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## **Dialogues with Slavoj Zizek: placing the role of torture in context.**

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Just after finishing my two recent books: *Tracing Spikes in Fear and Narcissism in Western Democracies Since 9/11* (Peter Lang) and *The Challenges of Democracy in the War on Terror* (Routledge). While in the first work I traced back the limitations of Psychoanalysis as well as its complicities to legitimate the advance and expansion of capitalism, the latter focused on the role of torture –as a lesser evil- of contemporary government in their war on terror. One of my arguments sounded polemically as though not only terrorism is the organization of labor by other means but psychoanalysis organized a specific ethic, which extracting its nature from ancient Greek philosophy, ascribed to the theory of scarcity which is the touchstone of capitalism. Secondly but most important, Occident carefully developed a doctrine of security, which the part may be sacrificed at the moment the body is in danger. Let me put the medical metaphor of cancer. While the medical gaze is programmed to look and eradicate the pathology, the illness,

cancer derives from an anomaly of cell growth. Once some organs are affected, the medical gaze does not hesitate in extirpating the affected organ. The same allegory can be applied to the war on terror and the serious risks of ghettoization the Muslim community daily faces.

As noted, both works were a clear critique of the conception of liberal democracy and nation-state. Of course, in my texts, I did not mention (or even incorporated the caustic classic, *The Universal Exemption*, which was authored by Slavoj Zizek. In fact, Zizek exerted a radical criticism, like me, to the postmodern politics and its intersection with terrorism, torture, 9/11, and the impossibilities of modern democracies to deal with the totalitarian spirit inside them. My decision in excluding this book seems not to be accidental. I reserve a full book review to discuss further Zizek's strongholds but above all his limitations in the understanding of the contemporary society. Though coming from sociology, one of my first challenges was to avoid excessive jargonism, complex vocabulary and explaining Zizek's argument as clear as possible.

He departs from the premise that the bipolar world, where the US conducted a symbolic war with the Soviet Union, ended, and of course, withered away. The left-wing scholars not only become in the most conservative thinkers of our contemporary society but also appeal to a cynic position which though overtly criticizes the effects of capitalism, they did not the minimum to change their zone of comfort. This evinces a clear dissociation between *the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation*. To put the same in other terms, the postmodern politics seems not to pretty different to the terrorist's message, which says I want you not only to do what I want, but I want you to do it as if you really want to do it!. Zizek argues convincingly that lay-citizens are often subject to an "extreme civility", which is oriented to expand the belief people move freely while at the bottom they are strictly determined by "the Big Other". Needless to clarify, this "Big Other", which is opposed to little Other, has not the physical entity, nor it relates to "the Big Brother as many scholars assumed. It represents the syntactical, grammatical, implicit norms, social conventions that daily mold the individual and collective

behaviors. Whether the relations between capital owners and workers are part of the little other, the underlying conditions of labor exploitation signals to the Big Other. As Žižek puts it,

*“The role of civility in modern societies to the rise of autonomous free individual – not only in the sense that civility is the practice of treating others as equal, free and autonomous subjects, but, in a much more refined way, the fragile web of civility is the social substance of free independent individuals” (Žižek 2015: preface, xv)*

As above cited, the extreme civility represents the opposite, oddly the act of feigning people are free when really they are not. We live, undoubtedly, under the hegemony of totalitarian regimes, which are camouflaged of liberal democracies. One of the aspects that define the dictators is prone to pose *criminal law so severe that* if followed literally all we are guilty of something. The different chapters and sections revolve around the idea that institutions contain underlying cultural values which not only determine the individual decision-making process but also lead the people even without their consent. He put the examples of pedophilia and Catholic Church, or the torture in the Supermax Prisons. The priest who commits these acts surely cannot be guided by their own instinctual desires but by the founding values of Christianity and above all the structural background of Catholic Church. Breaking these implicit rules implies not only the priest is symbolically executed (isolated) but confronting with the values of the institution. The same happens with torture. Per Žižek’s viewpoint, there is nothing soldiers can do to avoid torture (over their prisoners) and not being sanctioned by their peers.

In what, at least for this reviewer is the best chapter of the book (*Heiner Müller out of Joint*), he discusses the essence of liberal democracy from an innovative angle. He posits a more than a pungent question, what would happen if a political party which is next to gain election, refuses the founding values of democracy?, is this emerging party punished or pressed to operate in the clandestine life?

As Žižek observed, liberal democracy should be seen as a formal legality, which orchestrated to resolve the adversarial positions in the game:

*“Democracy... concerns above all, formal legality: its minimal definition is the unconditional adherence to a certain set of formal rules which guarantee that antagonisms are fully absorbed not the agonistic game”.  
Democracy means that whatever electoral manipulation takes place, every political agent will unconditionally respect the results (Žižek 2015: 59).*

Given the problem in these terms, the first section of the book ends with the dichotomy of formal “written” law, and what Žižek dubs as “the obscene superego” which exemplifies the hidden law. To test this, he places the example of the law in Southern America and the illegal action of KKK. While the formal prohibited extreme punishments against hapless blacks, the KKK imposed a disciplinary mechanism of violence which legitimated the formal juridical background. Any member of KKK was a renowned member of his community, but he might be very-well exiled while rejecting a direct order of a superior to lynch a black. In that way, Žižek adds, the system keeps a light and dark side to keep the close scrutiny of its members.

To here, we reviewed the most interesting parts and debates on *The Universal Exemption*. To my end, Žižek deserves a great recognition by his attempt to place in dialogue disciplines originally characterized by a mutual indifference -as psychoanalysis and Marxism-, but at the same time, he toys with the belief we are living in a world where the values were radically transformed. There is nothing like the good or the evil, what should or ought to be done. This closed system disposes of individual characters, dreams, and hopes simulating that they amply move in a climate of freedom as never before. However, beyond these fabricated feelings and narratives, underlies a system of exploitation, which operates in the opposites. The confrontation of the two opposite bands, far from bringing to a third way, legitimates the same cultural values. In perspective, Žižek tries to explain this in different ways –throughout the book-

which ranges from the position of leftists towards the discourses of multiculturalism. Leo Strauss imagined an aristocratic society where some secrets should be covered for lay-persons, veiled by the ignorance. Most probably, the book can be synthesized with Socrates' trial. He was *guilty as charged* "because philosophy is a threat to society" (p 62). To put this in bluntly, the current crisis of democracy suggests that just after revealing the necessary lie, the ruling elite remains naked.

What may we object to Zizek's insights?

First and foremost, as we have confronted with the idea that psychoanalysis gives further understanding on the material asymmetries of capitalism. Even, psychoanalysis derived from the theory of scarcity, which was encapsulated in ancient Greece. Freud never thought the principle of desire as eternal or complete in the same way, Greeks refused the belief in a total happiness. The diverse Greek myths from Troy to Orpheus teach that the eternal happiness only leads to disaster. The world always imposes to the individual quest for pleasure. This is exactly what influenced S. Freud and psychoanalysis from its inception. A more than interesting question arises, why psychoanalysis and Orpheus's tragedy are vital for western capitalism?

A tentative answer is capitalism needs from the doctrine of scarcity, which means no other thing than all circulating goods is not affordable for all members of society. In view of this, each member should sacrifice part of their desire to maximize their goals. The principle of scarcity not only played a crucial role in the configuration of the modern economy but also is the symbolic touchstone of capitalism. However, psychoanalysis should not be seen as dissociated to the industrial world. As Zizek says in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, it is important not to lose the sight of the fact that Christianity proffers an alternative answer to the poverty and the injustices of the world, which keeps the hapless workforce under control, but far from being the ideological core of capitalism, Christianity endorses to the same values of psychoanalysis, which remind that a world of total happiness is not possible. The

second point which deserves further discussion is the Crucifixion of Christ –cited and approached by Žižek in the same book. Christianity has a perverse core, which consists in the unilateral subordination of all political values, out of any revolutionary reaction. While classic cults need from loyalty to persist, Christianity makes from the treason its main touchstone. In this respect, Christianity disposes of the sin and the cure at the same time. Christianity tells us that the happiness rests on our own incapacity to defy the status quo. In this way, the subject is tied to express its desire in the plenitude. The Christ's cavalry and Crucifixion, for Žižek, reveals the impossibility of God to save his son in the same line, Job was cynically placed between the wall and the deep blue sea. Here two assumptions should be done. On one hand, the same concerns revolving around Christianity replicates surely in the Greek Tragedy and psychoanalysis. On another, the crucifixion of Christ cannot be defined as a founding event, as Žižek did, but as the continuation of an already-given landscape in Judaism as the Noah's Ark. We have cast some doubts respecting Žižek's accounts. (Korstanje 2016). We hold the thesis that the contemporary society sets the pace to a new stage of capitalism, where the Other's death is exchanged as the main commodity. Not only in media entertainment, but also in other institutions, the global audiences are prone to gaze "how the Other is suffering". This opened the doors to a new culture, we dubbed as "thana-Capitalism". In this vein, though 9/11 accelerated the decomposition of postmodernism to a "thanaptopic-modernism", Noah's ark is the founding myth which legitimates a Darwinist climate where the winner takes all. At a closer look, God is upset with a world he originally created. Not only the man has fallen as prey of the sin, but also he needs from another man to perpetrate his plans. God asked Noah to build an ark lumping together a couple per specie. The rest of the story says that the Universal flood not only purged the sin but also gave a new opportunity to mankind to prosper in a new land. Beyond this post-apocalyptic myth, this was esteemed as the first Genocide, and Noah its architect. Once God revealed his plans, Noah would tell others humans or advice to others who would be the victims of God's rage. However, his silence led millions to death. At that founding act, God divided the world in two: the victims (the entire mankind) and

Noah (the witness). The Christ's tribulation not only confirmed the same dynamic but also showed that the sacrifice (which means the pain) and death are the resulting mainstream values of capitalism, which rests on the theory of scarcity.

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