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Bourne, Richard (2016) Vertigo in the City: Urban Crime, Consumerism and the Theopolitical Act. International Journal of Public Theology, 10 (2). pp. 167-192.

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Vertigo in the City: Urban Crime, Consumerism and the Theopolitical Act

Abstract

This article explores some theological points of contact and development arising from an understanding of the city not yet receiving sustained attention in urban theologies - crime and punishment. It gives an account of the expressive criminality of late modern cities and the attendant sociology of vindictiveness that shapes practices of punishment. It demurs from an influential but highly pessimistic vision of the persistence of consumerist desire, the only escape from which comes in a largely unsustainable politics of renunciation (Steve Hall drawing on Slavoj Žižek). It begins to develop an account of non-consumerist desire and political subjectivity though a critical dialogue with Žižek's exposition of Romans 7. It suggest that the fragmentary urban practices of Christian mercy (offender reintegration, education programmes, anti-gang social projects, youth work) enact a form of asceticism which more satisfactorily parallels the covenantal and participatory thrust of Romans 5-8.

Keywords: Asceticism, Crime, Consumerism, 'Inherent Transgression,' Vertigo, Žižek

Vertigo in the City - A Brief Summary of Cultural Criminology and Urban Life

The movement of 'Cultural Criminology' has begun to shed light on a much neglected area of criminogenesis - desire and emotion. It foregrounds the particular shaping of desire and affect in the late modern consumerist city, and moves beyond the simple binary of social structure vs individual responsibility. Instead, drawing most explicitly on the work of Jack Katz[1], it renews focus on the emotional experience of crime as a means of self-expression and perceived revolt against the mundanity and banality of late modern urban life.[2] Wider cultural dynamics of late modern consumer societies are characterised by an urban experience of simultaneous cultural inclusion into the desires and ideal self of late modern consumerism, alongside endemic structural exclusion from the attainment of such goals; yielding what Jock Young has described as a 'bulimic society.'[3] The prevalence of anomie, frustration, exclusion and alienation generates both expressive crime and the erotics of transgression. This erotics includes, for example, an exaggerated performance of masculinity which itself seals the offender into low-paid and insecure employment and

[1] Jack Katz, *The Seductions of Crime : The Moral and Sensual Attractions of Doing Evil. (*New York: Basic, 1988), *How Emotions Work* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).
[2] Keith J. Hayward, *City Limits: Crime, Consumer Culture and the Urban Experience* London: Glasshouse Press, 2004) pp.151-2.
[3] Jock Young, *The Exclusive Society* (London: Sage, 1999).

thereby denies them the self-realisation they have been promised in a putatively meritocratic (but in fact highly privileged and stratified) social order.

The picture of social anomie arising from frustrated ambitions owes a great deal to Robert Merton's diagnosis of recourse to crime as an 'adjustment' or 'adaptation' responding to the lack of legitimate avenues for the attainment of the American Dream[4] or European equivalents in late modern consumer capitalist societies. Cultural criminology adds recognition of the energy and eroticism of transgression; crime is not merely rationally chosen as the most viable option for attainment; it is a carnival[5] and a seduction[6]. Transgressive desire is tied to the conditions of late modern consumerism, and is actualised in ways riven with class sensibilities and sub-cultural signification. Mike Presdee discusses dog-fighting, cock-fighting, bare-knuckle fighting, street racing, and the voyeuristic consumption of 'real' humiliations, crimes, and violence of reality television. These are the seductions that "run along the edge of 'shame'."[7] Thus fuelling an increasing penal vindictiveness that is often inflected with terms vilifying an urban precariat or 'chav' underclass.[8] "The never-ending process of commodification under contemporary capitalism dovetails neatly with the increasing need for privately enjoyed, carnivalesque transgression. As the 'official' world of politics, rationality and science tracks down transgression, so the 'second life' of the people erupts as private pleasures."[9]

These four elements: the expressive and erotic carnival of transgression; Mertonian calculations; the 'othering' of the offender; and a culture of penal vindictiveness; all flow from a pervasive ontological insecurity driven by the assemblage of desire in the late modern consumer city. As Keith Hayward notes, the expressivity of crime, perhaps especially of violence, is "both a product and a reflection of 'hegemonic masculinity'…In this sense, the desire to 'exert control' becomes even more urgent when set against the backdrop of the *post*-industrial working-class urban landscape."[10] The 'delight of being deviant' is not merely a seduction into the sublime but ephemeral 'rebel self,' but also a desperate grasping at the crumbling sands of previously stable and controlled identity. "In a powerless world, crime creates power for the individual to express their individuality. …This is the art in crime rather

[4] Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie" *American Sociological Review* 3 (1938) 672-82; *Social Theory and Social Structure* Rev. Edn..(Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957).
[5] Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[6] Katz, *Seductions.*
[7] Presdee, *Carnival,* p.74.
[8] Keith Hayward, K. & Majid Yar, "The 'Chav' Phenomenon: Consumption, Media and the Construction of a New Underclass" Crime, Media, Culture 2:1 (2006) 9-28, or popularly Owen Jones, *Chav: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2011).
[9] Presdee, *Carnival*, p.72.
[10] Hayward, *City Limits,* p.151 n.10.

than the art of crime and in turn creates crime's seductive nature."[11] Stephen Lyng persuasively argues (when applied to male urban criminality at least) that a wide variety of such transgressive and risk-laden crimes constitute but the criminal end of a variety of spectacular expressive and exhilarating 'edgework,' from base-jumping to tagging, whereby 'the individual's failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death, or at the very least, debilitating injury.'[12] Thus edgework is a means of asserting control, "the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos" and thus rail against "the unidentifiable forces that rob one of individual choice."[13] It is, paradoxically, predicated on precisely the modernist myths of control, choice and individual entitlement which have generated the pervasive sense of banality against which it erupts. Whereas Lyng's work is aimed at a generic description of risk taking, and largely focuses on discrete, demarcated and even bespoke risk-taking spaces; Hayward rightly argues that, in the case of urban criminal edgework "the run-down estate or ghetto neighbourhood becomes a paradoxical space: on one hand, it symbolizes the systematic powerlessness as often felt by the individuals who live in these environments; and on the other, the sink estate serves as a site of risk consumption that provides numerous illegal avenues. The ghetto becomes a 'performance zone' in which displays of risk, excitement, masculinity and even 'carnivalesque pleasure' in the form of rioting …are frequently perpetuated."[14]

But life in this setting is not merely playful. Ethnographic research conducted by Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum has shown the prevalence of a "permanently atomised, competitive and hostile milieu …an 'open competition' with big prizes, few winners and many losers, [which is] democratising and diffusing throughout the population the physcho-social forces that fuel the search for social distinction as self-aggrandisement."[15] The quest for social distinction fuels a practice of consumption that is "not about freedom, it is a defence against humiliation…"[16] The discourse of failure is ever present, with neologisms like 'no-mark,' 'Skip rats' and 'aldi-bashers,' all of which denote the dispossesed urban poor; an insignificant 'other' with little self-respect or concern for consumer signification.'[17] Here consumer goods are not loved for their own sake (in some kind of fetishised base

[11] Presdee, *Carnival,* p.158.
[12] Stephen Lyng, "Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk-Taking; *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1990) 876-921, at 857.
[13] Lyng, *'Edgework'*, pp.859, 870.
[14] Hayward, *City Limits,* p.165; see also Presdee, *Carnival*, pp.31-56.
[15] Steve Hall, Simon Winlow, & Craig Ancrum, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime, Exclusion and the New Culture of Narcissism* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2008) p.206.
[16] Hall, *et al. Criminal Identities,* p.203.
[17] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* pp.219-221.

materialism) but are the pinnacle of a rapacious, unforgiving and aggressive material-semiotics.

The ubiquity of this sensuality and desire generates a kind of anxiety which Young describes as 'vertigo.'

> Vertigo is the malaise of late modernity: a sense of insecurity of insubstantiality, and of uncertainty, a whiff of chaos and a fear of falling. The signs of giddniess, of unsteadiness, are everywhere, some serious, many minor; yet once acknowledged, a series of separate seemingly disparate facts begin to fall into place. The obsession with rules, an insistence on clear uncompromising lines of demarcation between correct and incorrect behaviour, a narrowing of borders, a decreased tolerance of deviance, a disproportionate response to rule-breaking, an easy resort to punitiveness and a point at which simple punishment begins to verge on the vindictive.[18]

This vindictiveness is the result of an attempt to 'create a secure base' in the face of pervasive ontological insecurity.[19]

It is easy to see how the ontological insecurity of perpetual self-creation, combined with the commodification of complex cultures as brands and lifestyle choices constrains secular and religious political engagement in such contexts.[20] The widespread diagnosis of a dissolution of the social, and in particular, of the impossibility of genuine political action, is manifest in post-industrial urban working-class neighbourhoods. Here "the majority of formal citizens are no longer actively involved in creating social meaning and institutions, only ephemeral lifestyles in a process of narcissistic identification"[21] The subject, as Lacan argued, is captured by the consumer environment and a basic infantile narcissism is retained throughout the life-course. As a result "adulthood is now a continuation of the narcissistic aspects of the infantile world, and as this simulated faux-adulthood is imposed on the child from an early age, we are seeing the end of both traditional childhood and adulthood: distinct life-course stages that are now melding into a single undifferentiated consumerist form."[22]

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[18] Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 2007) p.12.
[19] Young, *Exclusive Society*, p.15.
[20] Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge,, 2005) pp.1-29, 87-122; Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp.73-106; Graham Ward, The Commodification of Religion, or The Consummation of Capitalism" in Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, (eds.) *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2005) pp.327-399.
[21] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* p.208.
[22] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* p.201.

The rush of adrenaline may be the dominant driver in urban violence or vandalism, but the motivational focus is not always devoid of pragmatism of financial gain.[23] There should be no swing towards an emphasis on agency that retains blinders to the criminogenic impact of social structure. As Steve Hall and Simon Winlow claim "one of the main factors in the recent rise of crime and violence is the individual's need for a technique of satisfying these ambitions and desires and thus releasing over-stimulated psychic tension in those locales where the opportunity, support and skills necessary to do this in traditional legal ways are not easily available, where cynicism abounds, where the confidence to create cultural alternative has never existed, where the tradition of criminality is strong, and where the sense of mutual solidarity and politics has been shattered."[24] Persistent theft, shoplifting, and the like are not simply attributable to a direct erotic thrill. One of the interviewees discussed in Winlow and Ancrum's ethnographic study, 'Tony', explains:

> [t]hese fuckers who say people do it for the buzz, for some sort of jolly, what a load of shit. You don't fucking risk your liberty for a buzz. You do it to get things you couldn't get any other way. … You do crime to get the prize, end of story.[25]

On the other hand, the older paradigm of rational choice theory, even in Mertonian variants, treats such instrumental rationality as essentially neutral. Thus, in response, cultural criminology seeks to provide "Merton with Energy, Katz with Structure."[26] What it lacks, however, in line with the eschewal of normativity in contemporary criminology, is a clear account of the possibility of resistance and change, the first step in which, I shall suggest, must be an account of the education and formation of desire, asceticism.

Like Katz, discussions of desire and affect in cultural criminology, and also in much urban theory,[27] centres around a rather static, naturalist and irrationalist account of desire and affect. This exaggerates the separation of transgressive thrills from instrumental reason, and underplays the extent to which emotions and drives to transgression are contingent upon the machine of savage capitalism, i.e. the particular constellation of desire-producing and shaping apparatus of contemporary consumer capitalism. The infantilized consumer is then a product of postwar marketing strategies which seek to garner extended access to the high phase of disposable income through the deliberate extension of adolescent desire from 12 to

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[23] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* p.69.
[24] Steve Hall, & Simon Winlow, "Anti-nirvana: Crime, Culture and Instrumentalism in the Age of Insecurity" *Crime, Media, Culture* 1:1 (2005) 31-48, at 46.
[25] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* p.83.
[26] Jock Young, "Merton with Energy, Katz with Structure: The Sociology of Vindictiveness and the Criminology of Transgression' *Theoretical Criminology* 7: 3 (2003) 389-414.
[27] Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect" *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (1) (2004) 57-78; Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* London: Routledge, 2008); Ash Amin, & Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (London: Polity Press, 2002) pp.78-104.

30.[28] This infantilism is a parasitic inversion of the demand for maturation in Christian visions of sanctification. As Benjamin Barber's evocative polemic notes:

> Much of the pop-cultural literature apes Puritanism's mood even as it debases its currency. It preaches sobriety (twelve-step programs) while encouraging indulgence (advertising and marketing), calls for temperance of character (conservative cultural critics), even as it moulds behaviour into a consumerist mould (conservative support for market capitalism). It demands leisure for consumerism (shopping malls as surrogates for town centres) but turns leisure into a kind of work (the imperative to shop) since the ascetic ethos is conserved not in an obligation to produce, but in a new obligation to shop and consume. Greed becomes a form of altruism, indulged not out of love of self but out of love for capitalist productivity.[29]

In contrast with the Christian ascetic vision in which desire may be shaped, virtue acquired, and character formed by the Spirit; modern consumer capitalism furnishes a libidinal economy of short-circuited, fragmentary and anxiogenic cycle of the creation and satisfaction of 'needs.'[30] Thus modern urban life is saturated with affective demands which overload our somatic and social bodies, and generate social disaffection.[31]

Against Romance and Tragedy

A conservative appeal for resurgent 'family values' of modesty, community and delayed gratification would leave in place the libidinal economy which produces consumer-driven crime. It also trades upon a vision of the moral agency of criminals which drastically overestimates and fetishises autonomy, and is blind to the pervasive impact of the symbolic order which it itself perpetuates. At its best it may yield some rather patrician philanthropic gestures, but these are little more than a sop. In Slavoj Žižek's terms, this would maintain 'an ambiguous attitude of horror/envy with regard to the unspeakable pleasures in which sinners engage."[32] Any such finger-wagging condescension produces the frisson of jouissance, and thereby operates as an 'obscene supplement' which perversely sustains the symbolic order of consumerism. Likewise the celebration of transgressive identity, including the criminal pursuit of consumer signification and status apes the way that global capitalism

[28] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* p.155. See also Benjamin R. Barber, *Con$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) pp.3-37.
[29] Barber, *Con$umed,* p.41.
[30] Bernard Stiegler, "Pharmacology of Desire: Drive-based Capitalism and Libidinal Dis-economy" *New Formations* 72:1 (2011) 150-161.
[31] Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals: Disbelief and Discredit vol.2* trans. Daniel Ross. (London: Polity Press, 2013) pp.86-90.
[32] Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Verso, 2001) p.68.

rapaciously colonises all particular identities, reducing particularity to brand. The effacement of agency and the eschewal of teleology found in both poststructuralism and critical criminology sacrifice the normative core which remains essential to a theological and ethical account of crime and desire. Hall and Winlow have similarly criticised cultural criminology for a focus on the spectacular which titillates but leaves untouched the structures of injustice which give rise to these acts.[33] Certainly, it would be easy enough to adopt a somewhat romantic vision of urban criminality as resistance. It is not that these practices begin as genuine resistance, but are vulnerable to co-optation or reterritorialization into the consumerist machine. Rather, in so many cases of subcultural self-creation, this 'resistance' has never been anything else but the consumerist pressure valve - the production of a pseudo-rebellious brand choice. Thus while the self-perception of those formed in consumer culture may be that the self-assertion of their criminal act represents, amongst other things, an open defiance of the logic of the system; it remains, in fact, part of the ongoing proliferation of signs in which apparent diversity and resistance belie a deeper hegemony of the same. This, of course, is experienced as the double-bind of the consumer-self - both to 'fit in and stick out' at the same time. But in such a context, Hall et al argue, "these minor eruptions of symbolic mischief - joyriding, pirate radio, grafitti, alternative fashions, culture jamming and so on - are merely *ignii fatui (sic)*, not the seeds of effective resistance."[34]

Radical criminology commits a clumsy ontological inversion in which deviance is renamed 'as a proto-political leap for existential freedom while renaming conformity as collusion with the repressive 'system'"[35] The alternative proposed by Hall draws on Žižek's identification of transgression as the obscene supplement to the symbolic order, and the futility of a 'perverse' attempt at a political act, doomed despite itself to reinforce that order.[36] We turn to a brief critical explication of Žižek's account of the possibility of a genuinely political act, and in particular to critique the inflexions of heterodox theology which influence his vision for an unplugging from the symbolic order of consumerism. Once we have identified the

[33] Steve Hall & Simon Winlow, 'Cultural criminology and primitive accumulation: A formal introduction for two strangers who should really become more intimate' *Crime, Media, Culture* 3:1 (2007) 82-90.

[34] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities* p.157. The inclusion of graffiti here may be sweeping. Chris Shanahan's work on graffiti spirituality on the Bromford estate in Birmingham shows how, in fragmentary fashion, graffiti can serve as an occasion for collective organisation and expression. Chris Shanahan, (2013) *'Bromford Dreams': Graffiti Spiritualities Project* available at http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/research/projects/social-exclusion.aspx [accessed 30th October 2014]

[35] Hall *et al, Criminal Identities,* pp.167-8.

[36] Steve Hall, *Theorising Crime and Deviance: A New Perspective* (London: Sage, 2012).

shortcomings of this analysis, we will be better placed to sketch the lineaments of a more radical and more orthodox theology of urban crime and consumerism.[37]

The notion of inherent transgression or the 'obscene supplement' functions in Žižek to identify those unwritten modes of transgression which uphold symbolic domination by contravention of public symbolic "Law."[38] This is a form of ideological inscription into the symbolic order, not escape from it.[39] Thus, for example, military 'hazing' and the disavowed homosexuality of 'don't ask, don't tell' are cited as a libidinal foundation for military cohesion that can only function when unacknowledged.[40] Public symbolic law finds in such transgression not a genuine challenge but an 'unacknowledged, obscene support.'[41] Žižek makes use of the Lacanian psychoanalytic categories of perversion and hysteria (the latter a form of neurosis) to note the way transgression may feedback into and sustain the symbolic order. The pervert constantly transgresses the 'law,' but precisely insodoing the 'law' remains definitive. Perverts operate within a 'closed loop' and do not question the symbolic order or doubt the injunction to enjoy. The existing order and the transgression of that order hold together. Transgression, including the occasional theft or riot, is prohibited in public law, but are nonetheless produced and, in that sense promoted, as transgressions by the law's obscene supplement. Transgression occurs *within* the ordering of consumerism. Perverse transgression cannot detach the subject from the 'law' of consumerist symbolisation.

If not transgression, then what can offer a genuine alternative political subjectivity? Žižek's answer is that the symbolic order must be traversed through an unplugging more closely modelled in hysteria. "The pervert is thus the 'inherent transgressor' *par excellence,* he brings to light, stages, practises the secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse, while the hysterical position precisely displays doubt about whether those secret perverse fantasies are 'really *it.*'"[42] The hysteric is the one who is unable to locate themselves reliably within the symbolic order, they do not know what the law requires or promises of them. This uncertainty places the entire symbolic order in doubt, and thus detaches the hysteric from it. One should note the shift in verbs here, the clinical hysteric is unable to position themselves, but the ethical demand to 'hysteria' requires a deliberate act.

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[37] Though as remarks below regarding Milbank will show, this need not thereby be a form of 'radical orthodoxy.'

[38] Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's "Lost Highway"* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2000) pp.9-12.

[39] Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002) p.lxi.

[40] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies,* (London: Verso, 1997) pp.23-5.

[41] Žižek, *Art of the Ridiculous,* p.11.

[42] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political* Ontology (London: Verso, 1999) p.248.

There is a radical decisionism to Žižek's vision of unplugging. We shall later return to the question of the sustainability of an unplugged existence. For now we must note that mere disdain or 'critical distance' from consumerism are insufficient for the radically of the breach required. Indeed, the stance of cynic is, for Žižek, the default mode of consumerist subjectivity, which thereby only intensifies the solipsistic refusal of the Other at the heart of the late modern symbolic order. The 'neighbour' is the genuinely threatening other who takes their consumption too seriously. The rioter looting to obtain goods of consumer signification may be all too easily dismissed in the mock ridicule - why would 'they' be so foolish as to risk imprisonment for something so meaningless as a phone or trainers? Thus middle-class cynical consumerism adopts a stance of one immune to the pressures of social signification, thereby labelling of the underclass as libidinally ill-disciplined and foolish. In failing to recognise the symbolic power of consumer goods to any subculture, a cynical subject exemplifies the view that the enemy of late modern civility is the 'fanatic' who fails to display 'a proper distance towards the dispersed plurality of subject-positions."[43]

For Žižek, drawing extensively on Jacques Lacan, in tones redolent of baptismal theology, the genuinely political act is a traumatic experience of radical 'subjective destitution', a symbolic death.[44] Only a radical 'feminine' act of this kind can enact the kind of hysteric 'insanity' that denies the range of choices, including the branded range of rebel options proffered in the symbolic order of law and obscene supplement.[45] Unlike the clinical hysteric, however, this ethical act is not staged for the benefit of the watching Other. Thus, for Žižek, any authentic political act is structured paradoxically: "[a]n act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be 'impossible', yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility."[46] Žižek turns to the language of Paul, specifically the contrast in Rom. 7 between spirit and flesh, the law of God and the law of sin. (Rom. 7: 14-25) "[T]he radical gap that [Paul] posits between 'life' and 'death', between life in Christ and life in sin, has no need of a further 'synthesis'; it is itself the resolution of the 'absolute contradiction' of Law and sin, of the vicious cycle of their mutual implication. In other words, once the distinction is drawn, once the subject becomes aware of the very existence of this other dimension beyond the vicious cycle of Law and its transgression, *the battle is formally already won."*[47] Only in the contrast of law and love, says

[43] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) p.216.
[44] Žižek, *Ticklish Subject,* p.281.
[45] Žižek, *Art of the Ridiculous,* p.13.
[46] Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau & Judith Butler *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left,* (London: Verso, 2000) p.121.
[47] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) p.299.

Zziek, is the subject uncoupled not from the explicit prohibitions of law, but from the obscene supplement.[48]

We shall return shortly to the difficulties with Žižek's selective and limited appeals to Rom. 7. First we must establish the complexion of the genuinely political act. Žižek deploys a range of examples from contemporary literature and film to illustrate his vision of the act. In Toni Morrison's acclaimed *Beloved* Sethe kills her children rather than see them enslaved.[49] Likewise, in *The Usual Suspects*[50], Keyser Soeze 'strikes at himself' by shooting dead his own wife and daughter, as they are held hostage by a rival criminal gang. Only in such an act of radical destitution can Soeze "[cut] himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, [only thus may] the subject gain… the space of free action."[51] Such Lacanian acts are required to expose and disturb, in Žižek's terms to 'traverse,' both the consumerist fantasy, and its ideological correlate in liberal democracy, which offers a false freedom, a realm of banal 'activity' and illusory choice. The genuine act, as opposed to mere activity, only occurs when the 'phantasmic background itself is disturbed.'[52] Not only is the fantasy that which structures desire, indeed, it issues the injunction to enjoy; but it does so by providing a blamable obstacle to our desire. Here then is the fantasmatic root of consumerist urban crime, and of a pervasive penal vindictiveness and a vilification of the poor. I could have that pair of trainers, car, smartphone, or some other particular object invested with intense consumer signification *if only* I wasn't unemployed, *if only* I was properly paid, *if only* I hadn't had such a run of bad luck; or conversely, I would be able to enjoy my large house and new car, *if only* I didn't have to worry about thieves, burglar alarms and the constant threat of home invasion. The fantasy need not explicitly posit an obstacle, it may also inscribe one in a fantasy of resentment that tarnishes enjoyment, "I work hard to get what I have, and even I can't afford the [prominent consumer item] that those benefit scroungers and 'chavs' have for free." Notably though, there is always a 'they' who have stolen or tarnished my enjoyment.[53] Importantly, this is not to deny that there are real issues of unemployment, low pay or domestic security. Rather, it is to say that these are never identified merely descriptively, but themselves construct a powerful symbolic order, undergirded by a libidinal economy that flourishes on the anomie and anxiety produced.

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[48] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000) p.130.
[49] Žižek, *Fragile Absolute* pp.142-5.
[50] Dir. Bryan Singer, 1995.
[51] Žižek, *Contingency* p.122.
[52] Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* p.374.
[53] Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* pp.201-5, see also Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) p.206, pp.308-9.

Žižek's earlier writings focused on the possibility of reorienting desire by traversing the fantasy; as Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher note, later writings eschew the reformist stance in favour of a more radical vanguardism in which an ethics of drive permits the replacement of the symbolic order.[54] This is not just a switch from gradual reformism to revolution, but also a movement in account of the Lacanian Real. The Real is not just the inexpressible surd lying beneath linguistic expression,[55] the "'true reality' behind the virtual simulation, but the void that makes reality incomplete/inconsistent…"[56] Thus, in contrast to the hysteric whose ethics is to keep desire in constant frustrated motion, the ethics of the drive is to 'mark repeatedly the trauma as such, in its very 'impossibility,' in its non-integrated horror, by means of some 'empty' symbolic gesture."[57] This 'marking' is not so much picking of an ethical scab, but the anamnestic repetition of an apparently 'lost cause;' though as we shall see shortly, the Christian connection of participatory and ascetic motifs in which that repetition may be figured are eschewed by Žižek. Nonetheless, against 'really existing Christianity'[58] Žižek detects the ground of new subjectivity both in baptism,[59] and in the Father's sacrifice of the Son, in particular in Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross.[60] Žižek reads this latter through the lens of a heterodox Joachimite-Hegelian modalism in which Christ serves as the vanishing mediator at the transition to an acephalous pneumatic community. While with Lacan, Žižek's subject is a constitutive gap, a breach not a positively constructed ego; contrary to Lacan's insistence on the inevitable return of a big Other, Žižek maintains the possibility of dialectically surpassing the support of all big Others.[61] The community empowered by the Holy Spirit "is the community deprived of its support in the big Other."[62]

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[54] Matthew Sharpe, & Geoffrey Boucher, (2010) *Žižek's Politics: A Critical Introduction* Edinburgh: Edinburgh university Press.

[55] While more common in earlier works, these kinds of metaphors of the Real as the inexpressible underlying the symbolic continue to permeate Žižek's writings - *Plague of Fantasies* p.208, *In Defence of Lost Causes* p.85.

[56] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jaques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2007) p.248.

[57] Žižek *For They Know Not* p.272.

[58] Žižek, *Puppet and Dwarf,* p.53.

[59] Geoffrey Holsclaw, "Subjects between Death and Resurrection: Badiou, Žižek, and St. Paul in Harink, D *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision* (Eugene, OR. Cascade, 2010) pp.155-175.

[60] Slavoj Žižek, "A Meditation on Michelangelo's *Christ on the Cross"* in John Milbank,Slavoj Žižek, & Creston Davis, (eds) *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010) pp.169-183.

[61] Žižek,*Ticklish Subject,* p.152.

[62] Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) p.171.

In painting the radical political act as homologous to the therapy of the psychoanalytic patient, Žižek precludes the hopeful note of conventional soteriology. The goal of psychoanalysis is not one of salvation, deliverance or redemption, but acceptance of tragedy. Life is constructed around a 'tragic kernel beyond redemption."[63] Nonetheless, Žižek permits himself to stray close to triumphalism in his sporadic, if imprecise, invocation of Christian apocalyptic eschatology. "At the core of Christianity there is a radically different project: that of a destructive negativity which ends not in a chaotic Void but reverts (organises itself) into a new Order, imposing itself on reality."[64] Only then in strains like Altizer's Death-of-god theology is the traumatic eruption of the dissolution of any and all Master Signifiers allowed to stand. More orthodox readings are, for Žižek 'a series of [perverse] defences against true traumatic apocalyptic core of incarnation/death/resurrection."[65] Here, ironically enough for the critic of all political liberalisms, resurrection is construed in terms reminiscent of nineteenth century theological liberalism, as nothing but the passage into the religious community, reconstituted here as a distinctly under-described communist collective of revolutionary subjects. In undergoing crucifixion God "who has fully 'become a man' a comrade amongst us, …not only 'does not exist' but also *knows this himself,* accepts his own erasure, passing over entirely into the love that binds all members of the 'Holy Ghost,' that is, of the Party or emancipatory collective."[66] The Spirit of the community of believers "exists only as the 'presupposition' of acting individuals."[67] While Žižek may be right to insist that only a genuinely political act can escape this symbolic order and its undergirding libidinal economy[68] he takes little opportunity to trace the possibility of such an act beyond the initial rupture.

Against Žižek's Critique of Asceticism

After the rupture, then what? How is the mode of apocalypse extended from the event of rupture to the *ad hoc* sustained insurgency. For Žižek the negativity that is the 'Lacanian-Hegelian' subject can engage in a genuine political act only as a purely negative gesture of "suspension-withdrawal-contraction …prior to its reversal into sublimation"[69] There is no presence of the ascended Christ - for Christ is here the signal 'vanishing mediator'

[63] Žižek, *Fragile Absolute,* p.98.
[64] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011) p.116.
[65] Slavoj Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox" in Slavoj Žižek, & John Milbank *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* edited by Creston Davis, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2009) 230-306, at 260
[66] Žižek, *Living in the End Times,* p.402.
[67] Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity" in Slavoj Žižek, & John Milbank *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* edited by Creston Davis, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2009) 24-109, at61; see also Slavoj Žižek *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001) pp.50-51.
[68] Žižek, *Art of the Ridiculous,* p.13.
[69] Žižek, *Ticklish Subject,* p.160.

bequeathing only a negative subjectivity and a politics of withdrawal into the foundational nihil of Žižek's scheme. The sharp distinction between inescapable transgression and genuine unplugging owes much to the bifurcation of psychoanalytic categories of perversion and hysteria, but it is also found in Žižek's reading of Rom. 7. We will here explore the nature of this bifurcation, and then briefly show something of the way this misses the point of the text, and insodoing misses the chance for an understanding of sustained unplugged acts. For Žižek the only means of extricating oneself from capitalist social 'reality' is the utter renunciation of the fantasmatic supplement, that which continues to tie us to the capitalist order. Thus Žižek claims:

> What if the split between the symbolic Law and the obscene shadowy supplement of excessive violence that sustains it is *not* the ultimate horizon of our experience? What if this entanglement of Law and its spectral double is precisely what, in the famous passage from Rom. 7:7, Saint Paul denounces as that which the intervention of the Christian *agape* (love as charity) enables us to leave behind? What if the Pauline *agape,* the move beyond the mutual implication of Law and sin, is *not* the step towards the full symbolic integration of the particularity of Sin into the universal domain of Law, but its exact opposite, the unheard-of gesture of leaving behind the domain of Law itself, of 'dying to the Law' as Saint Paul put it (Rom. 7.5).[70]

Actually existing Christianity is perverse, for Žižek, in shifting too rapidly from cross to resurrection, from critique to the positing of a 'new harmony' via the intervention of some new Master-Signifier. The contrast between the perverse re-inscription of actually existing Christianty, and psychoanalytic deliverance from the Big Other is figured as the contrast between law and love. Žižek speculates on the concomitant theologies of the atonement in which these divergent modes of hope are expressed. The apparent gratuitousness of the economistic 'sacrificial' view of the atonement gives a 'falsely innocent Christlike figure of pure suffering and sacrifice for our sake [who] tells us: "I don't want anything from you!," [but] we can be sure that this statement conceals a qualification "…except *your very soul."*[71] Žižek construes the contrast in relation to notions of grace and redemption which more than flirt with Pelagianism: Christ does not redeem us, but give us the possibility of redeeming ourselves in a decisionistic leap. Only the rupture is the *imitatio Christi.* "We repeat Christ's gesture of freely assuming the excess of Life instead of projecting/displacing it onto some

[70] Žižek, *Fragile Absolute* p.92. Žižek continues "In otherwords, what if the Christian wager is *not* Redemption in the sense of the possiblity for the domain of the universal Law retroactively to 'sublate' - integrate, pacify, erase - its traumatic origins, but something radically different, the cut into the Gordian knot of the vicious cycle of Law and its founding Transgression". See also *Ticklish Subject* p.151. Further, see Žižek's comments on the necessary negation of the negation that is penal substitution *Puppet and Dwarf, pp.*102-3.

[71] Žižek, *Puppet and Dward,* p.170.

figure of the Other."[72] Žižek repeats the stale and questionable contrast between the ontological model of sacrificial or substitutionary atonement which inscribe a perverse passivity, and the moral influence model of inspiring genuine imitation of Christ's unplugged gesture. Beyond the breach, there is no stipulation here of what such imitation may look like. With one exception, to which we shall return shortly, Žižek repeats precisely the pattern of which St Paul is so frequently and erroneously charged, of ignoring the actual public ministry of Jesus in favour of an exclusive focus on the cross.[73] While conservative evangelical theologies may focus on the cross as propitiatory exchange or forensic imputation of righteousness, and Žižek focuses on a denuded *imitatio;* a thoroughly libertarian account of freedom, a certain arbitrary decisionism, undergirds both.

This fragile event of leaving behind the capitalist libidinal economy can only become, for Žižek, a politics and ethics of complete renunciation. Žižek offers his interpretation of Bartleby the Scrivener, the famous character from Herman Melville's short story, as a politics of refusal; Bartleby's repetition of the response 'I would prefer not to' to every apparently reasonable request to do his job. Here we find one potent image of Žižek's conception of a passive aggressive revolutionary subject in late modernity.[74] As with his Christology, Bartleby's politics is read not simply as a politics of resistance, but as stepping away from the ongoing process of obedience and transgression, law and crime. Bartleby's refusal creates a gap, and thus displaces the constitutive power of symbolic order over the self. It is thus not merely the preparatory moment prior to the constructive offer of a new policy, but rather is that negativity which is 'given body' in a new social order.[75] This remains a politics of refusal without content; it is suspended on the edge of action, teetering without the normative content or direction necessary to step forward. Adrian Johnstone rightly objects that Žižek's constructions hamstring his ability to identify the practice of genuine resistance.[76] I suggest that the disjunctive contrast of Law and Love, sacrifice and participation, and the failure to extend his reading of Rom. 7 into Rom. 8, are a significant facets of this failure.

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[72] Žižek, *On Belief,* p.105.

[73] While true of Žižek, this is not true of Paul (thus placing in further question the substantive vacuum of 'the event' in Badiou's account). See, for example Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Exeter:Paternoster, 1992); Victor Paul Furnish, V. *Jesus according to Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

[74] Žižek, *Parallax View,* p.342.

[75] Žižek, *Parallax View,* p.382.

[76] Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 2009) p.107.

Žižek only substantive reference to the public ministry of Christ is to identify the invocations in the Sermon on the Mount as exemplars of the breach that enables radical subjectivity. To turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, or to give both coat and cloak, are precisely the kind of over-identification with law that unplugs.[77] Unplugging here is achieved through the exposure of the arbitrary and unjust use of law - the *libido dominandi* concealed beneath the fantasy of honour and shame, *pax romana*, or valid private debt. As with both the proletarian in Marx, and we might add, the bulimic subject of Young, Christ is thus included and excluded simultaneously, or better, he is the one included *as* excluded - as *homo sacer*[78] or as the 'excremental remainder.'[79] In one of the only instances where Žižek's reflection on law and transgression focuses explicitly on crime, this leads him to say that the dialectical 'negation of negation' is the realisation that law is 'a subspecies of crime, crime's self-relating negation (just as property is theft's self-relating negation."[80] Combining this with his account of the dialectical nature of Christ's non-perverse sublation of the law, he then claims that what happens is not, per the standard progressivist reading of Hegel, the emergence of a new synthesis which obliterates both constituents, but the narration of a second story which 'brings home the antagonism, the gap that separates the two stories, and this antagonism is the 'truth' of the entire field."[81] Thus the Bartlebean moment requires an absolute separation of law and love (agape). "Once we become fully aware of the dimension of love in its radical difference from the Law, love has, in a way, already won, since this difference is visible only when one already dwells in love."[82] The announcement of this second story is, we might say, Christ's "you have heard it said …. But I say to you."

There is much of promise here, but it is compromised by the erection of one of Žižek's characteristic dichotomies. So, Christ's teaching wherein the sinful deed of adultery is radicalised into the prohibition of lustful gaze may be read either as enjoining a perverse discipline of desire or as the hysteric breaking the vicious cycle of desire and prohibition.[83] In the latter scenario the New Testament is read supercessionistically as the 'second text'

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[77] Žižek, *Fragile Absolute* p.125, 140, & *Living in the End Times* pp.125-6. In a notable example of Žižek's sometimes hasty scholarship he draws heavily on a blog entry here, where the exegesis originates in Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Augsberg: Fortress Press, 1992) pp.75-7.

[78] Giorgio Agamben, (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[79] Žižek, *Ticklish Subject,* p.161.

[80] Žižek, "Fear of Four Words" p.70. For more on the founding violence of law see, for example, *For the Know Not,* p.204.

[81] Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," pp.72-3.

[82] Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012) p.820. Also in *Living in the End Times,* p.154.

[83] Žižek, *Fragile Absolute,* pp.125-6.

which displaces the law of the Old Testament.[84] Thus Žižek runs together the possibility of genuine unplugging with the necessity of a vanishing mediator and a critique of asceticism, the education of desire. There is something of a distaste for the ambiguous and quotidian practices in which a life outside of the consumerist machine would be led. In turning in later works away from the 'ethics of desire' to the ethics of 'drive' Žižek takes aim at teleological accounts of the formation of virtue, the acquisition of a second higher nature, in Aristotelian terms. For Žižek's ethics there can be no education of desire that escapes perverse subjectivity. Only the ethics of the drive, with the radical Lacanian Act, may do this. In the logic of desire one seeks but never finds the true 'it' the object of desire which fulfils, which heals the lack or void at the heart of subjectivity - in Augustinian terms, the heart will remain perpetually restless. In the move to the ethics of the drive one finds not a frustration at the eternal quest for the lost object (objet a) of the nomadic libidinal heart, but rather an embrace of the ineradicable void, the negative surd of a perpetual circularity, a delight and quest not in or for a fugitive lost object, but in the unceasing and inescapable presence of lostness itself.[85] Thus, while capitalist consumerism exploits desire, it does so most fundamentally not with the promise of satisfaction (the logic of desire), but through drive, "understood as the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction."[86] This is sustained all the more vociferously with the self-referential deprecation of the consumer-cynic; the whimsical 'I am a shopping addict.' Likewise, the transgressive glorification of urban criminal edgework is not subject to the ethics of desire; it is not just a quest for the lost object, but a celebration of apparently excessive or pointless risk, a hyper-macho variant of the shift from desire to drive - "*a push to directly enact the 'loss'- the gap, cut, distance - itself."*[87] Thus it is not at all clear how Žižek's embrace of drive can issue in the kind of radical political act that genuinely escapes consumerism.

Moreover, the absolute separation of the love of desire (eros) from the radical self-restituting love of drive (agape) so famously bifurcated by Anders Nygren, is here combined with an appeal for a thoroughly politicised Kierkegaardian leap ("what we need today is a *theologico-political* suspension of the ethical,"[88] such that "Eros cannot truly overcome Law, it can only explode in punctual intensity, as the Law's momentary transgression … *agape* is what

[84] Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," pp.67-8.
[85] Žižek, *Less Than Nothing,* p.63.
[86] Žižek, *Parallax View,* p.61.
[87] Žižek, *Less Than Nothing,* p.63.
[88] Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: For a Theologico-Political Suspension of the Ethical" in Žižek, S. & Gunjevic, B., *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011) Kindle Edition loc.163.

remains after we assume the consequences of the failure of *eros*."[89] While John Milbank rightly echoes a long tradition repudiating this rigid separation[90], his positing of a participatory metaphysic absent the kenotic identification with the excremental remainder itself renders the particularity of the covenantal, nonviolent public ministry of Christ as a vanishing mediator of the ecclesia.[91] It is, we might suggest, a platonic reading of Rom. 7 & 8, without the baptismal rupture of Rom. 6. In contrast to both Žižek's and Milbank's schema, in the Pauline text the baptismal participation in Jesus' death and subjective dereliction on the cross (Rom. 6) precedes the description of the bind of law and transgression in chapter 7. But importantly for our purposes, the literary flow does not end in this amorphous invocation of collectivity. Rather it issues, in chapter 8, precisely in the adoption into sonship, the union with the second Adam, the new law of the Spirit in which life outside of the sin-occupied law is sustained. That is in the proto-Trinitarian pattern whereby union with the risen and ascended executed Son moves the believer, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, in practices of synergistic shaping of desire and will (asceticism), to the full eschatological presence of the Father.

Though we should note, against Žižek, that the common, but overplayed contrast in Pauline studies is not between sacrifice and participation in Christ,[92] but between federal and participatory schema. The separation is, as N. T. Wright suggests, much less clear when one views the passage within a covenantal milieu.[93] While the Abrahamic covenant may be regarded as beset with a history of perversion, the culmination of that history, as narrated in

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[89] Žižek, *Theologico-Political Suspension,* loc.195.

[90] John Milbank, "The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek" in Slavoj Žižek, & John Milbank *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* edited by Creston Davis, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2009) 110-233, at 195. As is often the case Protestantism functions as an undifferentiated bogey in Milbank, who here simplistically splitting this between the hyper agapeism of the Fanciscans, Protestants and Jansenists, and the participatory account of Catholic thought. Nygren's variant of Lutheranism is certainly not all there is to the Protestant tradition on love, which, from Barth to Ramsey to Jüngel, has come far closer to the Augustinian synthesis of agape and eros in caritas.

[91] Richard Bourne, *Seek the Peace of the City: Christian Political Criticism as Public, Realist and Transformative* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2009) pp.148-151.

[92] Žižek, *Puppet and Dwarf*, p.102, *Fragile Absolute,* pp.157-8.

[93] See, for example, N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013). For our present concern while some, like Adam Kotsko, see in Žižek's reading a somewhat 'dishonest' slippage from an espoused identification with the "consensus (sic) of biblical scholars in supposing that Paul only ever uses the term 'law' to refer to the Torah, the inner logic of his argument points toward the fact that this univocality of the term 'law' cannot possibly be sustained in light of what Paul is actually saying in Romans 7 - that is, Paul must be referring to pagan law and describing the plight of a pagan subject." Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: Continuum, 2008) p.52. There is something of a false opposition, as if Torah here names only the moral conditions for a covenant people. The covetousness used as an example in Paul's exposition gives the lie here - for in Jewish and Christian thought the decalogue applies to both Jews and gentiles. But it does so precisely as Torah, not as pagan. For Torah is the law of the people covenanted to bless the whole earth.

Rom. 5-8, calls to mind both the Exodus narrative of deliverance (escape from the libidinal economy of possessive identity, violence, slavery) and the broader narrative of the Adamic and Abrahamic covenants which culminate in the participation in the cross, resurrection and ascent of Christ.[94] As with Rom. 3 or Gal. 2, it is participation in the active faithfulness of Jesus which shows God's faithfulness to the covenant. Thus, in Gal. 2:22 Paul unites federal and participatory motifs in declaring that the life he lives *in the flesh* he lives in union with the faithfulness of Christ.[95] There is no bifurcation between justification and participation. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in Rom. 8 is thus an incorporation into redeemed humanity by way of an ascetic reeducation of desire, an inauguration of a Christic libidinal economy. To love the world *in God* is to participate in God's love for that world, to love and to desire as God loves and desires.[96] The Kantian and pseudo-Lutheran dichotomisation of law and love means that, for Žižek as much as for the ever-vigilant evangelical defenders against semi-pelagianism and works righteousness, quotidian acts of mercy, construed within a synergistic messianic sanctification cannot be thought.[97] That is to say, this dichotomisation is the root of the tension between the dominant focus on rupture in Žižek's account of the Lacanian Act, and the more recent sporadic and underdeveloped suggestion of the need for a range of practices, a liturgy, in which the rupture may be sustained. Only such a liturgy, he claims, can hold open the possibility of that 'non-sense' which reveals the incompleteness and contingency of the 'sense' of a symbolic order.[98]

For Žižek's schema, asceticism is associated with perversion, with the "morbid moralistic" problem of "how to crush transgressive impulses, how finally to purify myself of sinful urges…" Thus subtending or effacing the more pressing question "how can I break out of this vicious cycle of the Law and desire?"[99] Mirroring Hegel's critique, Žižek repeatedly invokes ascetic renunciation, perhaps most particularly celibacy, as a perverse enjoyment of

[94] Hardly surprising, then, that Gregory of Nyssa's great classic work on asceticism is his *Life of Moses,* See Gregory of Nyssa *Life of Moses* Edited and translated by A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1978).

[95] This, of course, requires one adopt, at least in part, the subjective genitive translation of *pistewj Ihsou Xristou* as 'the faithfulness of Christ', e.g. Rom. 3.22, Gal. 2:16 See, classically, Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An investigation of the Narrative substructure of Gal. 3:1-4:11* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1983).

[96] See, classically, Augustine *De Trinitate Books 8-15,* trans. Stephen McKenna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) Book VIII, chapter 8 pp.19-21.

[97] On the unthinkability of asceticism since Luther see Patrick Hagman, "The End of Asceticism: Luther, Modernity and How Asceticism Stopped Making Sense" *Political Theology* 14:2 (2013) pp.174-187.

[98] Žižek, *Living in the End Times,* p.378.

[99] Žižek, *Fragile Absolute,* p.149.

endless mortification, desire is intensified in its renunciation, for jouissance is inescapable.[100] The functioning of New Age Spiritualities, perhaps emblematically represented by the consumer product of 'western Buddhism' for Žižek, is a perverse salve for the subjective strain of late modern life. It is essentially a kind of 'universalised indifference.'[101] Spirituality, unlike religion, lacks the potential for genuine act. It is mere activity. It remains, in other words, trapped within the cycle of enjoyment and renunciation (caffeine-free coffee, alcohol-free beer, the diversity of multicultural 'identity politics', against which Žižek's entertaining polemics rail), permitting one to enjoy consumer goods, as long as one does so with the right disposition of detachment and spiritual disdain. Likewise, asceticism is associated with "the Miser [who] invests moderation itself with desire (and thus with a quality of excess): don't spend, economise; retain instead of letting go - all the proverbial 'anal' qualities. And it is only *this* desire, the very anti-desire, that is here desire *par excellence. …*
… Thus the very sticking to the rule of moderation, the very avoidance of excess, generates an excess - a surplus enjoyment - of its own."[102] This is a renunciation that leaves the consumer-subject entirely in tact. The theological question is whether asceticism, the deliberate and sustained discipline of desire, really is opposed to genuine political acts; can it ever be the means by which a pneumatically empowered sanctification 'unplugs' one from the symbolic order?

Asceticism as Political Act

Can there then be an asceticism which is neither perverse nor a rhetorical radicalism stalled at the moment of rupture? The privative logic of miserliness is the perverse form of renunciation, the fetishisation of surplus value. What is absent in the programme of the miser's heavy-locked vault, is precisely the *use* of the 'property.' It is to be contrasted with the ascetic and monastic accounts of *use* in which both property and human desire are disposed toward the common good.[103] Thus, if we adopt a broader and more original

[100] Žižek, *For They Know Not, p. 141, 143; Ticklish Subject* 44, 106, 150, 293, 298, *Less than Nothing, 150, Totalitarianism,* pp.40-3.
[101] Žižek, *Puppet and Dwarf,* pp.26-33, See also Slavoj *Žižek,In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) p.364.
[102] Žižek, *Totalitarianism,* pp.40-43
[103] On the failure of possession as a structure of desire see Herbert Mccabe 'Poverty and God' in *God, Christ and U*s (London: Continuum, 2005) pp.53-8. On Augustinian 'Use' see Charles Mathewes, "On Using the World" in William Schweiker & Charles Mathewes, (ends) *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 189-221. There are an array of construals of the radical potential of Franciscan use, including some vague invocations by Žižek, see *On Belief* p.8, more extensively but without substantive theological deliberation in Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) p.413, and especially *Commonwealth*, (Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 2011) pp.43-4. More substantively see Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty : Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). For a more fulsome theological

definition of asceticism (*askhsiv askēsis*) as the formation and disciplining of desire, as self-formation not self-negation (which it becomes under the devaluations of the material world in the theurgic techniques of neo-platonism and gnosticism), then the term retains currency. One might object that this broader definition of asceticism flirts with vacuity.[104] Here the return of teleology is essential. The way toward this is, I suggest, opened up precisely by reading Rom. 7 in the light of the covenantal and messianic thrust of the full literary unit of Rom. 5-8. In the short space that remains, I can merely give brief indications of how a reading of Rom. 5-8 as invoking a messianic asceticism may address the vertiginous complexion of urban crime and penal vindictiveness.

The connection between asceticism and works of mercy is found in the pattern of active union with Christ; baptismal union issues in a participation in the descent of God in Christ to the outcast, to unjust death, and thus in his ascent to the Father. For Gregory of Nazianzus Christian asceticism awaits gracious completion, without which it cannot become true *filanqropia* (philanthropia), the redeeming good work of God. This ascetic ascent is the sacramental and soteriological experience of theosis, which Gregory explicitly associates with the notion of becoming not divine, but heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:12-17).[105] Notably Nazianzen does not give a programmatic stipulation of ascetic practices, but instead indicates how the showing of mercy is an ineradicable demand of the transformation of the flesh.[106] *Filanqropia*, unlike modern philanthropy, is anything but patrician condescension.

Thus the form of asceticism which may unplug its subjects from the libidinal economy of consumerism must not merely exercise self-discipline and temporary restraint. As with Žižek's account of the authentic act of unplugging, ascetic practices do not merely define themselves oppositionally to the symbolic order of consumerism (instant vs deferred gratification, immature longing vs mature rationality). While one might demur from her exclusively non-personal account of pneumatological 'force,' Valérie Nicolet-Anderson is right to claim that

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exploration see Kelly S. Johnson, (2007) *The Fear of Beggars: Poverty and Stewardship in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

[104] For such issues with broad definitions of asceticism see Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2008) and Geoffrey G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[105] Gregory of Nazianzus 'Oration 14 - On the Poor' in Brian Daley,(ed.) *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge, 2006) pp.75-97. See also Oration 1 §5 on theosis and adoption.

[106] While Nazianzen exhibits impatience with the body which may strike us as confirming the stereotype of an anti-body asceticism, it is notably that this is here figured in visceral terms of revulsion at the corpulent and sweaty reclining 'fleshy hulk' of a decadent body. Gregory of Nazianzus 'Oration 14' §17.

> the spirit functions as a productive force for practices of imagination that invent and create new ways of being a community ([Rom.] 8:26) The spirit stands behind the practices of *askesis* asked of the Christ believers. It contributes to the endless and tiring work of deconstructing and recreating a reality that portrays itself as natural and unchangeable. The spirit for Paul is a force that can nourish the practices of resistance central to the identity of the Pauline communities.[107]

Take perhaps the most commonly criticised element of a body-denying Christian asceticism, celibacy. Amongst the messy history of this complex set of practices we find early forms of celibacy in which the focus is not on a perverse rejection of sexual desire, but a repudiation of the exploitative and dehumanising structures of reproductive servitude.[108] Celibates breached the pervasive system of patriarchal social signification, displacing the tying of honour and shame, glory and humiliation to the production of sons and heirs. Celibate fraternity was thus the provocative ascetic liturgy of unplugging, based precisely in Christic participation in the gloriously dishonourable adoption as children of God. Of course, these accounts of celibacy and mysticism still drip with eroticism; not because desire is prohibited, but because it is redirected and, in the suggestive notion of Gregory of Nyssa, it is intensified,[109] not in its lack but in its satiety.

There is an inherent fragility to unplugged acts; perversity is always a danger. What is notable in Rom. 8 is that hope is not structured as a fiduciary exchange, there is no promissory note issued to the faithful, and nor, despite the use of sporting images for sanctification, does Paul regard this process as one characterised by linear development in an incremental trajectory. In being unplugged from the cycle of law and inherent transgression, the believer is not transported beyond suffering (Rom. 8:18) but finds their struggles caught up into the event of divine descent and pneumatic elevation. (Rom. 8:26-27) Baptismal union with the death of Christ (Rom. 6) unplugs the subject from the cycle of law and inherent transgression (Rom.7) and issues directly in an anticipatory life of often apparently futile and frustrated gestures. (Rom. 8) These come close to the 'lost causes' Žižek defends as prefiguring the communist collectivity, or the Christian community of outcasts.[110] When Žižek reaches for an instantiation of a community of solidarity with the

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[107] Valerie Nicolet-Anderson, *Constructing the Self: Thinking with Paul and Michel Foucault* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) p.235.

[108] Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Saviour: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) pp.103-124

[109] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate* available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm See also Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On The Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.13.

[110] Žižek, *Living in the End Times* p.402. Žižek, "Meditation" p.183.

'non-all,' it is notable that he points to slum dwellers.[111] Even here though, the solidaristic rhetoric lacks the structures and practices by which sustained action may emerge.

In relation to our focus on penal vindictiveness and urban crime, the ecclesial practices of prison visiting (whether for comfort and companionship, education or worship), offender reintegration and mentoring,[112] youth work in deprived areas, anti-gang projects, and the like, may enact the fragile collective asceticism in which divine *filanqropia* is made present.

These mundane practices counter the perverse positing of the figure of a criminal other deserving of severe punishment. The mutual exposure of vulnerabilities, and the pro-active offer of trust to ex-offenders found in faith-based prisoner reintegration programmes serves as a clear example of the practices by which the self-enclosing operation of consumerist desire are undone. Notably, the offer of trust without or prior to evidence of trustworthiness runs entirely counter to state-provided training in offender reintegration, which is strongly dominated by risk management and a tendency to regard offenders as inherently undeserving of trust.[113] Such enterprises are the kind of messianic ascetic acts which rupture the libidinal economy of neoliberalism in which coalesce consumer desire, penal vindictiveness and positivist risk management.[114] They offer integration into a social body not structured around the incessant pressure of self-creation and consumer signification. They are ascetic precisely in that they may form an integral part of the narrative of criminal desistance in which the formation of character and virtue are central.[115] This is not to say, of course, that the church is immune from its own perverse consumerist logic.[116] Without an explicit and sustained repudiation of consumerism, the urban presence of the churches

[111] Žižek, *Parallax View* pp.268-9, *In Defence of Lost Causes* p.428, Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2008) p.128.

[112] See, for example, http://hopeintoaction.org.uk/ , http://www.message.org.uk/enterprise-centre/ , http://www.caringforexoffenders.org [accessed 1st October 2014]

[113] Ruth Armstrong, "Trusting the Untrustworthy: The Theology, Practice and Implications of Faith-Based Volunteers' Work with Ex-Prisoners *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27:3 (2014) 299-317. See also Samuel Wells,& Marcia A. Owen *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2011). Needless to say, this need not be taken as a simplistic contrast whereby placing trust in ex-offenders eschews morally and legally required measures of safeguarding other vulnerable parties.

[114] Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2009); Jonathan Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[115] On criminal desistance as virtue formation see Anthony Bottoms & Joanna Shapland, "Can Persistent Offenders Acquire Virtue?" *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27:3 (2014) 318-333. This would be consistent with a call for reform of practices of punishment in line with the formation of virtue, perhaps most notably the Thomist account of the virtue of penance. See Richard Bourne, "Communication, Punishment and Virtue: The Theological Limitation of (Post)Secular Penance" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42:1 (2014) 78-107.

[116] Mark Clavier, *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism* (London: SPCK, 2013) Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality;* Miller, *Consuming Religion.*

would remain perverse, and their role in reintegration of ex-offenders would return the participants only to an asceticism of delayed gratification and an ingrafting into more 'respectable' and cynical modes of consumption and social signification. Nonetheless, the Christian community, even in often fragile urban presence, remains one of the only alternative sites of belonging to desiccated sociality of urban marginality or the Hobbesian contract of gangs.[117]

In contrast to the notable absence of the schema of ascension in Žižek's reading of Romans, it is in raising to the right hand of God the one who had been rendered an 'excremental remainder' that the vertiginous symbolic order is ruptured. The cry of dereliction from the cross evokes not the passing away of the big Other, but the covenantal fidelity of a God whose own subjective destitution ruptures the flow of stumbling idolatrous perversity and invites participation in a renewed subjectivity.[118] The acts of mercy in which are found a sustained messianic asceticism, expose and fracture the libidinal economy in which drive remains cycling, desire remains nomadic, the Neighbour continues to be figured as enemy, and the discourse of honour and shame in consumer signification press urban subjects into crime, anomie and anxiety. Genuine political hope against consumerist vertigo, crime and penal vindictiveness is grounded in a range of ascetic disciplines sustained by a community whose master took the form of a slave. Only the education of desire away from the unbearable pressure of fearful lack and grasping agonism can form the basis for the apocalyptic inversion found in St Paul's most surprising claim in his correspondence with the 'no-marks' and 'Aldi-bashers' of Corinth - "Everything belongs to you." All the narrowing of brand-loyalties, the self-constructions of factionalism and fear are subordinated to the apocalyptic Lordship of Christ - "whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future —all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."(1 Cor. 3:22-3)

[117] Robert Beckford, *God and the Gangs: An urban Toolkit for Those Who Won't Be Sold Out, Bought Out or Scared Out* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004). Most studies have been conducted in American contexts - e.g. Edward Orozco Flores, *God's Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity and Gang Recovery* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). On the complex complexion of religious conversion from gang membership see Robert Brenneman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For the Hobbesian contract of the gang in the state of nature of (American) prison life see David Skarbek, *The Social Order of the Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern the American Prison System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[118] Žižek nowhere shows an awareness of the Markan use of Psalm 22 throughout the passion scene, in which the cry of dereliction (Ps. 22:1) is antiphonally countered by covenantal faithfulness (Psalm 22:3-5 and passim).