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Vilifying Communism and Accommodating Imperialism The Sham and Shame of Slavoj Žižek's “Honest Pessimism”

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The December 2011-January 2012 issue of *The Platypus Review* features an interview with philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek.[1] It is a fusillade of distortion of the historical experience of revolution and socialism in the 20th century, accompanied by an egregiously uninformed and unprincipled attack on Bob Avakian's new synthesis of communism. Žižek's musings about communism are dressed up as new and nuanced thinking, but on display is a rather old and clunky anti-communism of a piece with the dominant bourgeois narrative of communism as “failure” and “horror.” Žižek portrays himself as “anti-capitalist,” but on parade are apologetics for capitalist-imperialism. This is the fruit of what Slavoj Žižek calls his “honest pessimism.” In what follows, I respond to Žižek's central claims and misrepresentations. But at the outset I call on Slavoj Žižek to take part in a public debate with me about the nature of imperialism, and the history and prospects of the communist project.

1. Real Stakes, Real Alternatives, and Real Responsibilities

The world is a horror. An environmental emergency threatens the very ecosystems of the planet; neocolonial wars waged by Western imperialism produce death, destruction, and dislocation; malnutrition and hunger stalk one billion human beings; women, half of humanity, are objectified, shrouded, trafficked, and degraded. The development of technology and the accumulation of human knowledge have brought human society to a threshold in which it is now possible to put an end to this and provide for a decent material and rich cultural life for all of humanity—and yet the profit-above-all system of world capitalism constrains and chokes this potential.

Growing numbers of people, from Egypt to the Occupy movements, are resisting and questioning the existing social order. People are raising their heads and searching for solutions and alternatives. The responsibility of revolutionaries and all radical thinkers in relation to these movements is, most definitely, to unite with and work to build them in their overwhelmingly positive thrust. But it is also crucial to engage the obstacles and contradictions that these movements and struggles face—and work to provide direction to divert things onto a more fully and consciously revolutionary path. At the same time, there is pressing need to demarcate between genuinely radical and revolutionary discourse and politics—and that which would consign us to the world as it is.[2]

There is a way out of the suffering and madness of this world. It is revolution, communist revolution. The first attempts in modern history to create societies free of exploitation and oppression—the Soviet revolution of 1917-56 and the Chinese revolution of 1949-76—were led by visionary vanguard parties and instantiated new liberating economies and governing institutions, new social relations based on cooperation and overcoming inequality, and tackled old ways of thinking—all against incredible ideological and material obstacles.

These revolutions represent historic watersheds for oppressed humanity. Their accomplishments were both unprecedented and monumental. At the same time, there were problems and shortcomings in conception, method, and practice—some quite serious, some even grievous. How should all this be evaluated? This first wave of communist revolution was eventually defeated and capitalism restored. What were the underlying causes and factors?

Bob Avakian has produced a body of work that in summing up the overwhelmingly positive but also negative lessons of this first wave of revolution, while also drawing from diverse spheres of human experience and endeavor, opens new pathways to go further and do better in a new stage of communist revolution. This is a new synthesis of communism. A radically transformative communism...that is unflinching in its determination to lead millions to take power through determined revolutionary struggle once the conditions emerge to do so...and that aims at nothing less than using that power to emancipate humanity and achieve a world where human beings can truly flourish.

There is a monumental challenge, but a real basis, to fight for and to bring into being such a world. The stakes are real, as are the intellectual responsibilities. Professor Žižek shrinks from this challenge. What we get instead is his ill-founded and

misdirected dabbling in analysis unmoored from the struggle to radically transform reality, a studied stance of “let’s not take ourselves too seriously,” and, ultimately, conciliation with this world with all its misery.

II. Refusing to Engage While Irresponsibly Attacking Bob Avakian’s New Synthesis of Communism

Early in the *Platypus* interview, Žižek comments on Bob Avakian’s new synthesis of communism: “there is no theoretical substance: it doesn’t do the work.”[3] Do the work? There is not a shred of theoretical engagement from Žižek in this interview with critical elements of the new synthesis, with:

Issues of philosophy. In works such as *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy* and *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity*, Avakian has further ruptured with some teleological and semi-religious notions that have been carried into communism, along with some pragmatist and empiricist tendencies, and has put communism on a more scientific foundation.

What it means to be an internationalist in the world in which we live today. In works as early as *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will* (1981), Avakian has explored how the overall global dynamics of the imperialist system set the terms for what goes in each individual country. He has developed orientation for how revolutionaries have to approach everything, including making revolution in the countries in which they live, from the standpoint of the world revolution first, and how—and why—the leaders of the first stage of communist revolution strayed from and even at some junctures acted counter to this understanding and orientation.

Vital new understanding of the nature of socialism as a transitional society and with what is needed to go from the deeply rooted inequalities and disparities of the world today to a communist society and world without classes and class distinctions, without the oppressive institutions that enforce them, and without the ideas that flow from and reinforce those divisions. While deeply learning from Mao, Avakian has recognized and emphasized the need for a greater role for dissent, a greater fostering of intellectual ferment, and more scope for initiative and creativity in the arts in socialist society. He has criticized a one-sided view in the communist movement toward intellectuals—toward seeing them only as a *problem*. This bears profoundly on the search for the truth, on the transformative character of the communist project, and overcoming the ages-old divide between intellectual and manual labor. How the new synthesis re-envisioned socialism as a vibrant period of transition is elaborated in such works by Avakian as “The End of a Stage—the Beginning of a New Stage,” *Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Socialist Transition to Communism* and “Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom.”

Revolutionary strategy and the need for communist movements to resist the pull to become just another part of the political scenery of bourgeois society, instead of working to make revolution. *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity* is a critical work in this regard. The RCP has developed a strategy that speaks to the real problems and difficulties of making revolution in an imperialist country like the U.S.

This includes the existence of a large middle class in the U.S.; overcoming deep divisions, racial and sexual, among different sections of the people; bridging gaps and effecting positive synergy between intellectuals and those on the bottom of society; and the challenge of hastening the development of a revolutionary situation at a time when there is no revolutionary crisis while preparing people to seize the opening when it does occur.

Fitting the masses to change the world and themselves. Avakian has stressed that communist revolution must be carried out with the orientation that the masses must be the driving force but as “emancipators of humanity.” This is not a revolution about revenge or changes in position in a “last shall be first, and the first shall become last” framework—this revolution is about transforming the entire world, so there will no longer be a division of society into “first” and “last.”

What does Slavoj Žižek have to say about these elements of the new synthesis? Nothing. Žižek charges that Avakian and the RCP “always have the answers: no questions, only answers.”[4] In other words, he would have readers believe, there is no grappling with difficult and vexing contradictions on the part of the RCP—only self-knowing certitudes. He brands us as “perverts,” claiming that we seek to impose on others what their desires are or should be.

This, it must be said, is an astounding “perversion” of truth. An entire section of Bob Avakian’s *Birds Cannot Give Birth to Crocodiles, But Humanity Can Soar Beyond the Horizon* speaks precisely to this contradiction, particularly as it is posed in socialist society between the fundamental interests and needs of the masses of people, on the one hand, and what some of the people may want at any given time, on the other—and the challenges involved in handling this contradiction, with its many complexities, in a way that continues the advance toward communism while at the same time fundamentally relying on the masses of people to consciously carry forward this struggle.

Indeed, the whole of the above-cited work, along with *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity*, are rich examinations by Avakian of many of the key contradictions and complexities involved in making revolution—and doing so in any particular country as part of the overall struggle toward the ultimate goal of communism worldwide. Žižek also accuses Bob Avakian and the RCP of simply talking about taking power and then dealing with the problems, and not addressing how all this will come about and “what it will mean in regard to the masses.” This is yet another hollow charge. In addition to the works I’ve already mentioned, the *Constitution for the New Socialist Republic in North America (Draft Proposal)* and the RCP’s statement “On the Strategy for Revolution” are highly relevant in speaking to these issues.

From Žižek there is neither substantive engagement with nor principled criticism of the new synthesis—just cheap distortions of Avakian’s work and the line of the RCP. But Professor Žižek, have another go at it, let’s debate communism and the new synthesis in a public forum.

III. Rabid Anti-communism Masquerading as New Thinking

In the *Platypus* interview Žižek tells us that “the lessons [of the 20th century] are only negative.” He speaks of socialism in the Soviet Union and the Stalin period as “brutal direct domination.”[5] In his introduction to a Verso edition of several of Mao’s essays on philosophy, Žižek charges Mao with “reducing people to a disposable means.”[6] In his October talk at Occupy Wall Street, Žižek obsesses that “communism failed absolutely.”[7]

It is hard to discern what is more at work here: willful disregard for historical accuracy, or anti-communist pandering to the powers that be. In any case, Žižek’s declarations are wrong and cause great harm. To get at the truth of the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions, I would commend to readers writings by Avakian, some of my research and speeches, the Set the Record Straight website, and the polemic “Alain Badiou’s ‘Politics of Emancipation’: A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World.” But a few points of specific response are in order:

“Only negative”? The Soviet and Chinese revolutions achieved amazing things in liberating women, overcoming national inequalities, moving with decisive resolve to address the material needs of the people, seeking to forge new values and culture. The Cultural Revolution in China of 1966-76 effected unprecedented transformations in education, in industrial-management practices, in healthcare, in grass-roots governance, and in the arts. In no society in the world has there been such conscious political struggle and transformation.

Žižek’s screed against Stalin and what he labels “Stalinism” is stunning for the absence of materialist analysis. No sense of unrelenting encirclement and threat, or the effect of persisting social divisions and other remnants of the old society, and the continuation of classes and class struggle within the conditions of the new Soviet state. Nor the real and decisive questions and struggles of line and program: the policies and road that Stalin represented and fought for, and the lines and policies that others in leadership stood and struggled for—and the consequences of this for the direction of society. Instead we get Stalin the despot.

Žižek pronounces the Great Leap Forward in China of 1958-60 to be a “mega-tragedy.”[8] Never mind what the Great Leap Forward was actually about *and* actually accomplished in terms of collectivizing agriculture, overcoming urban-rural inequalities and technological-cultural gaps, developing a more decentralized system of economic planning, challenging feudal and family tradition, and, yes, contributing to solving China’s historic food problem. Žižek would have the unwary reader believe that this so-called “mega-tragedy” (he’s referring to famine deaths that Mao supposedly perpetrated) is “demonstrated” by “archives being opened.” Nonsense! What is widely circulating in the name of “archival research” is organized vilification of Mao and sensationalistic history by body count based on all manner of spurious extrapolation and flat-out lies.

For Slavoj Žižek, a defining component of “new” and “innovative” radical theorizing is repudiation and slander of the historical experience of communist revolution.

IV. Žižek's Anti Anti-Imperialism

Žižek proposes to “rethink the critique of political economy” in light of today’s global capitalism. Where does *his* “rethinking” lead him? Let’s consider some of his findings:

“The biggest result of the Bush presidency is that the U.S. is becoming merely a local superpower.”[9] Am I hearing this right? Sadly, yes. Now it would be one thing to “credit” George W. Bush with leading U.S. imperialism into serious difficulties, but to claim that the U.S. is no longer a true hegemonic power, and is reduced to being merely a local superpower, not only flies in the face of reality but actually disorients and disarms people in fully recognizing, and opposing, the reality of what U.S. imperialism does in the world. And I would be eager not only to debate Žižek’s assessment of U.S. imperialism but also his excuses for Nelson Mandela’s conciliation with imperialism and objective betrayal of the masses of South Africa, as well as prettification of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the name of supposed opposition to Islamic fundamentalism.[10]

In the same *Platypus* interview Žižek makes the claim that “in today’s global capitalism...there is no longer the metropolis screwing the Third World countries.”[11] The global network of sweatshop labor, export processing zones, and child labor in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that are integral and critical to the profitability of Western capital—somehow this has disappeared or lost its significance in the political economy of Slavoj Žižek. The minerals and raw materials often mined in slave-like conditions in vast regions of the Third World, international property rights that keep medicines out of reach of the world’s impoverished, Western agribusiness that destroys peasant agriculture—these apparently are artifacts of a receding neocolonialism. For Žižek, the great, oppressive, and enforced divide between imperialism and the oppressed nations is no longer one of the most profound contradictions marking the world.

Žižek cannot let go of bourgeois democracy. He offers this paean to leaders of the bourgeois revolution: “radical bourgeois freedom fighters were well aware that freedom comes only insofar as it is truly social freedom.”[12] He tells Charlie Rose that he is not “blindly anti-capitalist” and appreciates the fact that “so many people lived such relatively free lives and safe lives, in relative welfare as...in Western Europe in the last fifty to sixty years.”¹³ There you have it: while communism “absolutely failed,” imperialism is a partial success. Žižek can only be bedazzled by consciously blinding himself to the reality that bourgeois freedoms and social welfare stand on a platform of super-exploitation, wars of aggression and conquest, and a system of neocolonial rule that includes the propping up of viciously repressive client regimes the likes of Saudi Arabia.

I would encourage people to contrast Žižek’s social-chauvinistic views on imperialism and democracy, views by the way that are consistent for their lack of any scientific understanding of the relationship of the superstructure to the material base of society and the world system, with such works by Bob Avakian as *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?*, *Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy* and, once again, *Birds Cannot Give Birth to Crocodiles, But Humanity Can Soar Beyond*

the Horizon.

V. Conclusion: A Reckoning and a Call for Sharp and Honest Debate

Slavoj Žižek wrongly and unscientifically negates the whole experience of communist revolution. He agonizes over “no easy solutions” and “honest pessimism” but can comfortably align himself with imperialism. It is political and moral capitulation writ large. It has everything to do with why Slavoj Žižek does not acknowledge—and quite possibly does not, and cannot, recognize—what is in fact new and of decisive importance in the new synthesis of communism brought forward by Bob Avakian. In a world that cries out urgently for radical change, this new synthesis is both viable and vital for carrying forward the struggle for the emancipation of humanity.

Once again, and in closing, I challenge Slavoj Žižek to publicly debate these questions.

NOTES

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1. “The Occupy movement, a renascent Left, and Marxism today: An interview with Slavoj Žižek,” *The Platypus Review* (42) December 2011-January 2012.

2. It is worth noting that in his discussion of the upsurge in Egypt, Žižek contents himself with tailing this movement, even making a principle out of some of its weaknesses and narrow aspects, including (so far at least) the neglect, or negation, to too far a degree of the Palestinian question. See Žižek interview, p. 4.

3. Žižek interview, p. 2.

4. Ibid., p. 2.

5. Ibid., p. 5.

6. Slavoj Žižek *Presents Mao: On Practice and Contradiction* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2007), p. 10.

7. "Slavoj Žižek at OWS Part 2," October 9, 2011.

8. Žižek interview, p. 2.

9. Ibid., p. 3.

10. In the *Platypus* interview, p. 4, in his commentary on anti-Iraqi war protests, Žižek faults the U.S. left for not working with the Iraqi left, particularly the Iraqi Communist Party. This utterly revisionist party took part in the elections for the first post-invasion government—elections that were carried out under the auspices and in the service of U.S. occupation. Žižek notes the participation of the Iraqi Communist Party and goes on to say: "The standard narrative was that the Iraqi people should liberate themselves, without the U.S. occupation. But they had the same problem, and got into a deadlock. With attacks on the Green Zone: which side should you take, there? I was not ready to do what some did, to claim that, since they opposed the American occupation, they should side with the resistance. I don't think these radical Islamists should ever be supported."

Under the mantle of not giving quarter to Islamic fundamentalism, Žižek is effectively legitimizing the U.S. invasion and occupation. Contrast this social-chauvinist position with the orientation of the RCP, USA, which is based on the internationalist stand and analysis of Avakian. This analysis a) points to the existence of "two outmodeds": imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism; b) identifies both as being reactionary; c) calls for bringing forward a genuine revolutionary movement in opposition to both; while d) making it crystal clear that, of these "two outmodeds," it is imperialism, and above all U.S. imperialism, that does greater harm to, and constitutes a far greater obstacle to the emancipation of, the masses of people in the world. See Bob Avakian, "Bringing Forward Another Way."

11. Ibid., p. 4. By contrast, see my discussion of the persistence of the savage contradiction between the imperialist metropolises and the Third World in Part 1 of the series "Shifts and Faultlines in the World Economy and Great Power Rivalry."

12. Ibid., p. 4.

13. "Charlie Rose with Slavoj Žižek," October 26, 2011.