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Acting as One – A Dialogue

Luke Evans and Sina Badiei (in conversation)

The following work represents the extension of a debate that began in July of 2009. The authors felt it useful to commit to document their exchanges, and questions for one another, over the issues of building the Left project in the international context, where are the subjects to be found for alternative political projects, how are we to interpret the Iranian protest movement, and whether it is possible to resuscitate Marxism for our age.

Luke Evans (LE): The contention that Slavoj Žižek has made in his LRB article, vis-à-vis the genuine political character of the recent uprisings in Iran was a vital intervention on behalf of a prominent academic, as too was the letter co-signed by himself and other prominent academics, trade unionists and political figures from within the British scene (Achcar, Callinicos, Orr, Sewotka, Žižek 2009).

I find myself drawn towards seeking to identify in these movements a grammar, or gesture, of political intervention that may represent a new modality of politics. It is not so much a refutation of the formal similarity to the protests that erupted across the globe in 2003 over the then impending invasion of Iraq, in particularly spectacular numbers in the UK, or that there may be a particular resonance with the history of civil rights movements across the globe in previous times. It is that, given the particularities of the particular conjuncture we are moving through, with economic crises, the rise of Euro-fascism, the deepening ecological catastrophe etc., what has emerged in Iran is perhaps the formal appearance of emerging revolutionary collectivities in the 21st Century...?

To what extent do you think the events in can be said to support or not support the proclamation that what has been occurring in Iran heralds some form of the "new" in the terms of political subjectivity, in both a formal sense as a space of organising political activity, as well in terms of the specificity of the concrete, articulated demands of this manifestation? Do you, in the sense Žižek postulates, view this as the "right question" to be asking of this movement?

Sina Badiei (SB): I think before expounding on the issues you have raised it is important to give some sort of cognitive map of the situation so that later elaborations can be perceived in their proper context.

The most important aspect of this is that Iran has not been part of the global order in the last 30 years, and I say this without blinding my eyes to the fact that this has only been the case up to some certain points. Some people would enumerate a list of areas, which they would then take as a proof of Iranian government complicity with global hegemony, but what these people miss is that the will had been to keep away from the order. Even in the case of authentic revolutionary systems this is somewhat impossible given that I don't understand whether this position, by calling a system totally out of the global order, means really anything but that there should be a full scale war between them.

As such, after 30 years of international isolation, on the one hand, no one any longer buys the government rhetoric about being at war with the global order (something they call ironically Zionism and not the global capitalist order, which is itself very revealing), but on the other hand, due to the very same reason, the true nature of the new world order has not been fully grasped by the new Iranian generations and in spite of the huge governmental propaganda on the issue, nonetheless, they have failed to exert any effective mindset on the majority of Iranian youth. Having justified all their failures, and incapability, due to a conspiracy by Zionists and imperialists, consequently they have just managed to influence those who are ultimately ideologically linked with them i.e. religious communities who equalize government with their most personal beliefs, as well as government affiliates and agents, including members of the revolutionary guard, basij, and any other one who has economic interests in them.

I think the whole situation can be very precisely explained if we approach it through the main slogans of the Iranian 1979 revolution. Out of the major ones - independence, freedom, and an Islamic republic - clearly independence and Islamism have swallowed and sacrificed a free republic, and as such, I think that when Žižek spoke of a return to the utopian dreams of the previous revolution he missed the point that it was a return but not a return to all that it was. For clearly the main driving force behind the demonstrators was to demand the two lost dreams of the revolution i.e. freedom and republicanism which in its Iranian context can be interpreted as being equal to democracy, and as such if this was a return it was a return to the unachieved utopias of that revolution, over against the achieved utopias of the very same revolution.

In the period just before the election Iranians enjoyed a freedom they could not even imagine before - since until very recently any, even friendly, gathering of more than three people in the street was accompanied by the police force ordering you to move on and to disperse - but now they could experience it in carnivals and large groups. The political twist of the situation also distinguished it very much from similar events right after the Iranian soccer team won a soccer World Cup spot few years before. As such, I think this was precisely what brought people to the street after the election. It was not a point of rigging or fraud, it was simply a point of either a return to the period of before this unique experience or not.

As such Ahmadinejad was simply an epitomization of before, and Mousavi was an epitomization of this new experience, and as such both figures had acquired such a symbolic significance that speaking of any electoral process here is already to miss the point. I think the main reason that demonstrations mainly took place in bigger cities and particularly in Tehran was because of this very novel experience and if anyone from anywhere in Iran had experienced those nights he too would have longed for not having a return. That radically different experience, even if some in the West denounce it as longing for something trivial, definitely had some grain of truth, but not without a qualification, and here is where I start to expound on your points on the nature of the protest and whether it may be said to represent a new modality of politics.

First of all it needs to be further clarified that what this modality is supposed to be. In the sense that whether or not any new modality of politics can be raised, without any prior thinking, I am very sceptical of the possibility of such a thing.

Something may be of interest here. A few months prior to the elections both Google and Facebook were planning on stopping giving access to users whose IPs was coming from Iran. Right after the election and in the course of what happened both suddenly introduced special Farsi language features!

As such, in a broader context I am personally very sceptical, too, of any intrinsic truly revolutionary potential in the new means of communication. I think these means are very effective against the less modern systems of authority but for this potential to move towards authentic politics is something I can't readily agree on. For that matter Obama and the Iranian recent demonstrations are the furthest they can go. Another issue in Iran was the fact that the government, ultimately seeing itself in danger, cut access to most of the media including cellphones, Internet, and satellites, for a long period of time.

This can also occur anywhere else as, ultimately, those who have the control of such systems are those in power and, as such, even if it means to hinder online banking services etc., as soon as they pose a real danger to the existence of power structures, I'm sure they won't lose any time in cutting access.

On the issue of similarity between these movements and those that you have mentioned I should say that the nature of the situation was so radically different that to forge any possible

similarity, or other distinction, is something perhaps not really of interest given that, first of all, it can be said that, if not pro-West, these demonstrations were certainly not anti-globalization, and anti-global order, and on the other hand, even though there is undeniably harsh oppression of minorities in Kurdistan, Baluchistan and some Arab sections of Iran, to be fair, the Iranian government is not forged of any particular ethnic background - at least I can't recognize in it any element of specific ethnic determination; the true nature of this regime should rather be looked for in its handling of religious issues. So for example, if it oppresses Kurds, it's not because they are ethnically Kurdish but, rather, because they are Sunni. As such, if there are any similarities between this and the civil rights movements it can be said to be, this asking for freedom from religious repression - this includes freedom for Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and Jews alike.

As a matter of fact, the participation in the movement was truly universal in the sense that people from the entire political spectrum including people with a working class background, and leftists, were part of it. But to deceive ourselves and think there was any likelihood of emergence of any new, previously unheard form of collectivity I think is rather naïve - apart from the fact that the procedures that had been undertaken for organizing later gatherings were sometimes really novel and unique given that the whole movement can be truly said to be without central leadership.

Iran has been isolated from the world for more than 30 years and in these 30 years the main official project has been to denounce America and the West for simply all failures. Now what is a leftist government supposed to do even if we ideally think that people in the left manage to turn this movement into one of upper class-lower class division and bring about an authentic leftist government? Whether to keep on with this isolation which would effectively mean no real change, or rather to initiate relationship with the West, which would simply mean that a leftist government has re-initiated ties with capitalist global order after taking power?

Consequently to be honest, apropos the problem of global capitalism, I see no viable solution but to really deal with it in the same scale as of itself i.e. on a global scale. To my understanding the major lesson to be drawn from the failure of Soviet Communism is that equality can only, and will only, win, if the whole world rises up to it all at the same time and not like what we saw first here and then there.

For now we can better understand that old Marxist motto that in fighting capitalism the true enemy turns out to be social democracy, for it is precisely what capitalism turns into when it is posed a real danger.

My question is that on what grounds can you even potentially think of any concrete leftist victory in Iran and on what hope? Who is supposed to become our ally afterwards or how are we supposed to forge our foreign policies?

In this respect, apart from quasi-leftist populist movements like that of Chavez, what other form of leftist politics can you even think of, and I won't even ask of it being concrete? In a world best

characterized in having been sundered into red zones and green zones by Naomi Klein (2008: Chapter 20) in her really interesting book *The Shock Doctrine*, a process that I see to be still very vigorous and alive - outside our intellectual circles, and beside our concerns, that are honest, and very relevant without doubt, but are still in a true absence of any authentic emancipatory political project - do you see any other likelihood of politics apart from fascism and nationalism in the more developed parts, religious fundamentalism in the least developed parts and ultimately naive dreams of good democracy in the parts in between who are not yet part of the global system, and isn't Iran is one of this last sort?

In this sense of course Iran's significance lies precisely in its in-between-hood, but nonetheless, how is something new supposed to possibly emerge, without having been thought of before? On a par with this question I would also like to know how do you see a well known Žižekian/Lacanian contradiction according to which, on the one hand, we should avoid the passage à l'acte, and on the other, the fact that any act is ultimately a premature act and hence how we should think of deciding on the point between these two i.e. how to avoid passage à l'acte and knowing simultaneously that to act means finally to act prematurely?

LE: What I would raise as a response to the issue you raise about the relationship between the unrest in Iran and its constituting a passage à l'acte is also in many respects how I would also aim to answer some of your other questions.

When Walter Benjamin wrote of history, he declared historical materialism, Marxism, not as a historiography, which would allow us to trace the procession of historical events from one to the next, but argued that history was a constellation of events, with each one rupturing the *jeitzhzeit* though with shards of Messianic time. It was not the ritual of religious observance, clutching at the rosary beads, but the violent upheaval brought by the Messiah that would bring us our redemption (Benjamin 1999: 245 – 255).

Our time is not uniform or even in any sense whole. What exists at any one point is a collection of scissions, rendering the time of now pregnant with final, redemptive, potential.

It is this sense that I suggest our time is littered with True acts, emerging from the detritus of history. What the true task involves is thus not discerning the true act from the passage à l'acte, but which events are not True acts. It is by identifying the dead ends, not the potential hopes that we can orientate ourselves towards the emerging “New”. If all true acts comprise a speculative leap into the void, which in turn realises its own site for, and of, emergence, then there we become much more productive by eliminating those events which do not hold the potential to be resonant with the shards of Messianic time.

The moment of emergence of forces of the “New” correlates to the contradictory character of the ideological constellation of our times.

As outlined by Žižek the recent Iranian protests are “the ‘return of the repressed’ of the

Khomeini revolution" (2009: unpaginated). The performing of a utopian gesture of invention tied to the reclamation of a history deemed by many to have only one apparent expression; the authoritarian Islamist orthodoxy upholding Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitic regime.

The emergence of an alternative appropriation alerts us to the immediate, contradictory character of ideology. As Žižek has remarked in regards to the function of ideology to interpolate multiple, opposed positions (embodied in the famous *Casablanca* scene and the Socialist supplement of the Polish peoples confrontation with "Really Existing Socialism"), the making official of the revolutionary history of Iran is, in and of itself, the very condition for the emergence of this new, alternative legacy.

In some sense, this ideological constellation is not confined to a linear directional appropriation, from the political Right/the establishment to the political Left/the resistance. Here in the UK, the British National Party has incorporated both opposition to Western military intervention in the Middle East and anti-corporate rhetoric, into the articulation of an anti-immigrant Rightist populism. The libertarian and activist-led anti-capitalist movement, and the historic anti-war movement here in the UK, have spawned an unforeseen ideological mutation in the form of an insular, racialised nationalism. How do we account for this, and in what ways is there an even more ambiguous legacy than that?

The true act is never known ahead of its emergence, but like the passage from the non-violent mass protests of the anti-war movement, to the open confrontations via university campus occupations triggered by the Israeli incursion into Gaza, it cannot be known in advance these will emerge. Rather what will guarantee the effectiveness of an action are the Truths to which it pertains, and the fidelity thereof.

The question of who represents the allied forces for the Iranian mass movement is answered in kind. The forces that respond to the Truth of the event, who also hold to its fidelity, are its true allies. This is not those who proclaim the protests as symptom of a middle-class quest for freedoms of identity, the capitalist Utopia. The perpetuation of the dialectic of the war of civilisations does not represent the true character of the Iranian uprisings. It is those who also see in the mobilisations the spirit of Iran's revolutionary history, re-articulated and wrenched out of official orthodoxy that are the true allies of the protesters. Chavez is not your ally, for he too buys into the crude anti-imperialist Leftist support of Ahmadinejad as the champion of the working class. Here, just as the emerging protest movement is without a name, so too are your allies. We are numerous, but we are in some cases unknown or without substantive power.

The very act of shattering the false dialectic between Secular Enlightened Western Democracy, and the backward, fundamentalist, Islamic world, is the clarion call that the protests have unleashed. We can now force the break between this idea and the interpretation of really existing conflicts.

My question for you is how do we create the linkages, the lines of solidarity between forces

on the international stage? Do we resuscitate the idea of the International? What form would it take? Do you think we can we resort to classical Marxist claims to class solidarity? György Lukács recognised the genius of Lenin in his explosion of the Narodniki advocacy of the People, and the implementation of the political project of unifying all of the oppressed across the discontinuous terrain of an unevenly developed capitalist world system. He aimed to achieve this in their own name, not in that of the false unity of the people, but, how do perform this Leninist gesture today? What is the uneven terrain upon which we seek to mobilise?

SB: Before answering your main question I see it necessary to clarify some points. First of all apropos Chavez, I certainly do not see him as an ally since I entirely echo your view regarding him. Nonetheless, if there is one thing it is here where we need to acknowledge Laclau's position on such a matter.

For the problem of the rise of people like Chavez lies precisely in the fact that there had been absolutely no one else to create what Laclau calls an equivalential logic (Laclau 2006; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000), to encompass the demands of people in Venezuela. For this also pertains even to the notorious case of fascism. As such, we should not pretend that in different forms of populism, by simply taking a critical stance, we have dealt with it properly. For me, the true question to be answered by the left vis-à-vis Chavez and fascism alike, is that why there had been no other politics to answer the outcry of those subjects, so that they have succumbed to such hypocritical figures like Chavez and Eurofascist leaders?

It is not enough that we criticize people like Chavez so that liberals then cannot accuse us of postulating something, which they claim, has its true embodiment in people like him. For the lesson I draw from Laclau's position is that, instead of talking to liberals, we should learn that our true subjects are, among others, precisely those who have succumbed to alternative politics, Chavezism and fascism alike.

Here, still not in defence of Chavez, but to be historically accurate, I think there has to be made a clear distinction between Chavez and Ahmadinejad. For as we all know, what the rise of Chavez represented in the beginning was far more than being a class struggle; a struggle between exploited indigenous community of Venezuela over against almost dominantly white ruling class. In contrast, the main problem with Ahmadinejad is that whilst he apparently condemns the inequalities that have emerged in the Iranian society, particularly after the Iran-Iraq war, he nonetheless fully identifies himself with the main pillars of Iran's ruling establishment i.e. the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards. As such, what is in fact the real problem of populism, which is the hidden complicity of its head figures with power structures, is so evident in the case of Ahmadinejad, that there is no point to be led astray about him.

Regarding the linkage between international revolutionary subjects, the first point that comes to my mind is the irrelevance of solely sticking to old class divisions. For first of all, I think

Marx's choice of proletariat as the subject of revolution was due to the fact that at the time in Europe, there was a concrete chance for working class to take power and bring about a full transformation of the society, and this far from representing Eurocentrism, for me manifests his political maturity.

The same can be said with Lenin and his ingeniousness, but something we shouldn't forget is precisely that to be truly faithful to both Marx and Lenin is not to blindly repeat exactly what they did but rather to preserve the relationship between their revolutionary actions vis-à-vis the concrete situation that they were part of. Laclau would here obviously argue that the contingency involved in the unification that was brought about by Lenin would make it impossible to have any linear transformation of the act/situation relationship to our time.

However the problem with Laclau, as suggested by Žižek, is that the equivalential logic that he postulates is impossible to forge on an international level according to his own way of suggesting it, whereas, the global capitalist framework operates on precisely such a level.

On the other hand even though class struggle is still very vigorous and alive in many parts of the world, such as China, India and in Iran too - and this is to such an extent that we can even claim that the notion of an existing class struggle has never been more appropriate than in our time, having hundreds of millions of workers in China and India alone - still, I don't think we can any longer deny tout court as lumpenproletariat a large majority of the world's population, who can in no way be characterized as being workers, but are mostly unemployed for most of their lives and as their situation have mostly remained intact, even in spite of past Marxist-Maoist revolutions, it seems that without dealing with them too, speaking of class struggle is an empty gesture merely to improve one's own situation.

For instance, in many parts of the world the importance of the existing resources has by far subordinated the importance of the work that is being contributed by the workers, and as such in those places, its not even a matter of workers being exploited, but rather of people who are conceived as surplus for the very fact of their existence. As such, although we need to acknowledge the existence of localized struggles that are authentic and concrete in their context, nonetheless, against Laclau, I think there should be a name that all of those who fight different forms of exploitation and repression identify themselves with, and this I think can not be an empty signifier as Laclau would suggest, but rather one that is, or perhaps ought to be, evident in all those struggles for them to be considered authentic. Otherwise we'll end up either in a denunciation of any struggle as being not authentic and effective without bearing in mind that perhaps in that specific moment it had been a real death/life struggle for its subjects, or on the other hand, to regard any struggle as a valid one, even if it is a struggle of a bank employee with his boss over the reduction of his salary from a big amount to a lesser but still big amount.

It is not so difficult to identify this very name to be equality but not mere equality in front of an outer entity be it religion, law or party. For I think the main task today is to think of a new

manifesto of equality, one that can effectively address the concrete state of our global situation and our predicament. My question then consists in asking how do you think, in formulating such a manifesto, we can keep what Derrida called in his *Spectres of Marx* the “messianic without messianism” (2006: 74, 92, 210) aspect, or perhaps in another formulation of the very same thing to avoid seeing the dynamic essence of reality as what Hegel would have called a 'dead Thing' or yet in another form in such a way that we in advance thwart it from becoming something like a religion in the future, something even Marxism has proved itself not to be immune from? Or otherwise, if you see the potential aim of such a manifesto very present in Marxism itself, then what do you see as a way to take it out of its current impasse where, for instance, in China workers are being constantly oppressed in the name of a communist party?

LE: I wish to evoke here an anecdote concerning Lenin, which is recounted in the aforementioned Lukács study. It is the July days of the Russian Revolution, and Lenin and the Bolsheviks are in hiding. As part of this, Lenin is living with a family of workers. Lenin realises that those workers are eating the better white bread, than the inferior black bread. From the quality of bread, Lenin deduces that the ruling class are still attempting to placate the rising workers movement. From the quality of bread, Lenin could perceive the actuality of the proletarian revolution.

When we come to think of the possibilities of political practice, we must make a careful distinction. This is the distinction made between epoch and conjuncture. Whilst we can observe idiosyncratic relations between forces in the immediate constellation of contradictions, this does not indicate an epochal change. We have to be aware that the quality of our bread is not just a product of the immediate struggle for power between rival forces, but is the concrete expression of the asymmetrical social positions of bourgeois and proletariat.

Žižek has mis-recognised in the practice of Lenin the signifier of the birth of an epochal transformation. But in Lenin, what we have is a strategist capable of fully realising the conjuncture of his time. The specificities, as they are expressed through and in particular constellations of the immanence of Messianic historical time, act as coordinates within any given epoch. When Žižek identifies in Lenin a figure who acted with utmost expedience to produce the revolution, up to and including the inclusion of the peasantry thereby anticipating Maoism, what is really there is the figure of a revolutionary who perceived the conjunctural relation between forces beyond the working class as a necessary supplement of the revolutionary movement.

Lenin was not the prize fighter of the excluded, but the Grand Marshall of the exploited, who was able to think with precision, and was able to hit the correct aspects of the constellation of historical penetration and perpetuation that made up his particular time of the Now. Lenin was not the repetition of Marx as such, but was acting in fidelity to the epoch heralded by the Bukharin-Event, the Hilferding-Event, and the Luxembourg-Event ...

In this sense, we cannot call out for something beyond the history of Marxism, of its

expression of class politics, with the symbol of Lenin, because it is in the very Lenin-Event that we get Marxism as a living, breathing, and revolutionary actuality.

To seek a new name would advocate not the Leninist mobilisation of the conjuncture of forces which belong to our epoch, but rather calls for a new set of epochal determinations into which we may then invest the Leninist moment of grasping the fragments of messianic time in the here-and-now. To do so would also annihilate the fidelity to the Lenin-event, for any movement into a truly new epoch makes the coordinates for our conjuncture and intervention beyond those of the Lenin-events' fidelity to the notion of imperialism, thus making of capitalism, a not-imperialism.

I do not hold that we are on or have passed through a threshold that moves us beyond the epoch of Lenin. The recent market crash is a clear symptom of this. The catastrophic implosion of the financial markets represents the very limit of this current epoch of capitalism to exceed its own internal contradictions. These very limits, whilst destructive, are also intensively productive. It is through this retrogression of productive forces that new spaces for speculative innovation and market dynamics are opened up, but never with the voracity of the previous processes. This productivity is the condition for the emergence of new conjunctures to be grasped, opened by the fissures and scissions left behind by these readjustments.

The Leninist gesture is thus not to reinvent, but to know when to resist invention. It is about knowing when the pathological reiteration of the new, ordained by the market dynamic will meet with friction, and to turn the generated sparks and heat into the blazing inferno of fire inside the minds of men.

In this sense we need not be Communist. If we accept that both Stalinism and what became of the Cultural Revolution, as both actual expressions of Communism in some form, then we cannot claim to be Communist without accepting these tragedies as a familial likeness.

The question is not so much how we engage in becoming-Communist, but rather how we create communism without resort to using either Mao or Stalin as forebears. Our adequacy comes in exceeding the promise offered by Mao or Stalin. It seems to me we must create communism without Communism.

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Luke Evans has recently completed as Master of Arts in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Cultural Studies, as Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has been active in radical politics within and without the academy, and participated in the recent wave of campus occupations over the Israeli incursion into Gaza. He has also been interviewed on BBC Radio 5Live, and Resonance FM. He currently lives in London, and his interests include revolutionary politics in the 21st Century, the political economy of the Internet, the works of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, and the legacies of Marxism.