

interviews with slavoj žižek

culture and other crimes
liberation hurts
end of pornography



hayalci hücre: #61 hayalcieng #4 | slavoj žižek | interviews with slavoj
žižek: culture and other crimes, liberation hurts, end of pornography |
hayalcieng dizi editörü: bilgesu savcı | derleyen: slavoj žižek ve soner
torlak ©2024 hayalci hücre | bu kitabın ingilizce ve türkçe yayın hakları
slavoj žižek, soner torlak ve hayalci hücre yayın'a aittir. | kapak
tasarımı-dizgi: nail dündar | baskı-cilt: repar tasarım matbaa, yenibosna
merkez mh. cemal ulusoy cd. no: 43 bahçelievler/istanbul (sertifika no:
40675) | 1. baskı 2024 / istanbul | isbn no: 978-625-6597-51-8 | sertifika
no: 73832 | hayalci hücre yayın lema yayıncılık basım dağıtım kırtasiye
ticaret limited şirketi sinanoba mahallesi aktay caddesi A3-27 blok no:
6a iç kapı no: 6 büyükçekmece / istanbul | <https://hayalcihucere.com>



eng

դիհ

աբգդեզզգդհլլնյոբիհհհ

hayalci

Երես



interviews with slavoj žižek

culture and other crimes
liberation hurts
end of pornography



Slavoj Žižek

Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst. Known for his ability to link critical theory and popular culture in ways that are both humorous and thought-provoking, Žižek is one of the world's most high-profile intellectuals. An incredibly prolific and wide-ranging writer, Žižek writes for publications ranging from world-renowned newspapers such as *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books* to blogs and academic journals. Working in multiple languages, one of Žižek's greatest talents is his ability to provide critical responses to world events that are almost always immediate and intuitive. While Žižek's books have attracted a large readership, he is also a thinker with as many fierce opponents as supporters. Žižek was born in 1949 to a middle-class family in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia during the Communist Yugoslavia. He studied philosophy and sociology at the University of Ljubljana, where he started as an assistant researcher in 1971. He was expelled from the Yugoslav academy because his master's thesis was "not Marxist". He spent the next four years in the Yugoslav national army and did his compulsory military service. In the late 1970s he was hired as a researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Ljubljana, where he completed his PhD on German Idealism in 1981. He then studied psychoanalysis in Paris with Jacques-Alain Miller, son-in-law of Jacques Lacan, and completed his habilitation thesis (on Lacan, Hegel and Marx). Outside academia, Žižek was one of the founders of the Liberal Democratic Party of Slovenia and in 1990 the four-member collective ran for the Slovenian presidency, narrowly missing election. The publication of Žižek's first English-language work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in 1989 marked the high point of his popular writing career. By applying a mixture of Lacan and Hegel to a fundamentally Marxist problematic, it set a model for his numerous future publications.



“Humanity is OK,
but 99% of People are Boring Idiots”

13

“Hegel Don’t Bother Me!”

23

“If You Have a Good Theory,
Forget About the Reality!”

43

The Day After

55

“The Pandemic is Only a Test for the
Real Crisis!”

69

On Culture and Other Crimes

79

Liberation Hurts

97

“OMG Some Leftists Would Lynch Me
for That” — Part I

135

“Pornography No Longer Has Any
Charm” — Part II

149

“Why Only a Super-
Anthropocentrism and the Reading of
Hegel Can Save Us”

165

Appendix: An In-depth Analysis on
Slavoj Žižek’s Oeuvre
Matthew Sharpe

175





interviews with
slavoj žižek

culture and other crimes
liberation hurts
end of pornography

#1

“Humanity is OK, but 99% of People are Boring Idiots”*

* “Slavoj Žižek: 'Humanity is OK, but 99% of people are boring idiots’”; by Decca Aitkenhead; 10 June 2012; *The Guardian*; See <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jun/10/slavoj-zizek-humanity-ok-people-boring>

~

*A genius with the answers to the financial crisis? Or the
Borat of philosophy? The cultural theorist talks about love,
sex and why nothing is ever what it appears to be.*

~

Slavoj Žižek doesn't know the door number of his own apartment in Ljubljana. "Doesn't matter," he tells the photographer, who wants to pop outside. "Come back in through the main door, and then just think in terms of politically radical right; you turn from left to right, then at the end, right again." But what's the number, in case he gets lost? "I think it's 20," Žižek suggests. "But who knows? Let's double check." So off he pads down the hallway, opens his door and has a look.

Waving the photographer off, he points in the distance across the Slovenian capital. "Over there, that's a kind of counter-culture establishment – they hate me, I hate them. This is the type of leftists that I hate. Radical leftists whose fathers are all very rich." Most of the other buildings, he adds, are government ministries. "I hate it." Now he's back in the living room, a clinically tidy little sliver of functional space lacking any discernible aesthetic, the only concessions being a poster for the video game Call Of Duty: Black Ops, and a print of Joseph Stalin. Žižek pours Coke Zero into plastic McDonald's cups decorated in Disney merchandising, but when he opens a kitchen cupboard I see that it's full of clothes.

"I live as a madman!" he exclaims, and leads me on a tour of the apartment to demonstrate why his kitchen cabinets contain only clothing. "You see, there's no room anywhere else!" And indeed, every other room is lined, floor to ceiling, with DVDs and books; volumes of his own 75 works, translated into innumerable languages, fill one room alone.

If you have read all of Žižek's work, you are doing better than me. Born in 1949, the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic grew up under Tito in the former Yugoslavia, where suspicions of dissidence consigned him to academic backwaters. He came to western attention in 1989 with his first book written in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, a re-reading of Žižek's great hero Hegel through the perspective of another hero, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Since then there have been titles such as *Living in the End Times*, along with films – *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema* – and more articles than I can count.

By the standards of cultural theory, Žižek sits at the more accessible end of the spectrum – but to give you an idea of where that still leaves him, here's a typical quote from a book called *Žižek: A Guide for the Perplexed*, intended to render him more comprehensible: "Žižek finds the place for Lacan in Hegel by seeing the Real as the correlate of the self-division and self-doubling within phenomena."

At the risk of upsetting Žižek's fanatical global following, I would say that a lot of his work is impenetrable. But he writes with exhilarating ambition and his central thesis offers a perspective even his critics would have to concede is thought-provoking. In essence, he argues that nothing is ever what it appears, and contradiction is encoded in almost everything. Most of what we think of as radical or subversive – or even simply ethical – doesn't actually change anything.

"Like when you buy an organic apple, you're doing it for ideological reasons, it makes you feel good: 'I'm doing something for Mother Earth,' and so on. But in what sense are we engaged? It's a false engagement. Paradoxically, we do these things to avoid really doing things. It makes you feel good. You recycle, you send £5 a month to some Somali orphan, and you did your duty." But really, we've been tricked

into operating safety valves that allow the status quo to survive unchallenged? “Yes, exactly.” The obsession of western liberals with identity politics only distracts from class struggle, and while Žižek doesn’t defend any version of communism ever seen in practice, he remains what he calls a “complicated Marxist” with revolutionary ideals.

To his critics, as one memorably put it, he is the Borat of philosophy, churning out ever more outrageous statements for scandalous effect. “The problem with Hitler was that he was not violent enough,” for example, or “I am not human. I am a monster.” Some dismiss him as a silly controversialist; others fear him as an agitator for neo-Marxist totalitarianism. But since the financial crisis he has been elevated to the status of a global-recession celebrity, drawing crowds of adoring followers who revere him as an intellectual genius. His popularity is just the sort of paradox Žižek delights in because if it were down to him, he says, he would rather not talk to anyone.

You wouldn’t guess so from the energetic flurry of good manners with which he welcomes us, but he’s quick to clarify that his attentiveness is just camouflage for misanthropy. “For me, the idea of hell is the American type of parties. Or, when they ask me to give a talk, and they say something like, ‘After the talk there will just be a small reception’ – I know this is hell. This means all the frustrated idiots, who are not able to ask you a question at the end of the talk, come to you and, usually, they start: ‘Professor Žižek, I know you must be tired, but ...’ Well, fuck you. If you know that I am tired, why are you asking me? I’m really more and more becoming Stalinist. Liberals always say about totalitarians that they like humanity, as such, but they have no empathy for concrete people, no? OK, that fits me perfectly. Humanity? Yes, it’s OK – some great talks, some great arts. Concrete people? No, 99% are boring idiots.”

Most of all, he can't stand students. "Absolutely. I was shocked, for example, once, a student approached me in the US, when I was still teaching a class – which I will never do again – and he told me: 'You know, professor, it interested me what you were saying yesterday, and I thought, I don't know what my paper should be about. Could you please give me some more thoughts and then maybe some idea will pop up.' Fuck him! Who I am to do that?"

Žižek has had to quit most of his teaching posts in Europe and America, to get away from these intolerable students. "I especially hate when they come to me with personal problems. My standard line is: 'Look at me, look at my tics, don't you see that I'm mad? How can you even think about asking a mad man like me to help you in personal problems, no?'" You can see what he means, for Žižek cuts a fairly startling physical figure – like a grizzly bear, pawing wildly at his face, sniffing and snuffling and gesticulating between every syllable. "But it doesn't work! They still trust me. And I hate this because – this is what I don't like about American society – I don't like this openness, like when you meet a guy for the first time, and he's starting to tell you about his sex life. I hate this, I hate this!"

I have to laugh at this, because Žižek brings up his sex life within moments of our first meeting. On the way up in the lift he volunteers that a former girlfriend used to ask him for what he called "consensual rape". I had imagined he would want to discuss his new book about Hegel, but what he really seems keen to talk about is sex.

"Yeah, because I'm extremely romantic here. You know what is my fear? This postmodern, permissive, pragmatic etiquette towards sex. It's horrible. They claim sex is healthy; it's good for the heart, for blood circulation, it relaxes you. They even go into how kissing is also good because it devel-

ops the muscles here – this is horrible, my God!” He’s appalled by the promise of dating agencies to “outsource” the risk of romance. “It’s no longer that absolute passion. I like this idea of sex as part of love, you know: ‘I’m ready to sell my mother into slavery just to fuck you for ever.’ There is something nice, transcendent, about it. I remain incurably romantic.”

I keep thinking I should try to intervene with a question, but he’s off again. “I have strange limits. I am very – OK, another detail, fuck it. I was never able to do – even if a woman wanted it – anal sex.” Anal sex? “Ah, anal sex. You know why not? Because I couldn’t convince myself that she really likes it. I always had this suspicion, what if she only pretends, to make herself more attractive to me? It’s the same thing for fellatio; I was never able to finish into the woman’s mouth, because again, my idea is, this is not exactly the most tasteful fluid. What if she’s only pretending?”

He can count the number of women he has slept with on his hands, because he finds the whole business so nerve-racking. “I cannot have one-night stands. I envy people who can do it; it would be wonderful. I feel nice, let’s go, bang-bang – yes! But for me, it’s something so ridiculously intimate – like, my God, it’s horrible to be naked in front of another person, you know? If the other one is evil with a remark – ‘Ha ha, your stomach,’ or whatever – everything can be ruined, you know?” Besides, he can’t sleep with anyone unless he believes they might stay together for ever. “All my relationships – this is why they are very few – were damned from the perspective of eternity. What I mean with this clumsy term is, maybe they will last.”

But Žižek has been divorced three times. How has he coped with that? “Ah, now I will tell you. You know the young Marx – I don’t idealise Marx, he was a nasty guy, personally – but he has a wonderful logic. He says: ‘You don’t

simply dissolve marriage; divorce means that you retroactively establish that the love was not the true love.’ When love goes away, you retroactively establish that it wasn’t even true love.” Is that what he did? “Yes! I erase it totally. I don’t only believe that I’m no longer in love. I believe I never was.”

As if to illustrate this, he glances at his watch; his 12-year-old son, who lives nearby, will be arriving shortly. How is this going to work when he gets here? Don’t worry, Žižek says, he’s bound to be late – on account of the tardiness of his mother: “The bitch who claims to have been my wife.” But weren’t they married? “Unfortunately, yes.”

Žižek has two sons – the other is in his 30s – but never wanted to be a parent. “I will tell you the formula why I love my two sons. This is my liberal, compassionate side. I cannot resist it, when I see someone hurt, vulnerable and so on. So precisely when the son was not fully wanted, this made me want to love him even more.”

By now I can see we’re not going to get anywhere near Žižek’s new book about Hegel, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. Instead, he tells me about the holidays he takes with his young son. The last one was to the Burj Al Arab hotel, a grotesque temple to tacky ostentation in Dubai. “Why not? Why not? I like to do crazy things. But I did my Marxist duty. I got friendly with the Pakistani taxi driver who showed to me and my son reality. The whole structure of how the workers there live was explained, how it was controlled. My son was horrified.” This summer they are off to Singapore, to an artificial island with swimming pools built on top of 50-storey skyscrapers. “So we can swim there and look down on the city: ‘Ha ha, fuck you.’ That’s what I like to do – totally crazy things.” It wasn’t so much fun when his son was younger. “But now, we have a certain rhythm established. We sleep ‘til one, then

we go to breakfast, then we go to the city – no culture, just consumerism or some stupid things like this – then we go back for dinner, then we go to a movie theatre, then we play games ‘til three in the morning.”

I wonder what all Žižek’s earnest young followers will make of this, and worry they will be cross with me for not getting anything more serious out of him. But to Žižek, Dubai tells us just as much about the world as a debate about the deficit, say, ever can. When his sweet-looking, polite young son arrives, I try to steer Žižek on to the financial crisis, and to the role his admirers hope he will play in formulating a radical response.

“I always emphasise: don’t expect this from me. I don’t think that the task of a guy like me is to propose complete solutions. When people ask me what to do with the economy, what the hell do I know? I think the task of people like me is not to provide answers but to ask the right questions.” He’s not against democracy, *per se*, he just thinks our democratic institutions are no longer capable of controlling global capitalism. “Nice consensual incremental reforms may work, possibly, at a local level.” But localism belongs in the same category as organic apples, and recycling. “It’s done to make you feel good. But the big question today is how to organise to act globally, at an immense international level, without regressing to some authoritarian rule.”

How will that happen? “I’m a pessimist in the sense that we are approaching dangerous times. But I’m an optimist for exactly the same reason. Pessimism means things are getting messy. Optimism means these are precisely the times when change is possible.” And what are the chances that things won’t change? “Ah, if this happens then we are slowly approaching a new apartheid authoritarian society. It will not be – I must underline this – the old stupid authoritarianism. This will be a new form, still consumerist.” The whole world

will look like Dubai? “Yes, and in Dubai, you know, the other side are literally slaves.”

There is something inexplicably touching about all Žižek’s mischievous bombast. I hadn’t expected him to be so likable, but he really is hilariously good company. I had hoped to find out if he was a genius or a lunatic – but I fear I leave none the wiser. I ask him how seriously he would recommend we take him, and he says he would rather be feared than taken for a clown. “Most people think I’m making jokes, exaggerating – but no, I’m not. It’s not that. First I tell jokes, then I’m serious. No, the art is to bring the serious message into the forum of jokes.”

Two years ago his front teeth came out. “My son knows I have a good friend; none of us is gay, just good friends. So when he saw me without teeth, he said: ‘I know why.’ My son! He was 10! You know what he told me? Think, associate, in the dirtiest way.” I think I can guess. “Yes! Sucking! He said my friend complained that my teeth were in the way.” Žižek roars with laughter, great gales of paternal pride.

“And you know what was tragicomic? After he told me this, he said: ‘Father, did I tell this joke well?’”

~

#2
“Hegel Don’t Bother Me!”*

* “Hegel Don’t Bother Me!”; by Simon Joseph Jones; 17 April 2015; *High Profiles*. This edit was originally published in the August 2015 issue of *Third Way*. See <https://highprofiles.info/interview/slavoj-zizek/>

~

Slavoj Žižek has been called both 'the Elvis of cultural theory' and 'the most dangerous philosopher in the West'. On 17 April 2015, Simon Joseph Jones called on him at his home in Ljubljana and, in a three-hour conversation, tried to get a word in edgeways.

~

Simon Joseph Jones: *As a student of psychoanalysis, you'll understand why I want to start with your childhood. Can you tell us a little about those years?*

Slavoj Žižek: Mother, father, both were resolutely atheists. I remember once when I was in my early teens my father caught me reading a Bible – I was buying books already – and he sat me down and tried to convince me how this is all nonsense blah blah. He was terribly afraid that I would be seduced by it. I was shocked – like, if he is really an atheist, why is he so worried? Has he some doubts?

You know, a psychiatrist who has specialised in the psychology of suicide bombers told me that they have enormous doubts and it's as if by 'acting out' they will prove to themselves that they really do believe. But what fascinates me is the opposite: the atheist who [in effect], in his daily life, believes much more than he would be ready to admit. I like that motif that today we are not simply non-believers but our beliefs are materialised in our rituals and so on. You can have beliefs that function socially, because people obey them in practice, though no one is ready to say: 'I really believe.' I'm tempted to claim that even in medieval times beliefs were not so direct. Maybe this believing in the first person – I, in myself, believe – is something that early modernity – Protestantism and so on – brought about.

My Jewish friends all tell me the same story, that when they were in their teens they went to their rabbi and said, 'I

have a problem: I don't really believe in God.' And they all got the same answer: 'Why are you bothering me with your inner turmoil? I also don't believe. My duty is to teach you to follow the rules.'

There is for me something almost beautiful in that. This is maybe what marked me so deeply: in my teens I read a book I quote often, Aldous Huxley's *Grey Eminence*,¹ the story of Father Joseph, who served Cardinal de Richelieu during the Thirty Years War. Politically, he was utterly evil, unprincipled and ruthless, but now comes the surprise: every evening when the day's dirty work was finished, he engaged in the most beautiful mystical reflections. There is no doubt, he had authentic [experiences], at the level of (if I may be slightly obscene) the 'big hits' of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. How is this possible? So, from the very beginning I was against this notion of a religion of 'inner truth'. There is an ethical void at the heart of it.

Sorry, you wanted to say something.

Well, I was –

And, you know – sorry to interrupt you again! – there is a book by a Buddhist monk called *Zen at War*,² which is one of the most edifying and at the same time terrifying books I have ever read. It describes how the Japanese Zen community supported the war effort in the 1930s and '40s – and not only supported it but justified it. For example, in the late Thirties D T Suzuki, the great populariser of Zen in the hippy years, tried to convince the Japanese authorities that a minimal Zen training can be of immense help in training soldiers.

Let's say I encounter you on the battlefield: I have a sense of decency, how can I kill you? Suzuki says: Yes, but I feel like this only if I remain in this realm of illusions and I think that you and I are real persons. But if I see that we don't have selves and reality is just a dance of appearances, it's no

longer a problem: the sword in my hand is simply part of this dance and somehow your body falls on it and it has nothing to do with me.

Isn't there something terrifying in this, that you can both have a deep, authentic spiritual experience and be a ruthless killing machine? And then [during the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia] I arrived at the formula 'No ethnic cleansing without poetry'. As I said, it's difficult for most of us to kill, and so we need a strong poetic, mythic or religious vision to do it, no?

So, the only solution that I see is that of the three 'religions of the book', Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which is this turn against inner experience. This is how I read the iconoclasm of Judaism. Why should we not paint the image of God? Not simply because God is way beyond our representation but because God is present here, not in our shitty meditations but in how we treat other people. That is what matters: not your inner belief or whatever but what you enact.

But what distinguishes Christianity is that, although it is a 'religion of the book', it is entered through a person, the 'Godman' – I think you have called it somewhere 'the traumatic encounter with the radical Other'.

The truly dramatic point is in Christianity, and that is why, although I am (I must admit it) an atheist, I think that you can truly be an atheist – and I mean this quite literally – only through Christianity. That's how I read the death of Christ – here I follow Hegel, who [said]: What dies on the cross is God himself.

I take seriously those words Christ says at the end: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* It's something really tremendous that happens. G K Chesterton (whom I admire) puts it in a wonderful way: Only in Christianity does God himself, for a moment, become atheist.³

And I think – this is my reading – that this moment of the death of God, when you are totally abandoned and you have only your ‘collectivity’, called the ‘Holy Spirit’, is the authentic moment of freedom. You have this freedom in other religions, but it’s still only in ‘the other world’ – in *nirvana* and so on. Only in Christianity do you have the ‘Holy Spirit’ in the sense of an egalitarian community which can exist only on this earth.

I am so impressed by those stories in the Bible where Jesus is with his followers and someone tells him, ‘Outside, your family are waiting for you’ and he says: ‘No, *this* is my family.’ The emancipatory core of Christianity is, for me, that there is an egalitarian community possible already on this earth outside the edifice of social hierarchy. Then, of course, come all the problems: How far can you go? Can you make a whole society along these lines? But this seems, for me, the tremendous achievement of Christianity. Judaism doesn’t dare to do it. Judaism is still, you know, ‘Respect your parents’ and so on. Christianity is not just a belief, it is a certain mental space, spiritual space, or space for ideas, let’s call it. What happens there is, I claim, absolutely unique.

And – a step further – I claim that this is what is really threatened today. This is my sad impression of the United States, that even if the majority is still nominally Christian, their *de facto* stance is more and more what I call ‘enlightened Buddhist hedonism’, where the call is for ‘authentic living’ and ‘being true to yourself’.

Sorry, can I ask –

Please interrupt me! As you can see, it’s the only way with me...

For many people, an essential element in Christianity is resurrection. Do you have room for that?

Here, probably, we disagree. OK, with a little irony I will use harsh terms: all the finale of the Bible – Armageddon, the Second Coming – screw it! For me, the key is in the Gospel, when Christ announces, ‘I will die [but] I will come back’ and somebody says: ‘But how will we know?’ And then he says those famous words: ‘When there will be love between two of you, I will be there.’⁴ *That’s* enough, I claim. The whole point, in my radical reading of resurrection, is that the community which is searching for Christ is already the living body of Christ. It is for idiots to wait [until] he comes as a person again. No! He is here, in [our] love, already.

I know it’s a crazy, idiosyncratic reading but I think that Christianity at its most radical precisely renounces this need for a ‘big Other’. All notion of a ‘big Other’ dies on the cross. What you get [instead] is the ‘Holy Spirit’ – that’s it – without any guarantee, you know, [that] there is a big, old guy up there – or everywhere – who is in control, or (not so primitive) there is some deeper meaning in creation, so don’t worry too much!

My Jewish friends reproach us who are part of the Christian [tradition] by saying that only in Judaism you confront the anxietyprovoking impenetrability of God, but in Christianity you get an easy way out, like ‘Don’t worry, God loves you!’ I think you don’t. I think that when Christ dies, you lose that guarantee – the abyss is even stronger. The message of Christianity is not [that] God loves us; the point is, God is love – which is in us.

And this is such a radical message that even today it is unacceptable. Now we are at the crucial point! In contrast to those postmodern thinkers who try to find in Judaism or some pagan religion some richer experience repressed by Christianity, I think: No, what is repressed by institutional Christianity is its own founding gesture. It is as if Christianity as a religion fights its own excess.

Given that you are an atheist, you talk a lot about God and Christianity. Why is that?

I agree that this is the big question. On the one hand, I am opposed to Richard Dawkins and Co – even those who are not so aggressive, they simply don't get how religion works, they simply miss their target. On the other hand, I agree that when leftists accept religion, they often do it in this implicitly manipulative, even racist, way: 'We know there is no God but in places that are a little bit more primitive you need something like religion to mobilise people. It gives people hope,' whatever. No! I want to take things much more seriously.

If I am a materialist, how can I talk about the experience of a divine dimension without reducing it to a useful illusion? Here, my answer is double. First, Rowan Williams in his book on Dostoevsky, which I like very much, says something wonderful: that for him the most profound dimension of the religious experience is not this idea of a good ol' guy God but simply a kind of – let's call it 'ontological uneasiness': you feel that you are not totally of this world, that there is something structurally wrong. And here comes my trick: this does not mean that there is another world, just this sense that we don't fully belong in this one.

The second dimension is this wonderful notion of counterfactuals. Maybe you've heard of my friend [the philosopher] Jean-Pierre Dupuy? He's almost a genius, I think. He gives this simple example that I love. If I say, 'If Shakespeare didn't write *Hamlet*, another person did,' this is undoubtedly true, because *Hamlet* exists. But if I say, 'If Shakespeare [hadn't] written *Hamlet*, another person would have,' this is a much more problematic statement, because it means there was some kind of pressure to write a play like *Hamlet*.

You know the standard Marxist theory of Napoleon: the logic of [the] French Revolution was that it had to [mutate]

into some kind of imperial regime and, without Napoleon, another guy would probably have been picked, contingently, to do the job. But say that Stalin has an accident in '23, would Stalinism still happen but with another guy? Or does it depend on Stalin's person?

Dupuy provides a wonderful answer: that it happens contingently, but once it happens, it retroactively becomes necessary. Like, when Julius Caesar [reaches the] Rubicon, it isn't written in the stars [that he will cross it]; but once it happens, it retroactively creates its own necessity. The best example here would be this: you fall in love totally contingently – I don't know, you [bump into a woman] on the street – but once it happens, you experience it as if for your whole lifetime –

It had been predestined?

Yeah! And now comes the beauty of Dupuy's argumentation: he tries to prove that this is not simply an afterwards illusion [but] that things in themselves are ontologically open – like, in a way things retroactively become fully what they are. And this brings us back to Christianity. Christ was contingent, but once he is here he is [an] absolute necessity. And another point – now things become crucial! This, I think, is how we should read redemption and so on: we can change the past not factually – of course, what happened happened – but *counterfactually*. Things don't only happen but things *might have* happened, and retroactively you can change the whole tapestry of options.

For example, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* what happens when Madeleine (who we later discover was not really Madeleine) jumps [from the bell tower]? Scottie loses his love, no? OK, but what happens towards the end of the film, when he discovers that this Madeleine never existed, because the woman he was in love with was an impersonator? In this way, the past is, counterfactually only, changed.

Now, from this we can draw another conclusion: that even if something didn't happen, it is still important in what sense it didn't happen. For example, you can say that God doesn't exist, but *which* God doesn't? Because counterfactuals, as counterfactuals, exist and socially, symbolically, exert influence. That's why it is extremely important, even if you are a materialist, to fight counterfactually for what notion of God we have.

I don't want to [speak] of a lie, because it sounds too denigrating, but God is for me a lie in the sense of something counterfactual that you absolutely need to see the truth. I'll give you an example. Did you see the Polanski movie *The Ghost Writer* [2010]? A retired British prime minister, clearly based on Tony Blair, [turns out to have been] trained by the CIA. There was a wonderful review of this film that said: Of course, it's not true – but if it had been true, it would have explained everything.

So, this is the crucial paradox: the counterfactual is formally a lie, but a lie absolutely immanent to reality. You erase the lie, you lose reality itself. You cannot simply say: There is no God. Like, there is a wonderful story a friend told me. A rabbi is telling a young boy some old story from [the] Talmud and the boy says: 'It's wonderful! Did it really happen? Is it true?' You know what the rabbi says? 'It didn't happen, but it's true.' It's not enough to say that God is a useful illusion; he is ontologically necessary. In this sense, we cannot get rid of God.

When Jesus says in the Lord's Prayer, 'on earth as it is in heaven', is heaven a useful illusion?

Counterfactual. It's not illusion. You know what's the problem with the term 'illusion'? The opposite of illusion is reality, but this reality is constructed *through* illusion. My God, even your empiricists knew this. In Jeremy Bentham's Theory of Fictions, the point is not 'Our universal concepts

are fictions. Open yourselves to reality!’ He knew that if you erase the fictions you lose reality itself. And now comes the beauty. I am not saying: Our reality is just another illusion. I’m not a postmodernist! There *is* a reality. That’s the paradox. Sometimes, something that exists only counterfactually can deeply determine your entire reality.

So, tell me, which is the God who you don’t believe in?

What interests me tremendously is this idea of a God who is omnipotent but at the same time capricious. In the Book of Job – which (if I may repeat this line) ‘can be counted as the first exercise in the critique of ideology in the entire history of humanity’⁶ – his three friends come to him and each of them offers an ideological justification of his suffering – and then comes the beauty: when God arrives, he says: No, this is bullshit!

They were ‘totally orthodox and totally wrong’.

Yes! So, Job asks: ‘OK, but why *did* I suffer? What does it mean?’ And God goes into that crazy speech: ‘Who are you to ask me this? Where were you when I created those monsters?’⁷ You know how Chesterton reads this? As God telling Job: ‘You think *you* are in trouble? Look at the universe! Everything is confusion.’

You know where you find this [idea of God] now? In the Johnny Cash song ‘The Man Comes Around’.⁸ The way the Last Judgement is staged there is almost like what happens in a concentration camp. We are all gathered and God just says: ‘You’re in. You’re out.’ Isn’t predestination the pure idea of God as totally arbitrary? He just throws the dice, whatever, we don’t know.

This insight of Protestantism is crucial theologically, I think. It’s much closer to me than all that Catholic stuff, because it’s less corruptive, you know? The moment you concede that your salvation depends on your good works, we are

at the level of bargaining: ‘Should I do this, so I get that?’ and so on. No! If you take seriously the ethical core of Christianity, you cannot make salvation dependent on good works.

But somehow you must, as it were, civilise that crazy God who, because he is omnipotent, is on the edge of being evil, you know? I think this is the great discovery of Protestantism. In Catholicism, God is the high point of an orderly, hierarchic universe. The absolute excess of God, what mystics called the ‘madness’ of God, is lost.

This is the paradox that people don’t get, I think. This is very profound Protestant logic, that God is an absolute tyrant and only through utter humiliation [do] you get the modern notion of free individuality. Luther even says: We are the shit that fell out of God’s anus. And this reduction to nothing is weirdly liberating, you know?

I think this barbarian [element of Protestantism] is the necessary obverse of modern human freedom. In this sense, I am not very fashionable! I debated this once with Rowan Williams and I told him – OK, I was provoking him – ‘When I take power, even you will go to a re-education camp,’ because he has some tenderness towards Eastern Orthodoxy. I am here totally Western European. Eastern Orthodoxy is the worst, because it has this formula which is totally wrong, I think: that God became human so that we can become God.

There are some nice analogies here with Bolshevism – for example, Gorky and Lunacharsky proposed what they called *bogograditelk’stvo*, ‘the construction of God’: the idea that humanity will gradually divinise itself. No! I think we should stick to Luther, that, you know, the only space for freedom is to be divine shit.

You referred to ‘when you take power’, and you did in fact run for the presidency of Slovenia in 1990. Why did you do that?

To help my party. It was a very modest party, not even very leftist, called Liberal Democratic. We were nonetheless dissidents, and our fear was that Slovenia would [end up with] just two political blocs: the old Communists, who were, up to a point, genuinely popular, and the (mostly conservative) nationalists. So, the point was to establish, like, a third way! And for almost 20 years it worked and we did avoid those dangerous dynamics that happened in Croatia and Serbia.

Why did you subsequently move from a hands-dirty kind of politics to being almost entirely a theorist? I know you don't enjoy teaching –

I hate it, actively.

– but the way you reference popular culture means you can communicate with people outside the ivory tower. Is there something you are trying to achieve, or is it just that a philosopher must find ways to communicate or what's the point in having ideas?

There are two levels here. The first is my terror of jargon. I always say: the idiot I am trying to explain things to is not my public, it's myself. I have terrible memories from my youth when philosophers just exchanged jargon and people didn't understand what they meant.

The other level is that, very traditionally, I do feel a kind of public responsibility of an intellectual – at least to raise the right questions. People ask me: 'What should we do today, politically, ecologically?' Fuck it! What do I know? I don't have answers. The important thing is to ask the right questions, because the way ideology works today, I think, is precisely at the level of how we perceive a problem. Ideology is at its most dangerous when it deals with a real problem but there is a mystification in the way it describes it.

For example: sexism, racism and so on. We tend today automatically to [consider these in terms of] tolerance and harassment, and I find both problematic. Of course there is harassment, but isn't there in this also something of a fear of your neighbour? If I may put it this way, this is today's predominant anti-Christian attitude. The Christian attitude is 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' but this delivers a message to the neighbour: 'If you come too close to me, you harass me.' It's part of, I think, our narcissistic self-perception.

This is why I am also opposed to [giving to] charity, because, I think, its true purpose is precisely to keep the suffering neighbour at a distance.

With ecology, it's the same. What I especially hate is this, again, pseudo-superego personalisation of ecology. Like, instead of systemic changes, you are personally terrorised: Did you recycle all your newspapers and all your Coke cans and so on? It becomes your problem, and of course you are [made to feel] always guilty – but at the same time, if you recycle everything, 'Oh, I did my duty. It's not my problem' and so on.

How do you think things are going to develop?

I'm a Hegelian optimist. For Hegel, the French Revolution went wrong but he nonetheless wanted to retain its legacy, so there is no return to the *ancien régime*. And I think: Isn't our problem today similar? Communism was a fiasco, but the problems are still here which generated it. Look at ecology – the market is not enough. For example, the Japanese government [has admitted] that two, three days after the explosion at Fukushima they thought for one or two days that they would have to evacuate the entire Tokyo area. Like, 30 million people or whatever! Sorry, it's not the market that you need for that but total, almost military, organisation. And

I am not now preaching a return to some sort of Stalinist regime; I am just saying that, to avoid that, we really need to find a new logic of large collective decisions.

If things go on the way they are going, we are – this is my still Marxist belief – approaching some end point which may be not universal catastrophe but some very sad new authoritarian society, where we will keep most of our personal freedoms – gay rights, abortion, whatever you want – even, up to a point, freedom of expression – but key decisions are made elsewhere, in a global process that is more and more impenetrable, untouchable – it's just capitalism. This is what worries me.

Capitalism less and less needs democracy, and we are so deeply into this depoliticised society where we enjoy our freedoms but politics is left to experts. In some countries it is only the Christian conservatives who are truly engaged and, if the left doesn't answer this, what I fear is a society where the opposition is between a technocratic centre and the Christian (but in the bad sense) fundamentalists, whatever. And, admit it, we are moving towards that, in France, in Scandinavia and [other] countries. In England, maybe not?

So, I am not a Marxist determinist. I think that, if anything, the [trajectory] of history is...

Downward?

Yes! Although we still have relatively good lives, in the long term things are going downwards, I'm afraid.

What can we do? Maybe we will not do anything. If we do nothing, it will turn really bad – but I am more than aware of all the problems. For me, the big trauma is Stalinism still. Fascism was a relatively simple thing: there were bad guys who decided they wanted to do bad [things] and when they took power they did them. But Communism, whatever you say, was at the beginning an emancipatory explosion, though

it turned into a total nightmare. We still don't have a good theory of why.

So, what [is the alternative]? At one point, it looked [to be a] social democratic welfare state, but with globalisation and so on that is over. What my friend [Yanis] Varoufakis, [then] the Greek finance minister, is proposing to the Brussels bureaucracy and Germany is something that 40, 50 years ago would have been a very moderate social democracy, but now [if you propose it] you are decried as a lunatic and so on. This makes me really sad. What the Greeks are demanding is modest. They are arguing very rationally.

You have been very critical of those, such as the French economist Thomas Piketty, who have argued that the system is essentially OK if only we can get people to pay more tax or whatever. You point out that we are no more likely to get people to pay more tax than we are to have a revolution and rebuild the whole system.

Ah, I like this argument. As the Trotskyite Marxist [cultural critic] Alberto Pascano says, maybe modest reformism is our ultimate utopia, you know? Piketty is well aware that capitalism is global, which means that one country [can't afford to raise taxes on its own]; but if we were in a position to raise taxes globally, it would mean we would already have won, because we would have a worldwide government with full authority. So, his idea is: we will win when we['ve] already won!

Here I would say another thing, which I like to emphasise when people accuse me of being pro-violence and so on. People associate violence with change [and so they say] we shouldn't change things, but the problem is the violence which is needed, more and more, just to keep things the way they are. When people say, 'Isn't revolution risky?', I tell them: Look at [the Democratic Republic of] Congo! Nine years ago, a cover story in *Time* magazine reported that in

the last eight years over four million people [had] died unnatural deaths and so on. I met the editor-in-chief at the time and he told me he [had expected a] big outcry but they got a couple of letters, that's all. My God! Nobody cares. Why? Congo is [a failed state] but it is fully integrated into the world market and the local warlords provide [the rare minerals needed] for our computers or whatever.⁹

This is why – this was a heavy provocation! – I said that the problem with Hitler was that he wasn't violent enough. Hitler – here, I'm a classical Marxist – killed millions to keep things basically the way they were. He was a coward: he was afraid to risk real change. Gandhi was more violent than Hitler, in the sense that he didn't kill anyone but he brought the British Empire down.

What can our readers who believe in the emancipatory logic of Christianity do?

I will give you a very modest proposal of how to be – let's say 'reformist-revolutionary'. I don't like pseudo-radical leftists who say, 'Don't get your hands dirty by participating!' and sit and wait for the big event. I think what gives me hope is precisely what I told you about Syriza and so on. This is how we should proceed.

For example, let me tell you something which may surprise you. It's so easy to be disappointed by Barack Obama. Some of my stupid leftist friends, if you listen to them – what did they fucking expect? That Obama would introduce communism? OK, he did many things wrong, but some things are important that he didn't do. He didn't attack Iran or Syria, for example.

The universal health care he fought for is a moderate success. Now, the point is this: universal health care is not something revolutionary – Canada has it, most of Europe – but obviously in the United States it is. We saw that Obama was

dragged to the Supreme Court, he was attacked [on the basis that] ‘he doesn’t really love America’ and all that. OK, but isn’t this a model of how you should [proceed]? You pick a very rational, modest demand and you trigger a process of rethinking.

This is, for me, the art. In every country, you pick the right thing – for example, in India, which prides itself on being the greatest democracy and so on, there is still the system of castes. Try that! It’s not in itself revolutionary, but it triggers the process. You know I am a critic of multiculturalism, but in Turkey it means justice for Armenians, for Kurds – it’s revolutionary. Or in Europe, what Syriza is doing.

Now, I come to my final paradox. The highest art is to [set] the market against itself. Some years ago, I saw on CNN a report on Mali which explained that they grow really good cotton and it’s one-third the price of American cotton. So, why can’t they succeed? Because the United States gives more money to its cotton farmers in financial support than the entire state budget of Mali. So Mali’s minister of finance said: ‘We don’t need any help. Just respect your own market rules and don’t cheat! You tell us “no state intervention”. You do [the same] and our troubles are over!’

You know, that is the problem today with global capitalism: it’s not austerity, it’s that they don’t follow the rules they impose on others. So, this is bad – but at the same time it gives us hope, I think. This is, if you ask me, the way to proceed: it is vain to wait for a big revolutionary moment, we have just to start modestly here and there and pick out those strategic points that will trigger the process of change.

Otherwise, I really am a pessimist. If Greece fails...

By the sound of it, you are ‘a pessimist of the intellect, an optimist of the will’.

Yeah, yeah! OK, I agree. Or I will put it like this: I am a Communist (as I like to say) by default.

And I think that – people start to shout at me when I say this – we need to rehabilitate what is worth saving in our European legacy: Christianity, democracy, whatever. Let's not behave as if we have to be ashamed of it, we are always the guilty guys. I really think that the left today, with this false multiculturalism and permanent self-hatred, is playing a very dangerous game, because what is replacing that legacy is something terrifying.

References

↑1 Grey Eminence: A study in religion and politics (Chatto & Windus, 1941)

↑2 Brian Daizen Victoria, Zen at War (Rowman & Littlefield, 2nd ed 2006)

↑3 Chesterton wrote in Orthodoxy (1908): 'Let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.'

↑4 This may refer to Matthew 18:19f.

↑5 Dostoevsky: Language, faith and fiction (Continuum, 2008)

↑6 From Living in the End Times (Verso, 2010)

↑7 Job 38–41

↑8 See bit.ly/1gBOnvX.

↑9 See eg bit.ly/1wqlloG.

~

#3

**“If You Have a Good Theory,
Forget About the Reality!”***

* “Slavoj Žižek: Interview”; by Sean O’Hagan; 27 June 2010; *The Guardian*; See <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jun/27/slavoj-zizek-living-end-times>

~

The Marxist provocateur and bestselling philosopher on communism, poststructural theory and his reluctance to play poster boy for the fashionable European left.

~

The large lecture hall of the French Institute in Barcelona is full to overflowing. People line the walls, sit in the aisles and stand three-deep at the back. There are a few middle-aged, smartly dressed people in attendance as well as a handful of old leftists with long hair and caps, but the majority of the audience are young and stylishly dishevelled, the kind of people one would expect to see at a Hot Chip or Vampire Weekend gig.

They have gathered here to listen to a 61-year-old Slovenian philosopher called Slavoj Žižek, whose critique of global capitalism now stretches to more than 50 books translated into more than 20 languages. Žižek describes himself as “a complicated communist” and, as if to complicate things further, he deploys the psychoanalytical theories of the late French thinker Jacques Lacan to illustrate the ways in which capitalist ideology works on the collective imagination. “I don’t give clear answers to even the simplest, most direct questions,” Žižek says. “I like to complicate issues. I hate simple narratives. I suspect them. This is my automatic reaction.”

Žižek’s book titles reflect his playful and often self-contradictory theoretical thrust. They include: *The Ticklish Subject*, which deals with “the spectre of the Cartesian subject in western thought”; *The Plague of Fantasies*, which analyses the ways in which “audiovisual media clouds the ability to

reason and understand the world”; and the wonderfully titled *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, a fierce critique of “the liberal-democratic consensus”.

He seems drawn to taking unfashionable stances that make him unpopular with traditionalists of whatever political hue. A recent book, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, argued that, in philosophical-political terms, Heidegger’s fascist sympathies and Foucault’s support of the Iranian revolution were “right steps in the wrong direction”. Rebecca Mead, writing in the *New Yorker*, dubbed him “the Marx Brother” and described his approach thus: “His favoured form of argument is paradox, and his favoured mode of delivery is a kind of vaudevillian overstatement, buttressed by the appearance of utter conviction.” That just about nails it – except that it overlooks the seriousness of Žižek’s thinking and the way he has managed to bring dialectics into the mainstream.

“Slavoj is unique in that he operates between two different and, for the most part, exclusive, places,” says the filmmaker Sophie Fiennes, who directed him in *The Pervert’s Guide to the Cinema*, a documentary that is as provocative as its title suggests, but in a strictly intellectual way. “He has been incredibly successful in taking theory out of the ivory tower of academia and into the world. He challenges the current fear of words like ‘ideology’ and, correctly in my view, sees this fear as a product of our information culture. It is also, he argues, a fear of what real, deep political thinking might generate in terms of unrest and discontent.”

Žižek, though, is also a political provocateur and an absurdist prankster. For one of his books, he wrote a (rejected) fictional autobiographical blurb: “In his free time, Žižek likes to surf the internet for child pornography and teach his small son how to pull the legs off spiders.”

As an avowed atheist, he sees no contradiction in arguing, as he did in *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian*

Legacy Worth Fighting For?, for a world in which Christians and Marxists unite against “the contemporary onslaught of vapid spirituality”. This kind of thing does not sit well with traditional analytical philosophers. Neither does his tendency to roam freely through high and low culture, illuminating the Lacanian undercurrents in Hitchcock as well as Hegel, Leibniz and David Lynch. (In his new book, *Living in the End Times*, there is a serious, and seriously funny, essay on *Kung Fu Panda*, the recent DreamWorks animation, which Žižek insists is “a somewhat naive, but nonetheless basically accurate, illustration of an important aspect of Lacanian theory.”)

Despite, or perhaps because of, his iconoclasm, his tendency to contradict himself, and his general political incorrectness – which may, one suspects, be more mischievous than heartfelt – Žižek is to today what Jacques Derrida was to the 80s: the thinker of choice for Europe’s young intellectual vanguard. This fills him with dismay. Unlike Derrida, though, he is determinedly left wing, if not in the traditional sense.

“I am what you might call abstractly anti-capitalist,” he says. “For instance, I am suspicious of the old leftists who focus all their hatred on the United States. What about Chinese neo-colonialism? Why are the left silent about that? When I say this, it annoys them, of course. Good! My instinct as a philosopher is that we are effectively approaching a multicentric world, which means we need to ask new, and for the traditional left, unpleasant questions.”

Unlike the dapper Derrida, Žižek is a sight for sore eyes: pale to the point of sallow, bearded, overweight and effortlessly eccentric. In the 2005 documentary, *Žižek!*, he gives director Astra Taylor a tour of his kitchen, opening drawers and cupboards containing not cutlery and china, but his socks, underpants, trousers and shirts. His day-to-day style – if that is not too extravagant a word – consists of several dull

variations on the proletarian outfit of ill-fitting T-shirt, baggy jeans, free airline socks – “Lufthansa are the best” – and lumpen footwear surely sold exclusively by a Slovenian shoeshop that has somehow missed the collapse of the Soviet bloc. (A Slovenian friend claims she recently saw him striding though Ljubljana in a T-shirt bearing the slogan “I Am Beautiful”; it’s difficult to imagine any other philosopher doing that.)

When he speaks, or writes, Žižek comes alive and his thoughts flow out in what seem like uncontrollably tangential torrents. His message, at least what one can decipher of it from his scattergun approach, is both politically pessimistic and philosophically elusive.

“If you ask me if I am an optimist, I would have to say no. I am not one of those old-fashioned communists who says, with that old tragi-comic Marxist satisfaction, at least history is on our side. No. If anything, the train of history is hurtling towards a precipice. The task of the leftist thinker today is, to quote Walter Benjamin, not to ride the train of history, but to pull the brake.”

In the jam-packed auditorium of the French Institute in Barcelona, Žižek speaks for more than two-and-a-half hours without once pulling the brake. His central thesis, also explored in his new book, *Living in the End Times*, is that “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero point.” Žižek, though, regards the idea of a central thesis in much the same way that the great jazz saxophonist John Coltrane regarded a melody – as something to riff off, extemporise on, and return to only when all associated sub-themes have been exhausted. This approach has its problems, not least the sense that a single Žižek riff could perhaps more profitably be extended into an entire lecture that might be both deeper and more illuminating. Tonight, for instance, he

barely addresses the reason why he resolutely believes in communism despite its shredded reputation.

“I don’t see any continuity with old-style communism in my approach. So why do I then call it communism?” he says when I ask him about it later. “As to its contents, though, the problem is always the same. It’s the enclosure of the commons. Marx was talking about land and property when he wrote about this, but today intellectual property is our commons, information is our commons. Something that Marx could not have predicted is taking place today: we are witnessing a strange regression to the same kind of enclosure of the commons, and people having to pay rent to people like Bill Gates for intellectual property.”

He seems a slave to the speed of his thoughts, his motor-mouth delivery barely keeping pace with the frenetic motion of his overcrowded mind. Silence, even a pause for breath, seems to make him intensely uncomfortable. So, too, does the company of strangers. “I avoid other people if I can. The ultimate nightmare for me is a party in my honour in the United States. Having to mix and talk, to strangers, maybe 20 or 30 people who want to have a debate or, even worse, polite conversation. My God, I hate this above all, but it is the nature of my tragic life.”

To witness Žižek in full flight is a wonderful and at times alarming experience, part philosophical tightrope-walk, part performance-art marathon, part intellectual roller-coaster ride. Most startling of all are the nervous tics that accompany his every utterance: the constant wiping of his beard and lips, the incessant dabbing of his furrowed brow, the closed eyes, clenched fists and the strange guttural noises that punctuate his speech. Then, there’s his lisp and his odd mispronunciations – in Barcelona, he kept using the term “a dollar cent”, which I assumed was an example of fiscal insider jargon until I realised he actually meant “adolescent”.

In my notebook, I map out the contours of his lecture in a series of headings. He begins with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the inevitable, in his view, rebirth of some kind of post-digital global communism, before touching on the writings of his beloved Hegel via the thoughts of Pascal. Suddenly though, in the first of many conceptual swerves, he is comparing the fall of communism to the end of the silent movie era which leads him into a riff on ideology as represented by “the disembodied voice” in Chaplin’s *City Lights* and Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. From there, we learn how the scene in *Fight Club* where Brad Pitt’s character punches himself in the face is a metaphor for revolution – “Before you beat the bosses, you must first beat yourself.”

By this point, the faithful are enthralled, the curious baffled and the traditionalists utterly bemused. Žižek, though, is just warming up. On and on he roams, through the French and Haitian revolutions, the Iraq war, Rumsfeld’s famous speech about “known unknowns”. (What about the “unknown knowns?”, asks Žižek. “This is exactly how capitalist ideology works; you follow an illusion without even knowing it.”) He cites the myth of Santa Claus as a supreme example of ideological indoctrination, dismisses Hollywood’s love of the Dalai Lama and “all this vague, insipid Buddhist bullshit”. He tells us how cynicism has become western culture’s current default mode, what Christianity can teach communism, and why God is essentially a narcissist. He touches on biogenics by way of the inevitable Richard Dawkins – “This kind of extreme atheism misses the point of religion entirely” – and illustrates how science has lost its monopoly on truth. Eventually he realises there is a limit to the collective power of the audience’s concentration, and he ends, as he began, with the communist revolution, informing us that the next one will succeed only if it embraces the essentially Christian, conservative social etiquette of politeness and deference. About 155 minutes after he started, he suddenly

stops, drenched in sweat and bathed in applause. On cue, an old Trotskyist stands up and takes him to task for betraying the cause....

“I hate these civilised debates followed by the questions from the audience,” he tells me the next morning. “So I keep going to subvert this boring ritual, but always there will be one old unreconstructed leftist who will stand up and accuse me of being a Stalinist. This,” he says, sighing, “is how it goes.”

The son of Slovenian communists, Žižek was born on 21 March 1949 in what was then Yugoslavia. His father was a state economist, his mother an accountant for a state-run business. I ask him if, growing up by the sea in Portorož, he had a happy childhood. “No. You could say, in a vulgar Freudian way, that I am the unhappy child who escapes into books. Even as a child, I was most happy being alone. This has not changed.”

As a teenager, living in the capital Ljubljana, he read voraciously and, he says, “did pretty well at high school though I completely ignored the curriculum”. At 15, he wanted to be a “movie director” but soon realised that his love of theory surpassed even his passion for film. At university in the 1960s, he was seduced by the new wave of French post-structuralist theorists – Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and, above all, Jacques Lacan. His postgraduate thesis was initially rejected for being too critical of Marx, and even though he amended it, he was deemed unfit to teach philosophy. “It is very ironic how professors who attacked me for not being a Marxist have now turned nationalist and attack me for being a Marxist. But, really, I don’t care.”

In the 1970s, Žižek made a living by translating works of philosophy and, at one point, took himself off to France for four years. He also did four years’ national service in the Yu-

goslavian army. He has no bitterness about that. “My formative experience was Yugoslav self-management socialism,” he says, “but Slovenia had communist rule without an official philosophy so it was superficially better than anywhere else.”

In 1978, he finally landed a job at what he calls “a marginal research institute”. It was, he says, “a kind of banishment but also a wonderful post. Just pure research.” He made contacts with philosophy institutions in France and the US, which stood him in good stead when he finally published his breakthrough book, 1989’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. “Without the communist oppression,” he says, quite seriously, “I am absolutely sure I would now be a local stupid professor of philosophy in Ljubljana.”

In 1990, he baffled his leftist friends and supporters by standing for election as a Liberal Democratic party candidate. He came fifth. “Politics is my tragedy,” he tells me dolefully. “It shadows me.”

When not travelling or teaching in America or Europe – he has held posts at Columbia, Princeton and is international director of humanities at Birkbeck College, London – Žižek lives alone in Ljubljana in a small apartment full of books, DVDs, classical music CDs – “I am a committed Wagnerian and, this will shock you, I even like Elgar.” Depending on whom you believe, he has been married and divorced two or three times. He is not saying. On April Fool’s day, 2005, he famously wed a 27-year-old former lingerie model and Lacanian scholar from Argentina. He has two sons, one in his early 30s, the other nine years old. When I leave him, he heads off to find an iPad as a present for his youngest child. “I am a hypocritical communist, no?”

In the flesh, Žižek is, if anything, more demonic and unhealthy-looking than his photographs, his matted hair and greying beard surrounding a face that looks like it’s never

seen sunlight. He suffers from diabetes, a condition not helped by his nomadic lifestyle and manic disposition. “I have exploited you,” he says by way of greeting, “in order to have a few hours free from the duties these Spanish leftists expect me to perform.”

He seems both eager and uncomfortable and ushers me quickly upstairs to the apartment that is his temporary home. As a cleaner flits about, I ask him if he is surprised at his popularity, particularly among the young.

“My God, I am the last person to know the answer to these questions,” he says, looking genuinely dismayed. “But, really, I am now thinking there is so much pressure on me to perform. I am getting really bored with it. I am a thinker, but people all the time want this kind of shitty political interventions: the books, the talks, the discussions and so forth.” He sighs and closes his eyes and seems to deflate before my eyes. “I will tell you my problem openly and for this my publisher will hate me. All the talk and the writing about politics, this is not where my heart is. No. I have been sidetracked. I really mean this.”

He opens a copy of *Living in the End Times*, and finds the contents page. “I will tell you the truth now,” he says, pointing to the first chapter, then the second. “Bullshit. Some more bullshit. Blah, blah, blah.” He flicks furiously through the pages. “Chapter 3, where I try to read Marx anew, is maybe OK. I like this part where I analyse Kafka’s last story and here where I use the community of outcasts in the TV series *Heroes* as a model for the communist collective. But, this section, the Architectural Parallax, this is pure bluff. Also the part where I analyse *Avatar*, the movie, that is also pure bluff. When I wrote it, I had not even seen the film, but I am a good Hegelian. If you have a good theory, forget about the reality.”

Why, then, given that he does not like most of his books and does not have any enthusiasm for the lecture circuit, does he not call a stop to the Žižek show? “I am doing that right now!” he shouts. “I am writing a mega-book about Hegel with regard to Plato, Kant and maybe Heidegger. Already, this Hegel book is 700 pages. It is a true work of love. This is my true life’s work. Even Lacan is just a tool for me to read Hegel. For me, always it is Hegel, Hegel, Hegel,” he says, sighing again. “But people just want the shitty politics.”

Reviewing *In Defence of Lost Causes*, the British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton concluded that it was “a frenetic, eclectic parody of intellectual scholarship, by one so assured in his grasp of the finer points of Kafka or John le Carré that he can afford to ham it up a little.” Only time will tell if Žižek is serious about becoming utterly serious, but if he devotes the rest of his brilliant, brainy, slightly bonkers, utterly singular life to Hegel, and Hegel alone, it will be a great gain for pure philosophy and a great loss to radical, risk-taking political theory.

“He is very much a thinker for our turbulent, high speed, information-led lives,” says Sophie Fiennes, “precisely because he insists on the freedom to stop and think hard about who you are as an individual in this fragmented society. We need a radical hip priest and Slavoj is that in many ways.” The very thought, I suspect, would have him quaking in his proletarian boots – and free airline socks.

~

#4
The Day After*

* “The Day After: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek” by Robert Eikmeyer;
Fillip 5 — Spring 2007; See <https://fillip.ca/content/the-day-after>.

~

*In the conversation that follows, Robert Eikmeyer sits down with Slavoj Žižek to discuss biopolitics, democracy as fetish, globalization as fate, principled opportunism, efficiency of masks, liberal communism, multitude, Vladimir Lenin, and the legacy of Karl Marx. This interview is excerpted from a German translation to be published in Jonathan Meese/Slavoj Žižek: *Ernteschach dem Dämon*, edited by Robert Eikmeyer for Christoph Keller Editions & JRP|Ringier, Zurich, 2007.*

~

Robert Eikmeyer: *In your essays on Lenin, you claim that between February and October of 1917 Russia was the most democratic country in Europe. Perhaps this is why Lenin insisted that revolution was necessary.*

Slavoj Žižek: I think that Lenin was correct in thinking that it could not last. It was magical between February and October of that year. But it was clear that sooner or later it was going to come to an end. For me, this is what defines a truly revolutionary situation. In a reformist situation you have to be realist. You can't have it all. You fight for what you can. But sometimes the situation is such that you have to aim at more even to save the little bit of what you have. And I think that was true for Russia in 1917. It was a truly revolutionary situation.

In many of your books you mention the paradox of forced choice. My understanding of this is that the so-called freedom of choice reflects the fact that we are unable to choose. Is your idea that Western capitalist democracy is unable to achieve liberty and justice?

Here we have to be more precise. I am very much against this reductive Marxist criticism of formal democratic choices that do not in reality constitute any choice. Jacques Rancière

has shown us that, in principle, Marx was correct. The reality of human rights is not as neutral as we might think. In fact, they have covertly privileged man and his property. So to say that this universality of human rights—a standard Ideologiekritik—is actually a mask that privileges particular interests. Rancière acknowledges that human rights are a mask. But let's not forget that the mask is never only a mask. A mask has an efficiency of its own and can create a certain dialectic that can produce new possibilities.

We can look at the examples of the Women's Rights Movement and the Haitian Revolution when women and blacks asked, "Why not us?" The Haitian Revolution couldn't have happened without the French Revolution. My friend Peter Hallward is writing a book about the Haitian Revolution. This event is really a weltgeschichtliches phenomenon. According to Susan Buck-Morss, the Haitian Revolution was a model reference for [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel when he was writing *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*. Hegel was reading reports in the French press about Haiti.

While socialism may criticize the false democracy of human rights, the very space for this criticism was opened up by bourgeois democracy. To make freedom informal, you must first proclaim a formal principle of freedom.

I would like to organize a colloquium on the notion of dictatorship of the proletariat. Why dictatorship? For me, the issue is not dictatorship versus democracy. Rather, it has more to do with the need to be aware of how every democracy has a dictatorial aspect. The logic of power and the state apparatus has its own inertia. Another point is that we may democratically have a dialogue, but there is often violence in the background. It doesn't matter how open the field is. For me to democratically acknowledge you, I need to enforce upon you a certain field consisting of rules and regulations. We need to be aware that underneath every partial political

struggle is a much more radical struggle at work. It's not a struggle of who will win within the field, but rather who will determine the field.

I know that it's problematic to use the term proletariat today, but it stands for the idea that the ultimate emancipatory subjects are those who are members of a community or state but who don't have a determinate place or identity within it. I think that all radical emancipatory projects must speak from this position of an unprivileged element that is somehow supposed to stand in for universality. This is the opposite of today's biopolitics or this post-political regulation of life that respects difference. People think I'm crazy when I say that today we have a choice between democratic biopolitics or the dictatorship of the proletariat. I think that democratic biopolitics can be genuinely democratic, but the whole space is that of a democratically tolerant apartheid where each group has its own way of living. Here, the radical emancipatory universal impetus is threatened.

There was an opening during the years before and after the Iranian Revolution when even the Ayatollah Khomeini made reference to the proletariat. He didn't want to say "working class" or "masses" so he resuscitated an older word meaning "those who are oppressed and downtrodden." I think that we need to accept this notion of biopolitics as the fundamental coordinate of today's politics. Biopolitics includes the brutal forms of regimentation that exist in our world as well as the desire to prevent human suffering. The old leftist paradigms of the communist and social democratic welfare states is lost. What came after that—what I ironically call liberal communism—doesn't cover everything. A more radical emancipatory leftist way of thinking and acting needs to be reinvented. And this is what one should struggle for today.

You have referred to democracy as the master signifier of today's global capitalism.

My source is always Hollywood. Isn't it paradoxical how even Hollywood films can afford to be anti-capitalist? Think about the standard conspiracy thrillers in Hollywood featuring some bad mega-corporation. The ideology of these films is that our societies are open enough for us to strike back. Have you seen *United 93* (2006)? It's about the hijacked plane that gets grounded by its passengers. The film gives you this hope that you can strike back. A leftist critic wrote something very ingenious. He suggested that something should have been done to make this film really shattering. He said keep the same story but without the redemptive moment when they strike back. In this way, we would be confronted with the true despair of the situation.

Democracy has been used as an ultimate reference. I'm referring to this on a deeper level than the standard idea that Americans are imposing their form of democracy. And here I'm even much more cynical and open than some of my leftist friends who have accused me of being pro-American and who automatically believe that whatever the United States does is bad. I'm talking about the way that democracy imposes itself today as this master signifier organizing the whole. This prevents us from seeing our true constraints and limitations. It gives us a false hope. The point is not to blame democracy, but to show how democracy functions today.

Globalization started to speak the language of fate when socialism and the welfare state were abandoned and disintegrated as alternatives in the early 1990s. Our only options were to either accommodate it or resist it. If you resist it you pay the price—you're excluded. You go bankrupt, or whatever.

Why have you suggested that it is necessary to subvert Marx's thesis on Feuerbach and his notion that "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it"?

It's important to be specific. Do you know who gave me this idea? Marx. In 1870, Marx wrote a very worried letter to Engels. The Paris Commune looked like a utopian prospect at this time and some thought that the European revolution was around the corner. In his letter, Marx states, "But wait a minute. I haven't yet finished Capital. Can't they wait?" This is the Marx that I like: "Fuck revolution, I want to finish my book." We should learn from Marx and his idea to give more time to theory. This discourse of urgency is more and more predominant today. Even rhetorically I find it disgusting. I hate attending lectures where some social critic says something like, "Are you aware that for every word that you used in your speech, ten children died of hunger in Africa?" or "Do you know that for every sentence that you uttered, a woman was brutally raped in this country?" I'm deeply suspicious of this pseudo-sense of urgency. I think it's the same as "act, so that you don't have to think."

Today, more than ever, we need time to think. This doesn't mean that we don't protest or do what's possible. But let's not behave as if everything is clear. "We just need to act." But do what? Act how? Here I'm deeply skeptical. I don't think we even have a really convincing theory of where we are today. We have these traditional theories that are either liberal theories asserting that "globalism is just capitalism doing better" or Marxist theories claiming that "it's just the same thing going on." Then we have these post-theories and theorists who are suggesting that something new is happening. Yet, I don't think that we even know where we are. New forms are clearly taking shape. We only have to look at

the situation in China today, where a new sub-species of capitalism has emerged.

I think that this discourse of urgency is not only unsubsversive in relation to capitalism, but it fits in perfectly with what I mockingly refer to as *Liberalkommunismus*. Late capitalist humanitarians like George Soros and Bill Gates have contributed to this discourse of aid. I have argued that the United States should intervene. I don't want to support the United States with this. But when critics of America—including Alain Badiou—continue to talk about diminishing suffering, what do they want? We have horrible examples of human suffering in Africa. I understand that there are those situations where the suffering is so terrible that help is accepted even if it comes from the devil. What interests me is not this simplistically moralistic opposition to United States, but the properly tragic dimension of it as an example.

There is also the war in Iraq. Let's imagine George W. Bush being arrested and tried in a 1930s Stalinist trial. The charges against him would be clear. While Iraq was once a kind of an obstacle against Iran, the former is now more or less being politically delivered to the latter. The only conclusion for a good Vyshinsky-type prosecutor would be that Bush is an Iranian agent.

I'm not just moralistically attacking the United States. I'm just saying how Americans will pay the price for what is going on in Iraq. I agree with those liberals and some intelligent conservatives who claim that, in the long term, Bush represents a catastrophe for the United States—even for the interest of capital. I think that Al Gore would have been a much better president in serving the interests of the ruling class [laughs].

I think that we should criticize the Right without adopting a cheap moralism of the Left that simply masks impotence. Saying, "let's stick to our principles," can be the lowest form

of opportunism. It indicates that you are not really ready to confront the new. Something really new is emerging today. It's still capitalism, but what kind of capitalism I don't agree with the details of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's analysis. I think that it's more a literary theory of anti-capitalism. And I think that it's totally unworkable. Their multitude politics are approaching a deadlock. No wonder Negri is doing some crazy things. Now he likes to praise the emancipatory potentials of late digital speculative capitalism. When he was being interviewed in Brazil, he said that the most advanced capitalism is practically already communism. His idea was that we should join it and at a certain moment shift it a little. I don't agree with this.

But there are two good things that Hardt and Negri are doing. First, we finally have a theory which, at least in a limited way, is a theory related to some kind of large-scale political movement. This is something to celebrate after two or three decades of the hegemony of the late Frankfurt School and the French deconstructionists. There was a certain kind of Marxism that was always at its best when things went wrong, resulting in a perfect Marxist theory of why things went so wrong. This is the first thing. The second thing is that Hardt and Negri are aware that today's capitalism is something new. They call it "empire." I don't agree with their solutions. I don't even agree with the way they formulate the problems. But at least they're dealing with the right problems and the prospect of some kind of collective subjectivity, and collective action.

Maybe the situation here is similar to that one of Lenin in 1917 in that we are also approaching a deadlock. For example, today's capitalism is already a multitude capitalism.

People ask me, "But what's wrong today?" We may have a relatively prosperous liberal democracy, but every day I read all about torture and apartheid. Both are signs of our

time. I am pessimistic. Even with the current freedoms that we enjoy, the system will have to curtail them further. Some claim that I exaggerate but I think that a couple of things will have to happen. The first is that the United States will have to renounce its goal to spread democracy. I think that the truth of globalization is that the more commodities circulate, the more populations will be prevented to circulate. The problem is not that we want more. And the problem is that it will be either more or much less. I don't think that the present model of democracy, with its relative levels of freedom, can survive for very long.

But capitalism has this tremendous regenerative power. Don't you think that it's unstoppable?

Here I remain an old fashioned Marxist in that I think the inner tensions of capitalism are approaching a point of explosion. I have a whole series of reasons for this. Not all of them have to do with ecology. I don't think that this external shock theory works like the secret hope of some ecologists.

No, it's more that capitalism will solve these ecological problems.

Let's imagine a mega-catastrophe: Europe is slowly being covered by water and we are forced to move to the North Pole. My prediction is that this will be turned into an extremely productive new field of capitalist investments. I don't believe in the theory of external shock. What interests me more are these problems. This is today's dogma. The property is not so much the property of material means of production but knowledge, patents, and intellectual property. But for me the very form of property is approaching its limits. I simply think that capitalist ideology will no longer work at that point. Even if there are signs of limitation, it is a sobering step to say that capitalism is indestructible. To admit this is at least the first step towards getting rid of this simplistic and moralistic reliance on the old Marxist hope that

capitalism will just ruin itself. What greater proof is there than China? If there was an attempt to really go to the end, it was Mao's Cultural Revolution. And that's now its objective result. It is the most explosive and thriving capitalist economy that you can imagine now.

In the end, I think we should talk about the alternatives to capitalism. The present situation in the EU is similar to the days of the Communist Manifesto. There is a holy alliance that fears the ghost of an alternative. How would this alternative look today? You describe democracy as a fetish to cover up or blur the current social hierarchy. The alternative is not communism, is it?

Names are open here. I'm even ready to call it communism. But what does it mean? I'm ready to strategically stick to the word "communism" but mostly for negative reasons. I want to signal the necessity of a more radical step. Sometimes you have to adopt a position, not for what it is in itself, but to create an open space that exists only as a negative option. This is why I have written about progressive Eurocentrism. Today we have two global models: American-style capitalism and Asian-style capitalism. I don't want to live in a world where these are the only choices. So Europe interests me more in a negative way. I don't have such a great trust in underdeveloped countries. I think that many of them desire to enter some kind of exploitative symbiosis with the super developed countries. I think that if something new emerges, it will be from post-industrial countries that were once the centre of industrial production but are now still living in the shadows. I am thinking of the ones that haven't yet found a way to fit into the newly emerging global constellation. This is for me the interesting thing about Europe. Obviously, with the way globalization is progressing at the mo-

ment, Europe is the loser. But I think that all historical progress goes like this. The loser has to be reinvented in order to redefine the global coordinates.

Democracy today works like a fetish that prevents us from seeing something. In this sense, democracy does not need to be rejected but questioned instead. What does democracy mean? How does it function today? It's crucial to somehow confront and question this pseudo-postmodern ideology of "emerging properties" and "spontaneous self-organization." It is more than obvious that this functions as ideology. But this is only one side of it. The other side is the unheard-of strengthening of state apparatuses. The United States has emerged as an extremely strong organized state apparatus which is engaged in a very global project of war and terror. It is necessary for us to break this pseudo-postmodern spell of self-organization and instead rehabilitate the logic of large collective actions. Why not even collective discipline? I think we are all too infected with this postmodern liberal ideology that posits collective discipline as proto-fascist.

My only optimism comes from my pessimism. What I am saying is that capitalism is generating tensions and catastrophic potentials within its own field. It will not be able to maintain control indefinitely. As a result, we will be forced to act in a utopian way. True utopia is not: "Oh, we're doing well but why don't we dream of doing even better" For me, true utopia is born out of being in a totally desperate situation where you simply cannot survive within the existing coordinates and it becomes a matter of survival to invent something new. I think that we will be forced into this. But, of course, that's no guarantee that the result will be positive.

I think that another crucial thing for the Left is to overcome this fascination with the revolutionary event. Here I am referring to this idea of the event as being a carnivalesque liberation that takes places before things go back to normal.

What interests me more and more is the day after. The only measure of the greatness of the event is how it succeeds in structuring everyday life.

For me, the truly interesting part is where failure takes place. The real battle was after the October Revolution when the most elementary rituals of everyday life had to be reinvented. But again, I think the situation is very dark. It cannot go on indefinitely. There will be explosion, but hopefully this will push us into something.

~

#5

“The Pandemic is Only a Test for the Real Crisis!”*

* “Slavoj Žižek: ‘The pandemic is only a test for the real crisis’”; by Tomasz Kurianowicz, 2 December 2020; *Berliner Zeitung*; See <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/en/slavoj-iek-the-pandemic-is-only-a-test-for-the-real-crisis-li.123096>

~

*Slavoj Žižek (*1949) is one of the world's most famous and influential philosophers. The Slovene became known through his writings on Jacques Lacan and psychoanalysis and his critical work on society and capitalism, which he likes to process through the lens of pop culture, often referring to Hegel, Marx and Lacan. Žižek is a professor at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana and the director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London. We spoke to the philosopher over Skype about his book Pandemic!: Covid-19 Shakes the World - which came out in Germany in November.*

~

Star philosopher Slavoj Žižek has been pondering over Covid-19. He wants to be vaccinated yesterday and sees this as a historical turning point.

~

Tomasz Kurianowicz: *Mr. Zizek, where are you right now?*

Slavoj Žižek: *I am at home in my apartment in Ljubljana. We currently have up to 50 Covid-19 deaths per day in Slovenia. If you relate that to the size of my country, we have one of the worst death rates in the world.*

How are you personally?

I am in a depressed state. This whole isolation will continue until spring. In addition, the irrational resistance of many people leaves me speechless. Weren't there protests in Germany too? Half of the population in Croatia said they did not want to be vaccinated. How is it in Germany?

The majority want to be vaccinated. I think around 40 per cent are skeptical.

Well, the vaccinated will be protected from the non-vaccinated.

Are you going to get vaccinated as soon as you can?

Immediately, yes. Why not? I'll get the vaccination quickly. I am 71 years old, have diabetes and relatively high blood pressure. I fulfill all the points on the list that make you vulnerable.

How have the last six months been for you? Do you spend all the time in Ljubljana, in Slovenia?

Yes. The country is in a lockdown. In August it was a little more relaxed when I went to the Slovenian coast for a few days. But I wasn't even close to the sea. I stayed in the apartment. Still: I thought it would get worse in isolation, but actually it's okay.

It is easy for me to work. I can do everything on the laptop. I don't believe these people who now say that social isolation is so terrible. One of my American friends wrote: "There's only physical isolation right now. The price is that we are totally overrouted socially." That's right! We are more socially connected than we have been for a long time. We are controlled by the state. The authorities examine where we are going, what we are doing. The state asks how we are, whether we have a cold. And think of all the digital changes! I have never used the phone or the computer as much as I do today. I keep checking my e-mail. I really hate that. I actually like to be alone. But we are much easier to reach through the home office, even in private. I've never felt this connected before. What I really miss is authentic isolation, real loneliness.

Do you think there are cultural differences in how the virus spreads? It is said that the French greet one another with kisses and therefore transmit the virus faster. What's it like in the Slavic countries? Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia are currently the worst in the world.

It's all paradoxical. In the beginning, the Czechs and the Poles were the world champions in fighting the virus. I don't know what happened in the summer so that all of that changed. At first France was also very efficient. Then the numbers exploded. Now Germany has problems. I am very careful to cite cultural characteristics as reasons for the growth of infections. At the beginning my leftwing friends told me that post-socialist states were fighting the virus better and were showing more solidarity with one another than Western, classic neoliberal countries. However, this is no longer the case today. In all honesty: I can't really explain the infection process.

At the moment you could say that China is doing a really good job. There are hardly any infections. After all, it's a socialist country with strong control mechanisms.

Yes, the Chinese are really good. But that doesn't have to mean anything either! There is also a Western-oriented country that is doing almost as well as China. I'm talking about Taiwan. Australia and New Zealand are also doing very well. What I want to say: cultural clichés don't help with the analysis. In Germany the situation is worsening day by day. There are many more deaths, although Germany is a disciplined society. And what do the leaders do? Instead of admitting the complexity of the situation, guilty parties are constantly being named. First, it was the young parties. Then it was the restaurant owners. Now it's the offices and workplaces. What is frustrating is how little we still know about the virus.

What do you think: how will things go in the next few months? In your book Pandemic! you paint a gloomy picture.

I spoke to my Latin American friends who were attempting to do a psychological reading of the pandemic. You rightly pointed out that the first lockdown was still pleasant. Many saw it as a kind of vacation. They wanted to spend time

with the kids, relax a bit, shut down their minds. Even the US expert Dr. Fauci assumed that the virus might be defeated in the summer. The first lockdown was a pleasant trauma.

And now?

Most economists I trust tell me that economic conditions will be dire in the spring of 2021. People suspect that. Many advocate a lockdown light. But didn't summer 2020 show that it didn't work? Lockdown light is an illusion! We should get rid of the idea that this middle ground works. The only thing that works is a hard lockdown - and only if the number of infected people is still manageable. Australia shows how it is done. I admire that country. There were very small outbreaks in Melbourne. The city was then put into tough lockdown for a month. The economy is now working as well as it was before. Vietnam is doing it right as well. Another success story. The early, hard lockdown not only works, it is also the best solution economically.

The summer of 2020 was also the summer of the protests. How did you experience it?

The Black Lives Matter protests mainly took place in the USA. I was afraid that the protesters wanted to get rid of Kant and Hegel. Kant made a few statements that one would describe as racist today. An American friend who participated in the demonstrations told me that the left are happy to finally be able to participate in an old-school struggle again, in which it is clear who the enemy is - the police, racism and so on. For a moment you could forget about Covid-19 and pretend normality was working again. There was a perverse lust involved.

Did you wonder why the leftwing protesters didn't take the virus seriously?

It's the same today! It's strange that the numbers are much worse than in spring and that people still don't take the situation seriously. They go shopping. The streets are full. It's kind of a strategy of denial. I miss a healthy panic. I think people are desperate. They register that an epoch is coming to an end. The third wave will be a wave of mental illness. That will increase dramatically. This can already be observed in the psychological state of children and adolescents. They are socially isolated and depressed. Nobody gives them a clear outlook. Sure, the vaccine is coming. But as the sociologist Bruno Latour said: This pandemic is only a small sample of the real crisis that will come later: other viruses, global catastrophes and, above all, global warming.

Can one still hope?

One can hope, but in a paradoxical way! I advocate a courage of hopelessness. If we want to hope, then we should accept that our old life is over. We should invent a new normal. Our basic relationship with reality has changed - how we see the world, how we interact with it. Our relationship with reality has fallen apart radically. The sooner we admit that, the better.

What do you think of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben? You write about him in your book. Agamben thinks we should not be intimidated by the virus.

That's right. He is against the safeguards. Agamben recently wrote a text entitled "When The House is on Fire". He admits that the house is on fire, but at the same time he says: "We can only observe the catastrophe. If we try to change it, we will only make it worse." He says that we should live like the people in the Middle Ages - continue to live as if there were no danger. That means meeting friends, having coffee in the afternoon, pretending everything is okay. Even when we know it's over. Agamben says: "This is the only dignified way to die."

What do you think?

I don't think so. If you think like that, as a leftist, you quickly get close to Trump. The rightwingers go out into the street and say that wearing a mask is like wearing a muzzle. I find that interesting. That's why I say that a crack has gone through our consciousness. Agamben wants us to ignore the crack and live as before. That would mean that the pandemic would spread and make even more people sick. I don't think it would be like Agamben says - that people would die, but society as a whole would preserve its social dignity. It would rather be that society would fall into a despicable barbarity. You only have to look at the USA: how many people there are currently buying firearms? 20 million or so. There would be more brutality and unrest. We would fall into a kind of barbaric, medieval state if we followed Agamben and ignored the virus. You know who argues like Agamben?

Who?

Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of Trump. You know what he said? It was beautiful, in a cynical sense. He said: Trump got Covid from the doctors and gave it back to the people.

Agamben also criticises the wearing of masks. He says, "The tyrant is faceless."

He refers to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who recognises the infinity of the self in the face. By obscuring the face, this would now be impossible. Because one does not see the abyss opposite, the absolute. I think that is untrue. I speak now as a Freudian. In psychoanalysis, the face is completely irrelevant. The face-to-face conversation is always only the preliminary stage in analysis. In psychoanalysis, there must be no eye contact. Freud made it clear that this is the only way to illuminate the real abyss of the "I". I would say: okay, there are masks. But the ultimate mask is the face

itself. Our face lies. The eyes may tell the truth. But not the face. You can still see the eyes, despite the mask.

Are you not at all afraid of state control?

The state controls one way or another. China openly controls. The USA controls in the same way, only differently. The Americans live only in the illusion of being free. And what happens now? People are so afraid of the corona app. They say, "The state controls me." I always say: Are you kidding me? All the big states have been doing it for 10 or 20 years. China does it, Israel too, of course. An Israeli secret service agent told me that all conversations in Israel are recorded and evaluated. Julian Assange confirmed it: Facebook, Google, all these companies have worked with the American security forces. In view of this surveillance apparatus, it is absurd that people are now protesting against a comparatively harmless corona app.

You can't understand the opponents of the measures at all?

There is one good thing: everyday life is currently making us philosophers, albeit stupid philosophers. I think it's great that there are people, perfectly normal average people, who now protest against wearing masks and compare masks with muzzles and themselves with dogs. After all, they are thinking - perhaps for the first time in their lives - about dignity and humanity. One can only think that is great. The pandemic has brought out the best and the worst in us. Many doctors and nurses risk their lives saving the lives of others. I think these are examples of pure beauty. Doctors risk their lives without asking for applause. To quote Kant, "You can, for you shall." They just do it. That is why I say that our dignity is not threatened by the protective measures and masks. On the contrary: these measures are proof of our humanity.

Are you optimistic?

About the future?

Yes, in your book you hope for a “disaster communism” which would be the antidote to disaster capitalism. You write: the state should not only take a much more active role and organise the production of essential items such as masks, test kits and respirators, confiscate hotels and other resorts, ensure the living conditions of those who have recently become unemployed, and so on. It should do all this by abandoning the mechanisms of the market.

It will either get much worse or much better. That is entirely up to us. Covid-19 is not going to just disappear. We will have to act in a new way, despite vaccinations. But my biggest concern is something else. Have you noticed the temperature in Siberia? In July, temperatures of over 35 degrees were measured there. We should really be afraid of that.

~

#6
On Culture and Other Crimes*

* “On Culture and Other Crimes: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”; by Kerry Chance, Anthropology, University of Chicago; *Exchange*; <https://ucexchange.uchicago.edu/interviews/zizek.html>.

~

Slavoj Žižek, psychoanalytic philosopher and cultural critic at the Institute of Sociology in Slovenia, has taught all over the world, most recently at the University of Chicago. His first public lecture at Chicago, entitled “The Ignorance of Chicken, or, Who Believes What Today”, looked every bit the rock show. Crowds stretched across the main campus quad, a ‘merch’ table featured his latest book *The Parallax*

View, and as the lecture began with crowds still waiting outside, people climbed through the windows of the packed auditorium. While at Chicago, Žižek also taught a seminar as the Critical Inquiry Visiting Professor on topics ranging from Lacanian ethics, political correctness, habit in Hegel, the Big Other, Stalin, theology, politics and the role of the intellectual. Žižek has written innumerable articles and is the author of more than fifty books, including *The Sublime*

Object of Ideology, *The Ticklish Subject*, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, *On Belief* and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* - to name just a few that have contributed to his widespread popularity in and outside the academy. Here, Žižek speaks to *Exchange* about culture, Lacan, cognitive science, neoliberalism and projects for contemporary anthropology.

~

I.

Kerry Chance: In class and in your public lectures here at Chicago, you’ve frequently talked about culture and have done so in two ways: first, in terms of belief as you have theorized it in your earlier work, and secondly in terms of Hegel’s notion of habit. How are you thinking culture in Lacanian terms?

Slavoj Žižek: Traditionally, Lacanians like to identify culture simply as the symbolic system, within which there is a

linguistically limited horizon of meaning, but I think two things should be added.

First, what is for me the zero-sum of culture, if I improvise, is what to do about embarrassing excesses. When somebody does something embarrassing, burps after eating for example, culture is how you react to it in a polite way. To be very vulgar, all seduction rituals are the cultured way of dealing with the fact that people would like to copulate with each other. Now, someone will say, "wait a minute, to feel something as embarrassment, culture must already be there." No, I don't think so. Somehow, embarrassment is first. In other words, we have to presuppose an excess, again, embarrassment apropos of something disgusting, non-social, or an excess of obscenity or enjoyment.

So again, this would be the first specification: to put it in bombastic Lacanian terms, first the excess of the real, embarrassment, shock - and culture is how you deal with it. This is why Lacan in a nice, tasteless way put it that one measure of the passage from the animal to the human kingdom is what to do with shit. He always liked this example, that an animal by definition just shits wherever, for humans shit is always an embarrassment. It always amused me when I was a boy that, at circuses, you have animals, horses and especially elephants that take a big shit and usually you see people hidden behind them ready to make the shit quickly disappear. Animals don't care. The problem with humans is what to do with this embarrassment.

The second thing that interests me, which is a much more concrete historical analysis, is why there is such an obsession with culture today. Why is it that today not only do we have culture studies but everything - and by everything I mean at least the humanities and for some people even the hard sciences - has become a subspecies of cultural studies? In the hard sciences, people will say following Thomas Kuhn's *The*

Structure of Scientific Revolutions, their history is the history of culture, of paradigm shifts and so on. Everything becomes culture.

How is this linked to your notion of belief?

Again, this is linked to my notion of belief, to the idea that something is changing in the status of belief. Today, the predominant form is a belief that culture is the name of a belief, which is no longer taken seriously. Culture means, for example, I am a Jew, and although I don't think there was a stupid god coming down and shouting some stupid things to people on Mount Sinai, I nonetheless say out of respect for my lifestyle or whatever, I don't eat pork. This is culture.

To complicate things even further, I think two traps should be avoided here. Among other things, I have tried to focus my work on one of these traps in the last few years. First, it is too simple to say, "does this mean once before people were taking culture seriously." No. Not only conservatives, but even progressives like to criticize the present, evoking, "oh, but once it was different, things were more authentic." No, it wasn't. It is not that before people did believe. If anything, they believe more today. It's just that the modality of distance was different. Before, it wasn't a matter of belief. Rather, it was a feeling of being more attached to, and having more respect for, the power of appearance of ritual as such. Something changed today at that level, I think. So paradoxically these external signs of belief - "nobody takes anything seriously" - if anything, points to how it's more difficult today for us to trust the symbolic ritual, the symbolic institution. But again, there is no time when people 'really meant it.'

What I know from anthropology, I may be wrong, is that all the great errors started with a phenomenological evolutionary illusion. I think when researchers found a certain gap between reality and beliefs or between form and content,

they always thought, “ah, we have a later descendent state of evolution, there must have been some point earlier when people meant it.” The dream is that there was an original moment when people really ‘meant it.’ An example I know from my Marxist past, in anthropology you must know him from the 19th century, Lewis Henry Morgan. I remember from my youth that Engels among other classical Marxists relied on him. Morgan found that in some tribes all the men in one tribe referred to the women of the other tribe as their ‘sister wives.’ From this he deduced, that this is the linguistic remainder of some primordial form of marriage. The incest prohibition already in place, you were not allowed to have sex with women in your tribe, but only with the women in another tribe. The women were exchanged in a block, collectively. It was basic incest, but regulated. The way I heard it, anthropologists later proved that there never was this nice regulated collective orgy. That is to say, the wrong conclusion was that from this name ‘sister wives’ you conclude that there was a point when it was really meant. No, the gap is here from the very beginning.

What fascinates me in this example also is the logic of institution. By institution, I mean how, in order for something to function as a belief, you cannot simply say, “okay, let’s pretend.” In my book, I think the Ticklish Subject (Verso, 1999), I have a wonderful anecdote, which for me again tells about what culture is as an institution. It is a crazy story about elections some fifteen years ago in my country, Slovenia. An ex-friend of mine, who was a candidate told me - okay, he had to do these democratic games like kissing the asses of local constituents - an old lady came to him and said if he wanted her vote he would have to do her a favor. She was obsessed with the idea that something was wrong with her house number (number 24, not even 13), that this number brings misfortune. There was a burglary twice, lightning struck the house, and she’s convinced that it’s because of the

number. She said, can she arrange with the city authorities to change the number, to 23a or something, just not 24. He said to her, "But lady, why even go through all this mess? Why don't you simply paint a new number and change it yourself?" She said, "No, it must be done properly." Though it was only superstition, to be effective it must be done properly through the institution. There must be a minimum reification to take the game seriously.

Is this a project for anthropology?

This returns to another aspect of your question. That is, another lesson of all these notions of culture is the irreducibility of alienation. We should abandon this old phenomenological - and for some people, Marxist motive - that every institutionalization means reification in two directions, the past and the future. For the past, it is the idea that we should try to reconstitute a moment when it was not alienated, when it was 'meant seriously.' For the future, it is to isolate the moment, to dream or to work toward the moment when this transparency and authenticity of meaning will be reinstalled. No, we should also see the liberating aspect of it.

To return here to what I know of anthropology, when anthropology about half a century ago shifted from "let's observe the mating rituals in Southern Samoa or South Pacific" or whatever, to focusing on our daily life rituals. You remember Florida, the scandal elections and the first Bush victory. A guy somewhere from Africa wrote an article imitating that sort of journalistic report, you know, an enlightened Western journalist goes to Africa, where they allegedly have some election and he mocks the election, "ha, ha, what corruption." Well, this guy wrote about Florida in the same way, saying there are votes disappearing, the brother of the candidate is the local government, you know, describing Florida as a provincial Banana Republic case of cheating. It was a wonderful result. It was anthropology at its best.

I think this is what interests me, the anthropology of our lives. Not only is this a politically correct procedure - in this exceptional case, I use the term 'politically correct' in a positive way - but also I find it always a subversive procedure. The starting point is always the implicit racism of the anthropologist: you look at a foreign culture, you study them with this detachment, "oh what strange rituals" and so on. The phenomenological humanist temptation would be to say, "No, in this engaged participating fieldwork, we should immerse ourselves, become one of them to really understand them." This series of presuppositions we should reject. What does it mean that we should be one of them to understand them? They usually don't understand themselves - isn't it the basic experience that people as a rule follow rituals that are just a part of tradition, which they themselves don't get? I think the anthropology of our lives is the true breakthrough from this implicitly racist attitude of studying the eccentricity of others, to adopt the same view of ourselves. It is much better as a double alienation.

This is connected to another central motive of my work, this obsession with not only rules but also habits, which tell you how to obey or disobey rules. Especially social prohibitions never mean what they appear to mean. This is an incredibly wealthy topic of ideology for contemporary anthropology. Why is it so important? Precisely because we live in an era of so-called post-ideology. I claim that at precisely this level, ideology has survived.

My interest in anthropology, what always fascinated me was people never mean what they say and in order to be a part of a culture you have to get this gap. There is an important role of obscenities here. Let me tell you a comic adventure. This weekend, I was with Fred Jameson at Duke and there Fred invited an old, very distinguished Argentine gentleman - I will not tell you the name it's too embarrassing -

because of my wife, who is also Argentinean. This gentleman, you would be afraid of using the f-word in front of him, so I said to myself, okay, can I make him say something dirty? And I did seduce him, you know how? The specificities of Argentine Spanish are very different from say Venezuelan Spanish or Mexican Spanish. So, I told him how I tried to learn Spanish, and then I made my first step into obscenity. I told him I knew the word ‘cojo,’ which in Spanish simply means ‘to catch’ something, like “how do I catch a taxi?” Now, this word will be important because I told him I heard somewhere in Argentina there is a series of jokes, where a stupid Spaniard comes to Argentina and asks, “Where do I catch a taxi?” In Argentinean Spanish, ‘catch’ here means the f-word. Then, the distinguished gentleman smiled briefly and I saw that he knew a really dirty example. And I like it how he broke down. After two or three minutes, he broke down and said, “It’s against my nature but I must tell you Argentines have an even more dirty joke...” which is that a Spanish guy says, “How do you catch a cab?,” which means to fuck a taxi, and the Argentine says, “Well, the only practical way I can imagine is the exhaust pipe.” I was so glad that this distinguished gentleman, that I made him say this joke. For me, this is culture. For me, it is not a violation, but the closest you can get to authentic communication.

II.

I wanted to talk about Lacanian ethics and about Lacan’s injunction to be consistent with your desire -

The thing about Lacan’s injunction is what if your desire is not consistent? In other words, the way I read Lacan is that more and more in his late work he devalues desire, desire itself as not an ethical category. The Lacan of the fifties and sixties, it is the ethics of desire to not compromise your desire. But later, more and more he emphasizes that desire is a

priori something hypocritical, inconsistent. In this sense, desire mostly thinks with a secret code that you will not get, the whole economy is to avoid the realization of desire, which is why Lacan understood that fantasy is a realization of desire. He doesn't mean realization of desire in the sense of getting what you desire, like I want to eat strawberry cakes and I in the fantasy imagine myself realizing it. For Lacan, it is to stage a scene where that desire as such emerges. What would be a nicer example, let's say I have a desire to eat strawberries but as always with desires, you have this suspicion, what if I will be disappointed. A fantasy would be, for example, I am there sleeping and somebody brings me strawberries, then I taste one, then I stop and it goes on. This 'going on' - I never fully have the strawberries - is fantasy. You don't realize desire - getting your dirty mouth full of strawberries - you just stage this scene on a pleasant, hopeful state of desire, on the verge of satisfaction but not yet there. There is a pleasant obstacle preventing it all the time. This is fantasy.

How does this ethical injunction, both in the early and late Lacan, play out in the political realm, specifically thinking about it in relation to the cartoon depictions of Mohammad, a debate that opposed unlimited freedom of the press to respect for the other?

Do you see the piece I wrote - not in *The New York Times*, which was censored - but "Antinomies of Tolerant Reason"?

You know, many leftists were mad at me there. They thought I made too many compromises with Western liberals, too much anti-Muslim compromise. But the reason I did it was that I got a little bit sick and tired with these politically correct Western liberals - didn't you notice this hypocrisy? I noticed it was the same people, who in the West are so sensitive - like I look at you and it already can be harassment - and all of sudden, they say it is a different culture, blah, blah,

blah. I hate that even some feminists now are turning to culture as one of the standard defenses of Islam. In the West, we at least have formal equality of women. I am very sorry but there, you have a culture, at least in the predominant mode that is so openly anti-feminine. My god, but they are openly doing what we here are trying to unearth as the anti-feminism beneath the emancipated feminine. My god, are we now even prohibited from stating the obvious?

Do you know this famous, eternal politically correct example of clitoridechotomy? This example is not Islam - it is a ritual independent of Islam. But I remember some Muslim women claiming: isn't it that in the West in order to be attractive to men, women have to remain slim, seductive; isn't this a global clitoridechotomy; isn't it much worse? There, it's only the clitoris, here, it's as if your entire body is clitoridechotomized. I hate this - I remember when I was a youth what the facts were about the Gulag. People would say: but at least here, you are in or out of the Gulag; isn't it that the whole United States is one ideological Gulag? You know, this cheap counter universalization. I don't buy it - this is what I try to say in that text. The first thing is to admit a genuine deadlock and to stop this hypocrisy.

In that text, I hope it is obvious this fury I have at this logic of respect. Sometimes, respect is the most disrespectful category. Respect here is like telling a child false things so not to hurt him. Here, respect means not taking him seriously. I think a lot of the people who preach, "you should show restraint, show respect to Islam," are enacting the worst sort of patronization. Paradoxically, violent critics of Islam, on the most elementary level, show more respect for Islam than those who, out of respect, do not attack it. I am not saying we should turn to this, but at least those critics take people seriously as believers.

III.

What does it mean to return to big theory?

You remember, years ago it was fashionable to say big theory overlooks its own historical, concrete, anthropological conditions and presuppositions. That it is naive. Foucault has this attitude in its utmost when he says, before asking what's the meaning of the universe, you should ask in what historical context is it even possible to ask this question. So direct truth questions become questions about the concrete historical conditions in which one can raise such a question. I think this was a deadlock.

Today's big theory is no longer a naive big theory. It's not saying "let's forget about historical context and again ask, does god exist, or are we free." No, the point is that concrete theory - the idea that we cannot ask metaphysical questions, only historical questions - had a skeleton in the closet: it has its own big theory presuppositions. Usually, even some rather primitive historicist, relativist ideas, for example, everything depends on historical circumstances or interactions, there are no universalities, and so on. So for me, it's about not forgetting from where one speaks. It's about including into reflection, into historical reflection, the very historicism, which was unquestioned in this eternal, Foucauldian model. I find it so boring. It's so boring to say, "no, you shouldn't ask are we free, the only question is what does it mean in our society to ask the question are we free."

The presence of cognitive science is increasingly felt in anthropology. What particular problems does cognitive science pose for social sciences?

Big theory brings us nicely to cognitive science because what it so tickling about them is precisely this question of freedom - does it mean we are not free? It's interesting that all the debates about cognitive sciences - the image of the

human being emerging from all these interactions, from the brain sciences or more abstract mind sciences - is about are we free.

I don't know about social sciences, but I know about my field, psychoanalysis. I dealt with cognitive sciences extensively in my last book (See *The Parallax View*, MIT Press 2006). I think firstly, they should be taken seriously. They should not be dismissed as just another naïve, naturalizing, positivist approach. The question should be seriously asked, how do they compel us to redefine the most basic notions of human dignity, freedom? That is to say, what we experience as dignity and freedom is it all just an illusion, as they put it in computer user terms, a user's illusion. Meaning, for example, when you write a text on a computer, you have this user's illusion scrolling up or down that there is text above or below. There is no text there. Is our freedom the same as a user's illusion or is there a freedom?

The thing to do - and I'm not saying I did it, I'm saying I am trying to do it - is to take these sciences very seriously, and find a point in them where there is a need for an intervention of concepts developed by psychoanalysis. I think - I hope - that I isolated one such point. I noticed how, when they tried to account for consciousness, they all have to resort to almost always the same metaphor of this autopoiesis, self-reflexive move, some kind of self-relating, self-referring closed circuit. They are only able to describe it metaphorically. What I claim is that this is what Freud meant by death drive and so on.

But it's not that we psychoanalysts know it and can teach the idiots. I think this is also good for us - and by us I mean, my gang of psychoanalytically oriented people. It compels us also to formulate our terminology, to purify our technology as it were.

IV.

What, if anything, is neoliberalism?

You must know, and it has often been noted, that the big shift in the study of the human mind from traditional approaches to modern cognitivism mirrors perfectly the shift from bureaucratic capitalism to neoliberal capitalism with its flexibility and plasticity. It's so interesting to notice how many cognitivists that I've read even say this openly. They say that traditional science of mind was production oriented, organizing up and down, like traditional bureaucratic capitalism. Today, it's like this digital, flexible capitalism - you don't have one central deciding point, you have free interaction, nomadic plasticity and so on. I found this very interesting.

Catherine Malabou wrote a wonderful book called *What to Do With the Human Brain*. She develops, in a very nice way, that plasticity can have two meanings. One meaning is this neoliberal plasticity. Basically, it's an accommodating plasticity: how to succeed on the market, how to adopt new identity. But there is a more radical plasticity, where the point is not just an adaptive plasticity. It's a plasticity that not only adapts itself to existing circumstances but also tries to form a margin of freedom to intervene, to change the circumstances.

The same would go for me for neoliberalism. My point would be first, there obviously exists something like neoliberalism. That is to say, it is a fact that at the level of relations between the states, within singular economies new rules of capitalism are emerging today.

But my first doubt would be about the process of describing the fact that something new is emerging. I don't think it is adequately described by the way neoliberalism describes itself. For example, saying "the rule is no longer state intervention, but free interaction, flexibility, the diminishing role of the state." But wait a minute, is this really going on? I

mean, take Reagan's presidency and Bush's presidency today. While bombasting against big spending Democrats - that is to say, big state - the state has never been as strong as it is today and there is an incredible explosion of state apparatuses. State control today is stronger than ever. That would be my automatic reaction: yes, there is something new but, when covered by the label neoliberalism, it is not adequately described. The self-perception of today's era as neoliberal is a wrong self-perception.

Even leftist critics all too often accept this self-description on its own terms and then proceed to criticize it, saying, "no, we can't leave everything to the market." Wait a minute, who is leaving everything to the market? If we look at today's American economy, how much support there is for American farmers, how much intervention, military contracts, where is there any free market? I mean, sorry, but I don't see much free market here.

Just look at this paradox, which I think is the nicest icon of what goes on today. You know the problem of cotton in the state of Mali I think, which is the producer of cheap cotton far better than the United States' cotton. The country is going to ruin because, as you know, the American cotton producers get more state support than the entire Gross Domestic Product of the state of Mali. And they say there, we don't want American help, what we want is just when you preach about corrupt state intervention and the free market, you play by your own rules. You know, there's so much cheating going on here.

So that would be the kind of anthropological study that's needed: what neoliberalism really means. That's what we have to do.

~

Zizek Picks

Most important book published in the last six months: On Creaturely Life by Eric Santner

It will sound hypocritical but really, I would say On Creaturely Life. If you go further back to 2005, it would be The Persistence of Subjectivity by Robert Pippin.

Most important film released in the last six months: Manderlay directed by Lars Von Trier

My god, this is a tough question. My problem is, as much as I love even commercial Hollywood, I really don't remember one in particular. It's a weird film but I like it, the last Lars Von Trier, Manderlay. Need I add that I haven't seen it, but a priori I don't deal with empirical things.

Favorite obscure text: Sex and Character by Otto Weininger

Sex and Character. It's obscure today but remember that this book was published in 1903 and was reprinted like fifty times. Then, it was a megabook. It's vicious - radically anti-feminist, anti-Semitic, anti-whatever-you-want but I think it's shattering.

Most underrated philosopher: Hegel

It will sound crazy because he is one of the most overrated philosophers, but I think, Hegel. Because for the last two hundred years, every philosopher defines himself as somehow wanting to go over Hegel. He's this universal punching bag. Known as he is, he is still the most underrated.

Favorite politician of all time? Lenin and Cromwell

My answer is so boring. It's boring, it's stupid, it's provocative, I'm ashamed to pronounce it: Lenin. You know, many naive leftists, who want to maintain their democratic credentials, would say some tragic victim like Allende. I think there is no perspective there. I have a cynical idea that

Pinochet's coup d'état came at the right point. Imagine what would have happened if someone like Clinton and not that stupid Nixon-Kissinger gang were in power. Someone like Clinton would have gotten the formula: annoy him economically, wait for the true economic crisis to explode and then Allende would either have to opt for a three-way neoliberalism and play all those emancipatory welfare games. Or, he would have to turn Castro, get really tough and lose. Don't you think they struck at the right point to redeem him? So I don't respect this kind of person.

I would love to have somebody else - I have such traditional tastes. Okay, again, it's traditional but if you go back further, Freud loved him: Oliver Cromwell. I like it the way he ruthlessly went from first using the Parliament to cut off the head of the king, to then disbanding Parliament.

What surprises me is this myth that Cromwell was this cruel Puritan. Not only did he have personal integrity, but contrary to royalist myth, he was not revengeful. To put it naively, he was even personally kind. It may also come as a surprise how religiously tolerant he was. This is a myth, you know, this pale-lips Puritan just killing all the Catholics and everybody else. No, he was striving very much, for his vision was a kind of secular plurality of religions. He was a genuine tragic, tragic figure, I think.

~

#7
Liberation Hurts*

* Rasmussen, Eric Dean. “Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”, *Electronic Book Review*, July 1, 2004, Chicago, Illinois. <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/liberation-hurts-an-interview-with-slavoj-zizek/>. <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/liberation-hurts-an-interview-with-slavoj-zizek/>

~

Slavoj Žižek addresses the situation of post-9/11 global politics - and his own, controversial, theories of the political - in this interview with Eric Dean Rasmussen.

~

The following interview with Slavoj Žižek took place on the morning of September 29, 2003 in the Palmer House Hilton, a Gilded Age-era hotel in downtown Chicago. In the hotel's opulent lobby, it was easy to spot the bearded Žižek amongst the nattily dressed businesspeople and well-healed tourists. As befits a self-described "old-fashioned left winger,"* Žižek seemed dressed down for our meeting. Yet when he lectured at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute later that night, Žižek wore the same striped velour shirt and casual pants and looked even more disheveled. With his comfortable attire and unassuming demeanor Žižek lacked the authority and panache of an academostar such as, say, Edward Said (whose elegant and opulent fashions even *The Nation* remarked upon favorably) but he instantaneously grew in stature once he began to philosophize. He spoke extemporaneously with an arresting verve and displayed the theoretical prowess and outrageous sense of humor that have established him as one of the world's foremost intellectuals.

Not that such academic accolades probably mean much to Žižek, who described himself to me as a philosopher with "a very technical, modest project" - to reactualize the legacy of German Idealism. After determining that it was too noisy in the bustling lobby to conduct the interview, we headed to Žižek's room. "So, what's your agenda?" he asked me conspiratorially as we entered his room, which appeared almost

* See Geert Lovink, "Civil Society, Fanaticism, and Digital Reality: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek" in *Uncanny Networks* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) p. 39.

ascetically empty. Žižek was on the road for several weeks, yet he apparently traveled with only a single duffel bag, a laptop computer, and some novels by Henning Mankell, the Swedish detective novelist.* Žižek's review of Mankell's *The Return of the Dancing Master* discusses the effects of globalization on the locale of recent detective novels. Žižek was coming down with a bad cold, and apologized for his sniffing. While I readied my recorder, he climbed into bed, pulled up the covers, and in a comfortably reclined position, cracked a joke about waxing philosophical from his sickbed. Žižek's self-deprecating humor helped me to relax, not least because his posture reminded me of the provocative author's photo adorning the back cover of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. Shot at the Sigmund Freud museum, on the 100th anniversary of the birth of Jacques Lacan, the photo features an intense-looking Žižek lounging on a canopied couch covered with a Southwestern-style rug. Immediately above Žižek's outstretched legs, affixed to the back of the couch, is a framed picture of the bottom half of a woman's torso, her hairy vagina prominently displayed. I half expected to see the picture hanging above Žižek's hotel bed, but in the interest of professionalism refrained from telling him so and launched into the interview, which lasted just under two hours.

Despite being under the weather, it didn't take long for Žižek to display the vigor and loquaciousness for which he is famous. As he launched into a polemic against the Other as posited in Levinasian-Derridean theory, Žižek lurched up from the bed and began gesticulating with his arms, his strength increasing with each idea that rapidly came to mind. For the remainder of our interview Žižek was extremely animated, and the rapidity of his speech increased with each

* See Slavoj Žižek, "Parallax," in the *London Review of Books* 25.22. (Nov. 20, 2003).

passing minute. It quickly became clear that I would be unable to ask all of the questions I had diligently prepared. In retrospect, I wish I'd more thoroughly interrogated him about his animosity towards "so-called deconstructionism": did Žižek intentionally use this term instead of deconstruction? That is, was Žižek rejecting the theory of Otherness advanced by Levinas outright, or simply the way it has been deployed by 'post-secular' academics? My sense was that, had I asked only one question, Žižek would've continued to talk for the remainder of the interview. In order to get my questions in, I had to speak quickly and risk interrupting the verbose Žižek, who was understanding of my desire to direct the interview but clearly wanted to insure that he was able to elaborate upon and clarify his points. Not surprisingly, then, the interview ran over its allotted time by almost an hour. After all, two books on Deleuze and Iraq were forthcoming, and Žižek enjoyed joking with Irina Rasmussen Goloubeva, my Russian-born wife, about Western misconceptions regarding Soviet-era life behind the Iron Curtain. As he apologetically escorted me and Ira out the door, Žižek was still theorizing at a machine-gun rate. "When does he get the time to write?" we wondered, in awe of our encounter with this sublime, yet humble, Slovenian philosopher.

~

Eric Dean Rasmussen: *In The Puppet and the Dwarf one of your theoretical maxims is that "in our politically correct times, it is always advisable to start with the set of unwritten prohibitions that define the positions one is allowed to adopt."** Hereafter all citations from *The Puppet and the Dwarf* will be cited parenthetically as (PD) followed by the page number. You argue that although proclamations for various forms of multiculturalist spirituality are currently in

* See Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 5.

vogue, professing “serious” religious beliefs - that is, proclaiming one’s faith devoutly and unironically - is an exemplary case of an unwritten prohibited position, at least in academia. Do you really think that expressing sincere religious belief is so taboo in public discourse, at least in the United States? In fact, aren’t we witnessing a resurgence of fundamentalism? Under the Bush Administration’s “faith-based initiatives,” for example, fundamentalist Christian organizations are beginning to receive government funds to manage social services, etc. Should concerned academics not speak out against the erosion of the separation between church and state, or do you think that they “secretly believe much more than they are willing to admit” (PD 8) and it would be hypocritical for them to do so?

Slavoj Žižek: No, no I don’t think this is any longer the unwritten rule. I think that what we usually refer to as the ‘post-secular turn’ really designates not quite the opposite tendency, but that some kind of spirituality is again ‘in’ - even in academic circles. For example, in one of the predominant orientations, so-called deconstructionism, with its Levinasian ethico-religious turn, the motto is that traditional onto-theology - where you assert God as a supreme being and so on - is over. But then you play all of these games - there is no God, but there is some absence, a void, calling us, confronting us with our finitude. There is, as Levinas would put it, a radical Otherness confronting us with the absolute responsibility, ethical injunction, all that. So, what interests me is precisely this kind of - how should I put it? - disavowed spirituality. It is as if the form of spirituality, the ultimate, I am almost tempted to say, iconoclastic spirituality (which it is no wonder that the central representative is a Jewish thinker like Levinas, no?) is a kind of spiritual commitment which shouldn’t be positivized in a set of beliefs and so on.

It is amusing sometimes to follow the more detailed ramifications of these rules, what is prohibited, what is not. For example, this abstract Jewish spirituality is in; in other circles, some kind of a pagan spirituality is in. Of course, as you hinted at, these are in clear contrast to 'mainstream' America, the Bible Belt, where you find more orthodox belief. But even there, that belief already functions in a different way. The so-called moral majority fundamentalism is - to put it in slightly speculative Hegelian terms - the form of the appearance of its opposite. Let's be serious: Nobody will convince me that people like Donald Rumsfeld, John Ashcroft and George W. Bush believe. They may even be sincere, but... from Hegel we learned how to undermine a position - not through comparing it directly with reality to assert its truth status, but seeing how the very subjective stance from which you announce a certain position undermines this position. A classic, simplified Hegelian example would be asceticism. The message of asceticism is I despise my body, but all the focus is on the body, so the very message of the practice is the opposite of the official message. Along the same lines, if you look closely at - to take the most extreme example - televangelists, figures we all love, like Jim Bakker, or Jimmy Swaggart, with all their complaints against liberal decadence, and so on, the way they relate to religion is a kind of narcissistic ego trip. The way they deliver their message undermines the message. You don't need an external criticism.

I'm willing to go even further here. For example, take family values. I disagree with my leftist friends who immediately cry wolf, "Oh family values, they want to reimpose the patriarchal family, what about gay marriages, new forms? blah, blah, blah." No, let's look at what effectively happened. I don't think there was an era that did more to undermine so-called family and community values than the Reagan era, with Reaganomics, all these shifts to a new econ-

omy, the end of fixed employment, mobility, etc. So, my response to conservatives is not that we need to defend plurality and different lifestyles, but look who is taking! Your policies undermined the family, and you don't have any right to even speak about family values.

To return to the fundamentals of your questions, one of my theses is that belief is a complex phenomenon. I don't mean this in a superficial way, "Ha, ha, they are fakes; they don't really believe; they are cynical manipulators, and so on." In a more serious way, what does belief mean? What does it mean when you say people believe in something? For example, I had very interesting conversation with a priest during the Turin shroud controversy, and he told me kind of a half-public secret - the French have this nice expression, *le secret de Polichinelle*, a secret which everybody knows about - that the Church really does not want, and is secretly absolutely afraid for, that shroud to be proven to be the real thing, the blood of Christ from that time. The idea is that the shroud should remain an object of belief, and its status shouldn't be directly proven. It would complicate things if you proved the shroud was really from year zero in Palestine with, say, a DNA profile of Christ. [Chuckles] But at the more fundamental level, intelligent theologians like Kierkegaard knew that belief should not be knowledge, it must be a leap of faith. Often, when you believe in something, the utmost shattering experience or shock can be an immediate, brutal confirmation of your belief. For example, did you see the movie *Leap of Faith*? See *Leap of Faith*, dir. Richard Pierce, Paramount, 1992. It's naïve, and I don't like Steve Martin in it, he's playing a stupid role politically, but it's a nice movie about a fake faith healer/preacher with Martin and Debra Winger.

No, I haven't seen Leap of Faith, but the film illuminates the Kierkegaardian distinction between belief as faith versus knowledge as objective, scientifically verifiable fact?

It's the story of one of these swindlers who goes around the Bible Belt, selling miracles, healing cripples, and so on - it's all a fake. Then, at some point, a young guy, who is the younger brother of a woman whom Martin wants to get to bed, to seduce, publicly approaches him to perform a miracle. So he does, and it works. It totally ruins him! He immediately runs away, dropping everything. This is how belief functions.

Interestingly, the last time I was in Israel, I spoke with some specialists over in Ramallah who told me that they know people from the families of Palestinian suicide bombers. They told me that even those people who are usually portrayed to us [Westerners] as true believers, their belief is more complex than it appears. First, there are much more secular motivations at work. This is our Western racism, when we imbue them with motives like, "I blow myself up, and then I awaken with those famous forty virgins at my disposal." No, no, no, it's more like, "This sacrifice is for my nation." Even more importantly, it's a strange logic in which the bombers themselves have doubts, and their suicide becomes a way of confirming their belief. "If I kill myself in this way, I can calm my doubts and prove, even to me, that I do believe." So, even here, the issue of belief is more complex than it might seem.

You may be aware of an almost repetitive motif in my work, how not only those people whom we perceive as fundamentalists, but how we enlightened Westerners believe more than it may appear. The usual strategy is displaced belief, what in Lacanian theory is referred to as "the subject supposed to believe," in which literally believe through the Other. It's a wonderful topic. For example, Paul Veyne's book, *Did the Ancient Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* - I don't agree with its conclusions, but it sets forth a wonderful problematic - demonstrates that the notion of belief we have

today, this fully subjectivized belief (here I am, I literally mean it, I stand behind it) is a modern phenomenon. For example, the ancient Greeks, they believed, but they believed in an anonymous way. One believes, not me. The Greeks didn't believe that if you climbed to the top of Mount Olympus that you would encounter God, or Zeus there. No, their belief is something more paradoxical. Do you remember how we greeted each other the first time? Let's say we said, "Hello, how are you? Nice to meet you." Such greetings are usually fake, in the sense that, if we've just met for the first time, and I were to ask, "How do you feel? How are you?" and you were to suspect that my questions were meant literally, you would have the right to say, "Sorry, it's none of your business!" But it's wrong to say it's hypocrisy. That's the paradox of culture: It's not to be taken literally, but it's totally wrong to say it's hypocritical. Small children haven't assumed the paradox of culture fully. My small son, for example, plays this game of taking things too literally. When I say, "Could you pass me the salt?" he says, "Yes I can," and then looks at me before saying, "You didn't tell me to pass the salt." There's a certain paradoxical level of thought, you cannot but call it sincere lying. If I ask you, "how are you?" literally, I lie, but it's a sincere lie, because at the metalevel the message is to establish, to use old hippie terminology, positive vibrations [chuckles] or whatever. So, again, belief is a much, much more complex phenomenon than is generally acknowledged.

Let's follow up on your suicide bomber reference. In both Welcome to the Desert of the Real and The Puppet and the Dwarf you seem to come close to endorsing "hysterical" violence as a preferable alternative to an "obsessional," micromanaged, life-in-death. I'm thinking of the contrast you make between the Palestinian suicide bomber, the American soldier waging war before a computer screen, and the New York yuppie jogging along the Hudson River. In the moment

before the bomber kills himself and others, you suggest he is more alive than either the soldier or the yuppie. How would you defend yourself against charges that you are promoting terrorism or romanticizing revolutionary violence?

Such charges may be a below-the-belt blow. Believe me, from my personal experience, coming from an ex-socialist country, I know very well the misery of living in a post-revolutionary society. Let me first state my basic position, which is the fundamental paradox that I repeat again and again in my works, and which is basically a paraphrase of that reversal by Jacques Lacan where he says, against Dostoevsky, that, if God doesn't exist, not everything is permitted, but everything is prohibited. Lacan was right, and the so-called fundamentalist terrorists are exactly the proof of his claim. With them, it's inverted: God exists, so everything is permitted. If you act as a divine instrument, you can kill, rape, etc., because, through all these mystical tricks, it's not me who is acting, rather it is God who is acting through me.

I was shocked recently when I read some speeches by Commandant Marcos of the Zapatistas, Behind a mask, Marcos says, "I am nobody. Through me, you have this poetic explosion. Through me, dispossessed peasants in Brazil, poor drug addicts and homeless people in New York, sweatshop workers in Indonesia, all of them speak, but I am nobody." See how ambiguous this position is? It appears modest, but this self-erasure conceals an extreme arrogance. It means all these people speak through me, so the silent conclusion is if you attack me, I am untouchable, because you attack all those others.

What interests me is the following paradox: of how, precisely in our liberal societies, where no one can even imagine a transcendental cause for which to die, we are allowed to adopt a hedonistic, utilitarian, or even more spiritually ego-tistical stance - like, the goal of my life is the realization of

all my potential, fulfillment of my innermost desires, whatever you want. The result is not that you can do everything you want, but a paradoxical situation: so many prohibitions, regulations. You can enjoy your life, but in order to do it, no fat, no sexual harassment, no this, no that. Probably never in human history did we live in a society in which, at the microlevel of personal behavior, our lives were so strongly regulated.

To this paradox, I like to link another, which interests me even more: how this applies at all levels, not only at the personal level. Namely, how false is the official position that we live in a permissive society of consumption where you just consume until you drop, and so on. No, I think that if there is something which is paradigmatic for today's society, it's phenomena like decaffeinated coffee. You can consume coffee, but it should be decaf. Have beer, but without alcohol. Have dessert, but without sugar. Get the thing deprived of its substance. And the way this interests me is not only at this personal level. What is safe sex, but another name for sex without? It makes me almost sympathetic to that famous racist notion in Europe, where they ask an African guy, "With such a high rate of AIDS, why don't you use more condoms?" and he responds, "It's like taking a shower with a raincoat on." But I tend to agree with it [chuckling], I'm sorry. Even war follows this logic. What's Colin Powell's doctrine if not war without war? War, but with no casualties on our side, of course. And I could go on. The emblematic product of all these phenomena is a chocolate laxative, laxative in the form of chocolate. Chocolate is perceived, at least in the popular imagination, as the main cause of constipation. So, advertisers devised a wonderful publicity slogan: still constipated, no problem, have another portion of chocolate. No wonder, then, that there is such a movement for, among some so-called radicals, to liberate the consumption of marijuana. Marijuana is precisely kind of a decaf coffee - opium,

without opium. You can have it, but not fully. The paradox for me, in this sense, is that precisely by dedicating your life to a full assertion of life, life's pleasures, you pay a price.

Now I come to truly answering you. What if this sounds almost proto-fascist, a celebration of violence and such? I will give you a horrible answer. "Why not?" This line of questioning is the typical liberal trap. In *These Times* - those crazy loonies, they are my friends, I like them, Leftists - published an essay of mine apropos Leni Riefenstahl in which I ferociously attack a typical liberal reaction against fascism.* You don't really have a theory of fascism. So you look a little bit into history, encounter something which superficially reminds you of fascism, and then you claim that it's proto-fascist already. Before making her famous Nazi movies, Riefenstahl did so-called bergfilms, "mountain movies," filled with this heroic, extreme danger, climbing mountains, passionate love stories up there. Everybody automatically assumes these films must already be proto-Nazi. Sorry, but the guy who co-wrote the scenario for her best known early film, *Das Blaue Licht* (The Blue Light), Béla Balázs was a Communist. [Chuckles]. Now, liberals have an answer to this one, which is [spoken in a half-whisper] "this only proves how the entire society was already penetrated by the spirit of Nazism." No, I violently disagree. Take the most popular example used again and again by Susan Sontag in her famous text on Leni Riefenstahl: mass public spectacles, crowds, gymnastics, thousands of bodies. I'm very sorry, but it's an historical fact that the Nazis took these forms from the Social Democrats. Originally, these forms were Leftist. The liberal point would be, "Oh, this only proves how totalitarianism was in the air." I am totally opposed to this line of argument.

* See Slavoj Žižek, "Learning to Love Leni Riefenstahl," In *These Times* Sept. 10, 2003), http://inthesetimes.com/comments.php?id=359_0_4_0_M.

We should not oppose something just because it was appropriated by the wrong guys; rather, we should think about how to reappropriate it. And I think that the limit is here - I admit it here, we are in deep critical waters - very refined, between...engaging in redemptive violence and what is truly fascist, the fetishizing of violence for its own sake.

A kind of litmus test is - this always works on all my friends - "How do you stand toward *Fight Club*, the movie?" All the liberals claim, "Ah, it's proto-fascist, violent, blah, blah, blah." No, I am for it. I think the message of *Fight Club* is not so much liberating violence but that liberation hurts. What may falsely appear as my celebration of violence, I think, is a much more tragic awareness. If there is a great lesson of the 20th-century history, it's the lesson of psychoanalysis: The lesson of totalitarian subordination is not "renounce, suffer," but this subordination offers you a kind of perverted excess of enjoyment and pleasure. To get rid of that enjoyment is painful. Liberation hurts.

In the first act of liberation, as I develop it already in *The Fragile Absolute*, where I provide lots of violent examples - from Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects*, who kills his family (which I'll admit, got me into lots of trouble) to a more correct example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. But, of course, now, I'm not saying what Elizabeth Wright, who edited a reader about me, thought. I love her, an English old lady. I had tea with her once, and she said, "I liked your book, *The Fragile Absolute*, but something bothered me. Do I really have to kill my son to be ethical?" I love this total naïveté. Of course not! My point was to address the problem of totalitarian control. The problem is: how does a totalitarian power keep you in check? Precisely by offering you some perverse enjoyment, and you have to renounce that, and it hurts. So, I don't mean physical violence, or a kind of fetishization of violence. I just mean simply that liberation hurts. What I

don't buy from liberals is this idea of, as Robespierre would have put it, "revolution without revolution," the idea that somehow, everything will change, but nobody will be really hurt. No, sorry, it hurts.

You just critiqued the misrecognition of fascism, in which liberals rush to denounce a cluster of phenomena as fascist or proto-fascist without first formulating or advancing a rigorous definition of fascism. Do you think that the Left, in the United States, is wrong to use the rhetoric of fascism to critique the Bush Administration? Does the Left err when it makes claims like "the Bush Administration is an incipient fascist regime," or "the United States government is moving rightward, in the direction of fascism?"

This is wrong, but it's not that the Left is too harsh on Bush. It's that they are, in a way, not harsh enough. In *Organs Without Bodies*, I have a chapter where I try to prove that - it's a totally crazy book, the wager of the book is double - Deleuze is the best theorist of Oedipus and castration and he is Hegelian. To explain these points I have a chapter on the underlying Hegelian structure, of the paradoxes, those famous stupidities and slips, uttered by Dan Quayle and George W. Bush. I compare them as two kinds of self-relating negativity tricks. I don't recall if it was Bush or Quayle who said, "Tomorrow the future will look brighter," but this is wonderful, totally Hegelian. And the title of the chapter is "Dumb and Dumber," a reference to the movie. [Laughs] Don't you also have the feeling that all this crying wolf, all this "Fascism! Fascism!" is a kind of admission of impotence signaling the lack of a true analysis of what actually is going on now. If I say that the Bush Administration's agenda is not fascist, I am not saying that it's not so bad. What I'm saying is that these are different structures of domination. I hate it when Leftists say we're returning to fascism! My reply to them is, "You don't know what you are talking about! You

don't have a conceptual apparatus." They're simply taking recourse to this old notion of fascism, which is a catastrophe.

I do admire thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, with his theory of homo sacer, which is a much more refined analysis.* Agamben's basic insight is the following one: We have two apparently opposed tendencies today. On the one hand, we have so-called biopolitics, that is to say, more and more our lives are controlled through state mechanisms, whatever, all these theories articulated by Foucault and later by Agamben. On the other hand, we have what right wingers usually refer to as a liberal, extreme narcissism, this "culture of complaint," or, "culture of victimization." You know, where whatever you do -like, I look at you now and [smacks his hand on the table] ha, ha, ha, rape already or harassment - is construed as oppressive. Incidentally, the only way to react to excessive political correctness, I claim, is propagating dirty jokes.

Dirty jokes are ambiguous. On the one hand, of course, I'm well aware they can be racist, sexist, and so on. On the other hand, I hate the term "African-Americans." I prefer black, and they do too. I think African-American as a term is the worst example of apparent political correctness. My best example of this was in Minneapolis, one of the capitals of political correctness [chuckles]. On TV, I saw a debate involving Native Americans, and they referred to themselves as "Indians," and this white, PC liberal said, "No, no, no, don't use that colonialist term. You are Native Americans." And at the end, one of the poor Indians exploded. He said, "Sorry, I hate that term! Please, give me at least the right to call myself what I want. 'Native American' means that you're making me a part of nature! You are reducing me! What's the opposite of nature? It's culture! You Europeans

* See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

are culture, then you have horses and us, 'Native Americans,' here, with foxes or whatever." So whenever I meet blacks in this kind of situation, I immediately try to break these racist barriers. And what's my measure that we truly broke the barrier? Ok, at one level it's political correctness, but it's absolutely clear that if you play this game, only politically correct terms and ooooh, this fake interest, "ooooh, how interesting, your culture, what a wealth," and blah, blah, blah, it will backfire. Blacks confess to me that they secretly despise this kind of white liberalism. What's the trick? Humor. It's a kind of dialectical double reversal. And this is when they really admit you. That somehow you can return to the worst starting point, racist jokes and so on, but they function no longer as racist, but as a kind of obscene solidarity. To give you an extremely vulgar example, I met a big, black guy, and when we became friends, I went into it like, [assuming a naïve, awe-filled whisper] "Is it true that you have, you know [makes gesture signifying a gigantic penis]?" and (this is a racist myth I heard in Europe) "Is it true that you blacks can control your muscles so that when you walk with a half erection and there is a fly here you can BAM! [slaps thigh] snap it with your penis?" We became terribly close friends! Now, I'm well aware of how risky these waters are, because if you do it in the wrong context, in the wrong way, I'm well aware that this is racism.

What bothers me about so-called tolerance is that, if you combine tolerance with opposition to harassment, what do you get? You get tolerance that effectively functions as its opposite. Tolerance means we should tolerate each other, which practically means that we shouldn't harass each other, which means I tolerate you on the condition that you don't get too close to me! [chuckles]. Because, often, the fear beneath harassment is one of proximity. Don't get too close to me, emotionally or physically. We have here, again, the same

chocolate-laxative logic, the Other yes, but not too close, deprived of its substance.

I don't think these two levels are opposed. One the one hand, the state wants to control you via biopolitics, and, on the other hand, the state allows this extreme narcissism. I think they are two sides of the same coin. Both have in common this logic of pure - how should I put it? - biopolitical levels, pure life, pleasures, sensitivity, whatever. Simply falling back to this old position of "oooh, we are returning to fascism, and so on" doesn't work. And while I despise so-called fundamentalists, we should not knock, or buy too simply, this liberal opposition between us, good liberal guys, versus them, bad fundamentalists. The first counterargument that I mentioned is "Wait a minute; are these really fundamentalists?" It's an affront to fundamentalism to call people like Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart [chuckles] fundamentalists. I had once a conversation with my good friend, one of the last Marxist dinosaurs, Fred Jameson, who told me, "True fundamentalists are people like the army theologians who were against the Vietnam War." In Israel, it's the same. As all my Jewish friends are telling me, it's not some stupid, fanatic rabbis in Jerusalem versus tolerant Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv is worse, if anything! In Tel Aviv, you know, it's ethnically cleansed. There are almost no Palestinians. So, the most radical proponents of dialogue with the Palestinians are some very orthodox Jewish theologians.

Increasingly, I'm convinced that we must problematize the way the mass media present us the big opposition: liberating, multiculturalist tolerance versus some crazy fundamentalism. Let me be precise here. I know the danger here is the old temptation to become fascinated with the - old Georges Sorel stuff - liberating aspect of violence.* I am well

* See Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

aware of - and I'm not afraid to use this term - the "inner greatness" of liberalism, because usually religious fundamentalists approach liberalism as a kind of "humanist arrogance." However, the origin of authentic liberalism is something much more tragic and sincere. Liberalism emerged after the Thirty Years War in 17th-century Europe. It was a desperate answer to a very pressing problem: we have here groups of people with mutually exclusive religious commitments, how can we build a governable space? There is an initial modesty in Liberalism. Liberalism was not originally a doctrine of "man is the king." No, it was a very modest attempt to build a space where people could live together without slaughtering one another. As I repeat again and again in my books, I don't buy the simplistic, Marxist reductive decoding, "human rights, screw them, they are really just rights for white men of property." The problem is that from the very beginnings of Liberalism there was the tension between content and form. The properly political dialectic is that the form, even if it is just a fake appearance, has its own symbolic efficiency and sets in motion a certain process.

Even before the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft said, "Why not also we women?" Then, human rights triggered the first big political rebellion of the blacks, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti. The demand was not "let's return to our tribe." The Haitian Revolution was explicitly linked to the French Revolution and the Jacobins - I still love them - invited the black delegation from Haiti to Paris. They were applauded there. It's only Napoleon, then, who turns it around. But this is the properly dialectical process that fascinates me. It's not only the story of degeneration - something is authentic and then it's co-opted - what interests me much more is how something can start as a fake, but then acquire its own [authentic] logic. For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the black Madonna. It's clear that Catholicism is first imposed on the natives - ok, here I cannot think of another

term for the people who lived in Mexico before the Spaniards arrived - but the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe marks precisely the moment when Catholicism was no longer simply a tool of oppression, but had become a site from which to articulate grievances, a site of struggle. So, things are here much more open.

To be quite frank, especially after doing that book on Lenin*, people laugh at me saying “oh, oh, oh you want Leninism.” But no, sorry, I am not totally crazy [chuckles]. I’m just saying that - as you hinted at also - I don’t think the Left is ready to draw all the consequences of the deep shit it is in. The phenomena you invoked - calling Bush a fascist, and so on, display the Left’s disorientation. In Europe, you have this nostalgic reaction, which explains the Left’s irrational hatred of people like Tony Blair or Gerhard Schröder in Germany. Not that I love them, but the way they are often criticized is that they betrayed the old welfare states. Ok, but what was the choice? It is not as if everything would be ok if we would just remain faithful to the old social democratic logic. Or, to give you another example, once I had dinner with Richard Rorty, and he admitted to me that his dream is that of Adlai Stevenson; his solution is that we should return to a socially active role for the Democratic Party. I wonder if it’s as simple as that? I don’t think it’s simply that some bad guys around Tony Blair in England, for example, betrayed the old

* See Slavoj Žižek, *Repeating Lenin* (Small Press Distribution 2002), “Can Lenin Tell Us About Freedom Today?” in *Rethinking Marxism*, 13.2 (Summer, 2001), and “Seize the day: Lenin’s legacy, London Review of Books, 24. 14 (25 July 2002). Žižek edited and wrote the introduction and a substantial afterword to *Lenin’s Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (New York: Verso, 2002).

Labour Party. No, the problem is that... What is the alternative here? To be quite honest, I am at the state of just asking questions.

So, again, when I problematize even democracy, it's not this typical Leftist, fascist way of thinking, "oh it's not spectacular enough; we need radical measures." No, it's that maybe we should start to ask questions like "What does democracy effectively mean, and how does it function today? What do we really decide?" For example, let's take the last twenty or thirty years of history. There was a tremendous shift, as we all know, in the entire social functioning of the State, the way the economy changed with globalization, the way social services and health care are perceived. There was a global shift, but we never voted about that. So, the biggest change, the biggest structural shift in the entire logic of capitalistic, democratic states is something that we, the citizens, never decided. Now, I'm not saying we should abandon democracy. I'm just saying that we should start asking these elementary questions: What do we decide today? Why are some things simply perceived as necessity?

For example, it's interesting to note the big shift within the thinking of the postmodern Left, who believe that we can no longer change the functioning in the economy. The economy is a certain objective problem, to be left to experts - don't mess with that. One of Tony Blair's advisors said frankly, "Regarding the economy, we are all Margaret Thatcher's pupils." All we can do, then, is exercise a bit more tolerance here and there, and so on. I'm not saying that the answer to this is simply that we should return to our old welfare state project, but that there are still tough questions to be asked.

In a recent issue of The Nation (29 Sept. 2003), William Greider - repeating the thesis of his book, The Soul of Capitalism: Opening Paths to a Moral Economy - suggests that

through a “transformation of Wall Street’s core values,” American capitalism might be reformed so as to eliminate the gross inequalities that are structured into the system. Greider suggests, for example, that organized labor, which controls billions of dollars in the form of workers’ pension funds, could exert influence and improve capitalism by insisting that the money it manages be placed in investment funds that are more socially and environmentally responsible. Do such reforms sound promising?*

Maybe, but such reforms have already been tried. When the Swedish Social Democracy was at its high point in the 1960s, there already was a timeline - they set a limit of thirty years - established for how trade unions and pension funds should buy, to put it simply, private property, setting the way for a kind of radical people’s capitalism. But it failed. But maybe this is one option. Another option to pursue. Robin Blackburn published a book on retirement funds.* It isn’t talked about, but there are tremendous amounts of money there, possibilities for popular control, and so on. Another option - which I wouldn’t underestimate, at least in some underdeveloped countries - is a more risky strategy: of not just playing this liberal identity politics game for the media. What if we risk, and this doesn’t mean violence, alternative communities? For example, I am fascinated with the favelas in Latin America. Favelas are the squatter settlements, illegally established on vacant land by the poor, that lie on the margins of Brazilian cities. Don’t romanticize them, it’s desperate! In many of them, you have, ultimately, mafia control,

* See William Greider, “The Soul of Capitalism,” *The Nation* 277. (Sept. 29, 2003). <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030929&s=greider>

* See Robin Blackburn, *Banking on Death: Or, Investing in Life: The History and Future of Pension Funds*, (New York: Verso, 2002).

and the State simply doesn't care about the people living there. It might care a little bit about hygienic conditions when it appears that there might be an outbreak of a disease. What interests me is that the residents of the favelas were pushed into self-organizing. These different forms of self-organization, we need to think more about them.

Again, I don't have great positive answers. I just think that something is effectively happening with today's capitalism and that both standard positions - on the one hand, the standard Leftist view, it's nothing new, it's just the old financial capitalism; on the other hand, the opposite view, all the 'post-theories (information society, post-industrial society, whatever) - at some level misfire. They elevate into a self-contained entity something which can function only as a part of a larger society. The argument that we are living in this post-industrial, information society, service society, with no blue-collar workers, is a fiction. I know, because I have a small son. Go to a toy store; ninety percent of the toys are made in China, the rest are made in Guatemala, Indonesia, and so on. This is one of my standard jokes from my early books. It always fascinated me that the only place where you see the old-fashioned production process is where? Hollywood. In James Bond movies. It's a formula; two-thirds of the way into the film, Bond is captured by the big, bad guy and, then - this is the kind of structural stupidity that enables the final victory of Bond - instead of immediately shooting Bond, the villain gives Bond kind of an old Soviet Union socialist tour, showing him the plant and how it works. Of course it's some kind of criminal activity, like processing drugs, or manufacturing gold. But there you see it, and the result you know - Bond escapes and destroys it all. It's as if Bond is a kind of agent of Anthony Giddens and other sociologists who claim that there is no working class.

But you see my point. What these “post”-theories don’t take into account radically enough is that this split is structural. In order for the United States to function the way it functions today, you need China as the ultimate communist-capitalist country. What do I mean by this? Everything hinges on this symbiosis between the United States and China. China is an ingenious solution. It’s a country where, yes, you have political control by the communists, but everyone in the West focuses their attention on those persecuted religious sects or dissidents. Screw them - not that I don’t care about them. For me, the true news about China is that there are now desperate attempts by millions of jobless workers to organize themselves into trade unions. There lies the true repression. So, China, as long as you don’t mess with politics, is the ultimate capitalist country, because capitalists can do whatever they want in the economy, and the state guarantees them total control over the working class - no interference by trade unions or whatever. That guarantee of noninterference, I maintain, is absolutely crucial. One way it is done is by this famous outsourcing.

Outsourcing is not only an economic phenomenon. Take this flirting with torture - as proposed by Alan Dershowitz and Jonathan Alter. Their true message is not so much that the United States should practice torture, but that torture should be outsourced. “We cannot [torture suspected terrorists] so let’s give them back to Pakistan. They will do it.” Again, although people accuse me of being some arrogant Hegelian, Leninist, I’ll admit - very honestly, that I don’t have answers. At this state of the revolutionary process [chuckling] I see my function as introducing more trouble, if anything, to force confrontations. As a friend put it, the standard Leftist stance is that we basically know what’s going on, and we just need to find a way to mobilize people. I don’t think we really know what’s going on. By this, I don’t mean anything mystical. I simply mean that the Left still

doesn't have a representative theory. I see elements here and there. For example, although I violently disagree with the second half of the book, the first half of Jeremy Rifkin's *The Age of Access*, offers a nice description of the whole change in the commodity structure.* Basically, your life itself is now the ultimate commodity. What you are buying is not an object, but the 'time of your life.' You know, you go to a therapist, you buy your quality life.

You buy - or access - experiences.

Yeah, exactly. So there are elements here and there, but I don't think we have a theory. Here, I am even more pessimistic. It's not that the Left knows what's going on and just doesn't know how to mobilize people. This view is the last, and maybe the most dangerous illusion, of the Left.

*I want to return to your earlier allusion to Kierkegaard. When I read *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, I was struck by your appeals to a sort of passionate commitment. For example, when you ask, "What if we are 'really alive' only if and when we engage ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond 'mere life?'" (94) you seem to be advocating a sort of Kierkegaardian passionate commitment.* In "From Homo Sucker to Homo Sacer," the Kierkegaardian resonances of Žižek's claim are even more explicit, because in his original formulation Žižek uses the verb "commit" rather than "engage." For Kierkegaard, of course, this commitment entailed developing one's relationship with God, and he stressed that such an inward, existential, relationship should*

* See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where all of Life is a Paid-For Experience*, (New York: J. P Tarcher, 2001).

* See also Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 88.

not and could not be externally visible to others. As Derrida stresses, the gift must remain secret.

It's very complex with Kierkegaard. It's inward, but this inwardness is externalized in that it's a traumatic inwardness. People usually only take one side of Kierkegaard - that he's against Christendom as institution. Yes, but, at the same time, Kierkegaard was the most ferocious opponent of liberal Christianity, which asserted that external institutions don't matter and that what matters is the sincerity of one's inner belief. Let's take the ultimate case, Abraham. His faith is inner in that he's unable to communicate his predicament, that he must sacrifice Isaac, his son. He cannot turn to the community to explain why he must do it. At the same time, it's a totally crazy order that Abraham must obey. It's not that Abraham in his insight knows why he must kill his son. It's not a New Age narrative; it's not an inner enlightenment. With Kierkegaard, things are more ambiguous. If you read Kierkegaard's most wonderful, enigmatic text, *Works of Love* (I don't like big Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*) you find the wonderful formula - that to love your neighbor means you must love him as you love death; a good neighbor is a dead neighbor, and all these paradoxes. Or, that wonderful short text on the difference between an apostle and a genius, in which he has wonderful formulas on authority. If there is anything totally strange to Kierkegaard it is this simple opposition - external, institutional authority versus inner.

Here, Kierkegaard is effectively close to Kafka. For Kafka, bureaucracy is an innermost, metaphysical phenomenon, and I tend to agree with him. This is the theological dimension today. A year ago, the wife of a friend of mine, living in France, was informed by the local authorities that her *carte d'identit*», her ID card, was stolen. So, she went to the authorities and told them, "I have my card here; it hasn't been stolen. There's been a mistake." The authorities told her that,

“You may have it there, but officially, it’s stolen. So, what you have there, is officially a fake, a forged ID card. You should destroy it and then request a new one.” This is, for me, everyday life theology, metaphysics.

When you suggest that “what makes life ‘worth living’ is the very excess of life: the awareness that there is something for which we are ready to risk our life (we may call this excess ‘freedom,’ ‘honor,’ ‘dignity,’ ‘autonomy,’ etc.) Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive” (PD 95) you seem to be pushing for a different sort of existential commitment, something, perhaps, along the lines of Judas’s betrayal of Christ?

Ok, I think there are only two heroes there, Judas and St. Paul.

For what excessive causes or projects are you passionately committed? Are there any existential causes for which you would be willing, if necessary, to sacrifice your life, or, to commit a heroic betrayal?

Well, I don’t think we can repeat the formula of Judas’s betrayal today. It’s a different logic. It’s no longer this heroic logic of “I sacrifice my life, but I will count in posterity, and will be recognized as a hero.” Now, you must also risk your second death. This would be for me the new logic. I’m looking for a non-heroic logic of activity. Even the term “sacrifice,” I don’t quite like. I have very elaborate criticisms of the notion of sacrifice. Did you see that wonderful melodrama, *Stella Dallas*, with Barbara Stanwyck? She has a daughter who wants to marry into the upper class, but she is an embarrassment to her daughter. So, the mother - on purpose - plays an extremely vulgar, promiscuous mother in front of her daughter’s lover, so that the daughter can drop her without guilt. The daughter can be furious with her and marry the rich guy. That’s a more difficult sacrifice. It’s not, “I will make a big sacrifice and remain deep in their heart.”

No, in making the sacrifice, you risk your reputation itself. Is this an extreme case? No, I think every good parent should do this.

The true temptation of education is how to raise your child by sacrificing your reputation. It's not my son who should admire me as a role model and so on. I'm not saying you should, to be vulgar, masturbate in front of your son in order to appear as an idiot. But, to avoid this trap - the typical pedagogical trap, which is, apparently you want to help your son, but the real goal is to remain the ideal figure for your son - you must sacrifice your parental authority. But, to go on very naïvely, in art, in science - this is, for me, the site of actual sacrifice, not some spectacular sacrifice - you are obsessed with the idea of a work of art, and you risk everything, just to do it. You do it. There are people doing this, but very few of them. People who are committed to a certain project. Really, it's tragic.

Let me put it this way. Bernard Williams, the English moral philosopher, develops, in a wonderful way, the difference between 'must' and 'have to.' He opposes the logic of positive injunction - in the sense of "you should do this" - with another logic of injunction, a more fundamental sense, of "I just cannot do it otherwise." The first logic is simply that of the ideal. You should do it, but never can do it. You never can live up to your ideal. But the more shattering, radical, ethical experience is that of "I cannot do it otherwise." For example - this is one of the old partisan myths in Yugoslavia - Yugoslavian rebels killed some Germans, so the Germans did the usual thing. They encircled the village and decided to shoot all the civilians. But, one ordinary German soldier stood up and said, "Sorry, I just cannot do it." The officer in charge said, "No problem, you can join them," and the German soldier did. This is what I mean by sacrifice.

There's nothing pathetic about it. This honest German soldier, his point was not, "Ooooooh, what a nice, ideal role for me." He was just ethically cornered. You cannot do it otherwise. Politically, it's the same. It's not a sacrificial situation where you're secretly in love with your role of being sacrificed and you're seeking to be admired. It's a terrible, ethical, existential deadlock; you find yourself in a position in which you say, "I cannot do it otherwise."

Ok, so you're not advocating a sacrificial ethos. In fact, the logic of the heroism you've described doesn't necessarily posit the need to make an existential choice; rather, one is compelled to "do the right thing?"

I'm trying to avoid two extremes. One extreme is the traditional pseudo-radical position which says, "If you engage in politics - helping trade unions or combating sexual harassment, whatever - you've been co-opted" and so on. Then you have the other extreme which says, "Ok, you have to do something." I think both are wrong. I hate those pseudo radicals who dismiss every concrete action by saying, "This will all be co-opted." Of course, everything can be co-opted [chuckles] but this is just a nice excuse to do absolutely nothing. Of course, there is a danger that "the long march through institutions" - to use the old Maoist term, popular in European student movements thirty-some years ago - will last so long that you'll end up part of the institution. We need more than ever, a parallax view - a double perspective. You engage in acts, being aware of their limitations. This does not mean that you act with your fingers crossed. No, you fully engage, but with the awareness - the ultimate wager in the almost Pascalian sense - that is not simply that this act will succeed, but that the very failure of this act will trigger a much more radical process.

Let's shift gears a bit. I'd like you to comment about the idea of "confronting the catastrophe," which you present as

a strategy for problem solving that inverts the existential premise that, at a particular historical juncture, we must choose to act from a range of possibilities, even though in retrospect the choices will appear to us as being fully determined. In *The Puppet at the Dwarf*, you explain the inversion as follows: “Jean-Pierre Dupey suggests that we should confront the catastrophe: we should first perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities... upon which we then act today” (164). Then you suggest that Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory provides a “a supreme case of the reversal of positive into negative destiny” (164). How does Dupey’s strategy of confronting the catastrophe specifically relate to the outlook adopted by the Adorno and Horkheimer of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*? When one reads “*The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*” today, its diagnosis appears strikingly prescient, yet at times uncannily naïve in its implicit conviction that the hegemony of the culture industry had nearly reached a crescendo point back in the 1940s.* Did Adorno and Horkheimer neglect to imagine a sufficiently catastrophic or dystopian future?

I can only give you an extremely unsatisfying and naïve answer, which is that Adorno and Horkheimer’s formal logic was correct. The whole project in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is “let’s paint the ultimate outcome of the administered world as unavoidable, as catastrophe, for this is the only way to effectively counteract it.” Adorno and Horkheimer had the right insight; I agree with their formal procedure, but as for the positive content, I think it’s a little bit too light. Although all is not as bad as it might appear. Let me give you

* See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972).

an interesting anecdote, which may amuse you. Officially, for the youth generation the standard position is “Adorno is bad; he hated jazz. Marcuse is good; solidarity with the students and so on.” I know people in Germany who knew Adorno and I know people, such as Fred[ric] Jameson, who knew Marcuse. Marcuse was much nastier. To make a long story short, Marcuse was a conscious manipulator. Marcuse wanted to be popular with students, so he superficially flirted with them. Privately, he despised them. Jameson was Marcuse’s student in San Diego, and he told me how he brought Marcuse a Rolling Stones album. Marcuse’s reaction: Total aggressive dismissal; he despised it. With Adorno, interestingly enough, you always have this margin of curiosity. He was tempted, but how does something become a hit? Is it really true that the hitmaking process is totally manipulated. For example, if you look in the Introduction to Music Sociology, in the chapter on popular music, Adorno argues that a hit cannot be totally planned. There are some magic explosions of quality here and there. Adorno was much more refined and much more open at this level.

My answer, then, would be this vulgar one. Adorno and Horkheimer’s formal strategy was the correct one, but my main counterargument, which I develop a bit further in my Deleuze book, is that the key enigma concerning the failure of critical theory was their total ignorance and avoidance of the phenomena of Stalinism. I know, I did my homework; You have this general theory, which was very fashionable in the 1930s, of how all big systems - fascism, Stalinism - they approach the same model of total state control, blah, blah, blah, end of liberal capitalism. Then you have Marcuse’s very strange book, Soviet Marxism, which is totally dispassionate and very strange. Then you have some of the neo-Habermasians, like Andrew Arato, and so on, but they don’t so much advance a positive theory of Stalinism. What they do instead is this civil society stuff, which I think is of very

limited usefulness. Of course, civil society was a big motto in the last years of real socialism as a site of resistance. But from the very beginning, it was ambiguous. For example, in Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovsky - alright now he's a clown, but... If there is a civil society phenomenon, it's Zhirinovsky. Vladimir Volfovich Zhirinovsky is one of the founders of Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) which emerged in 1989 and advances a far-right, nationalist platform that has included promises to reclaim territory in Finland and Alaska from Russia's imperial empire and to use nuclear weapons. Although Zhirinovksy has been dismissed as a fascist, a xenophobe, and an anti-Semite whose extremist views threaten democracy in Russia, he and the LDPR have attracted popular support. The LDPR won the largest share--23%--of the popular vote and 15% of the seats in the 1993 federal assembly election. Zhirinovsky placed fifth in the 2000 presidential election. It's the same in Slovenia. Quite often, if I were to choose between the state and civil society, I'm on the side of the state.

Then you have in Adorno and Horkheimer, in their private letters, these kind of aggressive statements, but with no theory. Now isn't this an incredible thing - the dialectic of Aufklörung - the idea being the project of Aufklörung, of emancipation. The supreme question should be why did Marxism go wrong? But the Frankfurt School was too focused on anti-Semitism and Nazism to ask this question. How could they have ignored this? Even Habermas, he only has this totally boring, unsatisfying theory of belated modernization. The idea being that we don't have anything to learn from the East; it was a deadlock; the East has to catch up with us. It's not surprising, then, that Habermas is very unpopular in ex-East Germany, because basically his lesson is the worst West European appropriation: we don't have anything to learn from you, you have to join us. Habermas explicitly rejects any notion that any positive could emerge from the reunification of

the two Germanys as being potentially right-wing revisionism. The idea being that such thought can be functionalized, used by a right-wing, anti-American, anti-liberal, anti-Western-democracy rhetoric. So, again, this is my big problem with this idea of the dialectic of enlightenment. Although there is, of course, an element of truth in this basic insight that so-called permissive societies can also have forms of domination, what was later expressed by Marcuse's terms, "repressive tolerance," "repressive desublimation," nonetheless, they do it via a kind of false shortcut. The way they do it is basically, "Oh, there is something wrong there. The apparatus of the dialectic of Aufklärung, this basic idea of instrumental reason, domination over nature, and so on." Something wrong there. The analysis is not strong, not concrete enough. If the problem was "how did the dialectic of Aufklärung go wrong?" the focus should've been on Stalinism.

I say this, and people accuse me of Leninist-Stalinism, but no, sorry, I am from the East, I know what shit it was. I have no nostalgia for Stalinism. In simplistic terms, the paradox is that it's a relatively easy game to assess fascism. Hitler was bad guy who wanted to do some bad things, and really did many bad things. So, ok, with all the complexity, how did it function? The situation in Nazi Germany is fairly clear. But, my god, with the October Revolution, with Lenin, it's more complicated. Sorry, but if you read the reports, how did Lenin succeed, against even the majority of the politburo? There was a tremendous low-level explosion. People down below wanted more. However the revolution was twisted, there was an emancipatory explosion. The difficulty is thinking this explosion together with what happened later and not playing any of the easy, Trotskyite games. If only Lenin were to live two years longer, were to make the pact with Trotsky, blah, blah, blah. I don't buy this [line of argument]. No, the problem is how, as a result of first the socialist revolution,

you get a system that at a certain level was, in naïve terms, much more irrational.

For example, take my mental experiment. Compare two ordinary guys, in Germany and the Soviet Union, in 1937 let's say. First the German. Ok, a couple of provisos are necessary, I know. First, let's say you are not a Jew, not a communist, and you don't have accidental enemies in the Nazi apparatus. Now, with these conditions met, if you didn't meddle with politics, of course, you could live a relatively safe life. Incidentally, to give you some proof, there is a biography of Adorno that came out. Did you know that Adorno was going back to Germany until 1937? This gives you a slightly different image of Germany. But not in the Soviet Union. Wasn't it the case that 1937 was the high point of the purges? I mean, the fear was universal, literally anybody could be exterminated. You know, you didn't have this minimal safety of, you know, if I duck down, if I don't stick out, I may survive. Ha, Ha! No, under Comrade Stalin, no way, no way! [Chuckles] So, isn't this, my god, calling, calling for a kind of refined analysis? And, shit, you don't find it there. That's, for me, the tragedy of critical theory.

Again, it's even more ridiculous, with Habermas, living in West Germany. It was across the street from the GDR, but he simply treated it as a non-existent country. East Germany didn't exist for him. Now, isn't this a symptom of some serious theoretical flaw? And this is why I think Habermas is fundamentally a failure. He has this model of enlightened, modernity as an unfinished project - we should go on - it's not yet fully realized, blah, blah, blah. Sorry, I don't think this is a strong enough analytic apparatus to equate fascism with Stalinism, because they didn't fully realize the Enlightenment project. Again, we still lack an adequate theory of Stalinism.

You know who comes closest to my position here? The so-called revisionist scholars of the Soviet Era, like Shelia Fitzpatrick. Some of the more radical anti-communist historians try to dismiss them, saying they try to whitewash the horror, but I don't think so. They paint the horror. I've read Fitzpatrick's book - it's wonderful, in a horrible sense - *Everyday Stalinism*. See Shelia Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). It doesn't go into excessively big topics. She limits herself to Moscow. It asks a simple question: what did Stalinism mean? Not if you were a top nomenklatura and caught in the purges. How did Stalinism function at an everyday level? What movies did you watch? Where did you go shopping? What kind of apartment did you live in? How did it function? Historians are starting to ask the right questions. You know, you get a pretty horrible image of the extremely chaotic nature of life under Stalin.

Everybody emphasizes how there was a big purge in 1936-37, when one-and-a-half million people were thrown out of the Communist party. Yes, but one year later one million, two-hundred thousand people were readmitted. Now, I'm not saying it wasn't so bad. I'm just saying that the process was much more chaotic. There is one ingenious insight by Fitzpatrick. The game Stalin played was the pure super-ego game; Stalinism was Kafkaesque in the sense that it wasn't totalitarian. Ok, it was, ultra -totalitarian, but not in the superficial sense, where you get clear orders that must be obeyed. Stalin played a much more tricky game. Take collectivization. From the top, you received an order, say, "Cossacks should be liquidated as a class." It was not stated clearly what this order meant - dispossess them, kill them etc. That ambiguity was part of Stalin's logic. Being afraid of being denounced as too soft, local cadres went to extremes, and then, the interesting irony is that the only positive concrete

intervention of Stalin was his famous dizziness with success. Here, he would say, “No, comrades, we should respect legalities.” Stalin’s obscenity was that he put in this kind of abstract, superego injunction which threw you into a panic, and then he appeared as a moderate.

My final question might be impossibly broad, but it is one that I know interests many of your readers. Can you provide a concise account of the relationship that you see between Hegel and Lacan’s thought? Do you see a direct historical progression from Hegel’s dialectical theory of subjectivity to the Lacanian model of the barred subject and the nonexistence of the Big Other?

Ok, ha, ha! I will give you a punchline. If you were to ask me at gunpoint, like Hollywood producers who are too stupid to read books and say, “give me the punchline,” and were to demand, “Three sentences. What are you really trying to do?” I would say, Screw ideology. Screw movie analyses. What really interests me is the following insight: if you look at the very core of psychoanalytic theory, of which even Freud was not aware, it’s properly read death drive - this idea of beyond the pleasure principle, self-sabotaging, etc. - the only way to read this properly is to read it against the background of the notion of subjectivity as self-relating negativity in German Idealism. That is to say, I just take literally Lacan’s indication that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian cogito - of course, I would add, as reread by Kant, Schelling, and Hegel. I am here very old fashioned. I still think that basically this - the problematic of radical evil and so on - is philosophy, and all the rest is a footnote. [Chuckles]. I think that philosophy is something for which Spinoza laid the ground, but Spinoza’s edifice must be kicked out. Then it’s Kant transcendentalism, which is, I think, a much more radical notion than people are aware, because it totally turns around the relationship between infinity and finitude.

Kant's fundamental idea, which was correctly addressed by Heidegger, is that infinity itself is a category of finitude. It's something which can only be understood from the horizon of our finitude. Then you get Schelling, with this tremendous idea of historicity, the fall, temporality, of this tension within God. Schelling, I think, provided the only consistent answer to the question of how you could have, at the same time, evil and so on - not this cheap theodicy - and how to account for evil without dualism. Then, of course, you get Hegel. Of course, things are more complex. Hegel didn't know what he was doing. You have to interpret him.

Let me give you a metaphoric formula. You know the term Deleuze uses for reading philosophers - anal interpretation, bugging them. Deleuze says that, in contrast to other interpreters, he anally penetrates the philosopher, because it's immaculate conception. You produce a monster. I'm trying to do what Deleuze forgot to do - to bugger Hegel, with Lacan [chuckles] so that you get monstrous Hegel, which is, for me, precisely the underlying radical dimension of subjectivity which then, I think, was missed by Heidegger. But again, the basic idea being this mutual reading, this mutual bugging [Chuckles] of this focal point, radical negativity and so on, of German Idealism with the very fundamental (Germans have this nice term, *grundeswig*) insight of psychoanalysis.

It's a very technical, modest project, but I believe in it. All other things are negotiable. I don't care about them. You can take movies from me, you can take everything. You cannot take this from me. And let me go even further. This is horrible. If you will say, ok, but even here no let's go over binary logic. Do you ultimately use Hegel to reactualize Lacan, or the other way around? I would say the other way around. What really interests me is philosophy, and for me, psychoanalysis is ultimately a tool to reactualize, to render actual

for today's time, the legacy of German Idealism. And here, with all of my Marxist flirtings I'm pretty arrogant. I think you cannot understand Marx's *Capital*, its critique of the political economy, without detailed knowledge of Hegelian categories. But ultimately if I am to choose just one thinker, it's Hegel. He's the one for me. And here I'm totally and unabashedly naïve. He may be a white, dead, man or whatever the wrong positions are today, but that's where I stand.

~

#8
“OMG Some Leftists Would Lynch Me for That” —
Part I*

* Interview: Armen Aramyan, Nastya Podorozhny, Vladimir Mikheev, Gleb Golubkov; Photos: Aglae Gerasimova; Editing: Anastasia McAuliffe; Published: 16.11.2017; <https://doxajournal.ru/en/texts/zizek1>.

~
*Slavoj Žižek on the 'last fortress of Europe', ties between
God and erection and why everybody hates Slavoj Žižek*

~
*Before our interview, Slavoj Žižek asked us about our me-
dia and our attitude towards the conflict with Ukraine, so
we started talking about international politics. At a certain
point we began recording our discussion.*

~
In chorus [everybody except Žižek]: Bandera.

Žižek: Yeah, yeah. But do you know where he mostly was
in the 1930s?

Gleb: *In prison.*

Žižek: A Polish prison! He thought at that time that Poles
were more of a danger [than Russians — Ed.]!

Nastya: *I mean, he is from western Ukraine, which has
always had a complicated relationship with Poland.*

Žižek: Yeah, I know. But the problem is... I don't know
what is true, but all my Polish friends deny this relationship
problem. They claim something like: "No, Ukrainians are
our friends, they want to be with us," and so on.

Nastya: *This attitude has changed in recent years. I mean,
I've been living in Poland for the last 4 years and they are
becoming much more xenophobic towards Ukrainians.*

Žižek: [Surprised] Really? But why? Is this this European
arrogance, like they are the "real Europe"?

Nastya: *Because more and more Ukrainians come to Po-
land as they run away from the east of Ukraine.*

Žižek: Ah, this is the same story. It is quite comical how
almost every nation in ex-Yugoslavia is presenting itself as

the last frontier or the last fortress against the barbarian east, the “others”.

For us Slovenes, we were part of the Austrian Empire, we are the European civilization, and the Croats are already the primitive Balkans. For the Croats, they are Catholics, civilized, and the Serbs are Orthodox, primitive. And it goes on! For Serbs, they are the last fortress of Europe and some Bosnians, Albanians — they’re primitive and so on. But you know, the comedy goes on. For Austrians, we Slovenes are already barbarian and it’s them who are the last frontier. For the Germans, the Austrians are already too mixed, they are the civilised ones. For the French, the Germans are barbarian, strange. Here I prefer the Englishmen, who think all the continental Europe is like big Balkans — ridiculous, full of confusions... They are the true ones. It is quite comical, this obsession of being the last frontier, like “we defend”...

Vladimir: *Once you’ve said that Europe is the only place, where the enlightenment project is proceeding.*

Žižek: No, I’m well aware of what shit Europe is now, I can see this. A series of fiascos has hit Europe. The first fiasco is the immigrants. I don’t agree with those leftists who think we should just open ourselves to immigrants. No, I am very open, but I still think — oh my God, I will sound like a right-winger, some leftist could lynch me for that [Laughs] — that this wave of immigrants wasn’t simply “one million people decided to go to Europe”. You know, not all, but some of these immigrants, they do get a little bit possessively violent. [...]

But you know what really is a sad thing? I often go to Israel, to the West Bank, to Palestinians — and you have such Zionist Orthodoxy now in Israel! For example — I quote this in one of my books — recently the big rabbi of the Israeli army said that it says in the Ancient Talmud (or wherever) that when the Jewish army occupies a territory, their

soldiers have the right to rape local women. It was a scandal, but he remained the top rabbi. Now, you know, if an Arab were to say this, they would say: “Ooh, ISIS, fundamentalism...” and so on. It is very weird to hear modern day Israelis arguing in a direct religious way that one would expect more from the Muslims. Like, if you ask them: “Why do you have the right to the West Bank? Okay, you did lose that territory, but that was 2 thousand years ago and the Romans did this, not Muslims,” — they simply say: “No! The Bible says that the territory is ours. End of debate.” It is very sad that this type of reasoning is permitted.

So I have no illusions, but what I do like in Europe is that it did try to build some kind of a transnational above nation-state political block which should take care of common sub-minimal human rights or whatever and so on. It is failing now, I admit. The first failure was the refugees, and the second is that Brussels authorities totally capitulate to what I call now the new axis of evil. You know, countries like Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, now also Austria — these new anti-immigrant racist populists who are taking over there up to Baltic countries. I didn’t tell you a wonderful anecdote — it really happened about half a year ago. This is not a private rumor from some cafeteria. I think it was Latvia or Estonia maybe. To defend them from Putin or whatever, the USA symbolically sent 3 battalions of their soldiers as NATO help. Then the Ministry of Defense sent an official note to NATO to discover that some of these American soldiers are black. And when this aroused, it negatively excited the local population. So “could they please send soldiers who are not black” and so on.

These Baltic countries are interesting. Here’s what some people admitted to me when I was in Vilnius: when they were in the Soviet Union, not only did they have a little bit higher standard of living as for the USSR but also even a

little bit more intellectual freedom. For example, in social sciences (not in natural sciences, where it was different) the Soviet Union did not have a lot to offer, but they did have 2-3 things. One of them was that philosopher who's even now well-read, Ilyenkov — he is seriously taken even now — he was not just another apparatchik philosopher. He was very interesting. He was simply a Marxist, and this brought him so many troubles that he basically fell into alcoholism and killed himself in the 1970s. The other thing, you know, is the Semiotic School, Yuri Lotman, all of them. They were seriously read, but it was typical, it was not in Moscow, they wouldn't be tolerated there. It is the same with Parajanov in Georgia. The movies he was making there could be made because he was there...

Armen: *On the outskirts.*

Žižek: Yeah, and they were playing nice games. A friend of mine visited Tbilisi in the 70s and described a small provocation: while the big sleeping train was leaving for Moscow at Tbilisi station, the speakers announced: "The train for the Soviet Union is leaving the platform". It was silently tolerated, so it is not as simple as people claim "it was just a big Russian oppression". But that's also how your Russian Mikhail Bakhtin survived — he was moved to Kazan. He was there. And don't celebrate too much.

My friend Boris Groys, he is Russian, but now he works in Germany, and he tries to move to the USA, but it doesn't work... Anyway, he told me that he discovered now, you know, Bakhtin's famous work *Rabelais and His World* on François Rabelais where he developed his theory of carnival. Idiots, those western-leftists, celebrate this carnival freedom — slave is master, master is slave. No-no-no, he is much more ambiguous — it is discovered now by the manuscripts — you know what Bakhtin's secret model of carnival was?

The Stalinist Purges. [...] His model was scandalous! That's why I always say: don't celebrate carnival too much.

This carnival is reversal. Every totalitarian system, even every racist system has it. For example, in the American South in the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan was a carnival. It meant for the white people: "Let's get together, get drunk, let's lynch some black boys, let's rape some black girls," and so on and so on. No! Like, if you want to be really critical, I don't care about carnivals, but I want to have a better order. You know, every idiot can do carnival explosion. Don't you think that democratic societies are usually much more organized? Much more! Listen! If you read good books about Brezhnev era economy, beneath the superficial order of planning and so on, it was very chaotic. You have to bribe, find your way and so on. Denmark, Norway, Sweden — are you aware of how tightly organized these countries are? This may horrify you; I am a partisan of order, I really want order.

Vladimir: *I just want to ask you: in one of your interviews you said Trump is needed because he will shake the American system. Now you say that stability and order are better than carnival. So how—*

Žižek: Ah, because I thought that maybe I will be right. My idea is that America is so deeply rooted in this two-party system where nothing can happen and so on that he will trigger all the dangerous contradictions. It is even happening now. But of course, me supporting Trump — no way! You know, Trump is popular in Slovenia because his wife Melania is Slovene. And now they immediately discovered the small town from where she is, now you can buy Melania-wine, Melania-cake and whatever...

[Giggles] Maybe I was too optimistic that you need an idiot like Trump who is a trauma for the American establishment. What I was shocked with is this total unreadiness of the Democrats to confront the problem, "What did we do

wrong to lose against Trump?” Yes, probably Russians did try to influence the American elections, but sorry, the US are doing this all the time! I’m not saying Putin is innocent, but do you remember how Yeltsin was elected? Sometime in the mid-90s the Communist Party with Zyuganov almost had a chance to win. There was a direct American intervention — they sent their specialists and so on.

That’s the problem of Americans: if they do it, it is okay, they protect democracy, if another guy is doing it, it’s totalitarian. I am not pro-Putin, I’m just claiming how absolutely clear it is that Democrats didn’t lose because of the Russian intervention. They lost when they brutally got rid of Bernie Sanders. It’s proven now by the opinion polls. Without Bernie Sanders they lost at least 5-6 million votes. And now they’re just going on with these same polls, so no wonder that in her memoirs Hillary puts the blame on the Russians and Bernie Sanders. I am totally against Hillary, I’m disgusted!

Vladimir: *So you said that Trump can revive American politics. But what you think can revive Russian politics?*

Žižek: I don’t know. I don’t know. It is so difficult. I don’t believe in these pro-Western liberal reformists to beat Putin. Because I think that what you have with Putin here is just a part of the general global movement, which is very sad — it’s in China, in Turkey, even in America. Typical capitalist countries no longer need liberal democracy. It is much better for today’s capitalism if you are in a slightly conservative authoritarian country. You know who is the father of this? Lee Kuan Yew — the father of modern Singapore. He got this! There is a certain type of patriotic authoritarianism which can work much better for modern countries... And do you know that Deng Xiaoping introducing his reforms literally looked on Singapore? In India Modi is doing the same.

That's why Putin is not just a Russian aberration. It is, unfortunately, a tendency of today's capitalism. It's very sad. Or look at China. I mean, once I had a debate (years ago) with Fukuyama. A small debate, we just met somewhere for a little bit. And I told him: "Okay, I agree with you, communism lost, but isn't it a paradox that the best administrators of this global capitalism are ex-communists?" Because if you go to China, you'll see that basically the Communist Party is the best manager of capitalism.

What I'm saying is even though we all, as leftists, know that this bourgeois welfare state democracy is false, now something even worse is gradually emerging. I always repeat this: it is not Muslim immigrants who are the threat to European identity. It's the inability of the European Union to have a firm stand. For example, this scandal — Catalonia. This inability of the European Union to impose its position. I don't even care what this stand would have been. And it is the same with Orban in Hungary. First, everybody was embarrassed by him — now he is in, he's been accepted and so on. If you ask me, I am more of a pessimist now. I think this is the end of Europe. This is simply the end of Europe.

After an hour of talking, we finally got to ask Žižek the questions we had prepared.

Vladimir: *So, I think we can start to ask the questions from our list.*

Žižek: Ok. Sorry, please, yes, but let's do it quickly, I talk too much, please do it.

Nastya: *We would have stopped you before if it wasn't interesting! [Laughs]*

Armen: *Yeah, first I wanted to ask you, now that you count as one of the most popular contemporary thinkers—*

Žižek: I'm losing a lot because of my position towards immigrants, LGBT and so on. You cannot imagine how

much hatred I get! People say “popular”, but at the same time I have no real academic power. Everybody in United States will tell you: academic power is — forget popularity! — is whether you influence who gets a job, whose book is published, who gets some research grant and so on...

Nastya: And you don't get that.

Žižek: No. I am hated so much. This detail will amuse you: some of my friends asked me for a recommendation letter and then didn't get a job because of it! No-no-no, it is very brutal. Of course, conservatives and liberals hate me, for them I am a crypto-Stalinist and so on. But now leftists also hate me because of my position on Trump, although I obviously emphasize that Trump is a nightmare! But they all say: “You are pro-Trump!” and so on. There was even a nice theory, I almost liked it: I'm supporting Trump counting on Melania, my compatriot, and I want to get an invitation to the White House, you know. [All laugh] No-no-no, it's absolutely incredible.

Armen: I just meant that you are well-known, if we ask a random person...

Žižek: Yeah, but a random person is not from academic circles.

Armen: ...not from the academic circle, and ask them to name the most well-known philosopher or thinker, they will name you.

Žižek: Okay, if I were to be cynical, I would have said: “This demonstrates in what low state we are today if an idiot like me can be the best....” But sorry, let's go on.

Armen: Yeah, the question is: do you have any idea why it is like that, why you've become this well-known?

Žižek: Most of it is a veiled attack on me. Those people for whom I'm popular usually argue: “He's crazy, don't take him seriously, but at the same it's amusing, go read him,”

so... okay, maybe I'm a little bit guilty of it, that I tell obscene jokes, I accept it. And now I'm getting old, I care less and less. The political stuff that I'm saying... I do it more as a citizen's duty, because I feel like I have things to say which should have been said by somebody else at a much higher level. And so it's just ersatz, my real home is philosophy. Until now, do you know that it's approaching 100 — the number of books published on me? So it's not all that social comedy. And again, more and more because my mega-book *Less Than Nothing* (it was my dream to write a book which is over 1000 pages, like the Bible) — that book, then after that another serious book, *Absolute Recoil*, then another one, *Disparities*, then another one and so on. I'm really working on that.

Vladimir: *Once you said that philosophy starts from Kant and ends with Hegel, so do you think that progress in philosophy is possible?*

Žižek: Yes! I do, I do! I'm very — my God, some leftist would lynch me for that — I think that philosophy is a strictly European invention. This is so unpopular to say today. Take the great Asian systems: buddhism, taoism and so on — it's not philosophy, it's a kind of old-fashioned wisdom, and so on. They're now rehabilitating. My Japanese friend Kojin Karatani wrote a wonderful book about the importance of this early ionian materialism, Democritus and so on. They're incredibly important.

This doesn't mean other nations don't have extremely important systems of thinking, art and so on. But I do count you as Europe: Russia, this may surprise you. And if you ask me about the absolute Russian writer of the 20th century — of course, Andrei Platonov. Absolute hit with all my friends. I think that what you find in his *Chevangur* and so on is something incredible! He saw the — let's call it dangerous — nihilist, especially his other book, *The Foundation Pit*, you

know why it's breathtaking? He saw the destructive dimension of Bolshevism, but from within! He wasn't some kind of a liberal or external conservative opponent. And he gets this already in the 20s! It's fashionable to say by idiots that he was interesting only in the 20s, that later, in the 40s, he had to become more conformist... Even those novels are extremely interesting. The same with — okay, everybody laughs at him today — Malevich. But they even like his apparently more realist paintings a lot. Because he somehow survived [...] and in 1930-31 did some paintings of kolkhoz girls and so on. But if you look at the structure!

Vladimir: *So, what about problems in philosophy?*

Žižek: There absolutely are some! Maybe it would be problematic to call it “progress”. But for example: I'm a big fan of Plato. I don't buy this liberal idea of “totalitarian Plato vs better, more open Aristotle”. No, I'm for Plato! I will give you two examples. Whatever you say against Plato, totalitarianism and so on, read his Republic: there are no slaves there, while for Aristotle it was natural, for him slaves are speaking tools and so on. And even more interesting, in his Republic Plato emphasises that women are equal.

Armen: *They can even be soldiers.*

Žižek: Yeah. Aristotle ontologises sexual difference, you know, his basic couple “hyle-morphe” (“form-matter”) is like “masculine form is screwing, fucking feminine matter [Giggles] to create everything”.

So we have early materialism, the Ionian School — incredible achievement. The big one, Plato to Aristotle... Then Medieval times are bullshit. Here I agree with Hegel. I don't believe that Thomas Aquinas is of any interest. He's the worst systematiser. But then the one who really took it over — he was a genius, a follower of Descartes — was Nicolas Malebranche. He developed this up to the point of madness: he has this beautiful dualist theory, occasionalism: God is observing you all the time when you raise your hand. It's not

that you directly influence your hand, because they are totally separated. God sees your intention and moves your hand. He [Malebranche] then again refers to erection. His idea is that men became too arrogant, people thought that they can directly dominate their body and, to punish them, God says: “You will have a penis, but you will not dominate its movement.” It will rise up when you don’t know. Not so much Spinoza, but Kant-Hegel, it’s breathtaking.

What I like, even about Lenin, is when things were wrong for him, in 1914, World War I, he did what every leftist does — he withdrew to Switzerland and began to read Hegel. And you know what I like so much? He didn’t read so much historical works of Hegel, religion history, phenomenology. No, he read logic, which for Hegel defines it ironically as thoughts of God before God created the world — isn’t this beautiful, ironic? Okay, Hegel, then I have great problems with post-Hegelian philosophy.

19th century, Marx is interesting, but he is most interesting where he implicitly refers to Hegel in his critique of political economy and so on, I consider early Marx totally vulgar and unimportant: German ideology, all this aggressive materialism. Nietzsche... I was never a big fan. I still think Heidegger is a great philosopher, although he was a Nazi. I think all this is a tremendous progress. And here, for me, progress is not simply some linear line, “Oh, we go forward”, the progress is when it becomes impossible to think the same way we were thinking before, just in this sense. For example, in music. The composers of this early modernism, they brought changes after which you can’t simply compose in the old tonal way. And even if you write tonal stuff, you must somehow react to this atonality and so on. So this is progress for me, that some topic is introduced, and even if you try to think in the old way, you’re already reacting.

~

#9

“Pornography No Longer Has Any Charm” — Part II*

* Interview: Armen Aramyan, Nastya Podorozhnyaya, Vladimir Mikheev, Gleb Golubkov; Photos: Aglae Gerasimova; Editing: Anastasia McAuliffe; Published: 19.01.2018; Second part; <https://doxajournal.ru/en/texts/zizek2>.

~

*Slavoj Žižek on 'great thinkers',
the future of psychoanalysis and on his favourite porn.*

~

Vladimir: *So could you name a person or a movement that changed philosophy for the last time?*

Žižek: Maybe I'm too optimistic, this is my view, but there is a whole movement that is still creating a big revolution — the movement usually called “French structuralism”. And I distinguish it from so-called deconstructionism, I think that figures like Althusser, not so much Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, I think that they're more important than Derrida and so on. The true genius of pure philosophy is Gilles Deleuze for me, but all that field — Levi-Strauss, Deleuze, Lacan, Althusser — it's still maybe the last big revolution. I don't think we're over it, but there are already some interesting new trends. I don't know if they're popular here. Graham Harman, Meillassoux, this new so-called object-oriented ontology. They are interesting for me, I have contact with them. I know Meillassoux, he's a wonderful guy, and what I admire in Meillassoux is his asceticism. He wrote one short book, after finitude, but do you know that this book is a part of his thesis, which is two thousand pages? And he doesn't want to publish them! [Laughs]

Vladimir: *He's right.*

Žižek: He's right, yeah, okay, then unfortunately he was side-tracked, and now it's people like Graham Harman. Although I debated with him, I think he and guys like him detect the right failure of this deconstructionist philosophy: you avoid big ontological questions, you just do the critical thinking. If you ask a deconstructionist philosopher or somebody like Michel Foucault, does man have a soul, his answer would be: “In which discursive field episteme can you even

talk about this?” Like, they basically prohibit direct naive questions. For them, the last reality is episteme, a field of understanding and so on, and I think we should risk to return to big philosophical questions of what reality is, what the world is and so on.

The problem here, though, is how to do it without falling back into pre-Kantian realism when you simply talk about the outside world. This is why, with all my sympathy for Lenin, I think his work on materialism and empirio-criticism is the worst book even written. Even in Lenin’s philosophical notebooks, that fragment on Hegel, you can clearly see his limit, which is Hegel’s logics of essence. Lenin didn’t know what is a concept in the Hegelian sense.

We also have the “brain” sciences today. They are not philosophy, but I’m not simply opposed to them. Forget about big popularizers who are idiots, like Steven Pinker. He hates me personally. He is a simplifier, you should distinguish popularizers and guys who do science. But you know what’s so fascinating about all this interest in evolutionism, Richard Dawkins and so on? Because philosophy neglected the big metaphysical questions, these sciences started rising them. Isn’t this ironic? All these questions — does the world have a beginning, or a limit, are we humans really free and so on — 100 and 50 years ago they were philosophical questions, now they’re almost scientific questions. Neurology’s struggling to determine is there a place for freedom, and quantum cosmologists are researching whether the world has a beginning.

Armen: *Speaking of contemporary leftist theory, what do you think about this movement of accelerationism?*

Žižek: They think that precisely capitalism at its most crazy, as this future speculation, is where we come closest to communism. They even published it, I’m afraid to publish

for Russia Today because I'm afraid that I will be manipulated in some sense, nonetheless... this idea of "left behind", you know, it's a popular theological idea. I always love them because they're crazy, these American fundamentalist Christian writers, who deal with the topic of "left behind", like God took all those who really believed in him for himself because it will be Armageddon, and we are all "left behind", we are not loved enough by God to be taken.

But I think that this is happening with capitalism mostly today, that more and more you have the ultra-developed countries and more and more there are those people who are "left behind", but I think those "left behind" should not be simply "left behind", at some point I still believe in this — I'm sorry to use this old Marxist term — in a dialectical reversal the most progressive development can be combined with those "left behind". And I've recently read a wonderful book on it. You know who Tuaregs are, those crazy [people] in the middle of Africa? They are absolutely "left behind", but as such, they all now have mobile phones, computers, they live in the same state. And this is my idea, that maybe this ultimate post-modern way of living — "we are nomads" and so on — will find an echo in them. I'm always fascinated by this idea that true progress is not just that the winning side wins more and more, but true progress is the reversal of the very standard of progress, where what was perceived as "left behind", "nothing", all of a sudden becomes one side where you can move even beyond modernity.

So this is my point against accelerationism. That no, it will have to come to this detour — I was shocked by this. I know one interview by Negri, where he says he walks by a company — a fabric factory in Venezia, the industrial part of Venice — where they're closing down the store and he says: "Look, they're dead, but they don't know that they're dead,

all those oppressed workers”. No, I think that it’s not as simple as that. I think that if anything, this pseudo-Deleuzian Negri-Hardt model of revolution, multitude, dynamics and so on, its pace, I think that their mode of revolution is past, and they’re aware of it. You know, half a year ago Negri gave an interview where he says that we should stop with this multitudes, with no-power, we have to rehabilitate two things: the idea of taking political power and the idea of not just — Deleuzians like this horizontal connection, no hierarchy, just multitudes connecting — no, Negri now discovered leadership, hierarchical organization — I’m all for that. And so, now people will tell me: “Then are you for Putin?” No, I think that the problem with this anarchic left is that it isn’t that simple: to solve the problems of ecology and so on we need very strong large organizations, the problem is precisely how to do it not in the old totalitarian way.

We have to reinvent power structures. If not, for me the model of “What went wrong?” is Venezuela. Chávez tried to do local democracy, it all worked because there was Chávez, one strong leader. So my irony’s over always those who want more decentralized democracy end up focusing on ultra-strong leader who guarantees this.

Gleb: *Since we’re talking about contemporary philosophy, could you name three living philosophers... who are alive, whom we should follow or read?*

Žižek: Ah, you know, I would prefer to name three living philosophers who are dead. [Laughs] You know, I don’t think there are any big names at this moment. The last big name was maybe Alain Badiou, but I’m highly critical of him. Although we’re good friends, I simply don’t follow his model. And even in analytic philosophy in United States, even in this more leftist social-democratic tradition — look, Habermas’s outside, he’s the living dead. And that’s why

he's personally very traumatised, he's simply an old euro-centric Enlightenment guy. It's not just Habermas, but the whole Frankfurt school, did you notice how they totally avoid the problem of Stalinism? They're obsessed with fascism. Okay, Herbert Marcuse wrote a book called *Soviet Marxism*, but it still doesn't provide an answer.

There is another fashion I'm totally opposed to — the so-called analytic Hegelianism. The big star there is Robert Brendon, the big book is *Making It Explicit* — basically they read Hegel not as a big metaphysician, but as a theorist who systematized all the rules of our discourse: the rules on how to argue, how to think — they epistemologized Hegel. The other thinker close to this movement is Robert Pippin: I have contacts with him, I like him, but he's way too liberal for me, and he secretly reduces Hegel to Kant.

These guys aren't real big names though. Now comes my feminist side: I love the fact that in the last decades there were four really good books on Hegel, and all written by women. The first one is already forty years old, *Hegel and the Critique of Metaphysics* by Beatrice Longness, then you have *L'avenir de Hegel* by Catherine Malabou. The third one is Rebecca Comay with an excellent book *Mourning Sickness* about Hegel and the French revolution. And finally, my good colleague, Alenka Zupančič, Slovene, the author of the book on Hegel and comedy [*The Odd One In* — Ed.]. Maybe there's a wonderboy somewhere — in Russia or China, I don't know, — but among the people I know, there's no thinker I would call "big".

If you move it back like twenty-thirty-forty years, okay, the obvious candidates are Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and so on. Even in analytic philosophy, you know, the sad thing is that there were a couple of potential geniuses. For example, thirty-forty years ago Saul Kripke published a book on naming and necessity, and then he did another book on

Wittgenstein, but after that he disappeared, he went crazy, he got involved in sexual scandals with students and so on and he was totally ruined. And, unfortunately, you can see potential for a true genius — and then they go down. So, unfortunately, I will still tell you: to read a genius, read Alain Badiou. But he's also approaching a limit. I mean, years ago he was criticising me for publishing many books — now he's writing more than me. Three-four books a year — you can see how he's getting old.

Armen: *Psychoanalysis is now in this ambiguous situation, on the one side it's, like, dead--*

Žižek: You know, the first proclamation of psychoanalysis being dead was in 1910... But I think now its time is coming. Psychoanalysis is not this simplistic theory that we have inner sexual drives that's being oppressed because of the civilization. Freud's problem is exactly the opposite one, how sexuality's antagonist failed in itself. For example, Freud would be delighted to see the nowadays situation, where with all the permissivity — you can do whatever you want in sex and so on — we have never had more impotence and frigidity. That's what bothered Freud.

The problem for Freud is not the father who prohibits you — “Don't do it with boys or girls!” - because in this situation you will rebel, it all will be okay. The problem is a father — and I've had such a father, it was a nightmare — who was asking me: “Were you already with some girls? How did you do it? Do you want me to explain it to you?” I was ashamed, this was a horror. Freud was very attentive to these paradoxes of self-sabotaging, he called it “the death drive”. You're not a right-winger when you say this: it's impossible to reduce this sabotaging to just an effect of social oppression. This left Freudian myth of how we will really start enjoying life if we just get rid of social oppressions — it's totally wrong, it's totally wrong.

Jacques Lacan said something wonderful about atheism. I quote it often. He says that Dostoevsky was wrong when he said: “If there is no God, everything’s permitted”. Lacan said the opposite, which is true: “If there’s no God, then everything’s prohibited”. The aphorism “if there is God, then everything’s permitted” is the definition of religious fundamentalism: you can kill, rape, do anything if you can claim that the God is on your side.

Vladimir: *There is an opinion of Karl Popper that psychoanalysis is impossible to falsify, thus it’s not a scientific field.*

Žižek: Psychoanalysis is clearly not a science. I think it even has an authentic philosophical dimension. It has radical ontological dimension. My good friend, a member of my Sloven-Lacanian gang, Alenka Zupančič, has recently published a book *What Is Sex?* It’s not a sex manual, the title confuses people. She explores wonderfully in this short book why psychoanalysis matters for philosophy, why psychoanalysis is not simply a science about a certain domain, but it’s a basic ontological thinking about how we relate to reality. So I don’t see a problem here with psychoanalysis, we should just use this reproach to clarify what it really is. Okay, give me the last one now.

Armen: *Firstly, before the last question, I wanted to ask you: what do you think of Bruno Latour and his actor-network theory?*

Žižek: More interesting than Graham Harman, his idea of this relation theory and so on. But still, I remain attached to the notion of subjectivity. Not in this transcendental sense, but I think that subjectivity is an irreducible dimension — not in the sense of “inner life”, self-experience... You know, what is subject. And that’s my problem with him. Although he is interesting and so on. Okay, fuck you, go to the last one.

Vladimir: *Maybe last two...*

Armen: *Okay, the last question is about pornography...*

Žižek: Yeah, but this is so boring. Don't you think that today pornography is irrelevant? It no longer has any charm. You know what I mean? Subversive charm... You get it. What interests me much more is this real-life pornography. For example, yesterday I read — on the flight here in Times magazine — about the exploding popularity of silicone, plastic bodies of women. And they're quite exquisite, you know. It's not just something that you blow up as a big balloon. The silicone's soft, it's warm and so on. I think that it's not even virtual sex because you have some kind of a robot partner. It will become more and more important until we don't even need a real partner. It's already happening!

Here's an anecdote, maybe I mentioned it somewhere: my son, who is 18, is in high school. Last year I had to meet the head of the class. And you know what she told me? She found out that in the last 10–15 years boys and girls are discovering sex later, later and later. Like, 15 years ago they started sexual life when they were 16 or even 15. Now it has moved to 17–18. They're so obsessed with virtual sex and playing at all — not even sex, the games and so on! I think that it's a paradox, a tragedy, that precisely now, when sex is permissive and so on, it's disappearing.

Armen: *Yeah, but actually my question would be... Even you said that actually pornography is a very massive system, porn industry and--*

Žižek: Absolutely! But nonetheless...

Armen: *[Giggles] And the question is: there's no theory of pornography, there's no theorised system...*

Žižek: That too, although in France they did some stuff... But it's not only pornography, there is another domain like that which is extremely important, I mentioned it in my talk

today: video games. Did you know that 3–4 years ago they already earned more money than movies and TV altogether? They're absolutely by far the most important, amusing field and there are only a couple of books, not really good...

Armen: *Actually, there is a game studies movement in Russia.*

Žižek: Ah, that's nice, then maybe you are really more progressive. Because I know a couple of books, but they are simply not interesting. So I think... Now it's fashionable to say that TV series are more important than films, that the spirit has moved from Hollywood to TV series. But you know how complex some of these new video games are? They're no longer just like "press your finger fast" or whatever, no. We're just not ready to take some phenomena seriously.

Armen: *But if there would be some kind of a discipline [studying pornography], a movement, from what do you think would they begin?*

Žižek: What I fear is that it would be dominated by politically correct pseudo-leftist idiots. And they will just try to show how we're all exploited, manipulated there and so on and so on — it's much more ambiguous. You cannot just reduce it to this absolute manipulation: women are objectified, and so on, whatever, whatever, sex is totally alienated... I think that sex is always alienated. I don't believe in this. Okay, I'm a great believer in romantic love, passion...

Vladimir: *What kind of problems and questions can we raise in this status of porn?*

Žižek: I cannot answer this question because I'm not a specialist, but I always try to challenge the dogma and first ask with what type of subjectivity, how are we constructed as viewers? The usual vulgar theory is just to get excited, to masturbate and so on. I don't think you identify with a guy

— if you're a standard heterosexual, I think you identify with a pure gaze. You want to witness a woman enjoying, not a man.

Nastya: *And what about women? What are women gazing at?*

Žižek: Uh... I hope that the same. I think it's asymmetrical.

Nastya: *You mean a man enjoying?*

Žižek: No no, they don't care and they are right. [Laughs] A woman enjoying, yeah. That's my spontaneous idea. Although I will show you radical asymmetry. It's a part of the standard heterosexual porn movie — mostly for men — that there is a lesbian scene, but never a male homosexual scene. It's totally prohibited. Now, the conclusion I draw from this is not who is better, who is worse, it's just that... I never believed in this symmetry. I claim that lesbianism is something fundamentally different from male homosexuality in its psychic economy.

Nastya: *And you don't think that society might have impacted that vision of male homosexuality?*

Žižek: Yeah, but now comes my point! Not in the simple sense that because gay porn is not masculine enough, it's much more ambiguous. I'm not a theorist here, but I'll share a personal experience which affected me deeply when I was serving in the army. First, it was absolutely homophobic. You know, if it was discovered that a soldier is gay, he was thrown out of the army, and for those couple of days before he was thrown out he had to suffer these ritualistic beatings. For example, when he was sleeping, somebody would put a pillow on his head, and then people would pull out their belts and beat him.

But at the same time, everyday life was so deeply penetrated by homosexual male innuendos. Like, in my unit,

when I met a friend after awakening, we never said “good morning” or whatever. The standard phrase was “I smoke yours.” “How are you? I will smoke yours.” “Yes, thanks, I will also smoke yours,” and so on. All those dirty games like when you are waiting in line, we were playing these disgusting games all the time. Some of them stick a finger up your ass from behind, then pull it out quickly, then you look around, “Ha ha! It wasn’t me!”, they all laugh, it was so primitive! So this is what fascinated me so much. This was absolute homophobia, but at the same time the whole space was being oversaturated with those innuendos.

Nastya: *So that might mean that they are interested in male homosexuality.*

Žižek: Absolutely.

Nastya: *Then why doesn’t that exist in porn? Why is it not in mainstream porn?*

Žižek: What’s interesting is another thing. You have a special subgenre — I’ve seen some of them — of gay pornography. You have it. But I don’t think that you have it as expanded as lesbian pornography.

Armen: *Because lesbian porn is considered mainstream.*

Žižek: It’s considered more mainstream.

Nastya: *So why is that?*

Žižek: I don’t have a good answer. These are my limits, you know. All I can say is that it has to do with women being constructed in a different way. It’s not just male chauvinism. I don’t think this means lesbianism is less subversive. All this bullshit about how subversive homosexuality is, I don’t think it’s as simple as that — it’s prohibited, but at the same time, in every military elite and so on, homosexuality plays a role. I read a biography of Tchaikovsky, your great one. You know, he was gay, but he had friends in some military circles

— high-rank officers and so on. So I think that this prohibition of male homosexuality is not because male homosexuality is more oppressed, but it's basically the power structure defending itself more. It's closer to the center of power or however. You know, every power has its secret. Homosexuality is not simply a transgression of power, it's the secret aspect of power itself. And that's mostly why it's prohibited.

I think it's more radical, that there's something in the way power structures function in our society which has a certain homosexual logic. It's there, but it has to be kept out of sight. You know, because the paradox of power is always that its basic mechanism should be invisible. I don't believe in transparent power. I believe in power which, for example, the big models of power like Sparta show, their homosexuality was almost open. They had their soldiers forming a couple, because they discovered that if your partner and you are fighting together, you will be more ashamed to appear a coward in front of him or you will help him more. And I like this idea that when something is prohibited, it doesn't mean it's external, we fear it.

Maybe we prohibit it because it's too close to us. Sorry, I have to finish it, I'm close to collapsing.

Gleb: *And just to end on a positive note, what kind of porn do you like?*

Žižek: I'm not kidding when I say this: very rarely you find pornography when you can feel that they're not just playing, that they got caught in the game, and you know where you can find this? When something fails. I believe that sexuality is the great practice of failure.

Have you heard the statement by Samuel Beckett? "Try again, fail again, fail better". I have a suspicion that this was basically sexual advice at first. Because I learned that when Beckett was young, he effectively helped some psychiatrist

in helping young people with their sexual problems and so on. It's not a joke. The great eroticism is when you declare love. Do you know what's a charming love message? If I fail the right way, it can be much more erotic than if I just do it right. Sexuality is confusing.

On the other hand, a psychiatrist told me that when somebody — usually a man — has impotence problems, the worst thing is to do some Buddhist meditation: “Don't think about it, just act, just do it...” He says that what works — and I love it — is the opposite, a bureaucratic procedure. He says: “Sit down with your partner and try to write a detailed plan in a Stalinist way. Like, ‘First, for two minutes we kiss. Then, you will put my finger here, there, and over there.’” And then you get engaged in a debate like: no, one minute of kissing and two minutes of that other thing. And then it gets so ridiculous that finally one of you say: fuck it, let's just fuck — and you do it. [Giggles] I absolutely believe in this, uh, bureaucratic approach. The worst thing to say is “Don't think, just do it”. That's the most terrifying pressure that you can imagine.

Well, this interview was not exactly 20 minutes...

~

#10

Why Only a Super-Anthropocentrism and the Reading of Hegel Can Save Us*

* A Conversation with Slavoj Žižek: Why Only a Super-Anthropocentrism and the Reading of Hegel can Save Us; October 20, 2021; Leonardo Caffo, Slavoj Zizek.



The following interview between Slavoj Žižek and Leonardo Caffo was recently published in the Italian magazine Sette—the weekly supplement of the daily newspaper, Corriere della Sera. It has been translated for Public Seminar by Thomas Winn.



Slavoj Žižek is one of a few living philosophers whose ideas have been translated into more than sixty languages. His thought remains decisively important for contemporary philosophy, bringing with it implications which stretch far and wide across art, literature, science, and politics. His worldwide fame is backed up by the longevity of decades of research.

In his rereading of Marx, Freud, Hegel, and Lacan, Žižek has built up a monumental collection of work. Films, musical works, and documentaries have been published, that, together with his thought, attempt to delineate and sketch out what it means to be human today, the greatest challenges appearing in the not so distant future, how to question capital without destroying capitalism, or, as with his latest book *Hegel in a Wired Brain* [Italian version: *Hegel e il cervello postumano* (Ponte alle Grazie)], the question of what happens in the event of human Singularity, the moment when (potentially) our brains become digitally interconnected.



Leonardo Caffo: *In your opinion, how healthy is contemporary philosophy, and what state is it in?*

Slavoj Žižek: Let us say that philosophy is contested between two very classic versions of “the end of philosophy.” One, being the most obvious, is that which tends to resolve

its greatest questions of meaning with a kind of extreme scientism: the cognitive sciences, neuro-philosophies, and a quantum mechanics which is not even fully understood but is used to solve every dilemma of the spirit. And then, on the other side, we find a historicism which tends to secularize all conceptual questions. In part, philosophy's unhealthiness is also connected to silly infighting in academia, the false and nonsensical division between continental philosophy and analytical philosophy (when in fact there is only good or bad philosophy), and a broader difficulty to make people see how philosophy's greatest questions of meaning, questions of sense, are crucial if we are to understand the gigantic epochal transformations which are well underway—epidemics, climate change, and political and economic earthquakes. It is a paradoxically interesting moment for philosophy. "The end of philosophy" has always been given lip service, and yet it is precisely today that we ought to be that much more capable of pointing out the philosophical knots that crucially intertwine with what is going on today.

This is also what you do with your latest book on Hegel, where you tell us something about the future of human subjectivity after the supposed interconnection of our brains with increasingly pervasive technological implants.

Yes, but the point is that it does not even matter if all these great prophecies concerning our interconnected brains actually take place. What interests me is what *would* happen if it does. How would our conception of the unconscious change, if, for example, we really could communicate with others directly through our mind? Or, what would remain of sex as we know it if we could directly interconnect our enjoyment without physical effort? These are indeed posthuman scenarios, but they do not concern the technical features of what being posthuman will look like, well not as such. I am simply asking myself: what will remain of humanity if, through

technology, everything that constitutes a human is lost? This is an intrinsically philosophical question which is irresolvable by science or history. It is a question which demonstrates the value of our work today to the degree that we manage to avoid entrenching ourselves into obscure philosophical systematizations—like what we are seeing with those great returns to realism and abstract metaphysics, and not to mention, what we are also seeing with the exclusionary aseptic questions of those analytical philosophies that do not dare to immerse themselves into what is actually going on out there.

Are you referring to philosophers such as Graham Harman or Markus Gabriel (with whom I have also spoken to in this newspaper)?

Yes, of course. Both Harman and Gabriel do a great job with those general questions that concern philosophy. Yet if these questions—of what reality means, what freedom means, what objectivity means—are not immersed into the urgency of a world bent backwards by a virus and digitalization, then there is a real risk of leaving the philosophical terrain open to various forms of skepticism. I think that would be a pretty serious error which can easily be avoided. In Italy, you have great philosophers who are celebrated all over the world; think of Giorgio Agamben, with whom however, I have not shared his approach to Covid, as it lays too close to those easy reactionary conspiracy theories (like: “the green pass limits our freedom. . .” as if dying from Covid has not limited it that much more), or Gianni Vattimo, who is a great friend and with whom in Turin I have often spoken about our differences from the present formation of Marxist thought.

But has Agamben not also immersed his philosophy into our current situation, using it to resolve such matters in the same way as you have just suggested before?

Of course, but seeking to use those theoretical tools that he is fond of (in his case, using Michel Foucault's biopolitics) is a clumsy way to thrust philosophy into the present, as these specific tools do not resolve newer and more complex questions. It is obviously clear that when abstracted, limiting the freedom of a population through prohibitive health regulations is a serious thing to contend with, but, in practice, given that the world which has produced this virus has in the first place been formed from far more serious atrocities, what are we meant to do? Agamben has only reasoned with the consequences of Covid. I think that philosophy should primarily be concerned with its roots.

What then is to be said about anthropocentrism, even if it is, perhaps, a reductive term?

I do not share in the kind of extreme victim mentality played out by some ecological philosophies: "We are all equal to every other living thing, we must all stop operating in an anthropocentric way." What is required from us in this moment is, paradoxically, a kind of super-anthropocentrism: we should control nature, control our environment; we should allow for a reciprocal relationship to exist between the countryside and cities; we should use technology to stop desertification or the polluting of the seas. We are, once again, responsible for what is happening, and so we are also the solution. The theme underlying my book on Hegel is that contemporary philosophy should have a proper Hegelian attitude when faced with issues such as working with dialectics. We are being called to not propose simple solutions, to not play the victim, to not be foolishly accusatory (i.e., "the evil West"), and to not take on those almost well-rounded conspiracy theories.

You also take this complex position towards issues such as racism, sexism, political correctness. . .

Obviously. Thinking that things can be resolved with “everyone is the same, everyone is a friend, a brother, a sister; let us use a nice neutral language” is nonsensical. In the end, it causes more harm than good. The issue of gender cannot only be a matter of ethics, so also the issue of racism. The point is not the banal task of respecting each other in an abstract way. Instead, it is a question of how we ought to bring together differing moralities and cultures and those unsettling monstrosities that we find in ourselves in the encounter with a stranger, and it is also the question of why it is that we can criticize Europe as much as we want with the flag of anticolonialism, as Europe is the only philosophical construction in which there are possibilities for an advanced ethics or a critical thought, which were given life a millennia ago with Thales. Political correctness which reacts to things by canceling them will impoverish a kind of thinking which necessarily passes through contradictions and leaps to ideas which are often rotten and politically incorrect themselves. What would happen to my politically incorrect anecdotes from European or American cinema (and to those readers who are used to them)?

Do universities and academia in general help towards perceiving philosophy as that which can immerse itself in the pressing issues of today, and perhaps resolve them?

No. Above all in the south of Europe, of which I think you know all too well, universities are prepossessed on defending a kind of partition of positions, in keeping power, on giving positions to their often shoddy students, and, in the end, being unwilling to generate a type of philosophy which is able to be perceived as both deep and interventionalist. There is no difference between philosophical research and philosophical intervention, except for those who do the first without knowing how to do the second—who then provide silly, unfounded academic excuses.

The risk, then, that a scientific vision could replace our conceptual ability is a concrete one, as you claim in your book.

The risk is concrete, actual, but ready to be circumvented by trying to explain why, for example, in view of our potentially interconnected brains (the topic that I confront in this most recent work of mine) the question of its probable technological potentiality is overshadowed by the question of how our species will change. Therefore, in some way, it is also a question involving potential tragedy (again, in respect to you and your work on the posthuman, I am a lot more critical of what this will mean for human subjectivity). We need to restore robust hermeneutical horizons, to demonstrate how most things in the future will not depend purely on an acceptance of data and scientific discoveries, but on our own capability to know how to interpret and manage their effects, looking to understand what is really at stake. We are free to make all of the proclamations that we want about the return to what is real in philosophy, but if then we do not confront actual ongoing conditions then we are condemning philosophy to its own disappearance, which will not be pleasant for anyone. There is a strictly concrete need for a type of thinking which can think both transcendently and be translated quickly in to actual political, artistic, and technical visions.

Is there space for a philosophy like this?

There is plenty of space. But we must defend—and in repeating this, I am probably disappointing many of my followers who side with the radical left—those bastions of critical thought such as Europe, deeply reform the universities, and hermeneutically oversee many of contemporary science's unquestioned conquests. Doing such requires that we do not reignite the fire of conspiracy theories, hiding their power alongside old philosophical concepts. The task of philosophy

then, is to focus on the “how” of things. Having such an approach is complex. It is one which does not want to propose solutions quickly, where “white” can be easily distinguished from “black.” Is the future digital? Not quite—not if digitalization is not compatible with ecology. Is feminism necessary? Of course, but if it builds itself up by being politically correct then it will implode. Are we truly antiracist? In theory yes, but when we find ourselves passing under houses in a neighborhood where there are different cultures and differing moral compasses, we risk the possibility of every certainty collapsing. Is anthropocentrism wrong? Not entirely, given that, as I said before, we are now required to adhere to a super-anthropocentrism if we want to save humanity’s existence on planet Earth. Obviously, I am simplifying things, but it helps in letting you understand what I mean when I speak about the task of contemporary philosophy.

~

Leonardo Caffo is a philosopher, writer, and curator. He is currently the Philosopher in Residency at the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art and Professor of Art, Media and Fashion at NABA Milan.

Translator Thomas Winn is a PhD candidate at the University of Dundee.

Slavoj Žižek is a philosopher and cultural critic. He is a professor at the European Graduate School, International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London, and a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His books include First as Tragedy, Then as Farce; Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle; In Defense of Lost Causes; Living in the End Times; and more.

~

Appendix:
An In-depth Analysis on Slavoj Žižek's Oeuvre*
Matthew Sharpe

* “An In-depth Analysis on Slavoj Žižek's Oeuvre” by Matthew Sharpe;
<https://iep.utm.edu/zizek/>

Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian-born political philosopher and cultural critic. He was described by British literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, as the “most formidably brilliant” recent theorist to have emerged from Continental Europe.

Žižek’s work is infamously idiosyncratic. It features striking dialectical reversals of received common sense; a ubiquitous sense of humor; a patented disrespect towards the modern distinction between high and low culture; and the examination of examples taken from the most diverse cultural and political fields. Yet Žižek’s work, as he warns us, has a very serious philosophical content and intention. He challenges many of the founding assumptions of today’s left-liberal academy, including the elevation of difference or otherness to ends in themselves, the reading of the Western Enlightenment as implicitly totalitarian, and the pervasive skepticism towards any context-transcendent notions of truth or the good.

One feature of Žižek’s work is its singular philosophical and political reconsideration of German idealism (Kant, Schelling and Hegel). Žižek has also reinvigorated the challenging psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, controversially reading him as a thinker who carries forward founding modernist commitments to the Cartesian subject and the liberating potential of self-reflective agency, if not self-transparency. Žižek’s works since 1997 have become more and more explicitly political, contesting the widespread consensus that we live in a post-ideological or post-political world, and defending the possibility of lasting changes to the new world order of globalization, the end of history, or the war on terror.

This article explains Žižek’s philosophy as a systematic, if unusually presented, whole; and it clarifies the technical

language Žižek uses, which he takes from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxism, and German idealism. In line with how Žižek presents his own work, this article starts by examining Žižek's descriptive political philosophy. It then examines the Lacanian-Hegelian ontology that underlies Žižek's political philosophy. The final part addresses Žižek's practical philosophy, and the ethical philosophy he draws from this ontology.

1. Biography

Slavoj Žižek was born in 1949 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He grew up in the comparative cultural freedom of the former Yugoslavia's self-managing socialism. Here—significantly for his work—Žižek was exposed to the films, popular culture and theory of the noncommunist West. Žižek completed his PhD at Ljubljana in 1981 on German Idealism, and between 1981 and 1985 studied in Paris under Jacques Alain-Miller, Lacan's son-in-law. In this period, Žižek wrote a second dissertation, a Lacanian reading of Hegel, Marx and Kripke. In the late 1980s, Žižek returned to Slovenia where he wrote newspaper columns for the Slovenian weekly "Mladina," and cofounded the Slovenian Liberal Democratic Party. In 1990, he ran for a seat on the four-member collective Slovenian presidency, narrowly missing office. Žižek's first published book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, appeared in 1989. Since then, Žižek has published over a dozen books, edited several collections, published numerous philosophical and political articles, and maintained a tireless speaking schedule. His earlier works are of the type "Introductions to Lacan through popular culture / Hitchcock / Hollywood ..." Since at least 1997, however, Žižek's work has taken on an increasingly engaged political tenor, culminating in books on September 11 and the Iraq war. As well as being visiting professor at the Department of Psychoanalysis, *Universite ParisVIII* in 1982-3 and 1985-6, Žižek has

lectured at the Cardozo Law School, Columbia, Princeton, the New School for Social Research, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Georgetown. He is currently a returning faculty member of the European Graduate School, and founder and president of the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, Ljubljana.

2. Žižek's Political Philosophy

a. Criticism of Ideology as "False Consciousness"

In a way that is oddly reminiscent of Nietzsche, Žižek generally presents his work in a polemical fashion, knowingly striking out against the grain of accepted opinion. One untimely feature of Žižek's work is his continuing defense and use of the unfashionable term "ideology." According to the classical Marxist definition, ideologies are discourses that promote false ideas (or "false consciousness") in subjects about the political regimes they live in. Nevertheless, because these ideas are believed by the subjects to be true, they assist in the reproduction of the existing status quo, in an exact instance of what Umberto Eco dubs "the force of the fake." To critique ideology, according to this position, it is sufficient to unearth the truth(s) the ideologies conceal from the subject's knowledge. Then, so the theory runs, subjects will become aware of the political shortcomings of their current regimes, and be able and moved to better them. As Žižek takes up in his earlier works, this classical Marxian notion of ideology has come under theoretical attack in a number of ways. First, to criticize a discourse as ideological implies access to a Truth about political things the Truth that the ideologies, as false, would conceal. But it has been widely disputed in the humanities that there could ever be any One such theoretically accessible Truth. Secondly, the notion of ideology is held to be irrelevant to describe contemporary socio-political life, because of the increased importance of what

Jurgen Habermas calls “mediasteered subsystems” (the market, public and private bureaucracies), and also because of the widespread cynicism of today’s subjects towards political authorities. For ideologies to have political importance, critics comment, subjects would have to have a level of faith in public institutions, ideals and politicians which today’s liberal-cosmopolitan subjects lack. The widespread notoriety of left-leaning authors like Michael Moore or Noam Chomsky, as one example, bears witness to how subjects today can know very well what Moore claims is the “awful truth,” and yet act as if they did not know.

Žižek agrees with critics about this “false consciousness” model of ideology. Yet he insists that we are not living in a post-ideological world, as figures as different as Tony Blair, Daniel Bell or Richard Rorty have claimed. Žižek proposes instead that in order to understand today’s politics we need a different notion of ideology. In a typically bold reversal, Žižek’s position is that today’s widespread consensus that our world is post-ideological gives voice to what he calls the “archideological” fantasy. Since “ideology” since Marx has carried a pejorative sense, no one who taken in by such an ideology has ever believed that they were so duped, Žižek comments. If the term “ideology” has any meaning at all, ideological positions are always what people impute to Others (for today’s left, for example, the political right are the dupes of one or another noble lie about natural community; for the right, the left are the dupes of well-meaning but utopian egalitarianism bound to lead to economic and moral collapse, and so forth). For subjects to believe in an ideology, it must have been presented to them, and been accepted, as non-ideological indeed, as True and Right, and what anyone sensible would believe. As we shall see in 2e, Žižek is alert to the realist insight that there is no more effective political gesture than to declare some contestable matter above polit-

ical contestation. Just as the third way is said to be post-ideological or national security is claimed to be extra-political, so Žižek argues that ideologies are always presented by their proponents as being discourses about Things too sacred to profane by politics. Hence, Žižek's bold opening in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is to claim that today ideology has not so much disappeared from the political landscape as come into its own. It is exactly because of this success, Žižek argues, that ideology has also been able to be dismissed in accepted political and theoretical opinion.

b. Ideological Cynicism and Belief

Today's typical first world subjects, according to Žižek, are the dupes of what he calls "ideological cynicism." Drawing on the German political theorist Sloterdijk, Žižek contends that the formula describing the operation of ideology today is not "they do not know it, but they are doing it", as it was for Marx. It is "they know it, but they are doing it anyway." If this looks like nonsense from the classical Marxist perspective, Žižek's position is that nevertheless this cynicism indicates the deeper efficacy of political ideology per se. Ideologies, as political discourses, are there to secure the voluntary consent—or what La Boétie called *servitude volontaire* of people about contestable political policies or arrangements. Yet, Žižek argues, subjects will only voluntarily agree to follow one or other such arrangement if they believe that, in doing so, they are expressing their free subjectivity, and might have done otherwise.

However false such a sense of freedom is, Žižek insists that it is nevertheless a political instance of what Hegel called an *essential* appearance. Althusser's understanding of ideological identification suggests that an individual is wholly "interpellated" into a place within a political system by the

system's dominant ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Contesting this notion by drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, Žižek argues that it is a mistake to think that, for a political position to win peoples' support, it needs to effectively brainwash them into thoughtless automatons. Rather, Žižek maintains that any successful political ideology always allows subjects to have and to cherish a conscious distance towards its explicit ideals and prescriptions—or what he calls, in a further technical term, “ideological disidentification.”

Again bringing the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan to bear in political theory, Žižek argues that the attitude of subjects towards authority revealed by today's ideological cynicism resembles the fetishist's attitude towards his fetish. The fetishist's attitude towards his fetish has the peculiar form of a disavowal: “I know well that (for example) the shoe is only a shoe, but nevertheless, I still need my partner to wear the shoe in order to enjoy.” According to Žižek, the attitude of political subjects towards political authority evinces the same logical form: “I know well that (for example) Bob Hawke / Bill Clinton / the Party / the market does not always act justly, but I still act as though I did not know that this is the case.” In Althusser's famous “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser staged a kind of primal scene of ideology, the moment when a policeman (as bearer of authority) says “hey you!” to an individual, and the individual recognizes himself as the addressee of this call. In the “180 degree turn” of the individual towards this Other who has addressed him, the individual becomes a political subject, Althusser says. Žižek's central technical notion of the “big Other” [*grand Autre*] closely resembles—to the extent that it is not modelled on Althusser's notion of the Subject (capital “S”) in the name of which public authorities (like the police) can legitimately call subjects to account within a regime—

for example, “God” in a theocracy, “the Party” under Stalinism, or “the People” in today’s China. As the central chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* specifies, ideologies for Žižek work to identify individuals with such important or rallying political terms as these, which Žižek calls “master signifiers.” The strange but decisive thing about these pivotal political words, according to Žižek, is that no one knows exactly what they mean or refer to, or has ever seen with their own eyes the sacred objects which they seem to name (for example: God, the Nation, or the People). This is one reason why Žižek, in the technical language he inherits (via Lacan) from structuralism, says that the most important words in any political doctrine are “signifiers without a signified” (that is, words that do not refer to any clear and distinct concept or demonstrable object).

This claim of Žižek’s is connected to two other central ideas in his work:

- First: Žižek adapts the psychoanalytic notion that individuals are always “split” subjects, divided between the levels of their conscious awareness and the unconscious. Žižek contends throughout his work that subjects are always divided between what they consciously know and can say about political things, and a set of more or less unconscious beliefs they hold concerning individuals in authority, and the regime in which they live (see 3a). Even if people cannot say clearly and distinctly why they support some political leader or policy, for Žižek no less than for Edmund Burke, this fact is not politically decisive, as we will see in 2e below.

- Second: Žižek makes a crucial distinction between knowledge and belief. Exactly where and because subjects do not know, for example, what “the essence” of “their people” is, the scope and nature of their beliefs on

such matters is politically decisive, according to Žižek (again, see 2e below).

Žižek's understanding of political belief is modelled on Lacan's understanding of transference in psychoanalysis. The belief or "supposition" of the analysand in psychoanalysis is that the Other (his analyst) knows the meaning of his symptoms. This is obviously a false belief, at the start of the analytic process. But it is only through holding this false belief about the analyst that the work of analysis can proceed, and the transferential belief can become true (when the analyst *does* become able to interpret the symptoms). Žižek argues that this strange intersubjective or dialectical logic of belief in clinical psychoanalysis also what characterizes peoples' political beliefs. Belief is always "belief through the Other," Žižek argues. If subjects do not know the exact meaning of those "master signifiers" with which they political identify, this is because their political belief is mediated through their identifications with others. Although they each themselves "do not know what they do" (which is the title one of Žižek's books [Žižek, 2002]), the deepest level of their belief is maintained through the belief that nevertheless there are Others who do know. A number of features of political life are cast into new relief given this psychoanalytic understanding, Žižek claims:

- First, Žižek contends that the key political function of holders of public office is to occupy the place of what he calls, after Lacan, "the Other supposed to know." Žižek cites the example of priests reciting mass in Latin before an uncomprehending laity, who believe that the priests know the meaning of the words, and for whom this is sufficient to keep the faith. Far from presenting an exception to the way political authority works, for Žižek this scenario reveals the universal rule of how political consensus is formed.

- Second, and in connection with this, Žižek contends that political power is primarily “symbolic” in its nature. What he means by this further technical term is that the roles, masks, or mandates that public authorities bear is more important politically than the true “reality” of the individuals in question (whether they are unintelligent, unfaithful to their wives, good family women, and so forth). According to Žižek, for example, fashionable liberal criticisms of George W. Bush the man are irrelevant to understanding or evaluating his political power. It is the office or place an individual occupies in their political system (or “big Other”) that ensures the political force of their words, and the belief of subjects in their authority. This is why Žižek maintains that the resort of a political leader or regime to “the real of violence” (such as war or police action) amounts to a confession of its weakness as a political regime. Žižek sometimes puts this thought by saying that people believe through the big Other, or that the big Other believes for them, despite what they might inwardly think or cynically say.

c. *Jouissance* as Political Factor

A further key point that Žižek takes from Louis Althusser’s later work on ideology is Althusser’s emphasis on the “materiality” of ideology, its embodiment in institutions and peoples’ everyday practices and lives. Žižek’s realist position is that all the ideas in the world can have no lasting political effect unless they come to inform institutions and subjects’ day-to-day lives. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek cites Blaise Pascal’s advice that doubting subjects should get down on their knees and pray, and then they will believe. Pascal’s position is not any kind of simple proto-behaviorism, according to Žižek. The deeper message of Pascal’s directive, he asserts, is to suggest that once subjects have come to believe through praying, they will also retrospectively see

that they got down on their knees because they always believed, without knowing it. In this way, in fact, Žižek can be read as a consistent critic not only of the importance of knowledge in the formation of political consensus, but also of the importance of “inwardness” in politics per se in the tradition of the younger Carl Schmitt.

Prior political philosophy has placed too little emphasis, Žižek asserts, on communities’ cultural practices that involve what he calls “inherent transgression.” These are practices sanctioned by a culture that nevertheless allow subjects some experience of what is usually exceptional to or prohibited in their everyday lives as civilized political subjects—things like sex, death, defecation, or violence. Such experiences involve what Žižek calls *jouissance*, another technical term he takes from Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Jouissance* is usually translated from the French as “enjoyment.” As opposed to what we talk of in English as “pleasure”, though, *jouissance* is an always sexualized, always transgressive enjoyment, at the limits of what subjects can experience or talk about in public. Žižek argues that subjects’ experiences of the events and practices wherein their political culture organizes its specific relations to *jouissance* (in first world nations, for example, specific sports, types of alcohol or drugs, music, festivals, films) are as close as they will get to knowing the deeper Truth intimated for them by their regime’s master signifiers: “nation”, “God”, “our way of life,” and so forth (see 2b above). Žižek, like Burke, argues that it is such ostensibly nonpolitical and culturally specific practices as these that irreplaceably single out any political community from its others and enemies. Or, as one of Žižek’s chapter titles in *Tarrying With the Negative* puts it, where and although subjects do not know their Nation, they “enjoy (*jouis*) their nation as themselves.”

d. The Reflective Logic of Ideological Judgments (or How the King is King)

According to Žižek, like and after Althusser, ideologies are thus political discourses whose primary function is not to make correct theoretical statements about political reality (as Marx's "false consciousness" model implies), but to orient subjects' lived relations to and within this reality. If a political ideology's descriptive propositions turn out to be true (for example: "capitalism exploits the workers," "Saddam was a dictator," "the Spanish are the national enemy," and so forth), this does not in any way reduce their ideological character, in Žižek's estimation. This is because this character concerns the political issue of how subjects' belief in these propositions, instead of those of opponents, positions subjects on the leading political issues of the day. For Žižek, political speech is primarily about securing a lived sense of unity or community between subjects, something like what Kant called *sensus communis* or Rousseau the general will. If political propositions seemingly do describe things in the world, Žižek's position is that we nevertheless need always to understand them as Marx understood the exchange value of commodities—as "a relation between people being concealed behind a relation between things." Or again: just as Kant thought that the proposition "this is beautiful" really expresses a subject's reflective sense of commonality with all other subjects capable of being similarly affected by the object, so Žižek argues that propositions like "Go Spain!" or "the King will never stop working to secure our future" are what Kant called reflective judgments, which tell us as much or more about the subject's lived relation to political reality as about this reality itself.

If ideological statements are thus performative utterances that produce political effects by their being stated, Žižek in

fact holds that they are a strange species of performative utterance overlooked by speech act theory. Just because, when subjects say “the Queen is the Queen!” they are at one level reaffirming their allegiance to a political regime, Žižek at the same time holds that this does not mean that this regime could survive without appearing to rest on such deeper Truths about the way the world is. As we saw in 2b, Žižek maintains that political ideologies always present themselves as naming such deeper, extra-political Truths. Ideological judgments, according to Žižek, are thus performative utterances which, in order to perform their salutary political work, must yet appear to be objective descriptions of the way the world is (exactly as when a chairman says “this meeting is closed!” only thereby bringing this state of affairs into effect). In *Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek cites Marx’s analysis of being a King in *Das Capital* to illustrate his meaning. A King is only King because his subjects loyally think and act like he is King (think of the tragedy of Lear). Yet, at the same time, the people will only believe he is King if they believe that this is a deeper Truth about which they can do nothing.

e. Sublime Objects of Ideology

In line with Žižek’s ideas of “ideological disidentification” and “*jouissance* as a political factor” (see 2b and 2c above) and in a clear comparison with Derrida’s deconstruction, arguably the unifying thought in Žižek’s political philosophy is that regimes can only secure a sense of collective identity if their governing ideologies afford subjects an understanding of how their regime relates to what exceeds, supplements or challenges its identity. This is why Kant’s analytic of the sublime in *The Critique of Judgment*, as an analysis of an experience in which the subject’s identity is challenged, is of the highest theoretical interest for Žižek. Kant’s analytic of the sublime isolates two moments to its experience, as Žižek

observes. In the first moment, the size or force of an object painfully impresses upon the subject the limitation of its perceptual capabilities. In a second moment, however, a “representation” arises where “we would least expect it,” which takes as its object the subject’s own failure to perceptually take the object in. This representation resignifies the subject’s perceptual failure as indirect testimony about the inadequacy of human perception as such to attain to what Kant calls Ideas of Reason (in Kant’s system, God, the Universe as a Whole, Freedom, the Good).

According to Žižek, all successful political ideologies necessarily refer to and turn around sublime objects posited by political ideologies. These sublime objects are what political subjects take it that their regime’s ideologies’ central words mean or name extraordinary Things like God, the Fuhrer, the King, in whose name they will (if necessary) transgress ordinary moral laws and lay down their lives. When a subject believes in a political ideology, as we saw in 2b above, Žižek argues that this does not mean that they know the Truth about the objects which its key terms seemingly name—indeed, Žižek will finally contest that such a Truth exists (see 3c, d). Nevertheless, by drawing on a parallel with Kant on the sublime, Žižek makes a further and more radical point. Just as in the experience of the sublime, Kant’s subject resignifies its failure to grasp the sublime object as indirect testimony to a wholly “supersensible” faculty within herself (Reason), so Žižek argues that the inability of subjects to explain the nature of what they believe in politically does not indicate any disloyalty or abnormality. What political ideologies do, precisely, is provide subjects with a way of seeing the world according to which such an inability can appear as testimony to how Transcendent or Great their Nation, God, Freedom, and so forth is—surely far above the ordinary or profane things of the world. In Žižek’s Lacanian terms, these things are Real (capital “R”) Things (capital

“T”), precisely insofar as they in this way stand out from the reality of ordinary things and events.

In the struggle of competing political ideologies, Žižek hence agrees with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the aim of each is to elevate their particular political perspective (about what is just, best, and so forth) to the point where it can lay claim to name, give voice to or to represent the political whole (for example: the nation). In order to achieve this political feat, Žižek argues, each group must succeed in identifying its perspective with the extra-political, sublime objects accepted within the culture as giving body to this whole (for example: “the national interest,” “the dictatorship of the proletariat”). Or else, it must supplant the previous ideologies’ sublime objects with new such objects. In the absolute monarchies, as Ernst Kantorowicz argued, the King’s so called “second” or “symbolic” body exemplified paradigmatically such sublime political objects as the unquestionable font of political authority (the particular individual who was King was contestable, but not the sovereign’s role itself). Žižek’s critique of Stalinism, in a comparable way, turns upon the thought that “the Party” had this sublime political status in Stalinist ideology. Class struggle in this society did not end, Žižek contends, despite Stalinist propaganda. It was only displaced from a struggle between two classes (for example, bourgeois versus proletarian) to one between “the Party” as representative of the people or the whole and all who disagreed with it, ideologically positioned as “traitors” or “enemies of the people.”

3. Žižek's Fundamental Ontology

a. The Fundamental Fantasy & the Split Law

For Žižek, as we have seen, no political regime can sustain the political consensus upon which it depends, unless its predominant ideology affords subjects a sense both of individual distance or freedom with regard to its explicit prescriptions (2b), and that the regime is grounded in some larger or “sublime” Truth (2e). Žižek's political philosophy identifies interconnected instances of these dialectical ideas: his notion of “ideological disidentification” (2b); his contention that ideologies must accommodate subjects' transgressive experiences of *jouissance* (2c); and his conception of exceptional or sublime objects of ideology (2e). Arguably the central notion in Žižek's political philosophy intersects with Žižek's notion of “ideological fantasy”. “Ideological fantasy” is Žižek's technical name for the deepest framework of belief that structures how political subjects, and/or a political community, comes to terms with what exceeds its norms and boundaries, in the various registers we examined above.

Like many of Žižek's key notions, Žižek's notion of the ideological fantasy is a political adaptation of an idea from Lacanian psychoanalysis: specifically, Lacan's structuralist rereading of Freud's psychoanalytic understanding of unconscious fantasy. As for Lacan, so for Žižek, the civilizing of subjects necessitates their founding sacrifice (or “castration”) of *jouissance*, enacted in the name of sociopolitical Law. Subjects, to the extent that they are civilized, are “cut” from the primal object of their desire. Instead, they are forced by social Law to pursue this special, lost Thing in Žižek's technical term, the “*objet petit a*” (see 4a, 4b) by observing their societies' linguistically mediated conventions, deferring satisfaction, and accepting sexual and generational difference. Subjects' “fundamental fantasies,” according to Lacan, are unconscious structures which allow them to accept

the traumatic loss involved in this founding sacrifice. They turn around a narrative about the lost object, and how it was lost (see 3d). In particular, the fundamental fantasy of a subject resignifies the founding repression of *jouissance* by Law—which, according to Lacan, is necessary if the individual is to become a speaking subject—as if it were a merely contingent, avoidable occurrence. In the fantasy, that is, what for Žižek is a constitutive event for the subject, is renarrated as the historical action of some exceptional individual (in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* the pre-Oedipal “anal father”). Equally, the *jouissance* the subject considers itself to have lost is posited by the fantasy as having been taken from it by this persecutory “Other supposed to enjoy” (see 3b).

In the notion of ideological fantasy, Žižek takes this psychoanalytic framework and applies it to the understanding of the constitution of political groups. If after Plato, political theory concerns the Laws of a regime, the Laws for Žižek are always split or double in kind. Each political regime has a body of more or less explicit, usually written Laws which demand that subjects forego *jouissance* in the name of the greater good, and according to the letter of its proscriptions (for example, the US or French constitutions). Žižek identifies this level of the Law with the Freudian ego ideal. But Žižek argues that, in order to be effective, a regime’s explicit Laws must also harbor and conceal a darker underside, a set of more or less unspoken rules which, far from simply repressing *jouissance*, implicate subjects in a guilty enjoyment in repression itself, which Žižek likens to the “pleasure-in-pain” associated with the experience of Kant’s sublime (see 2d). The Freudian superego, for Žižek, names the psychical agency of the Law, as it is misrepresented and sustained by subjects’ fantasmatic imaginings of a persecutory Other supposed to enjoy (like the archetypal villain in *noir* films). This darker underside of the Law, Žižek agrees with Lacan, is at

its base a constant imperative to subjects to *jouis!*, by engaging in the “inherent transgressions” of their sociopolitical community (see 2b).

Žižek’s notion of the split in the Law in this way intersects directly with his notion of ideological disidentification examined in 2b. While political subjects maintain a conscious sense of freedom from the explicit norms of their culture, Žižek contends, this disidentification is grounded in their unconscious attachment to the Law as *superego*, itself an agency of enjoyment. If Althusser famously denied the importance of what people “have on their consciences” in the explanation of how political ideologies work, then for Žižek the role of guilt—as the way in which the subject enjoys his subjection to the laws—is vital to understanding subjects’ political commitments. Individuals will only turn around when the Law hails them, Žižek argues, insofar as they are finally subjects also of the unconscious belief that the “big Other” has access to the *jouissance* they have lost as subjects of the Law, and which they can accordingly reattain through their political allegiance (see 2b). It is this belief, what could be termed this “political economy of *jouissance*,” that the fundamental fantasies underlying political regimes’ worldviews are there to structure in subjects.

b. Excursus: Žižek’s Typology of Ideological Regimes

With these terms of Žižek’s Lacanian ontology in place, it becomes possible to lay out Žižek’s theoretical understanding of the differences between different types of ideological-political regimes. Žižek’s works maintain a lasting distinction between modern and premodern political regimes, which he contends are grounded in fundamentally different ways of organizing subjects’ relations to Law and *jouissance* (3a). In Žižek’s Lacanian terms, premodern ideological regimes exemplified what Lacan calls in *Seminar*

XVII the discourse of the master. In these authoritarian regimes, the word and will of the King or master (in Žižek's mathemes, S1) was sovereign—the source of political authority, with no questions asked. Her/His subjects, in turn, are supposed to know (S2) the edicts of the sovereign and the Law (as the classical legal notion has it, “ignorance is no excuse”). In this arrangement, while *jouissance* and fantasy are political factors, as Žižek argues, regimes' quasi-transgressive practices remain exceptional to the political arena, glimpsed only in such carnivalesque events as festivals or the types of public punishment Michel Foucault (for example) describes in the introduction to *Discipline and Punish*.

Žižek agrees with both Foucault and Marx that modern political regimes exert a form of power that is both less visible and more far-reaching than that of the regimes they replaced. Modern regimes, both liberal capitalist and totalitarian, for Žižek, are no longer predominantly characterized by the Lacanian discourse of the master. Given that the Oedipal complex is associated by him with this older type of political authority, Žižek agrees with the Frankfurt School theorists that, contra Deleuze and Guattari, today's subjectivity as such is already post- or anti-Oedipal. Indeed, in *Plague of Fantasies* and *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek contends that the characteristic discontents of today's political world—from religious fundamentalism to the resurgence of racism in the first world—are not archaic remnants of, or protests against traditional authoritarian structures, but the pathological effects of new forms of social organization. For Žižek, the defining agency in modern political regimes is knowledge (or, in his Lacanian mathemes, S2). The enlightenment represented the unprecedented political venture to replace belief in authority as the basis of polity with human reason and knowledge. As Schmitt also complained, the legitimacy of modern authorities is grounded not in the self-grounding de-

cision of the sovereign. It is grounded in the ability of authorities to muster coherent chains of reasons to subjects about why they are fit to govern. Modern regimes hence always claim to speak not out of ignorance of what subjects deeply enjoy (“I don’t care what you want; just do what I say!”) but in the very name of subjects’ freedom and enjoyment.

Whether fascist or communist, Žižek argues in his early books, totalitarian (as opposed to authoritarian) regimes justified their rule by final reference to quasi-scientific metanarratives. These metanarratives—a narrative concerning racial struggle in Nazism, or the Laws of History in Stalinism—each claimed to know the deeper Truth about what subjects want, and accordingly could both justify the most striking transgressions of ordinary morality, and justify these transgressions by reference to subjects’ *jouissance*. The most disturbing or perverse features of these regimes can only be explained by reference to the key place of knowledge in these regimes. Žižek describes, for instance, the truly *Catch 22*esque logic of the Soviet show trials, wherein it was not enough for subjects to be condemned by the authorities as enemies, but they were made to avow their “objective” error in opposing the party as agent of the laws of history.

Žižek’s statements on today’s liberal capitalism are complex, if not in mutual tension. At times, Žižek tries to formalize the economic generation of surplus value as a meaningfully “hysterical” social arrangement. Yet Žižek predominantly argues, that the market driven consumerism of later capitalist subjects is characterized by a marketing discourse which—like totalitarian ideologies—does not appeal to subjects in the name of any collective cause justifying individuals’ sacrifice of *jouissance*. Instead, as social conservatives criticize, it musters the quasi-scientific discourses of marketing and public relations, or (increasingly) Eastern religion, in

order to recommend products to subjects as necessary means in the liberal pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment. In line with this change, Žižek contends in *The Ticklish Subject* that the paradigmatic type of leader today is not some inaccessible boss but the uncannily familiar figure of Bill Gates—more like a little brother than the traditional father or master. Again: for Žižek it is deeply telling that at the same time as the nuclear family is being eroded in the first world, other institutions, from the so-called “nanny” welfare state to private corporations, are increasingly becoming “familiarized” (with self-help sessions for employees, company days, casual days, and so forth).

c. Kettle Logic, or Desire and Theodicy

We saw how Žižek claims that the truth of political ideologies concerns what they do, not what they say (2d). At the level of what political ideologies say, Žižek maintains, a Lacanian critical theory maintains that ideologies must be finally inconsistent. Freud famously talked of the example of a man who returns a borrowed kettle back to its owner broken. The man adduces mutually inconsistent excuses which are united only in terms of his ignoble desire to evade responsibility for breaking the kettle: he never borrowed the kettle, the kettle was already broken when he borrowed it, and when he gave the kettle back it was not really broken anyway. As Žižek reads political ideologies, they function in the same way in the political field—this is the sense of the subtitle of his 2004 *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*. As we saw in 2d, Žižek maintains that the end of political ideologies is to secure and defend the idea of the polity as a wholly unified community. When political strife, uncertainty or division occur, political ideologies and the fundamental fantasies upon which they lean (3a) operate to resignify this political discontent so that the political ideal of community can be sustained, and to deny the possibility that this discontent might

signal a fundamental injustice or flaw within the regime. In what amounts to a kind of political theodicy, Žižek's work points to a number of logically inconsistent ideological responses to political discontents, which are united only by the desire that informs them, like Freud's "kettle logic":

1. Saying that these divisions are politically unimportant, transient or merely apparent. Or, if this explanation fails:
2. Saying that the political divisions are in any case contingent to the ordinary run of events, so that if their cause is removed or destroyed, things will return to normal. Or, more perilously:
3. Saying that the divisions or problems are deserved by the people for the sake of the greater good (in Australia in the 90s, for example, we experienced "the recession we had to have"), or as punishment for their betrayal of the national Thing.

Žižek's view of the political functioning of sublime objects of ideology can be charted exactly in terms of this political theodicy. (see 2e) We saw in 3a, how Žižek argues that subjects' fantasy is what allows them to come to terms with the loss of *jouissance* fundamental to being social or political animals. Žižek centrally maintains that such narrative attempts at political self-understanding—whether of individuals or political regimes—are ultimately unable to achieve these ends, except at the price of telling inconsistencies.

As Žižek highlights in his analyses of the political discontents in former Yugoslavia following the fall of communism, each national or political community tends to claim that its sublime Thing is inalienable, and hence utterly incapable of being understood or destroyed by enemies. Nevertheless, the invariable correlative of this emphasis on the inalienable na-

ture of one's Thing, Žižek argues in *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), is the notion that It is simultaneously deeply fragile if not under active threat. For Žižek, this mutual inconsistency is only theoretically resolvable if, despite first appearances, we posit a materialist teaching that says that the "substance" seemingly named by political regimes' key rallying terms (see 2e) is only sustained in their lived communal practices (as we say when someone does not get a joke, "you had to be there"). Yet political ideologies, as such, cannot avow this possibility (see 2d). Instead, ideological fantasies posit various exemplars of a persecutory enemy or, as Žižek says, "the Other of the Other" to whom the explanation of political disunity or discontent can be traced. If only this other or enemy could be removed, the political fantasy contends, the regime would be fully equitable and just. Historical examples of such figures of the enemy include "the Jew" in Nazi ideology, or the "petty bourgeois" in Stalinism.

Again: a type of "kettle logic" applies to the way these enemies are represented in political ideologies, according to Žižek. "The Jew" in Nazi ideology, for example, was an inconsistent condensation of features of both the ruling capitalist class (money grabbing, exploitation of the poor) *and* of the proletariat (dirtiness, sexual promiscuity, communism). The only consistency this figure has, that is, is precisely as a condensation of everything that Nazi ideology's *Arryan Volksgemeinschaft* (roughly, "national community") was constructed in response and political opposition to.

d. Fantasy as the Fantasy of Origins

In a way that has drawn some critics (Bellamy, Sharpe) to question how finally political Žižek's political philosophy is, Žižek's critique of ideology ultimately turns on a set of fundamental ontological propositions about the necessary limi-

tations of any linguistic or symbolic system. These propositions concern the widely known paradoxes that bedevil any attempt by a semantic system to explain its own limits, and/or how it came into being. If what preceded the system was radically different from what subsequently emerged, how could the system have emerged from it, and how can the system come to terms with it at all? If we name the limits of what the system can understand, do not we, in that very gesture, presuppose some knowledge of what is beyond these limits, if only enough to say what the system is not? The only manner in which we can explain the origin of language is within language, Žižek notes in *For They Know Not What They Do*. Yet we hence presuppose, again in the very act of the explanation, the very thing we were hoping to explain. Similarly, to take the example from political philosophy of Hobbes' explanation of the origin of sociopolitical order, the only way we can explain the origin of the social contract is by presupposing that Hobbes' wholly pre-social men nevertheless possessed in some way the very social abilities to communicate and make pacts that Hobbes' position is supposed to explain.

For Žižek, fantasy as such is always fundamentally the fantasy of (one's) origins. In Freud's "Wolf Man" case, to cite the psychoanalytic example Žižek cites in *For They Know Not What They Do*, the primal scene of parental coitus is the Wolf Man's attempt to come to terms with his own origin—or to answer the infant's perennial question "where did I come from?" The problem here is this: who could the spectacle of this primal scene have been staged for or seen by, if it really transpired before the genesis of the subject that it would explain (see 3e, 4e)? The only answer is that the Wolf Man has imaginatively transposed himself back into the primal scene if only as an impassive object-gaze—whose historical occurrence he had yet hoped would explain his origin as an individual.

Žižek's argument is that, in the same way, political or ideological systems cannot and do not avoid deep inconsistencies. No less than Machiavelli, Žižek is acutely aware that the act that founds a body of Law is never itself legal, according to the very order of Law it sets in place. He cites Bertolt Brecht: "what is the robbing of a bank, compared to the founding of a bank?" What fantasy does, in this register, is to try to historically renarrativize the founding political act as if it were or had been legal—an impossible application of the Law before the Law had itself come into being. No less than the Wolf Man's false transposition of himself back into the primal scene that was to explain his origin, Žižek argues that the attempt of any political regime to explain its own origins in a political myth that denies the fundamental, extra-legal violence of these origins is fundamentally false. (Žižek uses the example of the liberal myth of primitive accumulation to illustrate his position in *For They Know Not What They Do*, but we could cite here Plato's myth of the reversed cosmos in the *Laws* and *Statesman*, or historical cases like the idea of *terra nullius* in colonial Australia).

e. Exemplification: The Fall and Radical Evil (Žižek's Critique of Kant)

In a series of places, Žižek situates his ontological position in terms of a striking reading of Immanuel Kant's practical philosophy. Žižek argues that in "Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone" Kant showed that he was aware of these paradoxes that necessarily attend any attempt to narrate the origins of the Law. The Judeo-Christian myth of the fall succumbs to precisely these paradoxes, as Kant analyses: if Adam and Eve were purely innocent, how could they have been tempted?; if their temptation was wholly the fault of the tempter, why then has God punished humans with the weight of original sin?; but if Adam and Eve were not purely innocent when the snake lured them, in what sense was this a fall

at all? According to Žižek, Kant's text also provides us with theoretical parameters which allow us to explain and avoid these paradoxes. The problems for the mythical narrative, Kant argues, hail from its nature as a narrative—or how it tries to render in a historical story what he argues is truly a logical or transcendental priority. For Kant, human beings are, as such, radically evil. They have always already chosen to assert their own self-conceit above the moral Law. This choice of radical evil, however, is not itself a historical choice either for individuals or for the species, for Kant. This choice is what underlies and opens up the space for all such historical choices. However, as Žižek argues, Kant withdraws from the strictly diabolical implications of this position. The key place in which this withdrawal is enacted is in the postulates of *The Critique of Practical Reason*, wherein Kant defends the immortality of the soul as a likely story on the basis of our moral experience. Because of radical evil, Kant argues, it is impossible for humans to ever act purely out of duty in this life—this is what Kant thinks our irremovable sense of moral guilt attests. But because people can never act purely in this life, Kant suggests, it is surely reasonable to hope and even to postulate that the soul lives on after death, striving ever closer towards the perfection of its will.

Žižek's contention is that this argument does not prove the immortality of a disembodied soul. It proves the immortality of an embodied individual soul, always struggling guiltily against its selfish corporeal impulses (this, incidentally, is one reason why Žižek argues, after Lacan, that de Sade is the truth of Kant). In order to make his proof even plausible, Žižek notes, Kant has to tacitly smuggle the spatiotemporal parameters of embodied earthly existence into the postulated hereafter so that the guilty subject can continue endlessly to struggle against his radically evil nature towards good. In this way, though, Kant himself has to speak as if he

knew what things are like on the other side of death—which is to say, from the impossible, because impossibly neutral, perspective of someone able to impassively see the spectacle of the immortal subject striving guiltily towards the good (see 4d). But in this way, also, Žižek argues that Kant enacts exactly the type of fantasmatic operation his reading of the fall (as a) narrative declaims, and which represents *in nuce* the basis operation also of all political ideologies.

4. From Ontology to Ethics Žižek’s Reclaiming of the Subject

a. Žižek’s Subject, Fantasy, and the *Objet Petit a*

Perhaps Žižek’s most radical challenge to accepted theoretical opinion is his defense of the modern, Cartesian subject. Žižek knowingly and polemically positions his writings against virtually all other contemporary theorists, with the significant exception of Alain Badiou. Yet for Žižek, the Cartesian subject is not reducible to the fully self-assured “master and possessor of nature” of Descartes’ *Discourses*. It is what Žižek calls in “Kant With (Or Against) Kant,” an out of joint ontological excess or *clinamen*. Žižek takes his bearings here as elsewhere from a Lacanian reading of Kant, and the latter’s critique of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*. In the “Transcendental Dialectic” in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant criticized Descartes’ argument that the self-guaranteeing “I think” of the *cogito* must be a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). For Kant (as for Žižek), while the “I think” must be capable of accompanying all of the subject’s perceptions, this does not mean that it is itself such a substantial object. The subject that sees objects in the world cannot see itself seeing, Žižek notes, any more than a person can jump over her own shadow. To the extent that a subject can reflectively see itself, it sees itself not as a subject but as one more represented object, what Kant calls the “empirical self” or what

Žižek calls the “self” (versus the subject) in *The Plague of Fantasies*. The subject knows that it is something, Žižek argues. But it does not and can never know what Thing it is “in the Real”, as he puts it (see 2e). This is why it must seek clues to its identity in its social and political life, asking the question of others (and of the big Other (see 2b)) which Žižek argues defines the subject as such: *che vuoi?* (what do you want from me?). In *Tarrying With the Negative*, Žižek hence reads the Director’s Cut of Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner* as revelatory of the Truth of the subject. Within this version of the film, as Žižek emphasizes, the main character Deckard literally does not know what he is—a robot that perceives itself to be human. According to Žižek, the subject is a “crack” in the universal field or substance of being, not a knowable thing (see 4d). This is why Žižek repeatedly cites in his books the disturbing passage from the young Hegel describing the modern subject not as the “light” of the modern enlightenment, but “this night, this empty nothing ...”

It is crucial to Žižek’s position, though, that Žižek denies the apparent implication of this that the subject is some kind of supersensible entity, for example, an immaterial and immortal soul, and so forth. The subject is not a special type of Thing outside of the phenomenal reality we can experience, for Žižek. As we saw in 1e above, such an idea would in fact reproduce in philosophy the type of thinking which, he argues, characterizes political ideologies and the subject’s fundamental fantasy (see 3a). It is more like a fold or crease in the surface of this reality, as Žižek puts it in *Tarrying With the Negative*, the point within the substance of reality wherein that substance is able to look at itself, and see itself as alien to itself. According to Žižek, Hegel and Lacan add to Kant’s reading of the subject as the empty “I think” that accompanies any individual’s experience the caveat that, because objects thus appear to a subject, they always appear in

an incomplete or biased way. Žižek's "formula" of the fundamental fantasy (see 2a, 2d) "\$ <> a" tries to formalize exactly this thought. Its meaning is that the subject (\$), in its fundamental fantasy, misrecognizes itself as a special object (the *objet petit a* or lost object (see 2a)) within the field of objects that it perceives. In terms which unite this psychoanalytic notion with Žižek's political philosophy, we can say that the *objet petit a* is exactly a sublime object (2e). It is an object that is elevated or, in Freudian terms, "sublimated" by the subject to the point where it stands as a metonymic representative of the *jouissance* the subject unconsciously fantasizes was taken from her/him at castration (3a). It hence functions as the object-cause of the subject's desire that exceptional "little piece of the Real" that s/he seeks out in all of her/his love relationships. Its psychoanalytic paradigms are, to cite the title of a collection Žižek edited, "the voice and gaze as love objects". Examples of the voice as *objet petit a* include the persecutor's voice in paranoia, or the very silence that some TV advertisements now use, and which captures our attention by making us wonder whether we may not have missed something. The preeminent Lacanian illustration of the gaze as *objet petit a* is the anamorphic skull at the foot of Holbein's *Ambassadors*, which can only be seen by a subject who looks at it awry, or from an angle. Importantly, then, neither the voice nor the gaze as *objet petit a* attest to the subject's sovereign ability to wholly objectify (and hence control) the world it surveys. In the auditory and visual fields (respectively), the voice and the gaze as *objet petit a* represent objects like Kant's sublime things that the subject cannot wholly get its head around, as we say. The fact that they can only be seen or heard from particular perspectives indicates exactly how the subject's biased perspective—and so his/her desire, what s/he wants—has an effect on what s/he is able to see. They thereby bear witness to how s/he is not wholly outside of the reality s/he sees. Even the

most mundane but telling example of this subjective *objet petit a* of Lacanian theory is someone in love, of whom we commonly say that they are able to see in their lover something special, an “X factor,” which others are utterly blind to. In the political field, similarly—and as we saw in part 2c—subjects of a particular political community will claim that others cannot understand their regime’s sublime objects. Indeed, as Žižek comments about the resurgence of racism across the first world today, it is often precisely the strangeness of others’ particular ethnic or national Things that animates subjects’ hatred towards them.

b. The *Objet Petit a* & the Virtuality of Reality

In Žižek’s theory, the *objet petit a* stands as the exact opposite of the object of the modern sciences, that can only be seen clearly and distinctly if it is approached wholly impersonally. If the *objet petit a* is not looked at from a particular, subjective perspective—or, in the words of one of Žižek’s titles, by “looking awry” —it cannot be seen at all. This is why Žižek believes this psychoanalytic notion can be used to structure our understanding of the sublime objects postulated by ideologies in the political field, which as we saw in 3c show themselves to be finally inconsistent when they are looked at dispassionately. What Žižek’s Lacanian critique of ideology aims to do is to demonstrate such inconsistencies, and thereby to show us that the objects most central to our political beliefs are Things whose very sublime appearance conceals from us our active agency in constructing and sustaining them. (We will return to this thought in 4d and 4e below).

Žižek argues that the first place that the *objet petit a* appeared in the history of Western philosophy was with Kant’s notion of the transcendental object in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Analyzing this Kantian notion allows us to elaborate

more precisely the ontological status of the *objet petit a*. Kant defines the transcendental object as “the completely indeterminate thought of an object in general.” Like the *objet petit a*, then, Kant’s transcendental object is not a normal phenomenal object, although it has a very specific function in Kant’s epistemological conception of the subject. The avowedly anti-Humean function of this Kantian positing in the “Transcendental Deduction” is to ensure that the purely formal categories of the subject’s understanding can actually affect and indeed structure the manifold of the subject’s sensuous intuition. As Žižek stresses, that is, the transcendental object functions in Kant’s epistemology to guarantee that sense will continue to emerge for the subject, no matter what particular objects s/he might encounter.

We saw in 3c how Žižek argues that ideologies adduce ultimately inconsistent reasons to support the same goal of political unity. According to Žižek, as we can now elaborate, this is because the deepest political function of sublime objects of ideology is to ensure that the political world will make sense for subjects no matter what events transpire, in a way that he directly compares with Kant’s transcendental object. No matter what evidence someone might produce that all Jewish people are not acquisitive, capitalist, cunning, for example, a true Nazi will be able to immediately resignify this evidence by reference to his ideological notion of “the Jew”: “surely it is part of their cunning to appear as though they are not truly cunning,” and so forth. Importantly, it follows for Žižek that political community is always, in its very structure, an anticipated community. Subjects’ sense of political belonging is always mediated, according to him, by their shared belief in their regime’s key words or master signifiers. But these are words whose only “meaning” lies finally in their function, which is to guarantee that there will (continue to) be meaning. There is, Žižek argues, ultimately

no actual, Real Thing better than the other real things subjects encounter that these words name (2e). It is only by acting as if there were such a Thing that community is maintained. This is why Žižek specifies in *The Indivisible Reminder* that political identification can only be, “at its most basic, identification with the very gesture of identification”:

...the coordination [between subjects in a political community] concerns not the level of the signified [of some positive shared concern] but the level of the *signifier*. [In political ideologies], undecidability with regard to the signified (do others really intend the same as me?) converts into an exceptional signifier, the empty Master-Signifier, the signifier-without-signified. ‘Nation’, ‘Democracy’, ‘Socialism’ and other Causes stand for that ‘something’ about which we are never sure what, exactly, it is – the point is, rather, that identifying with the Nation we signal our acceptance of *what others accept*, with a Master-Signifier which serves as the rallying point for all the others. (Žižek, 1996: 142)

This is the sense also in which Žižek claims in *Plague of Fantasies* that today’s virtual reality is “not virtual enough.” It is not virtual enough because the many options it offers subjects to enjoy (*jouis*) are transgressive or exotic possibilities. VR leaves nothing to the imagination or, in Žižek’s Lacanian terms, to fantasy. Fantasy, as we saw in 2a, operates to structure subjects’ beliefs about the *jouissance* which must remain only the stuff of imagination, purely “virtual” for subjects of the social law. For Žižek, then, it is identification with this law, as mediated via subjects’ anticipatory identifications with what they suppose others believe, that involves true virtuality.

c. Forced Choice & Ideological Tautologies

As 4b confirms (and as we commented in 1c), Žižek's political philosophy turns around the idea that the central words of political ideologues are at base "signifiers without signified," words that only appear to refer to exceptional Things, and which thereby facilitate the identification between subjects. As Žižek argues, these sublime objects of ideology have exactly the ontological status of what Kant called "transcendental illusions"—illusions whose semblance conceals that there is nothing behind them to conceal. Ideological subjects do not know what they do when they believe in them, Žižek contends. Yet, through the presupposition that the Other(s) know (2c), and their participation in the practices involving inherent transgression of their political community (2c), they "identify with the very gesture of identification" (4b). Hence, their belief, coupled with these practices, is politically efficient.

One of Žižek's most difficult, but also deepest, claims is that the particular sublime objects of ideology with which subjects identify in different regimes (the Nation, the People, and so forth) each give particular form to a meta-law (law about all other laws) that binds any political community as such. This is the meta-law that says simply that subjects must obey all the other laws. In 2b above, we saw how Žižek holds that political ideologies must allow subjects the sense of subjective distance from their explicit directives. Žižek's critical position is that this apparent freedom ideologies thereby allow subjects is finally a lure. Like the choice offered Yossarian by the "catch 22" of Joseph Heller's novel, the only option truly available to political subjects is to continue to abide by the laws. No regime can survive if it waives this meta-law. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* hence cites with approval Kafka's comment that it is not required that subjects think the law is just, only that it is necessary. Yet no regime,

despite Kafka, can directly avow its own basis in such naked self-assertion without risking the loss of all legitimacy, Žižek agrees with Plato. This is why it must ground itself in ideological fantasies (3a) which at once sustain subjects' sense of individual freedom (2c) and the sense that the regime itself is grounded extra-politically in the Real, and some transcendent, higher Good (2e).

This thought underlies the importance Žižek accords in *For They Know Not What They Do* to Hegel's difficult notion of tautology as the highest instance of contradiction in *The Science of Logic*. If you push a subject hard enough about why they abide by the laws of their regime, Žižek holds that their responses will inevitably devolve into some logical variant of *Exodus* 3:14's "I am that I am" statements of the form "because the Law (God / the People/ the Nation) is ... the Law (God / the People / the Nation)". In such tautological statements, our expectation that the predicates in the second half of the sentence will add something new to the (logical) subject given at its beginning is "contradicted," Hegel argues. There is indeed something even sinister when someone utters such a sentence in response to our enquiries, Žižek notes—as if, when (for example) "the Law" is repeated dumbly as its own predicate ("because the law is the law"), it intimates the uncanny dimension of *jouissance* the law as ego ideal usually proscribes (3a). What this uncanny effect of sense attests to, Žižek argues in *For They Know Not What They Do*, is the usually "primordially repressed" force of the universal meta-law (that everyone must obey the laws) being expressed in the different, particular languages of political regimes: "because the People are the People," "because the Nation is the Nation", and so forth.

Žižek's ideology critique hence contends that all political regimes' ideologies always devolve finally around a set of such tautological propositions concerning their particular

sublime objects. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek gives the example of a key Stalinist proposition: “the people always support the party.” On its surface, this proposition looks like a proposition that asserts something about the world, and which might be susceptible of disproof: perhaps there are some Soviet citizens who do not support the party, or who disagree with this or that of the party’s policies. What such an approach misses, however, is how in this ideology, what is referred to as “the people” in fact means “all those who support the party.” In Stalinism, that is, “the party” is the fetishized particular that stands for the people’s true interests (see 1e). Hence, the sentence “the people always support the party” is a concealed form of tautology. Any apparent people who in fact do not support the party by that fact alone are no longer “people” within Stalinist ideology.

d. The Substance is Subject, the Other Does Not Exist

In 4b, we saw how Žižek argues that political identification is identification with the gesture of identification. In 4c, we saw how the ultimate foundation of a regimes’ laws is a tautologous assertion of the bare political fact that *there is* law. What unites these two positions is the idea that the sublime objects of a political regime and the ideological fantasies that give narratives about their content conceal from subjects the absence of any final ground for Law beyond the fact of its own assertion, and the fact that subjects take it to be authoritative. Here as elsewhere, Žižek’s work surprisingly approaches leading *motifs* in the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt.

Importantly, once this position is stated, we can also begin to see how Žižek’s post-Marxist project of a critique of ideology intersects with his philosophical defense of the Cartesian subject. At several points in his oeuvre, Žižek cites Hegel’s statement in the “Introduction” to the *Phenomenology*

of *Spirit* that “the substance is subject” as a rubric that describes the core of his own political philosophy. According to Žižek, critics have misread this statement by taking it to repeat the founding, triumphalist idea of modern subjectivity as such—namely, that the subject can master all of nature or “substance.” Žižek contends, controversially, that Hegel’s claim ought to be read in a directly opposing sense. For him, it indicates the truth that there can be no dominant political regime or, in Hegel’s terms, no “social substance” that does not depend for its authority upon the active, indeed finally anticipatory (4c) investment of subjects in it. Like the malign computer machines in *The Matrix* that literally run off the human *jouissance* they drain from deluded subjects, for Žižek the big Other of any political regime does not exist as a self-sustaining substance. It must ceaselessly run on the belief and actions of its subjects, and their *jouissance* (2c)—or, to recur to the example we looked at in 2d, the King will not be the King, for Žižek, unless he has his subjects. It is certainly telling that the leading examples of ideological tautology *For They know What They Do* discusses invoke precisely some subject’s will or decision as when a parent says to a child “do this ... because I said so,” or when people do something “... because the King said so,” which means that no more questions can be asked.

In 4a, we saw how Žižek denies that the subject, because it is not itself a perceptible object, belongs to an order of being wholly outside of the order of experience. To elevate such a wholly Other order would, he argues, reproduce the elementary operation of the fundamental fantasy. We can now add to this thought the further position that the Cartesian subject is, according to Žižek, is finally nothing other than the irreducible point of active agency responsible for the always minimally precipitous political gesture of laying down a regime’s law. For Žižek, accordingly, the critical question to be asked of any theoretical or political position that posits

some exceptional Beyond, as we saw in his reading of Kant (2e) is: from which subject-position do you speak when you claim a knowledge of this Beyond? As we saw in 2e, Žižek's Lacanian answer is that the perspective that one always presupposes when one speaks in this manner is one that is always "superegoic" (see 2a)—tied to what he terms in *Metastases of Enjoyment* a "malevolently neutral" God's eye view from nowhere. It is deeply revealing, from Žižek's perspective, that the very perspective which allows the Kantian subject in the "dynamic sublime" to resignify its own finitude as itself a source of pleasure-in-pain (*jouissance*) is precisely one which identifies with the supersensible moral Law, before which the sensuous subject remains irredeemably guilty, infinitely striving to pay off its moral debt. As Žižek cites Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

It is manifest that beyond the so-called curtain [of phenomena] which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves as much in order that we may see, *as that there may be something behind there which can be seen*. (Žižek, 1989: 196, emphasis added)

In other words, Žižek's final position about the sublime objects of political regimes' ideologies is that these belief inspiring objects are so many ways in which the subject misrecognizes its own active capacity to challenge existing laws, and to found new laws altogether. Žižek repeatedly argues that the most uncanny or abyssal Thing in the world is the subject's own active subjectivity—which is why he also repeatedly cites the Eastern saying that "Thou art that." It is finally the singularity of the subject's own active agency that subjects misperceive in fantasies concerning the sublime objects of their regimes' ideologies, in the face of which they can do nothing but reverentially abide by the rules. In this way, it is worth noting, Žižek's work can claim a heritage not

only of Hegel, but also from the Left Hegelians, and Marx's and Feuerbach's critiques of religion.

e. The Ethical Act Traversing the Fantasy

Žižek's technical term for the process whereby we can come to recognize how the sublime objects of our political regimes' ideologies are, like Marx's commodities, fetish objects that conceal from subjects their own political agency is "traversing of the fantasy." Traversing the fantasy, for Žižek, is at once the political subject's deepest form of self-recognition, and the basis for his own radical political position or defense of the possibility of such positions. Žižek's entire theoretical work directs us towards this "traversing of the fantasy" in the many different fields on which he has written, and despite the widespread consensus at the beginning of the new century that fundamental political change is no longer possible or desirable.

Insofar as political ideologies for Žižek, like for Althusser (see 2c), remain viable only because of the ongoing practices and beliefs of political subjects, this traversal of fantasy must always involve an active, practical intervention in the political world, which changes a regime's political institutions. As for Kant, so for Žižek, the practical bearing of critical reason comes first, in his critique of ideology, and last, in his advocacy of the possibility of political change. Žižek hence also repeatedly speaks of traversing the fantasy in terms of an "Act" (capital "A"), which differs from normal human speech and action. Everyday speech and action typically does not challenge the framing sociopolitical parameters within which it takes place, Žižek observes. By contrast, what he means by an Act is an action which "touches the Real" (as he says) of what a sociopolitical regime has politically repressed or wiped its hands of, and which it cannot publicly avow without risking fundamental political damage

(see 2c). In this way, the Žižekian Act extends and changes the very political and ideological parameters of what is permitted within a regime, in the hope of bringing into being new parameters in the light of which its own justice will be able to be retrospectively seen. This is the point of significant parallel with Alain Badiou's work, whose influence Žižek has increasingly avowed in his more recent books. Notably, as Žižek specifies in *The Indivisible Remainder*, the Act as what it is effectively repeats the very act that he claims founds all political regimes as such, namely, the excessive, law founding gesture we examined in 4c. Just as the current political regime originated in a founding gesture excessive with regard to the laws it set in place, Žižek argues, so too can this political regime itself be superseded, and a new one replace it. In his reading of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek indeed argues that such a new Act also effectively repeats all previous, failed attempts at changing an existing political regime, which otherwise would be consigned forever to historical oblivion.

5. Conclusion

Slavoj Žižek's work represents a striking challenge within the contemporary philosophical scene. Žižek's very style, and his prodigious ability to write and examine examples from widely divergent fields, is a remarkable thing. His work reintroduces and reinvigorates for a wider audience ideas from the works of German Idealism. Žižek's work is framed in terms of a polemical critique of other leading theorists within today's new left or liberal academy (Derrida, Habermas, Deleuze), which claims to unmask their apparent radicality as concealing a shared recoil from the possibility of a subjective, political Act which in fact sits comfortably with a passive resignation to today's political status quo. Not the least interesting feature of his work, politically, is indeed

how Žižek's critique of the new left both significantly mirrors criticisms from conservative and neoconservative authors, yet hails from an avowedly opposed political perspective. In political philosophy, Žižek's Lacanian theory of ideology presents a radically new descriptive perspective that affords us a unique purchase on many of the paradoxes of liberal consumerist subjectivity, which is at once politically cynical (as the political right laments) and politically conformist (as the political left struggles to come to terms with). Prescriptively, Žižek's work challenges us to ask questions about the possibility of sociopolitical change that have otherwise rarely been asked after 1989, including: what forms such changes might take?; and what might justify them or make them possible?

Looked at in a longer perspective, it is of course too soon to judge what the lasting effects of Žižek's philosophy will be, especially given Žižek's own comparative youth as a thinker (Žižek was born in 1949). In terms of the history of ideas, in particular, while Žižek's thought certainly turns on their heads many of today's widely accepted theoretical notions, it is surely a more lasting question whether his work represents any more lasting a break with the parameters that Kant's critical philosophy set out in the three *Critiques*.

6. References and Further Reading

a. Primary Literature (Books by Žižek)

- *Iraq The Borrowed Kettle*, New York: Verso, 2004.
- *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, New York, London: Routledge, 2003.
- *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, New York: Routledge, 2003.
- *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Essays on the (Mis)Use of a Notion*, London; New York: Verso, 2001.
- *The Fright of Real Tears, Kieslowski and The Future*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

- *On Belief*, London: Routledge, 2001.
- *The Fragile Absolute or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For*, London; New York: Verso, 2000.
- *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime, On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, Walter Chapin Center for the Humanities: University of Washington, 2000.
- *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and SZ. London; New York: Verso, 2000.
- *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, second expanded edition, New York: Routledge, 2000.
- *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London; New York: Verso, 1999.
- *The Abyss Of Freedom Ages Of The World*, with F.W.J. von Schelling, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- *The Plague of Fantasies*, London; New York: Verso, 1997.
- *Gaze And Voice As Love Objects*, Renata Salecl and SZ editors. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
- *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay On Schelling And Related Matters*, London; New York: Verso, 1996.
- *The Metastases Of Enjoyment: Six Essays On Woman And Causality (Wo Es War)*, London; New York: Verso, 1994.
- *Mapping Ideology*, SZ editor. London; New York: Verso, 1994.
- *Tarrying With The Negative: Kant, Hegel And The Critique Of Ideology*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood And Out*, London; New York: Routledge, 1992.
- *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock)*, SZ editor. London; New York: Verso, 1992.

- *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.
- *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As A Political Factor*, London; New York: Verso, 1991.
- *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London; New York: Verso, 1989.

b. Secondary Literature (Texts on Žižek)

- *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real*, Matthew Sharpe, Hants: Ashgate, 2004.
- *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, Ian Parker, London: Pluto Press, 2004.
- *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory*, Rex Butler, London: Continuum, 2004.
- *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, Sarah Kay, London: Polity, 2003.
- *Slavoj Žižek (Routledge Critical Thinkers)*, Tony Myers, London: Routledge, 2003.

~



