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On the Violence of Systemic Violence: A Critique of Slavoj Žižek

Harry van der Linden

Abstract

This paper questions the extension of the common notion of violence, i.e., "subjective violence," involving the intentional use of force to inflict injury or damage, towards social injustice as "systemic violence." Systemic violence is altogether unlike subjective violence and the work of Slavoj Žižek illustrates that conceptual obfuscation in this regard may lead to an overly broad and facile justification of revolutionary violence as counter-violence to systemic violence, appealing to the ethics of self-defense. I argue that revolutionary violence is only justified to counter subjective violence inflicted or organized by the state. Thus I reject in conclusion Žižek's further defense of revolutionary violence as retributive and as "shock therapy" necessary to disrupt the old society.

I

The common ("dictionary") definition of violence is that it is the intentional use of physical force to inflict injury on human beings or damage to property. My concern here is with violence towards human beings, especially for political purposes. Presumably, we should include psychological violence within the common definition of violence, provided that it is narrowly understood as involving cases of extreme psychological pressure, intense humiliation, and intimidation, constituting, as it were, an assault on the mind analogous to a physical blow to the body. For example, some forms of torture as inflicted by Americans on Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison may be properly described as psychological violence. The common meaning of

violence may be called its "core" meaning in that broader conceptions of violence are typically based on extending this meaning.[1] Johan Galtung's classic and original statement in favor of an extended understanding of violence as structural (i.e., systemic) violence illustrates this point. He argues that the limited (core) notion of violence – which he calls "personal violence" – is unsatisfactory because it would make peace as the absence of violence a too restricted or "negative" ideal. Galtung writes: "Highly unacceptable social orders would still be compatible with peace. Hence, *an extended concept of violence is indispensable* but that concept should be a logical extension, not merely a list of undesirables."[2] He goes on to argue for a notion of structural violence as social injustice correlated to the broader ideal of "positive" peace as the absence of structural violence, that is, social justice. Progressives, or the Left, have widely accepted Galtung's contention that we need a broader definition of violence, as is reflected in the topic of the Ninth Biennial RPA conference where this article was presented – "Violence: systemic, symbolic, and foundational."

My main aim here is to question the common extension of the core concept of violence towards structural or systemic violence. I will do so on basis of Slavoj Žižek's work (with an occasional reference to Galtung's classic discussion of structural violence), especially his recent *Violence* (2008), because his work exemplifies what I see as the main practical problem of the notion of violence as systemic violence: appealing to the widely accepted idea that violence is permitted in self-defense, it lends itself to a too-easy and rather broad justification of revolutionary violence as counter-violence to systemic violence. I will argue that revolutionary violence is only justified to counter (physical) violence inflicted or supported by the state. From this perspective, I will argue in conclusion that we should also reject Žižek's defense of revolutionary violence as retributive and as necessary to disrupt the entrenched social structures of the old society and transform pre-revolutionary desires and thought.

II

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[1] Cf. C.A.J. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 23.
[2] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* VI/3 (1969): 167-191, 168.

Žižek opens *Violence* by noting that when we think about violence we tend to think about criminal acts, acts of terror, civil unrest, and war. On his account, if we wish to understand violence, we must step back from the "fascinating lure" of this type of "subjective violence," that is, "violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent," and we must look at the violence in the background that generates subjective violence. Žižek continues: "This is the starting point, perhaps even the axiom, of the present book: subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence."[3] The first kind of objective violence is "symbolic violence," referring to the "violence embodied in language and its forms."[4] The second type is "systemic violence," referring to "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems."[5] Žižek adds that systemic violence tends be invisible because it is the "normal" state of affairs, the background against which we perceive subjective violence as disturbing. Yet, "it may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence."[6]

In order to further explain what he means by systemic and subjective violence and how they are correlated, Žižek tells in *Violence* a story, taking place in 1922, of the Soviet government forcing into exile a large group of anti-communist intellectuals. They left for Germany on what became known as the "Philosophy Steamer." Among them was the philosopher Nikolai Lossky, who "had enjoyed with his family a comfortable life of the haute bourgeoisie, supported by servants and nannies." Lesley Chamberlain, in her recent book on the expulsion of the intellectuals, reports that Lossky was puzzled as to why the Bolsheviks wanted to destroy his "gentle" way of life aimed at filling the world with high culture.[7] Žižek comments:

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[3] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 1.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 2.
[6] Ibid. Galtung makes a similar observation about structural violence (at least, in static societies): "Structural violence is silent, it does not show – it is essentially static, it is the tranquil waters." See his "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 173. Even though Žižek does not cite Galtung, it is clear that his understanding of systemic violence is directly or indirectly influenced by Galtung.
[7] Lesley Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia (*London: Atlantic Books, 2006). Published in the U.S. as *Lenin's Private War: The Voyage of the Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

> While Lossky was without doubt a sincere and benevolent person, really caring for the poor and trying to civilize Russian life, such an attitude betrays a breathtaking insensitivity to the s*ystemic* violence that had to go on in order for such a comfortable life to be possible. We're talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.[8]

Žižek continues to argue that since the Lossky family was blind to systemic violence, they could not understand threats of violence directed against them around the time of the Bolshevik revolution. For example, Lossky's son was taunted by a working class schoolmate with the shouted words, "the days of him and his family are over now."[9] To the Losskys, this act was incomprehensible, an evil coming out of nowhere. Žižek adds: "What they didn't understand was that in the guise of this irrational subjective violence, they were getting back the message they themselves sent out in its inverted true form."[10] In an endnote, Žižek writes that the Bolshevik expulsion of the intellectuals was justified,[11] and, so, it is not altogether surprising that he concludes his discussion of the threat of violence against Lossky's son as follows: "It is this violence which seems to arise 'out of nowhere' that, perhaps, fits what Walter Benjamin … called pure, divine violence."[12]

I will return in section IV to Žižek's notion of divine violence. Now it should be noted that Žižek's concept of subjective violence is similar to what I called the core notion of violence and that his extension of this core notion towards systemic violence has several components

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[8] Žižek, *Violence*, 9.

[9] Žižek recalls the story inaccurately. Chamberlain writes in *Lenin's Private War* that it was a servant girl who retorted to the son: "Pushkin-Lyagushkins! They will go to the devil now, you see" (24). My later comments on the Lossky are not meant as comments on the actual Losskys but rather as comments on the Losskys as constructed by Žižek. I think that Žižek overstates Nikolai Lossky's social blindness and political naivety.

[10] Žižek, *Violence*, 10.

[11] Ibid., 219 (chapter 1, note 1). I would have some sympathy with Žižek's position if it were the case that all exiles were active supporters of pre-revolutionary Russia and sought its restoration. However, many of the exiles, including Lossky himself, were critics of both the old regime and Bolshevism, and apparently Žižek holds that any intellectual opposition to Bolshevism was rightfully suppressed.

[12] Ibid., 10.

that he fails to distinguish.[13] First, Žižek uses the concept of systemic violence to indicate that certain social structures or institutional practices, such as political domination or capitalist exploitation, cause people to engage in subjective violence, both individually (e.g., rape and murder) and collectively (e.g., riots and war). In other words, social arrangements that cause subjective violence performed by individuals are called "systemically violent." Žižek uses "systemic violence" in this manner when he claims, as we have just noted, that "explosions of subjective violence" appear irrational if we don't take into account systemic violence as their "invisible" background. It is also the failure to grasp systemic violence in this sense that left the Losskys bewildered concerning the verbal attack against their son. No doubt, Žižek is correct that much subjective violence has political and economic causes, but he fails to substantiate why we must speak of invisible systemic violence in order to make this point. In my view, it is conceptually clearer to say that capitalist exploitation, for example, is a causal factor of violence than to claim that this exploitation is systemic violence. Still, as long as "systemic violence" is used merely in this way there does not seem to be any important practical issue (benefit or cost) at stake in extending the core notion of violence.

Second, Žižek uses the notion of systemic violence to refer to the fact that unjust social structures or institutions are sustained by threats of violence. Thus one aspect of Žižek's claim that Nikolai Lossky was blind to the systemic violence of pre-revolutionary Russia is that he was blind to the continuous threats of violence that were required to sustain this unjust society and his own lifestyle. Again, it seems conceptually preferable to say that threats of violence are inherent and common to certain social arrangements, or to speak of latent subjective violence manifest in certain social arrangements, than to call such arrangements "systemically violent." And, once more, not much seems to hinge on this other than a preference for conceptual clarity.

Third, Žižek uses the notion of systemic violence to refer to the fact that unjust institutional arrangements bring about serious harms, just as is true of subjective violence. Or, in the language of Galtung, whose view Žižek seems to accept, at least in its broad outlines, personal violence impedes our mental and physical functioning; social injustice, including

[13] Coady draws the same distinctions in his discussion of Galtung's notion of structural violence. See Coady, *Morality and Political Violence*, 26.

exploitation, economic inequality, oppression, exploitation, and the like, has the same impact; and, so, social injustice is structural violence. Accordingly, a person robbed at gunpoint is a victim of personal violence, while a poor person with an underpaid job or desperately in search of a job in an affluent society is a victim of structural violence. Here the purpose of talking about systemic violence is to bring attention to the fact that structures or institutional practices wrongly inflict significant harm upon us even if no subjective violence is directed at us.[14] Žižek seems to have this understanding in mind when he first introduces the notion of systemic violence as involving "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems." In other words, the smooth functioning of capitalism is, in fact, a violent process since it leaves behind a trail of preventable or unnecessary harms and suffering. Žižek also seems to appeal to this understanding of systemic violence when he maintains that there is "systemic violence inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism [since they] involve the 'automatic' creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed."[15]

The third meaning of systemic violence is its main meaning, and from now on I am using "systemic violence" in this meaning unless noted otherwise. Conflation of this meaning with the other two leads to muddled arguments and may leave one's proposed practical goals unclear. Relatedly, to view systemic violence and subjective violence as forms of violence may lead one to too quickly drawing the conclusion that the reduction of each requires the same remedies and strategies of change.[16] The most serious practical problem of the adoption of the notion of systemic violence, however, is that it may lead to the indefensible view that violence that seeks to counter systemic violence as such is legitimate revolutionary violence. To clarify this point, we must ask when subjective violence is justified. The common-sense view, to which Žižek seems to appeal (and which I accept in its broad outline), is that violence might be appropriate in the case of self-defense, or in the defense of other people, against persons who intentionally engage in, or pose a credible and immediate threat of, wrongful violence and are

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[14] See ibid.

[15] Žižek, *Violence*, 14. Žižek approvingly describes here Etienne Balibar's account of systemic violence.

[16] Cf. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence*, 33-34.

not fully excused in having the intention to inflict harm due to such factors as extreme duress and mental illness. Justified counter-violence must be necessary violence, for when a threat can be met in a nonviolent way a violent response would be disproportionate and, therefore, wrong. In a word, those who to some degree are morally responsible for wrongful or non-defensive violence lose their immunity to being subjected to violence. We may meet violence then with counter-violence. Roughly speaking, this ethics of self-defense is the same in meeting wrongful individual subjective violence (violent crime) and wrongful collective subjective violence (wars of aggression).[17]

At first, it seems that Žižek holds that this justification of violence as counter-violence or reactive violence is not applicable to systemic violence. He argues that in modern capitalism "it is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes." Žižek continues: "Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but is purely 'objective,' systemic, anonymous."[18] Accordingly, it would seem that since systemic violence is not attributable to specific individuals, the common justification of counter-violence is not relevant here since it concerns agents who have made themselves liable to counter-violence. The same seems to be true of Galtung's understanding of structural (systemic) violence because he argues that it should be conceived of as indirect violence since it lacks actors behind the violence similar to the subjects that execute personal violence.[19]

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[17] This is not to say that the practical rules governing both are the same. For example, war permits a more liberal use of lethal force since the perpetrators of unjust violence by putting on a uniform signal their preparedness to kill, whereas in violent individual (criminal) acts the intention of the agent is often unclear and falls short of lethal.

[18] Žižek, *Violence*, 12-13. Žižek is approvingly stating here what he considers to be Karl Marx's standpoint. In my view, Marx's self-understanding excludes ascriptions of responsibility, while in fact he frequently ascribes blame in the course of his actual study of capitalist society. Accordingly, Marx writes in the Preface to the First Edition of *Capital,* Volume I (New York: Vintage Books, 1977): "I do not by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colors. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations…. My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains…" (92). Žižek's work suffers from the same inconsistency.

[19] Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," 170-71.

However, it is obviously the case that unjust social structures are kept in place by individuals who fulfill, in varying degrees, indispensable roles in the continuation of the structures. These individuals sustain or execute "systemic violence," profit from it, and can be held in varying degrees morally responsible for it. Thus it would appear that these individuals are appropriate targets for counter-violence. Indeed, Žižek seems to draw this conclusion when he writes in reference to the violence directed at the Lossky family that "they were getting back the message they themselves sent out in its inverted true form."

Žižek is more explicit in making this inference in his analysis of "humanitarian" capitalists. He maintains that most people see only the philanthropic deeds of "humanitarian" capitalists, while the systemic violence that these capitalists inflict to generate the resources for their "good deeds" remains invisible. So people cherish, for example, the "good deeds" that King Leopold II bestowed on the Belgian people, including museums, parks, and public buildings, but they are blind to how his "ruthless exploitation" of natural resources in the Congo created a "holocaust" there.[20] Andrew Carnegie, with his use of a private army to suppress his workers, offers another classical example of humanitarianism masking brutal exploitation.[21] But Žižek's strongest criticisms are reserved for today's "liberal communists," such as Bill Gates and George Soros, who favor capitalism (and so are "liberals") and also pursue progressive goals, such as ending racism, poverty, and environmental destruction (and so are "communists").[22] What their admirers fail to see is that "today's liberal communists give away with one hand what they first took with the other," and that they "commit systemic violence that generates the very phenomena they abhor."[23] In conclusion, Žižek wonders how we should treat in the final analysis the "liberal communist who is undoubtedly a good man." [24]

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[20] Žižek, *Violence*, 14-15. Žižek overstates his case since Leopold's private rule of the Congo became a world-wide public scandal at the turn of the 19th century and led the Belgian state to take over its administration in 1908.
[21] Ibid., 21.
[22] Ibid., 19-23. See also Slavoj Žižek, "The Liberal Communists of Porto Davos," *In These Times*, April 11, 2006, posted at http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/2574/. Žižek writes that the French journalist Olivier Malnuit coined the phrase "liberal communists."
[23]See Žižek, *Violence*, 21 and 206, respectively.
[24] Ibid., 38.

He offers Bertolt Brecht's poem "The Interrogation of the Good" as his answer, the last lines of which read as follows:

> Hear us then: we know
> You are our enemy. This is why we shall
> Now put you in front of a wall. But in consideration of
> your merits and good qualities
> We shall put you in front of a good wall and shoot you
> With a good bullet from a good gun and bury you
> With a good shovel in the good earth.[25]

Thus Žižek argues, in fact, that the perpetrators of systemic violence are appropriate targets of revolutionary violence, just as the perpetrators of wrongful subjective violence are liable to defensive violence. To be sure, Žižek's exposition of the "humanitarian" capitalists conflates how individuals like Carnegie harmed their workers by ordering subjective violence against their struggles to improve their condition and how he harmed them through systemic violence by paying them poor wages and the like, but his main point that the "metaphysical dance of capitalism" actually has willing and culpable partners is clear. Many people are in various degrees responsible for upholding systemic violence, and so applying the common understanding of justified counter-violence as defensive violence, we end up with a very broad justification of revolutionary violence.

To call the harms of the normal functioning of global capitalism the result of "systemic violence" has a certain appeal. All too often such harms are overlooked, and putting them under the heading of systemic violence adds to their gravity and may make them more difficult to ignore. Surely, it is, for example, disconcerting that cases of public shootings in the United States make the headlines and that violent crime is central to much broadcasting, while huge harms caused by immoral social and economic institutional practices, such as the global human cost of raised food prices partly as a result of commodity speculation on Wall Street, receive hardly any attention. Accordingly, it is understandable that those who seek to overcome social injustice designate it as "systemic violence," and so seek to question the morality of those who

[25] Ibid., 39.

set or uphold unjust institutional rules with an air of innocence. This emancipatory purpose of the concept of systemic violence is more convincing as a rationale for adopting the concept than claims to the effect that the concept is important in order to bring attention to the fact that social injustice is sustained by the use of physical force or may cause people to commit acts of subjective violence. It is also more convincing than Galtung's rationale that we should define social injustice as an instance of violence so that the notion of peace as absence of violence is enriched. After all, we could simply proclaim that we must seek peace and justice (and peace studies could then still focus on social justice as a precondition for lasting peace). However, the emancipatory purpose is gained at the cost of conceptual clarity. More importantly, I doubt that this purpose outweighs the danger that the notion of systemic violence may lead to a very broad and superficial legitimation of revolutionary violence. Certainly, this danger means that we should be much more cautious and qualified in our discourse about social injustice in terms of systemic violence. But, of course, my claims assume what I still have to show: there are important differences between subjective violence and systemic violence, so that it would indeed be mistaken to hold that the justification of counter-violence with regard to subjective violence can transfer to, or includes, a justification of counter-violence against unjust social rules.

III

In order to examine the differences between systemic violence and subjective violence, we must compare them in terms of the moral liability of their agents, their respective processes of violence, including the types of harms generated, and the action options available to their victims. Let us first consider again the issue of moral liability. The prevailing view regarding the moral liability of the perpetrators of wrongful individual subjective violence is that they are generally fully morally responsible for the harm that they cause. No doubt, full culpability for subjective violence is too easily assumed in our society, the social roots of violence are too often ignored, moral indignation is too quickly expressed, and punishment is too eagerly and harshly imposed. Still, in most cases of subjective violence at least some moral responsibility may be

assumed and this is all that is required to (prima facie) justify counter-violence. Reduced culpability, however, raises the bar on what counts as proportionate counter-violence. As a general rule, the less the culpability of the perpetrators, the more the agents of counter-violence must be restrained in their use of force and so accept an increased risk of harm to themselves in order to reduce harm to the perpetrator. And how *much* harm they are willing to risk should increase as well.[26] It follows that much counter-violence in our society is excessive, while much praise for the agents of legitimate counter-violence is too easily given, so that this praise often at best is a distortion of the moral and emotional complexity of the decision to use force, and at worst a factor in stimulating excessive or even unjustified counter-violence. But there is no need to further explore here in our comparative analysis of the two types of violence the issue of praise for exercising justified subjective violence because in the common understanding of systemic violence it is wrongful violence only (and so its agents are not subject to praise).[27]

In sharp contrast to the culpability of the perpetrators of wrongful subjective violence, the culpability of the agents of systemic violence receives little attention in our society. Typically, this culpability is not recognized as an issue or it is viewed as non-existing or negligible. To the extent that the harms of systemic violence are recognized, one seems apparently to accept the common self-understanding of the perpetrators of this violence that they have good intentions in upholding the rules of their institutions, that they are not doing anything to cause the harms, or that the harms are the fault of the victims themselves or simply inevitable. At most, in the dominant view the very wealthy agents of systemic violence are mildly blamed for not contributing more to the relief of human suffering through charitable

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[26] For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially chapter 4.

[27] Since systemic violence in the common understanding refers to avoidable and unnecessary harms, this violence is always immoral and its agents are never appropriate subjects for praise. It appears, then, that we have here a significant dissimilarity between subjective and systemic violence. Cf. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence,* 33. However, this dissimilarity does not seem to bear on the issue of how the justification of counter-violence might be different with regard to wrongful subjective violence and systemic violence. Moreover, if we would include in the definition of systemic violence harms that are presently necessary but avoidable in the future, then some systemic violence might be warranted and the agents who sustain it may even be rightly praised. We may, for example, interpret Marx as claiming that systemic violence is inherent to socialist society in transition towards full communism. From this perspective, those who maintain this violence as a necessary step toward full communism might deserve praise.

work. In response, it should be acknowledged that the agents of systemic violence indeed typically do not intend or want to inflict harm, while the same is usually not true of people engaged in wrongful subjective violence. We will soon see that this fact is significant in terms of how the victims of subjective and systemic violence experience their respective harms differently. In terms of moral liability, however, the difference in intention is not essential. After all, we also hold that threats that are not intended but rather the result of negligence or recklessness may be met by violent self-defense or defense of others. Say a person who recklessly speeds through a neighborhood with children may in principle be violently stopped to save a child's life. So what makes people possible appropriate subjects for a violent response is not only intention alone but more broadly that we can meaningfully ascribe the wrongful harm caused by them to their agency. The agents of systemic violence may be appropriate subjects for a violent response because they are culpably wrong in their understanding that they are not "doing anything" in bringing on the harms of their society or that these harms are the victims' fault or basically inevitable. Nikolai Lossky erred in this way by failing to examine his own role in sustaining the oppressive institutions of pre-revolutionary Russia. Generally, people can be held morally responsible for not critically examining their own beliefs when these beliefs conveniently allow them to live very comfortably amidst much suffering. And the more people fulfill positions of authority the greater their culpability becomes, and so we may then hold them accountable in increasing degree for not changing their harmful institutions and hiding their failure in this regard behind "good deeds." Still, it must also be acknowledged that the connections between individual actors, their institutions, and the harms caused by these institutions are often complex and at times hard to gauge. From this angle, it is remarkable that Žižek states with great confidence (as we have just seen) that "today's liberal communists give away with one hand what they first took with the other," while he also says in a recent interview that "I don't think we really know how capitalism functions." Žižek continues: "The entire Marxist conceptual structure is based on the notion of exploitation. How does this concept function today? I don't have an answer."[28]

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[28] "Divine Violence and Liberated Territories: *Soft Targets* talks with Slavoj Žižek" (March 14, 2007), 3, in *Soft Targets* 2.1, posted at http://www.softtargetsjournal.com/web/zizek.php.

In short, the conclusion is that the degree of moral responsibility of the perpetrators of wrongful subjective violence and systemic violence do not so differ that it follows on this ground that the justification of counter-violence with regard to the former does not apply to the latter. Excusing conditions will typically differ in the two cases – notably, social injustice versus lack of causal transparency – but this does not bear on the validity of the conclusion since in neither case do the excusing conditions tend to completely absolve moral responsibility. Perhaps moral responsibility varies more among the perpetrators of systemic violence than is true of the perpetrators of individual subjective violence, but once again this does not undermine the conclusion because what is pivotal is that some responsibility is prevalent among most of the perpetrators of both forms of violence. Moreover, great variations in individual liability also occur among the perpetrators of unjust wars as a form of collective subjective violence. Soldiers who fight a defensive war against aggression will rightfully end up killing and wounding enemy soldiers whose responsibility might vary greatly due to differences in rank, duress, and support for the war. So, clearly, my contention that it is an error to justify revolutionary violence as counter-violence to systemic violence must be established on a ground other than that the moral liability of the perpetrators of wrongful subjective violence and systemic violence are decidedly dissimilar.

The most striking differences between systemic violence and subjective violence are to be found in their respective processes of violence. The dissimilarities are so pronounced that were it not for the fact that subjective violence sustains social injustice and that social injustice is a cause of subjective violence it would be hard to transition mentally from the core meaning of violence to the notion that social injustice *is* violence. In other words, equivocation prevents that the notion of systemic violence is experienced as highly counterintuitive. At any rate, subjective violence is a process of physical force, or a "mental blow," often suddenly and unexpectedly aimed at its victims, while systemic violence is a matter of being subject to harmful institutional rules as part of everyday-life functioning. Subjective violence in its most basic form involves that its agents generate physical force through their own body (stabbing, hitting, etc.), or an immediate extension of their bodies (shooting), and this physical force then strikes the victim. In psychological violence, the "mental blow" against the victim is also usually directly

generated by the perpetrator (shouting, threatening, simulating killing, etc.). The agents of systemic violence, to the contrary, do not generate or use "force," but rather create or maintain institutional rules that unjustly restrict the opportunities of their victims. People tend to accept oppressive rules, but even under such conditions law enforcement may lead to considerable physical harm. The agents of systemic violence might directly order or support this subjective violence and so be morally responsible for it, but it should be noted again that as agents *proper* of systemic violence they only execute, and are responsible for, "invisible violence," or the harm embedded in the mere conformance to oppressive rules.

The self-understanding of the perpetrators of systemic violence is such that they do not experience their "invisible violence" as traumatic, and what sustains their mental comfort is that the link between them and their victims is highly institutionally mediated. Directly inflicting subjective violence, to the contrary, is often felt as very traumatizing. Consider soldiers fighting in what they view as a just war. Assume, further, that they are actually engaged in wrongful subjective violence (so that the comparison with the perpetrators of systemic violence is closer). Like the perpetrators of daily systemic violence, the soldiers might (at least, initially) not wish to harm their victims (in the long run, hatred for the enemy might evolve), but unlike the perpetrators of systemic violence who *restrict* the opportunities of their victims, they are in fact *attacking* persons and wounding and killing them. In *On Killing*, David A. Grossman has made a strong case that most people have a deep resistance to performing the act of wounding and killing, and that this resistance is a major factor in explaining why soldiers who have killed end up deeply traumatized, including acquiring PSTD.[29] Other factors contribute to the emergence of trauma, such as fear, exhaustion, and feeling guilty about the possible exhilaration experienced when a successful "kill" takes place, but this only underlines how different subjective and objective violence are in terms of their impact on their agents. It is only in how psychological distance between the agents and recipients of violence is created that some resemblances emerge or that the dissimilarities become a bit less striking. Soldiers might find it easier to kill or wound the enemy by dehumanizing them, viewing them as morally inferior,

[29] See David A. Grossman, *On Killing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), especially Sections II and VII.

etc., processes not altogether unlike the perpetrators of systemic violence blaming their victims for their poverty, inadequate schooling, poor health, etc. Furthermore, military technology has enabled that killing in war is increasingly long-distance killing (even though asymmetric or fourth generation warfare somewhat reverses the trend[30]), making it easier for soldiers to sidestep their responsibility for causing harm and so avoid psychological trauma. The victims become more or less invisible, and the fact that the "force" of violence is no longer generated by the soldiers' bodies, or immediate extension thereof, enables them to become even more disengaged from what they are in fact doing. In a word, the execution of subjective violence in modern war is becoming more impersonal and detached, even though hardly as comfortable as the execution of systemic violence.

The "force" at the endpoint of the process of subjective violence, however, stays in place whether the violence is technologically mediated or not, and this force leads to a much more narrow range of harms inflicted by subjective violence than is caused by systemic violence. The harms of subjective violence are death, bodily harms, and acute psychological malfunctioning caused by "force," while social injustice or systemic violence leads to such a wide variety of harms as social and political exclusion, inadequate intellectual development due to insufficient educational opportunities, harsh working conditions, subsistent wages, lack of free time and recreational opportunities, inadequate housing or no housing at all, lack of basic medical care, hunger, and inadequate access to clean water. We have noted that the degree of permitted counter-violence should vary with the seriousness of the violent threat and the culpability of the perpetrator, and that from this perspective much counter-violence in our society is disproportionate or excessive. Some of the harms of systemic violence (e.g., restricted educational opportunities) are such that revolutionary violence as counter-violence would be disproportionate, especially since revolutionary violence may easily escalate and inevitably include seriously harming people with limited moral responsibility. Other harms caused by poor institutions, though, such as serious illness, starvation, or a much-reduced lifespan, are such that they meet the bar set by proportionality.

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[30] See Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2004).

What should be taken into account in making such proportionality judgments is that subjective violence tends to have a different psychological impact on its victims than systemic violence, even when their respective harms are otherwise equally bad or even similar in kind. Only subjective violence tends to come suddenly to its victims, often leaving them in fear, shock, paralysis, and helplessness. What adds to their trauma is the very realization that another human being is intent on physically harming or killing them, disrupting the everyday trust in minimal human decency and cooperation. So, for example, even a preventable industrial accident that occurs due to infrequent safety inspections as an instance of systemic violence will have a different psychological impact on a mining community than a brutal attack by the mine owner's private army against a peaceful protest of his workers in support of greater mine safety. Much systemic violence can be integrated into everyday life, but the same is much more difficult to do with regard to most subjective violence. It is this very fact that makes oppressive political violence so often effective in the short run. But, again, the differences here between subjective and systemic violence are less pronounced when subjective violence becomes impersonally or "bureaucratically" executed, as, for example, in penal violence (what happens during an execution provides a good illustration) and strategic bombing (assuming that the bombing campaigns remain limited in scope and frequency).

This brings me to the most crucial distinction – for my purpose here – between systemic and subjective violence: the range of options available to the victims in addressing the former are much greater than for the latter. Once the clubs come down or the bullets fly in political protest, the choice is to flee and capitulate, fight back, or hope that nonviolent sacrifice will cease the violence. Similarly, once a war of aggression is under way the basic choice is to fight back or surrender and then hope that a massacre will not follow. Surrender does not preclude nonviolent resistance to the aggressor, but it means at least that the aggressor has been initially successful in imposing his political will. In cases of political violence, the intention of the perpetrator is typically to impose his political will, restricting the options of the victims by making resistance to this will very costly. Personal violence might not have such coercive intent, but similar limited action options are in place. Basically, once an individual attacks you personally, the choice is to fight back or hope that the cheek is not hit too hard when it is

turned. In my view, fighting back, or counter-violence, is a prima facie right, but to make its actual execution morally right presumes that other moral standards are satisfied, such as proportionality in the case of individual counter-violence and *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* standards (or approximations thereof) in the case of collective violence. The mere fact of systemic violence, to the contrary, does not warrant counter-violence; for social injustice can be effectively addressed in many different ways, including through institutional reforms from within, nonviolent protests, boycotts, collective strikes, lobbying, and electoral action. Even when social injustice can only be addressed through revolutionary change, counter-violence is not prima-facie warranted because it might be disproportionate. More importantly, it might not be necessary because it has become abundantly clear during the past few decades that nonviolence strategies can be remarkably successful in overthrowing oppressive regimes and the recent emergence of the global public sphere will only increase the chance of success of future endeavors. However, once the struggle for social justice is met by widespread violence inflicted, or supported, by the state, revolutionary counter-violence is prima facie morally right. Broadly speaking, the ethics of self-defense retains its moral force in light of the fact that nonviolence has not proven to be effective against agents who have no qualms unleashing subjective violence. No doubt, these are all difficult moral issues that should be carefully discussed and placed within their historical context. But all too often this does not happen in Žižek's work, especially in *Violence*, and what we find instead is the claim that systemic violence rightfully begets subjective violence because it projects violence. This claim has only a ring of plausibility when we neglect that the two types of violence in this equation create very different ranges of options for remedial action. A more critical use of the concept of violence would not enable him to offer such a broad and facile justification of revolutionary violence.

To avoid misunderstanding, I am not claiming that the notion of systemic violence necessarily leads to a broad and superficial justification of revolutionary violence. Galtung, for example, does not make such an inference. However, one must then ask why the inference is not appropriate since it is commonly accepted that counter-violence against wrongful violence is justified. This means that one must show how systemic violence differs from subjective violence so that counter-violence is generally only prima facie just with regard to the latter. I

suspect that once such differences are articulated (as I have tried to do in this paper) the notion of systemic violence loses much of its credibility. At any rate, the proponent of the notion of systemic violence should at least caution or clarify that our typical emotive and moral responses to subjective violence might not apply to systemic violence. The proponent also should outline some convincing limits on extending the core concept of violence because without such limits, as will become clear in the next section, we might end up with more conceptual and practical confusion and questionable support of revolutionary violence.

IV

For Žižek, some revolutionary violence is divine violence, characterized as violence that seemingly comes out of nowhere and constitutes a rupture of the status quo; it is violence that is destructive of law rather than violence that confirms law; it is not the violence of an angry God against a sinning humanity in general (e.g., as some Christian fundamentalists viewed Hurricane Katrina), but rather it is the people's violence ("in the precise sense of … *vox populi, vox dei*").[31] Even though Žižek also describes divine violence as "violent popular self-defense,"[32] he places most emphasis on the retributive component of this violence. Referring to Walter Benjamin's angel of history who is propelled with his back into the future by a storm blowing from paradise and who witnesses the "pile of debris before him grow[ing] skyward," Žižek maintains that divine violence may be seen as "the wild intervention of this angel," who "strikes back to restore the balance [of justice], to enact a revenge for the destructive impact of 'progress.'" He adds: "Somewhere, in the sphere of the 'divine,' perhaps these injustices are not forgotten. They are accumulated, the wrongs are registered, the tension grows more and more

[31]See Žižek, *Violence*, 201 and 202.
[32] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 478. He is referring here to the "necklacing" of informants, police assassins, etc. of the Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorship by supporters of the new Jean-Bertrand Aristide regime.

unbearable, till divine violence explodes in a retaliatory destructive rage."[33] In short, divine violence is "Judgment Day for the long history of oppression, exploitation, suffering," and it *is* violence following the motto "*fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*."[34]

Žižek's examples of divine violence range strikingly in their historical scope and significance, including the threat against Lossky's son, the regime of terror of the French Revolution, the "Red Terror of 1919," looting and burning in the rich parts of Rio de Janeiro by the people of the favelas ("they were like biblical locusts, the divine punishment for men's sinful ways"),[35] "necklacing" done by supporters of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti,[36] and the recent Maoist rebellion in India.[37] Žižek's defense of violence in these cases ranges from fairly detailed discussions in a few cases to simply noting that the violence was "divine" (i.e., serving retribution) in other instances and so apparently legitimate. It is not the place here to assess his historical interpretation and defense of various revolutions or discuss his take on various recent protests; instead it should be noted that the very notion of revolutionary violence as retribution should be rejected on moral grounds.

From the perspective that violence is justified as counter-violence only, divine violence as retribution is indiscriminate since it is aimed at culpable persons irrespective of whether they pose a threat. Only those who seek to uphold the old regime through the use of force are appropriate targets of revolutionary violence. But even when this limit is taken into account, revolution as retribution is subject to dangers similar to fighting war as retribution to aggression: excessive or disproportionate force might be used, the rules of surrender might be ignored, and prisoners may be poorly treated or summarily executed. In both war and revolution, punishment should take place by legal instruments after the end of the conflict, allowing for the establishment of individual guilt. Once these guidelines are set aside, the injustice might be carried over into the future, and so the justice of the post-war or post-

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[33] Žižek, *Violence*, 179.
[34] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 162.
[35] See Žižek, *Violence*, 196 and 202
[36] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 162. See also note 31, above.
[37] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 394-95.

revolutionary society is put into question.[38] But even if we were to accept violence as just retribution, divine violence as a sudden burst of retaliatory anger by oppressed people is inevitably harming both to the guilty and the innocent. What adds to the problem is that rage has historical roots extending beyond the injustice that is inflicted on the presently living. Divine violence should remain within the divine realm; for only in this imaginary realm is there a being capable of establishing the moral guilt of all. Still, Žižek's notion that there are times that "the angel of history" interrupts "progress" has merit, but instances of collective rage are not such moments. Rather, "time comes to a stop" when collective action reflects human dignity and cooperation, anticipates a better society, and seeks to redeem past victims.[39] The recent nonviolent resistance on Tahrir square, leading to the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, may be seen as such an "interruption of history." Žižek hints at this when he describes the event as "universal" and "miraculous" due to its unexpected occurrence, "as if the uprising was not simply the result of social causes but the intervention of a mysterious agency that we can call, in a Platonic way, the eternal idea of freedom, justice, and dignity."[40]

Once the notion of violence is extended, where do you draw the line? Žižek is obviously not concerned with this issue, as is clear from his advocacy of what might be called revolutionary violence as "shock therapy." Violence is now described as the necessary force to disrupt entrenched social structures, and the "deeper" the systemic violence the more violence is needed to change it. This force may but need not involve subjective violence. This "shock therapy" includes the transformation of the will of the revolutionaries so that they are able to be really violent as well as the transformation of the will of the enemies of the revolution, "shocking" them to accept the new order. These aspects of violence as "shock therapy" come together in Žižek's claim that "it is difficult to be really violent, to perform an act that violently disturbs the basic parameters of social life." The difficulty includes that not all people have the

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[38] The recent revolution in Libya illustrates the point. The worry that the new regime might not be committed to full human rights protection was widely expressed after the apparent summary execution of Muammar Gaddafi. Not surprisingly, other war crimes committed by the revolutionaries against Gaddafi forces were reported around the same time. On the positive side, the National Transitional Council has at least recognized the need to respond to the criticisms.

[39] Cf. my *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 122ff.

[40] Slavoj Žižek, "For Egypt, this is the miracle of Tahrir Square," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2011. Posted at http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2011/feb/10/egypt-miracle-tahrir-square.

"toughness" to shock society into real change.[41] Thus Žižek maintains that "Hitler was not violent enough"[42] ("Hitler did not have 'the balls' really to change things"[43]), that "Gandhi was more violent than Hitler: Gandhi's movement effectively endeavored to interrupt the basic functioning of the British colonial state,"[44] and that Stalin's forced collectivization was an act "for which one truly had to 'have balls.'"[45] Now this word play may seem innocuous enough as some kind of assessment of these historical figures' intentions, aims, and methods, but the problem emerges when Žižek connects having the guts to seek real change with having the guts to use "shock therapy" as including physical violence as terror.[46] Most importantly, he describes those leftists in our time who don't embrace revolution as terror as "sensitive liberals [who] want … a decaffeinated revolution, a revolution which doesn't smell of a revolution."[47]

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[41] In *In Defense of Lost Causes* (169-70), Žižek describes the willingness to die as part of this "toughness" and praises revolutionaries such as Che Guevara for their preparedness to face their own death, similar to the attitude of Japanese soldiers in WW II who held their own funerals prior to leaving for the battlefield. He adds that Che praised the Cuban people willing to risk their own annihilation in the Cuban missile crisis. Thus Žižek fails to note the crux of the moral problem of revolutionary sacrifice: the Cuban people had no choice in the matter!

[42] Ibid., 151.

[43] *Violence*, 209.

[44] See Slavoj Žižek, "Disputations: Who are You calling Anti-Semitic? – The Philosopher Responds to Our Book Reviewer's Critiques," *The New Republic*, January 7, 2009. Žižek responds here to Adam Kirsch's review of his *In Defense of Lost Causes* (that appeared in *The New Republic* of December 2, 2008). Žižek's response is posted at http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/disputations-who-are-you-calling-anti-semitic. Ironically, Žižek offers a different account of his claim in an interview with *The Times of India* (January 10, 2010), responding as follows to the question why he said that Gandhi is more violent than Hitler**: "**It's crucial to see violence which is done repeatedly to keep the things the way they are. In that sense, Gandhi was more violent than Hitler. (…)Though Gandhi didn't support killing, his actions helped the British imperialists to stay in India longer. This is something Hitler never wanted." See http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-toi/all-that-matters/First-they-called-me-a-joker-now-I-am-a-dangerous-thinker/articleshow/5428998.cms. See also Adam Kirsch, "Žižek Strikes Again," *The New Republic*, July 26, 2010.

[45] Žižek, *Violence*, 210.

[46] Since "violence" is not always "violence" in Žižek, one might think that "terror" is also not necessarily "terror" in his work. So when Žižek says that "our task today is precisely to reinvent terror" (*In Defense of Lost Causes*, 174), it may not mean what it seems to say. Indeed, some Žižek commentators hold that he does not support terror. See, for example, Terry Eagleton, "The phenomenal Slavoj Zizek," *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 23, 2008. In my view, it would be an error to hold that Žižek is in favor of terror at the margins (say, as practiced by Baader-Meinhof Group in the 1970s), but he seems to argue that terrorism is acceptable as part of a broader popular left movement. It is regrettable that Žižek does not view lack of clarity as an intellectual and practical failure.

[47] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes,* 158.

Or, they want a "softened, 'decaffeinated' Fanon and Benjamin."[48] Those who seek real change, to the contrary, and, so, are really violent (i.e., they have learned "to love with hatred"[49]), must support violence as terror because only such violence (when the time of revolution arrives) can fully negate the present and bring about real new social structures and individuals. What is disconcerting is that violence is now justified without limit and discrimination. It further receives a stamp of approval when violence as "shock therapy" is also in some instances called "divine violence."[50] In the face of this violence, the violence that Žižek advocates (for now, at least?) in the concluding sentence of *Violence* is preferable: "Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do."

[48]"Divine Violence and Liberated Territories: *Soft Targets* talks with Slavoj Žižek," 1.
[49] Žižek, *Violence*, 204.
[50] Most boldly, Žižek declares in *In Defense of Lost Causes* that "divine violence = inhuman terror = dictatorship of the proletariat" (162).