

## *First as Creon, then as Chorus: Slavoj Žižek's Antigone*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The article critically evaluates *The Three Lives of Antigone*, Slavoj Žižek's first dramatic work. Žižek's polemical rewriting of Sophocles' tragedy is examined in the broader perspective of Žižek's philosophy and other *Antigones*: those of Sophocles, Jean Anouilh, Bertolt Brecht and Dominik Smole. Slavoj Žižek has interpreted Sophocles' *Antigone* in numerous philosophical works. In his earlier treatises, he mainly gave a cautious summary of Hegel's, Heidegger's and Lacan's theses on *Antigone*; lately, however, Žižek's attitude to Sophocles' *Antigone* has grown decidedly negative. The main point in Žižek's critique of Sophocles' tragedy is that his Antigone is not an appropriate symbol of genuine social revolt. Based on this conviction, Žižek contrived his own version of *Antigone* with an alternative ending in which the choir carries out a revolution and condemns Antigone to death. It is argued in the article that Žižek's dramatic project fails to convince. It is essentially a superficial apology for political violence, which can ultimately only be understood as a veiled defence of the political status quo.

**Keywords** Slavoj Žižek; *Antigone*; Sophocles; Bertolt Brecht; Jean Anouilh; Dominik Smole; Slovene drama

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Slavoj Žižek has recently published his first play, *The Three Lives of Antigone*, which appeared with an introduction by the author under the simple title *Antigone*. It is a shortened copy of Sophocles' *Antigone*, to which Žižek has added a few original verses and two alternative endings. The first ending is supposed to make it clear how Sophocles' tragedy is at heart an ethico-political mistake; the second ending aims to correct this mistake and to finally, after nearly two and a half millennia, put the myth of Antigone back on the right side

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of history. What, then, is wrong with the ancient Greek *Antigone*? What did the tragedian do to anger the philosopher?

Already in his first monograph, *Bolečina razlike* [*The Pain of Difference*], the young Žižek touches on Heidegger's interpretation of Sophocles (Žižek 1972: 42). In this early period of Žižek's work, Heidegger is by far his most important reference. In Žižek's doctoral dissertation, less than a decade later, one will already recognize his characteristic mix of Lacanian psychoanalysis with a materialist reading of Hegelian idealism. Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan. What do these thinkers have in common, apart from being the three main heroes of Žižek's philosophical development from his student years to international fame? Certainly, the fact that they read *Antigone* and offered original, competent interpretations that any thorough modern philosophical discussion of the play must deal with, whether by embracing or rejecting them.

In his encounter with these much-discussed interpretations of Sophocles' play, the ambitious Žižek understandably is not satisfied simply with summarizing, comparing and contrasting them; soon after his doctorate, he starts striving to develop his own original interpretation of the great tragic work (1985: 144–155; 1987: 65, 100, 193). From the late 1980s through the 1990s, this wish grows into a kind of obsession, even though it bears dull fruit at first, or perhaps precisely for that reason. In book after book, Žižek lines up dozens of commentaries and theses on Sophocles' tragedy,<sup>2</sup> the strongest common thread of which is the underlying presumption of his own ground-breaking originality. As Julian Young has convincingly shown in *Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, that presumption simply does not hold. Although "both Lacan and Žižek wish to distinguish their own approaches to tragedy in general and to *Antigone* in particular from, above all, Hegel's," and although Žižek thinks himself aligned with Lacan as regards the main points of departure for this demarcation,

in fact, however, Žižek does not agree with Lacan at all. For whereas Lacan views *Antigone* as *above* the ethical, in the sense that no recognisable human good is what she seeks, Žižek views her as *party* to an ethical dispute [...] There is nothing ineffable about her motivation: on this point, indeed, he manifests no obvious disagreement with Hegel's family-versus-state account of the drama. [...] In reality, there is nothing particularly (in Lacan's sense) sublime about Žižek's *Antigone*: she is perfectly comprehensible [...] How, then, does Žižek's account of *Antigone* differ from Hegel's? Simply in his denial that the

<sup>2</sup> See the appendix to this article, which lists the discussions of *Antigone* in Žižek's monographs in English between 1989 and 2014.

tragedy involves any 'reconciliation', either on stage or in the hearts and minds of the audience. [...] Žižek might be right. But as to a reason for accepting his irresolvability thesis and for preferring his account of *Antigone* to Hegel's, he provides us with none at all. (Young 2013: 261)

Sophocles' *Antigone* as seen through Žižek's eyes, then, only echoes the ancient complaint about the irresolvable nature of human contradictions. Žižek's writings on the play, as driven as they are and as much shelf space as they occupy, still fail – in Young's convincing analysis – both to genuinely connect with renowned philosophical and psychoanalytic interpretations of the tragedy, and to build further on them in any way (ibid. 262).

Although Žižek has nothing tangible to offer in the field of the philosophy of tragedy, his attitude to the title character of *Antigone* is a different matter. If Žižek in his earlier writings at least partly takes after the enchantment of his philosophical predecessors, and discusses Antigone's sainthood (1989: 130), cautions against the domestication of her sublimeness (Ibid.) and pronounces her revolt against Creon to be "the act par excellence" (1992: 156) – all in a mixed Heideggerian, Hegelian and Lacanian diction –, some twenty years later he would like to make it crystal clear that his love has grown cold: Antigone is a "bitch."<sup>3</sup> Žižek is also publicly ashamed of his past romantic statements about her. In 2008, he harshly criticizes "the underlying ethical position" of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which, he says, "in its very focus on the figure of Antigone, remains 'phallogocentric'." (2008: xviii) The reasons for this "philosophical weakness", Žižek thinks, may be found in "the remainders of the liberal-democratic political stance" in his thought at the time, which reveal themselves inter alia in his "praise of 'pure' democracy" and "critique of 'totalitarianism'." (Ibid.) Fortunately, after "years of hard work" he has nevertheless managed to "identify and liquidate these dangerous residues of bourgeois ideology." (Ibid.)

Even though Žižek in his engagement with *Antigone* has since the early 1990s gradually come to concentrate ever more on a negative portrayal of its heroine, it seems to be only in the last decade that he has come to see this emphasis as his fundamental interpretive breakthrough. At the press conference for the Croatian translation of his play, he proudly stated: "We have different readings of *Antigone*, but – feel free to correct me – I don't know a

<sup>3</sup> "Antigone is [...] a true bitch," Žižek said in his lecture *What if Antigone Were a Refugee?* in New York on 16 October 2010. Video of the lecture is accessible online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyzI4MKynMg> (Accessed 3 February 2020).

single interpretation that goes against Antigone.<sup>4</sup> Of course, anyone could have corrected Žižek by typing the title of the play into a search engine and reading through the first page of hits. A significant part of the philological – and in recent years also philosophical (Honig 2013) – treatments of *Antigone* in the 20th century, namely, focus precisely on the possibility of unsettling Antigone’s established heroic place in the play; some interpreters see Ismene as the true heroine (Rouse 1911: 40–42), others focus on Creon (Hester 1971: 13), and yet others stress the role of the gods (Adams 1955: 54). In these and related interpretations, harsh judgments about Antigone’s personality and/or deed are quite frequent (Hester 1971: 14–15). The negative characterizations of Antigone are even found in some of the earliest modern interpretations of Sophocles’ tragedy (Miola 2014: 236, 240).

Žižek is nevertheless partly right to claim that his approach to evaluating the Antigone character is unique. It is based, namely, on a unique misunderstanding: He reduces Antigone’s deed, which points toward ethical obligation beyond the limits of political arbitrariness, to a kind of political manifesto. From the viewpoint of Žižek’s political stance, apparently, this manifesto is scandalous. Why?

When his play appeared in German, Žižek explained that Antigone troubled him above all as an unfit symbol of revolt against the state (Žižek 2015). In Antigone’s defiance he sees an attack on “the universality of the public space of State Power” in the name of “particular family roots” (Žižek 2006: 397).

Not only Antigone’s aim, but also her way of pursuing it becomes contentious due to this narrow particularity. The heroine, namely, is *not* struggling for the general application of her principle, but is fixated on an apparently lone instance of it, with no ear for similar injustices. “She was ready to do what she did only for her brother, not for all the oppressed and excluded” (Žižek 2012: 575). This “monstrous” combination of “the unconditional ethical demand” with an “inadequate answer to it” (Žižek 2001: 137), then, must be let go. To successfully resolve the problems posed, Sophocles’ tragedy needs a different hero. Who might Žižek have in mind?

<sup>4</sup> The press conference was held in Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, 23 January 2016. Video of the conference is accessible online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6-JaGn1Or8> (Accessed 3 February 2020).

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Žižek's play largely relies on Sophocles' *Antigone*. The crux of Žižek's intervention in the text – which also reveals his central speculation about *Antigone* (and Antigone) – is the first of his two alternative endings: Žižek is convinced that if Creon met Antigone's demands, it would throw society into total catastrophe; the burial of a traitor would cause unrest to break out among the populace, a massacre would take place, and the city would burn:

**Messenger**

[...] Led by Creon,  
all three together went to the place  
where Polyneices' corpse was left to be devoured by birds,  
and performed a proper burial. But people who saw this  
spread the rumour around the city, and the crowd  
which considered Polyneices a traitor attacking his own city  
was shocked and enraged. Passions flared up,  
the crowd entered the royal palace, savagely slaughtered  
Creon and Haemon, and, unable to restrain and control  
their demonic passion, they went on a murderous spree  
of destruction. Now the entire city of Thebes is on fire.

[**Antigone** enters, dazed and half-crazy, she walks in a trance among the ruins,  
with fires burning all around her]

**Antigone (repeating)**

My nature is to love. I cannot hate ...

**Chorus**

But the horror around you is nonetheless your deed.  
(Žižek 2016: 22)

This narrative is more than just a new story; it is Žižek's unique way of presenting his interpretation of Sophocles. Žižek, namely, is trying to show that the outlined alternative turn of events would have followed inescapably from the premises of the Greek text if Creon had yielded to Antigone after she told him her view of the burial prohibition.

There is (at least) one big problem with this idea. Sophocles evidently anticipated the possibility of such a reading, and clearly stressed in Haemon's dialogue with Creon [687–700] that the people were decidedly on Antigone's side:

**Haemon**

[...] At least, it is my natural office to watch, on thy behalf, all that men say, or do, or find to blame. For the dread of thy frown forbids the citizen to speak such words as would offend thine ear; but I can hear these murmurs in the dark, these moanings of the city for this maiden; ‘no woman,’ they say, ‘ever merited her doom less, – none ever was to die so shamefully for deeds so glorious as hers; who, when her own brother had fallen in bloody strife, would not leave him unburied, to be devoured by carrion dogs, or by any bird: – deserves not she the meed of golden honour?’ Such is the darkling rumour that spreads in secret. (Sophocles 1888: 131–133)

In Sophocles’ play, “the public opinion” sympathizes with Antigone (Sene- gačnik 2007: 20). The social environment in which civil war erupts because Antigone’s request is granted, then, is not the one that Sophocles conceived in his work.

Žižek understands the burial of Polyneices as the rehabilitation of a traitor, even though this was never Antigone’s request or wish. This imaginary dimension of Antigone’s story, which cannot be made out from Sophocles’ text, is Žižek’s grounds for assuming Antigone’s success to be politically dangerous.<sup>5</sup> In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, then, Žižek focuses on the supposedly problematic premise of a heroine who is considered heroic for striving in a noble cause and – due to the tragic course of events – laying down her life for it; with an alternative twist, Žižek seeks to show that this premise is an illusion and that Antigone’s desired outcome would have led to an even greater catastrophe with broader implications for society. This is to strengthen the reader in the conviction that Antigone cannot and should not be understood as a heroic figure, but only, as he puts it, as “part of the problem” (2016: xxv). Žižek, by the way, never explicitly defines what the “problem” is supposed to be; in fact, since he does not seem to have too many reservations about Creon’s original prohibition, the only problem in *Antigone* seems to be – Antigone herself.

The second alternative ending is supposed to offer Žižek’s true solution for this problem; Žižek calls this solution “a way out.” (ibid.) Surprisingly, it does not lie in changing the deeds or personality of Antigone or any other

<sup>5</sup> Žižek sees political replicas of her ethical stance in a wide variety of historical horrors, from the Khmer Rouge – “God save us from Antigone in power! Antigone in power, that’s Pol Pot!” (1988: 27) – to the terror of September 11 attacks (2002: 142). In the first reference we may see another paradox in Žižek’s attitude to Antigone, who is supposed to be dangerous and abominable in her potential position of power, whereas, at the same time, Žižek will go on to repeatedly reproach her precisely for not getting involved – at least, not violently enough – in the struggle for power (cp. 2006: 397).

central character. Žižek sees his solution in the transformation of the chorus. He pondered on the role of the ancient chorus already in his early work *Jezik, Ideologija, Slovenci* [*Language, Ideology, Slovenes*]; there, the chorus is understood above all as a kind of emotional aid for the audience, which Žižek compares with the canned laughter in American TV sitcoms (65). Žižek's *Antigone* proposes a kind of emancipation of the ancient chorus; its role changes from passively supporting all the other aspects of the play, to actively struggling for power within it.

Žižek's chorus therefore introduces "a Stalinist twist" (2016: xiv) into *Antigone* by carrying out the swift condemnation and liquidation (xxiv) of all the main characters and establishing the rule of a self-declared "people's democracy" through this coup. (Ibid.) To Žižek, this solution – "a way out" with no sensible connection whatsoever to the original *Antigone*, Sophocles, the ancient chorus or, not least, the broader context of ancient tragedy – seems to be more than just a solution for the problem of *Antigone* (that is, a solution in which Antigone – in Žižek's view the fundamental problem of *Antigone* – is liquidated); to him, rather, it symbolizes the ultimate political solution, the answer to the fundamental "problem" of our world.

The political paradigm that Žižek celebrates in his *Antigone* is based on his ethics of violence. Here, again, I agree with Julian Young's view that this ethics is at heart simply a contemporary derivation from Nietzschean ethics (Young 2013: 261). The British philosopher John Gray, in his critique of *Living in the End Times* and *Less Than Nothing*, has claimed that Žižek's conception of violence is in fact extremely problematic even in the context of Žižek's self-identification as a Marxist. The main Marxist currents, namely, see violent revolution above all as a means of achieving a just society, whereas Žižek sees violence as the *end* in itself. In his ethics, violence *per se* appears as something markedly positive. Thus reading Žižek makes one wonder whether he really does place himself at the appropriate extreme end of the political spectrum: "There is a mocking frivolity in Žižek's paeans to terror that recalls the Italian Futurist and ultra-nationalist Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Fascist (and later Maoist) fellow traveller Curzio Malaparte more than any thinker in the Marxian tradition" (Gray 2012).

This ethical system, which places destruction and the annihilation of the enemy on a pedestal, and understands everything else merely as a consequence of this fundamental goal, obviously from the outset prevents Žižek from seeing a heroine in *Antigone*. Žižek, namely, is incapable of recognizing heroism in someone who has not succeeded through violence, that is, who has not subjugated his opponent by force. A hero(ine) must either hold power or show

(and ultimately realize) serious potential for seizing it. In Žižek's horizon of understanding, accordingly, Sophocles' *Antigone* is a problematic text already because its conclusion in a sense symbolically diminishes the power of the ruler without anyone taking over that power or subjugating it. In Sophocles' text Žižek sees above all the limiting of the state power. Žižek, the champion of extending the power of the state, seeks to resolve this inconvenient situation in his "way out" version of the play by setting up a new ruler, the chorus, which is in fact just a faceless double of Creon before his realization of his own wrongdoing. This facelessness eliminates the very thing that finally made Sophocles' Creon yield to Antigone – his personal circumstances, his *particularity*. Žižek's chorus is an impersonal Creon, a machine for ruling, in which no vestige of particular humanity remains. A machine that will not back down in the face of Antigone's affected grief and Tiresias' superstitious warning.

With his *Antigone*, Žižek has again proved to be radical only in his apology for the social status quo. It inevitably follows from his slippery ethics of violence, which finds its concrete and exemplary model in *Antigone*, that he cannot think of any substantive difference between entrenching the existing political system and overthrowing it completely.

"Medea or Antigone," Žižek wrote at the beginning of this century, "that's the ultimate choice today." For how can a genuine political struggle proceed? "Through the fidelity to the old organic Mores threatened by Power, or by out-violencing Power itself?" (Žižek 2001: 158). A revolution, as Žižek understands it in his philosophical works and represents it in his play, can be *better* than *the powers that be* only in the sense that it brings someone stronger and more violent onto the political battlefield. In the context of Žižek's ethics, however, it is actually even better if the powers that be are so much stronger that they can prevent a revolution in such a manner that even more violence is committed and power is even more firmly established. The substance of every stable authority and its relevant alternatives is, in the implicit foundation of Žižek's position, one and the same. Alternatives to the current social system, then, are not *alternative* in the sense that they bring something new. They are all established and justified by the same thing, namely violence. The one who is in power proves that he is right simply by being in power. The truth of the ruler's discourse can only be snatched from him by a more powerful political actor who takes over his throne.

It is no coincidence, then, that Žižek has become one of the court philosophers of the contemporary liberal West. With his supposedly radical teaching, which he proclaims everywhere from Occupy Wall Street to Google's

campuses, he instils in his audience a sense of the plural and dialogical nature of our societies, which – seemingly – enables discourse of every kind, even the kind that forcefully attacks the central values of these societies. At the same time, Žižek's teachings are music to the ears of the dominant ideological currents because his grotesque parody of critiquing them never truly problematizes the status quo, but rather justifies it with the unspoken consequences of his basic postulates. The main ideological points stressed in Žižek's opus, revealed in condensed form in his discussions of *Antigone*, are merely a different, more attractive packaging for the liberal doctrine about the end of history. There are only two options on Žižek's ethico-political table: either the current Creon should remain in power – and, if possible, become more powerful and more violent –, or some other, mightier and more violent Creon should take over.

### 3

Even though Žižek tells us in the conclusion to his introduction that his *Antigone* is not a work of art (2016: xxv) – which is undoubtedly true – it is still a dramatic work of sorts. As such, it begs a comparison with other dramatic texts that have followed Sophocles' lead and sought inspiration in the inexhaustible treasure-trove of the Antigone myth. We would search in vain through Žižek's introduction to his first play for mention of any of the numerous other modern adaptations and transformations of *Antigone*. The author even seems to be trying to create the impression that intervening in the narrative arch of Sophocles' tragedy to create a dramatic work with a different message than the original's, in itself, is something that the modern Western public declares an unheard-of act of sacrilege. There is no other way to understand the first paragraphs of the introduction, where Žižek first presents an ancient Inuit model of mythic narration that welcomes changes to the central narrative, then opposes that model to the allegedly rigid modern Western attitude to myth, and finally recognizes the shattering of this rigidity as the original move of his own project: "The only way to keep a classical work alive is to treat it as 'open', pointing towards the future, or, to use the metaphor evoked by Walter Benjamin, to act as if the classic work is a film for which the appropriate chemical liquid to develop it was invented only later, so that it is only today that we can get the full picture." Žižek goes on to mention two cases of such bold adaptations, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's *Tristan* and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal*, where in his view "one cannot resist the strong impression that 'this is how it really should be.'" He then asks himself, "So can we imagine a similar

change in staging *Antigone*, one of the founding narratives of the Western tradition?” (ibid. xii)

The only tradition of engaging with Sophocles’ work that Žižek recognizes and deals with is the philosophical constellation I described at the beginning (in the introduction, Žižek also adds Søren Kierkegaard, Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben to Hegel and Lacan, while Heidegger’s interpretation is strikingly omitted). It is not because he is opposed in principle to discussing drama or literature that he fails to mention other dramatic engagements with *Antigone*. On the contrary, in his analysis of *Antigone* Žižek relies heavily on examples from Claudel, Shakespeare, Sophocles’ other tragedies and other examples of classical literature. In short, it is not that Žižek would like to place his project in a context where talk of drama does not belong. Something else is going on.

The only alternative retelling of *Antigone* that Žižek begins to discuss is Kierkegaard’s sketch of “a modern *Antigone*” in *Either/Or*:

Oedipus has killed the sphinx, liberated Thebes; Oedipus has murdered his father, married his mother; and Antigone is the fruit of this marriage. So it goes in the Greek tragedy. Here I deviate. With me, everything is the same, and yet everything is different. Everyone knows that he has killed the sphinx and freed Thebes, and Oedipus is hailed and admired and is happy in his marriage with Jocasta. The rest is hidden from the people’s eyes, and no suspicion has ever brought this horrible dream into the world of actuality. Only Antigone knows it. How she found out is extraneous to the tragic interest, and in that respect everyone is left to his own explanation. At an early age, before she had reached maturity, dark hints of this horrible secret had momentarily gripped her soul, until certainty hurled her with one blow into the arms of anxiety. Here at once I have a definition of the tragic in modern times, for an anxiety is a reflection and in that respect is essentially different from sorrow. (Kierkegaard 1987: 154)

But Kierkegaard’s transformation of Sophocles’ tragedy, too, is just philosophical speculation about the possibility of a different *Antigone*, one that was never realized as a separate work. Žižek thus casts Kierkegaard as a kind of prophet who pointed the way to his own *Antigone*: “The path was shown by none other than Kierkegaard,” Žižek notes as he begins to reveal the plan for his play (2016: xiii). Reading Žižek’s introduction, one gets the impression that the author understands himself as the first writer daring (or even able) to write a new *Antigone*. In twenty pages discussing the idea of a modern transformation of the Antigone myth there is no trace, for example, of Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*, one of the most remarkable dramatic works of the 20th century, which also

posed some of the questions that Žižek tries to reinvent with his play, but did so in a far more fateful social and political context. Key to the turbulent reception of Anouilh's play, namely, was precisely the question of evaluating Antigone's attitude to power and rebellion. As Miriam Leonard documented in *Athens in Paris*, this evaluation was a highly charged one in occupied France, also because of the Vichy regime's favourable attitude to Anouilh's text and its performance; to many members of the Resistance, Anouilh's Antigone was a much-hated character in which they recognized a cowardly servility to the occupying forces (Leonard 2005: 106). This feeling would later reverberate in one of Lacan's seminars, where he even spoke of Anouilh's "petite Antigone fasciste" (Lacan 1986: 293).

Given Lacan's contempt, we might conditionally forgive his student Žižek for finding Anouilh unworthy of attention. Bertolt Brecht is a rather different matter. Žižek, namely, makes it clear that his *Antigone* directly follows the German playwright's legacy (Žižek 2016: xxiv). Yet he nowhere addresses the fact that Brecht, too, has written his own *Antigone* (first performed in 1948), even though it is probably the most noted modern dramatic adaptation of the Antigone myth apart from that of Anouilh. Given this suppression, it is interesting that Brecht's approach was at least to some extent quite similar to Žižek's. Brecht, too, took a classical translation of *Antigone*, Hölderlin's, as his starting point, and he even named his play *The Antigone of Sophocles*. To this reworked foundation he then applied his original ideas, largely guided – as with Žižek – by a desire for a vigorous political confrontation between classical tragedy and the author's own time. Nevertheless, there's a key difference between Žižek's and Brecht's *Antigone*: the attitude to Antigone. Brecht sees Antigone as a positive character that he opposes to the greatest evil of his time and place, German Nazism. Seen in this light, is it all that strange that Žižek forgets to mention this work? Žižek, who claims to write a Brechtian *Antigone*, in his own play devises an Antigone who is the opposite of Brecht's. Is Žižek here trying to be more Brechtian than Brecht?

A third odd, but understandable suppression is the absence of any mention of the Slovenian reception of the Antigone myth. It is clear, namely, that Žižek's work is to a great extent a critical response to the place and significance allotted to Sophocles' *Antigone* by central readings of this tragedy in Slovenia.

The most important Slovene literary reinterpretation of Sophocles' – and Anouilh's – *Antigone* is Dominik Smole's play by the same title (first performed in 1960), but Žižek's intervention cannot be said to be a direct response to

this work.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is a direct response to the most obvious social outcome of Smole's work: over the many years of agitated and controversial debate about Smole's *Antigone*, namely, a lasting connection formed between the Antigone myth and the mass killings in Slovenia, then part of Yugoslavia, in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>7</sup> This connection remains a live one in Slovenia today, partly because influential Slovenian thinkers such as Tine Hribar and Spomenka Hribar have included it in their ethical reflections on the nation's history and political modernity, but mainly because this connection is often made in post-communist Slovenian political discourse, primarily on the right wing – which is, of course, key to understanding Žižek's attitude to it.

The other Slovene particularity without which Žižek's play cannot be properly understood is *Antigone's* link with revolutionary violence; in Slovenia, the Antigone myth is often referenced in discussions about giving a burial to the tens of thousands of unburied victims of communist crimes during and after World War II. Precisely because of this context, revolutionary violence is more frequently discussed in the Slovene reception of *Antigone* than in most other cultural settings. A politically motivated massacre appears twice in Žižek's play; it even plays the leading role in both alternate endings. The plot of Sophocles' *Antigone* has no direct connection with this topic; clearly, it is the commonplace Slovene association of the themes of *Antigone* with reflections on communist terror that makes this connection for Žižek.

The main current of Slovene receptions of *Antigone* outlined above no doubt has its problems – chiefly, some vast oversimplifications of Sophocles' message that call for a thorough critical airing-out – but we still cannot defend Žižek's awkward dramatic debut as a justified protest in response. The main characteristics of his approach to Sophocles' tragedy, namely, are just

<sup>6</sup> Smole's drama is nevertheless one of the main implicit influences on the composition of Žižek's dramatic debut. Beside those obvious similarities which are also shared by Anouilh's piece – the vast importance of public opinion, the recurring theme of Antigone's stubbornness, accusations of madness etc. – Žižek's main idea, the rise of the chorus, vividly corresponds to the crucial emphasis in the international reception of Smole's *Antigone*. Steiner names it one of "the most intriguing [...] exceptions" in the modern depictions of the Antigone myth, where "the Sophoclean chorus tends to fall away", while Smole mainly expresses "the terror and moral-political meaning of Antigone's fate [...] via the chorus and several secondary personae" (170). This evaluation of the centrality and originality of the chorus in Smole's *Antigone* is quoted and affirmed in Maria de Fátima Silva's overview of the Antigone myth in the recent *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Sophocles* (452).

<sup>7</sup> For a short introduction to the complexity of these events, see Keith Lowe's chapter on Yugoslavia (»Europe in Microcosm: Yugoslavia«) in his book *Savage Continent*.

a conceptually and stylistically weak reversal of points stressed in prevalent Slovene interpretations, whose interpretive horizon Žižek does not transcend in any way, but only restricts even further. On its *home front*, too, Žižek's "way out" is at best – to use his own phrase – a "part of the problem."

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### Appendix: Žižek's writings on *Antigone* (1989–2014)

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