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'The Fool' Revisited: The Making of Žižek as Sacrificial Public Intellectual

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cus**Eliran Bar-Ei**

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Abstract

This article provides a sociological explanation for the global emergence of Slavoj Žižek as a public intellectual. It presents an integrative account encompassing both personal and institutional aspects. Drawing on positioning theory and performative frameworks, the article contributes to the sociology of intellectuals, as well as to the vast 'Žižek-literature' that focuses on his philosophical content or political activities. We analyse the distinctiveness of Žižek's performances, arguing that Žižek acts as a 'sacrificial intellectual': he plays 'the fool' and relies on irony to undermine the traditional role of the authoritative intellectual. Within the context of the digital public sphere and declining intellectual authority, Žižek's unique form of positioning has been particularly effective and has contributed to his celebrity status.

Keywords

celebrity, performativity, positioning theory, public intellectual, sociology of intellectuals, Žižek

No book on Western intellectuals can be instructive without catching the strangest case of all, the model of the modern intellectual: the intellectual Jew in the act of committing identity-suicide. (Rieff, 1969: vii)

This is the opening statement of the Preface to the edited volume *On Intellectuals*, compiled by the sociologist Philip Rieff and including contributions by Parsons, Shils and others. The paragraph was referring to Isaiah Berlin's essay on Moses Hess, which elaborated on Hess' contradictory positioning as both a communist and a Zionist. It was

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this self-positioning – referred to by Rieff as ‘identity-suicide’ – that eventually led to Hess’s demise as a public intellectual. The notion of identity-suicide refers to the act of taking opposing positions within a given context. The example of Hess brings to the fore the phenomenon of the ‘sacrificial intellectual’, sacrificing him- or herself supposedly for the greater public good. Indeed, for Berlin, Hess held on to his contradictory positioning because he was convinced that it provided the bedrock for a new political future; nonetheless, this identity-suicide undermined his intellectual and public legitimacy.

We will build on Rieff’s specific observation on Jewish intellectuals to point out the broader significance of ‘the fool’ and the ‘internal-outsider’ within the current public intellectual sphere. These will help to elucidate how, in the context of digital media and celebrity culture, public intellectuals may perform a rhetorical sacrifice of their position and thus become more attractive and viral (Baert and Booth, 2012). We shall demonstrate how Žižek’s self-positioning as ‘the fool’ of academia is built on a repertoire and reputation of internal-outsider, supposedly writing and speaking against the intellectual establishment and gaining street cred for doing so. This made him appealing to a broader public whilst still retaining his attractiveness within a traditional academic setting, having been offered several positions in English and American universities.

The phenomenon of the sacrificial intellectual has a long history. It has often been linked to the notion of speaking truth to power: a popular portrayal of philosophers is as bearers of truth, going against the tide and thereby possibly risking their institutional position or legitimacy. Looking back upon the history of philosophy, for instance, Bradatan (2014: 6) argues that ‘. . . a philosopher . . . is often a *parresia*stes, a radical straight-talker; part of her job description is not to keep her mouth shut’. The case of Hess shows that philosophers may also undermine their intellectual or public authority and legitimacy because they perform positions that seem contradictory in their contexts.

Amongst contemporary philosophers, Slavoj Žižek combines both sacrificial features. Not only is he extremely vocal, commenting incessantly on a wide range of topics from cinema to quantum physics (e.g. Žižek, 1996); he also regularly insists on taking contradictory positions. In contrast with Hess, however, Žižek’s contradictions are primarily rhetorical and performative devices. As we will demonstrate, his contradictions are intrinsic to his self-positioning. Further, an element of irony constitutes and accompanies his performance as a sacrificial intellectual.¹ We will elaborate on how such self-positioning became exceptionally attractive in the context of digital technologies and the related erosion of traditional notions of intellectual authority. This self-positioning effectively resulted in a ‘media–academia tension’: the more Žižek became a public intellectual celebrity, the more his writings and interventions were questioned in academic circles. In his review of Žižek, for example, Hollander scathingly remarked that the ‘. . . reputation and celebrity status of Slavoj Žižek is among the reliable indicators of the decline of the quality of academic-intellectual life in the North America and Europe’ (Hollander, 2010: 358). However, the loss of academic credibility does not necessarily result in institutional rejection: Žižek managed to secure several positions at prestigious universities.

The article consists of four parts. Part 1 will outline the theoretical framework underlying this study, in particular positioning theory. It elaborates on the core tenets of this theory in relation to other recent contributions to the sociology of intellectuals and celebrities, such as those by Charles Camic (1987, 1992), Neil Gross (2002, 2008), Michèle Lamont (1987, 2009) and Jefferey Alexander (2010, 2016). Part 2 explores the extent to

which Žižek fits what Ralf Dahrendorf (1969) described as ‘the fool’: someone who is both insider and outsider, and who, in that capacity, becomes a sacrificial intellectual. Part 3 focuses on the distinctiveness of Žižek’s performances, especially in relation to the shifting foundation of authority away from authenticity (York, 2014). Part 4 analyses Žižek’s engagement with popular culture that greatly enhanced his broader appeal while questioning his standing within academia.

Theoretical Framework: From Position to Positioning

Recently, sociologists such as Charles Camic (1987, 1992), Neil Gross (2002, 2008; Frickel and Gross, 2005) and Michèle Lamont (1987, 2009) have developed an empirical approach to the sociological study of intellectual production; this has sometimes been referred to as the New Sociology of Ideas (Camic and Gross, 2001; Camic et al., 2011). In Camic and Gross’s view, earlier incarnations of the Sociology of Knowledge tended to be speculative. In contrast, they proposed detailed empirical studies, which explored knowledge production within specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts (see also Santoro, 2009).

This type of research has taken different forms. For instance, Lamont (1987) inquired how Derrida’s deconstructive ideas gained acceptance ‘in the land of empiricism’. She analysed the reception and legitimation of his work by comparing the American and French contexts, and the literary and philosophical fields, respectively. Similarly, by exploring the specific institutional setting at Harvard in the 1930s, Camic (1992) provided an explanation for Parsons’s surprising choice to align himself during that period with relatively obscure European thinkers like Weber and Durkheim, rather than with the better-known paradigm of institutionalism. In a similar vein, Gross (2002) retraced Richard Rorty’s intellectual trajectory with the help of the notion of ‘self-concept’. Given Rorty’s parental background, Rorty developed a unique sense of intellectual selfhood, which would eventually guide him in the direction of American pragmatism and away from the more established analytical philosophy.

It is undeniable that the New Sociology of Ideas put forward a compelling research programme, which presented a necessary corrective to previous accounts of knowledge making. Based on empirical research, the New Sociology of Ideas rightly drew attention to the importance of institutional and cultural contexts for understanding the choices that intellectuals make (or indeed fail to make). Whilst this approach is to be commended, we supplement it with a detailed analysis of the performative dimensions of the intellectual scene (Chow and Mangold, 2014). In this regard, we are particularly attuned to the practical dynamics of intellectual interventions, moving away from both structural and psychological reductionism. Another difference with the New Sociology of Ideas is that we pay attention to the relevance of broader societal developments beyond the specific local institutional contexts in which Žižek found himself. We are convinced that these wider structural transformations, ranging from the fall of the Eastern Block to the rise of digital technologies, are significant for understanding his interventions and his appeal.

In addition to the New Sociology of Ideas, this article engages with sociological research of the phenomenon of celebrity (see Angermüller and Hamann, 2019; Coser, 1973; Debray, 1981 [1979]; Lilti, 2017) including academic celebrity (Walsh and Lehmann, 2019). A considerable amount of sociological research into celebrities focuses on the distinctive nature of celebrity culture and the extent to which this requires us to

talk about a new field involving new types of resources. In this context, for example, Driessens (2013) suggested expanding Bourdieu's four forms of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) and to add a fifth kind called 'celebrity capital'. He argued that this capital, as accumulated media visibility and recognisability, explains how some individuals convert their success from one field to another. With celebrity capital, this approach focuses on the field, be it academic or public, and on the capital flows and accumulations that make one a celebrity.

Whilst there is undoubtedly merit in this Bourdieusian approach and we most definitely acknowledge the unique features of celebrity culture requiring different resources to compete, our line of inquiry is different in that it draws particular attention to the dramaturgical dimensions that accompany this phenomenon. The dramaturgical dimensions allow for a more pragmatic account of the processes by which intellectuals achieve a public status within specific socio-political arenas. We argue that this perspective is particularly fruitful in a context when celebrities, including intellectual celebrities, are seen as cultural icons, symbolically re-presenting a set of values and practices. Jeffery Alexander's cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004) has been particularly adroit in describing the performances and rituals that make some intellectuals iconic. Particularly, Alexander (2010) proposed the perspective of totemism to better understand the current celebrity phenomenon. Drawing on Durkheim and arguing against the view that sees modernity as eradicating 'irrationality', Alexander points out that cultural idols and icons are like modern totems. Cultural icons such as celebrities create a collective representation by enacting an iconoclastic dichotomy between surface and depth: the former is the profane aesthetic signifier, and the latter is the sacred ethical signified. The individual's identification with such cultural icons leads, according to Alexander, to subjectification as one's own bodily appearance and behaviour change in accordance with the icon, which in turn is seen through idealization and objectification. As he puts it, intellectual 'persons become iconic, condensed, simplified, and charismatic collective representations of the transformational models they themselves propose—contemporarily, in real time, or retrospectively, in memory' (Alexander, 2016: 343).

This article shares Alexander's focus on performativity and his attention to the sacred dimension of contemporary society, yet it does not draw as explicitly on the distinction between surface and depth and is less concerned with uncovering hidden societal meanings behind intellectual interventions. Rather, it pays more attention to the way in which Žižek's performances positioned him in a particular fashion within the relevant socio-political contexts and how those forms of positioning were particularly effective in promoting his persona. Of specific interest is the more recent context of the celebrityization of academic life: whereas previously academic culture had been relatively immune to the external pressures of the market, increasingly economic principles and mass media have started to play a role in legitimizing and making academic careers (Bove, 1983: 83). Indeed, whilst Bourdieu's depiction of the academic realm as relatively autonomous was pertinent in the context of the mid-20th century, it is more difficult to maintain this portrayal in the context of societal shifts over the last few decades. It is in this new context of mass-media and new media that Žižek's performance of the fool was able to become a hot or viral commodity (see also Harpham, 2003). In short, he became a phenomenon.

To understand the complexities involved, we will, in what follows, draw on positioning theory (Baert, 2012a, 2015, 2016, 2018). This theory fills the void in the current literature of the sociology of knowledge and ideas by shifting from position as a state-of-affairs, to *positioning* as a process (Morgan and Baert, 2015). We analyse how Žižek's interventions – whether as books, articles or videos – have positioned him within the complex intellectual and cultural landscape in which he has found himself. The notion of positioning refers to the act of attributing certain features to oneself and to others. We are interested in the various performative devices through which intellectuals such as Žižek accomplish this positioning, sometimes with the help of others. For instance, we shall see how Ernesto Laclau's Preface to Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) presented his work as an innovative contribution to post-Marxist social theory. We are also sensitive, however, to the fact that an intellectual's positioning is an ongoing process as it is inevitably also the relational product of others' interpretations and critique (Bourdieu, 1999; Santoro, 2011). For example, Jacob Torfing's *New Theories of Discourse* (1999) tied Žižek's work to discourse theory, whereas Paul Taylor's *Žižek and the Media* (2010) depicted him as a radical media theorist and Wall and Perrin's *A Žižekian Gaze at Education* (2015) as a new pedagogical philosopher.

The performative perspective that we adopt here draws attention to the dramaturgical devices that are used by intellectuals to persuade the public. Loosely following Aristotle, three means of persuasion can be distinguished: intellectuals may use logical argumentation to put forward and defend their position (*logos*), they may use various devices to assert their moral authority (*ēthos*), and finally they may use powerful metaphors and images to elicit an emotional response (*pathos*) (Baert and Morgan, 2018). In this context, authoritative intellectuals have traditionally adhered to rules of internal consistency; and their performances asserted a certain gravitas, eliciting respect and cultivating a sense of aura. In contrast, we shall see that, for each means of persuasion, Žižek's performances have been highly unusual, breaking the mould in the light of changing social conditions.

This emphasis on the processual nature of intellectual interventions is consistent with Eyal and Buchholz's plea for a sociology of interventions (Eyal and Buchholz, 2010). Like them, we are particularly interested in the intersection between the academic and public domain and we are sensitive to the significance of what they call '... the interstitial space of expertise, where the borders between these domains are fuzzy' (Eyal and Buchholz, 2010: 120). We shall see how, especially in the digital context, Žižek plays on (and contributes to) the blurring of conventional intellectual norms and knowledge hierarchies. As such, we show how Žižek's 'foolish' performance positioned him as a sacrificial intellectual and how this contributed to the making of his global brand (see also Desch, 2016). Thus, Žižek's examination, against the context of growing globalization, the fall of Communism, and the rise of the academic as celebrity, will shed light on the growing phenomenon of mediatized intellectuals, who depart from traditional dramaturgical rules and seems to be more than a passing phase limited to few exceptional figures (Baert and Morgan, 2018: 15).

The advantages of positioning theory and the performative framework will be made clear in the analysis of key paratextual elements from Žižek's career, as well as his numerous and relational performative interventions. Methodologically, this study is based on our archive of Žižek's numerous and diverse intellectual interventions; these

include 250 books, 500 videos and 496 articles. We analysed these interventions and we conducted three semi-structured extended interviews with Žižek and his close collaborators, philosophers Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič. Each interview lasted between two and three hours.

Žižek, the Fool and the Internal-Outsider

Dahrendorf went as far as to equate the intellectual and the fool, arguing that ‘the fools of modern society . . . are the intellectuals – now again much despised’ (1969: 51). He was able to see intellectuals in this light because he saw them as ‘internal-outsiders’ (Pietila, 2011: 64), a position of ambiguity also repeatedly ascribed to Jews (Arendt, 1978; Weber, 1952). For Dahrendorf, ‘the fool is defined by the very fact that he always acts out of character. It is his role not to play his role’ (1969: 50). In this perspective, intellectuals ‘stand outside of the ‘thermometer scale’ of social ranks, who are not at all affected as it were by its gradations and careers, its privileges and petty quarrels’ (1969: 50). As a fool, its power ‘lies in his freedom with respect to the hierarchy of the social order, he speaks from outside as well as from inside it’ (1969: 50). It is because the fool sees the social space from the outside – while inside of it – he or she can expose a society’s malaise and shed light on its blind spots (Said, 1994).

We differ from Dahrendorf in two ways. Firstly, we do not describe all intellectuals in this light and we wish to be more attentive to the different manifestations of intellectual life (see also Baert and Shipman, 2012). Secondly, we would like to clarify the nebulous notion of the fool with the sociological concept of ‘sacrificial intellectual’, emphasizing in the process that the latter category is only applicable to some intellectuals. Whereas authoritative intellectuals, such as Sartre, acquired legitimacy and widespread appeal with the help of coherent and consistent sets of positioning and implicit or explicit claims regarding authenticity (Baert, 2012b; Baugh, 1988; Detmer, 2008), sacrificial intellectuals thrive on performing contradictory positions and relinquishing authenticity.

Žižek’s sacrificial performance, which undermines his own authoritative intellectual position, resonates with the current post-ideological context in which (political, scientific and parental) authority and authenticity are questioned in an ironic fashion (Schuster, 2020). We thus locate Žižek’s positioning process in the broader social context of the digital public sphere, or the ‘post-codex era’ (Burnham, 2014), whereby intellectual work is accomplished not solely by professionals and not merely on paper but rather involves laypersons and screens.

Both in his written and oral interventions, Žižek’s performative rejection of the authoritative intellectual position is abundantly clear. He often distances himself from the internal rules of the intellectual arena, thus acting as Pietila’s internal-outsider.² For example, in reviewing Žižek for *The Guardian*, Jonathan Rée (2012) rightly points out that he ‘. . . is a gifted speaker – tumultuous, emphatic, direct and paradoxical – and he writes as he speaks’. His colloquial, ‘subjective’ and engaged writing diverts from the formal, ‘objective’ and remote style expected of professional intellectuals. By doing so, he *prima facie* undermines his own credibility as a traditional intellectual; but this unusual writing style also allows him to gain street credit within the public sphere by reacting to the shifting foundation of intellectual (and political) authority in lieu of the cultural context.

We shall return to this ‘media-academia tension’ later on, but it is worth pointing out at this stage some of the idiosyncrasies of Žižek’s performances in both form and content. In addition to more straightforward academic lectures, papers and books, he has been involved in several films (some as a main protagonist) and viral internet clips, and he wrote extremely long and peculiar books (one of which is 1038 pages long and another only contains jokes!) and hundreds of media articles. As we shall elaborate later, his writing style counters the standard academic type of argumentation. He has a repetitive repertoire that includes rhetorical questions, examples, and jokes. In contrast to the value-neutrality and formality of academic discourse, his engaged and colloquial writing style is laden with profanities. Žižek’s recurrent use of dashes, prefixes and suffixes, capitals and italics makes for lively, engaging texts. He uses such unique language that one scholar even felt it necessary to compile a Žižek dictionary (Butler, 2014).

His constant preoccupation with popular culture, from cinema to TV shows, often eclipses his position as a professional philosopher. His frequent political interventions in the media (with an average of at least one significant intervention per month for over the last two decades) also differentiates his position from the standard ‘ivory tower’ academic. Additionally, he even violates common academic practices, and recycles his materials to the level of self-plagiarism (Wofford, 2014).

In sum, Žižek performs contradictory positions (Parker, 2004): he is both a professional academic and not. In what follows, we shall see that early on he already developed this unique profile, and we shall elaborate on the effects of this contradictory positioning for both his public success and his academic legitimacy.

Performing the Sacrificial Intellectual

Žižek had already differentiated himself from other intellectuals during his graduate studies. For instance, his MA supervisor, Boris Majer, was so concerned about the iconoclastic nature of his dissertation that he demanded the addition of a specific chapter on Marx (Irwin and Motoh, 2014; Tucker, 2017). Subsequently, in the early 1980s, he analysed the emerging Slovene punk phenomenon, using Peter Sloterdijk’s (1983) *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Whilst commenting on these artistic performances, Žižek (1984, 1994a) judiciously drew on philosophy to comment on the culture of cynicism which commentators had thought was corrupting Slovenia’s youth.³ His playful combination of ‘high theory’ and popular culture was not only novel, but also attractive to the wider public, especially to younger generations. Alenka Zupančič, now one of his closest colleagues but back then a teenager, recalls how different Žižek was from the typical authoritative intellectual and how much of an inspiration he was to her cohort. As she recalls:

One thing that was also extremely interesting for me, when this whole thing started in the 80s, was to see the difference between public intellectuals of that time, who were people perceiving themselves as these sage or wise men and women . . . and the way my camp worked. It was extremely witty; it was never from this point ‘OK, philosophers are people who from the heights of their whatever, they will now explain and talk about things like authenticity, and teach us things’. This was something completely different; this was ‘Fuck authenticity! Let’s take things as they are’. This was much more funny [sic], and rang enormously more true – simply the analysis of concrete events. (Zupančič, 2017)

To elaborate on the punk movement, Žižek was commenting on the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* or NSK (Badovinac et al., 2015; Bell, 2013; Monroe, 2005). Announced in 1984, the *New Slovenian Art* collective consisted of the cutting-edge music and cross-media group Laibach (significantly, 'Ljubljana' in German), the painters' group IRWIN and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (plus several departments). The Party and most public intellectuals regarded the NSK as pernicious, since it purposefully used Nazi symbolism and violated this taboo in post-war Yugoslavia. Even the name of 'Laibach' – the first of these groups to appear in 1980 – is an unsettling reminder of the German occupation during the Second World War. According to Zupančič:

When this band had its first concert in Ljubljana, there was this established public intellectual Slovene scene. They were, of course, immediately appalled by this; they really dismissed this. But Slavoj, from the effect that they were producing, he immediately got it. He got it right, and his theory is the one – even Laibach now present themselves in such a way. They started out just repeating in a very strong way all those clichés of the official politics, but never ironically! This was very uncanny for most of public intellectuals precisely because they were looking for some kind of ironic distance from the system. And Laibach refused to say any kind of irony, they would just very eagerly repeat these things and the effect of this ['over-identification'] was much more devastating for the power structure than any kind of ironic distance. (Zupančič, 2017)

Most Slovenian public intellectuals reacted to NSK's performances dismissively and with disdain given its proto-fascist undertones. They assumed that NSK was adopting an ironic stance, something which they regarded as politically problematic though relatively insignificant. Žižek countered this particular reading in terms of irony (Bondy, 1969; Weatherby, 2019), arguing that the public intellectuals had been complicit with the Party and had adopted the official line. In various contributions to influential journals, such as *Problemi* and *Mladina*, Žižek asserted that NSK should be taken seriously: by taking on a pseudo-fascist stance, the NSK had exposed some of the contradictions within the regime, in particular between its ordered appearance and inherently dysfunctional nature. Further, by reiterating the notion of national identity, the NSK also subverted it, similar to how the analysand (the patient under psychoanalysis) manages to create distance towards their identity by speaking about it continuously (see also Parker, 2012: 12). This distinctive reading of the NSK offered the Slovenian public a novel engagement with popular culture and politics. It did mean that Žižek became *persona non grata* with the Slovenian authorities, even having a brush with the law following a controversial *Punk Problemi* issue (Motoh, 2012). Eventually, Žižek demonstratively resigned from the Communist Party in 1988. As the Yugoslav political disintegration intensified, his approach became more appealing with the broader public.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Žižek entered the global intellectual scene with his inaugural English book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). In this book he exhibited the sacrificial mode, which would become his hallmark. He appeared as both intellectual and anti-intellectual, combining highly theoretical claims with references to popular culture and mixing academic and colloquial language. Through a combination of Hegel and Lacan, Žižek's book provided a novel link between social and individual phenomena, such as the production of commodities and dreams, which positioned him as a groundbreaking thinker who was able to refreshingly explain the timely political changes of the

East (i.e. the disintegration of the USSR) in western (post-structural) terms. Whilst Žižek's earlier publications in French had been relatively unsuccessful (Oltarzewska, 2005), this book had a considerable impact.⁴ The publisher certainly helped – the book was published within the *Phronesis* series of Verso – but the Preface by Ernesto Laclau, a renowned international intellectual, was equally significant (Dolar, 2017).

The paratextual⁵ elements which accompany a text facilitate its positioning. Paratexts *do* things: they attribute certain attributes to a text for a particular audience (see also da Silva and Viera, 2019: 10). Laclau's Preface was an act of vouching, where a symbolic value is bestowed by a senior position upon a junior one (Bar-El, 2020). Hence his depiction of Žižek's and the Ljubljana school as 'one of the most innovative and promising theoretical projects on the European intellectual scene' (Laclau, 1989: x). He positioned Žižek continuously as an academic internal-outsider, unique in showing how Lacanian categories can be used productively to develop an insightful philosophical *and* political agenda (Laclau, 1989: x, italics in original). More specifically, Žižek was praised for providing a new psychoanalytic perspective on the age-old topic of ideology, linking it to issues of identification, enjoyment and fantasy.

Laclau positioned Žižek as significant in the context of the linguistic and discursive turns in the humanities and social sciences, whilst emphasizing that the actual language used in the book is innovative, inclusive and inviting. As part of the framing and staging, Laclau explained how Žižek's book should be read and, equally important, how it should *not* be read (Laclau, 1989: xii; see also Bowman, 2012; Kotsko, 2012). Laclau pointed out that *The Sublime Object* is an unusual text, which does not fit a classifiable genre and which could easily confuse the reader (1989: xii). It does not follow a clear plan, nor is it merely a collection of essays. Rather, *The Sublime Object* is 'a series of theoretical interventions which shed mutual light on each other, not in terms of the *progression* of an argument, but . . . *reiteration* of the latter in different discursive contexts' (1989: xii). In a clear reference to Žižek's attempt to integrate philosophy and popular culture, Laclau applauded the way in which *The Sublime Object* breaks with the divisions between the 'theoretical languages and those of everyday life' (1989: xiii). With regard to the content, Laclau drew the reader's attention to Žižek's reintroduction of the notion of subjectivity, an innovative move in the context of the 'death of the subject' (see also Heller, 1990). For Laclau, the main point of the book is to show that the 'subject' is defined in terms of lack and not to be reduced to discursive 'positions of subject' (Laclau, 1989: xii).

Žižek's performative denunciation of the authoritative intellectual position was then continued in his second English intervention, *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991). Paratextually, the Introduction facilitated another sacrificial self-positioning by rejecting the position of 'the lecturer' as a 'Master supposed-to-know', and rather acting 'as the analysand addressing the analyst composed of his public' (Žižek, 1991: 3–4). This book furthered Žižek's politically oriented trajectory, with a specific focus on the notion of enjoyment now considered as a 'political factor'. As with *The Sublime Object*, *For They Know Not What They Do* mixed broad theoretical concerns, from philosophy and psychoanalysis, with popular culture and politics. Similarly, in Žižek's third intervention in English, by now part of his own Verso series, *Wo Es War*, he denounced again the traditional position of the intellectual (as somehow entitled to address the public from above) whilst covering topical issues such as feminine subjectivity and David Lynch's films.

Thus, in the first book of his series, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek (1994b) performed an uncommon rhetorical move appending the book with a self-interview. As a *mise en abyme* entitled *Taking Sides*, it discussed what Žižek himself calls intellectual 'subjective destitution', meaning that he rejected the conventional meaning and authority ascribed to him as an intellectual. This contradictory positioning – intellectual and anti-intellectual – was explicitly related to his notion of 'the fool' in his next *Wo Es War* intervention, *The Plague of Fantasies*. In that book Žižek argued that 'the right-wing intellectual is a knave, a conformist who refers to the mere existence of the given order as an argument for it . . . while the left-wing intellectual is a fool, a court jester who publicly displays the lie of the existing order, but in a way which suspends the performative efficiency of his speech' (Žižek, 1997: 45–46).

In sum, Žižek's interventions in the English language during the 1990s positioned him as an anti-intellectual intellectual, refusing to take an authoritative stance and tapping into the growing uneasiness with the distinction between high theory and popular culture. However, Žižek's unorthodox intellectual performance and contradictory positioning also led to some seemingly conflicting outcomes. It is to these that we will turn now, especially in relation to his timely reflections on *The Matrix*.

The 'Media-Academia Tension'

In the process of acquiring the position of a global intellectual, Žižek's interventions resonated further with even more diverse publics, commentating on global cultural and political issues, as his commentary of the popular motion-picture *The Matrix* demonstrates. Released on 31 March 1999, this movie struck a chord with a new media-savvy generation; it touched upon key theoretical and literary ideas in the context of digital technology, such as Plato's cave allegory. By commentating on this film, Žižek positioned himself as a relevant intellectual, in tune with the times, dealing with issues of global public interest and with emerging trends.

Žižek's public lecture on *The Matrix* was delivered first to the International Symposium at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, on 28 October, 1999 (Žižek, 1999a). Characteristic of the repetitiveness of Žižek's performances, the speech was subsequently published as an article in the journal *Philosophy Today* (Žižek, 1999b), leading to the collected volume *The Matrix and Philosophy* (Žižek, 2002). Interestingly, Žižek analysed the film itself by contrasting the common viewer and the intellectual:

When I saw *The Matrix* at a local theatre in Slovenia, I had the unique opportunity of sitting close to the ideal spectator of the film—namely, to an idiot. A man in the [sic] late 20ies at my right was so immersed in the film that he all the time disturbed other spectators with loud exclamations, like 'My God, wow, so there is no reality!' I definitely prefer such naive immersion to the pseudo-sophisticated intellectualist readings which project into the film the refined philosophical or psychoanalytic conceptual distinctions. (Žižek, 2002: 240)

By distancing himself from the 'intellectualist readings' of the film, Žižek positioned himself in line with the vantage point of most 'naive' viewers. He used this as a stepping-stone to develop a broader critique of the traditional intellectual position. Žižek conceived of intellectuals as somehow imposing a fixed interpretation onto cultural products,

denigrating ‘ordinary’ or ‘lay’ accounts. In contrast, he explicitly refused to accept the argument that there is a definite or ultimate meaning to the film in question, thereby recognizing the legitimacy of a plurality of voices and interpretations (see also Samuels, 2002: 339). In that context, he preferred to see the film as a Rorschach test, where each perspective finds itself, without the existence of external criteria that would allow one objectively to judge between them (Žižek, 2002: 339). By commenting on this extremely popular film in a playful and inclusive manner, he was able to introduce his core notions to a wider public: ‘What, then, is the Matrix? Simply the Lacanian ‘big Other’, the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us’ (2002: 339).

As his media appearances became more frequent and diverse, Žižek not only commented on cinema but also participated in it. Following a few niche features, Žižek’s mainstream cinematic interventions successfully positioned him as a global public intellectual. Firstly, in 2005 the film *Žižek!* came out, directed by Astra Taylor; the exclamation mark indicates his distinct style. This movie portrayed Žižek both at home and travelling the world, thus revealing both his personal and public lives. Goffman rightly pointed out that ‘celebrities not only link their own private lives to the public domain, but also can link the lives of private persons to it’ (1979: 11). It is in that sense that Žižek operated as the archetypal celebrity intellectual; he mixed the professional and the personal by introducing the viewer to both his intimate life (his kitchen and his laundry!) and his philosophical ideas (his indebtedness to Hegel and Lacan). The film also facilitated Žižek’s popularity by accentuating his eccentricity and idiosyncratic language.

In the opening scene of the film, Žižek immediately performs an anti-intellectual positioning: ‘The worst thing is to play this “we are all humans” game that some intellectuals like to play . . . I’m not human! I’m a monster, I claim’ (Žižek in Taylor, 2005: 7:38–7:46). This self-presentation continues throughout the film. It is this anti-intellectualism, together with his attention to popular culture, which made it difficult for him to obtain academic legitimacy, especially within Anglo-Saxon philosophy departments. Žižek himself was fully aware of this tension, as is exemplified in his response to a student’s question about the contradiction between his remarkable success in the USA and his repeated criticisms of that society:

Let’s be quite frank. At a certain superficial level I am relatively popular, but me and my friends, I don’t think you can even imagine how non-influential we are within the academia. Why is there this necessity to portray me as somebody who can only thrive through jokes and so on? . . . I’m almost tempted to say that making me popular is a resistance against taking me seriously. And I think it’s my duty for this reason to do a kind of a public suicide of myself as a popular comedian or whatever. (Žižek in Taylor, 2005: 1:01:30–1:05:19)

This exemplifies how Žižek plays the sacrificial intellectual. Indeed, Žižek’s view is that he became popular at the cost of creating a foolish image of himself, thereby losing academic credibility. This contradictory intellectual and anti-intellectual positioning was nevertheless compelling due to the personalized fashion in which it is conveyed (Andrews, 2007: 130). Further, in his performances, Žižek rejected expressions of authenticity normally associated with the authoritative intellectual. This persona resonated well with a certain type of public that had become sceptical of intellectual authority and sympathetic towards ironic distancing (Dolar, 2015; Eyal, 2019; Nichols, 2017).

The multiple reviews of his media performances and writings capture and confirm this picture of a media-academia tension. For instance, in his review of *Žižek!* René Lemieux argued that Žižek's reputation suffers since his celebrity trumps his philosophy. He claimed that Žižek 'tries to remove himself from the public image that one gave him: Slavoj Žižek became a media character who lives through conferences and, now, cinema. In fact, the media entertains Žižek's popularity, not its academic fame nor the depth of his thought' (2016: 2). In the 'post-codex' digital era of the internet and the growing importance of the image over the text (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013), Žižek's public engagement – running from one news studio to another for decades – went against the traditional notion of the authoritative intellectual. Having become a cultural trope and 'internet philosopher' (Burnham, 2018), Žižek's media performances are not without risk, involving 'a balancing act between his desire to break through the media's standard thought-screening procedures . . . and having his message drowned in the media's ocean of trivial detail and ideological disavowal' (Taylor, 2014: 23). This contradictory positioning is also captured in Žižek's interview for the *New Statesman* from 2013:

Žižek has previously said [in *The Guardian*] that while the concept of 'humanity' is fine by him, that '99 percent of people are idiots'. I ask him if [his latest film] *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* is in some way an attempt to communicate theory to 'idiots'. Žižek's response was: 'Yeah, but who are the idiots? I didn't mean so-called poor, uneducated, ordinary people. If anything, most of the idiots that I know are academics . . . I do feel some kind of stupid responsibility, as a public intellectual, and then I ask myself, sincerely, what can I do? It would be bluffing to claim that I can give answers. As I always repeat, what we philosophers can do is just correct the questions'. (Massey, 2013)

The reception of his films – and indeed his media performances and his work more generally – shows that this sacrificial performance has come at a symbolic price (Sassower, 2014). For instance, in his review of the film for the *New York Times*, Nathan Lee (2006) questioned Žižek's credibility and originality, claiming that 'academic circles may debate whether Mr. Žižek is a legitimate philosopher or merely an especially learned and witty synthesizer'. Lee's view of the academic establishment is confirmed in articles by numerous scholars, including, for instance Gigante's review article in the *New Literary History*, lamenting that Žižek 'fundamentally has no position. Rather . . . he functions as a "vanishing mediator", mediating between various theoretical points of view' (1998: 153). Other scholars are even more scathing: in *Film-Philosophy*, for instance, Edward O'Neill (2001) emphasized Žižek's sophistry and disingenuousness whereby in 'the absence of any detectable method, a dizzying array of wildly entertaining and often quite maddening rhetorical strategies are deployed in order to beguile, browbeat, dumbfound, dazzle, confuse, mislead, overwhelm and generally subdue the reader into acceptance' (see also Cassin, 2019). Yet, not all commentators considered his ambivalence as a drawback, especially not in non-academic outlets. Thus, in *Le nouvel observateur*, François Théron claimed that the 'unclassifiable' style of Žižek's 'mashup' (Gunkel, 2012) was particularly appealing in the current digital context:

His process of writing with copy-and-paste, back and forth, constant re-using of material already present in preceding works, books, interventions . . . [generates] the sense of déjà vu . . . not due

to the carelessness of the publisher, but to the movement of the writing which aims, each time, to reconfigure by the assemblage of its enunciation the situation of its own reception: retroactive performativity of the communication or of the Hegelian dialectic. (Théron, 2004: 50)

Some commentators have criticized Žižek for a lack of awareness of the conditions that allowed for this public rise. For John Gray, for instance, '[t]he role of global public intellectual Žižek performs has emerged along with a media apparatus and a culture of celebrity that are integral to the current model of capitalist expansion' (Gray, 2012). However, as Taylor points out (2014: 17), there is a reflexive dimension to Žižek's 'retroactive performativity' in that he was regularly commenting on the social conditions of which he himself and his readers are part. In that sense, Žižek created what Greimas (1990: 141) calls a 'topical space' as 'both the place we are speaking about and the place from which we speak'. Žižek explicitly commented on the specific conditions that allowed him to move away from the local Slovenian scene and to become a global, public phenomenon (Auer, 2009). Yet, Žižek kept holding onto the idea that he is an internal-outsider:

I don't have a place now to publish in the UK. And I was a big public presence around three years ago. The same happened . . . in France. *Le Monde* published me much more, invited me [and] now they more or less ignore me . . . Like, *The Guardian* . . . simply stopped answering me. [S]o when people say, 'oh! But we are celebrated, public presence' – No! (Žižek, 2017)

This reflexivity contributed further to the contradictory nature of Žižek's intellectual performance, using as he did the media forces whilst taking a critical stand towards them.

Conclusion

In this article we have drawn on theories of positioning and performativity to depict sociologically the emergence of Žižek as a global public intellectual of the sacrificial type. We showed how Žižek's interventions positioned him as a 'foolish' intellectual, tackling core philosophical issues in an unconventional and playful manner. This persona is also embodied in his eccentric appearance and mannerisms, including for instance his scruffy beard, the constant sniffing and casual dress. Moreover, in contrast with the traditional, authoritative intellectual, the sacrificial intellectual thrives on internal contradictions, rejects claims of authenticity and authority, and generally courts controversy (see also Mead, 2003: 39). This makes for the ambiguity of Žižek's position, seen by some as an innovative philosopher and by others as a charlatan or jokester (Thompson, 2013), and which prompted his response to critics with a piece entitled 'Am I a Philosopher?' (Žižek, 2016). In this article Žižek noted how his critics associate his performance and his intellectual position:

I find these critiques of my work problematic on more than one count, even if I discount the very problematic 'grounding' of my bodily tics (incidentally, the result of an organic disease for which I am taking medicines!) in my anxiety about being excluded from academic apparatuses and not recognized as a 'serious' philosopher. (Can one even imagine the Politically Correct outcry if another thinker – who is, say, a lesbian feminist – were to be 'analysed' at such a level?) (Žižek, 2016)

In this article, we tried to move beyond mere personal or local dimensions of intellectual production, delving instead into the global and digital processes that helped to create the Žižek phenomenon. Žižek's rhetorical self-denunciation amounts to a contradictory positioning that 'sacrifices' his intellectual authority within academic circles, while resonating with its shifting foundation. Again, the way in which he has performed the fool plays on this insider-outsider role. It is in this sense that Zabala depicted Žižek's interventions in a similar light to Edward Said's, disrupting ideological structures: it is *as if* Žižek was 'unemployed, in exile, and at the margins of society' (Zabala, 2012). This kind of reaction to the cultural context of mass-media and the phenomenon of the academic celebrity, culminated in a 'media-academia tension': whilst his ideas were disseminated on a global scale, they sometimes received frosty reception in academic circles.

Notes

1. Irony has been classically defined by Quintilian (c. AD 100) as 'contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est' [understanding the opposite of what is said].
2. Incidentally, the questioning of Žižek's position as a philosopher was even posed by other reputable philosophers and friends such as Alain Badiou, who remarked that 'Žižek is not exactly in the field of philosophy' (in Žižek, 2016: 1).
3. In her interview, Alenka Zupančič recalls how this corruption affected her: 'Definitely, I was very efficiently corrupted. I think the first book of this movement that I came across was actually Žižek's Slovene book which is called *History and the Unconscious*. And the book begins, there is this inscription "at the beginning there was . . .", and then on the next page it's written – "phallus". And I didn't know the word. I mean, the Latin word, I didn't know it. So I remember checking, looking up in the dictionary of foreign words, saying "Oh! This is really interesting!" So I just kept on reading. But this was kind of corruption of youth by the phallic signifier' (Zupančič, 2017; see also Johnston, 2004).
4. By the late 1980s Žižek had developed a strong link with France and he had started to publish in French. By then, he had already translated Derrida and Althusser into Slovene, and he had completed his PhD under Jacques-Alain Miller's supervision (Miller also happened to be Lacan's son-in-law). However, Žižek's philosophical rendition of Lacan was not well received in France; and Žižek's interpretation of Lacan eventually led to a rift with Miller, who had remained more clinical in orientation. It is only when Žižek started to publish in English that he became influential worldwide.
5. Paratexts include the materials that are located before and after the text. More technically, peritexts are names, covers, prefaces, etc., and epitexts are commentaries, indexes, etc. (Genette, 1997).

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Author biographies

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