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Zizek and Baudrillard on Terrorism: "Welcome to the Desert of the Real", Indeed!

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Introduction

Slavoj Žižek deserves to be considered among the most important living social theorists. His work is exemplary for instigating and preserving critical reflection among a Western and Global intelligentsia who, at the worst of times, can too often slip into ready-made (often a-historical), solutions to global problems¹. One of Žižek's important contributions has been to point out that the response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 typically lacked sufficient historical complexity.² Žižek has attempted to increase awareness among intellectuals of the ways in which avoiding such complexities deny the public the opportunity to be exposed to, and participate in, the kind of necessary critical self-reflection that terrorism demands. In short, Slavoj Žižek is an exemplary 'critical' scholar of the early 21st century. He has worked to

deepen and extend, through his own deep readings (drawing on Augustine, Hayek, Rousseau, Marx, Lacan, Badiou, and Agamben, among many others), to construct his own distinct critical narrative.

The problem with Žižek is that his thought sometimes fails to sufficiently reach beyond his Western points of origin. Žižek carries with him into the 21st century, a central bias of the critical Left since the 19th century, that communism (a very European idea in its origins), should eventually surmount other narratives around the world. While Žižek is no proponent of globalizing capitalism (he has been leading critic of neo-liberalism for two decades), he is a proponent of a global communism (Žižek 2011: unpaginated)³. Žižek's view is also steeped in his reading of psychoanalysis which, in his case, makes it difficult for him to take into account the motivations of those who attack Western targets – to understand them as sincere living, thinking beings. As we saw recently in his reply to the Charlie-Hebdo attack Žižek does little to consider the terrorists motives outside of the framework of psychoanalysis. If we really do wish to have a period of meaningful critical self-reflection following terrorist events, it is impossible to do so fully if we do not sincerely attempt to understand what is motivating the terrorists on their own terms. To do so we need to push ourselves out beyond the limitations of our traditional Western based analysis as Jean Baudrillard has done. The remainder of this essay provides an assessment of Žižek's critical approach to terror followed by my understanding of Baudrillard's more radical approach.

Žižek's Critical Approach to Terrorism

We in the West are Nietzsche's Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle up to their self-destruction. William Butler Yeats' "Second Coming" seems perfectly to render our current predicament: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity". This is an excellent description of the current split between anemic liberals and impassioned fundamentalists. "The best" are no longer able fully to engage, while "the worst" engage in racist, religious, sexist fanaticism (Žižek 2015: unpaginated).

Žižek's response to the "Charlie-Hebdo" attack was not unexpected given his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) and "Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence" (2005: unpaginated). In his *New Statesman* article "Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?" (2015: unpaginated). Žižek writes: "How fragile the belief of an Islamist must be if he feels threatened by a stupid caricature in a weekly satirical newspaper?" Žižek cautions against succumbing to blind Islamophobia and to his credit wants to critically investigate the deeper complexities surrounding this attack as he earlier asked Americans to do. What Žižek fears is that in our efforts to reflect upon the attacks we will accept the logic that the attackers are heroic men willing to give up their own life for what they believe. Some may see him as constructing a 'straw-man' here but he does sincerely believe this idea to be a "demonic myth" (Ibid.).

For Žižek, what the attackers lack is an "authentic fundamentalism". This kind of fundamentalism is practiced with "the absence of resentment and envy, the deep indifference towards the non-believer's way of life" (Ibid.). He then labels the Charlie Hebdo attackers "pseudo-fundamentalists". It is the very fact that these pseudo-fundamentalists attack us that shows how weak, hyper-sensitive, and inauthentic they are. If they really did have the way to truth they would not feel threatened by non-believers and would have no reason to attack. It is at this point that Žižek brings out his strongest weapon in his retaliatory strike on the Charlie-Hebdo attackers and their supporters: his reading of psychoanalysis. He argues that the fundamentalists who attack us "secretly consider themselves inferior to us". He continues: "...the fundamentalists are already like us ...secretly, they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them... what the fundamentalists really lack is precisely a dose of that true 'racist' conviction of their own superiority" (Ibid).

Žižek's best writing on this theme appeared in "Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France and Related Matters" (2005: unpaginated). Here Žižek argues that the attackers are motivated by "resentment" and "envy". The terrorists attack us because they envy our object centered consumerist Western lives and hold the primary goal of denying our enjoyment of our lives. As such they act out of resentment and envy towards us as inauthentic pseudo-fundamentalists working against their own self-interest (he points to how those burning cars and schools in the

Paris Banlieue mostly strike in their own neighborhoods). But something else however is going on here and Žižek, despite the lucidity of his approach fails to address it. Žižek's terrorists are like poor children beating up a rich child because he has so many toys and they have so few.

Until Žižek, most commentators on say, the Middle East, have understood as Žižek does, that the terrorists are in the minority of any country we might point toward. Like Baudrillard ([1995] 1997: 71)⁴, Žižek accepts that a significant number (if not at least a small majority), of the residents of any country, Islamic or otherwise, have already accepted many of the most significant Western consumerist values whether or not they proclaim or practice a religious faith. We have, rightly I think, tended to understand that those minorities willing to give up their lives in attacks on Western targets were motivated by non-Western values (a central tenant of Baudrillard's analysis of terrorism). Žižek's psychoanalytical inspired view refuses to allow the terrorists the legitimacy of their own thoughts – their right to be anti-modern or anti-Western. He only understands them as they are fed through his psychological processor out of which they emerge as resentful little neo-Westerners who strike out at the West out of envy and their own "secret" self-loathing.

For Žižek it boils down to a false conflict: 'You attack us and the very fact that you attack us shows your inauthenticity'. Žižek offers a solution to all of this bother – we can stop the pseudo-terror against Western liberal values with an injection of the Western radical Left. In the end, Žižek uses the Charlie Hebdo attack to continue his life-long condemnation of Western capitalist liberal values (which he says always undermine themselves without the brotherly help of the radical Left). Žižek seems to believe that everyone can get along in the name of the cause of the radical Left against globalizing capitalist oppression. This would provide Westerners and non-Westerners alike with a shared project as we all work together to undermine the false liberal values that set this false conflict in motion. What else is Žižek's overall project if not a heroic effort to convince the people of the world to work together for democratic communism? For Žižek, the followers of Islam, like people of all creeds and notions, share a goal that is only deferred by the current infighting. There is something heartwarming about Žižek,

if only from a nostalgic point of view, for those of us who lived in the days when belief in communism was more widespread than it is today.

Žižek attempts to offer a vigorous version of critical theory that does not, to his credit, dance lightly around issues of political correctness. For all of his excellent writing on a wide variety of topics and issues, Žižek does however, provide an excellent example of the principle failing of critical theory today – its inability to achieve sufficient escape velocity from its own culture. In casting the terrorists as pseudo, inauthentic, resentful, and envious, Žižek colonizes the terrorists within the mesh of his psychoanalytic frame of reference and strips them of otherness. Žižek's terrorists, while they can kill and destroy, are not very frightening, they have little of the incompatible or the indestructible about them. Žižek, for all his criticality, intelligence and wit, is playing at an old Western game: the denial of the hard, radical other and is producing the other he prefers (see Baudrillard [1995] 1996: 115-123, 129). It is difficult to imagine what could be called “unjust treatment” of the kind of people who attacked the Charlie Hebdo Offices but, in the manner of his approach, Žižek has managed it in his own terror attack on the radical other whom he suffocates with his well-intentioned criticality.

Baudrillard's Radical Approach to Terrorism

This reversal is a worldwide phenomenon. It is now becoming clear that everything we once thought dead and buried, everything we thought left behind forever by the ineluctable march of universal progress, is not dead at all, but on the contrary likely to return... with a vehemence and a virulence that are modern in every sense – and to reach the very heart of our ultra-sophisticated ultra-vulnerable systems. Such is the destiny of radical otherness – a destiny that no homily of reconciliation and no apologia for difference is going to alter (Baudrillard [1990] 1993: 138).

Baudrillard's particular contribution to contemporary thought was his way of projecting himself, as far as possible, outside of the comfortable limitations placed on each of us by our own language and culture. This is the first move of a truly radical approach to thought for Baudrillard. If we cannot at least attempt achieve an 'escape

velocity' from our own society we stand little chance of understanding the radical other who attacks it. For Baudrillard, the attackers of September 11 (and we may presume those of the Charlie-Hebdo offices and other incidents), represent radical otherness. Žižek's critical approach to terrorism transforms the other into merely different which is itself, for Baudrillard, a more subtle form of extermination (Baudrillard [1990] 1993: 133). After Žižek is finished with the Charlie Hebdo attackers, what is left of them that does not fall under what Baudrillard describes in the following passage:

Over recent centuries all forms of violent otherness have been incorporated, willingly or under threat of force, into a discourse of difference which simultaneously implies inclusion and exclusion, recognition, and discrimination (Ibid.: 128).

Writing in 1990, Baudrillard impeccably described what Žižek does to the terrorist other a quarter-century later. Žižek's well-intentioned failure has a history – a long history of humanism which tends to prefer sameness – a history which does not understand what Baudrillard terms: "The Spirit of Terrorism". For any global system, communist or otherwise, to succeed otherness must be conquered with difference (Baudrillard [1992] 1994: 109). Baudrillard gave up on such fantasies of the critical Left in the late 1960s-early 1970s (Baudrillard [1973] 1975). Radical otherness survives everything for Baudrillard ([1990] 1993: 146) as surely as the terrorists are likely to survive Žižek's attempt to theoretically exterminate them as "pseudo". Baudrillard is able to adopt such a position because he is, more able than Žižek, to achieve escape velocity from his own culture – including his own history as a humanist-Marxist precisely in the manner which Žižek has not. Baudrillard has made a passage that Žižek is, as yet, unwilling to make – the passage out of critical theory and into radical theory.⁵ The key difference between radical and critical theory is that the former sees new possibilities through the constant interrogation of its own beliefs. While critical scholars like Žižek constantly reassess – the effort is typically spent on augmenting their long held assumptions (there is no better example of this than Žižek on terrorism). Specifically, for a leading critical theorist enmeshed in communism and psychoanalysis to push him-self out of both, into radical new possibilities for thought, has been

accomplished by no one better than Baudrillard.⁶ Because of this he is able to assess the terrorists without himself attempting to theoretically 'exterminate' them.

What Baudrillard shows us is the truly frightening terrorist (neither envious nor resentful) who cannot be won over by Western approaches – the terrorist who is not merely different, but radically other. Baudrillard's terrorist not only cannot be mothered, s/he cannot be exterminated. Why? Because Baudrillard's terrorist is a product of hegemonic globalization: "...if Islam dominated the world, terrorism would rise against Islam, for it is the globe itself, which resists globalization" (Baudrillard, 2002: 12).⁷

Baudrillard's radical approach to terrorism, specifically terrorism against the West from Islamist sources, makes no effort to psychologize the terrorist or to explain away the sincerity of his/her motives via traditional critical Western theoretical approaches. Baudrillard's terrorist – the hard other – is a vehement actor in what he calls "The Fourth World War" – the battle of Westernization globalization to infiltrate everywhere on earth and the resistance to it (2002: 11, 2004). What is at stake in this war is globalization itself – the acting out of the fundamental antagonisms of globalization.

How does Baudrillard's hard other behave in this analysis? Firstly the terrorist is willing to turn their own deaths

...into an absolute weapon against a system... it is all about death, not only the violent irruption of death in real time [on television] but the irruption of a death which is far more than real: death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event (2002: 16-17).

For Baudrillard the terrorist hopes that the system under attack will then act against its own best interests (17) [the U.S. and its allies invasion of Iraq in March 2003 comes to mind]. Baudrillard understands the terrorists to be motivated historical actors in a game of life and death. Rather than attempt to deploy Western models such as psychoanalysis to belittle the terrorists, Baudrillard recognizes that they have carefully assumed the knowledge and practices of the West – all the things we sought to use to subjugate them (money, stock market speculation, computer and aeronautic technology, as well as the spectacle of the media) (Baudrillard 2002: 19) – and have sent these spiraling back at the heart of global capitalism (just as terrorists somewhere

else might be expected to react toward the heart of global Islam, global communism, or any hegemonic power).

While he does not support them Baudrillard understands that the terrorists who strike against the West are authentic living, thinking beings, there is nothing pseudo about their thought processes or their belief system, they are not something that can be explained away as easily as Žižek may think. For Baudrillard the terrorists “assimilated everything of modernity and globalism, without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power. For Baudrillard what is especially frightening about the September 11, 2001 terrorists is that they became rich without ceasing to want to destroy us.

For Baudrillard, the events of September 11, 2001 were one act in the Fourth World War. In this action the terrorists managed to return centuries of humiliation at the hands of the West, endured by Islam, and return this humiliation to the hegemonic Western power (what could be more humiliating, asks Baudrillard, than for the most powerful nation on earth to be attacked at its core as it was on September 11?) For Baudrillard, this kind of terrorism understands that it cannot win with a frontal attack but it can deliver humiliation by way of devastating “symbolic” attacks (Baudrillard 2002: 26).

Conclusion

Baudrillard’s hard other as terrorist does not offer us the comfort of Žižek’s “pseudo” terrorist. This is what theory must do – it must take us out of our comfortable history of humano-communist (or liberal) assumptions to see the terrorist, as much as possible, from his/her own point of view – without so easily imposing predetermined Western frames of reference. We can do this, as does Baudrillard, by not forcing the terrorist through the established categories of the hopes for the future that we prefer no matter how popular and theoretically just they may be. Contra critical theory, Baudrillard presents us with a radical analysis of a more frightening world.

Baudrillard, like any Western based theorist, is of course, never fully able to escape from his culture and its history – but he does go some distance. His “radical other” comes out of the same psychoanalytical and anthropological literature that has

shaped Žižek among others. What Baudrillard achieves, that others do not, is the deployment of these concepts in ways which make no effort to capture and smother the other. Baudrillard's radical projection of himself out of his previous zone of comfort has enabled him to understand terrorism in ways Žižek cannot. Imagine Baudrillard on terrorism without his passage through and beyond neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, and many other Western approaches.⁸ You might very well find someone quite close to Žižek. Baudrillard however chose the radical path less taken as the 1960s drew to a close. Žižek is among many who have opted for a critical approach. On the subject of terrorism it is a very significant difference and Žižek's version is more comforting. Baudrillard's message to the critical Left is that radical new perspectives on terrorism are to be gained by thinking outside of their critical comfort zone. Welcome to "the desert of the real" indeed.⁹

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Notes

¹ I refer here to, among others, the more than 50 American university professors who endorsed the US "Patriot Act" in 2002. This act constituted an effort to reconstitute the American Constitution through an anti-terrorist lens. It subjected all foreign and multi-cultural students and faculty to increased scrutiny by re-categorizing them as "moving targets" (see Rubio 2008: unpaginated).

² There is a nice discussion of this in Marc Acherman's "September 11" in Rex Butler (ed.) *The Žižek Dictionary*: 2014: 221-224.

³ At 37:00 minutes into his talk he describes the kind of communism he prefers: “We need some kind of large globally coordinated social activity”. Žižek is not hoping for the kind of communism experienced by the Soviet Union or China, for example, but a much more globalized version.

⁴ In *Cool Memories III* Baudrillard acknowledges the powerful lure of the West acknowledging that, to some extent, Americanism runs through every society, every nation... like modernity itself (71).

⁵ Baudrillard accomplished this in the late 1960s – early 1970s and its first culmination was his *The Mirror of Production* ([1973] 1975).

⁶ The reason, I think, so few theorists have taken such radical strides as Baudrillard is that it is very difficult to exile oneself from comfortable surroundings and histories, theoretical or otherwise. Baudrillard managed it as well as anyone and it left him in a somewhat mysterious (and very unpopular) place where theory could only operate as challenge. This came to be the core of his constant radical deployment of reversibility. Yet, given Žižek’s belief that it is the role of the philosopher to critique and not to proffer solutions, one could argue that it might be possible for him to make the leap from criticality to ‘radicality’. While it is unlikely to occur it is worth considering that he is probably the most likely to do it of all leading contemporary social theorists. For Žižek it would be a hard road to take and it would cost him so much of his current popularity as Baudrillard well knew.

⁷ There is plenty of food for critical thinking here for Žižek and his followers as it is the same world which resists capitalist globalization that resists universal communism.

⁸ Baudrillard turned against psychoanalysis about the same time as he parted company with Marxism. While Deleuze and Guattari were crafting the *Anti-Oedipus*, Baudrillard moved towards his understanding of seduction (1970s). On psychoanalysis Baudrillard wrote that it is “an illusion of interpretation” ([1979] 1990: 59) “which has become useless” (1993: 45). For Baudrillard psychoanalysis is “a production machine... which is terrorizing and terrorist” (1984: 26). On Marxism Baudrillard acknowledged its influence upon his work adding that he immediately came to question it and to then distance himself from it (1993: 20). “Communism” in Baudrillard’s view is merely “the materialist variant of Western universalism” ([1973] 1975: 113). Baudrillard’s contribution to radical theory cost him what it must always cost anyone who makes this choice – all the theoretical comforts he knew. In return he played a key role in advancing radical thought on terrorism and many other matters.

⁹ This title of Žižek’s (2002) book, originates in Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* ([1981] 1994), before it later appeared in the film trilogy *The Matrix*.