

ISSN 1751-8229  
Volume Four, Number Two

## **Psychoanalysis and Politics: Connections and Disjunctions in Žižek's Defence of Lost Causes**

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Žižek's work brings to the surface an important question bubbling away in the Left in many parts of the world for many years concerning the role of psychoanalysis in political theory, particularly revolutionary Marxist political theory which is at one and the same time designed to interpret and change the world. His *In Defence of Lost Causes* (Žižek, 2008a) (henceforth IDLC) is one of the strongest texts and test cases in this respect, for it elaborates connections between psychoanalysis and politics while embedding the political analysis in something very close, close enough perhaps to revolutionary Marxism. An attention to Žižek's use of psychoanalysis can serve as a way in to some of the political tensions in his writing; I focus on this question here in an overall approach to his book which takes it seriously as an intervention about which I have some tactical but no major strategic political reservations.

## The Causes

We need to note some key characteristics of the political narrative of IDLC as such before we turn to the place of psychoanalysis in it. The book oscillates at moments between the quasi-Maoist conceptual circuits of his comrade Alain Badiou (to whom he dedicates the book) and a quite sympathetic engagement with Trotskyism, the authentic creative impulse of the Left. Žižek's critique of social-democratic evolutionism, for example, is combined with a scathing account of 'stageism' – the claim that the struggle must pass first through a bourgeois stage of development before the overthrow of capitalism can be attempted – that is all-but Trotskyist (IDLC: 41). Cautious distance from Trotsky's (1936/1973) own critique of Stalinism, which enables Žižek's exploration of the bureaucracy's cynical promotion of 'the humanity of man' (IDLC: 211), eventually serves to underscore that critique. The complaint that 'Trotskyism often functions as a kind of politico-theoretical obstacle, preventing the radical self-critical analysis needed by the contemporary Left' (IDLC: 232) is undoubtedly true, a problem recognised and worked-through by the best of contemporary Trotskyists (e.g., Achcar, 1999; Bensaïd, 2002). It is precisely that necessarily incomplete self-critical analysis that has led Trotskyism through a practical engagement with feminist sexual politics and then new social movements culminating in the declaration of the Fourth International at its recent 16<sup>th</sup> World Congress that it is now an 'ecosocialist' organisation (Cannavó, 2010). Žižek has some smart comments on ecology as 'a new opium of the masses' (IDLC: 441), and is right to question 'the notion of nature we rely on' (IDLC: 445), especially when that notion is incorporated into an ideologically-charged image of balance in which we are enjoined to accept our place in a holistic wholesome order of things. That ideologically-charged image of balance is exactly what is at play in what is effectively a socialist-feminist analysis of 'the family myth of ideology' (IDLC: 52), a critical analysis that could then be turned back on his own apparent endorsement of the 'instance of the Two' proposed by Badiou as a binary logic to describe sexual categorisation (IDLC: 30).

The recursive application of Žižek's own critique to problematic elements of his own text is typically managed by him by startling exaggeration to make a point, jokes that introduce disturbances into narrative, and it is easy to get side-tracked into a one-sided objection to the exaggeration or joke, to avoid what is being said. Such jokes are usually at points where he is identifying problems which do deserve attention, such as the smug 'politically correct vision of sexuality, as promoted by gender studies' which bothers him

(IDLC: 30) and which would do any revolutionary wanting to bring in a class analysis. This has been very convenient to Žižek's detractors and also, doing no favours to the political impact of his work, by some of his admirers, self-styled 'Žizekians' who try to hang on every word and end up with an academic and depoliticised view of what he is saying. Notice that what is treated as a joke is itself contested territory, and it is only possible to do this kind of interpretative work from within a theoretical frame, not from the pretence of correct reading or divination of authorial intention.

One example might be the inconsistent chain of arguments that link the statement that 'Christ's erasure of our past sins means precisely that his sacrifice changes our virtual past and thus sets us free' (IDLC: 315) with the ironic comment that 'Christ is our master and simultaneously the source of our freedom' (IDLC: 432) and then the observation that the Church's message of hope 'relies on a pre-existing fear: it evokes and formulates the fear to which it then offers a solution of hope and faith' (IDLC: 437). A fervent Christian may seize on the first element in this chain of arguments, but will then have to confront the little snag phrase 'virtual past' for which the punch-line is that the Church itself 'evokes and formulates' what it presupposes. This is what we might see as a deadly serious joke, tendentious and pointed, for it takes seriously the symbolic terrain of human history marked by Christianity whether we like it or not. It is often atheists (like me) who find it difficult to get the joke because they often want to wish away that history too fast, to pretend that, as with the quite disastrous history of Marxism as a form of state power, we can deal with it by refusing to acknowledge its failures. This joke is then the setting for the quip that 'every feminist should support the Church' because it allows a space for the suspension of 'the polarity of the masculine and feminine opposites' and for 'the rise of feminine subjectivity' (IDLC: 66). (So, binary logic does also get the treatment at some point.) Quibbling about the niceties of political alliances or interventions misses Žižek's point here, which is that the Church betrays every principle that it pretends to observe, and any application of a principle will explode it from within.

Another example is the grotesque inflation of psychoanalytic diagnostic categories to explain the crimes of Stalinism – 'the underlying subjective position of the Stalinist communist [is] the position of a pervert' (IDLC: 227) – when one punch-line to this claim is that 'perversion' of someone who has 'stubbornly' as opposed to accidentally misread Žižek is 'conditioned by a weakness in his basic theoretical apparatus' that leads to a reiteration of 'old Freudo-Marxist platitudes' (IDLC: 317). As with the 'perverse' core of Christianity, reference to the 'perversity' of Marxism is a charge that becomes potent when

psychoanalytic categories become operative, that is, as Lacan points out, with the advent of capitalism; Žižek's gloss on this auto-reflexive argument – one that is homologous to analyses of the formation of Marxist critique under capitalism (Mandel, 1971) – is that 'psychoanalysis – not only as a theory, but above all as a specific intersubjective practice, as a unique form of social link – could have emerged only within capitalist society where intersubjective relations are mediated by money' (IDLC: 24).

'Perverse' is the position of the one who makes himself an instrument of the jouissance of the Other, including of the joys of psychoanalysis treated as the code of codes, as a meta-language; the sting is that this category of abuse is itself constituted within that particular code, which is something that the pervert using psychoanalysis refuses to acknowledge. There is an unravelling of appeals to categories of identity, including 'psychoanalytic' and 'Lacanian' categories, so that those who use those categories as talismanic touchstones of their argument are also unravelled. That is the frame in which it is possible for Žižek to make the outrageous claim that 'no Lacanian has ever committed a ... political blunder of being seduced by a mirage of a totalitarian revolution' (IDLC: 107). You can read this as a joke levelled against the reduction of psychoanalysis to identity – of course they would not make such a blunder, because then they would no longer be a Lacanian – or as literal specification that political commitment and intervention should be avoided at all costs so that one remains a good Lacanian (a position that academic Žižekians who just enjoy the writing and refuse to think or act with or against it are happy to go along with).

I say that the recursive applications of Žižek's argument are 'managed' by him because they cannot actually finally be resolved, and the insistence by hostile readers that they must be resolved in each and every line if not inside the covers of a book is indicative of the appeal to bourgeois individualism in academic work and even among sections of the Left. If the human being is indeed 'an ensemble of social relations' (Marx, 1845/1888), then the contradictory social forces that organise and run through those social relations in class society will also organise and run through each individual subject who speaks in them and of them. The demand that contradictions should be resolved at the level of the subject, that our author should harmonise those deep and pervasive antagonisms that make it possible for us to think and take a critical position in the first place, is undialectical; it is 'unrealistic' – it does not accord even with what we are able to know of the world – and it would wipe away attempts to speak of other possible worlds, of another possible world which does not yet exist. Furthermore, and this is where Marxist analysis

seems to shade into something more psychoanalytic, it is impossible to say everything all at once (Lacan, 1987). The demand that everything should be said is turned into a fundamental technical rule of psychoanalysis, 'free association', precisely because it is *not* possible; the points of impossibility – hesitation, blockage, diversion – draw attention to the contradictoriness of subjectivity.

Jokes are rhetorical devices to say what cannot be directly said and convey the contradictoriness of a response to a problem, even the nature of that problem as such. Points of impossibility are usually sealed over in reassuring narratives about the nature of social relations, even about what 'nature' is (which is why Žižek's critical analysis of the family myth of ideology is so relevant to Marxists); and each subject seals over points of impossibility in their own characteristic way (which is what makes it possible for us to recognise that this book is rehearsing again motifs from other books by the same author). It is actually an elementary Marxist point that there is no God's eye view of the world that would describe and explain each and every historical phenomenon, something outside historical accumulation of our experience of the world that organises it all and appears to give it meaning; as Lacan (1960: 688) puts it, we acknowledge that 'there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other'. Here, with this reference to Lacan we come to a point of impossibility, and we need to disentangle what connects politics with psychoanalysis from what divides the two domains of work.

### **Applying psychoanalysis**

It is here that we come to a crucial foundational argument that governs all of Žižek's putative 'applications' of psychoanalysis to politics: 'It is only psychoanalysis that can disclose the full contours of the shattering impact of modernity (in its two aspects: the hegemony of scientific discourse and capitalism) on the way our identity is performatively grounded in symbolic identifications, on the manner in which the symbolic order is counted on to provide the horizon that allows us to locate every experience in a meaningful totality' (IDLC: 33).

Of course, the 'two aspects' are intertwined, and each aspect demands analysis that works through without ever finally resolving the contradictoriness of it as a phenomenon. Marxism, as we have indicated, brings to the contradictions in capitalism a theoretical approach which is itself dialectical (Trotsky, 1942/1971); this is underpinned in

Žižek's work by a conceptual resource that is also configured as a necessary element of political transformation, as 'negativity', as, for example, 'a shattering experience of negativity' in which we are able to accept 'the nullity of that which we are afraid to lose' (IDLC: 433). Here we need to note a shift of emphasis in Žižek's work over the last twenty years from a concern with Lacan as a key to read Hegel applied to political phenomena configured for purposes of the analysis in terms recognisable to Marxists; the Marxism itself is there, in many of his texts, a canvas across which to sketch out a Hegelian argument, and a decoy by which some admirers are drawn into something resembling Marxism that turns out to be something a little different (Parker, 2004). The shift has been to a mode of argument that we now see in IDLC, for example, and more so in two shorter sharper polemical texts published immediately before and after it (Žižek, 2008b, 2009); now Žižek writes as a communist militant, and the questions posed by Hegelian and Lacanian vocabulary in the writing have to be rearticulated.

Psychoanalysis, meanwhile, has something quite specific to say about 'the hegemony of scientific discourse', and the dialectical character of the relationship between psychoanalysis and science then has significant bearing on the way that living in this 'symbolic order' itself has a 'shattering impact' which is repetitively sealed over with the vain attempt 'to locate every experience in a meaningful totality'. At stake here, among other things, is the place of psychoanalytic knowledge in this symbolic order as a 'meaningful totality' that configures itself as science; worse, as science that pretends to provide a 'meaningful totality', a series of 'symbolic identifications' in which 'our identity can be performatively grounded' (IDLC: 33). Žižek's careful formulation is in a line of critical psychoanalytic reflection on science as a 'worldview' which runs from Freud to Lacan.

Freud argues that psychoanalysis is incapable of creating a worldview of its own, it is 'not all-comprehensive, it is too incomplete and makes no claim to being self-contained and to the construction of systems'; furthermore, the 'science' that it might attach itself to is not even itself a worldview, but characterised by 'mainly negative traits, such as submission to the truth and rejection of illusions' (Freud, 1933: 181-182). Lacan (1965) gives this argument a further twist, noting that scientific discourse divides those subject to it, introduces a division between accumulating knowledge about them and a truth within them that always eludes scientific reason; psychoanalysis thus works as a practice which traces the contours of reason and what escapes that reason, giving space to the subject to articulate their truth, truth which operates according to a quite different logic. Scientific

knowledge is thus a precondition for there to be psychoanalysis, it constitutes the kind of human subject haunted by knowledge that is about them but also of them, but psychoanalysis cannot thereby be scientific itself, for it would then betray the space that it opens up. Thus Lacan's claim that psychoanalysis works upon 'the subject of science' and rather than offering knowledge to this subject as scientific knowledge or even as an alternative to scientific knowledge it catalyses in the space of the clinic a revolution in our *relation* to knowledge (Parker, 2010).

Here psychoanalysis needs to be embedded in a Marxist analysis. Nineteenth-century industrialisation in Europe required that the new workforce be gathered together in factories, and even if these workers or their immediate forebears had not been wrenched from the land and from an intimate temporal relationship with nature, abstracted life conditions in early capitalism induced at the very least a hearkening back to what, they sensed, was lost. Alienation is a peculiar form of separation of the human subject from their own creative activity which *constitutes* a form of rationality and irrationality, constitutes the form of knowledge which tries to make sense of what has, it seems, been lost, of what is other to it. The underlying rationality of capitalism is what psychoanalysts would characterise as being 'obsessional'. But at the very same moment alienation in capitalist society is constitutive of what we call 'fantasy', what we now characterise as fantasy, and rebellion against the obsessional rationality of capitalism, rebellion framed by the split between the rational and irrational, takes form in a way that it is all too easy for us psychoanalytic types to recognise as prototypically 'hysterical'. A domain of stereotypically-feminine 'feeling' is thus shut out of stereotypically masculine capitalism, and revolts against it, before eventually now being harvested as 'emotional labour' in a growing feminised service sector under conditions of neoliberalism (Hochschild, 1983).

Capitalism is a political-economic system which abstracts the human subject from social relations, inciting the subject to find its truth deep inside itself, to confuse privacy with individuality and to insist that contradictory collective forces can be comprehended and resolved inside the skin of the each bounded self. One of the names for the peculiar distinctive care of the self appropriate to this kind of subject is 'psychoanalysis', and we have to take psychoanalysis seriously if we are to understand how capitalism constitutes us as a certain kind of subject. Time and again in his work Žižek shows us how nostalgic longing for a time before capitalism when we imagine we were not alienated, in ourselves or in our communities, functions ideologically and he shows how that nostalgic longing then frames how we imagine a future beyond capitalism. Žižek does take psychoanalysis

very seriously of course, but the logic of his engagement with it as a conceptual system dialectically-intermeshed with capitalism is that we should also be able to work our way out of it; this is one of the lessons of the Enlightenment he draws from Kant; that what we imagine to be 'private' is 'the very communal-institutional order of one's particular identification' – our enclosed and stultifying attachment to our role in an organisation or place in a community – and against this we need to make 'public' our deliberative action as 'the transnational universality of the exercise of Reason' (IDLC: 199). It is only from within that conceptual frame – engagement with psychoanalysis is politically-historically necessary – that we can appreciate what is positive and negative about it, and appreciate that what is negative about it is what is positive about it. There are two key progressive aspects of psychoanalysis.

The first is its clinical practice, the space that it opens up in and against capitalist society for the subject to re-articulate who they think they are. The clinic is a site of practice, the practice of subjectivity through speech, which can only operate as such if there is a sharp disjunction between it and the outside world. Something happens through speech, psychoanalysis is a 'talking cure', but this can be but a preliminary to collective political practice. This is not to say that the clinic is a site for the production of revolutionaries, and the decision of each subject in analysis may just as easily lead to cynicism or stoicism. Psychoanalysis can help individuals get through bad events, facilitate their adaptation to what they know to be corrupt social relations and it can provide a source of consolation for the subject, especially when it is absorbed into a worldview. It can be progressive, but it is contradictory, it guarantees nothing.

The second progressive aspect of psychoanalysis lies in the way it circulates as a form of knowledge outside the clinic; here it disturbs what we take for granted about our identity, shows us that there is something beyond who we think we are and that a history bears us, conditions and positions us. It disturbs the identification we have with segregated conditions and positions, particularly around gender and sexuality; it insists that our attachment to who we are is powered by erotically-charged enjoyment, pleasurable, risky, dangerous, an enjoyment that Lacan calls 'jouissance'. Žižek then shows how potent this is in 'permissive' and 'tolerant' society, how it takes command in 'the very injunction to enjoy' (IDLC: 30). Psychoanalysis is already implicated in this command, in the satisfaction that it gives to those who master it and 'apply' it and in the fantasy outside the clinic that something mysterious and transgressive happens between psychoanalyst and analysand. So, no guarantees there that psychoanalysis will set us free either.



## Misapplying psychoanalysis

Fantasy about what happens inside the clinic and the attempt to blur the boundaries between clinical space and the circulation of psychoanalysis as a globalising interpretive force as if it should be a worldview signals the importance of insisting on a *disjunction* between the psychoanalysis as such and politics. Žižek does not claim, for example, that 'transference' can explain how 'a certain kind of Christianity' elevates Christ into a 'fetish' (IDLC: 300); he comes close to assimilating 'enthusiasm for a Cause' to the relation between 'analytic change' which 'can only occur through the transferential relationship to the external figure of the analyst' (IDLC: 378), but does not actually insist that political phenomena are a result of psychoanalytic processes. He takes account of the impact of psychoanalysis in politics, but keeps open a critically-important minimal difference between the two.

Psychoanalysis has taken influential shape in Western culture as a series of overlapping systems of thought that are used to interpret cultural artefacts. But we need to take a step back and think about the role of psychoanalysis in our work, to think about exactly what it is we are supposing of psychoanalysis such that it would appear to provide the key to unlock what is happening in economic or organizational life. We need to shift focus; from thinking of psychoanalysis as the 'key' which unlocks fantasy to thinking about how psychoanalysis is itself the *lock* which then has the key to open it and to confirm itself as a form of knowledge. Žižek at his best makes this shift and the key point here is that we need to make that shift in order to read him.

It is clearly the case that there are other approaches to subjectivity that are as illuminating as psychoanalysis, approaches that can be deployed alongside or instead of psychoanalysis. Let us briefly take three examples. First, there have been studies of the historical emergence of forms of emotion; a history of tears, for example, noted how men in French courts in the eighteenth century learnt to perform their sobbing as if it were blocked, welling up, expressed, as if there was prior affect and then the manifestation of it (Vincent-Buffault, 1991). Second, there is a tradition of work in the Frankfurt School, specifically in the negative dialectics that traces the formation of 'exact fantasy', which is fantasy that is formed at the intersection of subjective and objective, but (in a move more Kantian than Freudian) which aims to trace how an 'exact fantasy' translated into verbal representation maintains the truth of the object as historically constituted rather than as 'inside' the subject (Buck-Morss, 1977). Third, there have recently been studies of race

and racism in a strand of investigation that is part of what has been termed the 'turn to affect', and this work which combines elements of auto-ethnography and phenomenology is concerned with the formation of the apparent depth of affect on the folded surface of representation (Ahmed, 2004). The point here is not that either one of these options is sufficient as a fully-formed alternative to psychoanalysis, but that there are ways of thinking about subjectivity that would treat psychoanalysis itself as something to be interrogated, as the lock, rather than as the key.

It is easy to forget that the psychoanalysis we use as the root metaphor, or competing systems of root metaphors, to apply to written texts is actually concerned with *speech*, not writing. More than that, psychoanalytic phenomena are a function of speech, a particular kind of representation which is itself a function of a particular kind of social space, a particular form of organisation. There are peculiarities of clinical space; there is an asymmetry between those who speak organised around payment and disclosure, there are peculiar and distinctive contents to the speech of those who analyse and those who are analysed, and there are quite specific barriers between those who speak (such as the breaking of the line of sight when the analysand moves to the couch). Now we are in a position to grasp the implications of this as a materialist account of psychoanalysis: 'The analyst does not interpret the analysand's unconscious from the "outside"; on the contrary, the patient's unconscious is *produced* in the analytic relation.' (Voruz, 2007: 177).

The 'unconscious' is not like the contents of a pot bubbling away inside each individual's head, but it appears in quite specific and peculiar conditions, conditions of speech, and that unconscious, unconscious in a psychoanalytic meaning of term, is the site of fantasy and affect. It is not something that is dragged out from under the surface and shown to the analyst, but appears in the quite strange attempt and failure to 'free associate'. And our free association does not express unconscious contents; rather the attempt and failure to free associate, which is given a peculiar affective charge by the presence of another to whom one speaks, stumbles at certain points, runs up against certain kinds of blockage. Not all can be said, and it is what it is *not* said in speech that is what the analysis revolves around (Lacan, 1987).

This production of fantasy and affect, the closest we come to the production of fantasy and affect, is in relation to a certain kind of speech. This is what psychoanalysis is concerned with, and this is also why psychoanalytic training is one that proceeds through a crafting of speech in transmission of technique as part of an oral tradition (Bakan, 1958/1990). There is plenty of writing in psychoanalysis, the writing is one vehicle for

conceptualising psychoanalysis, but it also turns the psychoanalysis into a certain kind of discourse, scholarly perhaps, academic even, a certain kind of representation that misrepresents the practice. This is where we shift from Lacan and Žižek to ‘Lacanian’ and ‘Žizekians’ who are tempted to ‘apply’ what they read to other kinds of writing. The point here is that we cannot take psychoanalysis and ‘apply’ it outside the specific domain in which it works; we cannot do this unless we also reflect on the way it is being put to work as something quite different.

## **Two Consequences**

Let us contrast two pertinent political questions to make this point. The first is the charge that Lacan ‘Christianised’ psychoanalysis (Green, 1995). There was complicity between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Christianity which operated through composition of the apparatus of Lacan’s school after the break with the International Psychoanalytic Association, though its appeal to particular conceptual lines of work, the imagery it deployed, the formal structures that were elaborated to transmit it, and then by way of the frames retroactively mobilised by some of its supporters. These are frames then avidly promoted by Christians keen to recruit Žižek into psychoanalysis assimilated to a religious worldview (e.g., Pound, 2008). This question is one we need to address by tracing the formulation of programmes of work, allegiances of key personnel and consequences for practice. As far as the practice of psychoanalysis is concerned, it appears that there were ideological-institutional agendas aplenty in the formation of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a distinctive school, but it is in the nature of psychoanalysis that signifying content of every kind is dismantled in the clinic. Psychoanalysis in the clinic is anti-ideological, and therefore also necessarily ‘anti-Christian’; it is the place of the clinic as a privileged site of interpretation in psychoanalytic culture that is the problem rather than the supposed Christianising of the practice, which is why we need to insist on the disjunction between the clinic and the domain of politics, to insist that psychoanalysis is not ‘applied’ outside the clinic (Parker, 2010).

The second political question is the charge that Žižek is anti-Semitic (Kirsch, 2008). What should be noticed about this charge is that instead of tracing the logic of theological and political arguments that Žižek makes and, crucially, the tensions that are played off between different arguments in these two domains, there is an appeal to ‘the sheer weight and the troubling texture of imagery and example’ (Johnson, 2009: 126). That is, a quasi-

psychoanalytic mode of attack is used to divine what hidden intentions are at work, and a wilful misreading of the text of IDLC (for example) strings together de-contextualised quotes so that points where Žižek is characterising an argument so that this can then be dismantled are instead treated as evidence for what Žižek really thinks. (The 'deadly jester' and 'reckless mind' rhetorical devices in the titles of these attacks are a giveaway.) Here there is a deployment of psychoanalytic reasoning outside the clinic to unlock the hidden meanings of a written text which is then also tied to a charge that the author really does secretly know what they intended to say but are covering things up. A careful reading of the attacks on Žižek here would show that the target is actually his critique of Zionism, his critique of the anti-Semitic claim that all Jews are Zionists (a claim embedded in a logic of segregation and fixed identity that is anathema to psychoanalysis). We are reduced to abuse here, including abuse of psychoanalysis.

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