

Europe's Malignant Supplements, I Know. But Nevertheless...

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Abstract: This discussion review appeals to a minimal militant comradeship across struggles. Theory is also a struggle, and solidarity is always key. It agrees with Slavoj Žižek's main argument: the critique of Eurocentrism cannot sustain itself without acknowledging the positive influence of the Enlightenment radical tradition. It also underlines that particular emancipatory projects set against universalism fail to properly problematise political subjectivity. This is not to coalesce with certain Western/European metropolitan intellectual and political inclinations, not least in the Left, particularly prone to lay down the correct and rightful terms of anybody else's struggles. Various examples from different historic and contemporary contexts illustrate and clarify this point. In the process, some hints are also given on possible theoretical and political reconciliations between Decolonial Theory and the Idea of Communism or between Žižek's "possibilism" and Alain Badiou's politics of the impossible

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Introduction

Halfway through “My European Manifesto”¹ Slavoj Žižek points to the If-by-whiskey fallacy. Named after a famous speech by a Mississippi politician on whether upholding prohibition or legally restoring the consumption of alcohol, the dilemma translates into the European question as follows: If by Europe you understand the space of liberties and human rights, I am all for it; if by Europe you understand the fortress of white colonialist racism, I am absolutely against it. Establishing such a neat and comforting divide, of course, prevents any rational, or for that matter reasonable understanding of European and, by extension, Western civilization. Instead, Žižek’s *Manifesto* accounts for a line of reasoning, which is both consistent as well as it is committed. Consistent in that the core of his message can be traced back to his “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism’”² written some 20-odd years ago. Committed in that he does not dodge the difficult question of Europe’s irreducible ambivalence but confronts it head on: To those liberal views upholding the inherent virtues of the European tradition he responds that the solution is not to imagine a European entity devoid of its malignant supplements; against those mounting an all-out decolonial critique of Eurocentrism, he responds that a distinct European legacy must be acknowledged, the radical kernel of which is still worth fighting for universally.

Universalism and Its Discontents

The idea of emancipatory universalism emerges from within the European tradition of the Enlightenment, Žižek contends relying on the radically ambivalent heritage that the word Europe conveys. Žižek’s plea for universality is, if not entirely pitted against, certainly at odds with the main intellectual and activist approaches of the Left worldwide. In fact, the main aim of critical approaches such as “decolonial thinking,” “intersectional theory” and “left populism,” is, precisely, to challenge the dominant Eurocentric paradigm of a Western civilization claiming its own universality only from and for a particularly violent white-racist and male-patriarchal power position. My own contention is this: on the one hand, there is no denying that the politically transformative aim of these alternative knowledges resides on concretely situating economic inequality and the different forms of political violence exerted upon a multiplicity of subordinated or subaltern identities, cultural, sexual etc. On the other hand, however, denying subaltern identity politics of what Alain Badiou fittingly defends as the potential of universalism for radical

1 Slavoj Žižek, “Mon Manifeste Européen,” *Tribune, Le Monde*, May 13, 2021.

2 Slavoj Žižek, “Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism,’” *Critical Enquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 988–1009.

innovation in every particular situation³ on the back that universality is always-already exclusive to a dominant Western particular, can hardly make the cut.

The struggles for different oppressed identities are struggles for equality, not recognition. When we criticize the common Western notion of the universal for its particular male, white, bourgeois... bias, the duty of this critique should not be to replace universality with a dispersed array of unconnected alternative particularities but to visualize the distortions of this false Western universality and seeking for a true universality instead. In other words, when dealing with the issue of universality, or of how the universal is held to ransom by concrete oppressive particulars focused on the exclusion of subordinated Others, turning the equation upside down and placing emphasis solely on the particularity of subordinate differences is all too simply not good enough in political terms. For the issue is not to compute the fact that abstract universality represents a particular and specific form of domination organised around patriarchal and racist Western civilization. The issue is that to overcome the excesses of Western Eurocentrism, accepting the marginality of the Other as an inherent value also amounts to pure formalism – a point British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton underlined in his book on *Ideology*: “It is pure formalism to imagine that otherness, heterogeneity, and marginality are inherently political benefits regardless of their specific social content.”⁴

An additional shortcoming Žižek does not overlook is how for subaltern identity politics the local becomes the privileged location of political struggle and resistance failing to properly recognize, in the process, how the world constitutes now a wholly unified and homogeneous marketplace: “Capitalism is not just universal in itself, it is universal for itself, as the tremendous actual corrosive power which undermines all particular lifeworld, cultures and traditions, cutting across them, catching them at its vortex.”⁵

Žižek’s position against the culturalisation of politics is very much in tune, here, with Badiou’s take on the direct relation between globalized capitalism and the proliferation of local identitarian cultural politics.⁶ Both come to argue that the false universality of a globalized capitalism is devoid of any inherent cultural ideology and thus adapts to local particularities without any contradiction. In this context, verifying and ascertaining the distortion or partial particularity on which global capitalism relies, white, civilized, etc., the liberating response should be the struggle to replace this dominant and false universality by reconnecting and articulating diversity within the coordinates of

3 See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

4 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991), 128.

5 Slavoj Žižek, “Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” *Critical Enquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008), 672.

6 See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 9–13.

true universality. A universality that does not dissolve all particulars but that all struggling particularities share despite their differences. For Žižek then, the correct Leftist stance is:

Bring out the hidden antagonisms of your own culture, link it to the antagonisms of other cultures, and then engage in a common struggle of those who fight here against the oppression and domination at work in our culture and those who do the same in other cultures.⁷

For Žižek, Europe's radical emancipatory tradition is not about "a dialogue of cultures" but a "solidarity of struggles." Hence, he is clear as to the generic contour that worldwide solidarity and collaboration among struggling particularities should take: What must be praised is not the struggle of a particular marginalised identity formation as such but also the struggle within that identity itself. Take the example of the nation. Certainly, what Žižek is saying can be traced back and directly related to the classic two-nations-thesis of generic communism in a traditional Marxist way. Along the same path, however, although from a neat anti-colonialist position, Fausto Reinaga also offered the theory of two Bolivias, the Mestizo Bolivia exploiting and erasing Indian Bolivia. This he did in his *The Indian Revolution*,⁸ a book deeply influenced in its time by Fanon, Malcom X and Black Power politics and remains, nowadays, a work of reference in decolonial studies.

The point, here, being that the paragraph above alone forces, or anticipates, forms of strategic theoretical reconciliation between a renewed idea of communism with decolonial and intersectional politics. A reconciliation that also encompasses other sources of knowledge that cannot be abandoned on the simple account of them being European or Western in origin. In this sense, moving from the power dynamics of Settler Colonialism in Latin America to the historiography of subaltern classes in India, in a once acclaimed work, Dipesh Chakrabarty also provided hints for *Provincializing Europe*.⁹ without rejecting knowledge from Europe per se. From the specific postcolonial perspective of subaltern studies, Chakrabarty did not only remind us that academic disciplines, must be constantly interrogated and history, in his own case, is only one way among many of approaching the past. By attempting to provincialize history and democratise historiography, Chakrabarty also aimed to account for both the inadequacy yet indispensability of the European intellectual tradition – an approach that allows us to grasp the very Žižekian parallax view according to which, while many Eurocentric paradigms must be shaken from that sense of

7 Slavoj Žižek, "The 'Remedies' that Gates & Soros Use to Try to Offset Evils They've Caused Don't Cure the Disease, but Prolong It," *rt.com*, July 29, 2021, no longer available.

8 Fausto Reinaga, *La Revolución India* (La Paz: Ediciones PIB, 1969).

9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

superiority informing their intellectual practice, there are clear instances, nevertheless, key intellectual players, political movements, historical events, institutions etc. that cannot be entirely discarded on the sole grounds of belonging to, or stemming from the European tradition.

In short, despite Europe's decline in the present geopolitical situation the issue of universalism must still be addressed without seeking refuge in the idealism of the obvious: We know, what seems like universality is just a particularly oppressive Eurocentric identity claiming itself to be universal. It is a false universality. But nevertheless, the radical legacy of the European Enlightenment that Žižek reclaims, is still a fundamental intellectual and political tool, not least, as will be shown in due course, to shape true universalism out of the most particular and localised of struggles. In this sense, Žižek's nuanced plea for universalism remains relevant on the face post/decolonial critique privileging the particular within the overall context of subaltern identity politics. In the same breath, Žižek's position is far from the outright defense of the Enlightenment project in its centrist liberal form – a liberal defense, as we are to see next, which dwells on accounts of a human success history devoid of antagonism, of humanity without subjectivity. Instead, Žižek's shared emphasis with Badiou on the subject over the human, rests on the centrality of universality as consubstantial with radical antagonist, emancipatory politics.

The Subject(ed) of Eurocentrism

While pointing to all that is positive in the European or Western Enlightenment heritage, including secular liberal democracy, Žižek sustains that it can only be defended, preserved, and developed further by breaking away from old Europe and classical liberalism. With this Steven Pinker disagrees, claiming to himself a contemporary centrist liberal view between the political right and the political left. Here we leave aside the political right, not because the increasingly present and real danger of right-wing politics is to be dismissed. In fact, no means should be spared to combat religious intolerant fundamentalism and xenophobic, anti-immigrant populist nationalism based on Western white supremacy. But because in addition to the strawman we all love to hate, the “political right” also works as a smoke screen diverting the debate away from the main overall decolonial critique, namely, that of the relation between *the West and the Rest* and how Eurocentrism and the Enlightenment project itself are complicit with slavery, colonialism, imperialism, world wars, genocide etc.

Regarding *the Rest*, Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*¹⁰ or his most recent *Rationality*¹¹ refute this main critique outright: it is the other way around, the claim would be, the Enlightenment is the very way out to overcome the excesses of Eurocentrism. In regards of *the West*, likewise, Pinker shares none of the pessimism informing the main traditions of the humanities and the social sciences on the (still ongoing) effects of progress and modernisation: inequality and alienation (Marx), stratification and bureaucratization (Weber), isolation and neurosis (Freud), anomie and suicide (Durkheim)... Look around now, Pinker rebukes, despite all the apparent gloom of our time, things are going well. In fact, they have never gone so well. If we look at the material reality, there is the evidence for all to see: the average life expectancy of human beings is longer, safer, healthier, richer, and happier than at any other time in history. And all this is thanks to the European Enlightenment: Science, Reason, Humanism, Progress...

What is striking in Pinker's approach is how both capitalist relations of production and political subjectivity vanish in favour of an antagonism-free objective reality speaking its own – as if science, reason, humanism, and progress grew unrelated to how, say, British Marxist social historian E.P. Thompson depicted the general conditions under which *The Making of the English Working Class* took place: “The commercial expansion, the enclosure movement, the first years of the industrial revolution, all took place within the shadow of the gallows.”¹²

A main shortcoming, then, of Pinker's liberal approach lies in his defense of the European Enlightenment without any substantial sense of historicity, let alone of the political proper – a point that Žižek does not miss as he qualifies the extent of Western success: “For the last five centuries, the (relative) prosperity and peace of the ‘civilized’ West was brought by exporting ruthless violence and destruction to the ‘barbarian’ Outside.”¹³

Hence, in contemporary terms, in addition to the still relevant Marxist critique of capitalist oppression and violence, the main postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism also holds: the imperial Global North are the direct beneficiaries of a more prosperous civilization at the expense of the exploitation and suffering in the Global South. However, this is still not the whole truth either. Žižek's own depiction of the barbarian outside requires further qualification – something Eagleton does in his *Idea of Culture*, with the Irish national question also in mind:

10 Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

11 Steven Pinker, *Rationality: What It Is, Why it Seems Scarce, Why it Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

12 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 61.

13 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (New York: Verso, 2002), 132.

If the science of anthropology marks the point where the West begins to convert other societies into legitimate objects of study, the real sign of political crisis is when it feels the need to do this to itself. For there are savages within Western society too, enigmatic, half-intelligible creatures ruled by ferocious passions and given to mutinous behaviour; and these too will need to become objects of disciplined knowledge.¹⁴

Eagleton's figure of the "savage inside" allows us to shift the discussion to a political and intellectual terrain beyond the self-congratulatory liberal thinking that Pinker encapsulates.

An admittedly muddy terrain, which, in turn, leftist thinking, or to be more precise, Western metropolitan leftist intellectuals and activists alike, also choose to grasp in rather unsoiled terms. In this respect, a couple of examples from my own end of the woods may assist to attenuate their excessive propensity to discern on behalf of everyone else what historical conditions, political situations, or intellectual traditions can or cannot be transferred over and articulated together based on one's own presupposed first-hand access to the latest in true revolutionary political theory.

Alain Badiou, renowned worldwide nowadays, features in our first example. Interesting, here, is how Bruno Bosteels, expert scholar and translator of his works into English, reminds us of the following on the reception of Badiou's work at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. At that time, Bosteels points out when "Badiou's work, which was barely being 'discovered' by English-language readers, had been a familiar reference for many radical intellectuals and militants in Latin America and Spain – from the Basque country, where *Theory of Contradiction* was commonly used in the 1970s, all the way to Mexico and the Southern Cone."¹⁵ One should also add that Basque was the first language into which Badiou's *Ethics* was translated, neck and neck with Žižek's Slovenian, of all languages, since both were published two years after the original in French. And I know, I hear you: this is just an anecdote. But nevertheless: For a recipient of standard narratives excelling in exoticising a given cultural and linguistic "exception" along Eagleton's "enigmatic, half-intelligible creatures ruled by ferocious passions and given to mutinous behaviour" quip, this "anecdote" also speaks of a political "exception" within the context of the Western, certainly Anglophone, metropolitan left of the time that I prefer to underline for the sake of your own intellectual humility.

The second example further complicates standard metropolitan leftist opinion as to how political struggles against colonialism should or should not converge. Put in contemporary terms, the classic divide would read like this: anti-colonial struggles of the Global South cannot be conveniently

14 Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 27.

15 Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Duran, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xiii-iv.

transferred into other situations in the Global North with vastly different historical conditions. Which leaves one wonder, then, why Irish and Basque representatives took part in the Guard of Honour carrying Nelson Mandela's coffin shoulder to shoulder with representatives from Mozambique, Angola, Algeria, Palestine, and West Sahara. And I hear you again, I know: This does not invalidate American Marxist Fredric Jameson's double take that, one: as we look closely to "the very entity called Europe... history dissolves into a microcosm of national rivalries, cultural envy, racisms and collective hatreds";¹⁶ and that, two: the period of decolonisation led to a popular unity forged around the project of national liberation and the achievement of the Nation-state "which generally did not turn out so well." But, nevertheless, one: your obvious attempts to conveniently collapsing national liberation and right to self-determination with right-wing xenophobic nationalism remains perverse beyond repair; and two: there are no boundaries, either geopolitical or conceptual, to internationalist comradeship built on solidarity. Solidarity, that is, with political subjects as they are to themselves, not as we wish them to be to fit our own always-already self-righteous bill.

Conclusion: Žižek with Badiou

The personal may be the political but politics is certainly not personal. This discussion review rests, first, on my own personal difficulty to imagine any political emancipatory project set against universalism. In this context, Jameson's take remains relevant also that "Eurocentrism is an essentially ill-advised political slogan (which) becomes a wildly inaccurate target and a very imprecise way of sorting out friends and foes."¹⁷ Second, it points to possible theoretical reconciliations, not least between subaltern identity politics and the generic idea of communism informing Žižek and, of course, Badiou, among many others. This may appear as an opportunistic academic exercise unworkable on questions of principle alone. Regardless, the various examples given along the way speak of this gap already being bridged in practice. For, surely, the outcome of contesting the structural, top-down oppressions and dominations that intersectional identity politics aims at, cannot then be horizontal intra-subaltern fighting, as it is often the case, "gender critical" Feminism on trans, Afro-Pessimism.... On the contrary, building militant complicities across lines and across the world requires finding convergences in the shared purpose of advancing the causes of political freedom and social equality beyond, also, well passed the date stifling discussions on revolution or reform, horizontal social movement or vertical organisation etc – so long, of course,

16 Fredric Jameson, "Afterword: On Eurocentric Lacanians," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019), 167.

17 Jameson, "Afterword," 166.

the “impossible” of revolution informs the “possible” of reform that cannot become a managerial end in itself, and the antagonist demands of social movements prevail and command over the intrinsic tendency of organisations towards bureaucratization.

In this sense, one cannot but adhere with Badiou on two accounts: his general theory of the subject understood as the operator of a singular truth-event and his notion of “communist invariance,” a kind of lowest common denominator that all struggles for political freedom, social justice, gender equality and/or against racism, homophobia, ecological disaster, etc. retain. In this way, communist invariance refers to various connections that can be established among diverse emancipatory politics, both diachronically and synchronically so to speak in old structuralist parlance. In other words, just as an obvious common denominator can be found between Spartacus’ slave revolt and Toussaint Louverture’s Haitian’s slave revolution, the same connection can be established between both events and the struggle of your own political emancipatory movement. The point being that the context-specific dimension of any particular struggle draws from some universal invariants, freedom, equality, justice... that motivate and justify the correctness of that particular struggle led by our conscious decision and the freedom of discipline, persistence and determination to press on.

Let nobody be misled or mistaken though: identity is not subjectivity. Blending cultural identity and political subjectivity is misleading in that the fight against oppression and domination is not the fight for identity or culture. Recall Žižek here: Our engagement in common struggles also requires unearthing the hidden antagonisms within our own particular cultural identities. Furthermore, therefore, conflating the particularity of cultural identity with the singularity of collective political subjectivity is also a mistake. In this sense, Badiou’s general theory of the truth-event remains of great assistance to militants willing to make the effort to navigate through this key distinction between identity as the claim to mere existence of cultural, sexual, racial differences and subjectivity as the political art of forcing new things to happen, here and now, in the spirit of universal emancipation.

Because of its own format limitations one can only extend an invitation to traverse such theoretical fight, although of immense heuristic power to inform and understand practice – whether of anti-colonial movements involving savage barbarians outside and inside or workers anti-capitalist organisations also involving nomadic proletarians. Another limitation of this exercise may be that the shallow rhetorical declarations of vague, generic political principles rest on privileging old, mostly white male knowledge at the expense of unforgivable omissions.

If by privileging old, male knowledge you understand this implies either blindness to the new political concerns of younger generations or unawareness of the role of feminism in shaping contemporary political struggles, I am absolutely against it. If by privileging old, male knowledge you understand this does not stand in the way of your discipline-bound organisation deciding to be lead on feminist principles by feminist comrades, I am all for it.

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