

All Talk, No Action

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My advice would be [...] precisely to start thinking. Don't get caught into this pseudo-activist pressure: "Do something," "Let's do it" and so on. No, the time is to think.

– Slavoj Žižek

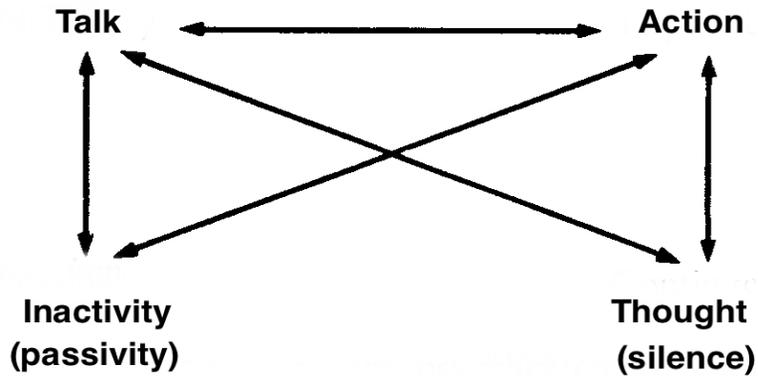
Talk is an often-diminished category. The term is used to reflect some sort of lack, whether it be a lack of meaning ("empty chatter"), or a lack of efficacy or will ("talk is cheap"). In the latter case, talk is under suspicion as a delay tactic, forever stalling a final decision and the action required to carry it out. In a recently circulated statement, quoted above, Žižek reverses this common emphasis, constructing "activity" as the empty and ineffectual category. Activity is what we do to forestall the real work of reflection, to ensure that things don't actually change. The premise of this assertion is that activity is a practice that is carried out according to pre-existing modes of behaviour and thus likely to reproduce the conditions of its own existence. Or perhaps, it is simply reactive and doesn't allow us to act intelligently. In this contest, "talk" is replaced with the weightier term "thought."

Whether it is talk or activity that is being scrutinized both can be understood as lacking a truly transformative gesture or meaning. The doing or the talking are diminished because they are practices carried out in a mindless, unthinking, rote manner. The subjective aim of such practices would seem to be the need to fill an empty space, to avoid the possible anxiety provoked by silence or an awareness of our own impotence. Žižek's statement would seem to indicate that the anxiety that our activity keeps at bay derives

from the very possibility that our actions might be effective, and in the process, effectively unsettle our daily existence along with the familiar comforts and pains that define our place in the symbolic universe.

What Žižek is advocating is a stoppage. Not a stoppage of thinking or working, but a stoppage of activity – taking up our time to busy ourselves with projects without pausing to question the parameters or function of this activity. If we expand the opposing terms “talk” and “action” into the structure of a Greimasian semiotic square, the first position of contradiction we arrive at is “non-action” or “inactivity.” Inactivity is what underlies talk and the terms are mutually implicated. However, Žižek’s point is that passivity as the contrary of action is not the only alternative in this field of meaning. In the opposing lower corner we must fill in the direct contrary of talk and we arrive at “non-talk” or “silence.” But what kind of silence can we conceive of that is not simply equal to passivity or inactivity? It is here that I would argue we would place “thought” as the term that necessarily underlies action. Thought is not a category of inactivity nor one that implies unproductive delay. It would seem that Žižek is in fact situating activity in the lower left corner as a form of passivity that is the contrary of a transformative action that depends on thought. What we are advised to seek out is neither a decisiveness without thought (activity) nor a discussion without decision (talk), but instead a dialectical praxis.

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Participation is a category that could subsume both talk and activity as empty gestures. Participation as an ideal implies that activity is always preferable to inactivity, that talk is preferable to silence, that to be involved in something, *anything*, is in itself beneficial. In my contribution to this issue of *Seachange* I explore the ideology of participation in relation to a particular experiment in open conference structures known as “bar camps.” It’s apparent in my article that I’m skeptical of the transformative potential of spaces that automatically privilege participation. In bar camps the compulsion for everyone present to speak reflects a double logic of decisiveness without thought (“everyone *will* speak regardless of the suitability of their comments or their preparedness”) and discussion without decision (“we can’t determine the purpose of this discussion because every individual brings their own point of view”). Here talk serves as an ideological bulwark against practices of solidarity since it is primarily grounded in individual empowerment.

Perhaps what is missing in this participatory version of talk is a sense of collective meaning or intention. Rather than compelling each of us to talk by parsing our interactions into individual slots of self-expression, we might open up a space of critical discussion with a more pointed invitation. Something along the lines of “let’s talk,” or, “we have to talk.” Both of these phrases lend talk a sense of direction while aiming for collective realizations. The phrase also implies that a common problem determines our communicative interaction from the outset. Further, it even suggests that a course of action must be taken or will be the consequence of such a “talk.” “We have to talk” because a problem exists and something needs to be done about it.

This dimension of talk is not cheap and does not exclude action. It is the moment of reflection that will determine our subsequent actions and possibly lend them a truly transformative meaning. It is with this in mind that I would like to consider the propositions I put forward in *Seachange* as an invitation to take a productive pause, to reflect on how our activity functions within our existing institutions of knowledge production.

Cayley Sorochan is a doctoral candidate in Communication Studies at McGill University. Her current research is concerned with the ideological function of discourses and practices of “participation” in online culture, political organization and consumer capitalism. Her wider research interests include urban theory, the politics of space, networked performance, spectatorship, and mobile/social networking technologies.