An Interview with Slavoj Zizek

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Abstract

Slavoj Zizek is a fifty year old Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst working in both Lubiana and the United States. He has been renowned and widely read abroad for years. His first Italian translation appeared in 1999 (Il grande altro, Milan, Feltrinelli). At the end of the same year L’isterico sublime. Psicoanalisi e idealismo tedesco (Milan, SA/TUROS Edizioni) was published: this is a sort of psychoanalytic reading of the notion of subject, as it is investigated in Hegel’s works. Zizek has also published some essays in «aut aut» (nn.293-294 e 296-297). An attentive observer of mass social phenomena, of the political dimension and the mechanisms of power (from the Balcan conflicts to Hitchcock movies), Zizek investigates his subjects using both the traditional philosophical methods and the psychoanalytic approach, notably Lacan’s. In this interview, conducted by Fabio Polidori, we asked him to speak of his researches in the context of the present situation.

- How would you, as a social philosopher and critic, characterize the situation of the human subject today?

The icon of today's subject is perhaps the Indian computer programmer who, during the day, excels in his expertise, while in the evening, upon returning home, he lights the candle to the local Hindu divinity and respects the sacredness of the cow. What we encounter here is a certain radical split: on the one hand, we have the objectivized language of experts and scientists which can no longer be translated into the common language accessible to everyone, but is present in it in the mode of fetishized formulas that no one really understands, but which shape our artistic and popular imaginary (Black Hole, Big Bang, Superstrings, Quantum Oscillation...). The gap between this scientific insight and common sense is unbridgeable, and it is this very gap which elevates scientists into the popular cult-figures of the ‘subjects supposed to know’ (the Stephen Hawking phenomenon). The strict obverse of this objectivity is the way in which, in cultural matters, we are confronted with the multitude of life-styles which one cannot translate into each other: all we can do is secure the conditions for their tolerant coexistence in a multicultural society.

- In what social circumstances does such a subject thrive?

The predominant feature of our social life is the process usually described as that of ‘reflexivization’ or ‘second modernization’: individuals are deprived of the last vestiges of the support in tradition or nature. Even the features which, till recently, were considered as inherited or imposed (ethnic identity, sexual orientation), are now experienced as a matter of free choice. However, this process engenders its own opacity and raw immediacy: the rising fundamentalisms, neoracisms, and other forms of ‘irrational’ violence. These phenomena can in no way be dismissed as remainders of the past that will simply vanish when individuals will assume the full freedom and responsibility forced on them by the ‘second modernization’. Etienne Balibar distinguishes two opposite, but complementary, modes of excessive violence in today's society: the objective (structural) violence that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism (the ‘automatic’ creation of excluded and dispensable individuals, from the homeless to the unemployed) and the subjective violence of emerging ethnic and religious fundamentalisms.

This second violence involves its own mode of knowledge, that of impotent cynical reflection. Being pressed for his motives after assaulting foreigners, and if he is capable of
minimal theoretical reflection, the skinhead will suddenly begin to speak the idiom of social workers, sociologists and social psychologists, citing the problems of diminished social mobility, rising insecurity, the disintegration of paternal authority, the lack of maternal love in his early childhood... in short, he will provide a more or less coherent psycho-sociological account of his acts. The tradition of Enlightenment from Plato onwards presupposes that knowledge is in itself liberating: «they do it, because they do not know what they do» - when the erring subject reflects upon his acts, he will no longer commit them. Today, this presupposition is inverted: the violent youth «knows very well what he is doing, but he nonetheless does it». In the guise of the hooligan who, with an ironic smile, explains to a perplexed journalist the causes of his violent behaviour, the tolerant multiculturalist bent on understanding the forms of excessive violence gets his own message in its inverse, true form.

- You are also a psychoanalyst, so how does this change affect the domain of sexuality?

Today's sexuality is under the sign of the superego command to enjoy - superego designates the point at which permitted pleasure turns into ordained enjoyment. Nowhere is this clearer than in the unfortunate case of Viagra, the potency-pill that promises to biochemically restore the capacity of male erection, by-passing all problems of psychological inhibitions. Now that Viagra manages the erection, there is no excuse, you should enjoy sex. If not, it is your fault!

There are two main forms of this superego injunction. On the one hand, a totalitarian power goes even further than a traditional authoritarian power. It does not only tell you «Do your duty, whether you like it or not!», it tells you «Not only must you obey my orders and do your duty, you must do it with pleasure, you must enjoy doing it!» On the other hand, we have the obverse paradox of pleasure whose pursuit turns into duty. In a 'permissive' society, subjects experience the need to ‘have a good time’, to really enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty, and, consequently, feel guilty for failing to be happy. And the concept of superego designates precisely the interzone in which these two opposites overlap, i.e. in which the command to enjoy doing your duty overlaps with the duty to enjoy yourself.

- How does this superego agency relate to the market economy and its compulsion to consume? Is «Consume!» a version of the superego injunction «Enjoy!»?

Definitely. Let me take the ultimate commodity, Coca Cola. It is no surprise that Coke was first introduced as a medicine - its strange taste does not seem to provide any particular satisfaction, it is not directly pleasing and endearing; however, it is precisely as such, as transcending any immediate use-value (like water, bear or wine, which definitely do quench our thirst or produce the desired effect of satisfied calm), that Coke functions as the direct embodiment of ‘IT’, of the pure Mehrgenuss over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandises.

This very superfluous character makes our thirst for Coke all the more insatiable: Coke has the paradoxical property that, the more you drink it, the more you get thirsty, the greater the need to drink more of it - with its strange bitter-sweet taste, our thirst is never effectively quenched. (And is, at a wholly different level, something similar not taking place with the IMF's help to the developing Third World nations? Is it not that, the more such a state accepts IMF help and obeys its conditions or advices, the more it gets dependent on IMF and the more further help it needs?) So, when, some years ago, the publicity motto for Coke was «Coke, that's IT!», we should discern in it the entire ambiguity: «that's it» precisely insofar as that's NEVER effectively IT, precisely insofar as every satisfaction opens up a gap of «I want MORE!». The paradox is thus that Coke is not an ordinary commodity where its use-value is transubstantiated into an expression of the auratic dimension of pure (exchange-)Value, but a commodity whose very peculiar use-value itself is already a direct embodiment of the suprasensible aura of the ineffable
spiritual surplus, a commodity whose very material properties are already that of a commodity. This process is brought to its conclusion in the case of the caffein-free diet Coke - why? We drink Coke or a drink for two reasons: for its nutritional value and for its taste. In the case of the caffein-free diet Coke, its nutritional value is suspended and the caffein as the key ingredient of its taste is also taken away - all that remains is a pure semblance, an artificial promise of a substance which never materialized. Is it not that, in this sense, in the case of caffein-free diet Coke, we almost literally «drink nothing in the guise of something»? What I am referring to here is, of course, Nietzsche's classic opposition between 'wanting nothing' (in the sense of «I do not want anything») and the nihilistic stance of actively wanting the Nothingness itself; following Nietzsche's path, Lacan emphasized how, in anorexia, the subject does not simply ‘eat nothing’ - he rather actively wants to eat the Nothingness (the void) itself that is the ultimate object-cause of desire. So, along the same lines, in the case of the caffein-free diet Coke, we drink the Nothingness itself, the pure semblance of a property that is effectively merely an envelope of a void?

This example makes palpable the inherent link between three notions: the Marxist surplus-value, the Lacanian objet petit a as surplus-enjoyment (the concept that Lacan elaborated with direct reference to the Marxian surplus-value), and the paradox of the superego, perceived long ago by Freud: the more you drink Coke, the more you are thirsty; the more profit you have, the more you want; the more you obey the superego command, the more you are guilty - in all three cases, the logic of balanced exchange is perturbed in favor of an excessive logic of «the more you give (the more you repay your debts), the more you owe» (or «the more you possess of what you long for, the more you are missing, the greater your craving»); this logic is the very opposite of the paradox of love where, as Juliet put it in her immortal words to Romeo, «the more I give, the more I have».

- Is this superego-structure limited to the Western liberal societies of consumption, or is it also operative in the reaction to it, in so-called ethnic fundamentalisms?

Here is how Aleksandar Tijanic, a leading Serb columnist, describes «the strange kind of symbiosis between Milosevic and the Serbs»: «Milosevic generally suits the Serbs. In the time of his rule, Serbs abolished the time for working. No one does anything. He allowed the flourishing of the black market and smuggling. You can appear on the state TV and insult Blair, Clinton, or anyone else of the ‘world dignitaries’. [...] Furthermore, Milosevic gave us the right to carry weapons. He gave us the right to solve all our problems with weapons. He gave us also the right to drive stolen cars. [...] Milosevic changed the daily life of Serbs into one great holiday and enabled us all to feel like high-school pupils on a graduation trip - which means that nothing, but really nothing, of what you do can be punishable».

This, again, is the reign of superego at its purest: such a suspension of moral prohibitions. Superego is thus the properly obscene reversal of the permissive «You may!» into the prescriptive «You must!», the point at which permitted enjoyment turns into ordained enjoyment. We all know Kant's formula of the unconditional ethical imperative «Du kannst, denn du sollst!»; superego inverts this Kantian «You can, because you should!" into «You should, because you can!". Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the unfortunate Viagra, the potency-pill that promises to restore the capacity of male erection in a purely bio-chemical way, by-passing all problems with psychological inhibitions: now that Viagra takes care of the erection, there is no excuse, you should enjoy sex, if not, it is your guilt! In a ‘permissive’ society, subjects experience the need to «have a good time," to really enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty, and, consequently, feel guilty for failing to be happy... In a closer analysis, one should oppose the ‘totalitarian’ to the liberal-permissive YOU MAY!. In both cases, the message is «You may - possess the object without paying the proper price for desiring it." And, in both cases, this
avoidance of paying the price for desire exacts a price of its own. In permissive liberalism, the «You may!" of freely inventing your Self gets entangled in the intricate cobweb of prohibitions concerning the well-being of yourself and your neighbors (what not to eat and drink, the rules of safe sex, the prohibition to injure the Other...); in an exactly symmetrical way, the totalitarian «You may..." (ignore your own and your neighbor's well-being) demands the subordination to the figure of the Master. And my point is that the concept of superego designates precisely the interzone in which these two opposites overlap, i.e. in which the command to enjoy doing your duty overlaps with the duty to enjoy yourself.

- What happens here with the good old working class?

Typically, in today's Western critical and political discourse, the term ‘worker’ is gradually disappearing from the vocabulary, and is substituted by ‘immigrants /immigrant workers’ (Turks in Germany, Algerians in France, Mexicans in the USA) - in this way, the class problematic of workers' exploitation is transformed into the multiculturalist problematic of the ‘intolerance towards the Other’, as if we exploit them because we cannot tolerate their Otherness. The obsession of the multiculturalist liberals with protecting immigrants's ethnic rights clearly draws its energy from the repressed class dimension. Although Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the ‘end of history’ quickly fell into disrepute, we still silently presume that the liberal-democratic capitalist global order is somehow the finally-found ‘natural’ social regime, we still implicitly conceive conflicts in the Third World countries as a subspecies of natural catastrophes, as outbursts of quasi-natural violent passions, or as conflicts based on the fanatic identification to one's ethnic roots (and what is ‘the ethnic’ here if not again a codeword for nature?). This massive reemergence of nature is the paradoxical obverse of what social theorists diagnose as the reflexivization of social life.

This obliteration of the working class is an effect of the division between virtual/symbolic site of ‘creative’ planning-programming and its execution, its material realization; the latter is more and more done in the Third World sweet shops, from Indonesia to China. On the one hand, there is the pure ‘frictionless’ planning, done in research ‘campuses’ or glass-wall corporate buildings; on the other hand, there is the ‘invisible’ dirty execution, taken into account by the planners mostly in the guise of ‘environmental costs’. This split is today more radical than ever, since the two sides are even geographically often separated by thousands of miles. For this reason, in today's ideological perception, it is work itself (manual labor as opposed to ‘symbolic’ activity), and not sex, which is progressively perceived as the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye. The tradition which goes back to Richard Wagner's Rheingold and Fritz Lang's Metropolis, the tradition in which the working process takes place underground, in dark caves, today culminates in the millions of anonymous workers sweating in the Third World factories, from Chinese gulags to Indonesian or Brasil assembly lines - in their invisibility, the West can afford itself to babble about the ‘disappearing working class’. What is crucial here is the equation of labor with crime, the idea that labor, hard work, is originally an indecent criminal activity to be hidden from the public eye. The only moments in a Hollywood film where we still see the production process in all its intensity occur when the action hero penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there the site of intense labor (distilling and packaging the drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York...). When, in a James Bond movie, the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of the production in a factory? And, in the triumphant final of the film, Bond, of course, destroys this site of production, so that we can return to our consumerist paradise.

- The usual liberal counter-argument is that, nonetheless, universal human rights are today in
an unprecedented way asserted as the supreme point of reference of political interventions: as the recent bombing of Yugoslavia shows, they can even legitimate military attacks on a sovereign state.

Yes, but the first paradox to note is that, in our permissive society, human rights tend to be more and more reduced to the Rights to violate the ten Commandments. ‘The right to privacy’ - the right to adultery, done in secret, when no one sees me or has the right to probe into my life. ‘The right to pursue happiness and to possess private property’ - the right to steal (to exploit others). ‘Freedom of the press and of the expression of opinion’ - the right to lie. ‘The right of the free citizens to possess weapons’ - the right to kill. And, ultimately, ‘freedom of religious belief’ - the right to celebrate false gods.

Furthermore, what bothers me apropos of the recent comeback of human rights is that they rely on what Nietzsche identified as the moralistic ressentiment and envy: they imply the fake gesture of the disavowed politics, of assuming a ‘moral’, depoliticized stance in order to make a stronger political case. We are dealing here with a perverted version of what, in the good old days of dissidence, Vaclav Havel called the «power of the powerless»: one manipulates one's powerlessness as a stratageme in order to gain more power, in exactly the same way that today, in our politically correct times, in order for one's voice to gain authority, one has to legitimize oneself as being some kind of a (potential or actual) victim of power. This stance is not assertive, but controlling, leveraging, bridling - like the ‘ethical committess’ in sciences popping up everywhere today, which are mainly concerned with how to define the limits and prevent things (say, biogenetic engineering) from happening. So, in this perspective, every actual ACT is bad: when Serbs cleanse Kosovo of Albanians, it's bad; when NATO intervenes to prevent it, it's bad; when the KLA strikes back, it's bad - every excuse is good, since it allows us to claim that, of course, we await and want an act, but a proper moralistic act the conditions for which are just never here - like the proverbial falsely enlightened husband who, in principle, agrees that his wife can take lovers, but complains apropos of every actual lover she chooses «Ok, you can have lovers, but not THIS one, why did you have to pick up precisely THIS miserable guy!?»

- The reference to human rights nonetheless provides for the minimal protection of the victims of ruthless violence...

Yes, but it is this very logic of the depoliticized victimization that I find problematic. A report by Steven Erlanger on the suffering of the Kosovo Albanians in «The New York Times» (In One Kosovo Woman, An Emblem of Suffering, May 12 1999) offers here a perfect example. Already its title is telling-taling: In One Kosovo Woman, An Emblem of Suffering - the subject to be protected (by the NATO intervention) is from the outset identified as a powerless victim of circumstances, deprived of all political identity, reduced to the bare suffering. Her basic stance is that of excessive suffering, of traumatic experience that blurs all differences: «She's seen too much, Meli said. She wants a rest. She wants it to be over». As such, she is beyond any political recrimination - an independent Kosovo is not on her agenda, she just wants the horror over: «Does she favor an independent Kosovo? ‘You know, I don't care if it's this or that', Meli said. ‘I just want all this to end, and to feel good again, to feel good in my place and my house with my friends and family’. Her support of the foreign (NATO) intervention is grounded in her wish for all this horror to be over: «She wants a settlement that brings foreigners here 'with some force behind them.' She is indifferent about who the foreigners are». Consequently, she sympathizes with all the sides in an all-embracing humanist stance: «'There is tragedy enough for everyone’, she says, ‘I feel sorry for the Serbs who've been bombed and died, and I feel sorry for my own people. But maybe now there will be a conclusion, a settlement for good. That would be great'». - Here we have the ideological construction of the ideal subject-victim to whose aid NATO
intervenes: not a political subject with a clear agenda, but a subject of helpless suffering, sympathizing with all suffering sides in the conflict, caught in the madness of a local clash that can only be pacified by the intervention of a benevolent foreign power, a subject whose innermost desire is reduced to the almost animal craving to ‘feel good again’...

In short, while NATO is intervening in order to protect the Kosovar victims, it is at the same time well taking care that THEY WILL REMAIN VICTIMS, not an active politico-military force capable of defending itself. The strategy of NATO is thus perverse in the precise Freudian sense of the term: it is itself (co)responsible for the calamity against which it offers itself as a remedy (like the mad governess from Patricia Highsmith's Heroine, who sets the family house on fire in order to be able to prove her devotion to the family by bravely saving the children from the raging fire...). What we encounter here is again the paradox of victimization: the Other to be protected is good IN SO FAR AS IT REMAINS A VICTIM (which is why we are bombarded with pictures of helpless Kosovar mothers, children and elder people, telling moving stories of their suffering); the moment it no longer behaves as a victim, but wants to strike back on its own, it all of a sudden magically turns into a terrorist/fundamentalist/drug-trafficking Other...

- We are now, finally, at Yugoslavia, your ex-country. How do you respond to those Leftists who express a nostalgic longing for ex-Yugoslavia?

The ultimate irony of such longing is that it ends up identifying as the successor of Yugoslavia the very force that effectively killed it, namely the Serbia of Milosevic. In the post-Yugoslav crisis of the 90s, the only political entity that can be said to stand for the positive legacy of the Titoist Yugoslavia - the much-praised multiculturalist tolerance - was the (‘Muslim’) Bosnia: the Serb aggression on Bosnia was (also) the aggression of Milosevic, the first true post-Titoist (the first Yugoslav politician who effectively acted as if Tito is dead, as a perceptive Serb social scientist put it more than a decade ago), against those who desperately clinged to the Titoist legacy of ethnic ‘brotherhood and unity’. No wonder that the supreme commander of the ‘Muslim’ army was General Rasim Delic, an ethnic Serb; no wonder that, all through the 90s, the ‘Muslim’ Bosnia was the only part of ex-Yugoslavia in whose government offices Tito's portraits were still hanging. To obliterate this crucial aspect of the Yugoslav war and to reduce the Bosnian conflict to the civil war between different ‘ethnic groups’ in Bosnia is not a neutral gesture, but a gesture that in advance adopts the standpoint of one of the sides in the conflict (Serbia). In short, the TRUE ‘separatist’ was none other than Milosevic himself who undermined the fragile balance that kept together Tito's Yugoslavia, and, paradoxical as it may sound, the separation from HIM was, for the others, the only way to save what was positive in the idea (political project) of Yugoslavia.

- The choice that confronts ex-Yugoslav republics seems to be the choice between embracing Western liberal capitalism or persisting in their ethnic self-enclosure - do you see a third way?

I think this is a false alternative and there IS a third choice, the combination of the first two options - what I am tempted to call ‘Russification’ of Serbia. What if, after Milosevic, we'll get a new ruling elite, composed of the corrupted nouveau riches and members of the present political class, that will present themselves to the West as ‘pro-Western’ (in order to get Western financial support), while endlessly postponing true democratic changes, justifying it by special circumstances, and (while, in the internal politics, actually following the nationalist line) claiming that, if the West withdraws its support from it, the nationalist hardliners will take over again?

- So how are we to break out of this deadlock?
A year or so ago, there was on Austrian TV a round table about Kosovo with a Serb, a Kosovar Albanian and a German-speaking pacifist. The Serb and the Kosovar were arguing in a clear and ‘rational’ way (rational, of course, if one accepts the underlying politico-ideological premise of their respective reasoning): the Serb for the Serb right to retain their hold over Kosovo, the Kosovar for the right of the Albanian majority there to freely decide their fate; the pacifist basically ignored their argumentation and just repeatedly insisted that they should renounce violence and promise not to shoot and kill each other, that they should strive to replace intolerance and hatred with the tolerant acceptance of the Other... In the midst of these pacifist's ruminations, the Serb and the Kosovar, the two sworn enemies, quickly, almost imperceptibly, exchanged their glances in an amused and perplexed way, as if, in an unexpected gesture of solidarity, saying to each other: «What is this idiot talking about? How can he be so stupid as not to understand ANYTHING AT ALL?» And my point is that if this brief moment of solidarity could have been somehow operationalized (to put it in an ironically-brutal way, if the Serb and the Kosovar were to tell to each other: «Do we really have to take this crap? Let's just shoot the idiot and go on...»), there would be some real hope for the Serb-Kosovar relations. That is to say, how are we to interpret this solidary exchange of gazes? The obvious way would be to read it as the sign of the obscene solidarity of ‘primitive’ ethnic murderers directed against a sincere civilized pacifist: «Let him go, the idiot doesn't know what pleasure ethnic hatred can bring!». However, what if the perplexion of the two ex-Yugoslavs rather expressed their awareness of how the pacifist's attitude itself displayed a patronizing racist ignorance?

- Your position towards the so-called ‘Third Way’ the renewal of Western social democracy as practiced by Tony Blair and his peers, must be then pretty critical?

According to the media, when, at a recent meeting of the leaders of the Western great powers, dedicated to the politico-ideological notion of the ‘Third Way’, the Italian prime minister D'Alema said that one should not be afraid of the word ‘socialism’, Clinton and, following him, Blair and Schroeder, could not restrain themselves and openly bursted out in laughter - this anecdote tells a lot about the problematic character of today's talk about the Third Way. Crucial is here the curious enigma of the second way: which is today the SECOND way? That is to say, did the notion of the Third Way not emerge at the very moment when, at least in the developed West, all other alternatives, from true conservatism to radical Social Democracy, lost in the face of the triumphant onslaught of the global capitalism and its notion of liberal democracy? Is therefore the true message of the notion of the Third Way not simply that THERE IS NO SECOND WAY, no actual ALTERNATIVE to the global capitalism, so that, in a kind of mocking pseudo-Hegelian negation of negation this much-praised ‘Third Way’ brings us back to the FIRST AND ONLY way - the Third Way is simply the global capitalism with a human face, i.e. an attempt to minimize the human costs of the global capitalist machinery, whose functioning is left undisturbed.