

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Six, Number One

Žižek, ECOLOGY, CONSERVATISM

Arthur Vafin, Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences

The theory of nature has troubled humanity's greatest minds since ancient times. Without reflection on nature man would not have struck a spark from a stone, would not have created nuclear reactors, would not have paused to think about the meaning of life, i.e. would not have raised questions about what man is, what environment is, what metaphysics is, that stands above nature. However, ecology as science did not arise until 20th century.

Apart from the theory of ecology, an ecological (ecologist) ideology exists in our modern world. Representatives of science are called ecologists, while political activists and ideologists are referred to as environmentalists. The specificity of rise of the environmentalist ideology is such that its core was based on an extreme understanding of man and nature, "extreme" meaning that man was declared a warrior of nature, stretching beyond the scope of social existence. There are two main streams in Europe, representing ecologism; these are "deep ecology" of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss and "eco-anarchism" of Murray Bookchin.

"Deep ecology" implies equal values of social and natural life. Nature is not a resource or a product to drain all juices from; nature is a part of man that science and progress cannot dare to touch. Apparently, it is on the assumption that nature is a part of man that Næss, unlike other environmentalists, who are mostly vegetarians, could easily afford crabs and caviar with vodka or wine (see an amusing story about this by Jens Bjørneboe [Bjørneboe 2005: unpaginated]).

“Deep ecology” does not imply denial of the benefits of civilization, it suggests limiting consumption. This ideology would be wonderful if in practice it was implemented without violence and victims not only from the part of nature, but from the part of the society as well (starting from man and ending with his/her means of production, technology). Thus, the followers of “deep ecology” from the “Earth First!” movement distinguished themselves with the following actions: physical violence against woodcutters; tree spiking with nails on the principle “better let the spiked forest die than the capitalist society get it”; mining of bulldozers and tractors. Dave Forman, one of the leaders of the organization planned sabotage operations on nuclear power plants in Arizona, California and Colorado. Those who share the ideology of “deep ecology” from the “Sea Shepherd” organization were famous for successfully sinking whaling ships in 1990s: “save a whale – kill a man”.

Bookchin criticized “deep ecology” for such activities. The main point of the program of “eco-anarchism” (or “social ecology”, as Bookchin’s relations with the anarchist movement were not simple) lies in the rejection of biocentrism. While “deep ecologists” replaced anthropocentrism with biocentrism, “anarchists” in Bookchin’s person sought to bring man and society back to nature. Bookchin got food for thought in the works of Peter Kropotkin, an anarcho-communist, a prince (knyaz), as the philosopher Rozanov would put it. Bookchin enclosed Peter’s ideas to his own environmentalistic schemes. The result was a utopian picture: there should be no government (all ecological problems result from it), it should be replaced with a commune-polis, a city based on the principles of self-government. Hence there is the rejection of any structure and hierarchy. There are organic (socially and environmentally) communities instead of them: "In organic societies the differences among people, age groups, genders and between humanity and natural diversity of living and nonliving phenomena were considered (here I use an excellent Hegel’s expression) as a “unity of differences” or a “unity of diversity”, but not as a hierarchy. Their world-view was distinctly ecological and on the basis of it they almost unconsciously derived the body of values, which influenced their behavior in relation to individuals in their own communities ... ecology knows neither "the king of beasts", nor "inferior creatures" (these terms are derived from our own hierarchical mentality). Rather, what is meant here are ecosystems where the living things are interdependent and play complementary roles in maintaining the stability of natural order" [Bookchin 2011: unpaginated].

Unlike ecologism, conservatism is a classic ideology. The founding fathers of conservatism are Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre. Conservatism arose as a reaction to the French revolution of 1789. Curiously enough, Maistre viewed it as a divine retribution, deserved by woeful France. Conservatism is something deep, sensuous, remindful of practical

sense, not restricted by the constitution of body and society, but a sense complemented with universal values. “The truth of conservatism,” Nikolai Berdyaev wrote, “is the truth of historicism, the truth of the sense of historical reality that is completely obsolete in revolutionism and radicalism. The rejection of historical succession is the rejection and destruction of historical reality, unwillingness to know the living historical organism. The rejection and destruction of historical succession is the same infringement upon the real existence as is the rejection and destruction of succession of personality, of individual human self. The historical reality is an individual of a special kind. There is organic continuity in the life of this reality. There are hierarchical levels in the historical reality. And the destruction of the hierarchical structure of universe is the destruction, not the actualisation of history.” (Berdyaev 1990: unpaginated) Do these hierarchical levels really exist? If we set out to answer this question, arising from not exactly an appropriate quotation, we will leave aside and forget Žižek. And why do we need this? Let’s continue.

It is much more difficult to determine the emergence of the conservative thought in Russia. Perhaps, in relation to Russia it is possible to apply the arguments of a conservative thinker Michael Oakeshott, who understood conservatism as something contextual, practical and anti-abstract. The history of Russia knows only two abstract experiments: the Revolution of 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union that led to liberal shock therapy. Lenin, Stalin, an ingenious wheeler-dealer Berezovsky, all these faces are forever imbedded in the non-existent collective unconscious, the collective unconscious of the Russian people. The memory of a bald, bearded, unstooping man and a black willpinist* will be everlasting... Revolution is superficial, but its flat state has got sharp edges, that are aimed at shredding traditions and roots. The digging out of roots by sharp edges is chaos. This surface is such that it seeks to go deep inside and destroy the deepness, replace it with itself.

Revolutions did not destroy Russia, there have always been leaders able to revive the Motherland that seemed impossible to bring back. These destructive abstractions were turned by the leaders to the right practical path, to which the context of tradition connected. That is why many people can be called Russian conservatives: Dostoevsky, Struve, Berdyaev, Frank, Likhachev, Solzhenitsyn, and other fine respectable people. They are all different but they all share love for their Motherland, love for Russia.

Among other Russian conservatives inquiring about nature, a distinguished philosopher Konstantin Leontyev speculated on the damage a man can cause nature. Like other Russian conservatives, Leontyev is remarkable for his broad-mindedness, an understanding of the fact

* Willpinism (rus. Вольпинизм) – a term taken from a semi-solipsict clandestine work of Boris Berezovsky; formed from the words “will” and “alpinism”.

that there are ideas in other ideologies that can be used by conservatism for the benefit of Russia and the world in general. Thus, Leontyev refers to a liberal thinker Mill: “When the last wild animal disappears,” Leontyev quotes Mill, “when there is no free wild forest, then all the depth of human mind will be lost, for it doesn’t pertain to a man to be constantly in a society of his like, and people learned long ago all the benefits to be derived from closeness and frequent communications”. Leontyev asks: “How is it possible to stop the frenzy of fruitless communications that Europeans are seized with (today it is fairer to mention not only Europeans, but the whole world ; A.B) in the course of peaceful progress without the collapse and destruction of old civilizations; how is it possible to calm this inflammatory, delirious bloodstream of roads, telegraphs, steamships, agronomic achievements, utilitarian travels and the like?” His answer is a truly frightening one: “There is only one way, and it is to wish that the progress will continue its organic development even faster so that the inflammation would become an abscess, ulceration or Anthony's fire and death, before the disease has time to take root in all tribes on Earth!” [Leontyev 1996: unpaginated] Was Leontyev a prophet? The disease has taken root; the fire and death are world wars, experiments on people, Hiroshima and Nagasaki – is it possible that Leontyev had foreseen all that?

The abscess has burst, but is everything really calm, isn't there a new one? Let us turn to Slavoj Žižek's ideas. Žižek is a critic of European conservative understanding of nature, but his critique could be useful for Russian conservatives. Thus, Žižek's ideas can be practically applied on the basis of conservative context. Accusations that Russian conservatism is lacking ideas so much that it cannot state anything of its own will not be accepted for the reason that without dialogue and polemics no new idea can be born: “One resists the invasion of armies; one does not resist the invasion of ideas.” (Victor Hugo)

In a most interesting film by Astra Taylor called *Examined Life* [Taylor 2008] there is a curious fragment where Žižek, dressed as a sanitation man, stands in a waste deposit in a pile of garbage and ponders over garbage and human existence. The pile of garbage is the remains of a brewing abscess. The pile of garbage is the place where we should feel at home, says Žižek. The waste deposit is an example of how man escapes from garbage, in a wider sense – from the thing one is most afraid of. It seems as though the thrown out garbage disappears from our world. However, it disappears only from the world of illusions, but still exists in reality.

According to Žižek, modern understanding of ecology is the real false consciousness, connected with mystification of real problems. Postmodern mysticism arises when disasters begin to be rationalized, interpreted in strict logic terms of cause-effect relations. Such interpretation makes life easier. However, nature is not an absolute balance and total harmony

(this aspect of Žižek's thought makes him akin to classical conservatives). Nature is a series of unthinkable disasters. Žižek believes that ecology is transforming into a new western conservative ideology: "One should not play games with nature! Do not touch DNA! Do not develop new medicines! Do not invent new technologies!" How one should react to these reproaches? Žižek's recipe is to reinforce alienation from nature, to become more artificial.

Isn't this recipe too radical? If to examine it more closely, Žižek is expecting the same thing that Leontyev did, maybe on another, but not less horrifying scale. To reinforce alienation from nature does not mean to destroy it. Nature is a social construct that is to be reconsidered. But how? What should be done for this? Firstly, one should not run away from one's problems and mystify, but should acknowledge them and deal with them. "Considering that depletion has reached its limits, they have started to talk everywhere about 'responsibility', the need for 'self-restriction' and 'asceticism'", writes Gunther Rormozer, an exponent of conservative political philosophy. However, "after a short indignation at the scale of the ecological crisis, it can be said that almost naturally there came the triumph of nihilism... Reports on forest mortality don't trouble anyone anymore." [Rormozer 1996: 188] Nowadays forest mortality should be as important as social well-being improvement. Secondly, dealing with problems should be based on spiritual values and not on the approach of profit maximization and cost minimization. Otherwise new transportable Fukusimas will come.

References

- Taylor, A., director (2008) Examined Life. Available at:
<http://www.hiddendriver.com/projects/examined-life>. Accessed April 19th 2011.
- Berdyayev, N. (1990) The Philosophy of Inequality. Available at:
<http://www.vehi.net/berdyayev/neraven/05.html>. Accessed April 19th 2011.
- Bookchin, M. Ecology of freedom (Fragment). Available
at:<http://livasprava.info/content/view/2624/1>. Accessed April 19th 2011.
- Bjørneboe, J. (2005) How Arne Næss and I conquered NATO: The History of a Norwegian Nonviolent Action. Available at:
<http://magazines.russ.ru/inostran/2005/11/bu5.html>. Accessed April 19th 2011.
- Leontyev, K. (1996) The average European as an ideal and instrument of universal destruction. Available at:<http://knleontiev.narod.ru/texts/evropeetz.htm>. Accessed April 19th 2011.
- N.O.M. (1992) Masters of the USSR or the Monkey's Muzzle. Available at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfp6maXj7E4>. Accessed April 19th 2011.

Rormozer, G. (1996) the Crisis of Liberalism. Moscow: Institute of Philosophy RAS.