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Reply to Stephens

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Scott Stephens puts my book *Žižek's Politics* in the series of products distinctive of global capitalism—Diet Coke, decaffeinated coffee, and virtual sex. There's something appealing in this idea. *Žižek Lite* might have been a good title insofar as the book in no way tries to make Žižek more complex. Instead, it distills the political ideas he has developed in over twenty books through his rigorous engagements with Lacan, Hegel, and numerous other thinkers, demonstrating the insight these ideas provide into the current political impasse in which the American left finds itself.

As a political theorist working in the US, I am deeply frustrated with political theories that approach contemporary politics in terms of ethics or micropolitics (not to mention democratic theories that focus on deliberation). Highlighting freedom, multiplicity, and inclusivity, these theories tend to reject claims to truth or the need for decision, as if a politics where everything is possible and valuable is any politics at all. Žižek provides a clear alternative to these approaches. My specific goal in addressing the book to political theorists in the US is to demonstrate the political importance of Žižek's theorization of enjoyment. To this end, I show how enjoyment helps explain why a society championing speed, fluidity, and activity is in fact characterized by stasis, fixity, and passivity. Not surprisingly, this discussion draws out the superego injunction to enjoy characteristic of contemporary capitalism. The book further details the working of the notion of enjoyment in Žižek's discussions of nationalism, fascism, Stalinism, democracy, law, and the possibility of the act.

Stephens says *Žižek's Politics* is written for the American Left. This is true. I don't approach political theory neutrally and this book is in no way an effort to persuade neoliberals and neoconservatives to embrace dialectical materialism. Rather, to my mind

Žižek's emphasis on the capitalist context of multiculturalism, the primacy of class struggle, the possibility of impacting the Real through the symbolic, and the imperative of moving beyond hysterical demands and the security of the big Other contributes to the fundamental task of reformatting politics today. He challenges the Left to confront the impasse of democracy, to acknowledge democracy's failures, impossibilities, and deceits and take on confront the imperative of imagining another politics.

That I apply the American political context to Žižek, that I use examples from current American politics to explain or elucidate Žižek's insights, in no way means that I think the US experience is immediately universalizable, as Stephens asserts. Why would that follow? It doesn't. Rather, it means I think the US has a global impact—as do many countries, corporations, and movements in a globalized, interconnected, era. For me, as an American, to ignore the violence inflicted by the US military and the destruction and immiseration spread by US corporate and financial interests would be delusional—a mere gesture (and hardly “truly radical” as Stephens implies). Why not confront the impasse directly and try to grapple with it?

One of Stephen's central errors comes in his claim that I present Žižek as offering a fully worked out political program. I don't. I write: “he does not give us an answer; he does not know what we should do, but his thought provides an external point in relation to which we can organize, consider, and formalize our experiences as ideological subjects.”¹ Stephens implies that I present Žižek as knowing what is to be done. I don't. Instead, I argue that Žižek presents a systematic theory of politics and that the category of enjoyment is the key component of this system. Rather than leading to a political program, the centrality of the category of enjoyment helps explain why such an answer or prescription would be fantastic: it would require the imposition of a master signifier which would relieve the subject of responsibility for enjoyment, enable the subject to get off by doing its duty, or proliferate endless substitutes for enjoyment as the subject hysterically challenges, rejects, and transgresses whatever is prescribed. Indeed, the focus on enjoyment exposes the lure of purity and certainty: subjects want to avoid the risky fact of contingency and getting their hands dirty; once we recognize that even the purest position or principle is necessarily stained, complicit (in its own drive for purity), the security of a certain outcome or righteous justification is lost forever.

Stephens' ire seems to have two major targets, one, my political views and, two, my attempt to put Žižek to use. So, he pulls examples out of context, making the issue less about Žižek's concepts than about his own disdain for pathetic American leftists. My suppositions of Left readers, criticisms of Bush, and reaction to the Iraq war irk him no end. So, he makes insinuations regarding conspiracy theory—why not directly state that I write

about conspiracy theories?—Michael Moore and Naomi Klein. He disingenuously juxtaposes “serious political theory” and blogging (finding the book more like a blog, which isn’t surprising since, as I explain in the acknowledgements, I worked out many of the ideas in the book on my blog, “I Cite.”), even as he has co-written an article that found what I write on my blog serious enough to take on and critique in an academic piece.² Stephens implies that my position against the war is “bland Leftist pacifism,” even as there is nothing in the book that would lead to this impression (unless of course one mistakenly thinks that all opposition to the war in the US stemmed from pacifism). And, he reads my account of Bush in terms of post-politics as expressing a “populist liberal sentiment,” a delirious accusation insofar as liberalism and populism are typically understood as opposed.

What most bothers Stephens is that I am unable to recognize that I am “implicated in Žižek’s criticism of the Left.” Unfortunately, he doesn’t explain how I am implicated. Because I’m tenured? Because I talk about radical change? Or, simply because I am on the Left? It seems that for Stephens any left view is suspect, that Žižek’s politics is fundamentally incompatible with any left politics. I disagree. I read Žižek as arguing with leftists in order to change left thinking and politics, in order to shift our attention away from identity politics and toward capitalism, in order to get us to recognize the trap of democratic fundamentalism and the inevitable futility of any politics that understands itself only in terms of resistance and never with an eye toward actually exercising power.

Stephens’ other target is my use of Žižek. He thinks that the form of Žižek’s writing is politically more important than its content. In fact, his emphasis on form is so great that he views Žižek as always writing the same book, as forever unperturbed by external phenomena, as indifferent to external contingencies. Of course, he can only make this claim, not prove it or even give arguments for it. It’s like an article of faith—just like his claim that Žižek’s concepts “cannot be distilled off from their expression, from the eccentricities of his style.” I read Žižek differently. Where Stephens finds one book, I find many. I see changes in Žižek’s approach to democracy and his account of the Lacanian Real. I see books on Lacan and film, books on Christianity, books that engage his philosophical contemporaries, books that discuss central figures in the history of philosophy, and books that intervene into current political matters. Far from a thinker indifferent to external contingencies, I see a thinker responding to hurricane Katrina, riots in France, events in the middle east, and the attacks in the US that occurred on September 11th. And, I think that one can read and discuss these books, moves that necessarily require distilling Žižek’s concepts from his expression and their style.

Stephens says there is only one question that matters: what do thinking and writing mean for Žižek. That’s not what matters to me. What matters to me in trying to understand

the present is the possibility of moving beyond capitalism, of breaking through the world in which we are trapped and into another, better one. While hopelessly pathetic and naïve, these questions are to me more vital and alive than thinking Capital theologically, at the level of its substance, whatever that means. Given Stephens' antipathy to putting Žižek's thought to use, I suspect that it involves a kind of prayerful contemplation of the form of Žižek's work, the way this work gives form to Capital as such. It can't involve writing or discussing, since that would detach Žižek's concepts from his style. It won't involve much reading since any book by Žižek is the same as any other. In fact, it can't involve much thinking since detaching Žižek's concepts from their expression, grappling with them, and putting them to work is dismissed as impossible.

Maybe it's a good thing I didn't use the title *Žižek Lite*: it's much better suited for a book "truly radical" enough to ignore Žižek's concepts and focus on his form and style.

Endnotes:

1. Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006) xx.
2. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, "Play Fuckin' Loud: Žižek Versus the Left," *The Symptom: Online Journal for Lacan.com*. Available at http://www.lacan.com/symptom7_articles/butler.html.