

# The Prospects of Radical Politics Today

Slavoj Žižek

Today, in the time of continuous swift changes, from the "digital revolution" to the retreat of old social forms, thought is more than ever exposed to the temptation of "losing its nerve," of precociously abandoning the old conceptual coordinates. The media bombard us with the need to abandon the "old paradigms": if we are to survive, we have to change our most fundamental notions of personal identity, society, environment, etc. New Age wisdom claims that we are entering a new "posthuman" era; psychoanalysts hasten to concede that the Oedipal matrix of socialization is no longer operative, that we live in times of universalized perversion, that the concept of "repression" is of no use in our permissive times; postmodern political thought tells us that we are entering a postindustrial society, in which the old categories of labor, collectivity, class, etc., are theoretical zombies, no longer applicable to the dynamics of modernization... Third Way ideology and political practice is effectively *the* model of this defeat, of this inability to recognize how the New is here to enable the Old to survive. Against this temptation, one should rather follow the unsurpassed example of Pascal and ask the difficult question: How are we to remain faithful to the Old in the new conditions? *Only* in this way can we generate something effectively New.

Habermas designated the present era as that of the neue *Unübersichtlichkeit* — the new opacity.<sup>1</sup> More than ever, our daily experience is mystifying: modernization generates new obscurantisms, the reduction of freedom is presented to us as the arrival of new freedoms.

Today, in the era of "risk society," the ruling ideology endeavors to sell us the very insecurity caused by the dismantling of the Welfare State as the opportunity for new freedoms. Do you have to change jobs every year, relying on short-term contracts instead of a long-term stable appointment? Why not see it as a liberation from the constraints of a fixed job, as the chance to reinvent yourself again and again, to become aware of and realize the hidden potentials of your personality? You can no longer rely on the standard health insurance and retirement plan, so that you have to opt for additional coverage for which you must pay? Why not perceive it as an additional opportunity to choose: either better life now or long-term security? And if this predicament causes you anxiety, the postmodern or "second modernity" ideologist will immediately accuse you of being unable to assume full freedom, of the "escape from freedom," of the immature sticking to old stable forms ... Even better, when this is inscribed into the ideology of the subject as the psychological individual pregnant with natural abilities and tendencies, then I as it were automatically interpret all these changes as the result of my personality, not as the result of me being tossed around by market forces.

In these circumstances, one should be especially careful not to confuse the ruling ideology with ideology which *seems* to dominate. More than ever, one should bear in mind Walter Benjamin's reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself with regard to social struggles — one should also ask how it effectively functions *in* these very struggles. In sex, the effectively hegemonic attitude is not patriarchal repression, but promiscuity; in art, provocations in the style of the notorious *Sensation* exhibitions *are* the norm, an example of the art fully integrated into the establishment. I am therefore tempted to reverse Marx's thesis 11: the first task today is precisely *not* to succumb to the temptation to act, to directly intervene and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility: "What can one do against global capital?"), but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. If, today, one follows a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space — it will be an act *within* the hegemonic ideological coordi-

nates: those who "really want to do something to help people" get involved in (undoubtedly honorable) exploits like Medecins sans Frontieres, Greenpeace, feminist and antiracist campaigns, which are all not only tolerated, but even supported by the media, even if they seemingly enter the economic territory (say, denouncing and boycotting companies which do not respect ecological conditions or which use child labor) — they are tolerated and supported as long as they do not get too close to a certain limit.

Let us take two predominant topics of today's American radical academia: postcolonial and queer (gay) studies. The problem of postcolonialism is undoubtedly crucial; however, "postcolonial studies" tend to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities' "right to narrate" their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms which repress "otherness," so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance toward the Other, and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance toward the "Stranger in Ourselves," in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves. The politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudo-psychoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas ... The true corruption of American academia is not primarily financial, it is not only that they are able to buy many European critical intellectuals (myself included — up to a point), but conceptual: notions of "European" critical theory are imperceptibly translated into the benign universe of Cultural Studies chic.

My personal experience is that practically all of the "radical" academics silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model, with the secure tenured position as their ultimate professional goal (a surprising number of them even play on the stock market). If there is a thing they are genuinely horrified of, it is a radical shattering of the (relatively) safe life environment of the "symbolic classes" in the developed Western societies. Their excessive Politically Correct zeal when dealing with sexism, racism, Third World sweatshops, etc., is thus ultimately a defense against their own innermost identification, a kind of compulsive ritual whose hidden logic is: "Let's talk as much as possible about the necessity of a radical change to make sure that nothing will really change!" Symptomatic here is the journal *October* when you ask one of the editors to what the title refers, they will half-confidentially signal that it is, of course, *that* October — in this way, one can indulge in the jargonistic analyses of modern art, with the hidden assurance that one is somehow retaining the link with the radical revolutionary past ... With regard to this radical chic, the first gesture toward Third Way ideologists and practitioners should be that of praise: they at least play their game straight and are honest in their acceptance of global capitalist coordinates, in contrast to the pseudo-radical academic Leftists who adopt toward the Third Way the attitude of utter disdain, while their own radicality ultimately amounts to an empty gesture which obligates no one to anything determinate.

From Human to Animal Rights

We live in the "postmodern" era in which truthclaims as such are dismissed as an expression of hidden power mechanisms — as the reborn pseudo-Nietzscheans like to emphasize, truth is a lie which is most efficient in asserting our will to power. The very question "Is it true?" apropos of some statement is supplanted by another question: "Under what power conditions can this statement be uttered?" What we get instead of the universal truth is a multitude of perspectives, or, as it is fashionable to put it today, of "narratives" — not only of literature, but also of politics, religion, science, they are all different narratives, stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and possibility to tell his/her story. The two philosophers of today's global capitalism are the two great Left-liberal "progressives," Richard Rorty and Peter Singer — honest in their respective stances. Rorty defines the basic coordinates: the

fundamental dimension of a human being is the ability to suffer, to experience pain and humiliation — consequently, since humans are symbolic animals, the fundamental right is the right to narrate one's experience of suffering and humiliation.<sup>2</sup> Singer then provides the Darwinian background.<sup>3</sup>

Singer — usually designated as a "social Darwinist with a collectivist socialist face" — starts innocently enough, trying to argue that people will be happier if they lead lives committed to ethics: a life spent trying to help others and reduce suffering is really the most moral and fulfilling one. He radicalizes and actualizes Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism: the ultimate ethical criterion is not the dignity (rationality, soul) of man, but the ability to *suffer*, to experience pain, which man shares with animals. With inexorable radicality, Singer levels the animal/human divide: better to kill an old suffering woman than healthy animals ... Look an orangutan straight in the eye and what do you see? A nonetoo-distant cousin — a creature worthy of all the legal rights and privileges that humans enjoy. One should thus extend aspects of equality — the right to life, the protection of individual liberties, the prohibition of torture — at least to the nonhuman great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas).

Singer argues that "speciesism" (privileging the human species) is no different from racism: our perception of a difference between humans and (other) animals is no less illogical and unethical than our one-time perception of an ethical difference between, say, men and women, or blacks and whites. Intelligence is no basis for determining ethical stature: the lives of humans are not worth more than the lives of animals simply because they display more intelligence (if intelligence were a standard of judgment, Singer points out, we could perform medical experiments on the mentally retarded with moral impunity). Ultimately, all things being equal, an animal has as much interest in living as a human. Therefore, all things being equal, medical experimentation on animals is immoral: those who advocate such experiments claim that sacrificing the lives of twenty animals will save millions of human lives — however, what about sacrificing twenty humans to save millions of animals? As Singer's critics like to point out, the horrifying extension of this principle is that the interests of twenty people outweighs the interests of one, which gives the green light to all sorts of human rights abuses.

Consequently, Singer argues that we can no longer rely on traditional ethics for answers to the dilemmas which our universe imposes on us; he proposes a new ethics meant to protect the quality, not the sanctity, of human life. As sharp boundaries disappear between life and death, between humans and animals, this new ethics casts doubt on the morality of animal research, while offering a sympathetic assessment of infanticide. When a baby is born with severe defects of the sort that always used to kill babies, are doctors and parents now morally obligated to use the latest technologies, regardless of cost? *No*. When a pregnant woman loses all brain function, should doctors use new procedures to keep her body living until the baby can be born? *No*. Can a doctor ethically help terminally ill patients to kill themselves? *Yes*.

The first thing to discern here is the hidden utopian dimension of such a survivalist stance. The easiest way to detect ideological surplus-enjoyment in an ideological formation is to read it as a dream and analyze the displacement at work in it. Freud reports a dream of one of his patients which consists of a simple scene: the patient is at the funeral of a relative. The key to the dream (which repeats a real-life event from the previous day) is that, at this funeral, the patient unexpectedly encounters a woman, his old love toward whom he still feels very deeply — far from being a masochistic dream, this dream thus simply articulates the patient's joy at meeting again his old love. Is the mechanism of displacement at work in this dream not strictly homologous to the one elaborated by Fredric Jameson apropos of a science-fiction film which takes place in California in the near future, after a mysterious virus has very quickly killed a great majority of the population? When the film's heroes wander in the empty shopping malls, with all the merchandise intact at their disposal, is this libidinal gain of

having access to material goods without the alienating market machinery not the true point of the film occluded by the displacement of the official focus of the narrative on the catastrophe caused by the virus? At an even more elementary level, is not one of the commonplaces of sci-fi theory that the true point of novels or movies about a global catastrophe resides in the sudden reassertion of social solidarity and the spirit of collaboration among the survivors? It is as if, in our society, global catastrophe is the price one has to pay for gaining access to solidary collaboration...

When my son was a small boy, his most cherished personal possession was a special large "survival knife" whose handle contained a compass, a sack of powder to disinfect water, a fishing hook and line, and other similar items — totally useless in our social reality, but perfectly fitting the survivalist fantasy of finding oneself alone in wild nature. It is this same fantasy which, perhaps, provides the clue to the success of Joshua Piven's and David Borgenicht's surprise best-seller *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to mention two supreme examples from it: What to do if an alligator has its jaws closed on your limb? (Answer: you should tap or punch it on the snout, because alligators automatically react to it by opening their mouths.) What to do if you confront a lion which threatens to attack you? (Answer: try to make yourself appear bigger than you are by opening your coat wide.) The joke of the book thus consists in the discord between its enunciated content and its position of enunciation: the situations it describes are effectively serious and the solutions correct — the only problem is *Why is the author telling us all this? Who needs this advice?*

The underlying irony is that, in our individualistic competitive society, the most useless advice is that concerning survival in extreme physical situations — what one effectively needs is the very opposite, the Dale Carnegie type of books which tell us how to win over (manipulate) other people: the situations rendered in *The Worst-Case Scenario* lack any symbolic dimension, they reduce us to pure survival machines. In short, *The Worst-Case Scenario* became a best-seller for the very same reason Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*, the story (and the movie) about the struggle for survival of a fishing vessel caught in the "storm of the century" east of the Canadian coast in 1991, became one: they both stage the fantasy of the pure encounter with a natural threat in which the socio-symbolic dimension is suspended. In a way, *The Perfect Storm* even provides the secret utopian background of *The Worst-Case Scenario*: it is only in such extreme situations that an authentic intersubjective community, held together by solidarity, can emerge. Let us not forget that *The Perfect Storm* is ultimately the book about the solidarity of a small working-class collective! The humorous appeal of *The Worst-Case Scenario* can thus be read as bearing witness to our utter alienation from nature, exemplified by the shortage of contact with "reallife" dangers.

On account of its utter "realism," *The Worst-Case Scenario* is a Western book par excellence; its Oriental counterpart is *chindogu*, arguably the finest spiritual achievement of Japan in the last decades, the art of inventing objects which are sublime in the strictest Kantian sense of the term — practically useless on account of their very excessive usefulness (say, glasses with electrically run mini-windshields, so that your view will remain clear even if you have to walk in the rain without an umbrella; butter contained in a lipstick tube, so that you can carry it with you and spread it on the bread without a knife). That is to say, in order to be recognized, the *chindogu* objects have to meet two basic criteria: it should be possible to really construct them and they should work; simultaneously, they should not be "practical," that is, it should not be feasible to market them.

The comparison between *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* and *chindogu* offers us a unique insight into the difference between the Eastern and Western sublime, an insight far superior to New Age pseudo-philosophical treatises. In both cases, the effect of the Sublime resides in the way the uselessness of the product is the outcome of the extreme "realistic" and pragmatic approach itself. However, in the case of the West, we get simple, realistic advice for problems (situations) most

of us will never encounter (who of us will really have to face a hungry lion?), while in the case of the East, we get impractically complicated solutions for the problems all of us effectively encounter (who of us has not been caught in the rain?). The Western sublime offers a practical solution for a problem which does not arise, while the Eastern sublime offers a useless solution for a real common problem.

So, back to Singer, one cannot dismiss him as a monstrous exaggeration — what Adorno said about psychoanalysis (its truth resides in its very exaggerations)<sup>5</sup> fully holds for Singer: he is so traumatic and intolerable because his scandalous "exaggerations" directly render visible the truth of the so-called postmodern ethic. Is not the ultimate horizon of postmodern "identity politics" effectively Darwinian — defending the right of some particular species of the human kind within the panoply of their proliferating multitude (gays with AIDS, black single mothers ...)? The very opposition between "conservative" and "progressive" politics can be conceived of in Darwinian terms: ultimately, conservatives defend the right of those with might (their very success proves that they won in the struggle for survival), while progressives advocate the protection of endangered human species, i.e., of those losing the struggle for survival.

In an incident in US academia a couple of years ago, a lesbian feminist claimed that gays are today the privileged victims, so that the analysis of how gays are underprivileged provides the key to understanding all other exclusions, repressions, violences, etc. (religious, ethnic, class). What is problematic with this thesis is precisely its implicit (or, in this case, even explicit) *universal* claim: it is making exemplary victims of those who are not that, of those who can be much more easily than religious or ethnic Others fully integrated into public space, enjoying full rights. There is a long tradition of Leftist gay bashing, whose traces are discernible up to Adorno — suffice it to mention Maxim Gorky's infamous remark from his essay "Proletarian Humanism" (1934): "Exterminate [sic!] homosexuals, and Fascism will disappear."<sup>6</sup> All of this cannot be reduced to opportunistically flirting with the traditional patriarchal sexual morality of the working classes, or with the Stalinist reaction against the liberating aspects of the first years after the October Revolution; one should remember that the above-quoted Gorky's inciting statement, as well as Adorno's reservations about homosexuality (his conviction about the libidinal link between homosexuality and the spirit of military male bonding), are all based on the same historical experience: that of the SA, the "revolutionary" paramilitary Nazi organization of street-fighting thugs, in which homosexuality abounded up to its head (Ernst Rohm). The first thing to note here is that it was already Hitler himself who purged the SA in order to make the Nazi regime publicly acceptable by way of cleansing it of its obscene-violent excess /excesses, and that he justified the slaughter of the SA leadership precisely by evoking their "sexual depravity." In order to function as the support of a "totalitarian" community, homosexuality has to remain a publicly disavowed "dirty secret," shared by those who are "in." Does this mean that, when gays are persecuted, they deserve only a qualified support, a kind of "Yes, we know we should support you, but nonetheless ... (you are partially responsible for the Nazi violence)"? No, but one *should* insist that the political overdetermination of homosexuality is far from simple, that the homosexual libidinal economy can be coopted by different political orientations, and that it is here that one should avoid the "essentialist" mistake of dismissing the rightist "militaristic" homosexuality as the secondary distortion of the "authentic" subversive homosexuality.

One of the divisions in the chapter on Reason in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* speaks about *das geistige Tierreich* (the spiritual animal kingdom): the social world which lacks any spiritual substance, so that, in it, individuals effectively interact as "intelligent animals." They use reason, but only in order to assert their individual interests, to manipulate others into serving their own pleasures.<sup>7</sup> Is not a world in which the highest rights are human rights precisely such a "spiritual animal kingdom," a

universe? There is, however, a price to be paid for such liberation — in such a universe, human rights ultimately function as *animal* rights. This, then, is the ultimate truth of Singer: our universe of human rights is the universe of animal rights.

This, then, is what gets lost in Singer's *geistige Tierreich*: the Thing, something to which we are unconditionally attached irrespective of its positive qualities. In Singer's universe, there is a place for mad cows, but no place for an Indian sacred cow. In other words, what gets lost here is simply the dimension of truth — *not* "objective truth" as the notion of reality from a point of view which somehow floats above the multitude of particular narratives, but truth as the Singular Universal. When Lenin says "The theory of Marx is allpowerful, because it is true," everything depends on how we understand "truth" here: is it a neutral "objective knowledge," or the truth of an engaged subject? Lenin's wager — today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever — is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: in a concrete situation, its *universal* truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position — truth is by definition one-sided. This, of course, goes against the predominant doxa of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests. If one does not specify the *criteria* of the different, alternate narrativization, then this endeavor courts the danger of endorsing, in the Politically Correct mood, ridiculous "narratives" like those about the supremacy of some aboriginal holistic wisdom, of dismissing science as just another narrative on a par with premodern superstitions.

In a closer analysis, one could expose how the cultural relativism of the "right-to-narrate" orientation contains its own apparent opposite, the fixation on the Real of some trauma which resists its narrativization. This properly, dialectical tension sustains today's academic "holocaust industry." My own ultimate experience of the holocaust-industry police occurred in 1997 at a roundtable in the Centre Pompidou in Paris: I was viciously attacked for an intervention in which (among other things) I claimed, against the neoconservatives deploring the decline of faith today, that the basic need of a normal human being is not to be a believer himself, but to have another subject who will believe for him, in his place. The reaction of one of the distinguished participants was that, by claiming this, I am ultimately endorsing holocaust revisionism, justifying the claim that, since everything is a discursive construct, this includes also the holocaust, so it is meaningless to search for what really happened there ... Apart from displaying a hypocritical paranoia, my critic was doubly wrong. First, the holocaust revisionists (to my knowledge) *never* argue in the terms of postmodern discursive constructionism, but in the terms of very empirical factual analysis: their claims range from the "fact" that there is no written document in which Hitler ordered the holocaust, to the weird mathematics of "taking into account the number of gas ovens in Auschwitz, it was not possible to burn so many corpses." Furthermore, not only is the postmodern logic of "everything is a discursive construction, there are no direct firm facts" *never* used to deflate the holocaust; in a paradox worth noting, it is precisely the postmodern discursive constructionists (like Lyotard) who tend to elevate the holocaust into the supreme ineffable metaphysical Evil — the holocaust serves them as the untouchable-sacred Real, as the negative of contingent language games.

## The Möbius Strip of Politics and Economy

What all the new French (or French-oriented) theories of the Political, from Etienne Balibar through Jacques Ranciere to Alain Badiou, aim at is — to put it in traditional philosophical terms — the reduction of the sphere of economy (of material production) to an "ontic" sphere deprived of "ontological" dignity. Within this horizon, there is simply no place for the Marxian "critique of political economy": the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx's *Capital* is *not* just that

of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental *a priori*, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations. The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the "two faces or a vase": one sees either two faces or a vase, never both of them — in other words, one has to make a choice.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, one either focuses on the political, and the domain of economy is reduced to the empirical "servicing of goods," or one focuses on economy, and politics is reduced to a theater of appearances, to a passing phenomenon which will disappear with the arrival of the developed communist (or technocratic) society, in which, as Engels put it, the "administration of people" will vanish in the "administration of things." (Does not the same "vase/two faces" paradox occur in the case of the holocaust and gulag? We either elevate the holocaust into the ultimate crime, and the Stalinist terror is thereby half-redeemed, reduced to a minor role of an "ordinary" crime; or we focus on the gulag as the ultimate result of the logic of modern revolutionary terror, and the holocaust is thereby at best reduced to another example of the same logic. Somehow, it does not seem possible to deploy a truly neutral" theory of totalitarianism, without giving a hidden preference to either the holocaust or the gulag.)

What we are dealing with here is another version of the Lacanian *il n'y a pas de rapport...*: if, for Lacan, there is no sexual relationship, then, for Marxism proper, there is no relationship between economy and politics, no "meta-language" enabling us to grasp from the same neutral standpoint the two levels, although — or, rather, because — these two levels are inextricably intertwined. The "political" class struggle takes place in the very midst of economy (recall that the very last paragraph of *Capital III*, where the text abruptly stops, tackles the class struggle), while, at the same time, the domain of economy serves as the key enabling us to decode political struggles. No wonder that the structure of this impossible relationship is that of the Mobius strip: first, we have to progress from the political spectacle to its economic infrastructure; then, in the second step, we have to confront the irreducible dimension of the political struggle in the very heart of the economy.

In this context, the first myth to be debunked is that of the diminishing role of the state. What we are witnessing today is a shift in its functions: while partially withdrawing from its welfare obligations, the state is strengthening its apparatuses in other domains of social regulation. In order to start a business now, one has to rely on the state to guarantee not only law and order, but the entire infrastructure (access to water and energy, means of transportation, ecological criteria, international regulations, etc.), to an incomparably larger extent than a hundred years ago. The recent electricity debacle in California makes this point palpable: for a couple of weeks in January and February 2001, the privatization ("deregulation") of the electricity supply changed Southern California, one of the most highly developed "postindustrial" landscapes in the entire world, into a Third World country with regular black-outs. Of course, the defenders of deregulation claimed that it was not thorough enough, thereby engaging in the old false syllogism of "my fiancée is never late for an appointment, because the moment she is late, she is no longer my fiancée": deregulation by definition works, so if it does not work, it was not truly a deregulation ... Does the recent Mad Cow Disease panic (which probably presages dozens of similar phenomena which await us in the near future) also not point toward the need for strict state and global institutionalized control of agriculture?

The key antagonism of the so-called new (digital) industries is thus: how to maintain the form of (private) property, within which only the logic of profit can be maintained (see also the Napster problem, the free circulation of music). And do the legal complications in biogenetics not point in the same direction? The key element of the new international trade agreements is the "protection of intellectual property": whenever, in a merger, a big First World company takes over a Third World company, the first thing they do is close down the research department. Phenomena emerge here which bring the notion of property to extraordinary dialectical paradoxes: in India, local communities suddenly discover that medical practices and materials they have been using for centuries are now owned by

American companies, so they now have to be bought from them; with the biogenetic companies patenting genes, we are all discovering that parts of ourselves, our genetic components, are already copyrighted, owned by others...

However, the outcome of this crisis of private property of the means of production is by no means guaranteed — it is *here* that one should take into account the ultimate paradox of the Stalinist society: against the capitalism which is the class society, but in principle egalitarian, without direct hierarchical divisions, the "mature" Stalinism was a classless society articulated in precisely defined hierarchical groups (top nomenklatura, technical intelligence, army). What this means is that, already for Stalinism, the classic Marxist notion of class struggle is no longer adequate to describe its hierarchy and domination: in the Soviet Union from the late 1920s onward, the key social division was not defined by property but by the direct access to power mechanisms and to the privileged material and cultural conditions of life (food, housing, health care, freedom of travel, education). And, perhaps, the ultimate irony of history will be that, in the same way Lenin's vision of "central bank Socialism" can be properly read only retroactively, from today's World Wide Web, the Soviet Union provided the first model of the developed "post-property" society, of true "late capitalism" in which the ruling class will be defined by direct access to the (informational, administrative) means of social power and control and attendant material and social privileges: the point will no longer be to own companies, but to run them directly, to have the right to use a private jet, to have access to top health care, etc. — privileges which will be acquired not by property, but by other (educational, managerial, etc.) mechanisms. The ultimate answer to the reproach that radical Left proposals are utopian should thus be that, today, the true utopia is the belief that the present liberal-democratic capitalist consensus could go on indefinitely, without radical changes. We are thus back to the old '68 motto "Soyons realistes, demandons l'impossible": in order to be truly a "realist," one must consider breaking out of the constraints of what appears "possible" (or, as we usually put it, "feasible").

Today, we already can discern the signs of a kind of general unease — recall the series of events usually listed under the name of "Seattle." The ten-year honeymoon of triumphant global capitalism is over, the long-overdue "seven year itch" is here — witness the panicky reactions of the big media, which — from *Time* magazine to CNN — all of a sudden began to warn about Marxists manipulating the crowd of "honest" protesters. The problem is now a strictly Leninist one — how to *actualize* the media's accusations, how to invent the organizational structure which will confer on this unrest the *form* of a universal political demand. Otherwise, the momentum will be lost, and what will remain is the marginal disturbance, perhaps organized as a new Greenpeace, with a certain efficiency, but also strictly limited goals, a marketing strategy, etc. In other words, the key "Leninist" lesson today is: politics without the organizational *form* of the party is politics without politics, so the answer to those who want just the (quite adequately named) "New Social Movements" is the same as the answer of the Jacobins to the Girondin compromisers: "You want revolution without a revolution!" Today's blockade is that there are two ways open for sociopolitical engagement: either play the game of the system, engage in the "long march through the institutions," or get active in new social movements, from feminism through ecology to antiracism. And, again, the limit of these movements is that they are not *political* in the sense of the Universal Singular: they are "single-issue movements" which lack the dimension of the universal, that is, they do not relate to the social *totality*.

Here, Lenin's reproach to liberals is crucial: they only *exploit* the discontent of the working class to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the conservatives, instead of identifying with it to the end. Is this also not the case with today's Left liberals? They like to evoke racism, ecology, workers' grievances, etc., to score points over the conservatives *without endangering the system*. Recall how, in Seattle, Bill Clinton himself deftly referred to the protesters on the streets outside, reminding the gathered leaders inside the guarded palaces that they should listen to the message of the demonstrators (the



message which, of course, Clinton interpreted, depriving it of its subversive sting attributed to the dangerous extremists introducing chaos and violence into the majority of peaceful protesters). It is the same with all New Social Movements, up to the Zapatistas in Chiapas: the systemic politics is always ready to "listen to their demands," depriving them of their proper political sting. The system is by definition ecumenical, open, tolerant, ready to "listen" to all — even if one insists on one's demands, they are deprived of their universal political sting by the very form of negotiation. The true Third Way we have to look for is this third way between institutionalized parliamentary politics and the new social movements.

Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* was the last great attempt to combine in a subversive synthesis the Marxist and the psychoanalytic traditions. They fully recognize the revolutionary, deterritorializing impact of capitalism, which, in its inexorable dynamics, undermines all stable traditional forms of human interaction; what they approached capitalism with is that its deterritorialization is not thorough enough, that it generates new reterritorializations — a verbatim repetition of Marx's claim that the ultimate obstacle to capitalism is capitalism itself, that capitalism unleashes a dynamic it will not be able to contain. Far from being outdated, this claim seems to gain actuality with today's growing deadlocks of globalization in which the inherently antagonistic nature of capitalism belies its worldwide triumph. However, the problem is: Is it still possible to imagine communism (or another form of postcapitalist society) as a formation which sets free the deterritorializing dynamics of capitalism, liberating it of its inherent constraints? Marx's fundamental vision was that a new, higher social order (communism) is possible, an order that would not only maintain, but even raise to a higher degree and effectively fully release the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which, in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle /contradiction, is again and again thwarted by socially destructive economic crises. What Marx overlooked is that, to put it in the standard Derridean terms, this inherent obstacle /antagonism as the "condition of impossibility" of the full deployment of the productive forces is simultaneously its "condition of possibility": if we abolish the obstacle, the inherent contradiction of capitalism, we do not get the fully unleashed drive to productivity finally delivered of its impediment, but we lose precisely this productivity that seemed to be generated and simultaneously thwarted by capitalism — if we take away the obstacle, the very potential thwarted by this obstacle dissipates ... Therein would reside a possible Lacanian critique of Marx, focusing on the ambiguous overlapping between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment. (It is often said that the ultimate products of capitalism are piles of trash — useless computers, cars, TVs, and VCRs ...: places like the famous "graveyard" of hundreds of abandoned planes in the Mojave desert confront us with the obverse truth of capitalist dynamics, its inert objectal remainder. And it is against this background that one should read the ecological dream-notion of total recycling — in which every remainder is used again — as the ultimate capitalist dream, even if it is couched in the terms of retaining the natural balance on Planet Earth: the dream of the self-propelling circulation of capital which would succeed in leaving behind no material residue — the proof of how capitalism can appropriate ideologies which seem to oppose it.)

While this constant self-propelling revolutionizing still holds for high Stalinism with its total productive mobilization, the "stagnant" late Real Socialism legitimizes itself (between the lines, at least) as a society in which one can live peacefully, avoiding capitalist competitive stress. This was the last line of defense when, from the late '60s onward, after the fall of Khrushchev (the last enthusiast who, during his visit to the US, prophesied that "your grandchildren will be communists"), it became clear that Real Socialism was losing the competitive edge in its war with capitalism. So the stagnant late Real Socialism in a way already was "socialism with a human face": silently abandoning great historical tasks, it provided the security of everyday life enduring in a benevolent boredom. Today's *Ostalgie* for the defunct socialism mostly consists in such conservative nostalgia for the self-satisfied constrained way of life; even nostalgic anticapitalist artists from Peter Handke to Joseph Beuys celebrate this

aspect of socialism: the absence of stressful mobilization and frantic commodification. Of course, this unexpected shift tells us something about the deficiency of the original Marxist project itself: it points toward the limitation of its goal of unleashed productive mobilization.

## Fetishism Today

The ultimate postmodern irony is the strange exchange between Europe and Asia: at the very moment when, at the level of the "economic infrastructure," "European" technology and capitalism are triumphing worldwide, at the level of "ideological superstructure," the Judeo-Christian legacy is threatened in the European space itself by the onslaught of New Age "Asiatic" thought, which, in its different guises, from "Western Buddhism" (today's counterpoint to Western Marxism, as opposed to "Asiatic" Marxism-Leninism) to different "Daos," is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism. Therein resides the highest speculative identity of opposites in today's global civilization: although "Western Buddhism" presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit* (placidity), it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement. One should mention here the well-known topic of "future shock," that is, of how, today, people are no longer psychologically able to cope with the dazzling rhythm of technological development and the social changes that accompany it — things simply move too fast, before one can accustom oneself to an invention, this invention is already supplanted by a new one, so that one more and more lacks the most elementary "cognitive mapping." The recourse to Daoism or Buddhism offers a way out of this predicament, which definitely work better than the desperate escape into old traditions: instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social change, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination — one should, instead, "let oneself go," drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of the accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just an insubstantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being ... One is almost tempted to resuscitate here the old infamous Marxist cliché of religion as the "opiate of the people," as the imaginary supplement of terrestrial misery: the "Western Buddhist" meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in capitalist dynamics, while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were to live today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his *Protestant Ethic* entitled *The Daoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*.

"Western Buddhism" thus perfectly fits the fetishist mode of ideology in our allegedly "postideological" era, as opposed to its traditional symptomatic mode, in which the ideological lie that structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms qua "returns of the repressed," cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie. Fetish is effectively a kind of *envers* of the symptom. That is to say, symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed truth erupts, while fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth. Let us take the case of the death of a beloved person: when I "repress" this death, I try not to think about it, but the repressed trauma persists and returns in the symptoms. Say, after my beloved wife dies of breast cancer, I try to repress this fact by throwing myself into hard work or a vivacious social life, but then there is always something which reminds me of her, I cannot escape her ghost. In the case of a fetish, on the contrary, I "rationally" fully accept this death, I am able to talk about her most painful moments in a cold and clear way, because I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death. In this sense, a fetish can play a very cons-

tructive role of allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thorough "realists," able to accept the way things are — since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to defuse the full impact of reality.

So, when we are bombarded by claims that in our postideological cynical era nobody believes in the proclaimed ideals, when we encounter a person who claims he is cured of any beliefs, accepting social reality the way it really is, one should always counter such claims with the question: OK, but where is the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality "the way it is"? "Western Buddhism" is such a fetish: it enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game, while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless this spectacle is — what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw...

Perhaps the most succinct definition of ideology was produced by Christopher Hitchens, when he tackled the difficult question of what the North Koreans effectively think about their "Beloved Leader" Kim Yong Il: "mass delusion is the only thing that keeps a people sane."<sup>9</sup> This paradox points toward the fetishistic split at the very heart of an effectively functioning ideology: individuals transpose their beliefs onto the big Other (embodied in the collective), which thus believes in their place — individuals thus remain sane *qua* individuals, maintaining the distance toward the "big Other" of the official discourse. It is not only the direct identification with the ideological "delusion" which would render individuals insane, but also the suspension of their (disavowed, displaced) belief. In other words, if individuals were to be deprived of this belief (projected onto the "big Other"), they would have to jump in and themselves directly assume the belief. (Perhaps this explains the paradox that many a cynic becomes a sincere believer at the very point of the disintegration of the "official" belief.) This is what Lacan aimed at in his claim that the true formula of materialism is not "God doesn't exist" but "God is unconscious" — suffice it to recall what, in a letter to Max Brod, Milena Jesenska wrote about Kafka: "Above all, things like money, stock-exchange, the foreign currency administration, typewriter, are for him thoroughly mystical (what they effectively are, only not for us, the others)."<sup>10</sup> One should read this statement against the background of Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism: the fetishist illusion resides in our real social life, not in our perception of it — a bourgeois subject knows very well that there is nothing magic about money, that money is just an object which stands for a set of social relations, but he nevertheless acts in real life as if he believed that money is a magical thing. This, then, gives us a precise insight into Kafka's universe: Kafka was able to experience directly these phantasmatic beliefs that we "normal" people disavow — Kafka's "magic" is what Marx liked to refer to as the "theological freakishness" of commodities.

This definition of ideology points out the way to answer the tedious standard reproach against the application of psychoanalysis to social-ideological processes: is it "legitimate" to expand the use of the notions which were originally deployed for the treatment of individuals to collective entities and to speak, say, of religion as a "collective compulsive neurosis"? The focus of psychoanalysis is entirely different: the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply at a different level from the individual experience, but something to which the individual him/herself has to relate, which the individual him/herself has to experience as an order which is minimally "reified," externalized. The problem is therefore not "how to jump from the individual to the social level"; the problem is: How should the decentered socio-symbolic order of institutionalized practices and beliefs be structured, if the subject is to retain his/her "sanity," his/her "normal" functioning? Which delusions should be deposited there so that individuals can remain sane? Recall the proverbial egotist, cynically dismissing the public system of moral norms: as a rule, such a subject can only function if this system is "out there," publicly recognized, i.e., in order to be a private cynic, he has to presuppose the existence of naive other(s) who "really believe." This is how a true "cultural revolution" should be

conducted: not by directly targeting individuals, endeavoring to "reeducate" them, to "change their reactionary attitudes," but by depriving individuals of support in the "big Other," in the institutional symbolic order.

It is easy to be "radical" apropos of gay marriage, incest, etc. — however, what about child sex and torture? On what ground are we justified in opposing them without having recourse to the "legal fiction" of the adult autonomous subject responsible for his/her acts? (And, incidentally, *why* should marriage be constrained to *two* persons, gay or not? Why not three or more? Is this not the last remainder of the "binary logic"?) More generally, if we adopt the standard postmodern mantra of the autonomous responsible subject as a legal fiction, what are the consequences of this denial for our dealing with, say, child rapists? Is it not deeply symptomatic how the very same theorists who denounce the liberal autonomous subject as a Western legal fiction, at the same time fully endorse the discourse of victimization, treating the perpetrators of sexual harassment as guilty (i.e., responsible) for their acts? Furthermore, the attitude toward sex between adults and children is the best indicator of the changes in sexual mores: three or four decades ago, in the heyday of the Sexual Revolution, child sex was *celebrated* as overcoming the last barrier, the ideologically enforced desexualization of children, while the Politically Correct ideology of victimization offers the sexually abused child as the ultimate image of horror.

In a recent pamphlet against the "excesses" of May ,68 and, more generally, the "sexual liberation" of the ,60s, *The Independent* brought back to memory what the radicals of ,68 thought about child sex. A quarter of a century ago Daniel Cohn-Bendit wrote about his experience as an educator in a kindergarten: "My constant flirt with all the children soon took on erotic characteristics. I could really feel how from the age of five the small girls had already learned to make passes at me. ... Several times a few children opened the flies of my trousers and started to stroke me. ... When they insisted, I then stroked them." Shulamith Firestone went even further, expressing her hopes that, in a world "without the incest taboo ... relations with children would include as much genital sex as they were capable of— probably considerably more than we now believe."<sup>11</sup> Decades later, when confronted with these statements, Cohn-Bendit played them down, claiming that "this did not really happen, I only wanted to provoke people. When one reads it today, it is unacceptable."<sup>12</sup> However, the question still hovers: How, at that time, was it possible to provoke people, presenting sexual games among preschool children as something appealing, while today, the same "provocation" would immediately give rise to an outburst of moral disgust? After all, child sexual harassment is one of *the* notions of Evil today.

Without directly taking sides in this debate, one should read it as a sign of the change in our mores from the utopian energies of the ,60s and early ,70s to the contemporary stale Political Correctness, in which every authentic encounter with another human being is denounced as a victimizing experience. What we are unable even to conjecture today is the idea of *revolution*, be it sexual or social. Perhaps, in today's stale times of the proliferating pleas for tolerance, one should take the risk of recalling the liberating dimension of such "excesses."

Slavoj Žižek. *The Prospects of Radical Politics Today*. In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): *Democracy Unrealized. Documenta11\_Platform1*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 68-85.

## References

- 1 See Jürgen Habermas, *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).
- 2 See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 3 See Peter Singer, *The Essential Singer: Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: Ecco Press, 2000).
- 4 See Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht, *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* (New York: Chronicle Books, 1999).
- 5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1996).
- 6 Quoted from Siegfried Tornow, "Männliche Homosexualität und Politik in Sowjet-Russland," in *Homosexualität und Wissenschaft II* (Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1992), p. 281.
- 7 See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 178.
- 8 See Fredric Jameson, "The Concept of Revisionism," intervention at the symposium *The Retrieval of Lenin*, organized by Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, February 2-4, 2001.
- 9 Christopher Hitchens, "Visit to a Small Planet," *Vanity Fair* (January 2001), p. 24.
- 10 Quoted in Jana Cerna, *Kafka's Milena* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.174.
- 11 Both quotes from Maureen Freely, "Polymorphous Sexuality in the Sixties," *The Independent*, January 29, 2001, *The Monday Review*, p. 4.
- 12 Quoted in *Konkret*, no. 3 (March 2001), p. 9.