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Introduction: “Žižek’s Communism” and *In Defence of Lost Causes*

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Slavoj Žižek’s *In Defence of Lost Causes* (*IDLC*) is probably the most provocative and flamboyant gesture in political philosophy since Sartre sold the Maoist *La Cause du Peuple* on the Parisian streets in June 1968. From the guillotine on the front cover, through the rehabilitation of Heidegger’s engagement with the Nazis and Foucault’s endorsement of the Iranian Revolution, to the announcement that the work seeks a dialectical recovery of the progressive moment in Stalin’s revolutionary terror and Mao’s cultural revolution, the book is calculated to shock. Committed to a politics of universal truth that avows the idea of egalitarian communism, Žižek’s position is vehemently opposed to the ruling liberal consensus. In place of the militant defense of human rights, passionate support for an extension of democracy and the multicultural politics of the struggle for recognition, Žižek advocates what he calls “emancipatory terror” (*IDLC*, p. 164), strict egalitarian justice and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

But at the same time, Žižek insists that “the true aim of the ‘defense of lost causes’ is not to defend Stalinist terror, and so on, but to render problematic the all-too-easy liberal-democratic alternative” (*IDLC*, 6). Thus, the real target of Žižek’s provocation is what he calls the “liberal blackmail,” the idea that every emancipatory project leads ultimately to a new historical catastrophe. For the liberal, the field of the political is defined by the opposition between liberal democracy and totalitarian dictatorship (religious fundamentalism, revolutionary terror, fascist totalitarianism, etc.). Žižek, then, is urgently demanding a re-opening of the question of radical politics, confined for too long within the closure of the idea that “there is no alternative” to free markets and the liberal conception of parliamentary government. The Left itself has, Žižek contends, thoroughly internalised the idea that capitalism is the only game in town, with a resulting shrinking of political horizons to reformist tinkering with the machinery of representation. It is time for daring utopian visions of social alternatives—and the first step, Žižek proposes, in reawakening the emancipatory imagination, is to boldly confront the moralising condemnation of all revolutionary aspirations.

Žižek’s *IDLC* seems like an inflammatory gesture that aims to open the radical imagination, after its two decades long closure under the sign of the “prohibition on thinking” about revolutionary alternatives. Certainly, the work has either been denounced as an irresponsible provocation or saluted as a timely catalyst to renewed utopian speculation. Žižek himself, however, insists that the problem is not really a lack of abstract ideas, but rather a “crisis of determinate negation,” that is, a lack of concrete proposals flowing from an analysis of the crisis tendencies of the world system today. In this edition of *IJZS*, the contributors investigate Žižek’s claim that his intervention is not a flamboyant posture masking the lack of a definite programme, but a serious contribution to the renewal of the emancipatory project of “egalitarian communism”.

In this Introduction—before we of course describe the individual contributions which follow—we want to articulate some of Žižek’s assumptions and to draw out some of his implied positions, in order to frame the contributions to this issue. First of all, some of the things that Žižek is against.

Žižek regards the world economic system as an order of structural violence that perpetuates material inequality between persons, especially across the developed/developing world divide. Žižek considers parliamentary politics to be a matter of management of the economic system through policy directions applied to the social world, particularly through manipulation of social solidarity. Žižek's critique of liberal political ideology flows from these considerations, for he regards liberalism as a motivated distortion of the material interests at stake in economic inequality and political apathy. Finally, Žižek thinks of the cultural products of the entertainment industries as fantasy outlets for the anxieties generated by radically alienated social and political worlds. In light of these problems, Žižek believes that the reformist forces of social democracy and American liberalism are morally irresponsible contributors to the underlying situation of economic inequality and political disenfranchisement. Žižek also regards the radical intellectual left as lacking the moral courage to challenge the hegemony of liberalism and therefore as acting effectively as a catalyst within reformism rather than an independent force.

Next, there are the things that Žižek is discernibly for. In *IDLC*, Žižek maintains that there is a progressive moment in the revolutionary terror of the French Revolution, in Stalin's forced collectivizations, and in Mao's Cultural Revolution. Žižek seems to approve the application of force, or "terror", in support of a policy of egalitarian justice, and he finds in forced collectivization a radical step forward on the path of industrialization. He locates in the popular impetus unleashed by the Cultural Revolution the embryonic form of a utopian political alternative. Žižek's program of egalitarian communism is to be actualized by a group dictatorship that will represent the interests of the radically disenfranchised worldwide and will implement policies aiming at material equality in the context of ecological sustainability.

Žižek's *IDLC* is, avowedly, about a leap of political faith. It is fully aware of its own radical positioning in today's political conjuncture. But it does not just advocate this leap: it *is* this leap, and it *enacts* the identification necessary for communist re-education. In other words, it is interpellatory discourse. Its deepest aim is to persuade, even perhaps to recruit a new generation of intellectuals to exhibit some of the militant *engagement* of a more committed time—although, it has to be said,

Žižek's characteristic stylistics make it difficult to separate provocation from genuine exhortation.

The articles collected in this special edition of *IJZS* represent a series of responses to *IDLC*, from leading authorities on Žižek's work from the past two decades. Our opening contribution is the text of a letter written to Žižek shortly after reading the manuscript of *IDLC* by Adrian Johnston. Johnston's response to *IDLC* positions his reception of the fundamental arguments of the book within an ongoing debate about the nature and status of the Event in Žižek's and Alain Badiou's works. Is it possible, Johnston asks, to conceptualise an Event that, rather than misfiring, might itself represent the abyss of freedom that is the Lacanian-Žižekian subject—and succeed. Johnston further probes Žižek's understanding of the link between the Lacanian Real and nature, in the context of Žižek's turn to ecology and his wider intervention in the reception of German idealism. Can Žižek defensibly extend the analysis of the non-existence of the symbolic Other, Johnston queries, to an ontology of nature which would resist the tendency of some ecological thought to totalizing, harmonistic conceptions of the environment.

Glyn Daly's "Causes for Concern: On the Politics of Žižek's Loving Terror" represents a close, sympathetic reading of *IDLC* as an intervention in wider debates in post-Marxist thinking on the Left. Daly begins from the multiply ambiguous figure of Rasputin in the history of Russian revolutionary politics, whose ambiguous status in this history he associates with the challenge posed by *IDLC* to contemporary Leftism: "viewed from a different angle," as Daly comments, "Rasputin can be seen as a figure that opened up an alternative kind of space in which it became possible to think the impossible." Today, Daly argues, the subversive programs of post-Marxism are all too easily recuperated into the working of global Capital with its culture of perverse permissiveness, together with its new-found adaptability in the face of the looming ecological crises. There is an urgent need to subvert subversion in this conjuncture, Daly proposes. It is for this reason, that Žižek's extremely provocative re-engagement with the legacy of emancipatory terror in the triumvirate of Robespierre, Stalin, and Mao opens up a necessary space for re-conceptualising counter-hegemonic political strategies.

Robert Sinnerbrink's "Goodbye Lenin? Žižek on neoliberal Ideology and Post-Marxist Politics" represents a typically lucid and measured reading of *IDLC*, which takes as its point of departure a sympathetic interpretation of Žižek's resistance to what he calls the "liberal blackmail", which operates under the sign of the limiting opposition: liberal democracy or else fundamentalist terror. Positioning Žižek's interventions within the post-Marxist speculative Left, Sinnerbrink examines what he calls a "stubbornly Hegelian" aspect in Žižek's political thought. Žižek, Sinnerbrink demonstrates, thinks from within a dialectical framework where the key to political strategy is the location of point of immanent of symptomatic torsion within the present sociopolitical totality: namely, global capitalism. Sinnerbrink questions the relation between what he calls: "the Hegelian impulse towards ideology critique and the Marxist impulse towards revolutionary politics". He points to a tension between the *praxis* of a new imputed proletariat, and the Hegelian motif of the gradual undermining of prevailing forms of *Geist*.

Ian Parker's short, but incisive intervention, "Psychoanalysis and Politics: Connections and Disjunctions in Žižek's *Defence of Lost Causes*", represents a more critical assessment of *IDLC* and its place in wider Left politics. One interesting feature of the piece is Parker's analysis of Žižek's style, taking several examples from *IDLC* and subjecting their work to close scrutiny. Parker's larger argument positions Žižek within a shift on the revolutionary Left, including neo-Trotskyist groups, within which Žižek's revolutionary turn remains multiply ambivalent. Arguing that "psychoanalysis needs to be embedded within Marxist analysis", Parker questions the unmediated application of psychoanalytic categories to the political-economic system of capital. Far from an anti-psychoanalytic gesture, Parker adduces Freud's own authority to propose "that psychoanalysis is incapable of creating a world-view of its own," implying in this, that Žižek's recent work substitutes psychoanalysis for an empirically rich interdisciplinary social theory or program for the Left. At the same time, he points to the vulgar psychoanalytic reasoning underlying many attacks on Žižek's revolutionary work, singling out the claim that Žižek is anti-Semitic (made by Adam Kirsch amongst others) for particular notice.

Matthew Sharpe's article, "Then We Shall Fight Them in the Shadows! Seven Paratactic Views, on Žižek's Style," like Parker's takes up the issue of Žižek's style.

Provocatively, and in a somewhat playful spirit, Sharpe reads Žižek ‘with’ Xenophon, with passing nods to the neo-conservative philosopher Leo Strauss. Sharpe’s wager is that to soften the impact of Žižek’s most radical claims in *IDLC* is paradoxically to betray the radical spirit of Žižek’s intervention. “In this spirit—and in what one is tempted to call in Hegelese a ‘coincidence of the opposites’—“, Sharpe prods, “wouldn’t the thing to do here be instead to suppose that Žižek *demand*s a hostile, sceptical, even combative reception, one that takes his most extreme provocations as the most serious, and the ‘excessively and compulsively ‘witty’ texture’ of his writings as exoteric only, “cruel traps” set for the ‘democracy-to-come’, *café*-lite-subversive crowd?” In this vein, indeed, Sharpe’s piece asks whether Žižek ought not to be positioned in a very ancient anti-democratic philosophical tradition, one of whose defining marks is a sympathy for the barracks society of ancient Sparta over Periclean Athens.

Yannis Stavrakakis’ piece, “On Acts, Pure and Impure”, continues Stavrakakis’ extended debate with Žižek concerning the latter’s notion of the Act, as the culminating moment of political strategy, and Žižek’s reading of (Lacan on) Antigone as a bearer of pure desire. Arguing “the constitutive imperfection and impurity of the act”, Stavrakakis proposes that Žižek’s conception of the Act—far from representing a solution to the dilemmas of the radical Left—is markedly apolitical. The Žižekian Act as Stavrakakis construes it is “not only ultimately anti-political but also ultimately impossible, based on an illusion.” This illusion, as the title indicates, is the illusion of a kind of revolution purity which Stavrakakis provocatively sees as more Gnostic than Marxist-Leninist. Self-reflexively examining the impurity of the Act, by way of a series of examples, Stavrakakis outlines the desirability and the possibility of a series of cultural (small ‘a’) acts. These acts would be consonant with the species of radical democratic politics he continues to defend, despite Žižek’s strong critique of his work in *IDLC* and elsewhere.

Geoff Boucher’s piece, the final contribution, is entitled “An Inversion of Radical Democracy: The Republic of Virtue in Žižek’s Revolutionary Politics”. In some ways the most critical of the pieces, Boucher questions whether Žižek’s revolutionary politics are not in fact merely an inversion of his own, earlier post-Marxist moment.

Drawing attention to the opposition between the Marxian critique of political economy, and the Jacobin politics of contemporary Francophile theory, Boucher argues that Žižek's own neglect of the former sees him in IDLC pushing headlong into the latter. "The combination," Boucher argues, "of scepticism towards the normative foundations of political community and rejection of participatory democracy is indeed a Jacobin position, but it is really only an inversion of radical democracy". Pointing out that the lack of a class-based understanding of political economy is the root of Robespierre's conversion of the democratic revolution into the bourgeois dictatorship of the Jacobin Party, Boucher asks whether Žižek's interpretation of the failure of Stalinism and Maoism does not betray similar limitations.