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# Humanism is not enough

Interview with Slavoj Žižek - Prague, November 2007

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*On a large scale you draw from Lacan and you show his potential usable to found a new direction of thought, sometimes called a post-deconstruction. Could you outline this new thought?*

First, I should clarify this: one of the standard philosophical approaches to Lacan is that in spite of all his high level of thinking it's still psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis does not have the dignity or the level of reflection of philosophy proper. This is my first thesis: Lacan's basic move is to elevate psychoanalysis to the level of philosophy. For Lacan, when he talks about philosophy, apparently clinical categories like psychosis, like neurosis, hysteria, these are not just subjective pathologies, these are disturbances in the basic ontological relationship between the subject and the world. Here Lacan is maybe close to Heidegger who, in his conversations with the Swiss psychiatrist Medard Boss, claims, for example, to understand psychosis. You must know how a human being ontologically stands in the world, how the world is open for you because psychosis is a basic ontological disturbance of your relationship with reality. Reality no longer exists for you as ontologically constituted. So this is what Lacan did. For him basic clinical categories are ontological attitudes of the subject.

Also, although Lacan sometimes uses the term "I'm an anti-philosopher" but what does this mean – nothing. Isn't all modern philosophy, from Kant onwards, anti-philosophy? Kant says: "critique of metaphysics against metaphysics", Hegel says

“Wissenschaft, science, not metaphysics” and so on. So I think that the pretension of Lacan is much higher.

My basic thesis is, to give as it was almost in this Hollywood, *Readers Digest* style formula, is to read the central premise of Freudian psychoanalysis, the hypothesis of what Freud calls “Todestrieb”, death drive, to read it not as something biological, whatever, but as an ontological, as it were, disturbance, structure which feeds to what in German idealism they call negativity. This is the thesis. And it’s very appropriate – ok, those names like post-communism, post-modernism, but we don’t have other names – but it’s very correct, I like very much the point of your question because usually, unfortunately, in many countries, Lacan is still thrown together with so-called deconstruction. Until recently in the United States, Lacan was read as another version of Derrida or whatever, one in the series, Derrida, Foucault and so on. What is now more and more clearly emerging is that Lacan belongs to a totally different field. If you are looking for people who share the same field, it would be Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou. And it’s a different field, already immediately you can notice it, it is something that may sound very paradoxically, but it’s a return to big theory, big ontology. I think, what characterizes deconstructionism is, to simplify it a little bit, this ultra-reflexivity of thought. You don’t write ontology, you, as a philosopher, write about how another philosopher read a third philosopher. What is typical as Derrida’s text? It’s how Rousseau reads Plato. It’s all interpretation of interpretations.

But this era of reflectivity is coming to an end. I think that we should again risk what once was called big theories. And I think Lacan enters here. So I think that’s the general tendency today. That we should end this post-philosophy, maybe we should even use double post, post-post-philosophy, we should shamelessly return to big philosophy.

What was your final point, sorry?

*Could you outline this new thought based on Lacanian psychology?*

Yes, although, again, to make it very clear, and I move now more and more in this direction. In the book that you translated into Czech (*The Ticklish Subject*), it’s clear that I oppose ironically at the beginning, paraphrasing of course the Communist Manifesto, how everybody is united against Descartes’ “cogito”. I think that even the most consistent philosophical interpretation of “cogito”, Heidegger’s notion of cogito as modern subjectivity, misses its crucial dimension. So, my idea is, the very core of my thinking – I don’t like to use these big words, thinking – is, not even Lacan, Lacan is for me a means to read Hegel. My view is in a way, if I exaggerate a little bit, a very paradoxical one. Philosophy is something which began with Kant and ended with Hegel (laughs). Before there were very interesting things, like Plato, which

announced it. Afterwards, it's all one big misunderstanding. As a leftist I say this, Marx obviously didn't understand Hegel and so on and so on. So my big point is to re-vitalize, to show the tradition of German idealism. To show how this is still actual, we are still within that horizon. We even haven't yet confronted the very core of it. And Lacan is only a means. It's just a lever. I use Lacan to read Hegel. I don't use Hegel to read Lacan.

*What is the importance of German idealism for today?*

Oh, to put it in very pathetic terms, obviously, we live in apocalyptic times. Not in the sense of the end of the world in a religious sense. But I sense that humanity, to put it pathetically, is approaching a certain endpoint. Like, the exploitation of nature has a certain dynamic which, obviously, cannot go on endlessly. The new divides, social divides, new apartheids, slums and so on, are leading to the prospect of certain social explosions. The most intelligent contemporary leftists, of course not orthodox Marxists, are predicting that, if the recent trends go on, we will have, even in Europe, a kind of a civil war between immigrants and the old Europeans so on.

So, obviously, for biogenetics, it's clear that what we can do now with genes, the genome, it's clear that this affects the very definition of what means to be a human being. And we need a conceptual apparatus to deal with these problems.

I started, maybe this would be interesting to you, when I was very young because, ok, I wanted to be a dissident bla bla, and in Yugoslavia it wasn't as dangerous to be a dissident as you. We were a paradoxical country where sometimes, if you were a moderate dissident, you could make a profession out of it, tolerated by those in power. So, I started as a dissident as a Heideggerian. My first book is a short book on Heidegger and language, when I was twenty or twenty-one. So, but, my formative experience was that the most popular approach to deal with all this, Heideggerian approach, which says, you know, modernity is the era of technological nihilism, we need to withdraw from this will to power, technological domination, find more of an attitude of "Gelassenheit," of relaxing - that it doesn't work.

So I think that, I'm very traditional basically, that German idealism, the metaphysics of German idealism, still offers the best conceptual tools to deal with the crisis we are approaching. Because, as Hegel knew, philosophy and crisis are always connected. All philosophy, it's clear, Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, even Plato. Plato – you cannot imagine Plato without the political crisis of Greece. No wonder that Plato's representative book is *The Republic* which typically, although you have all of Plato's ontology there, the metaphor of the cave and so on, but nonetheless all this emerges to answer which kind of political order do we need. So, that would be the point.

*Back to Lacan, you say somewhere that Lacan is an exponent of a radicalized form of Enlightenment. Can you explain that?*

Yes, of course. As always with polemical thinkers, like maybe me, you should always ask, what am I attacking here. What I'm opposing to. What I'm opposing is the standard popular notion of psychoanalysis which says the unconscious is some kind of irrational drive, man is not a master in his own house, rationality is just like the iceberg, a little bit that you see, but we are tools in the hands of irrational forces...

Lacan puts it very nicely: The lesson of Freud is the opposite one. It's not that our reason is a tool in the hands of some irrational forces, it is that the unconscious is rational. Not rational in the sense of instrumental, rational thinking, but rational in the sense of articulated, discursive. Unconscious has nothing to do with natural instincts, it's a totally rationalized version. But even an opponent of Lacan like Habermas knew that Freud himself is one of the last great Enlightenment thinkers. Freud's idea is not this Schopenhauerian or Jungian, Jung is here the enemy. Jung is anti-Enlightenment. We have some primordial archetypes and so on.

Freud is Enlightenment. Not only is psychoanalysis Enlightenment, but what is more important is that: What is the key not only of Enlightenment but of modern science? It is to accept the radical contingency of the Universe. Every intelligent historian of science knows, it's a nice paradox in the history of philosophy, what is the origin of modern science? It's precisely where Descartes or early nominalists like Duns Scotus, appear most crazy. When they say, even eternal truths were created by God. 2 and 2 is 4, not because it's self-evident but because God says so. If God wanted 2 and 2 to be 5 it would be 5. Why is this? Because it accepts the radical contingency of all truth.

This radical contingency is the beginning of modern science. There is necessity but you, as it were, accept the contingency of the necessity itself. So, again, even in a much more precise sense, Lacan is a thinker of Enlightenment. And this approach to contingency is how Lacan reads Freud. What is fantasy, what is our symptom is something totally contingent, some totally contingent symbolical formation that nonetheless sustains the subject's identity. We should accept this radical contingency on which our very identity depends. In this more serious sense...

*Can we say that Lacan represents a more radical form of Enlightenment...*

Yes.

*... than Habermas?*

Ah, this is a very good question, absolutely, I think. I think that the tragedy of Habermas, among other things, is that obviously, as it is clear from his last texts. There are two mysteries. Although I respect Habermas as a figure – I think there is nothing dishonorable to become, basically he was till recently a "Staatsphilosoph,"

you know, a pan-European state philosopher, a kind of a big authority. And he even acted like that, you know, he was all the time invited. When he visited England, Blair received him and so on. From time to time he was received of course by the Chancellor of Germany and so on.

Now, interestingly enough, you know who is now emerging as... he is too eccentric, not directly but secretly the state philosopher? Sloterdijk. He is all the time accepted by, by... Barroso, by Angela Merkel and so on. He is the new state philosopher. Interesting. But ok, let's go back.

First, I think that Habermas did not reflect enough upon the central event of our times, the collapse of Communism, what happened at the end of the 80s and at the beginning of the 90s. Did you notice how, and this is, I think, the big failure of the Frankfurt School, they were obsessed with fascism, anti-Semitism. They never developed a consistent theory of what Stalinism was. What went wrong with Communism? Because, what is the central thesis of the Frankfurt School? The dialectic of Enlightenment. That is to say, the horrible things of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to simplify it, were not simply remainders of old irrational powers. They are realizations of some critical flaw in the Enlightenment project itself. And I think that Habermas was never able to think this.

Isn't it a little bit crazy? Habermas is a German philosopher. If you read Habermas, you would, I think, never have learned that Germany was divided, that there was Communism in the East. He wrote a lot about the threats to German democracy, all that. He totally ignored the fact of Communism. A good theory – you don't find it in the Frankfurt School. There is one short book of Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, but it is very ambiguous, not a good enough analysis.

So, here Habermas was not radical enough to, how shall I put it, enlighten Enlightenment itself. To provide a proper theory, which is, I think, the big task of every serious left. Stalinism was what Badiou called a disaster, "désastre," in this sense of radical failure, perversion of an emancipatory project. And it is clear, you can't play these cheap games, they betrayed Marx and so on, it's not serious. Habermas ignores this.

Second thing, now with this biogenetic debate, what to do about our new abilities, Habermas typically even co-published a book with pope Benedict when he was still Ratzinger. He found common language there. Because both react in a reactive way, like – this is a threat, we should not do it. They don't really confront the threat. They just say we must guard our freedom but how? By not going on that way, but I think that biogenetics opens up much more radical problems. Like, my God, if I can, through genetic intervention or through some drugs, if I can even change your psychological features – does this mean that you are free at all? What if we have to accept that maybe we are mechanisms, I don't think this. But I think there is a whole set of more radical questions that Habermas is avoiding.

More generally, politically, I think that, let's be frank, Habermas's vision is simply this kind of a Third Way late social democratic emancipatory vision – welfare state, let's go on - it's a kind of a modernized old social democracy. If there is something clear today, it's that the model is exhausted.

So, no wonder that Habermas now turns back to Cassirer and to Neo-Kantianism defeated by Heidegger. I think that Habermas is in a way in that position, a respectful, democratic, friendly creature, but who no longer can really address things which are really actual today. It's a sad figure in a way.

*Back to your conception of the subject. You based the autonomy of the subject on the death drive or the self-relating negativity of German idealism. Which maybe can also be grasped as the disintegration of the identity.*

Yes.

*But we can suppose that disintegration cannot be everlasting and some kind of new identity is emerging. Are we somehow enforced to accept or create a new identity tight up with a passionate attachment in Butler's terms?*

I see, a very nice question. But first, I would say, I would give you a more abstract question. It's not only that we need a different identity, it's more reflexive, we need a different type of identity. But for example already capitalism is unique here. In pre-capitalist societies identity was something totally different to identity in capitalism.

In capitalism identity is a much more dynamic identity. The basic thing of capitalism is to remain yourself even if you have to change all the time. So what we have to do is to redefine the very category of identity.

We have today different formulas of identity. One type is whatever remains of the traditional identity. Those who escape into old fundamentalisms. But it's clear that they are lost, that these new terrorist fundamentalisms are basically a very modern phenomenon. Every historian of Islam will tell you that Taliban or Al Qaeda, this has nothing to do with traditional Islam, these are very modern forms of organization and so on.

Then there is capitalist individualist identity which is a more plastic identity. And my debate with Judith Butler is what she celebrates, you know, people have no fixed identity, our identity is always performatively engaged, performatively constructed, is that her type of identity, ok, to be very brutal, she fits late capitalism. I think she is still a late capitalist libertarian. She thinks that our existence is contingent, we can construct our own identities freely, and basically what she is fighting is just old

patriarchal ideology which fixes your identity. You are by nature man, woman and so on.

I think the target is false. Today's, to use this old fashioned term, ruling ideology in the United States, is not paternal authority – obey. No, it's a kind of a very fluid hedonism.

Today's spontaneous ideology is – you have the right to be free, dedicate your life to your passions, realize yourself, use your potentials creatively and so on and so on.

That's the predominant ideology. I think she is just a radical liberal. Her thesis is only – we didn't go far enough.

The type of identity we should recreate here, comes, it's a very crazy thing, I know, here comes my reference, my God, I have written three books, as a materialist, on Christianity. And here also, I belong to a movement, which is a very interesting movement, people who are otherwise different. Badiou wrote a book on St. Paul, Agamben wrote a book on St. Paul, it's practically a whole movement today of leftists appropriating Paul. And I think what they are looking for in St. Paul? St. Paul is precisely the answer to your question.

This idea of the Paulinian community of believers, in an apocalyptic time, that is to say, how to avoid the dilemma of either the old substantial community or dispersed liberal individualism. How to create a collective which is not the old community? But of course also not a totalitarian collective and so on.

The answer is, I think, given in this Paulinian engaged, struggling community of believers. This is what we are looking for there, this is maybe a disappointment for somebody, but what interests me in Paul is not theological premises. We read Paul in the way of "God is dead", God is telling us "It's up to you, I need your help." So, to put it in very brutal terms, as Alain Badiou once told me in a conversation, the Holy Ghost is the Communist Party, it's the community of believers which are ...

So here we are looking to an answer, maybe it's a false way but I think again that the re-actualization of St. Paul is precisely the answer to your question "What type of new identity?" And I totally agree with you, my reproach to Judith Butler with these passionate attachments, is that, how to put it, she goes too much into this notion of plasticity in the sense of attachment is always fluid and so on. What she doesn't see is that although modern capitalist subject is fluid, eternally reconstructing itself..., underlying this is the same structure which remains the same, the structure of capitalist subjectivity. That's what is really difficult to change. That's the basic paradox of capitalism, it's absolutely the most dynamic order you can imagine but, how to put it, everything changes all the time, so that things can really remain the same. Maybe we need less superficial change to change things more radically.

So to go back to your point. I totally agree, I don't have any obsession with the dynamic. And you know why your question was very good? Because this is one of

the points where, at least in the West, you can see already rhetorically how ideology functions. Today in the West if you say “identity”, “stability”, “universality”, it’s bad. If you say “difference”, “dynamic”, “nomadic”, “multiplicity”, it’s good.

But I think we should maybe change this. Badiou made here a nice point when he says, it’s not that we live in a fixed situation and then we should break out into multitude, nomadism, all this, that on the contrary, our situation is the one of confused multitude, nomadic, and the problem is identity. The problem is universality. We should not fight for multitude against universality. We live in confused, nomadic multitude, we should fight for universality. We should fight for a new identity. Identity is for me not an oppressive value, “I want to be plural, identity oppresses me.” Identity is progressive, identity is a task. We need to rehabilitate the notion of universality against, precisely, we go back to your first question, postmodernism which praises all this, you know, in the postmodern vision identity or universality is oppressive. No. So here I totally agree with your point. And I think again that the Hegelian negativity is precisely a force of universality. The Hegelian negativity is for me concrete universality. Because Hegelian negativity means precisely “You are never what you are yourself.” But why? And this is where universality appears. That’s the basic lesson of Hegel.

Universality always appears as a discord of particularity. Even at the very political level. Every total social order wants you to be what you are. This is the ideal of conservatives. Nice hierarchy. A teacher should be a teacher, a student a student, mother mother, worker should work, leader should lead... But then universality appears when you say – no, I don’t want to be only what I am. In this gap of particularity universality should appear.

*You say that we shall understand the Lacanian relation between empirical particular objects and impossible thing, das Ding, as a gap or a fissure is located into very particle object. Here the distance between them is turning into some kind of dialectical interconnection, it seems to me, all this evokes Adorno’s negative dialectics in which is depicted the relation between identical and non-identical in a very similar way. But there is a perspective of reconciliation there. What’s your view on Adorno, on his negative dialectics especially?*

First, I would say that what you, basically, provided is the formula, Lacan’s formula, of sublimation where an empirically contingent object is elevated into the impossible thing. But I think that with Adorno, strictly for technical philosophical reasons, is a problem. I think that his reading of Hegel is a misreading. I think this whole problem with Hegel, we have a closed system and then the system should be opened, negative dialectics and so on, I think that, again for complex philosophical reasons, this mystifies Hegel. That Hegelian Versöhnung, reconciliation, is not identity over difference. It’s precisely what you reconcile with in Hegelian reconciliation is precisely



difference itself. I think that what the Hegelian reconciliation means is that what appeared to you as obstacle is already reconciliation. Which is why, I repeat it all the time, I'm ashamed, it's in all of my books, when I quote that joke about Rabinovitch who wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union. That's the trick of Hegelian dialectics for me that in reconciliation the obstacle itself becomes its own solution. What happens in Hegel is not some big, final stability. You see stability in chaos itself.

Reconciliation... So again, in this sense Hegel already radically asserted difference. You see, for example, let's put it in very naïve terms, let's say we are in struggle, the two of us. Then the Hegelian point is not – we should reconcile. Reconciliation is when we see how, when we fight each other, this very fight already links us. You see, but this is all that happens in Hegel.

So, but this is a much more complex topic, one can even see, this is what I try to develop, for example, which is why I, paradoxically, I like to deal, as you probably know, in every book I mention it, with apparently the most conservative element of Hegel, his deduction of monarchy. A monarch is, for Hegel, the remainder of total contingency. A monarch or a king is, as Hegel makes it clear, an idiot. He just has to sign things. But you need him precisely because he is contingent, because you cannot have a totally rational system.

For example from here, I think, you can develop a nice, simple Hegelian theory of Stalinism. The problem of Stalin was not that he was a king but that, unfortunately, he wasn't a king. A king is someone who sits up there and is an idiot and then ministers bring him and he signs, no, whatever. But no, Stalin really wanted to know... So it's a totally different logic. In other words, I think that what one should rehabilitate, in the sense of return to it in a new light, is precisely the point of Hegel where Hegel appears to be the most metaphysical. "Absolutes Wissen," absolute knowing, absolute identity and so on. There Hegel is at his most subversive. This is also why I oppose to another reading of Hegel which is today becoming the most popular, influenced by Habermas, I don't know if they are known here, so called Pittsburgh Hegelians - Brandom, McDowell... This is a reading of Hegel which tries to deflate, to erase big metaphysical implications. They say Hegel is not a metaphysician at all, Hegel's Logic is just a kind of a collection of possible discursive strategies. We can talk about reality in different ways – as Being, as Essence and so on – and Hegel is just a kind of a generalized historical epistemology. Hegel tried to brought together all possible ways we can talk about reality.

This is a very modest Hegel, Hegel almost as a general pragmatics, without any metaphysical pretensions. I think this falls much too short. This is, as it were, like a Habermasian reply to Adorno's criticism. I think this we should also reject. You know what's the problem with Hegel? I think something unheard of is what happened with Hegel, a radical break. And it is as if philosophy wasn't ready for this shock and to deal with it, to cover this break, they established a certain ridiculous cliché. Hegel – absolute idealist, absolute knowledge. Hegel thought he knew everything. This absolute idealism, Hegel thought everything can be deduced from thought and so on.

Even Adorno accepts this too much. As if Hegel is some kind of absolute Spirit. I think Hegel is not this, Hegel is a much more radical thinker of negativity. Hegel is, I think, in a way the most modest thinker. This is what always fascinated me with Hegel. If you read the very end of Hegel's system, the last pages of his "History of Philosophy," when, after criticizing Kant, Fichte, Schelling, he comes to him. He says "This is, as far as we can see for the time being, the standpoint of the Absolute." So he relativizes even his own position. I think the problem with Hegel is that we live in the shadow of a certain paranoiac image of Hegel. So that then you can say the same as Michel Foucault said about Plato. All modern philosophy defines itself negatively with reference to Hegel.

Kierkegaard, the first individualist type of anti-Hegelian, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, they are all anti-Hegelians. All post-Hegelian philosophy defines itself negatively in relation to Hegel. Maybe the greatest way to undermine this stupid image of Hegel is Hegel himself. We should return to Hegel.

*Ok, but it is only the first question, the question of how to interpret Hegel properly. But the second question is if there is a parallel between your position and Adorno in negative dialectics.*

No! I don't. I think that Adorno for my taste gets too much caught in a kind of a, what I call, "die schlechte Unendlichkeit," bad infinity, you know. That it's always open, "ganz andere," totally other, endless process and so on. I think the point is not to criticize identity. The point is to see how identity itself is a radical difference. This is the Hegelian theory of identity. What is identity? Identity emerges only through self-relating which basically negates all determinate properties and so on. How do we become a person? By establishing a negative self-relation. So I think that...

*I see but I read Adorno's "Negative dialectics" so that the identity by itself is split into identity and non-identity.*

Ok, this is really the Hegelian formula, identity of identity and non-identity. But nonetheless I claim that we should turn this formula around. It's non-identity that's identity and non-identity. That is to say that Adorno still reads Hegel in a traditional way and nonetheless identity is the unity of itself and its opposite. His reading of Hegel is very traditional. His reading is that, yes, Hegel asserts non-identity, difference, but as a subordinate moment of self-mediation of identity.

I think that it's the opposite. Let me give you an example a propos crime, the dialectic of law, law, legal order, and crime. One usually reads Hegel as if he is saying crime

is necessary, transgression, but it's only a moment in the self-mediation, "Selbstvermittlung," of the law. Law realizes itself through generating crime and punishing crime.

But I think what Hegel is saying is more the opposite. What Hegel is saying is that not only is crime a moment of law but law is a moment of crime. Law, legal order, is universalized crime. The tension between crime and law is the tension between particular and universal. We are criminals. When I win, I impose my crime as universal, that's how we get a legal order.

Even Kant knew it obscurely, and all big conservatives knew it, you know, this big motif that you shouldn't dig too much into the origins of power, you always discover that every power originates in crime.

Hegel thought this, reflected about this to the end. And this is why I like great theologians like Chesterton who said the same, that Christianity, Christ is the greatest rebel.

So again my point would nonetheless be that Adorno accepts this traditional reading of Hegel – negativity is nonetheless subordinated as a moment to identity and then he said "But we must keep things open, negativity should" and so on and so on. Which is why, I think, Adorno has such problems with defining "Versöhnung." On the one hand, he asserts it as admitting the difference but then nonetheless it would be some kind of utopian identity with difference of course. Which is why I think that it's structurally necessary that it's never quite clear what Adorno means. Is he simply saying as a kind of, ironically I'm saying, Maoist, you know, struggle goes on forever, or is he saying there is a utopian vision of peace at the end?

I think here we have Adorno's impotence, which is why also it's tragic of how the whole of the Frankfurt School was never possible to even minimally to operationalize politically that project. That's for me the tragedy of the Frankfurt School. When they did try to enter into constructive dialogue with politics, like Habermas, they became some kind of left liberals, traditional left liberals. Adorno and Horkheimer remained totally abstract. It's very tragic, I quote him somewhere, when Adorno was asked, late in his life, "Ok, you criticize bourgeois society, alienation, totalitarianism all the time, but what should we do?" Adorno openly said: "I have no idea." It was a total blank. Ok, maybe he was right, I mean, there are situations where you cannot do it. I also, when people ask me, I would probably...

*Maybe he would say "to expect".*

That's a very good point, you know why? Because this is basically also the position of Agamben, you know, Agamben likes to refer to Benjamin, this Benjaminian idea of redemptive, divine violence. So, you know what Heidegger said in his last interview. "Nur ein Gott kann uns helfen." Only a god can save us. But isn't Adorno's position,

although he hated Heidegger, the same? Ok, not a god, “Only a divine violence can save us.” All we can do is sit, wait, show how every protest is already co-opted and wait for some miracle. Ok, it’s a consistent position but is it enough? We can doubt, no?

*Ok, we can make a step forward, towards Marxism. In what consists the importance of Marxism for today according to you?*

Here I’m very clear. Almost in a platonic sense. I want to save the idea of Marxism. The way to save it is to ruthlessly criticize the reality of Marxism. Not simply in this usual sense when they try to realize a communist society they went wrong. Of course, we should ask what went wrong already in Marx, Lenin, at the origins. And I think it’s totally clear, in some of my books I develop this clearly. We should problematize the Marxist notion of social subject, the Marxist notion of power, or more radically, the very fundamental Marxist vision of exploitation, revolution and so on.

But I think that we should repeat Marx in this sense, in a more Kierkegaardian sense where repeat does not mean you do the same. Your repeating means, as Kierkegaard puts it nicely somewhere, that we should recapture what in Marx was more than Marx - the impulse that Marx himself betrayed and to remain faithful to it. This is at the abstract level. Concretely, this means I see immense problems for example, with all the sympathies for Marx’s Capital, but it’s clear that if you want to explain what today is going on with Marx’s theory of exploitation, what goes on today with poverty and so on, you can no longer account for it in the Marxist terms of exploitation. Because the Marxist term of exploitation, it’s a very precise term based on his labour theory of value. To apply the Marxist theory of value today, to be cynical, to Venezuela which is doing relatively well because of oil, is to say that Venezuela is exploiting the United States. Because for Marx, it’s selling natural resources, oil is no source of value. You know what I mean, the whole situation has changed radically. Which is why when I ironically refer to myself as a Leninist, when people ask me “What kind of Leninist?” I always say the Lenin of 1915. When, with the fiasco of the First World War, everything shattered for Lenin. And what did he do? He went to Switzerland and started to read Hegel. That’s the Lenin that I like. To admit fully the disaster. The first task of a Marxist today is to be radically self-critical. To admit that it’s not just, you know, like the social democratic left betrayed a more radical legacy. No no no, the whole leftist project has to be radically re-thought. In the view of these new challenges, new forms of biogenetical potentials, ecology and so on and so on.

So, the point is to be faithful to the impulse of Marxism by ruthlessly, maybe even more ruthlessly than our enemies, right-wingers, to give a better critique of Stalinism, to give a better critique of Marx and so on. So again, this is for me the only sense to

be a Marxist ... again, what Lenin did in 1915, start from the zero point, refitting everything.

Obviously, the Marxist standard notion of revolution, you know, workers organized and so on, it's ridiculous even today to think in this term. I mean, what to do with state power? For example, there are the big topics, to simplify it, of Marxism, to abolish capitalism and totally to reorganize or to abolish the state. Today we no longer even think about this. What we should do is nonetheless to raise again these problems. I claim, you see, in this sense we should remain Marxist. We no longer even ask these questions. Everybody silently accepts Fukuyama. We should start to raise these questions. Is really capitalism the ultimate horizon? I believe it's not, but it's not that I believe in some workers' revolution. What I believe in is that capitalism has potentially too many antagonisms, tensions, to survive, at least the way it is. We should just start to ask more radical questions, and who knows where it will bring us.

*You write in your book "The Fragile Absolute" that productivity outside the frame of capital is a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself.*

I even write that communism is a capitalist fantasy.

*Yes. But doesn't it mean that capitalism is ultimately the only game in town?*

First, what I mean is that we should be more radical. It's very good that you focus on this. Because here I also briefly developed my critic of Marx. Marx saw a certain capitalist dynamic of eternal reinvention that is self-revolutionizing. Then Marx saw the capitalist form of surplus value, exploitation, as ultimately the obstacle. So Marx's dream was if we abolish this obstacle productive forces would explode even more. I think purely theoretically this is a fatal mistake. What Marx didn't see is what appears as an obstacle is effectively the mover. This is really a very nice dialectic – if you remove the obstacle you also lose what this obstacle was blocking. The true dialectic is to see obstacle as productive. In this sense, insofar as capitalism is defined as this drive to eternal self-revolutionizing expansion then in this sense for me communism, if we understand communism this explosive, in traditional Marxist sense, development of productive forces, is effectively the secret capitalist dream. How to have this capitalist explosion in its pure state without this constraining moment. My point is – the choice is either...

*But this may depend on the level of reference, I mean, if you speak as a philosopher or an economist. For example, Cockshott and Cottrell in their book "Towards a New Socialism" are compellingly claiming that a socialist economy based on the Marx's theory is viable.*

You know what's the first problem for me? Marx himself in this famous passage of "Grundrisse" to which Negri refers all the time claims that once knowledge, intellectual labor, becomes crucial for productivity, then the labor theory of value becomes meaningless. You can no longer measure labor by the time spent on labor. Obviously, we are there today. If you take somebody like Bill Gates, he is obviously exploiting people but it's also no less obvious that you cannot account this in traditional Marxist terms of exploitation. He didn't employ millions, how did he become the richest man in the world? Although now some Mexican guy is richer, my son likes this, we always check who is the richest guy.

Obviously we are already in the stage where Marx himself said that his labor theory of value which ultimately remains that simple, physical labor as time spent on laboring is the measure of value. You cannot apply it, at least not in a direct form. So I would have to know those authors because I simply don't see how you can apply this.

What I agree with is that the crucial thing here is to rethink radically the notion of exploitation. What does it mean – exploitation. Where I see a possibility is, although I totally disagree politically with Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, but when they try to rehabilitate that notion from early modernity of the commons. In early modern society you had forests, grass which belong to all, everybody could there go, take their animals, and then with capitalism the commons was privatized.

And aren't we in a similar situation today? At a much more radical level. What does the ecological crisis mean. Nature is our commons. And it's getting too much privately exploited. Biogenetics – isn't genetic inheritance our commons? The threat is that we will privately manipulate it. Even with culture, with people like Bill Gates, our language, our social substance should be commons, shared. So at this level I think we should see that the problem of communism is still our problem today. We should redefine communism. Obviously, the basic problem of ecology again is a communist problem. We should, of course, take here the lesson of socialism which is the Kantian lesson, I like here Kant, you know Kant's crucial distinction between public and private use of reason, which is very paradoxical, for Kant, when you work for the state, it's private use of reason, only when you debate as free individuals, outside the state, it's the public use of reason. That's what we need today.

I think in our technocratic societies, you know what is for me the private use of reason? You must have here the same shit. This is why I'm supporting today's

demonstration.<sup>1</sup> They say universities should be reorganized to serve social needs, to serve the economy, I mean this pressure that our knowledge should be useful. You know, they even want, in England, I was told from France, philosophy departments to organize courses for managers. This is the private use of reason. The state is private. In this sense we should rethink the notion of communism in the sense of how to define this domain of the commons.

*In your conversations with Glyn Daly you say there are things like honor, freedom and so on which are worth dying for. But what do you mean by that? Can we understand it so that these things represent a kind of platonic value?*

First, why not? I think quite seriously. Under the influence of the dialogue with my good friend Alain Badiou, I'm in a way a Platonist. E.g. communism is for me a platonic idea. It's almost already a Kantian regulative idea. Not in the sense of clear eternal idea. But I believe in eternity. I think every social dialectic is always a tension between temporality and eternity. The dream of freedom is a platonic idea. And you try to do it again and again.

Plato tried it in his a little bit totalitarian way, in the French Revolution they tried it, in the October Revolution they tried it. Ok, the result I'm to say was a nightmare, but the idea insists. It goes on. And I am even ready to do something totally crazy and to say that's the difference between Stalinism and fascism. Stalinism was a totally perverted expression, but nonetheless the effect of an eternal idea. Nazism is not an eternal idea.

This is not an idealist notion. Beyond capitalism, how to go into this...? How eternity or idea can be defined in a totally materialist way? It's not some substantial, material reality there. It's an impulse which is co-substantial with our social beings. The moment we have society, we have this communist idea whatever we call it, so... what was your question more precisely?

*Do these things worth dying for represent platonic values?*

Yes, why not? I'd even go a step further. You know what is my target here, again, let's ask who is the enemy. My target is the predominant liberal...

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<sup>1</sup> The demonstration took place in Prague 17 November 2007 on occasion of anniversary of the Velvet revolution from 1989. Its theme was a critic of neo-liberal reforms and a claim on more direct democracy as to question of U.S. missile base in the Czech Republic.

*My precise question is – what constitutes these fundamental values?*

First, I wouldn't call them values for precise theoretical reasons. Already with Plato, this is a modern reading of Plato, neo-Kantian. Here Heidegger is right, Plato would never call them values.

I don't like terms like anthropological constants but I would say that what I call the communist idea of justice, equality and so on is something which is co-substantial with us as social beings, at least in Europe, and here I am Eurocentric in a way.

Here in a strange way that would horrify many leftists I would maybe partially agree with your big figure, Patočka, who likes those platonic reference that there is something unique in European legacy which is this assertion of direct universality as I developed precisely in "Fragile Absolute".

All other societies have the idea of value as something - to be good means to fit the harmonious totality. Only with us, the Greek democracy, with Christianity, you have this much more radical idea. Me as an individual deprived of any link with social substance, directly, I have access to universality. When you look at the social body, it's not those who are in harmony, it's those who are disruptive who stand for universality. This is the idea of Christianity for me. What is the community of believers? Those who are outside but they stand for universality. It's in this very basic coordinate that these ideals, ideas are describing, if we call them like this, I don't like to use these terms. And again, I'm ready to go even further. I'm even ready up to a point to buy Plato's critique of democracy, I'm even ready up to a point... I always defended Plato against Aristotle. It's very fashionable to say bad Plato, proto-totalitarian, versus more open, democratic Aristotle. Ha. Read Plato's *Republic* and be careful just about two things: there is at least something that you don't find in Plato. First, do you notice he doesn't need slaves for his republic. Secondly, Plato explicitly says in his *Republic* that women and men are equal. It is totally contingent now that men have more authority but in his ideal state women are equal to men. One should stop with this story bad Plato, original European metaphysics and so on. If anything we can learn today that Plato's critique of democracy which is a very precise critique, a very Jacobin critique, which says that even, if I simplify it, if democracy is not empirically corrupted, there is corruption, in the very basic idea of democracy, which means there is no common good, that state politics should be determined by pragmatic negotiations between your interest, my interest, the highest social pact could be about the compromise between private interests as it were. Insofar as we understand democracy in this way one should criticize democracy, there is a kind of a priori corruption in democracy as such, independent of empirical democracy.

No, I don't have any problems with being platonic in this sense. It may sound crazy, I would have to develop in which sense a materialist platonic, but ... can I give you a nice pathetic example where the idea came to me of eternity? Eternity not behind but



as appearance. Recently I read Jorge Semprún, the Spanish writer. He was in the concentration camp Buchenwald. He wrote in his memoirs a wonderful story. It is very pathetic, it will sound like poetry but for me it's ontology. He says, once he was in a camp and he saw a train with 180 Jews and since it was winter they were all frozen. Only in the middle when prisoners were dying, they were in the train for two days, they put children in the middle. So they were all frozen horribly, in the middle 18 children survived. The German guards took them out and shot them, only two children there remained. One boy a little bit older, six years, another four years. And then they let the dogs run after the boys to amuse themselves. And what happened is that two boys, one six, the other four, started to run away with the dogs behind them. The smaller boy fell down. Heroically, the big boy returned and grabbed his hand. And at that point they were attacked by the dogs and killed.

But Semprún says very nicely "Their hands were joined for eternity." That was for me the moment where this totally absurd gesture, you know you die. This is honor worth dying for. It has no substance but this is the moment of ethical eternity for me, clasped hands, as Semprún says very precisely. I even imagine how this scene should be filmed, the image should be frozen, on the soundtrack you hear the children are dying, the dogs are tearing them apart, but the image is the platonic idea. It stands there.

People usually portray me as some crazy postmodernist, no, I'm a very traditional ethicist here.

*It's very important to say.*

Yeah, absolutely. My God, I believe almost conservatively. I'm even, to terrorize my left liberal friends, I'm one of the few people who is for death penalty.

*The true ethical act is always founded on the decision that has no guarantee. Well, but what is the role of the cultural historical circumstances?*

Absolutely. It's always an act within circumstances. No, no, it's not some kind of divine act. Whenever I give an example of an act it's clear that...

Let me give you a very pathetic example. Let's say we were here 30 years ago during the golden, I say it ironically, Husák era. Let's say we were members of a collective, the party wants all of us to sign a document condemning a colleague of ours. They tell you openly, if you don't sign this you will also lose the job like him. Everybody has signed. If you don't sign, it's an act. It can be an act. But then usually,

sometimes it happened, the party line changes. You don't have to sign. They become a little bit more liberal. But at that point if you don't sign it's no longer an act. No, no, an act is strictly defined by a situation. The paradox is – it's eternity but... That is what we should think as modern Platonists, contingent eternity, eternity which is eternity of a certain situation. You say No! for example Antigone, also, it's an act for Lacan. She insists, we should bury my brother. But in a different situation it would no longer be an act. So, yes, I totally agree with you and I reject here a criticism. They say – act, something divine. No, an act is strictly defined by a situation. You do the impossible, in the sense of unacceptable, in that situation. Which is why – this was the point about my confused story about the Husák era, the same thing done a little bit later or earlier is no longer an act. And this is the best way you recognize hypocrites. I remember when twenty years ago I was playing these dissident games, how we identified conformists. They waited, when we started to protest they waited a little bit. When they sniffed that, oh, now it's safe to protest they joined us. I don't know if you had them here, these were dissidents with a little bit of delay. They looked, when it was safe they quickly joined the protest. It's no longer an act. No, no, the whole point of an act is its impact. An act is totally defined in this sense by its situation. Outside this situation it's nothing. Take Antigone. I want to bury my brother. If you say this in a Western liberal society, fuck it, what's the point? It doesn't matter.

*Does it mean that we should re-actualize historical materialism as instrument to...*

Yes, but this is the problem how we use terms. I'm skeptical because the term historical materialism is for me too much identified with the core of traditional Marxism. I think a dimension which goes beyond mere history. This more ontologically fundamental dimension of what I called death drive, negativity. Historical materialism cannot think it. It views humanity as a collective, historical subject, classes, whatever, I think we need something more and this is my style of provocation, as you probably know, to annoy my friends I sometimes consciously use this much more terrible term dialectical materialism. I like this so much because then, you know, when you use this term today, they look at you like – are you crazy? Everybody still likes the term historical materialism, it's more respectable. Dialectical materialism – it's madness.

Because I like to occupy a position where, even if I am attacked and rejected, I am not contaminated, I'm very much a purist. The most important thing is not if people reject you or not but that you are not contaminated, appropriated.

The catastrophe, as I said at the beginning, for Lacan was that his position was appropriated in the space of Germany, England, United States for a long time by deconstructionists. So in this sense I would say, no, historical materialism is not enough.

*Now we are getting to theology. How to understand the Another Space from the final part of your "Fragile Absolute" which appeared when is carried out an ethical act, can we approach or enter this Another Space or you consider it something unavailable and untouchable as we know it from Lévinas...*

No, if anything I'm anti-Lévinas.

*And is it possible to enter the Another Space?*

But here I'm more Hegelian. The Other Space is a void. Hegel says at the end of the chapter on subjectivity "Beyond the appearances there is only what we put there."

The true problem, and this is for me the theological dimension of materialism. I didn't have time to develop this and I do develop it – materialism and theology – now, I can send it to you if you want, I like it very much, I think it's the best thing that I did over the last year.

How the truly difficult thing to think is the ontological incompleteness of reality. What we learn from quantum physics – it's not that we cannot measure particles etc. but reality is in itself as if it were open, incomplete, not fully ontologically constituted. And as already Benjamin knew, in this openness of reality, this utopian theological dimension enters. God is just a hole, a black hole, in reality. God means there is another dimension but just as a void. In a way it's a much more radical vision. And this is for me the lesson of Christianity, what I improvised in my Prague lecture. God dies, God which guarantees the meaninglessness of the universe. It's a totally open situation. There is a void, on us it depends to do, but the crucial thing is ... Friends always ask me "But why don't you simply call this humanism or what, why do you still call it theology? Is your thesis not young Marx's Feuerbach Thesis that the Holy Ghost is really just the spirit of humanity, there is no god?" For precise reasons I can develop – no. Humanism is not enough. In the same way that Freud talks about meta-psychology. There must be a dimension above it. Theology is another name for meta-psychology, for something that is in Man more than Man, the inhuman core of Man etc. These are very precise terms. It's interesting how many American theologians with whom I debated, they were very close to what I'm saying. They accepted this. They told me "If this is materialism, I'm a materialist." That is to say that God is not an old man sitting up there pulling the strings etc. God is just a name for this void, openness, this inhuman, more than human. I think that we should rehabilitate, and we all agree here with my friends, Badiou, Agamben, me, of course not in the sense of "Let's kill them" inhumanity, more than human, trans-human dimension.

This is for me what Christ stands for. A man who is inhuman, in the sense of more than man. So, it's absolutely crucial to radically reject this Feuerbach/young Marx theory.

*Christianity speaks about redemption. Is something of that kind possible from view of your materialism?*

Yeah, but it's nothing great. Of course, what do you mean by redemption? Of course not literally a miracle of redemption. But with every successful emancipatory movement, redemption happens. But redemption is for me already the collective itself. The zero level of political... you know when Christ says when he appears after his death "Whenever there is love between the two of you, I am there." That's redemption. Redemption is collectivity itself as this emancipatory collectivity. The tragedy is for me this legalistic commercial notion of redemption which too much determines Christianity, especially Catholicism. All this "God is paying the price for our sins, we owe God." or "Justice is all done with the Last Judgment, all the sinners will pay, we will be rewarded." We should radically drop this. The moment you define the death of Christ on the cross as this kind of commercial deal, God paid the price, first every good theologian will tell you you get immediately caught up in nonsense.

God paid the price for our sins. Ok, fuck it. To whom did he pay the price? No wonder that in the first century of Christianity, the most popular theory was the dualistic theory, where they claimed that the death of Christ is a deal between God and the Devil. Here on Earth we are in the hands of the Devil, God told the Devil "I want to make a deal with you, I pay the highest price, my son, if you give me back humanity." Which is again nonsense, we are in pagan dualism etc.

So again, it's very difficult to read this. Redemption yes, but totally rid of, deprived of all this commercial... I know it can be proven that even Paul uses terms that were used in... When Paul speaks about God paying for our sins he, I think, uses the terms that were used when in ancient Rome you were trading slaves, when you bought the freedom of a slave. This should be totally dropped, I think.