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And What of the Left? Žižek's Refusal of the Current Leftist Parable

Introduction to Special Issue of Žižek and the Left

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Recent events concerning Žižek at the Left Forum in New York have revealed much about the state of the Left. It appears that the Left is weaker than ever before and Žižek's appeal to return to radical roots, yet also break some Leftist taboos, situates the liberal Left as anxious, insecure and reactionary. It also appears that Žižek is deliberately and steadily undertaking what many have accused him of failing to attain – of not going far enough. Here, Žižek is breaking away from being the poster boy for the liberal Left and refining his commitment to communism through critiquing postmodern representations concerning tolerance, hyper-relativism and curation. As he states in his reflections on the 2015 Paris attacks (2015):

Another taboo that must be overcome involves the equation of any reference to the European emancipatory legacy to cultural imperialism and racism. In spite of the (partial) responsibility of Europe for the situation from which refugees are fleeing, the time has come to drop leftist mantras critiquing Eurocentrism.

For Žižek, it is today's liberal Left which is not going far enough in that in the face of current political crises, it adopts a fall back position of avoiding direct critique of the current political economy, but instead trumpets politically correct notions

and dispositions which never held much traction in the first place. The current refugee crisis is a good example of failure in today's political economy, with the complete destitution and displacement of a mass population, perhaps indicating that capitalism has nothing more to risk than itself. Žižek provokes us in asking why we should be so surprised at this failure when many, including Marx himself, warned of ultimate implosion implied within the logic of capitalism.

The agenda of the neoliberal-postmodern alliance actively obstructs social transformation. Žižek asserts this when he states that one of the dominant elements epitomising the late twentieth century is the failure of particular versions of Leftist projects; for instance, the dismantling of the welfare state by the far Right, the failure of communism to convert ideology into a practice which is more acceptable than that of global capitalism, and the impotence of grass roots social movements. Even a fusion of liberal state democracy with attributes of the rebel state, for Žižek, would be insufficient in achieving social transformation. In fact this would perpetuate the problem in that an emphasis on for example, political correctness, although apparently acceptable, is often no more than an empty gesture of systematic oppression. He also frames anti-racism, gay rights and multiculturalism as being within capitalism's insidious and systematic appropriation of postmodern relativism. For Žižek, these kinds of movements merely set up a false notion of democracy that urges the subject to imagine that democracy in its fullest expression, will somehow one day eventuate under capitalism and that in the meantime, we simply need to be patient and implement these tolerances, until democracy and capitalism find equilibrium and mature in a seamless marriage. For Žižek and many of the Left this is nothing more than an emanation from the capitalist propaganda machine.

A counter-perspective to this is Walter Benjamin's 'divine violence', a pure event usually sparked by a vague call for social justice which then erupts into violent demonstration. This commonly manifests as a call to destroy capitalist structures. We therefore need to start imagining viable and workable alternatives. However, what tends to happen is a fall back to neo-pragmatism in which 'divine violence' is downgraded to divine intervention, a sort of singular cultural event rather than one having political traction and longevity. One could argue this is where the current liberal Left lacks imagination in so far as essentialising 'divine violence' within a supposed natural order of social transformation appears to them problematic. It is here that the liberal Left needs to exercise more criticality which it could do by interpreting 'divine violence' as responding to existing class stratification in which private interests propagated by the political economy compete against global justice. Simply put, as Robespierre asserts, there can be no revolution without a revolution. Žižek explains this further when referring to 'moderate' Lefists (2006):

They want a revolution deprived of the excess in which democracy and terror coincide, a revolution respecting social rules, subordinated to pre-existing norms, a revolution in which violence is deprived of the 'divine' dimension and thus reduced to a strategic intervention serving precise and limited goals.

Žižek's call for a return to collective large-scale action is but one part of a rethinking of the political economy. It is here the Left can be most useful, yet it must dispense with interpellating the alliance between neoliberalism and postmodernism, both into its rhetoric and its praxis. What form should this rhetoric and praxis take and why is there resistance from the current liberal Left? Firstly, this form should be one which adopts fearless critique of public opinion, a critique which may not always be popular even among the Left. Secondly, this new form involves dispensing with hyper-relativism and also accepting that social constructivism provides at best a weak framework on which to situate conjecture. Such a framework too conveniently accommodates problematic notions of authenticity, distinction and the project of the self as central to consensus and emancipation. In addition, postmodernism's failed attempt to de-legitimatising authority is in fact no more than a by-product of its alliance with neoliberalism. Here Žižek is robust in his critique of the current liberal Left for being caught within the deadlock of this alliance. So when Žižek critiques multiculturalism, for example, he is referring precisely to the failure of postmodernism. Here postmodernism, being satisfied with a market and political economy which favour individualism and personal freedom over collective action, is positing a capitalist rather than a collective measure of actuality. Žižek states (2015):

[W]e should also add to this insight that the multiculturalist or anti-colonialist's defense of different "ways of life" is also false. Such defenses cover up the antagonisms within each of these particular ways of life by justifying acts of brutality, sexism and racism as expressions of a particular way of life that we have no right to measure with foreign, i.e. Western values.

The reaction of the liberal Left to the deadlock between neoliberalism and postmodernism is predictable, namely stoicism, cynicism and rigidity which propagate a neutral political liberalism with only the appearance of being Left, precisely, the conservative Left. Here Žižek uses the example of how the current political economy's propagation of freedom is in fact restrictive (2015):

In our global world, commodities circulate freely but not people. Discourse around porous walls and the threat of inundating foreigners are an inherent index of what is false about capitalist globalization. It is as

if the refugees want to extend the free, global circulation of commodities to people as well, but this is presently impossible due to the limitations imposed by global capitalism.

Even for those situated on the critical Left, Žižek poses some sobering and thought-provoking challenges. The Left is being confronted with new ways in which its practices can address tensions caused by the decreasing power of the nation state in the face of globalisation. However, to just ignore globalising forces cannot address the issues for Left, rather it is a lived actuality with which the Left needs to grapple. Whatever opinion one has of the Left still having ontological force, traction and therefore transformational capacity, the Left needs to actively respond to, for example, the current global recession, environmental degradation, continuing inequalities facing class and gender and the unequal division of increasingly scarce resources. The Left's old mantra of acting 'on behalf of' others is problematic in that people are being often unwittingly interpellated into ideological systems. For example, the one-world syndrome of the 21st century is problematic in that it holds on to divides as well as creating new ones, 'invisible walls' as Žižek calls them. If capitalism were to suddenly collapse, how are people to politically, culturally and subjectively represent themselves, without fully knowing what the future political economy will look like? There exists for the Left a strange and unnerving dialectic between dealing with the political and social crises that present here and now and imagining a future political reconfiguration. Jameson refers to Lenin when reflecting on this very issue (1990):

The problems of figuration that concern us will only become visible in the next stage, the passage from market to monopoly capital, or what Lenin called the 'stage of imperialism'; and they may be conveyed by way of a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience

Here we must return to Althusser, in particular his statement that ideology is to be understood within a dialectical tension (1971, p. 153): "the Imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence." Capitalism is like this, it is an illusory and totalising system operating at the level of the conscious as well as the hidden aspects of social and political life. It operates like Lacan's Master, as Fink candidly points out (1995, p. 131):

The master must be obeyed--not because we'll all be better off that way or for some other such rationale--but because he or she says so. NO justification is given for his or her power: it just is... The master must

show no weakness, and therefore carefully hides the fact that he or she, like everyone else, is a being of language and has succumbed to symbolic castration: the split between conscious and unconscious brought on by the signifier is veiled in the master's discourse...

It is a contradictory function of politics that it can orient desire and set it in motion, while simultaneously repressing it. The Master of capitalism undertakes this by negating or enslaving desire under specific ideological conditions. Even those subjects who resist this Master are still operating within its dominant discourse and further, in doing so are at risk of creating a new Master. So the question beckons: How can emancipatory politics fulfill revolutionary potential in a necessary absence of the Master? Žižek provide guidance here: the political act is where the solution lies. The act must not only displace the current Master of capitalism, but also traverse it in order to reveal that the Master has no literal meaning. Yet in doing so there is no finality, no certainty and certainly no new Master. Equally there is no investment in the Other, only the hope that the act counts for something. For Žižek it is important to confront those symptoms which hold together capitalism as the Master and the function of the Left today is to disentangle these symptoms and critique the political and social conditions which hold them in place.

Here the Left has quite a job ahead of it in its quest for a utopian vision because this quest requires remaining in a space of not-knowing, of uncertainty, of inevitable failure. More so it is not an easily desirable path to follow, nor is it paved with pragmatic endeavours that allow the good Leftist, in passing, to tick the boxes! The contrary must be anticipated. This does not escape Žižek when he states that (2015)

[w]e encounter here the old problem: What happens to democracy when the majority is inclined to vote for racist and sexist laws? I am not afraid to conclude: Emancipatory politics should not be bound *a priori* by formal-democratic procedures of legitimization. No, people quite often do NOT know what they want, or do not want what they know, or they simply want the wrong thing. There is no simple shortcut here.

This special issue attempts to address the role of the Left as both a historical and a potential future political force. In order to guarantee its future, it is crucial to now throw the Left into crisis, even posit it as a failure. As contributing authors conceptualise the Left in a variety of ways, what seems to be a common thread between them is a critical return to grand theories of Marx, Althusser and theology in order to make sense of the current crisis of the Left under capitalism. It is at this juncture that one needs to consider the somewhat anachronistic concept of class alongside the problematic one of identity but without the

conflating the two. The subject of the Left is currently in a quandary regarding its identity: although not unproblematic, it must confront the potential of universalism, notwithstanding its failings and misrecognitions. The mobilisation of people is the central feature of Leftist politics: all authors express this with varying degrees of critique. As Roland Boer, Ola Sigurdson, Won Choi and Jason Goldfarb state in their contributions, there needs to be a return to philosophy and modern critical theory. For example, in Mike Grimshaw's review of Žižek's *Absolute Recoil* he positions Žižek as one of the most radical *theologians* of the 21st century for suggesting that there is a role for critical theology in mobilising people to provide political traction and influence. In such ways, traditional institutions might provide both a forum and an infrastructure for sustainable radical collective action.

This special issue, although small, seeks to respond to the dilemma of the Left and the challenges it faces, also to provide a way for the Left to be ontologically and practically re-appropriated and reinvigorated so that it can inform, critique and respond to current political, social and environmental crises. The contributors reveal tensions within universalism, in tandem with the problems of globalisation. They grapple with how the nation-state can be reinvigorated within a globalised context in spite of the chaos this might involve. Important ontological ideas the Left could employ are highlighted. By both critiquing the Left and challenging it to stand back and survey current political and social landscapes, contributors suggest that the Left still has much to offer.

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