

# With Bloch against Žižek: Towards a critique of decisionist political theology

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Wherever political philosophy deals with the concept of utopia, and thus evokes the question by means of which categorical vocabulary the “non-place” of realized emancipation is supposed to be articulated, political thought finds itself (re)directed to theology as the place from which it—at least according to Carl Schmitt’s reading (Schmitt, 1979, p. 49)—once originated.

In this sense, many of the critical political philosophies of the twentieth century are characterized by an enormous breadth of reception of Jewish-Christian traditions and their integration into a political theology aiming for social emancipation. From the reception of Kabbalistic topoi in Frankfurt school critical theory (Martins, 2016), to Jewish-Messianic traditions in postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy (Derrida, 2006), on to the debates about the rereading of the Letters of Paul in the works of Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2005), Alain Badiou (Badiou, 2009), and Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2001b).

All of these reactualizations of theological heritage rely on the desire to find ways to express political transcendence as utopia under conditions of concrete, immanent political worldliness. Conceptions of a political utopia are in epistemological terms “transcendent,” because they are—along the lines of the Kantian definition of the term—beyond positive, empirical knowledge (Kant, 1968a, p. 236). The fact that as political concepts they still have to relate to worldly, immanent, positive categories, hereby marks the constitutive contradiction inherent in them, whose mediation therefore defines the theoretical challenge at hand. In this sense, it is not by coincidence that they find themselves constantly redirected to German idealism as the tradition in which the competition of reason and revelation in thinking social totality reached its most sophisticated form.

On of the more contemporary proposals in this regard is Slavoj Žižek’s Lacano-Hegelian reactualization of the Christian heritage, which he strongly marks out against what sees as a “Jewish” tradition in political theology. The aim of this paper will be a fundamental critique of Žižek’s project that relies both on political and philological arguments. I will argue that Žižek’s specific rereading of the Christian heritage leads to a voluntarist and solipsistic decisionism

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with strongly authoritarian tendencies. Žižek has already been criticized by many along similar fault lines. The charge of “decisionist irrationalism” specifically has already been levelled against him (and Alain Badiou) by Micha Brumlik (Brumlik, 2013, pp. 244–245.). A similar critique has been formulated by Oliver Marchart, calling Žižek’s political theory a “form of quasi-existentialist adventurism and decisionism” (Marchart, 2007, p. 104), while others have pointed out the inherent solipsism of his account of political subjectivity (Robinson & Tormey, 2005).

While I substantially agree with the trajectory of the existing criticism of Žižek’s political philosophy, I will formulate my own critique in the context of the political theology of Ernst Bloch, which both serves as a countermodel and a way to illustrate the—in my opinion—fateful philological choices Žižek makes in his reading of the German idealist and theological tradition. In this sense, my own critique of Žižek’s project does not systematically differ from the existing ones, but rather supplements them by providing a countermodel derived from an immanent critique of Žižek’s reading of the theological and philosophical tradition.

The juxtaposition of Žižek with Bloch appears as uniquely useful in this regard because the philological dimension of their respective political theologies runs along remarkably similar lines, which makes it possible to precisely identify the nodal points at which their conceptions part ways, thus shedding light not only on the fact that, but also why Žižek’s political theology devolves into irrationalist decisionism while making the case for a countermodel at the same time.

This venture seems all the more relevant, since the relation between Bloch and Žižek has hitherto been either neglected or misunderstood. Most importantly by Žižek himself. Although he has barely written on Bloch, there is one minor text that specifically focuses on him, a 5-page introduction into an anthology on Blochian utopianism. In this text Žižek mainly elaborates his own ontology along the lines of Blochian categories, specifically referring to

Bloch’s insight that “only an atheist can be a good Christian and only a Christian can be a good atheist.” One should take this insight quite literally: in order to be a true atheist, one has to go through the Christian experience of the death of God—of God as the transcendent Master who steers and regulates the universe—and of resurrection in the Holy Spirit—in the collective of those who fight for emancipation. (Žižek, 2013, pp. xix–xx)

As we will see, Žižek here attempts to parallelize the two approaches exactly at the point, where—upon closer scrutiny—they must appear most irreconcilable. The notion that Blochian and Žižekian “atheism” essentially mean the same thing, can only be upheld by neglecting a more thorough philological investigation of the roots of their respective conceptions of negativity. I will show that what Bloch refers to in the passage quoted by Žižek is a dialectical mediation of immanence and transcendence (atheism and Christianity), while Žižek’s model comes down to a radical immanentization of divine transcendence. The misunderstanding thus lies in equating these two approaches. What little exists in terms of research on this matter essentially either follows a similar parallelization than the one Žižek himself hints at (Thompson, 2019, pp. 295–301; Stolze, 2019, pp. 207–208) or at least finds the two approaches (whether in whole or in part) rather unproblematically compatible (Boucher, 2020; Hempel, 2019; Thompson, 2012; Thompson, 2009, pp. 10–11). In any case, the irreconcilably different conceptions of negativity and the diametrically opposed readings of the Jewish tradition that Bloch and Žižek embrace, respectively, are by and large conceptually ignored.

However, the misunderstanding could not take place if there were not substantial similarities between the two conceptions. Both Bloch and Žižek are dialectically versed thinkers whose thought is steeped in the tradition of German idealism. Both are interested in political theology as a means of articulating the transcendent base of a revolutionary emancipatory politics. And both their German idealism and political theology rest on strikingly similar sources.

Their exegesis of the Jewish-Christian tradition develops from their respective interpretations of the core of mosaic monotheism, and both see the myth of Job and the passion of Christ as climactic in this regard. The radically different conclusions at which they arrive can in turn be traced back to their diametrically opposed readings of late Schelling’s theologico-ontological considerations in his “*Freiheitsschrift*” (“Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom”) and the “world ages” fragments and their different assessments of the role of Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy in this regard.

Kierkegaard and, even more so, Schelling therefore appear as the crucial embodiment of an intellectual junction linking the tradition of German idealism either with left Hegelianism and subsequently Marxism, or existentialism, and its predecessors. Ernst Bloch himself referred to this intellectual junction as the intersection of the “line of salvation” (“Heilslinie”) and the “line of perdition” (“Unheilslinie”) (Bloch, 1985a, pp. 355–359). According to Bloch, depending on one’s reading of Schelling, and, more specifically, the “Freiheitsschrift” and the “world ages,” one either arrives via Schelling at the young Hegelians, Feuerbach, and eventually Marx (“line of salvation”), or one proceeds from late Schelling directly to Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and eventually Heidegger (“line of perdition”).

While Bloch, as we will see, takes the turn to Marx, specifically by taking up Schelling’s and Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegelian panlogism while discarding Schelling’s prioritization of nonbeing and Kierkegaard’s unmediated solipsism, thus managing to mediate transcendence and immanence in his political theology, Žižek, by affirming said prioritization as the “void” in the absolute and collapsing the Judeo-Christian tradition into pure immanence, follows a Kierkegaardian conception of political theology leading to solipsist decisionism.

I will develop my argument in six sections, three pertaining to each author. I will begin with a description and subsequent criticism of Žižek’s model in Sections 1–3, that will be further elucidated in Sections 4–6 by its confrontation with Bloch’s model along the lines of their reading of Schelling, Kierkegaard, and the Bible.

The first section will describe the relevance of Schelling’s late philosophy for Žižek’s ontological premises. The second section will show how Žižek approaches the theological canon, specifically Exodus 3,14, the book of Job and the passion of Christ, through the lens of the aforementioned ontological premises, while the third section will describe how Žižek politicizes his ontological considerations and his theological exegesis by recourse to Kierkegaard.

In Section 5, I will briefly outline the contours of Bloch’s ontological premises and their relation to the Marxist tradition, followed by a discussion of Bloch’s reading of Exodus 3,14, the book of Job and the passion of Christ in Section 6. The last section will deal with Bloch’s reading of Schelling and Kierkegaard and contrast it with Žižek’s interpretation.

## 2 | THE VOID OF THE ABSOLUTE: ŽIŽEK READS SCHELLING

One of the key thinkers that inform the political theologies of both Bloch and Žižek is Friedrich Schelling. This in large part due to the special position that Schelling occupies in the tradition of German idealism and that makes him uniquely interesting for the political theologies of Bloch and Žižek. Schelling’s late philosophy unifies elements that were to become prevalent in all forms of post-Hegelian thought. By formulating the first concise criticism of the Hegelian system as panlogism, questioning the totality of abstract reason and contrasting it with the counterprinciple of human freedom, while still adhering to the requirements of system philosophy, Schelling tried to creatively mediate the demands of the abstract universality of reason with the “indivisible remainder” (Schelling, 1975, p. 54) that does not merge in panlogic systems. In this, he can be seen as an early precursor to both Marxist materialism as well as existentialism and its insistence on “existence” against the all-devouring force of the essentialist “systems” of German idealism. It is not by coincidence that both Kierkegaard and Engels attended Schelling’s Berlin lectures (Frank, 1993, p. 9). Both Bloch and Žižek share this reading of Schelling as a crucial nodal point in philosophical history (Bloch, 1985a, pp. 358–359; Žižek, 2006a, p. 4; Žižek, 2007, pp. 8–9).

But, as opposed to Kierkegaard, in Schelling the critique of panlogic systematic philosophy becomes system itself. Logos still shapes the world, according to Schelling, but only insofar as it is mediated through something that precedes it:

The whole world lies, so to speak, in the nets of the understanding or of reason, but the question is how exactly it got into those nets since there is obviously something other and something more than mere reason in the world, indeed there is something which strives beyond these barriers. (Schelling, 1994, p. 147)

Therefore, rather than abstractly negating the force of systematic panlogism, Schelling recognizes that logos itself necessarily refers to something beyond itself.

Primarily in his "Freiheitsschrift," and in more detail in the "world ages" fragments, Schelling attempts to ontologically and conceptually reintegrate this other of logos into a philosophy that, despite its criticism of panlogism, still aspires to systematicity. He attempts to account for human freedom ontologically, connecting it to a split in god itself. According to Schelling, God is not only spirit, but a part of him is what Schelling calls "nature in god" (Schelling, 1975, p. 53), a groundless ground of irrational drives. This primordial "Ungrund [Non-Ground]" (Schelling, 1975, pp. 97–101) of a-logical or prelogical drives, similar to Schopenhauerian "Wille," marks the "indivisible remainder": That which always resists subsumption under the logos, the "rest" that remains after any systematic endeavor in philosophy (Schelling, 1975, p. 54). What prevents the absolute, or social totality, from coinciding with itself, thus becomes the key paradigm of philosophical investigation. This theoretical maneuver will be taken up by both Žižek and Bloch albeit from radically different perspectives.

The Schellingian conception of an "Ungrund" prior to Logos is interpreted by Žižek as articulating a void in the absolute itself which is, at the same time, by way of the subject's existential reference to the absolute, always already a void in the subject itself. An idea that Žižek will constantly reiterate in his following works, but that he develops by way of his Lacanian reading of Schelling. It is of utmost importance in this regard to note that Žižek's reading of the "Ungrund" is a profoundly negative one:

far from being a mere nihil privativum, this 'nothing' which precedes Ground stands for the 'absolute indifference' qua the abyss of pure Freedom which is not yet the predicate-property of some Subject but, rather, designates a pure impersonal Willing [Wollen], which wills nothing. (Žižek, 2007, p. 14)

The explicit reference to "nihil privativum," that is "nothingness" understood as a lack of something, marks the radical negativity of Žižek's conception: The nothingness of the absolute is not to be conceived as a lack or a potential but a radical glaring void.

According to Žižek's psychoanalytical-Lacanian reading of Schelling, the prime problem of ontology and theory of knowledge is therefore not the existence of an unattainable absolute and how it relates to the subject but the very idea of any transcendent entity relating to human subjectivity. At the heart of the absolute and the heart of modern subjectivity is a bottomless void:

Here one has to accomplish "another turn of the screw" and to transpose the lack of the subject (his inability to comply fully with the big Other's ethical injunction) into a lack of this Other itself: as Schelling emphasizes, the Absolute itself is split into its true Existence and the impenetrable Ground of its Existence, so that God Himself, in an unheard-of way, seems to resist the full actualization of the Ideal — this displacement of the split into the Absolute itself, of course, delivers us from guilt. (Žižek, 2007, p. 98)

Thus, the Žižekian "deliverance from guilt" quoted above is based on the idea that the absolute only exists in its nonexistence. Or, to put it differently: It is not us humans which are imperfect, fallible, incomplete vis-a-vis the perfection of a transcendent ideal, etc. but it is god (the ideal/the absolute ...), who is imperfect because as the absolute it (he) is identical with its (his) own nonexistence:

instead of a hidden terrifying secret, we encounter the same thing behind the veil as in front of it, this very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the "pure" difference that separates an element from itself. And is this also not the ultimate definition of the divinity—God, too, has to wear a mask of himself? Perhaps "God" is the name for this supreme split between the Absolute as the noumenal Thing and the Absolute as the appearance of itself, for the fact that the two are the same,

that the difference between the two is purely formal. In this precise sense, “God” names the supreme contradiction: God—the absolute unrepresentable Beyond—has to appear as such. (Žižek, 2006b, p. 109)

In Schelling's terms: The irrational “Ungrund,” the groundless ground of quasi-Schopenhauerian drives is already part of god himself. While Schelling still manages to incorporate the Ungrund into a system in which eventually logos triumphs as the primary principle, Žižek pushes this notion even further, resulting in a conception that keeps the mere form of an absolute intact, but voids it so thoroughly of any traces of substantialism as to make it virtual identical with nihilism.

### 3 | ŽIŽEK'S EXEGESIS

Based on these ontological paradigms, Žižek develops his political theology in the context of an examination of the Jewish legacy in political theology. Žižek echoes the standard philosophical account of the meaning of Jewish monotheism for the development of enlightenment metaphysics and its relation to utopian political aspirations (Žižek, 2001a, p. 129).

Ranging from the early rationalist philosophy of Maimonides, over to Mendelson and the tradition of Jewish enlightenment, up until German Neo-Kantianism and its foremost Jewish representative Hermann Cohen, the meaning of Jewish monotheism from an enlightenment perspective has been seen as prefiguring the core principle of enlightened universalism by referring to the idea of one God, wholly transcendent and cleared of any traces of anthropomorphism, of whom no pictures should be made. This etherealization breaks with the concepts of animism and anthropomorphism of god and prepares the ground for enlightenment universalism qua abstraction, and thus constitutes the core of “ethical monotheism” (Kepnes, 2013, Chapter 7). This account of Judaism developed in the discussions between Kant and his Jewish contemporaries who tried to challenge Kant's notion that Judaism, because of its supposed focus on lawful obedience, could not be a “religion of reason” (Kant, 1977, pp. 789–792). It furthermore formed the theological backbone of the Jewish Neo-Kantian tradition (Cohen, 1995) and also resonates through the works of Frankfurt school critical theory where it informs Adorno's and Horkheimer's famous insistence on the prohibition of images, lest immanence, the facticity of the “wrong whole,” be identified with transcendence (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006, p. 186). According to Žižek's reading, this tradition finds its most contemporary philosophical expressions in Levinas' ethics of the “infinity” of the other and Derrida's concept of messianic justice as the “indeconstructible,” thus identifying the Jewish modernist-theological roots of postmodernism (Žižek, 2003, pp. 138–141; Žižek, 2006b, pp. 113–114) and postulating a “Jewish” metaphysical tradition, encompassing Jewish enlightenment thought, the Frankfurt school and deconstructive ethics (Žižek, 2016, p. 39).

Žižek hereby emphatically rejects what he regards as the core principle of this “Jewish” tradition in metaphysics, by attacking the prohibition of images as an undue transcendentalization, which actually, rather than avoiding substantialist metaphysics, merely provides a more refined version of it. Thus, both Levinasian ethics and Derrida's deconstruction constitute:

the ultimate form of idolatry [which] is the deconstructive purifying of this Other, so that all that remains of the Other is its place, the pure form of Otherness as the Messianic Promise. (Žižek, 2003, p. 139)

Žižek essentially turns the basic premise of ethical monotheism on its head. What if the exact opposite of what it alleges, were true? What if it would not be Christianity and its cult of Jesus who was worshipping an idol and engaging in substantialist metaphysics? What if the most absolute form imaginable of idol worship consists precisely in transcendentalizing the idol?

To put it even more directly: pagans were NOT celebrating images, they were well aware that the images they were making remained inadequate copies of the true Divinity [...]. In contrast to the pagans, it was the Jews themselves who believed/assumed that the (sensual/material) image of the divine Person would show too much, rendering visible some horrifying secret better left in shadow, WHICH IS WHY THEY HAD TO PROHIBIT IT—the Jewish prohibition only makes sense against the background of this fear that the image would reveal something shattering, that, in an unbearable way, it would be TRUE and ADEQUATE. (Žižek, 2001a, p. 132)

What the image reveals, according to Žižek, is the fact that there is literally nothing behind it since its own incompleteness is glaringly obvious, while it is precisely the prohibition of images that still manages to insinuate some hidden truth. This is the core principle of Žižek's reading of the Jewish tradition. It is not the Christians who are worshipping an idol in Jesus, since his miserable death on the cross makes it perfectly clear that there is no metaphysical content "behind" the empirical person, but it is Judaism whose transcendentalization of the idea of god masks the void at the heart of the absolute more thorough than any idol ever could. An idol can fail, and what appears as divine can turn out to be profane, fallible, and human. The idol whose depiction becomes prohibited, however, cannot be disproven and is therefore more idolatrous than any "actual" idol ever could be. Žižek relates this to his reading of Exodus 3,14:

What if the Jewish religion itself generates the excess it has to prohibit? It is the JEWISH God who is the FIRST fully "personalized" God, a God who says "I am who I am." (Žižek, 2001a, p. 130)

In the original Hebrew, this passage reads: *אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה* which—depending on the translation one consults—is either translated as "I am that I am" (King James Bible and German unified translation), or as "I will be who I will be" (Lutherbible). While in the tradition of "ethical monotheism," this is taken to prefigure the abstract universalism of enlightenment ethics, it is criticized by Žižek as a metaphysical postulate of substantialist self-identity.

Žižek continues his reading of the theological tradition with the book of Job, where his ontology of the void enables him to read Job as a story about the Camus-like absurdity of existence. All explanations for Jobs suffering are to Žižek "ideology," not because they are fallible, but because the assumption of meaning as such, of any transcendent quality, is inherently fallacious. This allows him to discard with the problem of theodicy altogether, without even really engaging with it. Žižek thus concludes his reading by interpreting the book of Job as a declaration of Gods impotence:

What Job suddenly understood, was that it was not him, but God Himself, who was actually on trial in Job's calamities, and He failed the test miserably. (Žižek, 2003, p. 127)

Žižek's makes this conception even more explicit in his reading of the passion of Christ, which he sees as being prefigured in the myth of Job (Žižek, 2003, p. 124). Žižek takes Christs famous exclamation on the cross, "Oh father, why hast thou forsaken me?," quite literally. In the same way as Job does not find himself confronted by an almighty but enigmatic deity, whose workings he cannot possibly understand and therefore finds himself without answers to his suffering (while the premise that those answers indeed do exist still holds), so is the passion of Christ not a story about the sublation of Christs suffering into a higher form of redemption, but its moral consists in the fact that god has indeed forsaken Christ.

The son of god is left to die on the cross. God is actually dead. Yet again, this indicates, even more so than in the myth of Job, what Žižek's describes as a split in the absolute itself. Christ at the cross is god himself, bemoaning the nonexistence of god. God has forsaken god and thus Nietzsche turns up as the "perverse core" of Christianity:

Since the function of the obscene superego supplement of the (divine) Law is to mask this impotence of the big Other, and since Christianity reveals this impotence, it is, quite logically, the first (and only) religion radically to leave behind the split between the official/public text and its obscene initiatory

supplement: there is no hidden, untold story in it. In this precise sense, Christianity is the religion of Revelation: everything is revealed in it, no obscene superego supplement accompanies its public message." (Žižek, 2003, p. 127)

The crucial point for Žižek in this regard is that his considerations must not be confused with any kind of negative theology. Žižek's intention is a form of radical immanentization of divine transcendence that is radically opposed the gesture of transcendentalization that is constituted by referring to a "deus absconditus." Žižek does not aim to shield god from the ontico-empirical, but to draw him so brutally into this world as to kill him in the process.

#### 4 | FROM KIERKEGAARD TO POLITICAL ACTION: ŽIŽEK'S DECISIONISM

Based on these ontological and theological considerations, the crucial question seems to be: Where do we go from here? What are the political implications of Žižek's radical ontology of the void and his quasi-Nietzschean theology? For Žižek, the key mediator to translate these ontological considerations into political conceptions is Kierkegaard who serves Žižek as a model for political praxis. Furthermore, Žižek's discussion of Kierkegaard also answers the question, as to why Žižek still refers to a god or an absolute whose "death" he so empathically reiterates time and again:

Kierkegaard's God is strictly correlative to the ontological openness of reality, to our relating to reality as unfinished, "in becoming." "God" is the name for the Absolute Other against which we can measure the thorough contingency of reality—as such, it cannot be conceived as any kind of Substance, as the Supreme Thing [...]. [...] God is "beyond the order of Being," he is nothing but the mode of how we relate to him; that is to say, we do not relate to him, he is this relating. (Žižek, 2006b, p. 79)

The key to the puzzle of gods identity in identity and nonidentity therefore lies in conceiving of the absolute in terms of a pure relation. God exists in his nonexistence because he literally "is" the way in which we relate to him. This ontological consideration prepares the ground for Žižek's political interpretation of the Kierkegaardian "leap." If god is nothing other than the way in which we relate to him and if, furthermore, a conscious reflection of said relationship needs to categorically cross out any transcendent qualities beyond the immediacy of relationality, then God himself must coincide with our decision to enter into said relationship.

For Žižek, the Kierkegaardian "leap into belief" therefore becomes a sort of Fichtean fact-act ("Tathandlung") that both creates god and negates the symbolic universe in which political actions are embedded, through a categorical "No" (Žižek, 2006b, pp. 80–81). But since god is devoid of any transcendent qualities beyond the immediacy of relationality, both the radical negation of the subject's social environment as well as the affirmation of god collapse into one single act: A radical gesture of noncompliance and rejection. A radical "No" towards everything, refusing any kind of signification whatsoever. This theoretical maneuver politicizes the Kierkegaard's "leap" into something more similar to an existentialist "decision."

Here we enter a crucial zone of contradiction in Žižek's political conceptions. While at times it seems as if his ontological considerations, as outlined previously, prepare the ground for a sort of political decisionism, at other times he seems to opt for a more radical conception. The concept of "Decision" in the tradition of Carl Schmitt describes the transition from negating the social order to erecting a new one instead (Schmitt, 2015, p. 22). The Žižekian negation constitutes a complete and utter rejection of any sense including the construction of a new social order, by a gesture that cannot possibly be inscribed into the existing symbolic universe. Just as the Kierkegaardian subject leaps and refuses to accept or expect any compensation for its utter sacrifice, the revolutionary act for Žižek is constituted by a structurally similar categorical "No." Žižek elaborates these ideas at the example of Paul Claudel's play "The Hostage" which ends with a seemingly pointless suicidal act of self-sacrifice of Sygne, the main character, to her arch-enemy Turelure. Sygne, as she lies dying, stubbornly, and categorically refuses to signify her behavior in any way:



Sygne did it for the sake of it, her act cannot be inscribed into any sacrificial economy, into any calculating strategy. In other words, this “No” is not a “No” to a particular content [...] but a “No as such,” the form-of-No which is in itself the whole content, behind which there is nothing. (Žižek, 2006b, 83)

Žižek, however, is aware that the categorical nihilism implicit in this act remains constitutively related to the decisionist erection of a new symbolic order:

Sygne's gesture of separating herself from the Symbolic repeats the very form of the subject's entry into the Symbolic. It is crucial, however, not to confound this “No” with “No” as the zero-level symbolic prohibition, as the purely formal “No” which grounds the symbolic order [...]: Sygne's “No” names a more primordial negation, a feminine refusal/withdrawal which cannot be reduced to the paternal “No” constitutive of the symbolic order. Even at the abstract level, the difference between the two is clear: while the paternal “No” is purely formal, Sygne's “No” is, on the contrary, a “No” embodied in a little piece of the Real, the excremental remainder of a disgusting “pathological” tic that sticks out of the symbolic form. The two “No”'s are thus like the same X on the two opposed sides of a Moebius strip: if the paternal “No” is the pure form, an empty place without content, Sygne's “No” is an excessive element that lacks its “proper” place. (Žižek, 2006b, p. 83)

There are, so to speak two “No's” we are dealing with. “No” as a form of radical nihilist abstention, and “No” as a gesture of rejection towards the existing symbolic universe, that prepares the ground for the erection of a new one. A categorical “No” towards everything and a specific “No” that precedes the decisionist political act.

Although Žižek attempts to differentiate the two kinds of “No” from one another, his analogy with the Moebius strip makes it clear that the radical nihilism of the categorical “no” is (quite literally) only the flipside of the existential decision and reintroduction of the new symbolic order that follows it: a Moebius strip is a three-dimensional surface with only side, so that, by moving along the surface, one can connect any given point on the surface with any other point. Thus, Žižek himself hints at the decisionism implicit in his conceptions.

This becomes even more explicit in his readings of Badiou. Here Žižek interprets the break with the existing symbolic order as an existential decision, since “there is no Event outside the engaged subjective decision which creates it,” until, a little further down the road:

the real hard work awaits us on the morning after, once the enthusiastic revolutionary explosion is over, and we are confronted with the task of translating this explosion into a new Order of Things, of drawing the consequences from it, of remaining faithful to it. (Žižek, 2003, p. 135)

The negation here seems to be much closer to a decisionist one, than to the radical “non” vis-a-vis the symbolic universe: An existential “Decision” followed by the voluntarist introduction of a new order, by a subject that has aggrandized and legitimated itself to do so, by recourse to the relation to god it itself has established.

This radical political voluntarism has an inherent tilt towards authoritarian politics, since any possible normative constraints to political praxis are effectively conceptually abolished in Žižek's account. The political subject, who established a direct relation to the absolute, can neither be normatively constrained by said absolute (since it is virtually identical with it), nor by other political subjects (since they do not feature into a Kierkegaardian account of political subjectivity, that is modeled on the solipsistic relation of the individual believer to god).<sup>1</sup> Radical negativity thus collapses into its opposite: radical positivity, becoming identical with what is (the individual believer) instead of articulating a political horizon beyond the present political moment, thus sanctifying the present instead of transcending it. The voluntarist existential “decision,” as Adorno put it in his criticism of Kierkegaard, becomes “decision” for what exists anyway (Adorno, 2017, p. 47).



The fact that Žižek explicitly refers to the *community* of believers as inheriting the divine after the death of Christ on the cross (Žižek, 2003, p. 138) does not contradict the Kierkegaardian solipsism of his account of political subjectivity. The political nature of this community is not based on intersubjective processes of politicization but on a mere addition of fundamentally individuated acts of “fidelity to a Cause” (Žižek, 2003, p. 130). This “community” at best appears as a community of confessing monads.

The authoritarian dimension of Žižek’s political theology becomes explicit in his discussion of Kierkegaard in “Enjoy your Symptom!.” If the transcendent absolute is conceived of in terms of the gap between the absolute and itself and its core transcendent value therefore categorically rejected in favor of a radical immanentization, the same logic can be applied to political leadership which is precisely what Žižek does by politicizing Kierkegaardian theology in this regard.

Kierkegaard defines religious leadership in the case of the Apostles as purely based on the irrational faith in this leadership itself, by alluding to the very symbolically unrepresentable gap between the person and its own noncoincidence with itself that also marks the absolute. In other words: I follow the apostle not because I am convinced of his doctrine, enchanted by his charisma, or lead to follow him by any immanent quality that’s directly attributable to his person, but because of the naked fact that I believe that his words are the words of god. His authority is therefore entirely dependent on the noncoincidence of himself with himself, that is the transcendent quality of having been called by god (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 95). Just as in Kierkegaard’s description of the binding of Isaac (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 35–36), following the Apostle out of conviction would thus be akin to an almost Habermasian act of rationalism (“Paul has the better argument”) and as such per definition not belief but reason. Žižek now takes up Kierkegaard’s model and transfers it to the political:

Such an assertion of authority seems to be the very opposite of the Enlightenment whose fundamental aim is precisely to render truth independent of authority: truth is arrived at by means of the critical procedure which questions the pro et contra of a proposition irrespective of the authority that pertains to its place of enunciation [...] Marxism and psychoanalysis, both refer to the authority of their respective founders (Marx, Freud). Their structure is inherently “authoritarian”: since Marx and Freud opened up a new theoretical field which sets the very criteria of veracity, their words cannot be put to the test the same way one is allowed to question the statements of their followers. (Žižek, 1992, pp. 99–100)

Žižek thus turns Marx and Freud into latter day apostles, the measure of whose truth cannot and should not be defined by reason (which would imply an undue transcendentalization of truth) but only by the standards the respective apostles set for themselves. This radical immanentization implies an epistemological “law of the jungle”: ideas must become true when they are all-powerful and what is all-powerful must be true. Truth in this sense becomes indistinguishable from voluntarist terror. A concept that is apparently not alien to Žižek’s political theology, considering his interpretation of Jacobinist terror as “divine violence” (Žižek, 2008, p. 162).

## 5 | FROM THE ONTOLOGY OF “NOT YET” TO THE HUMANUM: IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE IN BLOCH

In the following, I will contrast Žižek’s politico-theological concepts with the ones that Ernst Bloch developed, based on his reading of largely identical philosophical and theological sources.

At a first glance, Ernst Bloch’s central philosophical project might appear like a contradiction in terms: a materialist metaphysics dedicated to bridging the gap between subject and object, spirit and matter, human and world, in a system whose ultimate point of reference is utopia: the place where we are not (yet), in which the basic contradictions of being will be reconciled and that speaks to us through a tendency articulated in all forms of human culture, finding expression in art, architecture, religion, and philosophy. The vague and not necessarily conscious notion that there is

something beyond what exists in the “darkness of the lived moment” — Bloch’s term for articulating the need to mediate the ostensible immediacy of the present moment (EBW 5, pp. 334–335)<sup>2</sup> — and that this “being beyond being” no less “is” than the being of existence, provides the ontological thread for Bloch’s metaphysics.

This ontology of “not-yet” relies on a dialectical mediation of subject and object, matter, and spirit. Everything that is tends to develop beyond itself out of its own constitutive contradictions. Existence might therefore precede essence, but essence is always already present in existence as tendency. Essence can therefore not be artificially separated from existence, but both are mediated through want. Everything in existence remains related to its essence as telos through drive and longing (EBW 15, p. 147). Bloch understands this ontology first and foremost as a form of materialism, albeit one that shirks the idea of matter as the dead and anorganic polar opposite to spirit. Bloch regards matter and spirit as moments of a teleological process of self-realization (EBW 7, pp. 470–472). The “Experimentum Mundi,” the experiment of the world, as Bloch terms it in his last opus magnum, is an experiment that matter conducts with itself and in which humanity has a privileged part (EBW 15, pp. 263–264). The relation of existence to its “Not-Yet” of essence at the same time defines the relevance transcendence has for Bloch’s metaphysics. When everything that is remains constitutively related to what is not (yet), then all thought that relates to transcendence must ipso facto have a certain truth value. Bloch reaffirms this epistemological consequence of his metaphysics by speaking about the equal importance of what he calls the “cold stream” of a rational critique of ideology and the “warm stream” of transcendent hope (EBW 7, pp. 372–376). The aforementioned utopian expressions in art, architecture, daydreaming, music, and philosophy contain such references to the “Not-Yet” of transcendence, but Bloch’s most important example is religion and theology, since religious thought most comprehensively articulates “the fantastic realization of human nature, inasmuch as human nature has no true reality” as Bloch puts it by quoting Marx (Bloch, 2009, p. 50; EBW 14, p. 91).

While there is undoubtedly an extraordinarily voluminous panoply of thinkers that informs Ernst Bloch’s utopian metaphysics, from the Greeks, to scholasticism, to existentialism, the theoretical backbone of his endeavor remains firmly within the trajectory that Marx and Hegel pointed out. Bloch’s Marx however remains far closer to Hegel than Soviet Orthodoxy would have him, and in his readings of Marx he mainly relies on his early works (Hudson, 1982, pp. 65–66) much in accordance with the mushrooming of “Hegelianized” readings of Marxism that were induced by the release of Marx’ Paris manuscripts in the 1930s.

The central cue that Bloch takes from young Marx is his anthropology, which provides the centerpiece for Bloch’s materialist metaphysics. In his early works, most notably the “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” the Paris Manuscripts, “On the Jewish Question” and the “Theses on Feuerbach,” Marx criticized Hegelian dialectics for its spiritual conception of mediation. While Hegel, according to Marx, was right to point out the inherently contradictory and mediated character of social totality, mediation itself is conceived of in terms of self-movement of spirit, therefore precluding any active role of (wo)mankind in the process (Marx, 2009, p. 151). Putting Hegel on his feet, as Marx famously put it, would therefore mean defining “labor” as the central concept in the mediation of social contradictions. It is by labor that (wo)man changes its environment, himself and others around it. Alienation thus designates a state of being in which the products of (wo)man’s own doing appear to it as an alien force. Communism in turn designates the conscious reappropriation of the fact that (wo)mankind as a species creates its own world.

If matter and spirit, subject and object, immanence and transcendence appear as mediated moments of a process, then what Bloch calls the “Humanum” constitutes the center of said mediation, the, as Bloch himself says, “archimedic point” (EBW 5, p. 333) of his endeavor. It is not by coincidence that Bloch’s magnum opus “The Principle of Hope” ends with an emphatic reference to the “root of history,” namely, “the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts” (Bloch, 1986, pp. 1375–1376; EBW 5, p. 1628). Bloch explicitly situates this transcendental humanism within a philosophical tradition that reaches from Kant to Marx, connecting the materialist, Marxist concept of (wo)man as producer of its own essence, with the idealist, Kantian notion of human dignity, freedom, and humanity as an end in itself (EBW 6, pp. 213–214). In this sense, Bloch connects the social-revolutionary tilt of Marxist humanism with Kantian ethics, referring to young Marx’ anthropology as a “material ‘categorical imperative’” (Bloch, 1986,

p. 1358; EBW 5, p. 1607) and explicitly invoking Kantian humanism in his rejection of Kierkegaard's justification of the binding of Isaac (EBW 2, p. 181).

But yet, Bloch is neither Marx nor Kant and what is "not yet" cannot be resolved into categories of immanence, anthropological, or otherwise. The residual transcendentalism that remains in Bloch's metaphysics might not be able to exist without its complementary immanent anthropology, but neither can the latter without the "warm stream" of theological utopian hope. The fact that laboring mankind creates the world that it lives in, but does not do so consciously but in a state of alienation, points at the intersection of immanence and transcendence: We could create a world that would be home to us, if we were aware that we could and yet, this world is still not here. It is, but it is not yet. It exists, but only in dreams, imaginations, and theological concepts. To seek out the truth value of religious thought is therefore key to Bloch's understanding of utopia.

## 6 | BLOCH'S EXEGESIS

In "Atheism in Christianity," Bloch develops a form of exegesis and bible criticism that Louis Althusser would have called a "symptomatic" reading (Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 28). Bloch's "detective work" in reading the Bible consists in identifying a subversive subterranean layer in the text that was subsequently redacted in the interest of legitimizing clerical power (EBW 14, p. 101). Bloch thus reads the Bible as a sort of revolutionary palimpsest, whose radical criticism of and struggle with god was brushed over and transformed into more digestible forms, but whose traces are still very visible. At the core of this "underground bible" (EBW 14, p. 110), instead of worship and subservience, we find a struggle with, wrestling with, and even revolt against god.

Part and parcel of the possibility of the holy text as a palimpsest is the fact of God's noncoincidence with himself. Bloch continually contraposes, what he sees as essentially paganist Baal- and Ptah-like influences on ancient Hebrew monotheism, designating a demiurgical god of lordship and subservience with the god of exodus, the god of the promise of liberation (EBW 14, pp. 59–61).

According to Bloch, therefore, the true revolution in mosaic monotheism and its conception of the god of exodus consists first and foremost in the transcendentalization of god:

Instead of the finished goal there now appears a promised goal that must first be achieved; instead of the visible nature god there appears an invisible god of righteousness and of the kingdom of righteousness. (Bloch, 1986, pp. 1233–1234; EBW 5, pp. 1454–1455)

From this transcendentalization of the idea of god follows a teleology of god. God becomes aim instead of presence. This is emphasized in Bloch's repeated reference to Exodus 3,14. Here, Bloch provides a reading that is diametrically opposed to Žižek's interpretation.

According to Bloch, the phrase: *אֵלֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶּיךָ*, which can be translated in both the future and the present tense, hints at the intersection of present and future that is characteristic of Bloch's conception of utopia: God both "is" and "is not (yet)." Mosaic monotheism in this sense becomes exodus: Rebellion against a world that is not yet redeemed (EBW 5, p. 1453) and whose ultimate battle cry is the mosaic "Let my people go" (EBW 5, p. 1456).

Bloch's exegesis reaches its climax in his reading of Job. What Job represents, according to Bloch, is a belief in the transcendent justice of god that is so strong, as to oppose god himself in its name. Bloch therefore identifies the explanations of Job's friends for his suffering, be it the reference to god's divine knowledge, or the allegation of Job's possible wrongdoings, as biblical examples of ideology. Much unlike Žižek, however, who also designates these justifications as ideology, Bloch asserts that the story of Job opens up the possibility of an immanent critique of divine justice: God becomes transcendentalized to such a degree as to allow for the seemingly paradox act of a revolt against god in the name of divine justice. This, in Bloch's eyes, is the true core of the myth of Job: The story of a "Hebrew Prometheus" (EBW 5, pp. 1455–1456, 1500), which also serves as a perfect example of the dialectical mediation of immanence and

transcendence in Bloch: God is being measured against god itself and the world as it is, against the world as it might be (but not yet is). Therefore, what in Žižek's reading of Job, points towards mere nothingness, leads in Bloch's reading of Job to the conclusion of a revolt against god in the name of god, with god's own imperfection pointing at the promise of liberation embodied by the god of exodus.

Bloch's reading of the passion of Christ appears similar in this regard. Here, too, Bloch discards the justification of earthly suffering—the passion of Christ—as ideology. Bloch goes so far as to liken what he calls the “sacrificial theology” of the passion of Christ to the cult of Moloch and human sacrifice (EBW 14, p. 222).

What specifically interests Bloch in Jesus, is his human-worldly immanence, which is why Bloch repeatedly insists on the historical character of Jesus as a real, empirical human being. For Bloch, this solidly grounds the belief in Christ in worldly immanence and anchors it against mystifying transcendentalizations. “Ecce homo” is for Bloch the key phrase in the passion of Christ (EBW 5, pp. 1482–1486):

Thus, Christian faith more than any other lives from the historical reality of its founder, it is essentially the imitation of a life on earth, not of a cult-image and its gnosis. This real memory acted over the centuries: the imitation of Christ, however great the internalization and spiritualization, was primarily a historical and only as such a metaphysical experience. (Bloch, 1986, p. 1259; EBW 5, pp. 1486–1487)

This insistence on immanence refers back to young Marx: The subject of the revolt against an unredeemed world is none other than (wo)man itself. In Bloch's critique of the transcendent negative theology of Karl Barth, he therefore takes an explicit stance against the conception of a “deus absconditus” (EBW 14, pp. 72–75). Bloch attacks Barth for a negative theology that demeans (wo)man to mere abstract “humanity” and can only conceive of god in the form of a heavenly “No.”

But still, the immanence of the Christ figure is always mediated through divine transcendence: Christ may be a man, but far more than that at the same time. Bloch in this regard understands the transcendence of the god of Exodus and the immanence of Christ—“the son of man” (EBW 14, pp. 207–212), as Bloch repeatedly insists—as mediated moments of the world process. Thus, also Barth's negative theology is not being rejected completely, but rather qualified by Bloch's addition of the Marxist humanist element, which becomes clear in Bloch's proposal to replace the “deus absconditus” of negative theology with a “homo absconditus,” therefore investigating the traces of the Humanum that is not yet, within the theological tradition (EBW 5, p. 1406).

This complex entanglement of transcendence and immanence is what Bloch refers to in the figure of “minimal difference”: The new world that utopia intends to build is in a certain sense “already here,” already immanent in the old world and already present, since its point of departure is none other than the political actions of political subjects here and now, and yet it constitutes a completely different, transcendent, redeemed world. Redemption is “already here” because it does not require any sort of divine, transcendent, or metaphysical intervention. There is no “outside,” no need for anything that would not already exist: (wo)man itself. Nevertheless, there is a gap. We are still unsaved, there still remains a (minimal) transcendent residue:

Another rabbi, a true Kabbalist, once said: To bring about the kingdom of freedom, it is not necessary that everything be destroyed, and a new world begin; rather, this cup, or that bush, or that stone, and so all things must only be shifted a little. Because this “a little” is hard to do, and its measure so hard to find humanity cannot do it in this world; instead this is why the Messiah comes. (Bloch, 2006, p. 158; EBW 1, pp. 201–202)

The crucial role of the aforementioned element of Marxist humanism lies in the possibility it provides Bloch with to bridge the gap between immanence and transcendence, which in political terms highlights the relevance of strategic political actions: It takes collective action within social structures that are not yet liberated to bring about future liberation.

While Žižek, in a similar manner than Bloch, locates ideology in the sacrificial logic of rationalizing Jobs and Christs suffering by reference to divine knowledge, his “Christian-Schellingian” approach of equating divinity with nothingness and collapsing it into unmediated immanence, appears strikingly undialectical in that it makes it impossible for him to engage in an immanent critique of divine justice in the way Bloch does. Because for Žižek “I am who I am” refers to simple self-identity, Jobs suffering is simply meaningless and god did actually die on the cross, any avenues for thinking beyond the immediacy of the “darkness of the lived moment” are effectively closed and the only truly political act that remains is the radical negation of everything. The ontological root of this political problem lies precisely in the difference between Žižek’s “Nothing” and Bloch’s “minimal difference” between transcendence and immanence.

## 7 | THE ABSOLUTE AS TELOS: KIERKEGAARD, SCHELLING, AND THE PRIORITY OF BEING

Similar to Žižek, also Bloch is specifically interested in post-Hegelian philosophy because of its criticism of Hegelian rational systematicity, which is why he specifically focuses on those thinkers that he identifies as “Anti-Panlogists”<sup>3</sup> One of the key conceptual points of departure for Bloch is the factuality of being as existence (EBW 8, p. 387) as a counterpoint to panlogic systematicity, a concern he shares with the existentialist tradition and which provides the conceptual background for his reading of their works, specifically in the case of Søren Kierkegaard. In “Spirit of Utopia,” Bloch enthusiastically praises Kierkegaard as the “Hume of our times,” that has, similarly to the latter, “awakened us from our dogmatic slumber” (EBW 3, p. 249) and whose existentialism serves as a corrective against Hegelian panlogism. For both Bloch and Kierkegaard “Existenz” as the factuality of being, or “Dass” (“That”), as Bloch puts it, must serve as the point of departure of any serious ontology, a fact that Hegelian panlogism in its ceaseless endeavor to make everything identical to reason and its abstractions does not sufficiently take into account:

Only that cognition, Kierkegaard teaches, which relates essentially to our existence, is essential cognition, existential pathos, in contrast to which all alienated, dispassionately systematic procedure represents nothing but a cheap, mendacious way to process oneself out of the immediacy from which the truth regards us utterly [...]. (Bloch, 2000, p. 198; EBW 3, p. 250)

However, “Dass” needs to be complemented by “Was” (“What”), quodditas by quidditas, existence by essence and therefore both need to be understood as mediated moments of the whole (EBW 15, p. 178). It is from this vantage point, where Bloch attacks Kierkegaard. While Bloch recognizes the need to guard concrete existence from being swallowed up by the panlogism of Hegelian systematicity, he regards Kierkegaard’s conception of existence as a solipsistic illusion, which might be able repress the consciousness of its own mediation through social totality but not abolish the fact of social mediation itself:

The Self, however, which Kierkegaard remembers against the general and the constructed abstract, is no less abstract itself. For it elopes to a home as unhomey as ever, it closes itself off from and raises itself above social relationships. Without ceasing to be part of them: Inwardness as well as privacy are social relationships, too. (EBW 8, p. 394 [translation by the author])

Parallel to his approach to Kierkegaard, also Schelling is being read by Bloch as a thinker of “existence”:

The fact that something is, as the late Schelling teaches, this discrete and actual Dasein is not deducible from thinking and reason. (EBW 8, p. 396 [translation by the author]).

But rather than identifying existence with human existence in the way Kierkegaard does, Schelling tries to accommodate it within the confines of a philosophy that still adheres to rational systematicity and that therefore differentiates *within* the system, as Bloch puts it “between the rational and the real, the logical factor and the subjectivist intensive” (EBW 8, p. 398 [translation by the author]). To Bloch, Schelling therefore becomes a “gnostic of the world process between primal urge and logos” (EBW 10, p. 102 [translation by the author]).

As opposed to Bloch's relation to Kierkegaard, there is already a significant amount of literature on the relationship between Bloch and Schelling. However, much of the existing literature puts an undue amount of emphasis on the indebtedness of Bloch to Schelling, with Jürgen Habermas famously going so far as to declare Bloch a “Marxist Schelling” (Habermas, 1960).<sup>4</sup> And while it is true that Bloch famously spoke about Schelling as his philosophical “brother” (Bloch, 1985, p. 204), and that there are glaring similarities between Bloch's anthropocentric materialism and Schelling's equally anthropocentric philosophy of nature,<sup>5</sup> what is conspicuously overlooked in many of these accounts is the degree to which Bloch engages in a quite radical critique of Schelling specifically regarding his conception of the “Ungrund.”

While Bloch recognizes and values the fact that Schelling introduces an element of nonidentity into German idealism whose relevance consists in the fact that through nonidentity the apologetic character of Hegelian systematic philosophy (which politically tends to sanctify the existing social order by identifying it with reason) becomes undermined (EBW 8, pp. 397–398), Bloch radically opposes what he sees as Schelling's effort the ontologize nonidentity in terms of a quasi-manichean ontology, by assuming an irrational *a priori* as opposed to logos. It is of utmost importance in this regard to read Bloch's critique of late-Schellingian philosophy closely: While he refers positively to the Schellingian conception of an “Ungrund” prior to Logos *per se*, he criticizes the specific conception this takes on in Schelling, which he regards as a prioritization and unmediated reification of nonbeing (EBW 13, pp. 261–262). This also where Wayne Hudson has it wrong, when he declares that

Existing reality is will-like (*dasshaft*) because it rests on a ground which is not a ground. This non-ground cannot be characterised as something with being. Rather, for Bloch, as for Schelling, the non-ground with which everything begins is before being. (Hudson, 1982, p. 121)

To Bloch “Being” remains the prioritized category. In this sense the “Ungrund” is not “before being,” which insinuates exactly the kind of abstract contradiction of being and nonbeing and the prioritization of nonbeing that Bloch criticizes in Schelling and seeks to avoid. As we have seen, this line of argument is of particular importance since it precisely marks the point where Bloch parts ways with Žižek in his reading of Schelling. Nonbeing is, according to Bloch, not abstractly opposed to Being but only conceivable in relation to it and ultimately even subordinate to it:

always nothing remains, although and because it stands opposed to being, a type of, a counter-type of being, namely non-being. Being is also in relation to non-being the overarching term; what stands opposed to nothing, is not being in general, but positive being, What-determinacy as fullness of being, rather than depletion of being [...] The ontology of nothing does not need its own non-ground, from which the black card of death emerges out of nowhere; this is mythological dualism. The latter might be better than the so-called wholesale drunkenness with being, which has lost the part of nothing almost completely from its concept of the world, according to which in all the pan-logic worldviews, there is not only no place for evil, but also none for time, not to speak of utopia; because everything then has to be depicted as if complete. Nevertheless, darkness is not a genuine principle of the world, dualistically alongside the origin, in manichean, Schellingian fashion. (EBW 13, pp. 252–253 [translation by the author])

While Ernst Bloch's reading of Schelling and Kierkegaard positively acknowledges their function as an existentialist corrective to Hegelian panlogism, while still criticizing Kierkegaard's solipsism and Schelling's “manichean”

ontology of nonbeing, Slavoj Žižek, as we have seen, provides a different approach. In a far less ambiguous manner than Bloch, he identifies Schelling and—even more so—Kierkegaard as those “vanishing mediators” that can help identify the truly Lacanian character of Hegelian dialectics. Thus, the very primacy of nonbeing that Bloch attacks in Schelling is received enthusiastically by Žižek. While for Bloch the groundless ground of ontology must be understood as “tendency” and incompleteness, which is why he criticizes Schelling for his manichean prioritization of nonbeing, for Žižek the “Ungrund” is a constitutive void. At the center of ontology, we do not find a “*nihil privativum*” as in Bloch, but radical abstract nonbeing, negativity as such. Thus, for Bloch, the split in God itself is between existence and essence and therefore manifests itself in a tendency towards a telos, based on a constitutive lack. For Žižek, the split equally refers to existence and essence, but conceives of essence as a mere form, radically devoid of any substance and as such identical with its own lack. Therefore, based on this constitutive void, there is neither “tendency” nor “telos.” In other words: What is a lack to be fulfilled for Bloch, is a bottomless void for Žižek. One that he subsequently attempts to fill with an existentialist voluntarism whose decisionism, unbound by any transcendental constraints, devolves into irrational authoritarianism.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

The conception of a split in God itself as the “Ungrund” of everything that is in the late works of Friedrich Schelling, marks the nodal point that condenses the essence of German idealism, the beginnings of existential philosophy and the political theology intertwined with both.

The idea that what is not god is already part of god, or—in secularized terms—that logos remains constitutively intertwined with its other, provides the background against which Bloch and Žižek conceptualize their respective political theologies, their readings of the Judeo-Christian tradition and their attempts to answer the core question of utopian politics: How can we conceive of, conceptualize or at least deal with the fact that our politics remains inextricably bound up with transcendence and that our political existence is antithetically connected to what is not (yet).

Any serious engagement with this issue needs to begin by asking what exactly we mean, when we say “not.” To what does the split in the absolute refer? What exactly is the “Ungrund,” the “indivisible remainder” that Schelling speaks about? To Žižek it is a void of pure nothingness. Hence, he complements and politicizes Schellingian ontology by recourse to Kierkegaard. However, once the Kierkegaardian “leap” becomes a political concept, it almost inevitably paves the way for an irrational kind of decisionism.

What Žižek dissolves into a pure immanence that aggrandizes the political subject thus enabling his solipsist decisionism, appears in Bloch as a complex dialectical mediation of immanence and transcendence. Thus, for Bloch, the Schellingian “Ungrund” refers to an as of yet unredeemed world, the fact that matter has not yet fulfilled the tendency towards which it strives. Like in the famous kabbalist theologumenon that Bloch refers to, things are not in their right place, there is indeed a lack in everything that exists. But it is a lack, not a void. The fact that it is up to us to bring this world about and fill this lack, is what for Bloch refers Schelling to young Marx in what Bloch called the “line of salvation.”

Žižek, as we have seen, takes a different direction. Because his conception of the Schellingian Ungrund prioritizes nonbeing, his Schelling does not refer to Marx, but, along the “line of perdition,” to a politicized Kierkegaard. Not to the “Humanum” realizing itself, but to nothingness and the “decision” that it begets.

Žižek’s voluntarism that follows from his Kierkegaardian conception of political subjectivity naturally leads to authoritarian tendencies, because his model of political subjectivity at its very root ignores the intersubjectivity of the political. Thus, when Žižek argues that his immanentization of transcendence “delivers us from guilt” (Žižek, 2007, p. 98), this has to be taken literally. Žižek’s political subject is absolved from responsibility for its actions, since it itself becomes virtually identical with the very place from which ethical injunctions might be made. Its I not by coincidence that Žižek’s endorsement of Jacobinist terror as “divine violence,” explicitly refers to terror as a “a decision [...] made in absolute solitude, with no cover from the big Other” (Žižek, 2008, pp. 163).



Contrary to this, Blochian ontology retains the contradiction between immanence and transcendence. Beyond purely ontological and epistemological considerations, this entails both ethical and strategic-political consequences that Žižek's concept lacks.

While ethical injunctions are irrelevant to a Kierkegaardian political subject that has short-circuited the relation between political subjectivity and ethics and solipsistically absolved himself of responsibility for the "terror" it proposes, to Bloch, the key concept of the Humanum both opens up a utopian horizon of potentiality in the Marxist-materialist sense, while at the same time reminding us that this potentiality remains anchored in Kantian ethics. Anything is possible for the collective of humanity, but by virtue of being a collective (rather than an agglomeration of individualized believers), this potentiality remains tied to itself, because its point of departure is at the same time its point of reference: The fact that (wo)man shall be the highest being for (wo)man (Marx, 1976, p. 385) or in Kantian terms, that humanity can never be a mere means to an end (Kant, 1968b, p. 429).

Retaining the contradiction between transcendence and immanence also has strategic-political consequences. The constraints of immanent, real-world political relations, the contradiction that we strive for emancipation but have to do so in an as of yet unredeemed world, is reflected in Bloch's model by looking for tendencies that exist in the present but point beyond the present order of political power. Bloch's model builds bridges from the world as it is, to the world as it might be and therefore opens up the possibility for strategic political initiative. Žižek's strikingly undialectical answer to the same problem is to merely propose gestures of radical negation towards everything, whose flipside—as he readily admits—is an essentially arbitrary "decision" for the sake of decision.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In this context, Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey have referred to the fact that Žižek's examples for politically transformative actions are almost exclusively framed as "isolated acts by individuals [...]. Even the Russian Revolution becomes for Žižek a set of individual choices by Lenin, Stalin and the aforementioned bureaucrats" (Robinson & Tormey, 2005, p. 102).
- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the collected works of Bloch refer to Bloch (1985b) and are quoted as: EBW 1–16. Wherever direct quotes appear, existing English translations are used as far as available and indicated alongside the references to the German *Werkausgabe*, where they are not available, direct quotes are translated by the author and also indicated accordingly.
- <sup>3</sup> (EBW 8, p. 390). One would have to add, that while Bloch explicitly treats Schelling and Kierkegaard as critics of Hegel, Žižek attempts to reintegrate them all into Hegel via Lacan (Žižek, 2007, p. 6).
- <sup>4</sup> Similarly: Hudson, 1982, pp. 72–73, 120–121. A more nuanced account (specifically regarding Bloch's reading of the "Freiheitsschrift") can be found in Wüsthube (1989, pp. 261–262). In this regard, see also Mayer (2014, Chapter 2). On the relation between Hegel and Schelling in Bloch's thought, see Zeilinger (2006, pp. 52–54). There is close to no literature on the relation of Bloch to Kierkegaard. The only two exemptions being Vaisfeld (2016) and Fahrenbach (1980).
- <sup>5</sup> Bloch explicitly discusses Schelling's philosophy of nature from a materialist perspective in EBW 7 (pp. 228–229).

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