifies and fascinates us at the same time. In other words, the monster, as a fantasy-formation, paradoxically binds us to the Thing, the kernel of our being and society, that is beyond our grasp, by way of its very impossibility. Our relation to this neighborly monster remains in a state of surplus and excess; asymmetrical and non-reflective, it confronts us with the problems of desiring and enjoyment, and signals the failure not only of knowledge and power but also of ethical domestication. Thus said, our neighborly proximity to the monster constitutes an urgent biopolitical and bioethical issue that calls for much critical attention.¹

¹ The above sketchy survey of the monster is presented to the interests of this paper; a more

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thorough assessment of different modes of conceptualizing the monster as well as horror in, for example, philosophy, theology or literary theory, be it in light of Levinasian Face, Derridan hauntology or Deleuzean anti-Oedipal becoming and body without organs, is definitely worthwhile but far exceeds the scope of this paper. The monster (or monstrosity as such) put in larger theoretical contexts can be explored, I would argue, with respect to "undeadness." Eric Santner in *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* approaches the undead as the excess of life unable to be assumed; however, the supplement of the law—in Lacanian terms, the superegoic underside or the fantasmatic support of the Law—is also undead in nature (22, 64). Such ambivalent formulations are carried to his later *Creaturely Life*, where the undead, "creaturely life" is characterized as the life delivered to "sovereign jouissance," a state of exception that institutes the law (or biopolitical domination) (15, 21-22). In a different vein, Eugene Thacker, who is much taken by Lovecraft's horror, sees the monster as *monstrum*, the aberration that demonstrates, testifies biopolitical norms (23); and his ontology of life in *After Life* attempts to move beyond the monster, beyond the dichotomous concept of life caught between biological reductionism and theological mysticism towards the unhuman limit as the foundation for thought, which he explores through Lovecraft's supernatural, weird tales and pre-modern Scholastic philosophy (x, 23). Based on Lacanian and Žižekian perspectives, my use of the term "neighborly monster" in this paper is based on the ground that contagions, illnesses and various kinds of risk, on the one hand, underlie biopolitical domination and, on the other, are always entangled with our fantasy, desire and enjoyment and resist being domesticated by risk calculus, immunitary defense and bioethical imperatives of health care. In other words, the neighborly monster, as the Neighbor in both Lacan and Žižek that provokes the subject with its radical Otherness, and confronts the subject with what lies beyond the pleasure principle or the imaginary good, embodies a kind of indivisible remainder that has its most implacable assertion when immunity turns to the autoimmunitary extreme and biopolitical regime is thus disrupted. If there is any possibility of radical ethics and politics, I would argue, it happens in our encounter with this neighborly monster, with its face of radical Otherness. For more detailed theorizations of the Neighbor, see Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 179-230, and Žižek, "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence." (For publications data, see Works Cited below.)

discussed in relation to theoretical accounts of the contemporary risk society and culture of fear to critically look at how risk and fear function as depoliticizing biopolitical instruments for disavowing social antagonism. Theorists such as Judith Butler and Roberto Esposito caution us against the (auto)immunitary biopolitical logic and call for vulnerability, precariousness and finitude to be adopted as the ethical principles for a “positive” biopolitics, while this paper will query whether human subjects are victimized and depoliticized in their discourses. The final part of this paper will turn to Žižek’s recent formulation of radical ethics and politics to address the possibility of reinventing the political in contemporary biopolitics.

Contemporary Biopolitical Conditions

Modern biopolitics emerges during the 18th century as a resource for war that prevents violent death and augments forces of life—hence, modern biopolitics as a domain of “permanently bellicose peacefulness” (Cohen 18), or a zone of indistinction between war and peace, norm and exception, life and death. It has its most atrocious, perverted actualization in Nazism; its contemporary conditions, nevertheless, have extended far beyond those of pure *thanatopolitics* (in Agamben’s terms) or any other nihilistic politics. Contemporary biopolitics is literally everywhere and saturates almost all the important political sectors: war of and against terrorism, mass migration, public health, measure of security, emergency legislation, and so on (Esposito, *Bios* 7). Concepts like *biopower*, *biocapital*, *biodefense*, *bioterrorism*, to name only a few, are frequently invoked and almost become commonplaces in political discourses, literary and cultural studies. Foucault, Agamben, Hardt and Negri and, more recently, Esposito come to the forefront of the debates on biopolitics, with Arendt, Heidegger, Schmidt and, still earlier, Nietzsche at the background of the theoretical scene.² Not simply limited by the antagonistic poles of health and illness, hosts and pathogens, *us* and *them*, contemporary biopolitics for most researchers, in spite of their own theoretical alignments, concerns “our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures” (Rose 3); it is generally seen as a politics that has more to do with the optimization of life and making-live, than with the deprivation of life and letting-die.

² For a succinct genealogical survey, see Robert Sinnerbrink, “From *Mechenschaft* to Biopolitics: A Genealogical Critique of Biopower” and Ed Cohen, *A Body worth Defending*, 11-26. For publication data, see Works Cited.

If the last observation is an adequate summation of the current academic discourse of the biopolitical, it indicates above all the enormous and continuing influence of Foucault's notions of governmentality, discipline and biopower which appear as early in his oeuvre as *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963; English trans. 1973) Foucault shows how what appears to be the disciplinary restructuring of medicine and jurisdiction—an innovation at the level of mere dossier-keeping, for example—ends up as an epistemological and ontological transformation of the human body and life. Accidents, illness, disease, reproduction, risk, healthy body, and so on, are all subject to the extensive medical administration and network of power and discourse. Throughout his work of the 1970s, Foucault continues his genealogical project and works out the notion of biopower, which he suggests is dispersive, distributive and multifaceted and cannot be implanted by the state's single strategy of regulation. In conjunction with disciplinary power, which aims at the docile, proper body, biopower invests, valorizes and optimizes the forces of the body and life. In Foucault's own words, "[A] power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms. It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of values and utility" (*History of Sexuality* 144). In other words, the problem of modern biopower for Foucault lies in its life-affirming administration rather than death-wielding "reign of terror." However, this does not mean that modern biopolitics has nothing to do with death qua the absolute Other to life. Death, for example, through capital punishment is measured in service of biopolitics or "in relation to [the] vital requirement of society in its totality" (Esposito, *Bios* 27). In the same vein, we also have to bear in mind that, as already pointed out above, modern biopolitics from its beginning has "[incorporated] within itself the very violence against which it contends, establishing wars as the political ground for affirming the lives on which, and in whose name, it acts" (Cohen 18). What's more, the modern biopolitical turn at issue signals the transubstantiation of the law from transcendence to immanence: the law as such now enters into the immanent level of medical knowledge and norms, and takes hold of the body from its very real, material substrate (Esposito, *Bios* 28). Briefly put, the body is constituted by strategic exigencies as a resource to be augmented through disciplinary techniques and biomedicine for national defense (Cohen 19-20). Foucault's caution against impoverishing the question of power solely in terms of the state and its apparatuses (*Power/Knowledge* 158) rightly turns our understanding of power to its capillary or rhizomic deployments, and he may be right as well in seeing the resistance to the state's central power for various

rights—for example, “the right to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or alienations, the right to rediscover what one is and all that one can be” (*History of Sexuality* 145)—as the other side to the increasing inscription into the new biopolitical techniques. We may be justified, however, in wondering how he can dispense with the immunitary origin, the neighborly, *extimate* kernel of modern biopolitics. Does Foucault’s genealogical valorization of splitting, discontinuity and incompatibility not lead to his reluctance or “failure to theorize the immunitary declension” of both governmentality and sovereignty (Campbell xiii)? Therefore, his theory remains inadequate to conceptualize the reversal of politics of life into politics over life, or a work of death (Esposito, *Bios* 8, 31-32)—not least since, as Agamben points out, an analysis of the concentration camp is absent in Foucault’s work (119).³

The above critical sketch, on the one hand, establishes Foucault as a significant point of departure for understanding contemporary biopolitics and, on the other, suggests that we need to look beyond the Foucauldian horizon and “rediscover what modern biopolitics is and all that it can be” tracing its immunitary origin and dispersions. To complete this task, we may turn to Roberto Esposito’s “paradigm of immunization,” as it is thematized in his seminal *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008). Esposito discovers in such thinkers as Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Luhmann, to name only a few, the conception of the negative⁴ as an indispensable singular but periodically productive element of human history, psyche, and system (*Bios* 47-49). Meanwhile, Esposito develops his own paradigm of immunization in relation to Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, Hardt and Negri, Harbermas, Dworkin, Agamben and Butler, a relation of synthesis as well as critique. To examine this

³ For Agamben, Nazis’ concentration camp represents not so much an unthinkable horrible “intrusion of biologic-scientific principles into the political order” (122) as the hidden thanatopolitical paradigm of modernity (123). What he sees between democracy and totalitarian states is a “hidden but continuous” contiguity rather than a sudden transformation (121). Nevertheless, whether Agamben indiscriminatively overgeneralizes Nazis’ thanatopolitical paradigm and loses sight of the singularity of various totalitarian or Fascist regimes is open to debate.

⁴ Esposito appeals to these thinkers in order to elaborate his paradigm of immunization, even though they do not explicitly use the term and concept of “immunization.” The negative in this context designates whatever contradicts order, norms and harmony, and the contradiction at issue can be logical, psychical, or, I would argue, ideological. My use of the neighborly monster, as is psychoanalytically-inflected, aims at the more ambivalent side to Esposito’s paradigm of immunization process (as well as risk society theory) or at what lies beyond the binary logic of negation and opposition. In some other passages, I use “negativity” more specifically as an equivalent to social antagonism that, based on Žižek’s formulations, attests to the (Lacanian) non-all, inherent split of subjectivity, community and reality.

complicated network of intertextuality exceeds far beyond the scope and concerns of this paper. It is feasible, at least, to observe Esposito's refusal—one that reveals a departure from Derrida—to “collapse the process of immunization into a full-blown autoimmune suicidal tendency at the heart of community” (Campbell xvii). He does not posit as a necessity the self-destructive autoimmune turn of immunity; this also explains his refusal to superimpose Nazi thanatopolitics over contemporary biopolitics as he finds Foucault, Agamben and many others do; on the contrary, he understands Nazis' production of death in a larger process of immunization.

Understood in its Latin etymological origin, *immunitas* designates a privileged exception from obligations, offices and gifts, all of which correspond to an exchange in return and constitute the conditions of *communitas*. According to Esposito in *Bios*, the internal mechanism of community from a very early age already relies on a negative internal mechanism, namely, the immunization process that presupposes that which it negates (51-52); community, in other words, forms not a homogeneous whole but a vortex in which continuum and being interact with discontinuity and non-being, a view that he elaborates in *Communitas* (1998) and “Community and Nihilism” (2009). Unlike the ancient liberty that is usually conferred on particular objects, modern liberty ensures the right of the individual subject to be free from other subjects' interference with its autonomy and from the subordination to any powerful order and, hence, the possibility of community (Esposito, *Bios* 72); the semantic center of gravity thus transfers from privilege to security and defense. In other words, immunity and defense do not come into being as medical concepts; they derive from “the ways that Western legal and political thinking accounts for the complex, difficult, and at times violent manner that *humans* live among other *humans*” (Cohen 3). As a “trickster,” a legal exception that proves the universal law and “lubricates the ineluctable friction between law and politics” (Cohen 5), immunity is later subsumed by biomedicine and applied to living human organisms and bodies. This migration turns immunity into the new avatar of scientific and medical practices, as well as a hybrid of the juridical, political and biological; more fundamentally, it transforms the subject's perception of its own body as well as diseases and healing: hence, individual organism becomes a space for the life-and-death struggle, which cannot not be reduced to a biopolitical trope or a purely ideological, imaginary construct. Here, what Foucault's conception of life as a site of resistance fails to address has its full assertion on the level of the material substrate of the body. The work on phagocytosis by Élie Metchnikoff (1845-1916), the founder of modern immunology, demonstrates that the organism “[regulates] the contradictory forces of competing

developmental imperatives” through intracellular struggles and digestion (Esposito, *Bios* 257). More precisely, phagocytes isolate and destroy the organism’s useless elements and the foreign bodies that penetrate its ectodermal envelope and model its protective shield (259). Life based on such an immunitary logic does not stay in balance or harmony, but always undergoes the process of fighting, attacking and devouring.

In Esposito’s paradigm of immunization as presented above, life intersects with law and politics. As he observes, only in modern civilization does immunization constitute “its most intimate essence” (*Bios* 55). This immunitary turn for Esposito does not herald a seamless convergence of modernity and immunity: the historical process of modernity cannot be reduced to immunity, which may work differently in other historical epochs. Rather, his work on modern biopolitics by way of the paradigm of immunization aims to open up a semantic and conceptual horizon with plural meanings. First of all, he acknowledges the centrality of modern philosophies of personhood. Concepts such as sovereignty, property and liberty in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Arendt and Berlin are revisited from immunitarian perspectives to highlight boundary maintenance as modernity’s central question. The centrality of this question is also corroborated by the modern scientific episteme that organisms “vitaly depend on a *perpetual* engagement against the world to maintain our integrity” (Esposito, *Bios* 8, my emphasis). The human body thus made immanent starts to function as a spatio-temporal sector of biopolitical agency that undergoes political contestation as well as economic transformation (9-10). At this point, we will not fail to see the continuance of the Foucauldian theme of power/knowledge: through immunity, various modern disciplines are injected into the human body, which thus acquires a scientific status and becomes naturalized. The hybrid of legal, political and military thinking renders biological immunity as the organism’s active, bellicose process of defense. Does this not shed light into the extimate kernel of modernity, a kind of neighborly monstrosity that can never be expelled and finds its dramatic representation in, for example, Stoker’s *Dracula* or any number of other outbreak narratives including *Twelve Monkeys*?

The immunitary turn of modern biopolitics in question attests to a crucial historical transformation in modernity. When the traditional natural defense, symbolic shield, and theologico-transcendental matrix lose their solid grounds, the biopolitical defense mechanism comes to take their place and turns defense of life into a problem of strategic choice, rather than a self-evident fact. Again, the purpose of defending life tends to invert into its uncanny, monstrous double and is

actualized in the domination over, even destruction of life: hence, biopolitics is responsible for saving life through “an antinomic *dispositif* that proceeds via the activation of its contrary” (Esposito, *Bios* 59). What does the Nazis’ “final solution” amount to, if not the modern immunitarian logic and biologization of politics carried to their extreme, namely, the horrendous connection of the therapeutic function and the thanatological frame of modernity? For Nazis, the health and unity of German nation can be preserved, and her illness cured, only by killing as many *inferior invading germs* (Jews) as possible. Taken as a whole, Esposito’s *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* redefines the categories by which we think of the defense of life, and it brings into view an affirmative biopolitics beyond the horizon of a thanatopolitical fight to the death against the Other, beyond the autoimmunitary turn—in immunological terms, when immune activity (defense against the Other) turns against the host organism (community) itself—of contemporary biopolitics (as illustrated in post-911 anti-terrorist politics) and beyond any fundamental norm of life. In Esposito’s own words, “As the human body lives in an infinite series of relations with the bodies of others, so the internal regulation will be subject to continuous variations” (*Bios* 188). In this aspect, Esposito appeals to a form of pre-individuated life, which concerns not so much exposure as openness to the Other, a life from immunization to communization. This move, to a great extent, aligns Esposito with Butler, who bases her Levinasian ethics of the Other on conceptions of shared finitude and vulnerability (Butler, *Giving an Account* 41-42; *Precarious Life* 20-24). Such an ethic model strives against (autoimmunitary) violence and fits easily with contemporary multiculturalism. If, as demonstrated above, the immunitary struggle or negative preservation of/against life (that is, life as the neighborly, extimate kernel of biopolitics) is foreclosed and never registered in Foucault, it is disavowed—which is to say it is both affirmed and negated—in Esposito.

The latter section of this paper will critically address the ethical issues involved in the last observation within the context contemporary risk society and culture of fear from Žižekian perspectives. In what follows, this paper, by way of Nicholas Rose’s work, will place the focus on how immunitary logic sustains biopolitical administration of health particularly in relation to contagions in order to explore how (in terms established at the beginning of this article) health, as the sublime biopolitical object, relies on contagions as its uncanny double, its neighborly monster, to (re)define itself. From the 19th century onwards, modern biology underwent a development associated with its borrowing from linguistics, communication theory and evolutionary theory new languages with which to

demarcate the organic functional unity of the living body as a figure under the constant threat of disruption (Rose 42-43). The question of boundary maintenance pertains to both living organisms and, in a meta-theoretical sense, biological science itself. Although in recent times the field of biotechnology has certainly seen unprecedented advances in modeling, programming, in the simulation of organic life and the analysis and sequencing of DNA fragments, we would, as Rose cautions, be mistaken to understand life itself as purely transparent information. Biological or biotechnological principles are probabilistic at most, rather than deterministic. The discoveries of such luminal entities as sperm, ova, embryos and, more recently, stem cells all provoke debates on the molecular level of vitality and, hence, the very fundamental elements of life itself. These entities, subject as they are to biopolitical administration and capitalization, all bring into view life in the state of excess and surplus and keep testing the applicability of the language of information as a whole.

The new molecularized biopolitics also, as Rose observes, involves the reorganization of the state apparatus. It no longer monopolizes biopolitical power but has many quasi-autonomous regulatory bodies—for example, research institutes, bioethics commissions, biotechnology corporations, and pharmaceutical industries—as its surrogates to take on the responsibilities for the management of health and reproduction. These regulatory bodies, together with a wide variety of support groups and pressure groups, bring to the forefront so-called “experts of life,” who virtually constitute new forms of biomedical authority or “pastoral power.” They intervene in individuals’ life through counseling or non-coercive ethical principles and expand the realm of bioethics into the aspects of everyday life (Rose 29-31). This new modality of power, of course, does not imply that the state has ceased to reign over its subjects’ lives; rather, life now is administered at a distance on the molecular, more capillary level (Rose 3-4). The most (re)productive site of biopolitical power, to a great extent, has to be located at laboratories, which function as a kind of factory for finding, testing, creating new forms of molecular life and fabricating new ways of understanding life (13): for example, owing to the contribution of simulation and visualization technologies, dynamic and complex biological systems can be understood and acted upon in terms of nucleotide bases, functional properties of proteins, and enzyme activities. In Rose’s words, “[M]olecular biopolitics now concerns all the ways in which [the] molecular elements of life may be mobilized, controlled, and accorded properties and combined into processes that previously did not exist” (15).

Biomedical technologies today work not simply to cure diseases but also to administer, change, engineer, reshape, enhance and predict—put straightforwardly,

to *optimize*—the vital processes of both the body and mind at the molecular level. This optimization presupposes that the aforementioned experts of life *responsibilize* individuals to manage their own affairs and constitute themselves as healthy, knowledgeable subjects immunized from the degeneration or disruption of their vital life. As Rose insightfully observes, these experts “have come to occupy the space of desires, anxieties, disappointments, and ailments between the will to health and the experience of its absence” (64). What is at issue here, if not a variation on Foucauldian panoptical surveillance? The blending of knowledge with ethical duties makes health care a more risky endeavor. Health is thus sublimated to the status of the (neighborly) Thing that fascinates the subject but also derails its desire and life at the same time. Moreover, how do biomedical and bioethical imperatives, albeit legitimated by professional knowledge, take hold of the subject, if not through the superegoic intimation (or intimidation?), a negative which the subject can never incorporate and live up to? The latter part of this paper will revisit the problem of the superego in a broader context to think together contemporary biopolitics, risk society and the culture of fear. At this point, it suffices to bear in mind a pivotal remark: health is never a neutral value free of political, ideological and psychological warfare.

The last remark also pertains to how the state immunizes itself against epidemics. Since the early stage of modernity in the 17th century, health has always been a decisive fulcrum of state power; a rather direct association is usually posited between the large size of population, their health and productive conditions, and the martial power of the state (Prince-Smith 194-95). Modern republican political philosophers like Machiavelli, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Hobbes contend that, people subject themselves to the state in exchange for its protection from the threats of pathogens (in both physical and metaphorical sense), be they domestic or foreign. This immunitary warfare, however, is always wielded across national, geographical, ecological and species boundaries. All these boundaries, in fact, are precarious and have to be remade and reimagined through the contagious microbes that traffic from primitive rainforests to metropolitan cities and bring into being a biotic community comprised of human bodies, organs and tissues, animals, plants, and so on (Wald 34, 51, 118). Particularly in today’s conditions of globalization, epidemics spread and evolve in the principles of complexity, non-linearity and randomness: unable to be fully contained by preventive or defensive strategies, pathogens with emergent properties are transmitted through the chain of contingent connections and feedback loops to various vectors and hosts (Prince-Smith 24). The outbreak of epidemic diseases definitely constitutes an exceptional turbulence and

threat to the health security of the state as well as to its social cohesion and economic interests, since the antagonism between different classes and ethnic communities owing to the unequal distribution of and access to biocapital will be thus intensified. Moreover, the outbreak of epidemics tends to provoke high levels of social hysteria, which results in the blaming of the Other (as the Carrier) and intensifies xenophobia and racism (Prince-Smith 32). As Priscilla Wald succinctly puts:

Contagion is more than an epidemiological fact. It is also a foundational concept in the study of religion and society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions. . . . The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community. Disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact.
(2)

Contagion conceived this way is equal to the neighborly monster that is formulated at the very beginning of this paper, the extimate negative to health security or the uncanny double that disrupts but mobilizes the biomedical power at issue and leads us to the no less uncanny fact that human community has been contaminated from its very kernel. Accordingly, we are justified to suspect that the antithesis of health and disease in question here, health care as an ethical imperative as discussed above, and all talk of solidarity in suffering and post-catastrophic “will-to-redemption,” are subsumed into the biopolitical measures that reinforce communitarian identification and disavow the fundamental social antagonism, the true *illness* that splits the society from inside. This observation is well attuned to the thesis of Margaret Lock’s seminal “Displacing Suffering”:

Efforts to reduce suffering have habitually focused on the control and repair of individual bodies. The social origins of suffering and distress, including poverty and discrimination, even if fleetingly recognized, are set aside, while effort is experienced in controlling disease and averting death through biomedical manipulations. (219, qtd. from Cohen 272)

So, what do contemporary biopolitical conditions as sketched above amount to from Žižekian perspectives? So far, this paper has critically looked at immunity

as *the neighborly kernel* of modern biopolitics: that life, as is conceptualized through the immunitary logic, always involves fighting corresponds to the basic psychoanalytic thesis of the subject as torn between *primordial drives*, always *out of joint* and not at home with itself, namely, as always enmeshed in the process of *tarrying with the negative*. Readers familiar with his work will not fail to notice some Žižekian signature vocabularies and motifs highlighted here. Moreover, his seeing so-called experts of life as the arch-surrogates of a biopolitical pastoral power that dominates over people's life through superegoic imperatives should be seen in the context of Žižek's long-term concern with the problem of superego in contemporary (postmodern) politics and culture. However, these observations should not lead us to conclude that Žižek's work in the last two decades has been a conscious and systematical intervention in the philosophy of biopolitics. Some latent critical confrontations still require explication.

From his very early work onwards, Žižek has been preoccupied with how the bureaucratic machine or technocratic system directly dominates over the subject's essence of life; it is a concern that is exemplified by his reading of Kafka, and of Nazi and Stalinist regimes and, more recently, by his analysis of cyberspace and *The Matrix* trilogy.⁵ From the late 1990s onwards, his critique of contemporary postpolitics, a task that brings him closer to Rancière and Badiou than he would admit, targets a variety of objects that include multiculturalist identity politics, the culture of political correctness and risk society on the common ground of their disavowal of fundamental social antagonism and lumps them together into the theme of the *totally administered society* in the interest of global capitalism. More recently still, his take on Levinasian ethics and critical dialogue with Judith Butler as well as his sophisticated conceptualization of the Neighbor-Thing, as is most thoroughly exemplified in "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence," are concerned above all with the Other beyond symbolic and imaginary identification and, more fundamentally, the passive, undead, and inhuman kernel that constitutes humanity, or humanity of zero degree; such an orientation places him on a par with biopolitical theorists proper like Foucault, Agamben, Hardt and Negri.

Put in a simplified but accurate way, Žižek characterizes the contemporary postpolitical era in terms of its refusal of higher Causes than life purely immanent to itself. Two ideologico-political constellations, as the two sides of the same coin,

⁵ The most exemplary cases can be found in "The Obscene Object of Postmodernity," *Looking Awry*, Chapter 6 and "Why Is Reality Always Multiple," *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Chapter 6. For Publication data, see Works Cited.

perfectly fit in this milieu: that of the biopolitical administration that reduces humans to bare life and that of “the [multiculturalist] respect for the vulnerable Other brought to an extreme, of the attitude of narcissistic subjectivity that experiences itself as vulnerable, constantly exposed to a multitude of potential ‘harassments’” (“From Politics to Biopolitics” 509, also see *The Parallax View* 297). For Žižek, contemporary biopolitics depends on the narcissistic personality that is bent on self-realization or happiness qua supreme commodity; it is subjects that make themselves objects of biopolitical administration of life: hence, from Žižek’s perspective, the expansion of Foucauldian “care of the self” to almost every aspect of everyday life. This also explains away the proliferation of ethics and dominance of experts of life. These experts, in Žižekian terms, enunciate the University discourse from the position of neutral knowledge or, in Lacan’s own terms, “the fantasy of a totality-knowledge” (*Seminar XVII* 33), while the discourse in question aims to calculate and totalize surplus *jouissance* (*Seminar XVII* 177) and “addresses the remainder of the real . . . turning it into the subject (\$)” (Žižek, “From Politics to Biopolitics” 505-06). For both Lacan and Žižek, all these biopolitical techniques involve the new capitalist master that has replaced the classical master and has dominated, in the context of this paper, the biopolitical field in the place of knowledge.⁶ The upper level of the University discourse (notated as S2→a) condenses Foucauldian and Agambenian biopolitics, where expert knowledge dominates and reduces individuals to bare life; the lower level (S1—\$) represents the impossibility of the subject to assume its symbolic mandate, namely, the subject’s life in the state of excess. Such excess or surplus, as is further reinforced by the Hysterical discourse which legitimates permanent self-questioning of desire, has been well integrated into today’s capitalist system as the driving force of its social production. Transgressions turn out to be immanent to today’s capitalist-bureaucratic biopolitics. And their outcome amounts to nothing but “the postmetaphysical survivalist stance of the Last Man” (“From Politics to Biopolitics” 506), which ends up, again, disavowing the fundamental social antagonism.

Life as a Risky and Fearful Business

As pointed out above, Žižek’s critical intervention in contemporary biopolitics

⁶ For Lacan, as interpreted by Boucher, discourses determine institutional frameworks that mediate social antagonism and reality, and the positional rotations of the four terms (S1, S2, \$ and a) in the four discourses do not imply any historical theology but are contingent on hegemonic articulations (Boucher 274).

particularly targets its depoliticizing effects, through which we notice, in addition to the subject's domination by expert knowledge, an immunitary logic that defends against fundamental social antagonism qua negativity as such. This critique, of course, must be positioned within the larger context of contemporary ideological constellations. For this task, we may rewrite the biopolitical motif of the neighborly monster as a point of departure: today, risk is thought to have become omnipresent and more polymorphous, molecularized, and penetrating than ever, while fear as its emotional impact spreads out as a kind of carrier that conjoins subjects to the biopolitical system.

In spite of their different methodological or theoretical foundations, theorists of risk since the early 1980s, for example, Mary Douglas, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Robert Castel, Mitchell Dean, and so on, have departed from the technico-scientific approach that tends to take risk as an objective phenomenon; instead, they assess risk in larger social, political and cultural contexts (Lupton 1-2). The works of these risk theorists can be read as biopolitically informed in the sense that they commonly posit risk (management) as a way of ordering reality and governing individuals, collectivities and population (Dean 131, Isin 218). For them, subjects manage their life through risk, while government proves its legitimacy by safeguarding its subjects from environmental, health and technological risks. In the terms of this paper, risk constitutes the overriding determinant of contemporary biopolitical conditions.

Put in broadest and most explicit terms, "risk" in risk society theory designates the probability or anticipation of damage, illness, death or catastrophes. From Beckian perspectives, risk has permeated into the fields of technology, economics, natural sciences, or more specifically, health (from the risk of smoking to that posed by nuclear power), aging, traffic accidents, unemployment (6-7): namely, risk stands as the dominant biopolitical condition. Meanwhile, according to Beck, the conception of risk is pervasive in a time marked by the decline of faith in transcendental or utopian redemptive powers and, hence, shadowed over by an uncertain future (4). In a world *at risk*, accordingly, the once-crucial epistemological, ethical and ontological distinctions between knowledge and non-knowledge, truth and falsehood, good and evil, no longer hold. Such conceptions perfectly fit in the general postmodern *Zeitgeist*, as well as the status quo of globalization, a stage of modernity with higher degree of self-reflexivity or heightened sense of the urgency of risk calculus and management. On the other hand, the media coverage on the events on 11 September 2001 and other similar terrorist attacks and on the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, the epidemics of

SARS and avian flu brings us to the realization that “*the face of the tragedy could have been our own,*” and a “hyper-individualized world risk society” is thus shocked and united by the cosmopolitan, traumatic experience (Beck 70, italics original). Risk as the anticipation of global catastrophe, in other words, attests to the collective vulnerability that mobilizes and consolidates global society. However, we must not fail to observe the immunitary logic at work here. The security of *our* global society is constantly threatened by, for example, transnational suicidal terrorism, which attempts to “create hell upon earth” and is not “counterbalanced by any compensatory benefits” (Beck 77). Risk turns out to be, again, the neighborly monster that invades and threatens global system from within and that the latter, in order to function, must, but cannot ever fully calculate, symbolize, imagine and introject. The “invasion from within” at issue here, as a recurrent motif of the horror genre, brings us back to the uncanny logic of immunity, which presupposes what it negates and, as pointed out above, works in the opposition between health and contagion. As is the case when we pass through a Möebius strip, what appear to mutually exclude each other from an external view invert from one to the other pole if one goes far enough. What characterizes safety and risk is therefore a minimal difference that is occluded by most risk theories. As long as we see the world through the perspective of risk, we sublimate health and security to the status of sublime objects (of ideology), and make them more risky than ever. Does this not manifest the vicious circle of the superego *par excellence*: “Whoever attempts to submit to the moral law sees the demands of his superego grow increasingly meticulous and increasingly cruel” (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 176)? Such a vicious circle perpetuates in the subject a struggle between too much and too little enjoyment. More accurately, the more the subject follows the so-called precautionary principle to repress risky desire, the more ferociously the latter will return to haunt the subject (for not being risky enough).

The uncanny logic of doubling and inversion in question, in a similar vein, applies to risk calculus and management in risk society theories, which constitute the dominant form of biopolitical expert knowledge or, in Lacanian-Žižekian terms, the University discourse. The association of biopolitics and risk society theories may come to us as no surprise, since more and more risk issues become medicalized (Furedi, *Culture of Fear* 11), and risk calculus, accordingly, works to buttress biopolitical administration of life. Risk calculus by default is based on rational, somewhat utilitarian calculation of means, costs and ends to predict, manage, counter and minimize accidents and insecurities (Fox 12-13). But this should not occlude us from the fact that risk today, not simply an object to be calculated and

managed, has *contaminated* systems of knowledge, which are characterized with higher degree of self-reflexivity and, thus, become more risky. Risk theories do not simply oppose knowledge to non-knowledge. As part of the postmodern “war against grand narratives,” they embrace non-linear theories of knowledge and privilege dissent, conflicts and “uncooperative, antagonistic networks of epistemic actors and coalitions” over consensus (Beck 125). It is thus no exaggeration to see scientific and technological knowledge as the breeding ground of risk. What concerns us at this point, based on risk society theory, is not so much a shift of epistemological paradigm as an ontological transformation. In Beck’s own words, “Non-knowing permeates and transforms human conditions of life and suffering, expert and control systems, the notions of sovereignty and state authority, of law and human dignity” (115). This also leads us to the view that not-knowing, as the risky, uncanny double to knowledge, has been made the inevitable point of reference in contemporary biopolitical, existential horizon.

The doubling of knowledge and non-knowing also concerns new form of biopolitical pastoral power. Generally speaking, risk theorists point to the loss of trust in authority and caution against taking for granted expert authority and scientific-mathematical rationalistic identification of risks. But this does not mean any loosening of biopolitical administration. As we can see from Rose’s molecularized biopolitics, today’s experts of life have taken the place of traditional coercive regulatory apparatuses (i.e. army, police and prisons) and intervene in individuals’ life through professional counseling and expand ethical imperatives of health care into various aspects of everyday life however minute. From psychoanalytic perspectives, the fragmentation and specialization of expert knowledge, rapid growth of counseling and professionalization of everyday life attest to the new experts that flourish on uncertainty and rule through superegoic intimation and intimidation.

Obviously, risk society theory as formulated by Beck does not work through the ideological undertexts that it claims to have overcome. His project of a general, abstract, and unified description of risk, albeit skeptical towards scientific and technological knowledge, remains bounded by the “hegemonic form of instrumental rationality” (Dean 135) and, more fundamentally, the narrative of modernization. In assuming risk as an omnipresent feature of our mundane existence or an already agreed-upon fact, Beck seems to have naturalized it, and his project as a whole knowingly or unknowingly turns out to be blind to how risk is socially, politically and ideologically constructed and, hence, imagined to displace real antagonism. When Beck as well as most risk theorists claims that classical distinctions have

been undermined by self-reflexivization, is it not ironical when the latter does not apply to his theory, as he still falls back on an opposition of “our global society and its Other” when commenting on global risk of terrorist attacks? Such unacknowledged indifference to the structural causes of geopolitical conflicts and naturalization of global system and its security and interest are symptomatically acted out in his assessments of the anticipated catastrophic side effects associated with new technologies and climate change as a combination of utility and probable destruction, for he imagines the likely catastrophic future in terms of usefulness for *some* and havoc for *others*, unequal distribution of hopes and fears, “grim eventualities” made palatable “by a promise of secular bliss (*at least for some*)” (Beck 77, emphasis mine).

If risk poses to risk society theories a negative to be calculated and introjected, a truly ethical self-reflexive gesture at issue concerns a kind of negation of negation. One may be justified in asking whether all the talks of self-reflexivization and risk calculus are merely ideological feints that displace, depoliticize fundamental antagonisms and leave intact the biopolitical structure of the status quo. The same holds for the subject responding to the self-reflexive imperatives of risk calculus without the support of objective knowledge or, in Žižekian terms, the symbolic Other. From Žižekian perspectives, risk society theories “leave intact the subject’s fundamental mode of subjectivity” (*The Ticklish Subject* 342); they presuppose a modern subject able to decide on the basis of its own norms and through democratic discussion of all options. The subject is offered many choices on condition that the fundamental choice (to opt out of the existing structure of biopolitical domination) has been excluded. Do we not perceive interpassivity at work here?⁷ Obviously, the non-existence of objective knowledge, namely, the decline of the symbolic, announced by risk theories does not redeem the subjects from “immobilizing dilemma” (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 219): they are bombarded with demands from all sides and, wherever they go, encounter problems issuing from ethical, financial, medical, or ecological assessments. What is the true origin of such an obsession

⁷ “Interpassivity” is one of the few, if not many, concepts that Žižek consistently elaborates throughout his oeuvre, but it develops an increasingly critical edge that is in evidence in his analysis of, for example, contemporary liberal democracy, cynicism, multiculturalism and cyberspace. Put in most explicit terms, interpassivity concerns how the subject displaces the fundamental passivity of its being, that which is disavowed by fantasy, to the Other in order to remain (falsely, or course,) active and, more, fundamentally, so as to avoid the enigmatic desire of the Other that always provokes anxiety in the subject. Such interpassive subjectivity in contemporary biopolitics and the risk society is exactly the object of critique in what follows. For Žižek’s original formulations, see *The Plague of Fantasies* 111-17 and *The Žižek Reader* 104-23.

with risk assessments, if not a narcissistic subjectivity that suspects itself of immunitary deficiency and thus always experiences itself as constantly exposed to and threatened by hazards and harassments from all sides? Do all these situations not also explain away the proliferation of conspiracy theories? It is not the case that people today fall back on conspiracy theories to regain a sense of reality, but that reality itself *is* conspiratorial, as when the Symbolic, which is supposed to confer social identity upon the subject and channel its desire, turns out to be the source of risk and uncertainty? However, those who do not believe in the efficacy of the symbolic fiction are enslaved by the uncanny double of the Law more than ever: in Žižekian terms, by the obscene Father-*jouissance*, the crueler, more demanding Master who is pulling the strings behind the scene and haunts the subject with superegoic commands to enjoy more than it can bear (*The Ticklish Subject* 142, 345, 349).⁸

This paper highlights fear as a pivotal biopolitical sector in the way that, as an emotional response to various kinds of risk, it works to displace the subject's deadlock of desiring and social antagonism. Fear spreads out like an epidemic and prospers as a lucrative business to hold together risk society; it may also target the Other (i.e. immigrants suspected of carrying pathogens) and turn into paranoid xenophobia. As pointed out above, contemporary biopolitics has so-called experts of life to enunciate the University discourse that aims to administrate life in its state of excess or "the remainder of the Real." These experts flourish on people's growing uncertainty and slackening trust in humanity, innovations and authority. Through their mediation, risk is supposed to be managed, and so is fear. However, the more knowledge people acquire about their life, the more they question their ability to know. Accordingly, fear develops an autonomized and free-floating epidemic dynamic and attaches to a greater number and variety of objects, events and phenomena (Furedi, "The Only Thing" para. 35). It is not necessarily associated with catastrophic threats but has permeated into various aspects of everyday life, however private and minute.

As both an emotion and cultural idiom, fear certainly serves as a biopolitical, ideological instrument that displaces fundamental antagonism qua impossibility of both the subject and society, and keeps the existing structure of domination intact. Put in biomedical terms, fear provides life essence for the immunitary mechanism

⁸ For a detailed Žižekian ideology critique of conspiracy and paranoid-cynical subjectivity, see Huang, "Conspiracy and Paranoid-Cynical Subjectivity in the Society of Enjoyment: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Ideology," *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 17 (2007), 159-98.

of both individuals and collectivities. Frank Furedi's insightful observation that the media's inflation of risk and promotion of fear is symptomatic of underlying social problems (*Culture of Fear* 25-26, 53) and that people's perceptions of risk diverges from "the real scale and intensity of the danger" (6) may work well as a necessary point of departure for an ideology critique of risk society and culture of fear. But such a critique epitomizes a limitation shared by most critiques of risk society and culture of fear in the way that it simplifies the libidinal economy at work in the objects of its critique. Put in Žižek's terms, the public Law always needs its superegoic, obscene support of enjoyment and the bureaucratic biopolitical machine will amount to nothing but dead letters without extracting a supply of enjoyment from its subjects, as is well exemplified by his reading of Kafka (*Looking Awry* 151-52) and casts an insight into the context of the decline of the symbolic efficacy, where the University discourse as enunciated by all those experts of life dominate over people's life by superegoic imperatives.

What is the libidinal truth of risk society and culture of fear, anyway? It suffices at this point to take a snapshot of Freud's and Lacan's formulations of anxiety in relation to fear. In the early stage of his instinct theories, Freud conceives of anxiety as the affective responses to repressed and non-discharged libido. Later, for example, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he defines anxiety as "a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one," while fear attaches to a definite object (12). Such distinguishing conceptions undergo more sophisticated theorizations in his seminal "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926). Anxiety, as part of psychical defense mechanism, emerges as the psychical preparedness for or reaction to castration, separation or loss of the love object; more crucially, it triggers, rather than results from, symptom-formations, which include fear attached to definite objects and events (126-29). Such conceptions attest to the immunitary nature of human psyche. Moreover, they pave the way for later Lacanian reformulations. Anxiety is then dissociated from the psychical response to the real or imaginary loss; it emerges when the subject comes too close to the object—more accurately put in Žižek's words, when the subject experiences the "suffocating proximity of the object-cause of desire" (*Puppet and Dwarf* 186)—so that lack (qua the motivating principle of desiring and reality) is threatened to lose its function: hence, lack of lack (Salecl 24; Shepherdson xxxii). Anxiety in this sense may derail the subject's desire and sense of reality. Is this not the libidinal truth that fear qua an immunitary symptom-formation occludes, the truth that when the subject in an age of biopolitics is confronted with more choices of consumption, more professional advices for the

“care of the self” and risk calculus, and more superegoic commands to enjoy, what he actually experiences are more inhibitions, more blocks to desire’s fulfillment?

Risking Risks, Fearing Fears

To recapitulate: this paper offers a critical survey of contemporary biopolitics, risk society and culture of fear within the context of postpolitics, where the Symbolic has come to its demise, higher Causes have lost their appeal and human subjects have been reduced to the status of bare life. Such victimized subjectivity has an uncanny, narcissistic double, which, forged and cemented as it is by risk, weakness and finitude, seems to concern nothing but purely immanent survivalist strategies, and experiences constantly threatened by the Other, and tends to be inverted into paranoid xenophobia or, much worse, the irruption of primitive violence or *evil in the name of enjoyment*. Such a postpolitics is the politics of status quo that disavows fundamental social antagonism and, thus, authentic ethical subjectivity and political transformation.

So, how are we to reinvent the political from Žižekian perspectives in such a postpolitical milieu? One fruitful point of departure for this end is to seriously take up his reinvocation of dialectical materialism, a monstrous, untouchable Neighbor-Thing for those who are still haunted by really existing Socialism and Communist regimes. Žižek’s dialectical materialism, as with radical politics and ethics in view, distinguishes itself from reductive, reified scientific materialism in the sense that it sees matter as an eventual site of unpredictable energy, which can occasion subjectivity and meaning. As can be seen from his long-term preoccupation with quantum physics and brain science, as well as his recent materialist intervention in contemporary theological debates,⁹ Žižek targets the

⁹ Obviously, Žižek’s recent works undergo a theological turn to, for example, Saint Paul, Chesterton’s defense for Orthodoxy, and critical dialogues with Milbank. His central concerns in these works, put in a simplified way, are the eventual conditions of emancipatory Truth-politics subtracted from contemporary cynicism, multiculturalist identity politics and global capitalism. In *The Puppet and Dwarf*, for example, Žižek conceives the Christian community as one of free believers that suspends all communitarian distinctions; it does not mediate or speak for any particular identities or ways of life but, rather, constitutes a militant whole grounded in unconditional universalism (130). To draw the itinerary of Žižek’s theological project throughout his oeuvre, of course, exceeds far beyond the scope of this paper. For other related recent works, see “The ‘Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy’” (2005), *The Parallax View* (2006, Chapter 2 in particular), “Toward a Materialist Theology” (2007), *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), “From Job to Christ: A Paulinian Reading of Chesterton” (2009), to name only a few. For a succinct comprehensive survey of Žižek’s materialist theological project, see Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and*

reified ontological order with his dialectical-materialist concept of the inherent gap, which he elaborates through the Lacanian conception of the Real (qua an impossibility that happens) and ingeniously grafts with his Marxist militant praxis. In “The Spectre of Ideology,” for example, he defines class struggle as the antagonism that splits society and reality from within: “[I]f ‘reality’ is to emerge, something has to be foreclosed from it—that is to say, ‘reality’ . . . is never ‘whole.’ . . . [C]lass struggle’ designates the very antagonism that prevents the objective (social) reality from constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole” (*Žižek Reader* 74). This antagonism is exactly what contemporary biopolitics, risk society and culture of fear occlude and what has to be reactivated for the reinvention of emancipatory politics. The inherent gap from dialectical-materialist perspectives in question also pertains to Žižekian ethical subjectivity. In diametrical opposition to the risky, victimized and narcissistic subjects grounded in common experiences of finitude, weakness, hurt, loss and so on, the Žižekian radical ethical subject subtracts itself from the state of situations and all forms of utilitarian risk calculus and management: namely, from whatever constitutes normality, habits and everyday life. Instead of indulging itself in consumerism, the care of the self, ethics of finitude or ethics against violence, the Žižekian ethical subject confronts, or is forced to confront, a radical uprootedness, the monstrosity of the Other which is beyond any ethical sublimation and domestication, and the state of inhuman excess. This is the moment when the immunitary logic is carried to such an extreme that the force of negativity destroys all false harmonious symbiosis between living organism and environment, all self-indulgent images of the ego, all false/forced choices that only serve to displace fundamental social antagonism, and is the only miraculous moment when the subject is able to intervene in and suspend the vicious circle of superegoic imperatives and *enjoying the symptom* (Žižek, “Neighbors” 152). This also leads us to the proper interpretation of the Bartleby politics that Žižek addresses in recent works such as *The Parallax View* and “Notes towards a Politics of Bartleby”: Bartle who embodies a kind of passive aggression that subtracts the subject from self-indulgent fantasy and interpassive choices, Bartleby as a living-dead Neighbor-Thing who is deprived of all cultural, ethnic identitarian registers and who cannot be counted, administered by consensus, multiculturalist biopolitics.¹⁰ *Who* could be our choicest heroes worthy of such ethical potentialities?

Theology (2008).

¹⁰ Žižek’s works on Bartleby should be read in parallel to those on the living dead (for example, in *Enjoy Your Symptom* 114-16, *Tarrying with the Negative* 108-13, *The Plagues of Fantasies* 89-90), where he, by way of Kantian “indefinite judgment,” explores the state of life in

A group of revolutionaries who dare to place all their stakes and see risk-taking as their sole ethical principle, or a swarm of outcasts, tramps, non-hospitalized leprous patients, who cast themselves away, or are cast away, from the world of the living, strike blindly and demand immediate justice and revenge (Žižek, *Violence and Virtue* xv), the moment universality irrupts in the guise of excessive violence? Or those who refuse to receive the H1N1 inoculation and thus outweigh any kind of biopolitical preventive measure, risk calculus and management? Whoever they are, they “fear fears and risk risks.”

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its surplus, or pre-ontological life substance, beyond recognizably human markers, a state more intriguing than “negative judgment” in the case of “He is dead” (with the predicates of life being negated but the subject’s humanity being kept intact.) Such undeadness, of course, perfectly fits in with the characterization of the Neighbor with radical monstrosity I cited above, as well as his interpretation of Kafka’s Odradek as a representative figure of Neighbor-Thing and “a stand-in for humanity by way of embodying its inhuman excess, by not resembling anything ‘human’” (“Neighbors and Other Monsters” 166). In the case of Bartleby, what Žižek reads into this somewhat over-interpreted figure is definitely more ambivalent than the refusal of work as a pivotal gesture against Empire as Hardt and Negri maintain in *Empire* (203-04). For Žižek, the problem with today’s resistant and liberatory politics, as made explicit in his conceptualization of interpassivity, is not that we are not active enough but that we are hyperactive: hence, a kind of aggressive passivity; “wherein one plunges into a blind flurry of movements in such a fashion that one’s sociopolitical perpetual motion ensures that nothing really changes in any fundamental way” (Johnston 141). We may be justified to claim that Bartleby for Žižek embodies a kind of negation of negation (or refusal of refusals), since he does not actually and specifically refuse anything. This amounts to, as Žižek succinctly puts it, “the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely minimal difference” (“Notes” 393). And this is taken up by Žižek to be a necessary precondition for any authentic act (*The Universal Exception* 223), a gesture of negativity that cleans the current ideological arena. In marked contrast, Agamben and Deleuze see Bartleby as a singular, non-exemplary original to whom all political, not to mention resistant or insurrectionary, roles are denied. For a critical survey of the different interpretations of Bartleby by Hardt and Negri, Žižek, Agamben and Deleuze, see Armin Beverungen and Stephen Dunne, “‘I’d Prefer Not to’: Bartleby and the Excesses of Interpretation.”

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