

IJŽS Vol 1.1 Reviews and Debate

How many revolutionary agents can dance on the head of a pin?

An Open Letter to Slavoj Žižek - Bülent Somay, IJŽS Board Member

Dear Slavoj,

I'm writing to you as a steadfast reader since 1995, and, although I cannot call myself a "faithful follower", I welcome anything from you with an open mind, knowing that it will be refreshing and challenging, even if I don't agree with you all the time. I have edited three of your books in Turkish (one of them my own compilation), and as a responsible editor I read (sometimes *into*) your every sentence carefully and critically, although even when I was critical, I was never unsympathetic. I also see you as a comrade in these dark times, when there is no discernible revolutionary agency militating for a non-capitalistic future *yet*, when the old "left" is still dispersed and confused, and the "new" left is fresh out of new ideas. Your work as a whole is a spark for all of us who seek a way out of this confusion, and (let me quote myself from my essay in the first issue of IJŽS) "I think [you are] some kind of a lighthouse for those of us who have tried to get together the (only) two really radical *Weltanschauungen*, Marxism and Psychoanalysis, and although [you are] not the first or only one to try [their] hand at this, [you are] so far the most promising and fruitful. The lighthouse, however, is just a lighthouse; it is not the sun, nor is it a ship. It can only illuminate us for brief instances, the light is not always where and when we want it. It is sometimes erratic, sometimes dim, and sometimes too much, especially when it shines in our eyes. It is not a ship, so it cannot take us from here to there; it can only help us in our own voyages, our personal or collective adventures. Appreciating [you] is exactly this: To appreciate [your] shortcomings, and benefit from them."

I will now try to express my concern about your insistence (actually, your haste: but this is not a call for undue delay, we can still be quick and timely without being "hasty", to put it in the terms of Fangorn in *The Lord of the Rings*) upon the primacy of the revolutionary act, and the part played by the revolutionary subject (that is, the

revolutionary party) in the coming about of this act, because I believe that it is one of the instances that the lighthouse shines directly into our eyes, and blinds us temporarily, rather than illuminating our way.

I will brutally sever a passage in *The Parallax View* from all context to criticize, because I believe that although meaning lies in the context, the framework, isolated passages, sentences and even single words still have a surplus of meaning which can sometimes have a compromising, even corrupting effect on the context itself.

So here's the passage:

In his famous short poem "The Solution" (1953, published in 1956), Brecht mocks the arrogance of the Communist *nomenklatura* faced with the workers' revolt:

After the uprising of the 17th June
The Secretary of the Writers Union
Had leaflets distributed in the *Stalinallee*
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts.
Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

This poem, however, is not only politically opportunistic, the obverse of his letter of solidarity with the East German Communist regime published in *Neues Deutschland* (to put it brutally, Brecht wanted to cover both his flanks, to profess his support for the regime and to hint at his solidarity with the workers, so that whoever won, he would be on the winning side), but also simply *wrong* in the theoretico-political sense: we should bravely admit that it is in fact a duty – even *the* duty— of a revolutionary party to “dissolve the people and elect another,” that is, to bring about the transubstantiation of the “old” opportunistic people (the inert “crowd”) into a revolutionary body aware of its historical task, to transform the body of the empirical people into a body of Truth. Far from being an easy task, to “dissolve the people and elect another” is the most difficult of all. (*The Parallax View*, p. 149)

Needless to say, we are in total agreement about Brecht's “opportunism”, which is far from being a first in his case. He was, on the other hand, also an opportunist through and through in his testimony before the McCarthyist Un-American Activities Committee, so why not here? Shouldn't we, who forgave him for his opportunistic *double entendres* then and there to avoid expulsion, who saw in his “trickery” just another version of his Galileo's “*Unglücklich das Land, das Helden nötig hat,*” also forgive this opportunistic act

of trying not to be a hero? Should we really (but really!) make the very substantial *ethical* distinction here between the McCarthyist committee and the East German *nomenklatura*, just because the latter happens to call itself communist?

But all these are beside the point here. What I'm chiefly interested in (and violently disagree with) here, is the mission you see fit for the revolutionary party. The disagreement is *not*, however, about the characterization of "people" as opportunistic or inert. "The people", for whatever it means, may be called opportunistic, inert, disinterested, oblivious, amorphous, or even mean and cruel. It *is* all of these, because "the ruling ideas of an era are the ideas of the ruling class," and "the people", defined as an amorphous blob, without social, political or ideological homogeneity, is of course the purveyor of these ruling ideas, in our case the bourgeoisie's. I likewise agree that "the 'old' opportunistic people (the inert 'crowd')" should transubstantiate "into a revolutionary body aware of its historical task," but now with a few reservations: What is this historical task of "the people" that it should be aware of? We should be precisely clear on what we are talking about here: For "the people" to have a "historical task", it must first be defined as an agent, a subject. Unfortunately, the term "people" is too broad, too indeterminate and too muddled to be considered an actual *agency*. Let me go back to Kant to further this point:

Individual human beings, each pursuing his own ends according to his inclination and often one against another (and even one entire people against another) rarely unintentionally promote, as if it were their guide, an end of nature which is unknown to them. They thus work to promote that which they would care little for if they knew about it. (Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent", 1794)

A full century later, Engels will repeat (maybe copy) the same thing in his attempt to "briefly define" materialism to Joseph Bloch:

In the second place, however, history is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant — the historical event. This may again itself be viewed as the product of a power which works as a whole *unconsciously* and without volition. For what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed. Thus history has proceeded hitherto in the manner of a natural process and is essentially subject to the same laws of motion. But from the fact that the wills of individuals — each of whom desires what he is impelled to by his physical constitution and external, in the last resort economic, circumstances (either his own personal circumstances or those of society in general) — do not attain what they want, but are merged into an aggregate mean, a common resultant, it must not be concluded that they are equal to zero. On the contrary, each contributes to the resultant and is to this extent included in it. (Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Joseph Bloch", 1890)

In both cases "the people" is not an agent, but rather a haphazard collection of separately-willed individuals, shepherded by a "force" unknown to them, except for the

difference that while Kant attributes agency to nature, Engels maneuvers away from it by using phrases like “this may again itself be viewed as” and “in the manner of a natural process”, which suggests an agency akin to but not exactly identical with nature. The demystifying (Marxist) step comes with the acknowledgment of an agency, not above and unknown to the people, but within (albeit unacknowledged by) the people, which can be viewed as the transcendental, shifting (or *metastasisng*) into the plane of immanence. The same demystifying step is also inherent in the Freudian transformation of Oedipus, who, in Sophocles, was driven by “Apollo, that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion,” into an agent driven by an unconscious desire. The Freudian demystification takes the transcendental agency which is above and unknown to the actual agent (the divine sphere in Greek tragedy), and transforms it into an immanent agency which is *within but unacknowledged by it* (the unconscious desire). The Marxist demystification does the same thing to Kant, transforming his transcendental agency (nature) into something *within but unacknowledged by* the people, namely the working class, which, although it sometimes constitutes a significant portion of this “people” and plays an important and sometimes determining part in its acts as a whole, is by no means identical to it.¹

If we must, therefore, assign a “historical task” to an agency, that agency cannot be the people, but only the working class. Of course whenever I mention the working class in the Marxist sense, I also cry *mutatis mutandis*. So let’s “mutate”: the “proletariat” is surely not the proletariat Marx and Engels were talking about in 1848 anymore. It is definitely not the *exclusively industrial* proletariat, “crowded into the factory [and] organized like soldiers.” It is not a mass of poverty-stricken workers, ruthlessly exploited in order for capital to accumulate, for capital has found another means of accumulation in the intervening 150 years: Rather than exploiting the already proletarianized mass more and more, it finds not-yet proletarianized masses elsewhere and uses them as the source of its growth, and as soon as *they* become proletarianized, it turns yet elsewhere. Or we should rewrite this last sentence in the past tense, because capital (as its most prominent ideologues proudly announce) has reached the limits of the globe (this is what they mean by “globalization”), and unless it finds not-yet proletarianized masses on the moon, Mars or Venus, this process will have to be reversed, and capital will have to regress into its childhood, into its 19th century policy of exploiting its already-proletarianized workers more and more, stripping them of their privileged status, driving them into poverty and unemployment. This, however, is only a projection. Even without it, though, there is something which remains unchanged in the proletariat of Marx and Engels and the not-exclusively-industrial, non-militarized and non-pauperized workers of the present day, and this “something” is precisely what makes them into an agency:

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property. (Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

¹ I owe this entire line of argument about Kant, Greek tragedy, the transcendental and the immanent to my colleague Ferda Keskin.

To sum up, what makes the working class into an agency and provide it with a mission is neither its poverty, nor its militant and pseudo-military organization, nor its proximity to the (chiefly industrial) means of production. It is only its structural inability to organize itself into yet another ruling class that provides the working class with such a mission. The proletariat is the only (revolutionary) class in history that abolishes itself in the act of abolishing its opposite. "The people", on the other hand, made up of a myriad of classes and sub-classes, social and economic strata, cannot structurally carry out such a mission. Quite on the contrary, whenever a "historical task" is assigned to "the people" as such, the outcome has always been that either a fetal bourgeoisie immediately took precedence and, through an accelerated growth process, organized itself into a ruling class (as it was in the case of "national liberation movements"), or a politico-ideological nucleus designated itself as a "caretaker" government for an indeterminate period (for the people or, more specifically, the working class), which unerringly ended up in empire (as it was in the case of Jacobins and Bolsheviks).

What I'm trying to ascertain here is that "the transubstantiation of the 'old' opportunistic people (the inert 'crowd') into a revolutionary body aware of its historical task," is, in itself a structurally impossible task, however "revolutionary", "determined" or "disciplined" the supposed perpetrator of this transubstantiation may be. So Brecht's sarcasm shouldn't be interpreted as his love for, or belief in the immutability of, "the people", but rather as directed at the party *nomenklatura* that places itself above and at the same time act as the unelected (or, even if not unelected, at least unduly elected) representative of this people. The critique of any kind of Jacobinism (coming from a Marxist), is never motivated by an irrationally ethical belief in democracy, or by a "love of the people", but rather in the simple conviction that Jacobinism, however well-intentioned, or however strict-disciplined, *does not work*. The people stay an "inert crowd", because there is no "historical task" for them to be aware of; the working-class who *does* have one, loses it as a result of its assimilation into "the people" and becomes a part of that "inert crowd", while the "historical task" is taken over by the Jacobin caretakers, who unfortunately have no course of action other than "transubstantiating" themselves into a ruling class, since *the only historical agency structurally incapable of doing so*, the working class, has been practically "sent to the bench" by the coach, its "guides and leaders".

The problem here lies in a confusion, characteristic of Jacobinism from its actual act in the French Revolution through its incarnations in most of the revolutionary (or, in Wallerstein's terms, anti-systemic) movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, a confusion of the revolutionary act with the revolutionary agency. To return to your formulation, if there is going to be a "transubstantiation of the 'old' opportunistic people (the inert 'crowd') into a revolutionary body aware of its historical task," the subject of such transubstantiation can only be the revolutionary act itself, not the revolutionary agent, the self-appointed party. Marx and Engels' definition of the communists vis-à-vis the proletariat leaves no room for doubt:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties.

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole. (Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

I should immediately add that the word “sectarian” in the third sentence was inserted in the 1888 edition (a post-Marx-ist insertion); in the original edition it was *besonderen*, that is, “separate”. According to Marx and Engels, therefore, the communists (for them, “the revolutionary party”) do not constitute an agency as opposed to the inert people: The agency, on the other hand, is not “the people” either, who may or may not remain inert, but the proletariat itself. The communists (“the revolutionary party”) are only a part of the actual movement of this class (*ergo*, no movement, no party), an important part because they represent the historical memory and transnational cohesion of this class, but they can by no means substitute it, represent it or “take over” for it. So, they cannot “dissolve the people and elect another”; they can only play a (hopefully significant) part in the revolutionary act, which is the sole hope of the dissolution of the people as an amorphous conglomerate of conflicting wills, strata and classes, and its re-formation as a more or less voluntary (and voluntarist) community of individuals. If there is a historically definable agency in this process, it is definitely *not* the “revolutionary party”, but the “revolutionary class”, a redefined proletariat. Only after such redefinition, and basing itself upon the existence of a revolutionary movement of this working class, can the “revolutionary party” can be considered an agency.

Even a decade ago this argument could still have been considered academic, even scholastic (“how many revolutionary agents can dance on the head of a pin?”), because there was “no movement, no agency”. Today, however, with globalization (the pride and nightmare of the bourgeoisie) on the way to completion, the constitution of a revolutionary agency (which, in the ultimate instance, can be nothing but a revolutionary, transnational political party) is more pressing than ever. And since I am a volunteer for becoming an individual part of this formation with no “separate and/or sectarian principles of my own”, I consider everyone on the same path comrades, and insist that it is high time we started discussing these issues, which were not only “academic” a decade ago, but also “treason” half a century ago.

Cordially

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