Clown Prince of the Revolution
On Slavoj Žižek, a new kind of leftist thinker

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RESUMEN: A few decades ago a new kind of leftist thinker has emerged —one who clothes his revolutionary zeal in a layer of irony, half-dismissing his own impractical idealism as though speaking through the face paint of a clown. Under this framework, this article analyzes and evaluates the phenomenon of pop-psychoanalytic Stalinism by Slavoj Žižek.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Marxism; Revolution; Hegel; Psychoanalysis; Socialism.

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During the 1960s and 1970s, the consensus in Western academic and intellectual institutions was very much on the left. Writers like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu shot to eminence by attacking the civilization they dismissed as "bourgeois". The critical–theory writings of Jürgen Habermas achieved a dominant place in the curriculum in the social sciences, despite their stupefying tediousness. The rewriting of national history as a tale of "class struggle", undertaken by Eric Hobsbawm in Britain and Howard Zinn in the United States, became a near–orthodoxy not only in university history departments but also in high schools. For us dissidents, it was a dispiriting time, and there was scarcely a morning when I did not wake up during those years, asking myself whether my teaching at the University of London was the right choice of career. Then came the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, and I allowed myself to hope.

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ARTICULO

For a while, it looked as though an apology might be forthcoming from those who had devoted their intellectual and political efforts to whitewashing the crimes of the Soviet Union or praising the "people's republics" of China and Vietnam. But the moment proved short–lived. Within a decade, the Left establishment was back in the driver's seat, with Zinn and Noam Chomsky renewing their intemperate denunciations of America, the European Left regrouped against "neoliberalism" (the new name for the free economy) as though this had been the trouble all along, Habermas and Ronald Dworkin collecting prestigious prizes for their barely readable defenses of ruling leftist platitudes, and the veteran Marxist Hobsbawm rewarded for a lifetime of unswerving loyalty to the Soviet Union by his appointment as "Companion of Honour" to the Queen.

True, the enemy was no longer described as before: the Marxist template did not easily fit the new conditions, and it seemed a trifle foolish to champion the cause of the working class, when its last members were joining the ranks of the unemployable or the self-employed. But one thing remained unchanged in the wake of Communism's collapse: the conviction that it was unacceptable to be on the "right." You might have doubts about certain leftist doctrines or policies; you might entertain the thought that this or that leftist thinker or politician had made "mistakes." But that was as far as self–criticism could go; by contrast, merely to entertain a right–wing thought was to place yourself in the devil's camp.

Thus, within a couple of years, the Manichaean vision of modern politics, as a fight to the death between the good Left and the evil Right, returned to its dominant position. Assuring the world that they had never really been taken in by Communist propaganda, leftist thinkers renewed their attacks on Western civilization and its "neoliberal" economics as the principal threat to humanity in a globalized world. The term "right–wing" has remained as much a term of abuse today as it was before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and leftist attitudes have adapted themselves to the new conditions with little moderation of their oppositional zeal.

There has, however, been one important change. A new kind of leftist thinker has emerged —one who clothes his revolutionary zeal in a layer of

irony, half–dismissing his own impractical idealism as though speaking through the face paint of a clown. If you set out to study in a humanities department at an American university, it won't be long before you come across the name of Slavoj Žižek, the philosopher who grew up in the comparatively mild regime of Communist Yugoslavia, qualified as a "dissident" during the declining years of Communism in his native Slovenia, but is now making waves as a radical critic of the West, though one whose tongue is always in his cheek.

It is proof of the Yugoslav regime's leniency that Žižek was able to spend time in Paris during the early 1980s. There, he came across the psychoanalyst Jacques–Alain Miller, whose seminar he attended and who also became Žižek's analyst. Miller is the son–in–law of Jacques Lacan, the unscrupulous power–maniac whom Raymond Tallis has described as "the shrink from Hell", and it is an unfortunate price to pay for the endeavor to understand Žižek that you have to engage with Lacan, too.

Lacan's collected *Écrits*, published in 1966, were one of the sources drawn upon by the student revolutionaries in May 1968. Thirty–four volumes of his seminars followed, published by his disciples and subsequently translated into English, or at least into a language that resembles English as closely as the original resembles French. The influence of these seminars is one of the deep mysteries of modern intellectual life. Their garbled regurgitation of theories that Lacan neither explored nor understood is, for sheer intellectual effrontery, without parallel in recent literature. Unexplained technicalities, excerpted from set theory, particle physics, linguistics, topology, and whatever else might seem to confer power on the wizard who conjures with them, are used to prove such spectacular theorems as that the erectile penis in bourgeois conditions is equal to the square root of minus one or that you do not (until worked on by Lacan) "ex-sist".

Another Lacanian concept —that of the big Other— is crucial to understanding Žižek. Following the famous lectures on Hegel by Alexandre Kojève, delivered at the Institut des Hautes Études before World War II and attended by everybody who was anybody in the Parisian literary world

(Lacan included), the idea of the Other became a fixture in French philosophical writing. The great and subtle argument of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to the effect that we attain self-consciousness and freedom through the recognition of the Other, has been recycled again and again by those who attended Kojève's lectures. You find it in Jean–Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Georges Bataille. And you find it, horribly garbled, in Lacan.

For Lacan, the big Other (capital *A* for *Autre*) is the challenge presented to the self by the not–self. This big Other haunts the perceived world with the thought of a dominating and controlling power —a power that we both seek and flee from. There is also the little other (lowercase *a* for *autre*), who is not really distinct from the self but is the thing seen in the mirror during that stage of development that Lacan calls the "mirror stage", when the infant supposedly catches sight of himself in the glass and says "Aha!" That is the point of recognition, when the infant first encounters the "object = a," which, in some way that I find impossible to decipher, indicates both desire and its absence.

The mirror stage provides the infant with an illusory (and brief) idea of the self, as an all–powerful other in the world of others. But this self is soon to be crushed by the big Other, a character based on the good–breast/bad-breast, good–cop/bad–cop scenario invented by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. In the course of expounding the tragic aftermath of this encounter, Lacan comes up with astounding *aperçus*, often repeated without explanation by his disciples, as though they have changed the course of intellectual history. One in particular is constantly repeated: "there is no sexual relation", an interesting observation from a serial seducer, from whom no women, not even his own analysands, were safe.

In addition, Lacan is credited with the view that the subject does not exist beyond the mirror stage until brought into being by an act of "subjectivization". You become a self–conscious subject by taking possession of your world and incorporating its otherness into your self. In this way, you begin to "ex-sist" —to exist outwardly, in a community of others.

Lacan's ruminations on the Other appear constantly in Žižek's writings, which offer proof of one feature in which the Communist system had the edge on its Western rivals: they are the products of a seriously educated mind. Žižek writes perceptively of art, literature, cinema, and music, and when he is considering the events of the day —be it American presidential elections or Islamist extremism in the Middle East— he always has something interesting and challenging to say. He has learned Marxism not as a flamboyant pursuit of an academic leisure class but as an attempt to discover the truth about our world. He has studied Hegel in depth, and in what are surely his two most sustained pieces of writing —*The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and Part I of *The Ticklish Subject* (1999)— he shows how to apply this study to the confused times in which we live. He has responded to the poetry of Hegel as well as to the metaphysics, and he has retained the Hegelian longing for a total perspective, in which being and nothingness, affirmation and negation, are brought into relation and reconciled.

If he had stayed in Slovenia, and if Slovenia had stayed Communist, Žižek would not have been the nuisance he has since become. Indeed, the release of Žižek into the world of Western scholarship could almost suffice to make one regret the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. By seizing on Lacan's psychoanalytic vision as the transcendental ground for his new socialist philosophy, Žižek raises the level of excitement beyond anything achieved by the dreary socialists who are the normal product of the Western academy. And his slick, all–inclusive style offers constant hints of persuasive argument. He can sometimes be read with ease for pages at a time, with a full sense that he is sharing matters that could form an understanding between himself and his reader. At the same time, he passes quickly over outrageous statements that seem, at first, to be slips of the pen but that the reader discovers, in time, to be the true content of his message.

As an indication of Žižek's style, here are some of the topics touched on in three consecutive pages, chosen more or less at random, from his engaging 2008 book *In Defense of Lost Causes*: the Turin shroud; the Koran and the scientific worldview; the Tao of physics; secular humanism; Lacan's

theory of fatherhood; truth in politics; capitalism and science; Hegel on art and religion; postmodernity and the end of grand narratives; psychoanalysis and modernity; solipsism and cyberspace; masturbation; Hegel and objective spirit; Richard Rorty's pragmatism; and is there or is there not a big Other?

The machine–gun rattle of topics and concepts makes it easy for Žižek to slip in his little pellets of poison, which the reader, nodding in time to the rhythm of the prose, might easily swallow unnoticed. Thus, we are not "to reject terror *in toto*but to re-invent it"; we must recognize that the problem with Hitler, and with Stalin, too, is that they "were not violent enough"; we should accept Mao's "cosmic perspective" and read the Cultural Revolution as a positive event. Rather than criticizing Stalinism as immoral, we should praise it for its humanity, since it rescued the Soviet experiment from "biopolitics"; besides, Stalinism is not immoral but too *moral*, since it relied on the figure of the big Other, which, as all Lacanians know, is the primordial mistake of the moralist. We must also recognize that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is "the only true choice today".

Žižek's defense of terror and violence, his call for a new Party organized on Leninist principles, his celebration of Mao's Cultural Revolution, the countless deaths notwithstanding and, indeed, lauded as part of the meaning of a politics of action —all this might have served to discredit Žižek among more moderate left–wing readers, were it not for the fact that it is never possible to be sure that he is serious. Maybe he is laughing —not only at himself and his readers but at an academic establishment that can seriously include Žižek alongside Kant and Hegel on the philosophy curriculum, with a *Journal of Žižek Studies* now in its fourth year of publication. Maybe he is cheering us all on in a holiday from thinking, scoffing at the idiots who imagine that there is anything else to be done with thinking than to escape from it:

> Here, however, one should avoid the fatal trap of conceiving the subject as the act, the gesture, which intervenes afterwards in order to fill in the ontological gap, and insist on the irreducible vicious cycle of subjectivity: "the wound is healed only by the spear

> which smote it," that is, the subject "is" the very gap filled in by the gesture of subjectivization (which, in Laclau, establishes a new hegemony; which, in Rancière, gives voice to the "part no part"; which, in Badiou, assumes fidelity to the Truth-Event; etc.). In short, the Lacanian answer to the question asked (and answered in a negative way) by such different philosophers as Althusser, Derrida and Badiou—"Can the gap, the opening, the Void which precedes the gesture of subjectivization, still be called 'subject'?"—is an emphatic "Yes!"—the subject is both at the same time, the ontological gap (the "night of the world," the madness of radical self-withdrawal) as well as the gesture of subjectivization which, by means of a short circuit between the Universal and the Particular, heals the wound of this gap (in Lacanese: the gesture of the Master which establishes a "new harmony"). *"Subjectivity" is a name for this irreducible circularity, for a power which does not fight an external resisting force (say, the inertia of the given substantial order), but an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately "is" the subject itself.* In other words the subject's very endeavor to fill in the gap retroactively sustains and generates this gap.

Notice the sudden intrusion into the logorrhea of a long italicized sentence, no clearer than any others, as though Žižek had paused to draw a conclusion before passing exultantly to the next half-formed conception.

The passage is part of a contribution to the Lacanian theory of "subjectivization". But its main import is to bring home to the reader that, whatever might be said by the other purveyors of fashionable nonsense, Žižek has said it, too, and that all truths, all insights, all useful nuggets of leftist nonsense, are tributaries flowing into the unstanchable flood of his all–comprehending negativity. The prose is an invitation: you the reader should plunge in, so as to be washed clean of the taint of reasoned argument and to enjoy, at last, the refreshing waters of the mind, which flow from topic to topic and from place to place unimpeded by realities, always flowing to the left.

Žižek publishes at the rate of two or three books a year. He writes at an ironical distance from himself, aware that acceptance is obtainable in no other way. But he is also concerned to undermine the superficial plausibility of the consumerist society that has replaced the old order of Communist Yugoslavia and to discover the deep *spiritual* cause of its ailments. When he is not writing allusively, jumping like a grasshopper from topic to topic, he

is trying to unmask what he sees as the self–deceptions of the global capitalist order. Like his other master, the far–left French philosopher Alain Badiou, he fails to provide a clear alternative. But absent a clear alternative, an unclear alternative —even a purely imaginary one— will do, whatever the consequences. As he puts it, using Badiou's language: "Better a disaster of fidelity to the Event than a non–being of indifference towards the Event". (The Event being the always longed–for, and always postponed, Revolution).

To summarize Žižek's position is not easy: he slips between philosophical and psychoanalytical ways of arguing and is spellbound by Lacan's gnomic utterances. He is a lover of paradox and believes strongly in what Hegel called "the labor of the negative", though following Lacan in taking negation to its extreme point —not simply as a way of setting limits to a concept but as a way of *ruling it out*. We become self–conscious by an act of total negation: by learning that there is no subject. Instead of the subject, there is the act of subjectivization, which is a defense against the subject —a way in which I prevent myself from become a substance, an identity, a center of being. The subject does not exist before subjectivization. But through subjectivization, I read myself back into the condition that preceded my self–awareness. I am what I become, and I become what I am by filling the void of my past.

For Žižek, as for Lacan, there is the "little other", which appears as the object of fantasy, and also of desire; and the big Other, the mother imago, which dominates the growing child, the authority–bringing order, the "consistent, closed totality" to which we aspire but that always eludes us, since "there is no big Other." As with the subject, so with the object —it doesn't exist, and nonexistence is its way of existing. This is the aspect of Lacan that Žižek finds most exciting— the magic wand that conjures visions and promptly waves them to nothingness.

Žižek uses this mystical vision to take shortcuts to many of his surprising conclusions. It is because Stalinism relies on the figure of the big Other that it is too moral —a nice excuse that nobody is in a position to refute. Democracy is no solution because, though it implies a "barred big Other", as

Jacques–Alain Miller has apparently shown, there is another big Other— the "procedural big Other" of electoral rules, which have to be obeyed, whatever the result.

But perhaps the real danger is populism, in which the big Other returns in the guise of the People. Or is it okay to invoke the People, if you do so in the spirit of Robespierre, whose invocation of Virtue "redeems the virtual content of terror from its actualization"? There is no knowing, but who cares? Certainly not Žižek, who takes refuge behind the skirts of the big Other whenever the little others come with their irritating questions. In this way, he can defend himself from the antitotalitarians, whose thoughts are "a worthless sophistic exercise, a pseudo–theorization of the lowest opportunist survivalist fears and instincts" —language that has all the authenticity of those Newspeak denunciations that composed the editorials of *Pravda*, *Rudé Právo*, and the Slovenian *Delo* in the days of Žižek's youth.

From Lacan, Žižek also takes the idea that mental processes fall into three distinct categories: fantasy, symbol, and the reaching for the Real. Desire comes through fantasy, which proposes both the object = a (the *objet petit a*), and the first subjectivization: the mirror stage, in which desire (and its lack) enter the infant psyche. The notion of fantasy is connected with that key term of Lacanian analysis —a term that incidentally entered and dominated French literary theory under the influence of Roland Barthes— namely, *jouissance*, Lacan's substitute for the Freudian "pleasure principle". Fantasies enter our lives and persist because they bring enjoyment, and they are revealed in *symptoms*, those irrational–seeming fragments of behavior through which the psyche protects its achieved terrain of enjoyment from the threatening realities of the world beyond —from the unvisitable world of the Real.

This thought gives rise to a spectacular emendation to Freud's idea of the superego, expressed in terms that unite Kant with the Marquis de Sade:

> It is a commonplace of Lacanian theory to emphasize how [the] Kantian moral imperative conceals an obscene superego injunction: "Enjoy!"—the voice of the Other impelling us to follow our duty for the sake of duty is a traumatic irruption of an appeal

> to impossible *jouissance*, disrupting the homeostasis of the pleasure principle and its prolongation, the reality principle. This is why Lacan conceives Sade as the truth of Kant.

Having pushed the nonsense machine this far, so as to identify Kant and Sade, and thereby to dismiss as a kind of obscenity the Enlightenment morality by which Western society has tried for two centuries to anchor itself, Žižek is able to offer a new theory of ideology, one that renews the Marxist critique of capitalism.

Ideology, in the classical Marxist analysis, is understood in functional terms, as the system of illusions through which power achieves legitimacy. Marxism offers a scientific diagnosis of ideology, reducing it to a symptom, showing how things *really* are behind the fetishes. By doing so, it "opens our eyes" to the truth: we see exploitation and injustice where previously we had seen contract and free exchange. The illusory screen of commodities, in which relations between people appear as the law–like motion of things, crumbles before us and reveals the human reality: stark, unadorned, and changeable. In short, by tearing away the veil of ideology, we prepare the way for revolution.

But in that case, Žižek reasonably asks, why has the revolution not come? Why is it that capitalism, achieving this consciousness of itself, continues to assert its ever–growing dominion, sucking more and more of human life into the maelstrom of commodity consumption? Žižek's answer is that ideology is renewed through fantasy. We cling to the world of commodities as the scene of our deeper *jouissance*, and we shun the reality beyond, the Real that refuses to be known. We come to understand ideology not as serving the capitalist economy but as serving itself —it is enjoyable for its own sake, in the way that art and music are.

Ideology becomes a toy in our hands —we both accept it and laugh at it, knowing that everything has its price in our world of illusions but that nothing of value will ever appear there. This, at least, is how I read remarks like this one, which is about as clear as Žižek gets on the topic:

> Why must this inversion of the relation of aim and means remain hidden, why is its revelation self-defeating? Because it would reveal the enjoyment which is at work in ideology, in the ideological renunciation itself. In other words, it would reveal that ideology serves only its own purpose, that it does not serve anything—which is precisely the Lacanian definition of jouissance.

It is at this point, however, that clarity is imperative. Is Žižek telling us that the world of commodities and markets is with us to stay and that we must learn to make the best of it? What does it mean that he has arrived at his position by deploying those strange Lacanian categories that appear throughout his prose in lieu of foundations but that are themselves entirely foundationless? Is there a real argument here, one that might be convincing to a person who has not had the benefit of brainwashing by Jacques–Alain Miller? Almost always, at the critical juncture, when a clear argument is needed, Žižek takes refuge behind a rhetorical question, into which he packs all the mysterious incantations of the Lacanian liturgy:

> Is not the paradoxical topology of the movement of capital, the fundamental blockage which resolves and reproduces itself through frenetic activity, excessive power as the very form of appearance of a fundamental impotence—this immediate passage, this coincidence of limit and excess, of lack and surplus—precisely that of the Lacanian objet petit a, of the leftover which embodies the fundamental, constitutive lack?

The syntactical pressure exerted by such rhetorical questions is directed toward the response: "Of course, I should have known that already." The goal is to *escape the real question*, which is that of the meaning and foundation of the terms. I give another and spectacular example, since it is directly relevant to the theme:

> Is not the ultimate domain of psychoanalysis the connection between the symbolic Law and desire? Is not the multitude of perverse satisfactions the very form in which the connection between Law and desire is realized? Is not the Lacanian division of the subject the division that concerns precisely the subject's relationship to the symbolic

> Law? Furthermore, is not the ultimate confirmation of this Lacan's "Kant avec Sade," which directly posits the Sadeian universe of morbid perversion as the "truth" of the most radical assertion of the moral weight of symbolic Law in human history (Kantian ethics)?

If you answered no to any of those questions, the response would be *"No? What on earth do you mean, no?"* For the *real* question is: "What exactly do *you* mean?"

But this brings me to the heart of Žižek's leftism. The Real, touched by Lacan's magic wand, vanishes. It is the primary absence, the "truth" that is also castration. The wand waves away reality and thereby gives fresh life to the dream. It is in the world of dreams, therefore, that morality and politics are now to be implanted. What matters is not the discredited world of merely empirical events but the goings-on in the dream world, the world of the exalted intellectuals, for whom ideas and enthusiasms cancel mere realities.

Thus, in a singularly repulsive essay on "Revolutionary Terror", Žižek praises the "humanist terror" of Robespierre and Saint-Just (as opposed to the "anti–humanist, or rather inhuman", terror of the Nazis) not because it was particularly kind to its victims but because it expressed the "utopian explosions of political imagination" of its perpetrators. No matter that the terror led to the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of innocent people and the deaths of as many more. The statistics are irrelevant, waved away by Lacan's wand, reduced to the square root of minus one —a purely imaginary number. What is relevant is the way in which, through speeches that Žižek would recognize to be self–vaunting bombast did his critical faculties not desert him in the face of a revolutionary hero, Robespierre "redeemed the virtual content of terror from its actualisation".

In this way, for Žižek, thought cancels reality, when the thought is "on the left". It matters less what you do than what you think you are doing, provided what you think you are doing has the ultimate goal of emancipation —of *égaliberté*, as the Marxian theorist Étienne Balibar expresses it. The goal is not equality or liberty conceived in the qualified

sense that you or I would understand those terms. It is absolute equality (with a bit of liberty thrown in, if you are lucky), which can, by its nature, be achieved only by an act of total destruction. To pursue this goal might also be to acknowledge its impossibility —is that not what all such "total" projects amount to? No matter. It is precisely the impossibility of utopia that fastens us to it: nothing can sully the absolute purity of what will never be tested.

We should not be surprised, therefore, when Žižek writes that "the thin difference between the Stalinist gulag and the Nazi annihilation camp was also, at that moment, the difference between civilization and barbarism". His only interest is in the state of mind of the perpetrators: Were they moved, in however oblique a manner, by utopian enthusiasms, or were they moved, on the contrary, by some discredited attachment? If you step back from Žižek's words, and ask yourself just where the line between civilization and barbarism lay, at the time when the rival sets of death camps were competing over their body counts, you would surely put Communist Russia and Nazi Germany on one side of the line, and a few other places —Britain and America, for instance— on the other. To Žižek, that would be an outrage, a betrayal, a pathetic refusal to see what is really at stake. For what matters is what people *say*, not what they do, and what they say is redeemed by their theories, however stupidly or carelessly pursued, and with whatever disregard for real people. We rescue the virtual from the actual through our words, and the deeds have nothing to do with it.

Reading Žižek, I am reminded of a visit I once made to the cemetery of Devichye Pole in Moscow, in the days of Gorbachev. My guide, a dissident intellectual not unlike Žižek in appearance and manner, took me to the grave of Khrushchev, on which stood a monument designed by Ernst Neizvestny. The sculptor had been singled out for particular denunciation by Khrushchev, when, following a visit to an exhibition of modernist art, the Soviet leader had decided to attack the entire artistic community. My guide regarded this particular tantrum of Khrushchev's far more seriously than his destruction of 25,000 churches and found nothing wrong in his burial here, in what was once consecrated ground.

The monument shows Khrushchev's head, mounted on two intersecting trunks of stone, one black, one white, symbolizing the contradictions in the leader's character. After all, my guide insisted, it was he who denounced Stalin and showed himself thereby to be the friend of the intellectuals, just as it was he who denounced artistic modernism, and so declared himself to be the enemy of the intellectuals. It was brought painfully home to me that the Russian people have counted for nothing in the intellectual history of Russian Communism, either in the minds of its champions or in the minds of its critics, for whom the entire modern period has been a kind of dialogue —conducted at the top of the voice and with every available weapon— between the Party and the intelligentsia. Millions of serfs have gone silently to the grave simply to illustrate some intellectual conclusion and to give to the arguments of power the decisive proof of another's helpless suffering.

This discounting of reality reminds us of the crucial fact: that the goal of a supreme emancipation, which will also be the reign of total equality, is a matter of faith, not prediction. It expresses a religious need that cannot be discarded and that will survive all the evidence adduced toward its refutation. For a while, in the wake of 1989, it looked as if the Communist agenda had been defeated and that the evidence pointed to the rejection of the ideas that had enslaved the people of Eastern Europe since the war. But the nonsense machine was wheeled on to obliterate the shoots of rational argument, to cover everything in a mist of uncertainty, and to revive the idea that the real revolution has yet to come and that it will be a revolution in thought, an inner liberation, against which rational argument (mere "bourgeois ideology") has no defense. The reign of nonsense buried the question of revolution so deeply beneath the possibility of rational inquiry that it could no longer be directly stated.

At the same time, the alchemists never ceased to propose revolution as the goal, the thing that was to be conjured from the darkness that their spells created. What exactly *were* they hoping for? Let us step back into the world of rational analysis, so as to notice that there are at least two kinds of revolution and that it is important, when we make an idol of this word, to

ask ourselves which of the two we mean by it. There is the kind exemplified by the English Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1783, in which essentially law–abiding people attempt to define and protect their rights against usurpation. And then there is the kind exemplified by the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, in which one elite seizes power from another and then establishes itself by a reign of terror.

The difference between those two kinds of revolution is enormous and of vast significance to us, looking at the course of modern history. But Žižek and other postmodern leftists dismiss the distinction with a sneer. For them, the English and American Revolutions did not scintillate in the imagination of exultant intellectuals but merely pressed themselves into being through the needs of real people. Instead of examining what such revolutions achieved, whether it might not have been sufficient and, in any case, the best that can be hoped for, thinkers like Žižek prefer to bury themselves in scholastic disputes with fellow leftists, shifting blocks of formidable Newspeak around the sanctuary where the idol has been hidden.

Those who imagined, in 1989, that never again would an intellectual be caught defending the Leninist Party, or advocating the methods of Stalin, had reckoned without the overwhelming power of nonsense. In the urgent need to believe, to find a central mystery that is the true meaning of things and to which one's life can be dedicated, nonsense is much to be preferred to sense. For it builds a way of life around something that *cannot be questioned*. No reasoned assault is possible against what denies the possibility of a reasoned assault. And thus it is that utopia stepped again into the place vacated by theology, to erect its own *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in the center of intellectual life. A new generation rediscovered the authentic voice of the proletariat, which speaks the language of the nonsense machine. And despite all the disappointments, they were reassured that "the dictatorship of the proletariat" remains an option —indeed, the only option. The proof of this is there in Žižek's prose; you have his word for it.

In Žižek, we find astonishing evidence of the fact that the "Communist hypothesis," as Badiou calls it, will never go away. Notwithstanding Marx's

attempt to present it as the conclusion of a science, the "hypothesis" cannot be put to the test and refuted. For it is not a prediction or, in any real sense, a hypothesis. It is a statement of faith in the unknowable. Žižek unhesitatingly adds his weight to every cause that is directed, in whatever way, against the established order of the Western democracies. He even sets himself against parliamentary democracy and has no qualms in advocating terror (suitably aestheticized) as part of his glamorous detachment. But his few empty invocations of the egalitarian alternative advance no further than the clichés of the French Revolution and are soon wrapped in Lacanian spells by way of shielding them from argument. When it comes to real politics, he writes as though negation is enough. Whether it be the Palestinian intifada, the IRA, the Venezuelan Chavistas, the French *sans-papiers*, or the Occupy movement —whatever the radical cause, it is the attack on the "System" that matters.

As in 1789, as in 1917, as in the Long March of Mao, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, the work of destruction feeds on itself. Žižek's windbaggery serves one purpose: to turn attention away from the actual world, from real people, and from ordinary moral and political reasoning. It exists to promote a single and absolute cause, the cause that admits of no criticism and no compromise and that offers redemption to all who espouse it. And what is that cause? The answer is there on every page of Žižek's writings: Nothing.[*]

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