

“TO TASTE SOMETHING NEW, FIRST EMPTY YOUR CUP”: BARTLEBY POLITICS, ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE AND STATE VIOLENCE

Timothy Bryar and Kristian Lasslett

Abstract: This paper brings together Žižek’s Bartleby politics with the praxis of organic intellectuals emerging out of the “Bougainville crisis”, in order to generate a new vantage point for theorizing anti-colonial resistance to state violence. Bartleby politics, it is argued, conceptualizes how socio-symbolic orders naturalize their existence, and the strategies required to disrupt this completeness of power, so we can begin again. Applying this approach, it is argued during colonization metropolitan powers shatter the permanency of indigenous socio-symbolic orders, by situating them within a wider (contrived) teleological historical sequence. However, the metropolitan power’s capacity to manage this risky enterprise—where the possibility of possibility emerges—is shaped by anti-colonial resistance. This resistance can shift a teleological moment to a contingent moment, where multiple vectors of history are opened up by the colonized “subjects,” that go beyond the set sequence offered by the colonial power. One of the most radical forms of violence colonized “subjects” can inflict on the colonial powers during this open historical moment, it is argued, is refusal. Refusal, that is to negotiate the terms and conditions of incorporation into Empire, and instead unilaterally setting a different historical course. The violence refusal inflicts on Empire, and the greater violence Empire inflicts back, will be examined through the case study of the Bougainville war.

Keywords: Bartleby politics; colonial crimes; state crime; resistance; Žižek; Bougainville conflict

Introduction

The endurance and stability of the capitalist politico-legal order is premised, like all orders, on the negation of its own temporality. While its origins lie in a distinctive break from feudal and absolutist regimes, the contingent nature of history, with its potential to unravel through multiple vectors—depending on the outcome of struggle—must be denied. That is, the current politico-legal order must deny its own origins and assume a naturalness so that its necessity is beyond the realms of question.

Timothy Bryar, independent researcher and writer. Kristian Lasslett, Ulster University.

The colonial moment—the wide-ranging set of practices which aim to curtail one civilization and absorb its living components and reusable assets into an introduced politico-legal order—involves a gamble for the metropolitan administrators and managers of the capitalist politico-legal order as they absorb civilizations dispersed across the “global south.” On the one hand, history as a contingent moment, with multiple potential vectors, has to be prised open, on the other it has to be subsumed within a teleological frame, so the transition is a singular path from “barbarism” to “civilization.”

However, the historical ambiguity colonial intervention creates cannot be authoritatively controlled by the metropolitan regimes, as “colonial subjects” express resistance through imagining alternative vectors of history. That is, while the transition from “pre”-capitalist communities to a capitalist politico-legal order is cast by the colonizer in a teleological light as the inevitable evolutionary movement from “primitive” to “advanced”, for the sovereign communities opposing the colonizer this transition appears or risks appearing as an open question, with multiple answers. In other words, while the social underpinnings and limits of their own civilization have been forcefully revealed, a transition to the colonially imposed order is not necessarily yet cemented as inevitable. The possibility of possibility becomes a revolutionary moment, whose most radical form of violence is an unwillingness to negotiate, or speak to the metropole—a refusal, that is, to participate at all, in the proposed project.

This paper seeks to bring together theoretico-political perspectives from the Global North and South to explore revolutionary politics grounded in the violence of refusal or subtraction. In particular, we draw on analysis produced by a number of organic intellectuals from the island of Bougainville, where the politics of subtraction triggered an episode of retributive state violence organized by the Papua New Guinea and Australian states, which pushed the island into a decade-long conflict that took approximately 20,000 lives. The paper will look to weave the notion coined by Bougainville philosopher Blaise Irainu, “To taste something new, first empty your cup,” with Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s concept of Bartleby politics. We claim that the social revolution enacted in Bougainville and the subsequent war from 1988 to 1997 provides a concrete case study of the theories of subtractive politics offered by these two philosophers.

As a brief but necessary aside, it should be noted that, in addition to Žižek, Herman Melville’s *Bartleby* has attracted the attention of several contemporary Continental theorists, including Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Attell 2013). A detailed comparison of these different readings of *Bartleby* is provided by Attell (2013) and will not be repeated here. However, an important question raised by Attell (2013) is whether or not the different interpretations of *Bartleby* provided by these theorists offer any account

of politics or rather simply reflect an often polemical debate about first principles of philosophical argument. Nonetheless, Attell (2013) claims that it is Žižek who, in terms more explicit and imperative than any of the others, calls for a *politics of Bartleby*, and that his Bartleby politics is a synonym for Žižek's broader theorization of political transformation. Furthermore, while from the position of first principles of philosophical argument, Žižek's Bartleby is close to that of Agamben (both use Bartleby to explicate their commitment to negative ontology), unlike the latter, Žižek appeals to the force of the negative as it is conceived within the Hegelian-Marxist tradition (which he further supplements with Lacanian psychoanalysis). For us, then, it is both the more explicitly political dimension of Žižek's Bartleby, as well as shared politico-theoretical leanings with Žižek that provide the grounds for our choice of Žižek's Bartleby.

Žižek's Bartleby has been heavily criticized for counselling us to sit back and do nothing in the face of injustice and violence (see e.g. Critchley 2010; Sharpe and Boucher 2010; Johnston 2009). However, to understand the paradoxes of Žižek's Bartleby politics requires locating it within Žižek's broader theoretical edifice, such as his account of the law. While Žižek is not a legal theorist (Dean 2004), various authors have nonetheless sought to outline aspects of a theory of law in his work (see e.g. Dean 2004; de Sutter 2015). A thorough account of a Žižekian theory of law is beyond the scope of this paper, however by considering Žižek's Bartleby politics within the context of his approach to law we seek to illuminate a number of important claims about revolutionary politics that enable a dialogue between Žižek's Bartleby politics and the philosophy and actions of revolutionaries in Bougainville. Specifically, these insights include the founding violence of law; the law as split between its public message and an obscene hidden law; the temporality of revolutionary action; and the disruptive power of revolutionary praxis.

The Founding Violence of the Law

The law and the politico-legal order it cements, according to Žižek, is founded on a violent crime: "'At the beginning' of the law there is a certain 'outlaw' . . . the ultimate truth about the reign of law is that of a usurpation, and all classical politico-philosophical thought rests on the disavowal of this violent act of foundation" (Žižek 1991: 204). Simply put, from the perspective of the previous social order, establishing something new in its place is experienced as a violent crime. The cultural and symbolic order epitomized in law, custom, schemes of perception, congruent with particular social relations and productive systems, must be violently supplanted and yet this act of negation must be hidden within the emerging positive order, whose legitimacy and "natural" character must necessarily deny

violent antecedents. This process has perhaps been most famously documented in its materialist form by Marx (1976) and Polanyi (2001) when studying the origins of industrial capitalism in England. Here the clearing of lands, and the generation of a vast reserve army of workers, was brought about through the usurpation of customs and tradition through “blood and fire”, a hidden history sealed off from the new order’s politico-legal edifice. The process of primitive or original accumulation as Marx framed it, which involved a traumatic break with established patterns of life and lifestyles, foreshadowed a pattern that would be replicated in the colonial projects primed by the globalization of industrial capitalism during the 19th century. On the one hand they involve a violent usurpation, on the other the new politico-legal order must deny this prehistory and the possibility of anything else but it.

Recognizing this process of violent dislocation that is incorporated within the colonial politico-legal project (and hidden within it), Bougainvillean theoretician and activist Blaise Iruinu (2015) encourages a revision of the temporal scale used to frame the Bougainville conflict. At the centre of this armed conflict (1988–2001) was a large-scale copper and gold mine (the Panguna mine), operated by the Rio Tinto subsidiary Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) between 1972 and 1989. The mine is situated along the Crown Prince Range of Bougainville. Over this period of operation Bougainville itself transited from administration under an Australian trusteeship to a province in Papua New Guinea, after the latter obtained its independence from Australia in 1975.

The Panguna mine operated and impacted most immediately on the custodial lands of one particular language group on Bougainville, the Nasioi (Ogan 1999). Such impacts included the dispossession of their land and its contents; forced displacement from their ancestral homes; imprisonment for resisting the mine’s construction; and the large-scale devastation of the surrounding ecosystems, which was experienced as a deeply spiritual and material loss. These impacts provoked an escalating series of demonstrations against the vast copper and gold mine in 1987/88. These demonstrations reached a climax with a campaign of industrial sabotage enacted during November 1988, which caused the mine to temporarily close down (see Lasslett 2014). Government paramilitaries were sent to the island in order to contain the social movement, by arresting or killing its leaders. The state violence precipitated the rise of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), which formed out of landowner resistance to the mine. Ultimately the BRA sought the island’s secession from Papua New Guinea.

Orthodox analyses that emerged during the crisis and its aftermath trace the resistance on Bougainville to internal rifts over mining revenues within the land-owning community, and wider anxieties on Bougainville associated with being incorporated into Papua New Guinea, by a province of peoples that view themselves

as ethnically distinct (Griffin 1990; Regan 2003). Contrawise, Blaise Iruinu traces the seeds of the conflict back to the late 19th century and the large-scale violence it involved, arguing “the Bougainville crisis or conflict began, when the colonizer came to Bougainville” (2015). “Annexed” initially by the German state in 1886, before becoming part of an Australian protectorate (following a brief military incursion in 1914), this was the initiation, he argues, of a colonial project which aimed to extract and incorporate the human and natural structures of Bougainville into a new liberal capitalist order, liquidating the cultural, productive, legal and political systems that could not be coopted and repurposed. By the 1960s the Nasioi, and other ethnic groups, particularly those impacted by the intensifying effects of the mine, were confronting a terminal crisis as the architecture of their indigenous social systems was being gradually besieged politically, economically and ideologically, by a colonial power looking to induct communities into the logic of “liberal” capitalism. In a speech to the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce in 1969, Australia’s Minister for Territories Charles Barnes put this in candid terms: “I suppose people suggest that they could be left in this sort of happy situation but we must not forget the disorder, the massacres and fights between so many different tribes and clans hostile to one another over centuries . . . so this is our endeavor—to advance them in the pattern of our own advancement because our advancement has been successful, whatever the theorists might say” (Barnes 1969).

Here the possibility of a transition from a “primitive” present to a “modern” future was cast by the colonial regime as necessity—with the supplementary “ideological fantasy” that once the indigenous past had been cast off, history would reach its end point or pinnacle. The construction of the giant copper and gold mine became one of the most visible and potent forums through which this colonial project was played out. The mine on Bougainville was widely viewed as the primary lever to achieve the colonial objective of “modernizing” a “primitive” people. For example, when reflecting on the escalating opposition to the mine expressed by impacted communities, David Hay (1967), the Administrator of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, remarked to a Department Secretary in Canberra: “Should a minority, however much we regret that some changes in their way of life are involved, be able to veto a project which will be vitally important to the future of the territory?” He argued, “it is surely wrong to try to deprive people of the benefits of progress.”

In a clear example of what Žižek (2008a) refers to as “symbolic violence”, during the colonial campaign to build the mine and “transform” Bougainville society, indigenous social systems had a demeaning light cast on them. Local societies were labelled backward, primitive, primordial and steeped in savagery by policy makers, the judiciary and colonial officers (although there were certainly notable examples of colonial officers sensitive to the violence of their mission). Technical variation

in the productivity of the means of production, and difference in culture, custom and politics, were in effect pathologized by the Australian administration to create an impoverished Other, whom the colonial power would negate through implanting the “uplifting” seeds of “civilization.” The application of these demeaning labels was a disorienting and traumatic experience for those agents who were the proud heirs of this “backward” way of life. Indeed, those whose human potential had been cultivated into concrete forms of agency through indigenous social systems faced the unedifying situation where their sensibilities, beliefs, knowledge, clothing and skills become personal signifiers of a barbarity and primitiveness, whose substantive cultural “destiny” was extinction. They were expected now to participate in a new social field, for which their disposition was poorly suited, within which they had little relevant power and where the structural deck was stacked firmly against them. As Iruinu (2015) explains, “The design of the [new] system contained the seed of dependency planted in the time of colonization . . . That’s why Papua New Guinea now has nowhere to go. Instead of surviving, she is dying. Borrow for investment, borrow for services, becomes a slave to the master.”

In Bougainville, the Panguna mine and its impacts remained the most contentious “seed” planted by the colonial regime. It pumped several hundred thousand tons of waste into surrounding valleys and waterways on a daily basis, which presaged the loss of land, flora and fauna (Applied Geology Associates 1989). Additionally, the economic activity prompted by the mine absorbed a growing number of local agents into emergent capitalist social relations and the related governmental-market institutions being established to administer these relations, through mechanisms such as wage-labour, business and petty commodity production (Lasslett 2014). In short, through its destructive and productive qualities, the mine intensely disrupted indigenous social systems, leading to structural crises within the most heavily impacted Nasioi communities, where the inputs essential to social reproduction in its indigenous form—land, culture and environment—were being destroyed. Agitated landowners were aware of the fatal blows being struck at an ontological level. One Paramount Chief (Chief Totobu) remarked: “After BCL caused all these tailings, destroyed the environment, destroyed everything, BCL also destroyed us. All our lives together. So BCL didn’t just cause the destruction of the environment, but our lives as well. We as human beings” (Totobu 2015).

A vanguard of entrepreneurs and political managers within the North Solomons Provincial Government—Bougainville’s provincial government—sought to contain growing anger by employing popular discontent as leverage for diverting mining benefits to the province, which it was believed would appease landowners. However, for those whose *habitus*—in the Bourdieusian sense of social cultivation that equips individuals to express agency within historically situated fields of practice, from which they obtain a sense of identity, purpose and meaning—was

wedded to a system facing crisis, this was the setting in of a social “purgatory” which could not be compensated for (Bourdieu 2020).

People found themselves caught between two worlds: there was the indigenous socio-symbolic order whose “limitations” had been often brutally hoisted into the consciousness of its participants by the colonial regime, and a liberal capitalist order incompatible with the values, aspirations and beliefs of rural communities still personally wedded to a way of life for which they felt a strong sense of custodianship. The openness generated by the colonial project, and the opportunity it implied to begin again, was seized by its targets to formulate the possibility of something else not envisaged by the “colonial masters.” On Bougainville, voices began to indulge this opening in their history, abruptly hoisted on them, to imagine new radical trajectories. In its initial iteration, such utterances took a decisively racialized and nationalistic form. For example, a young Bougainvillean student and future provincial politician, Leo Hannett wrote in 1966:

New Guineas, we have remained silent far too long. Let us not remain forever like some queer zoological specimens, fit only for examination and dissection by others . . . Let us not give away all our lands and become serfs to the whiteman. We do not just want political independence and become economic slaves in our own land to a few capitalists.

Crucially, the moment of openness the colonial regime had forcefully instigated had not been cemented through a new ideological fantasy which could pave over the contingent nature of history; Australia thus left behind the possibility of possibility for Papua New Guinea and Bougainville state managers to deal with. Indeed, it is the case with any politico-legal order that its founding violence is both constitutive and at the same time its point of weakness:

Žižek’s “law” includes its own potentially destabilising excess, also understandable as the typically Hegelian contradiction which, dialectically, functions as law’s unacknowledged anchoring point . . . the excess of the law is both the hinge that supports the explicit text of the law and the “weak point” that may allow us to reconfigure its content. (Vighi 2015: 199)

In other words, the law, and the politico-symbolic order it underpins, has no authority outside of itself, no transcendental Other that can anchor its legitimacy and integrate or redeem its founding violence. Rather, the law is grounded in a tautological authority beyond the rules which says the law is because it is (Žižek 1999). Revealing the inherent weakness behind this authoritarian gesture of the law provides a lever upon which revolutionary movements can pull in order to

open the possibility for political transformation. As such the violent crime of founding a new politico-legal order must be concealed in order for the latter to function. As Dean writes, “In short, the story of a concealed founding violence is a story about how the law is, rather than how law came to be . . . the gesture of concealment as the move that turns violence into law” (2004: 4). In order to deny the possibility of possibility, the law depends on an ongoing violence to keep its founding gesture, and therefore its weakness, concealed.

The Two Faces of the Law

The insight that law relies on a violent supplement as the positive condition of its functioning leads to what is perhaps Žižek’s most crucial claim regarding the law. As a result of the constitutive weakness of the law, the public rules are not enough to explain how authority comes to be invested in the law. That is, for Žižek the law is necessarily split between the public law and a violent, obscene supplement:

At the level of the Law, state Power merely represents the interests, and so on, of its subjects; it serves them, is answerable to them, and is itself subject to their control; at the level of the superego underside, however, the public message of responsibility, and so forth, is supplemented by the obscene message of the unconditional exercise of Power: “laws do not really bind me, I can do whatever I like to you, I can treat you as guilty if I decide to do so, I can destroy you if I want to . . .” This obscene excess is a necessary constituent of the notion of sovereignty (whose signifier is the Master-Signifier)—the asymmetry here is structural, that is, the law can sustain its authority only if the subjects hear in it the echo of the obscene unconditional self-assertion. (Žižek 2009: 336–7)

The key point here is that the split is not an external opposition between the law and its transgression (crime); rather, the law is itself split from within, between an external social law and an obscene violent excess (Dean 2004). Or as Žižek (2015) describes with regards to institutions, the split is the “institutional unconscious” necessary for reproducing the institution itself, it designates the obscene disavowed underside that sustains the public institution. The ongoing violence necessary for sustaining the law is not to be found in public rules, institutions and so on, but in a series of unwritten rules and practices where those in power transgress the public rules. We thereby enter the domain of secret operations, of what power does without ever admitting it (Žižek 2009).

Žižek provides a range of examples to illustrate this concept, from film (e.g. the practice of “code red” in the film *A Few Good Men*), to institutions such as the church and army, as well as the state (see Žižek 2005, 2009). For example, in

the case of the United States, Žižek claims the Abu Ghraib tortures by the United States government are to be located in the series of obscene underground practices that sustain an ideological edifice: "Abu Ghraib was not simply a case of American arrogance toward a Third World people: in being submitted to humiliating tortures, the Iraqi prisoners were in effect initiated into American culture, they got the taste of its obscene underside which forms the necessary supplement to the public values of personal dignity, democracy, and freedom" (Žižek 2009: 370). This creates a situation where this obscene violence becomes a recognized but unacknowledged foundation for observing the rule laden order.

So how do such obscene acts of ongoing violence ensure that people come to believe in the law and accept its authority? While part of the answer lies in the fact that such obscene acts by definition remain hidden from public view, Žižek asserts there is more to the law than violence (Dean 2004). For Žižek, the law also provides a degree of liberation which explains why, even if we want to reject the law altogether, we nonetheless act in support of it (Vighi 2015). Like the law, psychoanalysis conceives of the subject as inherently contradictory, and desire, which fills the space of this contradiction, maintains the fantasy that we can overcome the contradiction and achieve full self-identity. Although achieving the desire for fullness is ontologically impossible, the true function of the prohibitions of the law is to sustain the illusion that, through transgressing it, we can attain our desire. In this way, law provides a mechanism for the subject to avoid the impasse constitutive of desire by transforming inherent impossibility of its satisfaction into prohibition, as if desire would be possible to fulfil if it were not for the prohibition impeding free reign (Dean 2004). It is precisely this paradox of the split law that is exploited by the Lacanian superego, which persists as the ongoing violence of the law (Dean 2004). That is, where the law fails is filled in by the superego. The superego is responsible for issuing unconditional demands, to do the impossible and pursue our desires against the prohibition of the law. Therefore, what liberates us (from the impossibility of desire) and what punishes and torments us (for not pursuing our desire) are two sides of the same split law (Dean 2004).

For Žižek (1991) then the law is not simply violence, but it also opens our access to desire by enabling us to disengage ourselves from the rule of the superego's whim. Thus we are caught in a vicious cycle where the obscene superego law compels us without mercy, whereas external law relieves us of this compulsion. Locating a place beyond this ongoing cycle of the law and of the compulsion to transgress it is key if a revolutionary project is to be conceptualized (Newman 2004).

On Bougainville the founding violence of the law introduced by the colonizer, and the associated two faces of the law, triggered a movement in the 1980s that practically wrestled with this question. Put more precisely, the founding violence of the colonial regime presaged a new politico-legal order, whose liberal public

institutions and laws belied a founding brutality. For those immersed within this contradictory movement, and locked within a social purgatory it necessarily produced for local communities, the desire to go beyond the colonial project was met with ongoing violence by state agents. For example, when women landowners in the mine-impacted area famously organized sit-ins and protests in 1969, in an attempt to block mine construction efforts, they were met with riot squads who used tear gas and batons, with the Pacific Islands Regiment placed on stand-by if required. This more dramatic episode of violence echoed widespread low-key violence, as colonial police officers beat and arrested those refusing to grant access to mine workers constructing the mine and associated facilities. This created a pressure to find satisfaction through accepting this order, and consigning to the political unconscious the violence it is silently premised on, or finding a space beyond.

The growing tensions found expression within a new wave of radical activism in Bougainville, which became organizationally articulated through the Panguna Landowners Association (PLA). The PLA was established in 1979 to represent the concerns of mine affected communities (see Okole 1990). In its opening iteration the body was a conduit where certain landowner leaders—their basis for claiming customary leadership was a matter of contention—who had decided to socially invest in the colonial order, and observe its rules and etiquette, could lobby for greater compensation and benefits from the mine. This conduit allowed these leaders to accumulate new forms of power and prestige as they branched out into business and management. Eventually the Association became largely an organ for aspiring indigenous bourgeois, whose status and aspirations were inextricably aligned to the growth of liberal capitalism. However, in an important turn of events, the Association was the site of a democratic coup in which the self-appointed executive was replaced by a new elected, radical executive led by Perpetua Serero and Francis Ona in August 1987 (Lasslett 2014). Enjoying support from influential customary leaders in the mine region, the Association administered an expansive campaign of resistance. Protests, sit-ins, and road-blocks were employed to execute key demands, which included a symbolic payment of K10 billion in compensation (US\$12 billion), and an agreement to close the mine within five years.

This movement's new figureheads on the one hand articulated a marked discontent with all the material consequences that had emerged from behind the utopian vision presented in the colonial propaganda, on the other they gave form to the sight of those whose habitus had no currency in the increasingly dystopian reality landowners found themselves in. Crucially the founding gesture introduced by the colonial regime, which aimed to break with the indigenous past, had failed to stabilize the future, much less vanish the demeaning mediator that had explicitly opened up a contingent moment in Bougainville's history, where "what next" was an open question. Nonetheless, as discussed above, the vicious cycle created by the ongoing

violence of the law means that exploiting this openness in the name of revolutionary transformation is no easy feat. Therefore, the fundamental question for revolutionary action, according to Žižek (2009), is how are we to break free from the vicious cycle of the law and its superego injunction in order to transform the politico-legal order? In short, “this brings us to Melville’s *Bartleby*” (Žižek 2006: 393).

Bartleby’s Refusal and the Temporality of Revolution

Žižek’s *Bartleby*’s politics is an intervention which disrupts the vicious cycle of the law and its superego supplement, an *act* that suspends reciprocal incitation and struggle between power and resistance. The target of *Bartleby* politics is to unmask the contradiction at the heart of the law, thereby opening the place required for revolutionary transformation to occur. As such, *Bartleby*’s gesture “is what remains of the supplement to the Law when its place it emptied of all its obscene superego content” (Žižek 2009: 382). Based on this logic, Žižek claims it is

Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly . . . The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active”, to “participate”, to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. (Žižek 2009: 334)

Further, Žižek argues the “condition for true change (a true act) is to stop false activity, or as Badiou puts it in a sentence I quote repeatedly: ‘It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.’” (Žižek 2008b: 309). One can imagine *Bartleby*’s “I’d prefer not to” amongst the radical landowner leadership in Bougainville; that is, “Come and join us in the growth and prosperity of Papua New Guinea’s wealthiest province!”—I’d prefer not to; “Sit with us and let’s discuss appropriate compensation for mining your land!”—I’d prefer not to. This, to use a Bourdieusian metaphor, is a refusal to invest in the game and thus also become invested.

Indeed, in a practical manner, Žižek argues “Those in power often prefer even a critical participation, a dialogue, to silence—just to engage us in a ‘dialogue’, to make sure our ominous passivity is broken” (2008b: 334). The most “ominous” feature then of the new PLA leadership was not unrealistic claims for compensation, but the prospect that they were not interested in participating at all, even in critical dialogue. On Bougainville, Ona (1989) outlined how, “others have become rich by exploiting us especially the foreigners and a handful of black power wielders in Papua New Guinea. We are the ‘sacrificial lamb’ for the few capitalists whose hunger for wealth is quenchless and unceasing . . . We are not going to sit by and watch capitalists and their Papua New Guinean political allies exploiting us.” When BCL attempted to negotiate a

solution, through a more modest offering of benefits for mine-impacted communities, Serero warned, “our major concern is pollution—money is of secondary consideration, compensation for these are insufficient” (BCL 1988a). It was Francis Ona, however, who issued the movement’s most “ominous and threatening” message, when he informed BCL management: “we the landowners will close the mine . . . we are not worried about money. Money is something nothing. The operation is causing hazards healthwise. *We don’t want to talk anymore*” (BCL 1988b).

Amongst theorists who acknowledge the revolutionary potential in Bartleby’s refusal, there remains debate over the temporality of the gesture, or whether Bartleby’s gesture alone is sufficient for transforming the existing politico-legal order. For example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim that Bartleby’s refusal “certainly is the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only a beginning . . . What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal” (2005: 204). Similarly, Fabio Vighi argues that Žižek’s Bartleby politics is “at risk of remaining suffocated by its own demand for a liberated terrain upon which to articulate itself. If not complemented by an effort of creative daring, the ‘politics of subtraction’ is in danger of turning into (yet another) case of ‘subtraction from politics’” (2010: 113). Such comments indicate a double movement of revolutionary transformation—a clearing of the ground that is subsequently followed by the task of building something new, and becoming invested in this creation. At certain times in his writing Žižek would appear to agree. For example, he writes that under certain circumstances “the first truly critical (aggressive, violent) step is to withdraw into passivity, to refuse to participate—Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ is the necessary first step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity” (Žižek 2009: 342).

The revolutionary thinkers and activists emerging out of the resistance movement on Bougainville seemed to have a sense of the necessity of this double movement for transformational change. To implement their objectives, the Nasioi-led PLA in November 1988 initiated a campaign of industrial sabotage in which installations around the mine were burnt, and electrical pylons felled (see Lasslett 2014). With a strong show of force on the ground, Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister offered landowning communities a substantive settlement. The package would have increased levels of compensation, new business opportunities and an equity stake in the mine. The package was rejected by the PLA leadership (which later morphed into the BRA)—again their most radical weapon was the act of refusal. It prompted a formidable military response jointly engineered by the Papua New Guinea and Australian states.

What the examples here bring to light is that, just like Melville’s Bartleby, transformation occurs not through a single act of refusal but rather persistent and repeated refusals in order to avoid the ideological traps aimed at bringing the revolutionary movement back within power’s logic. Indeed, by revealing the place

through which revolutionary transformation can take place, what Bartleby does “is precisely to occupy all the time, even when the new order (the ‘new harmony’) stabilizes itself and again renders invisible the hole as such, the place of this hole” (Žižek 1993: 2). As an example, Žižek refers to the Arab Spring uprisings:

When President Obama welcomed the uprising as a legitimate expression of opinion that needed to be acknowledged by the government, the confusion was total: the crowds in Cairo and Alexandria did not want their demands to be acknowledged by the government; they denied the very legitimacy of the government . . . There was no room for compromise here: either the entire Mubarak power edifice fell, or the uprising would be co-opted and betrayed. (2012: 35)

The threat posed by this act of refusal to engage within the rules of the game set by power (accept the mine and the politico-legal order it is premised on, with the only legitimate struggle being over the level of compensation) was clearly felt by those economic nationalists who were leveraging local discontent to increase Bougainville’s stake in the revenues generated by mining capital, BCL itself and the Papua New Guinea-Australian governments. They sensed that this radical core through its ideological activity, military resistance and the new projects organically emerging from this determination to begin again, had the potential capacity to illuminate the incompleteness of power, and fundamentally disrupt a project they were invested in and progressing within a nationalist political paradigm.

With a communications and travel cordon progressively placed around the island, international commentators recycled the discourse utilized by the Australian colonial administration, and argued again that Bougainville had a choice between slipping into underdevelopment and savagery, or to become a mature democracy which accepts the core tenets of liberal capitalism (see Lasslett 2014). This was not a cynical plot, so much as a genuine inability to comprehend that the non-acceptance of the metropolitan civilizing mission may be rooted in visions for a progressive future. Media commentators cast the politics of subtraction as a Pol-Pot style campaign, designed to eviscerate any sign of progress of civilization from Bougainville (see e.g. Dorney 1998). As the BRA faced a growing international political-military campaign, the rebel’s supreme command employed Bougainville’s independence as a hegemonic project in which to fuse radical, nationalist and reactive currents, behind their political project.

Their success in this respect was hastened by the very military strategy set up to destroy the BRA’s social licence. During late 1989, drawing on air and naval supplies provided by Australia—including military advisors and line managers—the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) blockaded BRA held areas, denying civilians all goods and services, including medical aid and surgical equipment.

This was complemented by a military campaign marked by village bombardment, that forced civilians into the jungle canopy for safety, and the wide-scale use of detention camps. The punitive logic of the embargo was explained by an Australian diplomat: “The way to bring them to heel, was frankly to cut off the tap, to ensure that they would pay for not having the mine to operate, that they would pay for their defiance if you will” (Australian High Commission Official 2006). Papua New Guinea defence planners suggested: “These hardships may, in a few months time, force the ordinary people to pressure the BRA leadership to deliver their promised goods and services, [or] otherwise become more reasonable on the whole issue, including the negotiations” (Defence Intelligence Branch 1990).

On the one hand the military blockade and counterinsurgency campaign exacted a human toll barely recognized even today, on the other it became a prompt for building an alternative system for organizing social life on Bougainville that could break with the colonial project, and renew indigenous structures (Jubilee Australia 2014). Many examples could be pointed to of new radical initiatives that emerged during this contradictory period of loss and renewal. To cite one exemplary instance, a local agronomist Bruno Idioai atoned for his previous role in the logging industry through an expansive reforestation project: “So my whole idea sort of came about in 1989 that was at the tip of the Bougainville Crisis. And then at that time these BRAs were saying that they were fighting to safeguard our environment” (2014). He continues: “So this gave me an idea of starting to plant these trees [pointing to trees]. And then from then on I started planting trees and at the moment I have planted more than one million at this stage” (Idioai 2014).

The blockade can be understood as an example of what Fabio Vighi (2015) claims is the way that developments within global capitalism are already themselves, without our interventions to oppose it, altering the nature of the relationship between law and its excess. Thus, Vighi concludes, “do we not already have this *Bartleby* of non-participation, of clearing the ground for the act, in the infernal yet ‘liberated’ territories of the slums, or, more generally, in relation to any instance of exclusion?” (2010: 137). From this perspective, the blockade itself can be considered as the process that cleared the ground for the new to emerge. Blaise Iruinu, one of the key theoreticians behind the creation of a new social body, claims, “the crisis in Bougainville [which is ongoing], it’s a new way forward” (2015). The conflict, Iruinu contends, was a painful process through which the excesses of colonialism were violently exfoliated, so Bougainville could reboot in terms palatable to its people and the indigenous legacies they are heir to: “We have violated and exploited the natural creation. We have destroyed the natural habitat, with her natural laws. That’s why the crisis [occurred]. It is a progress of self-discovery and rediscovery of the Bougainville Man . . . It means: going back to the origin . . . we have to go back to start a new journey. Rehabilitate the mind-set and the hearts of the people” (2015).

An ex-combatant explains this double movement in more practical terms: “We have destroyed everything here [during the war]. You have already seen some of the place [destroyed] during the crisis, but we will rebuild it again” (Matevai 2014). He continues: “Like what I did to my car, I destroyed it [in a crash] and I rebuilt it again. You cannot see that this truck was tipped over because I modified it. And I modified it to suit the climate here. Because when it came from Japan, the thing was made for good roads only. But later when I crashed, I modified it to suit all the rugged road for this land” (Matevai 2014).

The large scale systematic violence experienced by mine-impacted communities, as noted above, led to the rapid militarization of the Panguna Landowners Association and finally the establishment of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, a guerrilla force set up under Ona’s leadership to combat state violence and pursue, through arms, a range of political objectives. The BRA fused together multiple social currents that had emerged in the mine-affected region of central Bougainville, and beyond. Some recruits were reacting to the mobile squad and defence force violence, and the increased presence of Papua New Guineans on Bougainville, including the growth of squatter settlements from the mainland; there were also economic nationalists, keen to utilize the instability as leverage to appropriate a greater share of mine revenues for Bougainville. But the most dangerous and arguably powerful current within the BRA was the core of radicals, who in the moment of the first negation (ending the immiseration of landowning communities by the mine’s operation) began germinating the seeds of a second negation directed at the colonial project itself. None of this was planned in advance. Nevertheless, once an opening unexpectedly appeared, there was an evident preparedness to utilize this moment in order to begin again.

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that against the earlier referenced endorsement of a two-step revolutionary process by Žižek, he nonetheless asserts a position that

Bartleby’s attitude is not merely the first, preparatory, stage for the second more “constructive” work of forming a new alternative order; it is the very source and background of this order, its permanent foundation . . . or as Hegel might have put it, the new post revolutionary order does not negate its founding gesture, the explosion of the destructive fury that wipes away the Old; it merely gives body to this negativity. (Žižek 2009: 382)

Understanding Žižek’s claim seems to rest upon a retroactive temporality which is key to his conception of the relationship between contingency and necessity. That is, when “a thing occurs as a result of a series of contingent conditions, it produces the *retroactive* impression that it was teleologically necessary” (Žižek 2014a: 30). As such, “the

meaning of our acts is not an expression of our inner intention, it emerges later, from their social impact” (Žižek 2014b: 21). In other words, whether an act of refusal successfully “cleared the ground” to enable something new to emerge is only discernible from the perspective of the something new. For example, the act of the industrial sabotage of the mine could be claimed as the critical act of clearing the ground only from the perspective of the Bougainville revolutionaries engaged in the ongoing struggle against the PNG Defense Forces. Furthermore, we can suggest that, rather than remaining faithful to this opening, the capitulation of moderate forces in the BRA who accepted greater economic control and concessions over Bougainville’s political status was a clear betrayal of the social revolution. Therefore, Žižek claims (2008a), there are no objective criteria in deciding whether a violent act (refusal) of clearing the ground is revolutionary, it is not determined by some transcendental Other; rather the risk of reading and assuming it as revolutionary is fully the subject’s own.

“Violence is Needed, But Which Kind of Violence?”

In Žižek’s (2008a) *Violence*, he outlines three different forms of violence: subjective, objective/systemic and symbolic. For Žižek, subjective violence enacted by one person against others is only the most visible of the three. There is no doubting the fact that the revolutionary struggle in Bougainville against the PNG Defense Forces was one of immense physical violence. For example, following the act of industrial sabotage, BCL proposed a show of force by the Papua New Guinea government, insisting on the deployment of mobile squad units, a paramilitary force with a well-known reputation for human rights abuses. After mobile squad units were deployed by the national government, they proceeded to burn villages, assault civilians and rape local women. To expand the apparatus of violence on Bougainville, the PNGDF was deployed, with logistic support from BCL. Only once this act of defiance was suitably punished, the company hypothesized, would radical landowners be in a mood to moderate their position.

In the face of such overwhelming subjective violence, however, Žižek argues,

we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible “subjective” “ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance. (2008a: 1)

This leads us first to the notion of systemic violence which Žižek (2008a: 2) describes as “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” The impacts of the mine emanating from the

system of colonial capitalism and its violent extraction of resources is precisely this kind of systemic violence, one which, in the case of Bougainville, provided the conditions for the explosion of subjective violence in an attempt to break out of the system and, conversely in an attempt to pacify it.

As the blockade and counterinsurgency campaign failed to yield anticipated results, it was the peace process, and the potential it held to accommodate the demands of “moderate” BRAs, which became the most powerful political tool for a nexus of local, national and international forces seeking to simmer away the radical core and the political project it espoused. Indeed, as tens of thousands displaced by the war sought security and stability, peacemaking became a vehicle which could harness growing antipathy to subjective violence, to establish acceptable political concessions with “moderate” BRA—castrating from the movement its most powerful weapon, refusal. The success of this strategy was most vividly demonstrated as the revolution’s figurehead, Francis Ona, became an increasingly reclusive and maligned figure, while those who had adopted a more modest stance—accepting greater economic control and concessions over Bougainville’s political status—became key power brokers in the aftermath of Bougainville Peace Agreement’s implementation.

One is tempted to claim that the success of the Bougainville peace process was that it brought about an end to both subjective and systemic forms of violence. In our analysis, however, the peace process itself reinstated to some degree the very systemic violence that the revolutionary movement struggled to overcome. Following the signing of the peace agreement in 2001 and a short period of respite, logging companies, mining exploration companies, gold traders and scrap metal dealers worked with moderate BRA leadership to gradually restore the system that had been shut down by the uprising and conflict, while a political leadership committed to maintaining the broader features of Bougainville’s political economy bequeathed by Australia assumed control of government, a process that has been accompanied by prolific levels of corruption (a blueprint, if you will, of the systemic violence initially denounced by Francis Ona, who in 2005 passed away unexpectedly). Here we should follow Wendy Brown who asks “what kind of politicization [those who intervene on behalf of human rights] set in motion against the powers they oppose. Do they stand for a different formulation of justice or do they stand in opposition to collective justice projects?” (2004: 454). Of course, a considerable number of activists on Bougainville participated in the peace process in order to pursue collective justice, in an environment marked by non-violence. However, the transitional environment that emerged out of this process saw moderate factions of the BRA work with former remnants of the provincial government, to restore a politico-legal order acceptable to themselves and the regional power brokers, in particular the Australian state, which played a key role in the peace process (whilst denying its own hand in the initial subjective violence).

This brings us to the third type of violence, symbolic. For Žižek symbolic violence is not “only at work in the obvious—and extensively studied—cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning” (2008a: 1–2). It is here that Žižek raises a crucial question regarding revolutionary violence: violence is needed but *what* violence? The answer brings us back to the beginning of this paper and the concept of the founding violence of the law. That is, the founding of a new politico-legal order is the violent overthrow of a previously existing symbolic violence, the imposition of a new universe of meaning. Although revolutionary violence—most specifically here the violent act of refusal—Žižek argues, has no intrinsic value, “it is a sign of the authenticity of the revolutionary process, of the fact that this process is effectively disturbing the existing power relations—the dream of revolution without violence is precisely the idea of a ‘revolution without revolution.’” (2009: 381). In this context, Žižek explicitly endorses “Frantz Fanon’s fundamental insight into the unavoidability of violence in the process of effective decolonization.” (2009: 381). That is not to endorse abstractly subjective violence in the sense described by Žižek, rather it is to say that there must be in revolution a direct and explicit goal of refusing, and supplanting, the politico-legal order.

In linking revolutionary violence to Bartleby politics, Žižek writes, in order for the violent act of changing the coordinates of a political-legal order to take place, a place “should be opened up through a gesture which is thoroughly violent in its impassive refusal, through a gesture of pure withdrawal in which . . . nothing takes place but the place itself” (2006: 393). Subsequently, as discussed earlier, “the formation of the new social order does not negate its founding gesture, the explosion of the destructive fury that wipes away the Old; it merely gives body to this negativity. The difficulty of imagining the New is the difficulty of imagining Bartleby in power.” (Žižek 2009: 382). In this precise sense we can perhaps argue that the problem with the Bougainville revolution was that it was not violent enough. That is, while the conflict in Bougainville certainly consisted of immense levels of subjective violence that left an immeasurable toll of suffering, the revolutionary struggle nonetheless did not lead to an enduring alternative to the colonial-capitalist system. In other words, it failed to successfully enact its own symbolic violence, under the heaving pressure of military and political incursions marshalled by the Australian and Papua New Guinea states.

Conclusion

The radical project initiated out of the unexpected events of 1988/89 has not disappeared. As one of the founding theoreticians of the revolution puts it:

If we want to fight against this monster, this monstrous system, with this capitalist interests, we have to go back to the origin, we have to revive our culture, our traditional norms and practices, and lay our foundations there, then we can mobilize with other people, who have same problems, like ours. Then we can build a special course to move. And I think it's not too late. It's not too late, there is still time. (Iruinu 2015)

This enduring commitment to such a vision, alongside the fear of facing new modalities of dispossession, has seen certain “hardcore” BRA fighters refuse to relinquish arms. As one “hardcore” BRA put it: “This is a sniper rifle [holding sniper rifle]. And this rifle, we didn’t bring it here. All those stupid people [colonial powers] they bring it here trying to use force on us. But now when it comes to our hands, we are going to use it as long as we are here. We are going to use it to defend our resources.”

Drawing on a Žižek’s *Bartelby* politics it has been argued that colonialism on Bougainville cast abrupt light on the limits of indigenous politico-legal orders, creating a historically open moment. Despite efforts by the Australian administration to deny the contingent nature of historical conjunctures—where multiple avenues of possible change emerge—through a mixture of ideological fantasy (a utopic vision of “catching up” with the “first world”) and force, the colonial regime failed to cement its teleological project. When a radical movement emerged that sought to negate the excesses of this politico-legal order introduced during the colonial period, through negating the colonial project itself, one of their most effective and radical weapons was silence, and a refusal to negotiate.

The symbolic violence of refusal had not been experienced by the mining company, or government, and drew a punitive response that was designed to punish intransigence. To remain silent, and to continue to refuse, the social movement became militarized. Attempts to curtail this refusal with even more punitive violence failed. It was only when state parties succeeded in pressing home internal tensions within the BRA, to initiate dialogue, and rewarding those who chose to negotiate the restoration of a governmental and market structure that broadly echoed the past, that they managed to defuse the movement’s most dangerous weapon. By then the radical factions of this movement had taken the uncertain steps that follow from beginning again. However, dialogue quickly isolated these tentative movements. They are still being taken today by rural communities inspired to begin again, but they do so on the margins of political power, and survive as largely localized, hidden initiatives.

The Bougainville case study suggests Žižek’s theorization of how power conceals its limits (imperfectly), and the radical moments that reignite the possibility of possibility, offers an insight into colonization, decolonization and violence. On the one hand his concepts can explain the ambiguity of the colonial moment—at once it must be shepherded through a radical process of historical transition, while conveying its inevitability and singular destination through an ideological fantasy of liberal

capitalism as the historical endpoint. On the other, this creates a rupture in indigenous social orders and resistance, which can radically reharvest the openness triggered by the colonization process, to begin an alternative historical path, a point made by a range of Bougainville intellectuals. During these moments, it has been suggested drawing on Žižek, the most radical and extreme form of violence wielded by decolonial movements is silence and a refusal to negotiate. Reactive violence and isolation administered by the metropolitan powers act as a bridge to the most powerful reactionary force from a revolutionary perspective, dialogue. Dialogue castrates the possibility of beginning again, and absorbs the movement back into the dominant socio-symbolic order, while the memory of possibility becomes erased as the mediating break vanishes under the weight of ideological fantasy.

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