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## **Socialism reconsidered: Remarks on Žižek's *Repeating Lenin***

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One of the paradoxes of contemporary times is that although society is dominated by a mood of conformism, by economic wealth and prosperity as well as cultural diversity, there are nevertheless many critical voices which utterly emphasize capitalism's rogue nature. Although liberalization of the world market, proclaimed community solidarity and global informational system have altogether often been seen as one of capitalism's major advantages, there are far more critical appraisals for replacing it with another social system, supposedly more humane, more beneficial and egalitarian. In that blurry environment socialism has become one of the magic words, one of the phrases that stand for a better world in similar way it happened more than one century ago. Obviously, the word (and the world, by the same token) is not the same: it lost its meaning through different political, social and mental transitions and translations, above all losing its performative power. Today, no one is frightened that his or her life will ultimately be changed by some revolutionary event that claims to defeat capitalism, since the Cold War is over and the winner has obviously never been stronger. Let us remember what happened twenty years ago. During the Cold War, intellectual supporters of capitalism tried to consolidate their position through defining themselves against communism. The West was able to strengthen its credibility by contrasting its way of life with the economic insufficiencies and the oppressive character of the Soviet communist regime. But their only strong argument was the claim of economic

efficiency. Socialism was discredited on both sides and it has not been even taken seriously from the time of its major ideological defeat after the fall of Berlin Wall.

So, the main question is wherein lays the claim to revitalize socialism today, who are its loudest intellectual supporters in the recent philosophical, sociological and/or political debate? I will concentrate my presentation mostly on one author, on one of the most interesting critical voices, namely on Slavoj Žižek's book *Repeating Lenin* in which he develops stubbornly the provocative idea of a return to socialism in order to oppose liberal-democratic hegemony. What is actually provocative in his idea of return to Lenin is to use this historical figure to reinvent the revolutionary project in the present conditions of global capitalism, i.e. to articulate ways of opposing capitalism in completely different manner than most of the leftist scholars did or are still doing. Žižek convincingly argues that our contemporary socio-political situation is marked by the end of social dreams: we are witnessing dystopia, breakdown of all ideals of social justice and fairness, truly classless society and economic welfare. As we all know, in previous times radical opponents of capitalism denounced the system precisely because it failed to provide people with the material possessions which they required for a decent life. Today's anti-capitalists claim quite opposite: we have *too many* possessions and we are thrived by the "mindless consumerism" that rules the market. In other words, it is paradoxically those who call themselves left wing intellectuals or socialists who are denouncing the idea of progress, expressing some sort of conservative reaction to progress which is originally (as utopia itself) a modernistic as well as socialist invention.

What finally happened is that over time conservative and liberal political currents and supporters thrived because more and more people became repelled by virtually every aspect of communist life embedded in Soviet Union or any other country in the Eastern block. The ultimate consequence is that the Cold War did not do much to revitalize the right or centre parties but it did much to *undermine the left*. By the end of the 80's many of the left ideas and initiatives in Western Europe associated with the socialism – planned economy, egalitarian social approach, the notion of Welfare State – were totally discredited. That environment – the apparent failures of both communism in Eastern Europe and social-democratic state in the West – have marked a severe blow to the ideas traditionally associated with left parties or leftist movement and made them socially irrelevant. In his recent book *Politics of Fear*, Frank Furedi gives an excellent overview on some issues such as decline of the leftist thought in contemporary world in which "left" and "right" lost their meaning and become completely politically and ideologically obsolete. In his view, "the cumulative impact of the experience of the past seven or eighth decades is that it has forced

the right to give up on the Past and the left to abandon the hope that it has invested in the Future". Therefore, society's estrangement from its past or future led to a situation where both traditions and hopes have little meaning for everyday life, so we are living in a world focused only on present. The left has naturally always been associated with change and progress, however now leftist thinkers abandoned future prospects and gave up the idea present needs to be improved, reformed and transformed. All those contemporary anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements are, as Furedi argues, uncomfortable with the ideals that have historically defined the future-oriented left, or are self-consciously hostile to them. This is the route of the "culture of fear", as Furedi names it, which denotes the left's alienation from the process of change and skepticism regarding the desirability of change. Ideas of progress or change (not to mention revolution) are no more relevant in the intellectual or scholarly discussion.

This interplay is accurately described in Susan Buck-Morris's book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (notion of dreamworld was borrowed from Benjamin) where she argues mass utopia was one of the major incentives of industrial modernization both in socialism and capitalism. Today, political rhetoric is no longer structured by the principle of the utopian myth (such as process of modernization), since the myth led to catastrophic consequences. Facing the end of social dreams for Žižek means we have to invent a new project, a new response to the diminished utopian imagery, so he uses Lenin, he tries to reactualise him beyond "nostalgic idolatry": the main function is not to return to Lenin in the nostalgic sense of "good old revolutionary times" or to use old programs to apply him to the new conditions, but primarily to repeat his gesture, to return deeply to his aims, to claim a new utopia of the possible, to retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation. He does not see him as a symbol of ancient, glorious times of socialism one century ago, as a symbol of nostalgic utopia, but rather as Lenin-in-becoming, the one who can overpass the fundamentally catastrophic constellation and to reinvent the discourse and strategies of political struggle. Herein we can find the true originality of this concept: it goes beyond the usual definitions, the usual emancipatory politics, beyond common discourse that focuses on strategies of either passive theoretical resistance or active anti-globalist riots. In other words, the struggle against the hegemonic neo-liberal model of globalization is possible only under the condition of reinventing a revolutionary project that abandons distinction between left and right, between both false promises of the new utopias and ideologically embedded discourse on human rights and political correctness as symbols of liberal fundamentalism. In that sense, this book resembles clear critical response to Hard

and Negri's *Empire* as an attempt to formulate a different notion of political sphere in which they proposed new models of resistance.

What are the main standpoints of Žižek's argumentation? Let us recall some major arguments throughout the history of socialist thought. The classical Marxist definition of capitalism as a system of commodity production was often equated with economic activity in general, classifying goods according to their use value and exchange value, hence focusing dominantly on the economic issues. It is worth noticing that most definitions of both socialism and capitalism begin with the economic rather than socio-cultural, anthropological, political or ideological differences. For instance, capitalism generally refers to an economic system in which the means of production are privately owned and in which distribution, production and pricing of goods and services are determined in a free market, whilst socialism is equated with the broad array of doctrines that envisage a socio-economic system in which property and the distribution of wealth are subject to social and state control. The Marxian notion of the market is one in which it undermines the moral values that are its own essential underpinnings, at the same time representing capitalism as something that carries within itself the seed of its own destruction together with the classical image from Marx that money is threatening and corrupting the society, being "an acid attacking the very fabric of society", has been usually seen as the firmest critique of capitalism, despite a certain romantic nostalgia. The classical image from Marx - capitalism is dangerous because it undermines all stable traditional forms of human interaction - is however more socially relevant in recent times. For instance, one may find very similar readings in contemporary debate regarding that issue: suffice it to mention Derrida for whom capitalism means difference because it always postpones its goals and is never finished, always borrowing from the future, or Kojin Karatani who repeats the Marxist notion that capitalism perpetually destroys itself from the very beginning.

Žižek goes beyond those definitions. For him, the major question is the possibility of radical anti-capitalism, the idea of democracy-to-come which he so conveniently borrowed from the French philosophers, and also the question could there be a proper response to the "administered world" (*verwaltete Welt*). Žižek clearly points out totalitarian roots of today's liberal democracy using the expression "political *Denkverbot*" which denotes impossibility of any critique, of any resistance in view of the fact that any questioning of liberal democracy is doomed to failure due to the inner mechanism of "prohibition to think" any socio-political order other than that. So, what is Lenin doing here and why does this matter at all today? According to Žižek, in what resides Lenin's greatness? As stated before, comprehending capitalism is not possible without problematizing its political form, i.e. liberal parliamentary

democracy, even more, it's impossible to undermine capitalism without undermining liberal democracy. His argumentation is extremely succinct: he claims that the expression "human rights" in today's world serves the global New Order dominated by the United States. In other words, "human rights" resembles a truly empty phrase used in the same way as the "war against terror". Moreover, totalitarianism displays itself in a globally dominant political correctness used and abused to put off conflicts in the public sphere, to get rid off all social inequalities in language and thus to pretend they do not exist in the society. The same goes to the excommunication of both extreme left and extreme right ideas in the political and social arena, labeling any excessive radicalism as the ultimate evil. That leads us to the catastrophic consequences. Firstly, on a global scale every conflict is seen as a dubious moral struggle between Good and Evil. Liberal democratic politics (dominantly, but not exclusively, run in the United States) is defined in terms of an illegitimate enemy instead of a legitimate adversary (those are the two notions of struggle in the political sphere as articulated in Mouffe and Laclau), clearly seen in "war against terror" with a transformation of the political adversary into devilish enemy. Secondly, with the constant depolitization of public sphere, all political problems have been transformed into "humanitarian" or "cultural" problems, thus making any serious politics impossible.

Žižek's assertion that the main failure of today's Left is the acceptance of the cultural wars (such as anti-racist or feminist) as the dominant terrain of the emancipatory politics is very easy to defend. There are basically two possible ways for the socio-political engagement: either to play the game of the system, i.e. to engage in the "long march through the institutions" or to get active in new social movements (such as feminism, ecology, anti-racism, minority rights, etc.). Žižek rejects both of them, being mainly negative towards the second since they are not political in a strict sense of the word: they are not more than "single issue movements" with the lack of social totality, focused only on one group of people or one single social issue, thus rejecting the universalism as an important part of any struggle in the public sphere. Instead of a "right to narrate" one personal story or story from one particular point of view of the so-called socially deprived groups, he emphasizes the "right to truth" as embodied in historical figure of St. Paul, calling on the traces of Alain Badiou for humanity beyond particular disintegration or abstract humanism, beyond pathetic brotherhood, instead based on the "politics of truth". He puts into play the role of Saint Paul because in the realm of political theology he aimed to ground a new collective that abandons and leaves behind both the "Roman" and "Jewish" way, i.e. false universalism of liberal democracy's discourse and orthodox right-wing fundamentalism. With his assertion of today's world seen as period of post-modern relativism where we should articulate the universal truth as prerequisite for

emancipatory politics, he overwrites the Leninist notion of "politics of truth" claiming it still has to be reinvented and implied. Since Badioi's notion of Event tends to "emerge out of nowhere", the same goes for Leninism as radical gesture: it is the only way to cope with contemporary totalitarian liberal democracy, so this reference to Lenin serves as an effort to break the vicious circle of these false options, i.e. either to play the game in hope you can one day beat the system or to fight the system emphasizing social particularities.

The statement is very clear and convincing: partial emancipation is possible only through universal emancipation, which means particular experience cannot be universalized and therefore denotes a conservative political gesture, such as an emphasis on minority rights, gay and lesbian organizations, etc. Žižek's critical remarks on the contemporary dominant fetish of repressed "otherness" as well as a concept of social intolerance towards the Other become the battlefield for analysis of Other's intolerance towards us, which is not politically correct but is politically true. Just as radicalism often represents an empty gesture, by the same token it is also the case with the political correctness as well as fascination with victimized Other, which leads us to the new type of exclusion, the exclusion of those who do not play by those imposed rules and are a priori considered terrorists or oppressors if they belong to the majority group (for example, single white Anglo-American male in today's United States in contrast to black lesbian woman). The important step, or to put it more clearly, the main theoretical act, is precisely to define hegemonic ideological coordinates because if you act you are already in the game, playing by the rules. Regarding political *Denkverbot* mentioned before, Žižek humorously but nonetheless punctually paraphrases Max Horkheimer's sentence "those who do not want to talk about fascism, should keep silent about capitalism" into "those who do not want to talk about global capitalism, should keep silent about socialism". Political activity is here accurately seen as an example of *political interpassivity*, i.e. doing things not to achieve something, but to prevent something from really changing, as in an unmentioned reference to famous Visconti's phrase in one of his movies that "everything has to be changed in order to remain the same".

The Return to Lenin has a quite different aim. Instead of playing the role of leftist intellectual who pretends to be critical towards capitalism discussing the transition from commodity fetishism to fetishism which is today itself commodified or to support the naïve belief in cyber communism as the possible way of resistance, he calls for repetition of Lenin's historical gesture with the famous question, once more brought into the intellectual debate: "Čto djelat?" or "What Is To Be Done?" Here it is crucial to emphasize the relevance of so-called "high theory" today for the most concrete political struggle – as we remember from socialism, theoretical knowledge is not unimportant; quite contrary, as Žižek argues, it is the

main incentive for the revolutionary act which follows it. Another author who uses Lenin as a crucial figure is Toni Negri (article "What to do with "What to do?" Or rather: The body of General Intellect"), who grippingly emphasized the biopolitical aspect of Leninism, (Lenin beyond Lenin), i.e. interpreting communist struggle as inevitably biopolitical struggle. Since the present ideologico-political constellation is characterized by the tendency to introduce moralistic reasoning into the political struggle, we are only a few steps away from a teleological explanation of liberal-democratic capitalism as the ultimate and eternal social order. The true problem with the democracy as *liberal* democracy is in its inherent paradox, since it is possible only in the conditions of its impossibility, and the major problem with the state from the socialist point of view is that it has always been seen as an instrument of oppression which can never be fully democratized. For that reason, socialist interventions pinpoint the dominant role of the state as well as democracy's insufficiencies.

Pointing out one more time the economic aspect as mentioned before, in Žižek's view socialism collapsed because it did not survive the passage from industrial to postindustrial society, repeating the same argument we might find in several authors, that economic factor was indelibly associated with its failure; everyone was surprised that socialism withered away so silently (there are very interesting passages on that issue in Francis Fukuyama's recent book on neo-conservative legacy, *America on the Crossroads*). The major argument for most of the authors is that today we live in the "post-property society" (Žižek would say *in the Leninist-socialist world* of "post-property") in which one is not powerful due to the economic wealth or material property, but because of the privileged position that enables him or her to have direct access to mechanism of power, i.e. to information to gain actual power or control. In other words, the role of property is vanishing, and today's social exclusion is based on different strategies or mechanisms than century ago: it is based on access or privileges related to knowledge or information. Should we then claim, as Žižek did, that due to the growing importance of the "immaterial production" (such as cyber-workers), those "symbolic workers" present the true proletariat in today's world? There are few interesting links towards that interpretation. For instance, in McKenzie Wark's book *Hacker Manifesto* the author concentrates on hackers' ideology, writing some kind of crypto-marxist manifest, portraying hackers as new artists of the possible, new revolutionaries which are creating a completely new social world deprived of material possessions, placed beyond the necessities of reproduction. In his words, since the notion of money and material possessions are no longer as important as they were in traditional capitalism, intellectual ownership today reflects a completely new source of power and domination. By creating a new concept of ownership, hackers create new notion of knowledge beyond any possible surveillance, thus producing

free knowledge and challenging model of intellectual ownership as main power mechanism of the ruling class.

To control information is to control society; hence the development of information as ownership represents a new form of capitalism in which proletarians are considered sometimes more powerful than financial power elites. In the concept of "gift economy" or free software we should recognize the new revolutionary potential, claims Wark, who however does not limit his notion of hackers to informational experts or geeks but considers it as a new class-in-becoming, similar to Hardt and Negri's notion of "multitude" in *Empire*, but much more articulated. On the same premises, we might paraphrase their concept and assert that those new proletarians are the multitude with a high level of education. Between those ideas and comparable theoretical viewpoints, Žižek's return to Lenin is maybe the most radical and theoretically compelling. Once again, in his words, repeating Lenin does not mean return to Lenin in the strict sense of the word: his solutions and politically enacted ideas monstrously failed and left a very distinctive scar on the face of Eastern Europe. What Žižek argues and votes for is primarily to focus on a utopian part in the whole project which is for him worth saving. Repeating Lenin means *to repeat what he failed to do*, based on both (originally Leninist) premises that it is crucial to emphasize the relevance of "high theory" today for the most concrete political and social struggles before taking any steps on the streets, and to reinvent a completely new revolutionary project in the conditions of (in Lenin's time, imperialism and colonialism) today's totalitarianism of liberal democracy.

We might conclude with a remark Žižek developed in a more articulated response to the contemporary debate than most of the authors who are coping with the same issue (including the somewhat overrated *Empire*). As it goes for the question *Has socialism a global future?* one of the possible answers might be counter question *Has capitalism a global future?* bearing in mind that both ideas of universalism and orientation towards the future are basically socialist inventions – therefore, one of the main tasks of contemporary theory is to make them relevant today. Neither by playing the game of the system nor getting active in "single issue movements" as forms of political interpassivity, but in rejecting those false alternatives and emphasizing the emancipatory politics that goes beyond those two limitations – that ought to be today's answer to the famous Leninist question *What Is To Be Done?* If new forms of socialism indeed have emerged in globalized world, they will survive only under the principle no socialism can confront globalization unless it is globalized itself.



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