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An Open Letter to Slavoj Žižek

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Dear Slavoj,

Having recently finished reading the manuscript of *In Defense of Lost Causes*, I'm now ready to write up some thoughts I had apropos the material encountered therein (reactions relevant to the issues raised by the interview questions you're in the process of answering). It's clear to me that some of the questions I posed prior to reading this newest book of yours already are answered in this book. However, as expected, additional lines of inquiry have occurred to me while reading this new material over the course of the past few weeks.

To begin at the beginning, in your introduction, you mention the Lacanian inflection to the phrase "lost cause" forming part of the book's title. However, what struck me is that, when Lacan explicitly uses this phrase in the eleventh seminar (on page 117 of the French and page 128 of the English), there's a fashion of reading it that goes some way toward shedding light on the most basic

theoretical underpinnings informing Lacan's general socio-political conservatism (as epitomized by his reaction to the events of May '68 and their aftermath). I've always understood Lacan's "*cause perdue*" in relation to the Real cause *qua tuché* as also elaborated in the eleventh seminar. More specifically, such a cause (as *tuché*) is "lost" precisely insofar as the *automaton* of Imaginary-Symbolic reality can register/represent the impact of these buffeting blows from the Real solely in an indirect manner; the abrupt, evanescent, and vanishing *tuché* defies being taken up into and captured by the structural scaffolding of reality's *automaton*. Translating this into a political register, it would seem that, at least *circa* 1964, Lacan hesitates to admit that eventual Real causes can be inscribed into the enduring orders of institutions and practices (in your own vernacular, any *tuché*-like revolutionary event ends up becoming something "lost" to the extent that it cannot survive the passage into the long, sobering "morning after"). Lacan's later reaction to the students involved with May '68 appears to move along these lines: The *tuché* of the carnivalesque upheaval is a "lost cause" since it inevitably must generate and be effaced by the installation of new figures of mastery ("What you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one"). As I understand it, *tuché qua* lost cause of the Real is associated, in the eleventh seminar, mainly with conceptions of embodiment and libidinal mechanisms in psychoanalytic metapsychology. But, re-interpreted from a socio-political vantage point, it seems to me that both your radical-emancipatory appropriation of Lacan's "*cause perdue*" as well as the alternate pessimist-quietist-conservative reading of it I've just now proposed here are equally defensible—in other words, this Lacanian phrase can be heard to be politically quite ambiguous.

However, most of what caught my attention in reading *In Defense of Lost Causes* has to do with two major topics in your work: freedom and nature. As regards the topic of freedom, my primary concern triggered by what I've recently read has to do with the connections you draw between autonomy and temporality. Already in *For They Know Not What They Do*, you contend, *contra* the commonplace notion that we tend to feel free in the present but determined retroactively, that, in actuality, the reverse is the case: we tend to feel determined in the present but free retroactively. In this newest book, you again emphasize

the *après-coup* aspects of autonomy (for instance, during a discussion of the Kantian conception of freedom in Chapter Six). With this example of Kant, one could say that the experience of being free is itself still experienced in the here-and-now of the present, that this sense of agency is contemporaneous with itself at the level of a self-consciousness relating to the possible causes that will come to move it upon its deciding to be thus-moved—causality is here retroactive, although freedom isn't. What I'm getting at is a sort of Schellingian critique of what looks a little like an evasion on your part of acknowledging that, perhaps once in a while (even if quite rarely), we feel free at the moment and really are free when feeling this (such would be an autonomy present to and contemporaneous with itself). As you know, Schelling (in, for instance, the *Clara* dialogue) stresses how people usually react to encountered instances of true autonomy (i.e., the "lightening flash" of freedom) in both others and themselves with anxiety, horror, terror, etc. Consequently, from Schelling's perspective, we normally will veer in the direction of obfuscating from view those unsettling exceptional moments when our whole being is caught up in the "abyss of freedom" (rather than this freedom being shunted off to times other than the immediate here-and-now of the present). From a Schellingian angle, the vulgar quotidian notion that we're free in the present but determined retroactively (the notion you critique) is indeed an avoidance of abyssal autonomy to the extent that it deceptively turns the past into a solid, stable ground of historical determinism/necessity. But, from this same angle, your insistence on the retroactivity of freedom runs its own risk of an avoidance of abyssal autonomy by hinting that subjective autonomy cannot ever temporally catch up with itself. Aren't there occasions when one genuinely is confronted with a groundless autonomy and is fully cognizant of this while it's happening?

Some of your comments on Badiou's philosophy are related to this. When you rightfully defend Badiouian courage against its liberal-democratic critics (in Chapter Three), the danger flirted with by this defense is its potential covering over of Badiou's Sartrean existentialist roots as relevant to his vision of bravery. Having thought some about this myself after the Birkbeck gathering last June—following my presentation dealing with courage and other affects in Badiou's

thought, I was asked by certain members of the audience about what, if anything, promises that a politics of brave evental militancy isn't (or won't degenerate into) totalitarian violence—I came to the conclusion that there is only one real answer to such liberal-democratic worries/queries: there simply is no guarantee in advance of a distinction between the violence of justified evental bravery and the violence of unjustified non-evental stupidity (*à la* the cliché about the fine, sometimes indiscernible, line between bravery and stupidity). To ask for such a guarantee in advance about courage is precisely to lack courage (as the courage for courage, as per Badiou's contention that courage is always the courage for courage, an inherently second-order dynamic). Given his profound indebtedness to Sartre, attempts to provide *a priori* criteria for courage or events (even if it's Badiou himself who makes the attempts) amount to a betrayal of the existentialist insistence on the underlying non-existence of any such assurances. In Lacanian terms, proposing such criteria amounts to an attempted reinstallation of some meta-level big Other able to vouch for the authenticity of what appears to be evental courage. Such reassuring criteria are again means of avoiding the anxiety of groundless, abyssal autonomy. Your own lines of argumentation elsewhere in *In Defense of Lost Causes*—I'm thinking here of the discussions of Merleau-Ponty on "humanism and terror" (Chapter Four), of Lacan on "the perspective of the Last Judgment" (Chapter Five), and of Lenin on the prematurity of revolutionary interventions (Chapter Six)—highlight the crucial implications of Lacan's "*le grand Autre n'existe pas*" in ways that speak against trying to supply any assurances, criteria, and guarantees whatsoever for Badiouian courage and events.

The case of Chavez is relevant here too. Prior to reading *In Defense of Lost Causes*, I was familiar only with your criticism of Chavez that he "doesn't go far enough" insofar as he relies upon the global marketplace of international capitalism to generate the oil wealth fueling his "Bolivarian revolution." At the time, I thought to myself: but, what if Chavez can be seen to be temporarily exploiting a transitory historical-economic window of opportunity within capitalism through which he can launch something that will, eventually, come to have capital-challenging effects in the future? Your Kant-Deleuze-Foucault inspired

articulation of revolutionary enthusiasm in this text, as well as your explicit articulation of various nuances coloring your understandable ambivalence toward Chavez, point in the same direction as this speculation. However, at this juncture, several of the ideas mentioned in the paragraphs above become highly pertinent. Perhaps, in the eyes of a leftist historical perspective, the line between Chavez-the-brave and Chavez-the-stupid (as he who ends up failing to challenge capitalism effectively) is like that between, for the Merleau-Ponty of “humanism and terror,” Stalin-the-brave and Stalin-the-stupid. In other words, maybe courage isn’t an emotional state experienced by conscious individuals in the present. Badiou’s various discussions of courage, fidelity, and love, for instance, inconsistently vacillate between, on the one hand, speaking of these as affective dispositions lived by individuals, and, on the other hand, insisting that these words designate, in his philosophical vocabulary, the objectively incarnated procedures, processes, and practices of subjects-of-events (rather than being subjective *qua* consciously registered psychological phenomena—for example, love not as a passionate amorous feeling but, instead, as a materialized way of being and doing). Taking into consideration the case of Chavez here, perhaps his courage, construed in a Badiouian de-psychologized fashion, can be determined as courage only retroactively. Simply put, whether he’s brave or stupid has nothing to do with him as a subjective agent in the present—as with Stalinism à la Merleau-Ponty, time alone (in the form of the backwards glance of subsequent historical judgment) will tell. Thus, unlike autonomy/freedom, maybe bravery/courage should be reconceived as linked to an *après-coup* mode. In the here-and-now of immediate circumstances, I cannot know for sure whether I’m being brave or stupid. Moreover, whether I’m brave or stupid might depend on the uncertain outcomes of objective processes set in motion by those deeds which could be either brave or stupid depending on how they turn out in the unpredictable, unforeseeable future. I believe the same could be said about the distinctions between events and non-events as well as between acts and non-acts/actions.

Before moving on to your reflections on nature, I have a few other scattered thoughts to convey about autonomy, temporality, Badiou, etc. In

Chapter One, when talking about freedom in relation to the Marxist conception of “base,” it occurred to me that the same thing could be said about the Freudian concept of drive: *trieb* isn’t (merely) a barrier, hindrance, or obstacle to freedom (as per the misinformed opinion that psychoanalysis is a discourse of determinism)—rather, it (also) functions as that which liberates human beings from any sort of straightforwardly animalistic-instinctual-natural determination (this being something I develop in Žižek’s *Ontology* and in this old unpublished book manuscript I wrote years ago right after finishing my dissertation—a text I entitled then *Freedom from Nature: Drive between Heteronomy and Autonomy*). This comparison/parallel of Marx’s base with Freud’s drive dovetails nicely with your later discussion of Dennett on free will and determinism in Chapter Nine.

In Chapter Four, your brief gloss on the Keyzer Soeze figure from *The Usual Suspects* reminded me of a famous lyric from Janis Joplin’s song “Me and Bobby McGee”: “Freedom’s just another word for ‘nothin’ left to lose’...” (somewhat resonant with Marx’s “you have nothing to lose but your chains”). I easily can imagine a Badiouian rejoinder to this: as per his recent discussion of destruction and subtraction as two modes of negation—I have in mind a talk he gave at the European Graduate School at which you were present and asked some questions—a purely destructive autonomy (i.e., as the negativity of a subject with “nothing to lose,” cut off from all its inner-worldly attachments) is politically problematic if not arising from and coupled with a prior subtractive autonomy *qua* commitment to a subtractive cause/project. On the terrain of the topics of freedom and subtraction, I can see here a possible recapitulation of the sorts of debates at stake in your discussion of subject-versus-subjectification in the chapter on Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* (debates taken up, from the Badiouian side, primarily by Bosteels). Of course, whereas Badiou sounds as though he now thinks destruction is required only in those instances when the negating subtraction of a positive cause/project is threatened from without, your musings on subtraction (in Chapter Eight) indicate that a subtraction which doesn’t give rise to an external threat (in the form of a system’s counter-revolutionary/reactive attack) isn’t a true subtraction *qua* real alternative to the

system it withdraws from—thus, subtraction without destruction isn't, for you, actually subtraction (at least in any strong sense).

Finally, in Chapter Eight, you claim that, “an Event is necessarily missed the first time.” I wonder about this. Not only am I tempted at this point to repeat my above-outlined Schellingian critique of your non-contemporaneous models of freedom-in-time—I suspect that Badiou himself would have problems with this. Although in both *Peut-on penser la politique?* and *Being and Event* he indeed talks about a two-event temporal model of eventual dynamics (one that could be brought into proximity with the more Benjaminian facets of your reflections on revolutionary temporalities as linked to losses, defeats, the virtual, and so on), his thesis that an event is an event to the extent that it “illegally” violates the set-theoretic/ontological prohibition on a set being a member-element of itself cuts against this claim you make. To be more exact, the trans-ontological self-belonging of an event Badiou posits involves this event's own name circulating amongst its other member-elements. Hence, the event is contemporaneous with itself; it self-reflexively names itself and this gesture of auto-nomination is part of its very unfolding. It doesn't miss itself the first time. Moreover, the material of mine from *The Cadence of Change* you cite elsewhere in Chapter Eight hypothesizes an opposite/inverse possibility: an event that, so to speak, is missed the second time (i.e., a vanishing event eclipsed by its own success at the level of its ensuing consequences).

And, now to the topic of nature (my remarks will focus on your recent *Lacanian Ink* article “From *Objet a* to Subtraction” as well as Chapter Nine of *In Defense of Lost Causes*): a couple of things occurred to me apropos your diagnosis of our new situation as being one where we're omnipotent without being omniscient. First, on a lighter and more free-associational note, this reminds me of how Bush, among others, is an incarnate refutation of the vision of history as a set of trans-subjective, macro-level processes in which single individuals feature only as subsidiary moments/instances of these collective forces and trends (i.e., that vision of history formulated, in part, in critical opposition to the old “great men” narratives); one “great man” (or, rather, not-so-great empirical person) really can twist and turn the unfolding of history. Second,

in a more serious vein, this omnipotence-without-omniscience is, in my view, a danger along the lines of the Hölderlin-Heidegger line “where the danger grows, there too grows that which saves”; this would further justify the whole account of political change and the politics of minimal difference I argue for in *The Cadence of Change* (and that came up in our past exchanges as regards Badiou). Moreover, jumping ahead to the end of Chapter Nine, I suspect that this problematizes your call to abandon the traditional Marxist/Maoist conviction that “historical time is on our side.” The stability of global capitalism is the one thing that can’t be banked on with any confidence. Yes, destabilizing implosions and upheavals with no politically positive and redeeming consequences (rather than authentic revolutionary transformations) might occur. But, not necessarily—thanks to the margin of incalculability between omniscience and omnipotence, we always have a fighting chance. As regards Dupuy, are you recommending his way of proceeding strictly at the decision/policy-making level? Or, are you suggesting that we need to “abandon hope” on a more subjective/psychological level? Is the confidence you’re calling upon particular leftists to relinquish a matter of thought, of affect, or of both? Interestingly, these questions re-connect with the above-invoked issue of whether Badiouian courage is affective in any sort of experiential/phenomenological sense.

My more substantial concerns about your recent reflections on nature are similar to some of my long-standing worries regarding materialist and idealist versions of the Real. Although I am extremely sympathetic to this extension of the consequences of the big Other’s non-existence to nature—as you know, for the past few months, I too have been writing about this in terms of atheism, materialism, and the “barred Real”—I fear that certain articulations of this in Chapter Nine (especially “Nature doesn’t exist” and “life 1.0” versus “life 2.0”) are vulnerable to being interpreted as a thorough liquidation of the natural compatible with various sorts of postmodern social constructivism with idealist leanings (ditto for your discussions of the Real-Symbolic distinction in these most recent of your writings). Recall why Freudian psychoanalysis isn’t a developmental psychology in any simple, straightforward way: when Freud insists on the timelessness of the unconscious, what he means is that prior phases of development (i.e., past

periods of psychical experience and structure) are not eliminated and replaced by subsequent phases of development; instead, the effects of the passage of time on the psyche involve the cumulative sedimentation of interacting layers, rather than successive demolitions of the old by the new (this point being illustrated by him with that image of the city of Rome in which all of the layers of its historical development are preserved side-by-side, sandwiched together). As regards the (human) “nature” underpinning subjectivity—this is apart from the ecological matters you’re focused on in Chapter Nine—I’d prefer to conceive of denaturalization as, at least in some circumstances, more of a sedimentary accumulation along Freudian genetic-temporal lines, a layering of heterogeneous jumbles of often conflicting dimensions running the gamut from the relatively “natural” (for example, evolutionary tendencies rooted in archaic environmental contexts) to the relatively “non-natural” (primarily, recent socio-historical phenomena). To misappropriate some of your language here, the whole problem is that “life 2.0” never fully succeeds at erasing/replacing what retroactively becomes “life 1.0.” At least in certain cases, the latter continues to operate in parallel with the former, with antagonisms and dysfunctions arising between them. As a related aside, in Chapter Seven, you appear implicitly to reject the genetic-temporal dimension to the psychoanalytic account of subject-formation in your delineation of the distinction between “subject” and “subjectification” (insisting that there can be no becoming of the subject, that it must always-already exist and that subjectification is a gentrifying, domesticating defensive reaction to it). Doesn’t this tacitly endorse a sort of *a priori* structural/transcendental formalism that you’ve elsewhere criticized on a number of occasions (as regards Kant, a transcendentalist Lacan, Laclau, etc.)?

Moreover, taking into account all of the paradoxical, dialectical oddities involved in the model of natural denaturalization I’ve argued for elsewhere—I won’t recapitulate this here—human beings, in terms of where we stand between the natural and the non-natural, could be described as creatures of temporal torsions (i.e., parts of us remain in the time-lag/time-warp of evolutionary-genetic influences linked to long-past contexts, whereas other parts, which can and do come into conflict with these same evolutionary-genetic influences, take shape

according to faster-moving historical temporalities—moreover, the latter are themselves outgrowths of evolution). Of course, I agree with you that “Nature” *qua* balanced, harmonious One-All doesn’t exist (i.e., this is another non-existent big Other). However, nature does exist both as, one, that which immanently allows for and generates the denaturalizations involved with subjectivity, and, two, as a set of anachronistic variables, within the substance of human being, out of joint with various and sundry aspects of our current milieu. Nature is a participant in the unbalanced ensemble of conflicting elements. So, to paraphrase Lacan’s “There is no Other of the Other” (rather than his “The big Other does not exist”), I would say that there is no Nature of nature, although there is nature as fragmentary, self-sundering components caught up in the conflicts constitutive of the “human condition.” In this vein, have you read Keith E. Stanovich’s *The Robot’s Rebellion: Finding Meaning in the Age of Darwin* (University of Chicago Press, 2004)? Among other things, I have this text in mind here. I’m not sure if I’ve been sufficiently clear in this and the previous paragraph. But, I hope I’ve managed nonetheless to render comprehensible some of my reservations regarding your fascinating treatments of the topic of nature.

Let’s be in touch again soon.

Warmest regards,

Adrian