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Afterword: On Eurocentric Lacanians

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The most productive theoretical contribution I can make to this topic is to explain my thoughts about the by now rather traditional Freudo-Marxist project and to assess Lacanianism in that light. It will be understood that in this form which approximates that of the interview – my positions will be little more than opinions, a form of ideological expression I don't much care for. Nor will I even try to give an opinion of Slavoj Žižek's extraordinary production, which I admire, learn from, and above all consider energizing, this last being certainly the ultimate aim of intellectual work.

What such a discussion demands is rather a statement about the place of Lacan and Lacanian psychoanalysis in a contemporary Marxist framework. I have elsewhere been happy to criticize the old Freudo-Marxist project, which involves, in my opinion, a bad concept of synthesis, and tends to turn Freud into a kind of psychology, if it does not turn Marx into a kind of culture-critique. This is evident even in the most intellectually sophisticated and ambitious versions of the Frankfurt School, where the obligatory theory of Nazism is inevitably reduced to yet another theory of human nature. Horkheimer and Adorno certainly hit on something when they denounced the principle of self-preservation as the barrier to any kind of Utopian social arrangement: but that is a negative and privative theory, which is quite different from the assertion of anything like an "authoritarian personality" or a human nature dominated by the Oedipus complex, embittered by repression, avid of leaderliness, and frustrated by puritanism and economic crisis (Reich, whose theory of character structure was important for Lacan, was however far more militant and aggressive in his early work, but knew a tragic destiny).

The slippage of these theories into psychology is important to denounce (the great strength of psychoanalysis is that it is not a psychology), and it was probably encouraged by a bad conception of synthesis. In addition, psychoanalysis moved uneasily towards a systematic philosophy (something one should also reject), that is, a generalized theory of nature and of human nature. In that sense, for me systematic philosophy has a more than family relationship to metaphysics on the one hand and ideology on the other (hence my resistance to a certain conception of "dialectical materialism" as a philosophy - something which will come up again later on). Meanwhile, that Lacanianism is subject to the same structural temptation seems evident to me, for whom the more ecstatic celebrations of the so-called death drive resemble nothing quite so much as the old-fashioned life force. I should add, however, that for me the proper opposite of philosophy is not "science" in that quaint old Marxist usage, but rather theory, as an ad hoc self-destructing philosophical and ideological critique: fanatical readers of my texts will have noted, for example, that I read Hegel's *Phenomenology* as theory, which the philosopher himself later converted into a full-dress philosophy (a form from which I then part company); and that I read Deleuze as a

professional philosopher who mostly does theory under the mask or pastiche of this or that classical philosopher.

But what made Lacan's extraordinary and ambitious elaboration a partner for Marxism is his transformation of the Freudian complex, such as that which carries the name of Oedipus, into a desire: now the Other is inserted into the psyche in a constitutive way as something like an ontological dimension (Sartre is an unavoidable reference here), and the ambiguity of the "desire of the Other" opens up a space for collectivity that so far only René Girard was able to transform, cunningly, into a religious *Weltanschauung* and a method all at once. Thus the social becomes in Lacanianism a constitutive element in the psyche, and not some external addition to the individual (or the family). At any rate, my own interest in the problems of conceptualizing collectivities passes very centrally through this matter of collective envy, about which Slavoj has also had many useful things to say: Europe in general, the Balkans in particular, are as good a place as the United States in which to observe this particular phenomenon. Meanwhile, the recent study of the Neighbor (in which Slavoj centrally participated) is a very pertinent Brechtian estrangement-effect and a good example of the productiveness of the Lacanian positioning of the other, as opposed to the pious humanism of Levinassian meditation.

At any rate, Lacan was not a philosopher either, however much he might have been tempted; nor was he always a psychoanalyst. The French 60s were for me an extraordinary rich explosion of all kinds of new theories and theoretical developments (one of the most important differences between my work and that of Slavoj is my own background as a Sartrean moving into Greimassian semiotics, without abandoning a Marxist orientation; I think that Slavoj never felt the pull of structuralism in the same way, but probably emerged from Heidegger rather than Sartre as a philosophical background).

Reading Lacan's seminars in the years since then, I have come to appreciate how almost everything in this immense field of radical difference that was the French 60s and 70s in fact ultimately originated with Lacan. His passing references sent his followers out to read the books, if not actually to translate them, sometimes for the first time; and his own prodigious culture, which emerged from surrealism but also passed

through the Sartrean force field, served as an inescapable model for French theorists who had long since already become political intellectuals.

The papers included in this collection are full of interest and of stimulating ideas, few of which I care to reject; and the nuanced differentiations between my work and Slavoj's are always worth pondering. I do have an interest in periodizing and in long-term history which I don't think he shares; I'm not much interested in religion, which as a Lacanian he finds as fascinating as any case study; he is an exciting and provocative commentator on the current situation (didn't he tell us that the election of Trump would shake things up and release a host of new possibilities?). I'm interested in the possible construction of socialism in ways a European who has lived through "actually existing socialism" might not find productive. But we certainly unite under the slogan of Hegel and Hitchcock, and many of our alleged differences arise from different interests rather than different conceptual positions. At any rate Kirk Boyle's essay underscores these divergences with some precision.

Matthew Flisfeder's essay is an immensely wide-ranging further account of all this and of the period itself. I would tend to accept his angle – that both our surface and our deeper differences reflect a tension between historical materialism and dialectical materialism, with the historical qualification I have suggested above, namely that Slavoj's version of the latter is not exactly to be construed as a return to Engels, and probably also does not appeal to a “philosophy of nature” and a dialectical view of science in quite so old-fashioned a way as the old party debates used to. But to be sure, they are revived in our time in the form of neuro-science and conjectures about the physical brain – projects about which I remain as stubbornly skeptical as I think he is. Meanwhile, my own emphasis can perhaps be cast in a different light by the dilemmas of the diachronic and the synchronic of the 1960s, which still live on in the historical projects that interest me in ways that probably do not excite Slavoj very much, but which do still awaken the spirit of that historical materialism of which Karl Korsch was perhaps the last defender.

As for Adorno, Ed Graham's ostensible topic, I oscillate between admiration and exasperation. Nothing he ever wrote lacked brilliance, but that could in itself be a source of annoyance. I'm currently teaching a course on Brecht and Adorno as mortal enemies;

I've revisited both their old houses in Santa Monica, of course (they lived only a few streets away from each other), and could only imagine the Tui-type armchair radical Adorno figured in Brecht's mind until I learned that the families had dinner together once a week. It would also be important to read into the record Adorno's early enthusiasm for the *3-Penny Opera* and *Mahagonny*.

For myself, it is rather the knee-jerk evocation of universal suffering which spoils my pleasure in Adorno's writing; and the enthusiasm for Beckett also wears less well today, or so it seems to me. But certainly this squares a little with Slavoj's supremely pertinent diagnosis of an absence of *jouissance*. But I think it is a mistake to reduce Adorno to a thinker of "non-identity," a theme in any case that is for all practical purposes an anti-Marxist one. Whatever the corner into which Adorno painted himself in his quest of an Archimedean point from which to exercise a dwindling negativity, he cannot be considered a post-Marxist of the Laclau variety. (I mean no disrespect to my late friend Ernesto for putting it that way.) As a negative, critical, destructive figure, however, Adorno at his best is surely unparalleled; and the Utopian problem puts all this in the right perspective.

As for the piece by Clint Burnham, always the most dazzling and exciting of my commentators, besides the mysterious Gibsonian Ohio city and the always stunning intervention of an image by Jeff Wall, it breaks new ground by linking the Greimas square with Lacan's theory of gender, where the affirmation that there is no sexual relationship mobilizes a very curious negative indeed. I now rather regret that my old proposal for a new slogan, "Difference relates!", never caught on. We will surely (or at least I will) be ruminating this rich essay for some time – as indeed with all the other essays in this collection.

With Zahi Zalloua we enter different territory; and I hope I may be permitted a quick word about the evocation of my so-called infamous Third World Allegory essay, in the spirit of historical precision. I wrote it in the era of what were then called Wars of National Liberation, an imprecise term which tended to be limited in political use to the period of decolonization which began with Ghana in 1957 (or earlier, Vietnam), reached its climax with Cuba and Vietnam, and ended with the liberation of the Portuguese colonies in Africa in 1975. I appreciate the welcome corrections of footnote 3, but in fact

I would continue to characterize the collective consciousness I was there analyzing as nationalism, with this qualification (in which I agree with Deleuze) that it is a question of nationalism before the latter comes to power, a popular unity forged around the project of national liberation and the achievement of the nation state, a political structure (admittedly European!) which generally did not turn out so well, particularly inasmuch as historically it was on the point of being superceded by a world economy (so-called globalization) unaccompanied by any new political form.

I dealt with that first small shelf of Third World classics which began to emerge in the 1960s, and which has since been superceded by all kinds of other group literatures, often ethnic or tribal, or gender-based, or racially or linguistically self-identified. My argument was that every kind of new group consciousness (today I would identify the theory of that, insofar as we have one, with what Ibn Khaldun called *asabiyyah*) finds its privileged expression in essentially allegorical structures. ("Third World" is by the way also a historical term, today superceded, but then proudly used by the inheritors of the Bandung conference of 1955.) The point is that group allegory has not disappeared from these literatures but that they are mostly no longer "national" in the sense of my old essay.

A few more observations about the slogan of Eurocentrism, an essentially political slogan which I consider to be ill-advised. I am always initially a little bewildered why it is not Americano-centrism which is stigmatized here, since it is the U.S. that has the power and U.S. mass culture which is the foremost wave of standardization over the world and very much in non-European countries (think only of music and film, if you don't want to include computer culture).

Then, too, I wonder which Europe is in question here. Surely not the current E.U. of the bankers and the utterly undemocratic power structure of their internal accords, which regulate non-organic genetically modified foods and farming, certainly, but which also regulate and suppress any kind of labor legislation a half-way social-democratic European government might be tempted to pass and enforce; and all this not even to speak of immigration.

I suppose that it is our current imprisonment in an ahistorical present, however, that causes us to forget that all the same issues arose within the older Europe of the nation states. I believe, for one thing, that the increasing absorption of superstructures by the base has given real content to Stuart Hall's idea of "discursive struggle," one powerful form of which (it explains Trump!) is called political correctness, which has had some very positive effects on our political consciousness. Edward Said's pathbreaking *Orientalism*, for example, sensitized us to realities we had only been too ready to ignore in the past (beginning with Homer's *Iliad*, an epic of orientalism if there ever was one!). But you would have to be historically ill-informed not to remember that for a provincial Germany, France (and to a lesser extent England) was precisely that advanced "civilization" which gave Central Europe – the Orient of its time – its bellicose inferiority complex (look at Thomas Mann's World War I *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*); and beyond that, to ignore the status of the "undeveloped" Balkans for the rest of some so-called Europe. Indeed, as you look ever more closely at this history the very entity called Europe dissolves into a microcosm of national rivalries, cultural envy, racisms and collective hatreds of exactly the same kind that Said denounced for our stereotypes of the Middle East (for I think Said's Orient did not go much further than the boundaries of Islam, nor did it take the continent of South America into consideration). So at that point "Eurocentrism" becomes a wildly inaccurate target and a very imprecise way of sorting out friends and foes.

Meanwhile, I would imagine that all this is limited to the Left. I do not really see much right-wing or conservative polemic about Hayek, for example, and his geographic origins (in the name, say, of America First!); I do not see centrist liberals taking their stand on deviations from the ancient traditions of the Magna Carta or the Ur-Germanic tribes and their democratic assemblies. I imagine that they are better placed to understand that what is called Eurocentric is in reality capitalism itself.

So the denunciations are quarrels on some very enlarged Left, and it is my experience that they almost always concern left intellectual traditions if not so-called state power. The anarchist denunciations of this last from Foucault to James Scott are less worried about transnational monopolies than about the (now defunct) Soviet party state or even the social-democratic nanny state. And as for the intellectual and cultural

polemics, they always end up denouncing Marx and Marxism. I think these battles on the left are unproductive politically and intellectually (Mariátegui or Fanon versus Althusser or the Frankfurt School!), and I think I must beg to abstain, with but a concluding reminder that Islam is the very climax of the Western tradition in this Renaissance sense; and also that I myself was always considered a staunch pro-Palestinian and Third-Worldist in the days in which this label still meant anything politically.

The binational solution, however, if it is one, is only a subset of a much larger political and conceptual dilemma, which is that of federalism as such. As the world population expands, it organizes itself (most often involuntarily) into large or small groups which might be called clans, but which range from the "identity" groups to the "national" ones (most often based on language, religion, and physical appearance ("race" being as we know an utterly unscientific pseudo-category)). When these groups are organized territorially, then we have the civil wars, movements of secession, wars of national independence and so forth (which are today pursued on virtually microscopic levels, as in Aceh for example). When the groups are intermingled, in urban-type agglomerations, then ideals of citizenship, multiculturalism and the like are floated as ideologies and attempt to capture some institutional status and a fetishistic hold on the unconscious. But no one has effectively theorized a solution suitable for all these situations; the old idea of world government sounds like something out of the 1950s (Karatani has revived it, however, and surely ecology makes some such thing unavoidable), while the word "federalism" stands as a problem rather than a solution; and it is a conceptual and philosophical problem on a par with that of the definition of the group as such. I think myself that language is as important here as race and religion and is insufficiently focused in these discussions, whose scandalous basic text remains Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and against which anarchism inevitably emerges as a psychic reaction. Let's try to make the pessimism that is inevitably inspired by such reflections an energizing rather than a demobilizing one.