



## Living and Really Living: The Gap Year and the Commodification of the Contingent

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### abstract

Gap years are associated with periods or breaks, usually in an unfamiliar location, between secondary and tertiary education or one job and another. Explanations for their popularity are found in promotional material on them. These describe the contrasts between the mundane life of subjects in familiar locations and/or situations and the adventure to be had in locations and/or situations seen as unfamiliar, even exotic. The gap year is a time of adventure as well as a means for improving career and educational prospects. In this regard, the ordinary life of paid employment merges into the exceptional life of the gap year. It is 'the time of your life', a period that from another perspective trains and vitalises the subject for the priorities of capital. It is this relationship between the ordinary life of home and the exceptional life of the gap year, or the priorities of capital and subjective desires as spatially and temporally configured, that this article addresses. By referring to promotional material from companies supporting gap years, the article examines the orientations and activities that complement career / lifestyle success. These are described, through a productive reading of Jacques Lacan's notion of 'enjoyment', as injunctions to be enterprising, to enjoy and to be ethical. The work of Slavoj Žižek helps situate the appeal of the gap year here and in terms of a desire to exceed the commodified limits of late-capitalism. With reference to the Lacanian concept of the Real, the event of the gap year, as a moment of excess or contingency, becomes the authentic referent or trauma for (re)imagining the subject for the labour market. Through the gap year example these points are distilled into a more general and essential argument about the relationship of the subject to free-market capitalism.

### Introduction: Commodifying the Gap

The gap year occupies an unusual place in the subject's biography as a period during which a break from formal employment or education is seen as having career and educational benefits. An institutionalised way of living life to the full, the gap year is a period of time – often in a distant location relative to lived experience – when we can fulfil our dreams, however structured, and sustain a relationship to the labour market back home. It is a 'professionalisation' of travel, as Kate Simpson (2005) puts it. It is an instrumentalisation of that most authentic of experiences, the world trip. Here we can formally acknowledge and positively embrace a relationship between travel and employment, to have fun, to be ethical and to advance our status in the struggle for inclusion as employable subjects. In this version of 'holidays in the sun' the experience adds value to the subject's personal profile and can be cashed in, in a manner of

speaking, for a job. In this way, the Gap Year is discursively constructed as productive and liberating:

A gap year is constructive time out – it can be anywhere, anytime, doing anything. You could be building a school in Chile, doing some work experience, basking on a beach in Fiji or simply working for a year to save enough money for university or a new house – or even taking time out to change your career. It is about living life to the full and realising that there is a world of opportunity out there just waiting to be explored. (<http://www.gapyear.com/firsttime/index.php?op=sm&mz=se&id=1760>)

By anticipating these benefits and structuring the trip accordingly, a gap need not signify a break with career trajectories. Here, ‘constructive time out’ and ‘basking on a beach’ are not a contradiction, they show, if anything, that the subject is able to balance their work/life commitments. After all, this is not a worker who will be seen to be too involved in pursuing career goals, to be “ingrown or narrowly focused” as Richard Sennett (2006: 171) puts it. Or, as highlighted in studies on customer services (cf. Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 167), this is not a worker who risks over-identification with routine labour and thus the possibility of (worker) burnout. Some autonomy from work enables us to sustain a productive relationship to the role. So by following the above advice the worker demonstrates their suitability to flexible labour regimes by performing the bureaucratic function and coming across as human too.

With these priorities in mind, the CV can help us to anticipate and frame activities for their post-gap year value or to insure against the risks of time out from formal education and employment. In this regard, a CV has a similar function to inoculations against rabies: to immunise or distance oneself from activities that are seen to have no direct or indirect value to employers. As gapwork.com advise, a gap year:

should be something that adds to your skills and experience, improving your skill set and making your CV more attractive to employers and admissions tutors. (<http://www.gapwork.com/gapsmart/before-you-go>)

UCAS, the university admissions body, endorse this point:

We at UCAS believe that by adding the experience of a planned year out to their qualifications students actively improve their chances of successfully completing a course. Quite simply experience complements education. Universities and colleges widely recognise the potential benefits of taking a year out which, when well-organised, extend into later life. (Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive UCAS, <http://www.yearoutgroup.org/>)

The gap year, then, enables the subject to improve their employment and educational prospects. It helps bolster the opportunities for those with access to the funds (or without commitments), whether acquired through parental support, paid employment or appeals to charity.

It is therefore a given that “[m]ost people need to work to save money before they go on a gap year. You can do this part-time while you are studying, or work for a few months in the UK before leaving” (<http://www.gapwork.com/finance>). Or, “If your family can help you out by lending or giving you money then this could go towards part of the cost” (*ibid.*).

Indications are that people want to take gap years. According to a YouGov poll of 2000 employees: “one in seven have already left the day job to go abroad, and more than 75% are thinking of doing the same” (<http://money.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5179109-110400,00.html>). It is a growing business that improves employment relations: “[it] boosts staff morale and increases productivity. And it’s good for recruiting new people” (Human Resources manager at Yorkshire Water, *ibid.*). However, according to Gapyear.com ([www.gapyear.com](http://www.gapyear.com)), the average amount spent on a gap year is £3000, putting it beyond the means of many people. So, if gap years are beneficial to education and career advance – a point reinforced by the perceptions of recruiters – then it is precisely those in a position of privilege who will improve their competitive position in the job market. This point is not made by the not-for-profit Year Out Group, set up to “promote the concept and benefits of well-structured year out programmes” (<http://www.yearoutgroup.org>) but made up mostly of commercial businesses. They claim that gap year programmes:

are educational in a broad sense and include, for instance, cultural courses and exchanges, expeditions, volunteer work, structured work placements – though not ordinary paid employment, independent travel or au pair work. (<http://www.yearoutgroup.org/>)

The class dimension to gap years, then, should not be understated, nor the point that the appeal of such breaks is likely to extend beyond those who can afford to take them. Should we be in a position to take a gap year we might want to consider whether our particular trip delivers value for money. Will we have a good time and more importantly will that good time (not taking life *too* seriously) improve career prospects?

It [the gap year] can make a big statement about you as a person, both to academics and employers and you know how important that CV is going to be! If properly planned, a year out can say as much, if not more, about you as an individual, as any set of exam results ever can! (<http://www.yearoutgroup.org/students.htm>)

So WHAT you do in YOUR YEAR OUT is VITAL! (*ibid.* original emphasis)

There is a conflation of the person, as defined by their interests and activities, with the expectations of employers. The point made here is reproduced over and again in advice on how to increase competitive advantage for employment. So, in one respect we have the ‘time out’ from formal obligations, a liberation of sorts. Yet the ‘gap’ is defined and determined both for and against routine employment, a non-gap to accelerate or advance particular knowledge, skills and abilities through ‘hands-on’ experience. This is not a ‘holiday’: it is not an example of time-space compression (cf. Harvey, 1989) or a carnivalesque ‘break’ from servitude. Yet there are obvious parallels. For example, if we apply Urry’s (2002: 2-3) analysis of the tourist gaze here, then as with the holiday the gap year presupposes a relationship to ‘regulated and organised work’. There is an ‘anticipation of intense pleasures’. The trip is seen to be ‘out of the ordinary’. There is a collection of ‘signs’ constructing the ‘gaze’, such as, in the case of the gap year, images of the volunteer ‘helping out’ in ‘Africa’. There are also places that the gaze distinguishes from paid work, except in the gap year this relationship is somewhat blurred. Important omissions from this list, for an analysis of the gap year, are the instrumental gaze of career advantage or the ‘enterprising gaze’ (see Cremin, 2003); the ‘ethical gaze’ of the liberal activist (see Simpson, 2004; 2005); and the ‘contingent gaze’, in one sense a beyond what is seen (MacCannell in Urry, 2002: 145), or through

a more apposite conceptual reframing, the desire to exceed the commodity form through a traumatic encounter with the Real (discussed later). The contingent here is important because it expresses both a desire to exceed and a need to authenticate the Gap Year Experience as unique to the individual. So that one does not merely consume a standardised holiday, but encounters something akin to a life changing moment for orienting the subject to cope with lifelong vicissitudes.

Throughout this paper these arguments are developed with reference to material promoting gap years and conceptually framed through Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian-influenced critical theory. In doing this I hope to relate these theoretical points more substantively to the empirical instance of gap years and demonstrate the usefulness of Žižek's ideas when addressing issues of a sociological nature. I should like to emphasise that here my interest in the gap year is almost exclusively in terms of the broader implications of the argument, which is to say not the epiphenomena of 'gap years' as such.

The argument is organised to address configurations of enterprise, enjoyment (fun) and ethics, described here in relation to the Lacanian notion of the superego injunction *enjoy(!)*. Firstly, I unpack the concept of employability and its relation to enterprise through the gap year example. Next, employability is related to enjoyment. This includes an excursus on Lacan via Žižek in order to explain the theoretical framework of the overall thesis. Thirdly, I attempt a brief analysis of the significance of ethical acts to a normatively all-rounded character as functional to neoliberalism (understood as a combination of liberal individualism and laissez-faire economics, cf. Harvey, 2005). In concluding I elaborate on the *contingent* element that exemplifies and authenticates the Gap Year Experience and orients the subject to liberal capitalism.

## The Enterprising Injunction

A selling point of the gap year – or a point of reassurance – is that the employability of the subject is improved. The word 'employability' (see McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) pertains, for the purpose here, to a reflexive ordering, accessing and marketing of all manner of disparate experiences, activities and identifications, or an ideological 'quilting point' to refer to Lacan (see Žižek, 1989: 87-8), for career advantage. Quoting from government sources, the 'not-for-profit' Year Out Group, underline the relationship between gap years and employability:

Young people who take a year out from their learning or employment can gain so much in terms of personal development and formulating their career choices. But they can benefit too from improved skills – in languages for example – which will make them more employable. And the experience of a year out can shape social values and a sense of community spirit. Ivan Lewis MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills and Vocational Education (quoted in <http://www.yearoutgroup.org>)

The idea of employability underlines New Labour thinking on social inclusion (cf. Levitas, 1998). It concerns 'assets', 'marketing and deployment skills', 'presentation' and 'the personal and labour market context' (Tamkin and Hillage, IES Report 361, 1999). It emphasises a supply-side logic (cf. Peck and Theodore, 2000) in which the

causes of and solutions to unemployment lie with the unemployed themselves and their (in)ability to flexibilise, motivate and price themselves into the market. Inclusion in this context is achieved by the efforts of individuals to adapt to a situation taken as given, rather than by addressing the conditions that engender un(der)employment and job insecurity. As such, the need to reflect on, adapt and market the self from the point of view of employers, shifts the relationship towards work from one in which the job is valued according to its immediate satisfactions (wage, well-being etc.), to how the particular role or activity improves future job prospects (cf. Baruch, 2001: 545). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) explain, this emphasis on individual 'activity', the idea that a person must never be seen to be without a project or to always be active, relates what the person does within and outside of paid employment.

The perception that in order to compete one has constantly to be involved in something helps to explain the emphasis on 'constructive time out'. By capturing the space of the gap year in the fold of the commodity, the person can avoid the problem that "a gap of any kind, for any purpose... is [seen by employers as being] unforgivable" (Ehrenreich, 2006: 169).

The gap is an enterprising one. The activity is related to the needs of capital. Enterprise refers both to an organizational form and "more generally... an image of a mode of activity to be encouraged in a multitude of arenas of life" (Rose, 1998: 154). In Foucauldian terms the enterprising discourse naturalises itself through the micro-effects of power so that it no longer appears as an object to be acquired but as a pre-discursive fact of life (cf. Burchell *et al.* 1991). Here power is reproduced through self-identifying 'subjectivities' rather than directly through relations of capitalist production (see Knights and Willmott, 1990). It is a point that is somewhat misleading. Following Žižek (cf. Butler *et al.* 2000: 203; also Böhm and De Cock, 2005: 284), the relationship of the subject to the mode of production, however discursively framed, remains the (disavowed) structuring principle. This can be explained in the example of subject disidentification with a particular role; for example, doing the thing while making ironic references to it, claiming that we do not really support the activity we are obliged to do. It is a false disidentification because we are still committing our labour power to the productive process, a situation, however it is viewed, we are obliged to maintain (see also Jaros, 2005: 17 on dilemmas in labour process theory). The point below, that year out group makes about future goals, is an oblique reference to the enduring primacy of capital in the considerations of gap year students:

merely clocking up the air miles or devising exotic ways of spending your own or your parents' hard earned cash, will do little to convince people of any sustained commitment to your all important FUTURE GOALS! ([www.yearoutgroup.com](http://www.yearoutgroup.com))

The subject may imagine that s/he is 'enterprising' independently of the pressures to secure paid employment. However, the choice to choose to partake in activities that employers regard as enterprising is one we are each obliged to make if we are to sustain employability in general terms. As such, enterprise is described here as an injunction that, in anticipation of the argument below on enjoyment, appears as a free choice made in the hope of fulfilling a particular desire (of the Other) or accounting for a lack or asymmetry between the subject and a world organised around the needs of capital.

Below are examples of people who have demonstrated enterprise either by raising money for a gap year or simply by using the time constructively ([http://www.gapyear.com/media/case\\_studies.html](http://www.gapyear.com/media/case_studies.html)):

John, at 18 (now 20), from Coventry, radio DJ: Took a gap year to find focus and further his media interests... Rated as hot property in Coventry he has won awards, met everyone from the Queen, Tony Blair and Hear Say! Now he has found his true career path he is postponing his university place.

Ben, at 18 (now 20), from London, entrepreneur: Featured on television, Ben made his mark in the dot com era and used his gap year to further his business ambitions. Having sold one of his websites to a competitor for a tidy sum Ben still has to his name a huge cyber community and one of the largest adult search engines on the net.

Georgina, at 18, (now 20), from Birmingham, Olympic Swimmer: Trained in her gap year and competed in the Sydney Olympics. Got to the semi finals, took British record.

Jackie at 16 (now 25), Solihull, abortive trip: After years of sexual abuse and expulsion from schools Jackie decided to run away. She stole money at a local charity event and headed off to France for her gap year. But she soon ran into trouble when she realised she'd lost her passport. So instead she took up casual work for unscrupulous firms in London.

Anna at 18 (now 20), at Oxford: Went to Ecuador to do conservation projects in the rainforest. Fundraised by writing an 'Interview Techniques' booklet which she sold to schools.

Stuart at 18 (now 19), from Derby – featured in our 'gapperslive': Assisted teaching deprived children in Brazil. Fundraising: Head shave, 'Day in drag', dad's skydive, held a college party, donations and also £50 from his MEP.

Sam, 30, Australian adventure – featured in our 'gapperslive' [career 'gapper']: Hitting 30 Sam decided to see the world. Her resolve to have fun and live her life overcame working in an office for a living.

The gap year of each individual represents an important stage in self-development. The experience is used as a springboard or opportunity to realise various ambitions and as reference point, even foundation, to future success. Part of the experience is the way the money is raised in the first place. After all, would the gap year have been less successful had Stuart, above, not had a 'Day in drag' and instead cadged the money off his parents? Or Ben, had he not 'made his mark' in the 'dot com era' but made no mark at all? Or Georgina, if instead of dedicating herself to swimming, she did so but ended up with neither a medal nor a job? Or would Anna's gap year experience have suffered if instead of doing 'conservation work' in a rainforest she chose instead to agitate for the violent overthrow of capitalism in London? What redeems these alternate realities is that each one can be marketed as enterprising, that Ben's 'adult sites' or Sam who had 'fun' instead of 'working in an office for a living' are marks of employability. The fictitious Jackie, above, is at odds in this list not because of her history and what subsequently has befallen her, rather it is because she has not 'bounced back', she has not turned her trauma into a marketable or commodified asset, it reminds us that for every winner there are countless losers.

Ideologically, the gap year endorses enterprise. It is an illustration of the opportunities available to those who are willing. The examples above are of people who are succeeding, sometimes in the face of adversity. And if they can do it then why can't

you? They have the right attitude. They overcame (self-imposed) limitations. So wouldn't we – you, me and everyone – be foolish, stubborn or lazy not to embrace the right spirit to achieve the same? Then what of Jackie? She is like the useless/repressed remainder, the impossible kernel or Real of the gap year (see section Discussion and Conclusion) that each of these other narrative fantasies disavows. No room for losers.

## The Injunction to Enjoy

The discourse of enterprise cannot entirely account for orientations of the subject to the gap year, employability or late-capitalism. It is not a totalising discourse, as Fournier and Grey (1999) unfairly claim du Gay (1996) argues (see Jones and Spicer, 2005). Rather, orientations to enterprise are supported in orientations to fun as a distinctive and compatible sphere of activity. The latter is an important aspect of the gap year in confirming the identity of the subject as human not wholly given over to business priorities, indeed distinctive (dis-identified) from an *enterprising* machine calibrated to maximise career and lifestyle opportunities. Year Out Group (<http://www.yearoutgroup.org/students.htm>) reminds us of this when they say that “you can still have a lot of FUN as well as a sense of ACHIEVEMENT” (original emphasis). Gap years are constructed as a disruption of routine but nonetheless productive to long-term career goals. Gaps throughout life become legitimate ways to be enterprising, to have fun or to enjoy in the Lacanian sense that one feels guilty for not making the right choice (see below):

Pre-university gaps, during and post-university gaps, career gaps (fastest growing gap year market), pre and post-baby gaps, ‘stag’ and ‘hen’ gaps, post-wedding gaps, pre-retirement gaps (second fastest growing market) – the list goes on. From the age of 18, people will now become ‘serial gappers’ as they head through each life stage, taking a ‘gap’ to prepare themselves for the transition ahead. The result will be a change in the mentality of society, away from the ‘live to work, work to live’ routine of a slow climb up a career ladder to a more exciting life path which simply involves doing what they enjoy in life and achieving that dream. Life is short. Why waste your time doing things you don't enjoy?! ([www.gapyear.com](http://www.gapyear.com))

There is no rub here, no ideological opposition. The person is simply doing what it is they want to do. Anything less is unacceptable. However, if a gap ‘year’ held up the prospect of a ‘life changing’ experience, by this token you can forget it. Gap years are designed, after all, to invigorate us for the challenges ahead: akin to lathering ourselves up in a power shower. It is a line that divides the before and after; a hibernation of sorts; an extreme makeover: work in progress. The before is the “live to work, work to live” (*ibid.*) routine, mundane conformity, bureaucratic oppression, a life dedicated to organizational priorities, plain living. The moment itself is doing what one enjoys in life and “achieving that dream” (*ibid.*). It is *really* living: it is fun, expressive, happy and spontaneous. It is the choice of reflexive agents making the most of their opportunities and having fun, so that once the chrysalis has ruptured the butterfly can leave its gap year cocoon and work for people friendly, interpersonal, flexible, team-based organizations. Therein, the fantasy that helps sustain the appeal of the gap year is that mundane life is a choice we make – the choice of losers, of single mothers, of the unemployed, of careerists – and that *real* life, as gap year, is for those with the attitude to live life to the full (independent of liberal-capitalist constraints). It is an attitude with

a price tag: those who are fortunate enough or indeed enterprising can buy into it, while the rest of us can dream.

Fantasy in Lacan, as Žižek explains, occupies an unusual position in that it can be defined neither as subjective nor objective, rather as ‘objectively subjective’ (see Žižek, 2004: 94 and 2006: 171). Fantasy pertains to the way we like to see the world – how the world objectively appears to us (an objective illusion) – even though it does not seem that way – how on an unconscious level the world really seems: for example, men describing their respect for women while unconsciously betraying misogynistic attitudes about the role of women in society. Through fantasy we account for gaps in the symbolic order – the rules of language and communication maintained through intersubjective agreement – or, put another way, the inscrutability of the Other’s desire.

This gap is the (empty) place that escapes symbolisation, the space that alienates the child from the (m)Other, the difference that the subject has to account for in order fully to orient itself in the world. With no other recourse, the child acquires the (m)Other’s tongue, the language to communicate a need for warmth, food, cleanliness and so on. The child comes to speak through the (m)Other, unconsciously to desire her desire by learning the symbolic codes that elicit specific responses from her (see Fink, 1997 for further elaboration). This gap or alienation is a creative space, the distance between the subject and Other overcome by orienting a need for total symmetry with the other by displacing it through a diversity of socially acceptable attachments. Put another way, the subject is an outcome of an unconscious desire to fill in for a lack in the Other, or what is unknowable about them to me (see, for example, Žižek, 1989: 124; 2006: 45). So what we desire in this sense is the desire of the Other (hence why the subject is decentred), with fantasy showing us *how* to desire by framing the unconscious desire to desire what the Other wants as our own desire (Žižek, 2004: 96). To give an example, we may enjoy a sporting activity, whistling in a certain way, strawberry cake, etc., but what remains inaccessible to us is why we desire it in the first place.

If we think of this lack, not in a specific literal Other – my pal, for example – but multiplied as the lack in everybody we encounter, it becomes clearer that what we seek to account for is a lack in the symbolic order as standing in for or coordinating this multitude of individual desires. A master signifier is thus made necessary as a way to relieve us of the burden of deciding what it is the Other wants. By acting *as if* there is an authority watching and judging us – a big Other – we in effect render that authority palpable as the ‘eyes’ of society (symbolic identification) (see Žižek, 1989: 105 and 1997: 153). To give an example, when gapwork.com ask us: “Are you learning to lead a team, or work as part of a team? Are you learning how to handle people from different cultures, or developing problem-solving skills?” (<http://www.gapwork.com/gapsmart/before-you-go>), are they not anticipating for us what the big Other wants? So that in this example symbolic closure is gained by actions that signify these qualities, that through a productive process of assimilation we can answer in the affirmative. In other words, we come to imagine or misrecognise ourselves in the mirror image or caricature of the teamworker, cultural ambassador, and problem solver (on imaginary identification see Žižek, 1989: 105).

This argument relates to the way the subject does the work of ideology by making up for gaps in the symbolic order, by seeking explanations for why the world is not harmonious. For example, blaming the Jew for the crisis in Weimar Germany, human greed/selfishness as the reason why society can never change, corruption in the third world as the reason for global inequalities. Žižek (2006: 304) makes the point that whatever the merits of such arguments, there is a need to posit something as a possible explanation for a fundamental antagonism or social alienation: we would have to invent the cause if it did not exist. Moreover, that in doing the work of ideology, in this way we derive a certain enjoyment or *jouissance*, described as an excessive fixation on recovering an impossible lost object, a traumatic X, a non-existent thing (Žižek, 1997: 95). “Jouissance is that which we can never reach, attain, *and* that which we can never get rid of” (Žižek, 2006: 15). This ‘object cause of desire’ is the (unconscious) enjoyment in taking back from the Master the pleasure he has stolen – for example, the pleasure in being singled out by the oppressive boss as a good worker – or the enjoyment-in-pain, the repetition of suffering as the block that is perceived by the (traumatised) subject (Žižek, 1997: 48) as preventing fulfilment of desire (the explanation for why things are a certain way, for example that Polish immigrants have deprived us of jobs). So when Lacan refers to the injunction *enjoy*, what is being referred to, as Žižek (2006: 188) argues, is a myth of absolute *jouissance*. This point is illustrated below.

In the past the repressive superego blocked ‘normal’ enjoyment (say of marital sex). Today the role of the superego has shifted. Now it commands us to *enjoy!* Examples abound in everyday life. We see explicit images of sexual acts on our cinema screens and the orgies that people like ourselves have; we learn about the dildo that works those fantastic orgasms. We see people around us, in leisure and entertainment complexes, on city streets – on holiday – indulging, having fun, and making the most of it: laughing, consuming, fucking. We hear of the great times people have on gap years, they *really* are living. We learn of high-flying entrepreneurs, social climbers: young professionals, career academics and property speculators. And what the superego (as externalised authority) asks in each of these examples is why *you* are not doing the same. Here the possibility of missing out by not taking an option that is available to us – the guilt that would obtain by not answering the Other’s desire – is resolved by making that choice: that is to step outside the ‘routine’, to let go by giving way to *jouissance*.

The obligation to enjoy displaces the spontaneous act of enjoyment or the ability simply to enjoy onto the Other. So when Žižek (1999) says that the appearance of choice becomes a trick the superego plays to compel us to do the right thing, the point is that the choice to choose has been blocked by the necessity to fulfil this obligation.

Or (we are obliged) to indulge in forced fun, a point Adorno (2001: 189) makes as regards to a reified “oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system”. If we are not having fun we feel guilty. In this context, the point of psychoanalysis is to allow the person *not* to enjoy, to be relieved of the burden of the Other’s desire (see, for example, Žižek, 2006: 304).

## The Ethical Injunction

The ethical injunction or the obligation to be ethical is a screen that obscures and sustains the relationship of coloniser to colonised, privileged western subject to Oriental victim (see Said, 2003). It is a means for symbolic integration as an imaginary humanitarian subject. Here, an injunction to be ethical (see Žižek, 2006: 354 on Freud here) should be understood not as the ethical *act* as such (that is to fully assume one's responsibility in exceeding the coordinates of liberal-capitalism or to *negate* one's direct inclinations (cf. Žižek, 2006: 202) say towards enjoyment. Instead, it is an act for sustaining an ideological commitment to the notion that capitalism can address its own crises through interventions on behalf of its victims. In other words, the ethical injunction is a correlate of enterprise and enjoyment, exemplified in Third Way social policy, the role of the volunteer or charity worker, 'Red Nose day' – a configuration of enterprise, enjoyment and ethics – and companies that are 'investors in people'. Here we note the post-political horizons of liberal democracy in which the various struggles that take place – for recognition, human rights, tolerance and so on – leave untouched the essential class relation of society (see Žižek, 2006: 321 and in Butler *et al.* 2000: 326 for discussions on this).

The gap year stages a (spatial/temporal) disorientation that distinguishes between experiences available in each place and the subjectivities that each place makes possible. So it is *there* where I lived life to the full, could make that contribution to humanity and could work without ironic distance or disidentification. It is as if by relocating a job to an unfamiliar location, imagined as exotic, the relationship to the role changes. This is especially so if the job can be described as ethical. In the following example from a brochure from 'madventurer' (see [www.madventurer.com](http://www.madventurer.com)) we have a list of jobs that could be described as both ethical and mundane:

teach English on Mount Kilimanjaro, build an orphanage in Uganda... hang-out in the Bolivian jungle [presumably they could not think of anything worthwhile to do in the Bolivian jungle either]... weigh babies in Tanzania.

Or, from *The Guardian* newspaper (travel section, 25/06/05: 3), "help plant a forest in Bhutan."

According to Martin Thomson of *Timebank*:

Volunteering gives graduates the opportunity to take an active role in the charity. Graduates can have the opportunity to experience first hand management and see the strategic view of an organisation. A high-flyer couldn't get better work experience than taking on a role like that. (*The Guardian*, 17/02/01: r3)

In a survey printed in the same newspaper, 90% of the population agree that "a society with volunteers shows a caring society" (*ibid.*). As Simpson (2005: 465) argues, situations and spaces are created in which "the gap year volunteer will be needed and will be able to provide some external expert assistance... [on] placements as teachers, builders, medical workers, etc." Such identities and positions, she argues, are not always available to the person in their usual location. As Gapwork.com ([www.gapwork.com](http://www.gapwork.com)) explain, "if you aspire to be a nurse, doctor, lawyer, engineer or something specific, there will be particular gap year schemes run by different

companies that are relevant to your needs.” By transposing such a role to a ‘developing’ country there is an ethical payoff by association. This is especially so if there is an explicit reference to humanitarian concerns:

If it had not been a humanitarian mission, I don’t think my boss would have given it [the time off] (nine week volunteer for a Sri Lankan orphanage). (<http://money.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5179109-110400,00.html>)

Assumptions about how other people live and what we can do to improve their lives underline this logic. This form of intervention sustains a tradition of cultural imperialism in which the (usually white) westernised subject mediates between different authentic, or quaint, cultural norms. This imagines the ‘Western’ subject as a multiculturalist. Žižek (2000: 216) is justified here when he describes multiculturalism as:

a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’ – it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which the multiculturalist maintains a distance made possible by his / her privileged position. (Žižek, 2000: 216)

The fantasy that sustains this idea of an Otherness generates the rationale for intervention on their behalf. At the same time, our class relation, or the form of oppression each one of us has in common, is disavowed in a ‘cultural’ valorisation. For example, on the 2005 ‘Madventure’ brochure we have a picture of a white (gap year) student surrounded by black teenagers (black on black would render the gap year subject ‘invisible’). Or, from gap.org (<http://www.gap.org.uk/uyearout/uyearout.html>):

An extended period of time in a specific community will make you far more aware of the differences between cultures. You’ll learn why differences in religion, political system and outlook emerge and hopefully you’ll eventually be treated as an equal, rather than as a tourist.

Or you could read a book instead. But this is the real thing,

‘... I gained a great deal from living in another country, away from home for 6 months – it really made me appreciate everything a lot more. I’ve already been back to visit, just a year later!’ GAP Volunteer at Mother Theresa Orphanage in North India as part of a Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award. ([http://www.gap.org.uk/uwhere/asiapac\\_ind\\_vol07.html](http://www.gap.org.uk/uwhere/asiapac_ind_vol07.html))

What we find, then, is that the gap year signifies a time and space in which interventions and indulgencies are possible without disturbing the order back ‘home’ or the conditions that sustain the relationship of one (nation) state to another. The ideology here is that there is no ideology, what matters are the ways in which free-market capitalism is administered. The ethical act proper breaks with this order, it is an identification not with the victim-Other (acting on their behalf) but a solidarity in a *common* struggle. This occurs, as Žižek (2000: 220) explains, “when I discover that the deadlock which hampers me is also the deadlock which hampers the Other.” Alain Badiou (2002: 25) makes a similar point when he argues that:

The whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other must be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question – and that is an extraordinarily difficult one – is much more that of recognising the Same.

However, the radical choice not to submit, to exceed the symbolic boundaries of the prevailing consensus, is the very choice around which the gap year is structured. It appeals to a desire to cut ourselves free, flirting with our powerlessness, imploring us to be other than who we are. It invites the subject to regard the location of the (victim) Other as a magical space in which alternative modernities are enacted and, for a time, can be indulged in.

Your 17 year-old daughter has let you know that instead of going to university next year, she'll be going alone to the forests of South America to 'find herself'. Your immediate reaction will probably be a mixture of horror, delight, admiration and panic. (Graham Jones, [www.ivillage.co.uk](http://www.ivillage.co.uk))

Of course, your 17 year old daughter will get over it, but as Madventurer tell us it will be "1 [sic] experience that will last you a lifetime". This, then, becomes an authentic reference point for (re)imagining the subject vis-à-vis the one back home. Thus a reward for enduring on the gap year physical discomforts, boredom, socio-cultural dislocation – the sweltering heat, the poverty, isolation and claustrophobia – and exploitative labour practices, is a re-imagining of the self in a way that is entirely consistent with business, the caring professions, NGOs and so on: to exemplify enterprise, fun (enjoyment) and ethics in a singular configuration. In other words, the confidence, empathy, social awareness, self-motivation, ability to work under pressure and the ability to communicate at ease can be attributed to that (distant) place, an (appropriated) authentic indivisible 'heart of darkness'. This confirms the subject as a fully adjusted human being. But the desire to fulfil such obligations is also conditioned by a desire to exceed them. This point can be examined with reference to the contingency the gap year anticipates.

## Discussion and Conclusion: Stuff Happens

Donald Rumsfeld used the phrase 'stuff happens' in an infamous response to the looting of Baghdad after the city's occupation by US troops. This phrase was repeated by commentators as an ironic reference to the looting of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Of course, the 'stuff' that did happen in both cities, the breakdown of law and order, the increasing desperation of the inhabitants, the looting, etc, were entirely predictable and indeed often predicted. The stuff that happens on a gap year, however predictable, is part of its attraction.

The popularity of the gap year would be inexplicable were it understood simply as a means for improving career prospects. Its appeal is not that it benefits us in career terms when there are various means to advance employability. Rather, gap years introduce a supplementary, non-instrumentalised, element as revealed in the way they are marketed. We learn that 'anything can happen' on a gap year, contingency as guarantor not that anything really will happen, but that what happens, however new or non-determined, is ideologically consistent. To give a rather clichéd, but pertinent, analogy, it is like the 'bungie jump', we are not really plummeting to our deaths but we can live out the sensation of a free-fall to oblivion. What the gap year signals is a desire to *really* live or to exceed the routine pressures of everyday life without having to assume the

consequences of realising that desire – perhaps by becoming ‘unemployable’ in the process of taking an adventure into the ‘unknown’. In other words, the various justifications for the gap year – dream fulfilment as simulacrum / cultural capital, acquisition of new skills / improvements in employability, helping others / charity – are productively contiguous to the desire to exceed the commodified limits of late-capitalism. The contingent moment, as the gap year promise, is what authenticates the experience as real or unique. It indulges the subject in the fantasy of a self-realisation that has already been anticipated as beneficial to employers. Thus the gap year is referred to here as an example of the commodification of the contingent.

Nevertheless, however much the words and images promoting a gap year construct ideas of what a life changing moment will be, the space for its occurrence is posited as empty. It is what exceeds the commodity relation and is accessible only to the subject, not reproducible. So what is being sold here is the experience as empty space or contingency, the Real as the shock of:

a contingent encounter which disrupts the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism; a grain of sand preventing its smooth functioning; a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject. (Žižek, 1989: 171)

As Žižek explains, this traumatic encounter, pure contingency, or irruption, as a definition of the Real apropos of Jacques-Alain Miller, can only be constructed as a point escaping symbolisation after the event. In other words, trauma is inscribed in language as ‘trauma’ only retroactively to the event itself, so that it is only ever the symbolisation or fantasy-effect of the event:

It is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. (Žižek, 1989: 169)

Returning to the subject of the void, because the empty place is inaccessible to us (barred) we fill-in for this impossibility through (subjective) fantasy: i.e. the symbolic universe is only ever a partial representation structured around an impossible Real kernel. Consider the following quotation from the Year Out Group (<http://www.yearoutgroup.org/students.htm>) (original emphasis):

You can learn to live in a NEW ENVIRONMENT and DEAL WITH THE UNEXPECTED. You can demonstrate your sustained commitment and cannot fail to develop the PERSONAL SKILLS and EXPERIENCE which will stand you in good stead for many years to come.

Here the contingency of the gap year *experience* is highlighted in the phrase “deal with the unexpected”. By opening ourselves to the possibility that the unexpected will happen, which of course prepares us for the ‘surprise’ element, we toy with trauma as a character-building exercise as a way to improve ourselves for home, or the socio-symbolic order. If home is a world of simulacra then here the image dissolves, the thing really happens to us. With money, opportunity and desire we can physically remove ourselves to localities or engage in activities likely to produce such a contingent effect. This way we engineer authentic character-building moments, the real that complements images of environmental catastrophe, terrorist attack, and poverty – like vibrations in the Nintendo ‘Wii’ motion-sensitive device controlling videogame avatars. Here the challenge of the unexpected compensates for the competitive disadvantage of not

having had experiences of a character-building nature, perhaps the kind of experiences typically associated with working class lives, the traumas specifically that have an exchangeable value. This is not so much a display of trauma (see Skeggs, 2005: 971); it is more like a construction. Contingency is a selling point to entice subjects into taking that journey and marketing that moment thereafter:

Zoe, 18, from Leeds, eventful round-the-world trip she'll never forget! Travelling with family friend Kate, 18, Surrey. Earned money working for British Rail, temp jobs etc. Robbed of all her stuff, bitten by a shark. ([http://www.gapyear.com/media/case\\_studies.html](http://www.gapyear.com/media/case_studies.html))

By planning in advance what happens during a gap year and building into its framework the contingent as part of a character-building experience (added-value in exchange terms), the moment is decidable (configured to established knowledge). But it is decidable not in that I shall know that by swimming in these waters a shark will bite me, but that the shark bite is already included as one of all the possible moments that make up and exemplify a gap year experience (improve employability and provide the subjective 'moment'). Thus we plan for the form if not the content of the moment. This traumatic inflection is part of the adventure we buy into. Without this the gap year is ordinary life. With, the experience is recognisable as self-evidently atypical of everyday life and exemplary of the *really living* promise selling the idea. Thus contingency is a simulacrum of the event (see Badiou, 2005: 46).

The success of the gap year, it has been argued here, is partly attributable to a disavowed desire of the subject to exceed or rather break with the symbolic order and the unconscious acknowledgement (that the gap year represents) of the impossibility, as framed in post-political terms, in achieving this. However, it is the failure of the left to forge an adequate *politics* of the impossible – grounding a politics based on the universality of the proletariat as exception (disavowed structuring principle) – that necessitates individualised responses to alienation across different spheres of activity (gap years included). Energies are directed towards the reproduction of thoroughly commodified forms of *enterprise*, *enjoyment*, and *ethics*. These are attractive to the individual and sympathetic to prevailing imaginary and symbolic orders. Hence the gap that defines the fundamental alienation of the subject is turned into an object to promote the gap year and harness the disruptive potential of trauma as a point for re-imagining and re-invigorating the subject (through passionate identifications) for their ineluctable and insecure role as worker:

With careful planning and preparation... you should find yourself in the best position possible: on course for a life-changing experience, without the worry of quitting your job. (<http://money.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5179109-110400,00.html>)

Or,

Paul Edwards, a 29-year-old City banker, convinced his employers to let him take a four-month career break with the promise that he would return afterwards. ([http://www.gapyear.com/media/case\\_studies.html](http://www.gapyear.com/media/case_studies.html))

The message here is simple, that a successful gap year returns us to the same. By appealing to a desire to exceed the material limits of everyday life we are invited on a hopeless quest to recover a *jouissance* by reproducing neoliberal versions of enterprise,

enjoyment and ethics as enhancements to employability and everyday life. These terms, as presented here, are described as having distinctive and relational characteristics that echo in the socio-symbolical ordering of late-capitalism. The gap year can be seen as an aid for social reproduction. However, whether contingency, in the final instance, is directed towards this, remains, of course, indeterminate.

The argument that is made here contrasts with Bauman's (in Hall and du Gay, 1998: 29) characterisation of the tourist who seeks experiences that can be "shaken off whenever they wish." The Gap Year Experience is a way to compensate for the fluidity of identity – 'a continuous present' – that Bauman (1995: 88) refers to, so that an ontological ground is (re)calibrated. Thus the individual is anchored to liberal capitalism – with its tendency to commodify heterogeneous sites of incommensurability (Jameson, 1984: 81) – through an orientation to a spatially alienated referent (the gap year) while, potentially, remaining tactical enough to make adjustments in respect of labour market insecurities (cf. Gabriel, 2003: 181).

In concluding it is apposite to refer to Žižek (2002: 88) when, in reference to suicide bombing, he asks:

What if we are 'really alive' only if we commit ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond 'mere life'? What if, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as 'having a good time', what we ultimately lose is life itself?

The excess that makes life worth living – the act – to take sides, is the thing that really happens, the *really* living is what the gap year would contain. Ideally, it does this by circling a desire to *really* live so that the subject is liberated from a decision that could potentially undermine future competitiveness.

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