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This is it?

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The following is based upon a Preface I had written to a Žižek Reader I compiled in Turkish, although much expanded at the suggestion of IJŽS editor, Paul A. Taylor. The book was called *The Fragile Contact*, a name suggested by Žižek himself, and although Žižek was quite well-known in Turkey by then, it was supposed to be an introduction to Žižek, bringing together (at least some of) his multi-faceted, expansive and diffused fields of interest. Faced with the impossible task of having to introduce such a colossal field in a scant few pages, I resorted to paraphrasing Žižek himself, trying to use his own anecdotes and turn of phrase to introduce himself, a not-too-clever publisher's trick. The outcome was ambiguous: I was afraid Žižek would be annoyed at being called an obsessional neurotic, and at the same time be embarrassed at being designated as the "object of desire" of the radical left for twenty or so years, so I never translated it for him; this is the first time he'll see it.

Was I being serious? Yes, since now I repeat the whole thing for a wider international audience in an expanded version. I think Žižek is 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 he is not the first or only one to try his hand at this, he is 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 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 Žižek is exactly this: to appreciate his shortcomings, and benefit from them. In my opinion,

therefore, the main mission of IJZS should be, not to praise him or repeat him (for he does not need any of this), but to pinpoint the instances *he failed to go too far*, and try to complete the work he constantly leaves behind, knowing all the time, of course, such completion will never be possible.

“It” as the Obscure Object of Desire

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek recounts the story of a young Yugoslav trying to dodge military service. The poor guy decides to fake insanity in order to obtain a discharge, and he specifically plays the part of an obsessional neurotic, picking up every bit and piece of paper he can lay his hand on, and discarding it with a “This is not it!” In the end, the military medical board examines him, and since he continues his act during the examination, they decide that he is indeed insane, and hand him his discharge papers, at which time the guy stops and says, “This is it!” Now what could be the moral of this story (except for the fact that this trick would never have worked in my home country, Turkey)?

This anecdote, according to Žižek, represents a case where the object-cause of desire is solidified as a real object; that is, the desire for liberation, for freedom from compulsory military service, is solidified as a set of papers, not only as signifiers but also as instruments of such liberation. The obsessive expression of desire, in this case, creates its own object, which means that the object *per se* did not exist in the beginning when the desire for it came into being.

In an age (of postmodernity?) totally obsessed with “the subject”, Žižek’s insistence on *the object* may seem a little bit odd; but beginning with his first English-language book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he seems to be equally obsessed with it, and with good cause at that. The grammatical and ideological insistence on *the subject* presupposes the existence, at least the *possibility*, of free-willed actors, a rehash of the constitutive elements of a free-market economy preached by the classical political economists. What Marx did in his critique of political economy was to problematize this presupposition: If we all are free actors, subjects in a free market, what is our grammatical object? In one word, it is *money*, the “commodity of commodities”, the only absolute commodity that can stand in for any other. Marx tells us in his critique that money acquires this role only because it is an abstraction, without any concrete existence, an exchange-value without a use-value of its own (other than being the absolute exchange-value). Money is the “sublime object of political economy”, the object which creates no satisfaction but only the insatiable need for more of itself. You may have enough food, enough clothes, enough cars or enough shelter, but never enough money. Money is indeed the prototype of Lacan’s “object of desire”, the elusive object which can never be had, because it is not there. The need for other

commodities, other use values, evaporates (as opposed to “solidifies”) as the desire for money.

What Žižek did was, to take this concept of money and extend it beyond the limits of the critique of political economy, to every corner of our everyday lives. The object of desire is a “thing” that will supposedly satisfy the need for completion arising from our primordial lack, a lack which arises from having been born on the one hand, and a lack in the symbolic order on the other. Of course such a thing does not actually exist, but the desire for it does. This impossible situation (the insatiable desire for a non-existent thing), finds its solution in money in political economy (money as a thing which is not a thing), and in the phallus in general (the phallus as a signifier without a signified). The affinity between money and the phallus (which should be the main argument in creating a crossover between Marxism and psychoanalysis) can be best seen, if we permit ourselves to indulge in a little playfulness. Marx’s short piece “The Power of Money”, from his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, loses almost nothing of its value and usefulness if we substitute “the phallus” for “money” throughout - (see *The Power of [the Phallus]* - web link on "about the author page").

In political economy and sexuality, in our eating and drinking habits and politics in general, in our everyday lives and our psychoses, we are constantly after what Žižek’s young Yugoslav has “found”. The punchline “This is it!”, however, as in every good joke, is ambiguous: What do the military medical board members do after they hear it? Take the papers away from him and tear them to pieces, probably, having got wise to the deception. And, on the other hand, doesn’t our young man, who is clever enough to devise such a trick, know that the moment he utters those words, the disguise is over? He most probably does, so the moment he achieves his “object of desire”, is the moment he gives it away. The object, which had solidified for one fleeting moment, is as unreachable for the young man as ever, and this will be *his own doing* (or undoing, whichever way you like it).

“This is not it!” on a Global Scale

We can also read Žižek’s anecdote (quite independent of the storyteller’s intention) as a metaphor for the obsessive search of the radical and/or revolutionary left, beginning from the early 80s when the symbolic order of the left/right polarity of the world was subverted. Although the “Left” had never agreed on the character of the Soviet Union and the “Eastern Bloc”, the “other end” of the ideological seesaw before 1980 was not as empty as it is today. Call it socialist, “real” socialist, degenerated workers’ state or simply state capitalist, there was a Big Other at the other end of the spectrum, a Name-of-the-Father which the Left could identify with or rebel against, take as a model or learn from its mistakes. The

positionings within the left were always indexed to this Big Other; whether pro or con, everybody defined themselves according to the Soviet Union. After the early 80s the left started to lose this anchor. Of course there was a lot of criticism directed towards this state of affairs, this Soviet Union-indexed positioning even before the 80s, especially within the 68 movement and within (some) Trotskyist and anarchist/libertarian Marxist movements before that. But even the most fervent critics of the Soviet Union and this “Soviet-oriented” positioning, were caught with their pants down when the 90s came. They found themselves in a gray and shapeless void, both disintegrating and inchoate, undefined, without positions.

With the 90s, the pattern on the surface of the couch we were sitting on changed radically. The thumbtacks fixing the signifiers to the signified, Lacan’s *points de capiton*, snapped loose; the couch lost its ordered, patterned shape and became an amorphous, cotton-filled sack. We tried to create new patterns with the thumbtacks that were left behind, all in vain; for as we were trying to place the second one, the first was coming loose. The cornerstones that made up meaning were dislocated for good. Let alone the “absolute truths” that were so much in fashion throughout the 20th century, even the historical and transitory meanings had become evasive, slippery. The left started to throw away each and every incomplete attempt at explanation and meaning with a cry of “This is not it!” It rapidly became an obsession: Althusser? “This is not it!” Poulantzas? “This is not it!” Frankfurt School? “This is not it!” Adorno? “This is not it!” Benjamin? “This is not it!” Back to Anarchism? “This is not it!” Back to Leninism? “This is not it!” Left-wing liberalism? “This is not it!” Ecologism? “This is not it!” Feminism? “This is not it!” Heidegger? “This is not it!” Hermeneutics? “This is not it!” New Age mysticism? “This is not it!” We can add to this list *ad nauseam*. Of course the main problem was not only the left’s (pretension of) obsessional neurosis. The problem was that we were looking for a complete and integral object of desire where none existed. To be fair, some intended objects during this search actually tried to convey the message “I am not it!” For instance, Althusser and Poulantzas clearly demonstrated this by escaping to unreason and suicide respectively, which, by the way, for this exact reason we can say that they were closest to the searched-for non-existent object, and, like Lot’s wife turning back and looking at the havoc over Sodom, caught a glimpse of the Real, which was too much for them (and would have been for any of us).

Will there be no moment, then, for the Left to be able to say “This is it!”? If we take Wallerstein’s all too reasonable prediction seriously, the next couple of decades will witness the “end of the world as we know it”, not only of capitalism as a world-system, but also of the systems of knowing/understanding we have developed so far. Again, according to Wallerstein, it is simple foolish optimism to believe that this “end” will automatically mean a predetermined fresh start. Quite on the contrary, what will determine the scope and direction of any possible new beginning is what we are going to do until and during this end. It is high

time, therefore, for the left to stop this pretension of obsessional neurosis, and grab a piece of paper (however historical, transient, incomplete and self-contradictory) to declare “This is it!” And of course, according to Žižek’s interpretation of the anecdote, the moment it declares this, will be the moment it actually finds it. The reverse, however, is not true: if it actually waits to find it in order to say “This is it!” it will never find it, because the searched-for object does not exist, or, the searched-for can only exist in the act of finding.

With this, we can now claim that Slavoj Žižek is one of the most prominent candidates of “This is it!”

Is Žižek “it”?

Marxists have a habit of defining the origins of Marxism as a triune structure, as a synthesis of British political economy, German philosophy and French utopian socialism. Boiled down to names, we’ll get Adam Smith-Ricardo, Hegel-Feuerbach and Saint-Simon-Fourier-Proudhon. Marx was not a follower of any of them, but rather constructed his own theory upon a series of readings of each one of the three “with” the others. So he read “Hegel with Feuerbach (placing a materialist core within the Hegelian “system”); “Proudhon with Adam Smith” (subverting the utopian illusions with a critique of political economy) and “Adam Smith with Hegel” (re-structuring the categories of political economy with dialectical reasoning).

Almost exactly the same thing happens with Žižek: He too starts with a triune structure (actually two of them); German idealist philosophy, psychoanalysis and a critical reading of popular culture; again boiled down to names, these give us the “Žižekian Holy Trinity”, Hegel, Lacan and Hitchcock. He reads “Hegel with Lacan” and “Lacan with Hitchcock”. He also uses another triune, namely, Hegel, Lacan and Marx (later Lenin), and reads (or rather re-reads) “Marx with Hegel” and “Lacan with Marx”, and later, “Lenin with Lacan”. This intellectual, and at the same time practical-revolutionary, strategy of reading “x with y” (credited to Lacan’s “Kant with Sade”, but actually the trademark of *any* kind of revolutionary thinking), becomes the basis of Žižek’s uncanny ability to subvert almost anything that comes his way, but at the same time it is accountable for the apparent chaos in his fields of interest, his political ambiguity (does he *really* praise Stalin?) and laxity (sometimes approaching sloppiness) of style. He never stays for long in any of the fields or disciplines he briefly visits; he conducts his investigations like a series of forays into *terra* (supposedly *cognita*, and leaves behind an upturned land, chaotic but ripe for resowing. His search becomes the prototype and an excessive model of the obsessive search of the post-80s Left: His each and every article or book, notwithstanding the assertiveness of his style and

the apparent certainty of his conclusions, is a declaration of “This is not it!” once it is finished.

This is why Žižek is one of the rare thinkers that could be named “it” by the contemporary revolutionary Left, because he is the perfect instance of their search, the most excessive representative of both their present ambiguity and their intended radicalism. And because he constructs his field of (re)search as a series of excesses, from Descartes to Balibar, from Hegel to Schelling, from Lacan to Stalin, from classical tragedy to modern popular cinema and science-fiction, he stands as the already-embodied metaphor for the “finally found” object of desire, the object-cause actualized by the search for its very self. Without a doubt, this “finally found object of desire” is a null set, an empty position, a position whose very existence is dependent on its emptiness. The reason Žižek can (albeit temporarily) seem to fill this position, lies in his excessiveness, his never being at the same place for long, combining this and that, reading this with that, and then, with a tip of the hat, moving onto a completely different subject altogether. And the one condition for him to continue to fill this empty space is for him to go on with his obsessive, excessive search. If at one point in time he cries out, “This is it!”, this “it” will not be what we were looking for all that time; on the contrary, by this very act of finding, Žižek himself will cease to be “it”.

“It” as *Le sujet supposé savoir*

Maybe at this point we can start thinking *à la* Žižek and try to explore this “it” a little bit further. What is this “it” which is “it”, but also no longer “it” once it ascribes itself the faculty of being “it”? Psychoanalytically, it is definitely the analyst, *le sujet supposé savoir*, whom we adore and despise, blame for all our past misgivings and misfortunes but also build all our hopes upon. We think (we hope) that they know, if nothing else, ourselves better than ourselves. This supposition, according to Lacan, is the basic moving force behind all analysis: if we fail to do so, analysis will not work. We have to suppose that our analyst sees through our lies, our clumsy efforts at cover-up; this is the only way we are able to keep on lying. Because, if we suppose that they are taken in by our lies, why go on paying them a small fortune? Our friends, parents, lovers, husbands and/or wives do it for free! There must be at least one person we cannot deceive, and that person had better be somebody we don’t know *at all*, somebody who is a complete outsider, who has no effect on the rest of our lives, other than the 50-minute hour we spend with them (and dearly pay for) in the séance room. We have to suppose that they *know*, they can read between our lines, see things we cannot due to our proximity to ourselves, so that our conscious and/or unconscious deceptions might become transparent for ourselves; so that we will have an external memory not subject to the whims of our repressive mechanisms.

The thing with the *sujet supposé savoir* is that, that subject must know that they do not know. This is the only way the analytical relation has any chance to work. The analyst-analysand relationship is basically one of disagreement: We must suppose they know and they must know they don't. This disagreement is the moving force behind all analysis. The problem arises when the analyst starts to share the supposition of the analysand and becomes vain (one of the seven deadly sins of psychoanalysis as well as Christianity); there is no room for a *sujet qui supposé qu'il sait* in analysis. As a matter of fact, the entire process of psychoanalysis is a series of disillusionments experienced by the analysand with the gradual realization that their analyst does not know. As the insight of the analysand grows, their self-knowledge increases, the supposition that the analyst is an omniscient subject begins to fade. By the time a successful analysis is terminated, the analyst must have been demoted, not to the status of a total ignoramus, but at least to an equal footing with the analysand. As can easily be seen, the main threat to a successful therapy comes not from the analysand's refusal to suppose that the analyst knows (in which case they will eventually abandon analysis and seek help elsewhere), but from the analyst's failure to accept their lack of knowledge. It is always easier to assume a non-existent surplus than to accept an actual lack. Most unsuccessful, unduly protracted or aborted psychoanalytic therapies have failed due to the inability of the analyst to accept that they are not omniscient.

This is a fruitful analogy, but we know that Žižek would not have stopped there. He would have gone on speculating, stretching the analogy and have arrived at a seemingly unrelated conclusion. Žižek may be an "it" for the confused and disoriented radical Left for the time being, but is one person enough? Shouldn't we be looking for something more organized, even institutionalized (oops, unintended pun!)? If we stretch Lacan's *le sujet supposé savoir* a little bit, we will find that it also applies to radical political subjects, but this time with a vengeance: the Jacobins in the French Revolution and the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution were subjects who were supposed to know, and the moment they started to share this supposition with their followers, they turned into conservatives, into radical fundamentalists, so to speak. People follow, vote for, or actually fight for a political party, when they believe that that party *knows*. The method to provoke this supposition differs: It may be anything ranging from successful propaganda to "telling the truth", from demagoguery to mass-psychological manipulation, from meticulous public relations to a science-fictional mind-control. It does not matter. The real danger, however, lies in the moment that party starts to believe that it actually knows. Of course the way to avoid this transformation, from "the subject who is supposed to know" to "the subject who supposes it knows", is not merely good intentions, or an oath to stay ambiguous. Any radical political

entity must have built-in self-ambiguating mechanisms, the least of which should be the right of minority opinions to survive and speak out within and from within this entity.

At this point we can make a grassroots turn and ask ourselves why Marx and Engels's definition of the communists vis-à-vis the proletariat shouldn't apply in this case, *mutatis mutandis*, of course, with the necessary adjustments made, rescuing the term "communist" from its negative connotations stuck onto it during the Bolshevik period of seventy years, and problematizing and redefining the term "proletariat" in order to save it from its 19th century delimitations and later mystifications in which it came to mean solely "industrial proletariat" and "the producers of the *material* means of subsistence":

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*)

Marx and Engels never define the communists as vanguards, or even as unique subjects. They are no different from other working class parties, they do not even have separate principles apart from these parties. They only act as the idea of the universality of the working class movement (reminding the local and national parts of the transnational whole all the time), and as a memory mechanism, always remembering and reminding the others of the past struggles, victories and defeats. The communists can never be anything but transnational political subjects, serving as the chronotopic memory of the working class as a whole. Žižek's characterization of the task of building transnational political subjects as "the only serious question today" in his article on the NATO bombing of Belgrade, coincides with Marx and Engels' definition of the communists vis-à-vis the proletariat to a great extent:

So the lesson is that the alternative between the New World Order and the neoracist nationalists opposing it is a false one: these are the two sides of the same coin — the New World Order itself breeds monstrosities that it fights. Which is why the protests against bombing from the reformed Communist parties all around Europe, inclusive of PDS, are totally misdirected: these false protesters against the NATO bombardment of Serbia are like the caricatured pseudo-Leftists who oppose the trial against a drug dealer, claiming that his crime is the result of social pathology of the capitalist system. The way to fight the capitalist New World Order is not by supporting local proto-Fascist resistances to it, but to focus on the only serious question today: how to build *transnational* political movements and institutions strong enough to seriously constraint the unlimited rule of the capital, and to render visible and politically relevant the fact that the local fundamentalist resistances against the New World Order, from Milosevic

to le Pen and the extreme Right in Europe, are part of it? (Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Double Blackmail")

Žižek's transnational political movements, who are supposed to be the main resistance against "the double blackmail" of global capitalism, must be ambiguous subjects, reminding the movement in Serbia that Milosevic is actually a part of global capitalist structure he pretends to be fighting against, and the movements in, say, NATO countries that their own states are the ones that create and re-create the likes of Milosevic. Years after Žižek wrote this article, we can now add to this list Taliban, El-Qaeda and Saddam, with exactly the same consequences.

As we can see, it is entirely possible in the Žižekian universe, to start from a young man's clever trick to dodge military service and end up in the construction of a transnational/revolutionary political subject. But again, we shouldn't be too involved in our own cleverness and start supposing we have solved the mystery of the cosmos (or of capitalism, of revolution, or even of a single psyche). We haven't. We have only started to see ways to construct ourselves as radical subjects, without sacrificing our ambiguity. Although the present popular presentation of Slavoj Žižek leans heavily on his narcissistic side, his narcissism is never so pathological that he forgets to consistently doubt his own word, consistently problematize his own theoretical/ethical framework. He is one of the ones who manage to remain ambiguous without sacrificing his radicalism.

What we can hope for today is for Žižek never to find what he is looking for, because as long as he goes on searching, we will continue finding.