

Democratic Violence

or

Totalitarian Security?

and other confrontations with forced choice

The way we approach the problem, the way we ask the question, is part of the problem.

-Slavoj Žižek

There are not only wrong answers; there are also wrong questions.

-Gilles Deleuze

Abstract

This essay is an attempt to understand how security threats/concerns are manifested and discerned within democratic societies using Slavoj Žižek's conception of "subjective" and "objective" violence. In his work *Violence*, Žižek discriminates between these two types of violence:

"Subjective violence [...] is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent."¹

This crucial distinction allows for an enhanced perspective on the ways in which security threats are discerned and met, and complicates the role of the state and international system in this process. One should not claim simply that there are concrete or traceable social or economic processes that serve as causal mechanisms for the acts of individuals or groups who commit violence. The relationship between "subjective" and "objective" causes of violence is, through Žižek's definition, reflexive. Acts of "subjective" violence deserve as much attention as does the "objective" violence that defines the "normal" functioning of the international system.

The terms "objective" and "subjective" are not meant in any way to create an *actual vs. perceived* threat dichotomy, claiming one type of violence or threat is any more "real" than the other (this does not parallel the distinction between subjective vs. objective views/judgments, where subjective is another word for bias and objective means true). In fact, subjective threats are often more immediate and palpable than objective ones. From terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in Iraq, kidnappings and murders on the streets of Mexico, piracy along the Horn of Africa, to military confrontations in the Caucasus, these phenomena share one thing in common: a singular, identifiable, subjective agent which is purported to be the cause (i.e. Iraqi insurgents, Mexican drug gangs, Somali pirates or Russian or Georgian military forces in August 2008, respectively.) To focus exclusively on subjective threats, however, may allow us to miss the underlying systemic violence that gives meaning to these lesser forms.

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, New York: Picador, 2008, p. 2.

For a clear indication of the presence of objective or systemic violence, disruptions that, nonetheless, seem more or less part of the “normal” run of things, we should look no further than the global economic crisis. While there are several culprits: deregulation, liquidity problems, excessive lending on sub-prime mortgages, an overzealous banking sector, and speculation on futures (to name but a few), the problem was *not* that the crisis eluded our senses or defied market expectations, but that it had *too many* explanations. After the fact, it seemed to have been *too* predictable.² The global economic crisis is nonetheless part of what is known as the “normal” business cycle: alternations between rapid economic growth and periods of stagnation or decline...thus, the erratic movement of the market’s invisible hand cannot be attributed to the actions or decisions of a single person or group, but is fully “normalized” and accounted for by the rules of market economy. The market and its inherent fluctuations/disturbances serve as the mysterious and anonymous background of social order, the zero-level conditions that constitute the frame of reference for what is an acceptable level of uncertainty, loss or damage. A deeper look into how this “objective” frame functions will allow us to reexamine the way security concerns operate in democratic states.

² In *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, Žižek recalls the joke used by Freud “to illustrate the strange logic of dreams: (1) I never borrowed a kettle from you; (2) I returned it to you unbroken; (3) the kettle was already broken when I got it from you, such an enumeration of inconsistent arguments, of course, confirms *per negationem* what it endeavors to deny – that I returned a broken kettle to you.” This logic is also evoked when he points out that an abundance, rather than lack, of reasons were used to justify the invasion of Iraq (see page 13 of this essay).