

An Interview With Slavoj Žižek: The Belated Actuality of Lenin

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C&C: There is a clear shift in the appreciation of October Revolution in your work. In your earlier works, Lenin is featured above all as the thinker of political decision, with the “April Theses” being perhaps the most exemplary political text in this period, which you read through the lens of a Hegelian-Lacanian theory of the act, which creates its own presuppositions. In your later work, Lenin appears mostly in the context of a critique of Leftist utopianism, as an example not so much of “impossible acts”, but of the need to do away with idealised attachments to political projects in the name of a certain ruthless pragmatism guided by the real of the situation. In this verve, you engaged mostly with the “Notes of a Publicist” and with the texts dealing with the NEP. Is there an underlying commonality between these two Lenin’s, or are these two incompatible appreciations - Lenin as the thinker of groundless subjective decisions and Lenin as the thinker of the distinction between political ideals and the real of politics?

S. Ž. I see your point and agree with it, but I would nonetheless like to emphasize what the two stances share - it is, I am not afraid to say, the ruthless will to grab power and then to hold it, to institutionalize it. Lenin’s focus on taking power did not just express his obsession with power, it meant much more: his obsession (in a good sense of the term) with opening up a “liberated territory,” space controlled by emancipatory forces OUTSIDE the global capitalist system. This is why any poetry of permanent revolutionizing was totally alien to Lenin – when, after the defeat of the expected all-European revolution in the early 1920s, some Bolsheviks thought it would be better to lose power than to stick to it in these conditions, Lenin was horrified by this idea. Lenin was here a kind of structuralist: the PLACE of power has priority over its content, so we should hold it and then improvise how to fill it in...

Furthermore, I don’t think there is a clear opposition between Lenin’s strategy of risking big acts and his ruthless pragmatism. One can see very clearly that there was a precise ruthless pragmatism in Lenin’s decision to enforce the October revolution. After the February revolution, Lenin immediately saw a unique chance for taking power – his insight resulted from the analysis of a very specific constellation, it was not an expression of some abstract “decisionism.” On the other hand, there was much more “utopianism” in Lenin’s efforts to fill the free space OUTSIDE the capitalist system with new content – the paradox is that he was a pragmatist in how to grab power, and a utopian in what to do with it.

C&C: Lenin was also the main thinker behind your proposal for modelling the Party-form on the analyst's discourse, a proposal that was based on the analysis that the Leninist vanguard Party inaugurated the thought of an immanent mediation between the objective working class and itself as revolutionary agent. This comparison between the role of the party and the role of the analyst, however, carries certain presuppositions, since the Party is a collective endeavour and the analyst is just one person - that is, the recognition that political organizations can function as "the semblance of the object cause of desire" seem to imply that collective organizations can be oriented by something other than a common ideal that binds together its partisans. To put it bluntly: what sort of infra-structure is envisioned for such a collective which would allow it to enter into such transferential relation with the people/class?

S. Ž. Psychoanalytic practice (treatment) is something that is possible only out of its own impossibility... a statement which many would instantly proclaim a typical piece of postmodern jargon. However, did Freud himself not point in this direction when he wrote that the ideal conditions for the psychoanalytic treatment would be those in which psychoanalysis is no longer needed? This is the reason why Freud listed the practice of psychoanalysis among the impossible professions. After the psychoanalytic treatment begins, the patient (analysand) resist it (among other things) by way of deploying transferences, and the treatment progresses through the analysis of transference and other forms of resistance. There can be no direct "smooth" treatment: in a treatment, we immediately stumble upon obstacles by way of working through these obstacles.

Does exactly the same not hold also for every revolution (and every process of radical emancipation)? They are only possible against the background of their own impossibility: the existing global capitalist order is a concrete totality which can immediately counteract all attempts to subvert it, and anti-capitalist struggle can only be efficient if it deals with these countermeasures, if it turns into its weapon the very instruments of its defeat.

So I must correct myself and abandon my earlier idea of the Party as a kind of collective analyst. In my new book (*Incontinence of the Void*), I refer to Lenin's late idea on a "control commission" which would overview the exercise of power by the Central Committee, and I propose to read it as a unique project to introduce the duality of Master and Analyst into the functioning of political power. While Lenin sees

clearly the need for the Party in power to function as a Master, he also sees the need to constrain the power of the Party *nomenklatura*, plus he is, as expected, distrustful of the "normal" democratic mechanisms, which brings him to his unique proposal which, I think, deserves our full attention.

C&C: You also have been one of the few Communist philosophers to defend the thesis that only the Left can produce a sufficiently radical critique of its own past, and that we should neither settle for an abstract analysis of totalitarianism, nor strive to defend 20th century socialism as if the only way to remain a Communists today were to cover up its social, political and economic catastrophe. This seems very much similar to the process of mourning, since for Freud the only way to "inherit" something of our past losses and failures was to work through the seductive alternative of idealizing what was lost. But just as mourning, in analysis, is something that is triggered by a transferential relationship is it possible to individually mourn a collective dream? And what would a collective process of mourning look like (if this can obviously not mean to build melancholic temples or statues)?

S. Ž. Again, I think Lenin would have been brutally honest here, he would have focused his "mourning" on the central problem of the lack of a viable alternate political and economic project. The standard radical Leftist reproach to the Left in power is that, instead of effectively socializing production and deploy actual democracy, it remained within the constraints of standard Leftist policies (nationalizing means of production or tolerating capitalism in a Social-Democratic way, imposing an authoritarian dictatorship or playing the game of parliamentary democracy...). Maybe, the time has come to raise the brutal question: OK, but what should or could they have done? How would the authentic model of socialist democracy have looked in practice? Chavez was not only a populist throwing around the oil money; what is largely ignored in international media are the complex and often inconsistent efforts to overcome capitalist economy by experimenting with new forms of the organization of production, forms which endeavor to move beyond the alternative of private and state property: farmers and workers cooperatives, workers participation, control and organization of production, different hybrid forms between private property and social control and organization, etc. (Say, factories not used by the owners are given to the workers to run them.) There are many hits and runs on this path – for example, after some attempts, giving nationalized factories to

workers to own them, distributing stocks among them, was abandoned. Although we are dealing here with genuine attempts in which grass-roots initiatives interact with state proposals, one must also note many economic failures, inefficiencies, widespread corruption, etc. The usual story is that after (half) a year of enthusiastic work, things go down...

In the first years of Chavismo, we were clearly witnessing a broad popular mobilization. However, the big question remains: how does or should this reliance on popular self-organization affect running a government? Can we even imagine today an authentic Communist power? What we get is disaster (Venezuela), capitulation (Greece), or a full return to capitalism (China, Vietnam). As Julia Buxton put it, the Bolivarian Revolution “has transformed social relations in Venezuela and had a huge impact on the continent as a whole. But the tragedy is that it was never properly institutionalized and thus proved to be unsustainable.” OK, but to insitutionalize it in an authentic way? It is all too easy to say that authentic emancipatory politics should remain at a distance from state: the big problem that lurks behind is what to do with state. Can we even imagine a society outside state? One should deal with these problems here and now, there is no time to wait for some future situation and, in the meantime, keep a safe distance from state. In other words, why was there no Venezuelan Left to provide an authentic radical alternative to Chavez and Maduro? Why was the initiative in the opposition to Chavez left to the extreme Right which triumphantly hegemonized the oppositional struggle, imposing itself as the voice of (even) the ordinary people who suffer the consequences of the Chavista mismanagement of economy?

In short, what if the search for an authentic Third Way beyond Social Democracy which doesn't go far enough and “totalitarian” turn which goes too far is a loss of time? The strategy of the radical Left is to try to demonstrate, with all theoretical sophistication, how the “totalitarian” radicalization masks is opposite: Stalinism was effectively a form of state capitalism, etc. In the case of Venezuela, radical Leftists blame the fiasco of Chavismo on the fact that it made a compromise with capitalism, not only by drowning in corruption but by making deals with international corporations to exploit natural resources of Venezuela, etc. Again, while this is in principle true, what should they have done? In Bolivia where the Morales-Linera government avoided these pitfalls, did they do anything more than remaining within the confines of a more modest “democratic” politics?

The commonplace “enough talking, let's act” is deeply deceiving – now, we should say precisely the opposite: enough of the pressure to do something, let's begin to talk seriously, i.e., to think! And by this I

mean we should also leave behind the radical Leftist self-complacency of endlessly repeating how the choices we are offered in the political space are false, and how only a renewed radical Left can save us... yes, in a way, but why, then, does this Left not emerge? What vision has the Left to offer that would be strong enough to mobilize people? We should never forget that the ultimate cause of the act that we are caught into the vicious cycle of le Pe Pen and and Macron is the disappearance of the viable Leftist alternative.

C&C: To stay a bit more with the theme of critically assessing the revolutionary past. One of the favourite exercises of the Left from a certain point onward became the debate “when” it all went wrong in a revolutionary process. In the case of the October Revolution, conservatives are defined as those who thought it went wrong even before it began, due to the very principles and nature of socialism; Leninists and Trotskyists as those who think the first years were on the right path, until Stalin rose to power; Stalinists are defined by the claim that the demise of Russian revolution came from the “outside”, it was an imperialist counter-action. What all these accounts have in common is the idea that historical processes need an external cause to “go wrong”: conservatives call it “socialism”, Trotskyists call it “Stalin”, and Stalinists refer to them/it as “traitors”. Your analysis, however, suggests that the particular brand of Soviet model of socialism is not the product of the intervention of an external force - which makes some people consider you conservative or anti-revolutionary - but you *also* do not claim that, because of this, revolutionary ideas should be discarded. This paradoxical position seems, once again, to resonate with the psychoanalytic theory of the drives, which warns us against the constant threat of “means” and “ends” inverting without any external interference. Could this parallel be drawn and if so in what way does your reading of the drive allow for a concrete analysis of what went wrong inn Russia (or is it in a certain sense only a preliminary that can show what conceptual coordinates need to be avoided to even start analysing this past)?

S. Ž. I think that, with his brutal and sharp approach, Lenin would have the (potentially) moralizing topic of “what went wrong?” and instead focus on the big problem of the missing revolutionary subject: how is it that the working class does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent? This problem provided the main *raison d'etre* of its reference to psychoanalysis which

was evoked precisely to explain the unconscious libidinal mechanisms which prevent the rise of class consciousness inscribed into the very being (social situation) of the working class. In this way, the truth of the Marxist socio-economic analysis was saved, there was no reason to give ground to the “revisionist” theories about the rise of the middle classes, etc. For this same reason, Western Marxism was also in a constant search for other social agents who could play the role of the revolutionary agent, as the under-study replacing the indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students and intellectuals, the excluded... up to the refugees. The failure of the working class as the revolutionary subject lies already in the very core of the Bolshevik revolution: Lenin’s art was to detect the “rage potential” of the disappointed peasants. October Revolution won due to the slogan “land and peace,” addressed to the vast peasant majority, seizing the short moment of their radical dissatisfaction. Lenin was thinking along these lines already a decade ago, which is why he was horrified at the prospect of the success of the Stolypin land reforms, which aimed at creating a new strong class of independent farmers – he wrote that if Stolypin succeeds, the chance for a revolution chance is lost for decades. All successful socialist revolutions, from Cuba to Yugoslavia, followed this model, seizing the opportunity in an extreme critical situation, co-opting the national-liberation or other “rage capitals.” Of course, a partisan of the logic of hegemony would here point out that this is the very “normal” logic of revolution, that the “critical mass” is reached precisely and only through a series of equivalences among multiple demands which is always radically contingent and dependent on a specific, unique even, set of circumstances. A revolution never occurs when all antagonisms collapse into the big One, but when they combine their power... But the problem is here more complex: the point is not just that revolution no longer rides the train of History, following its Laws, since there is no History, since history is a contingent open process; the problem is a different one: it is as if there IS a Law of History, a more or less clear predominant main line of historical development, and that revolution can only occur in its interstices, “against the current.” Revolutionaries have to wait patiently for the (usually very brief) period of time when the system openly malfunctions or collapses, seize the window of opportunity, grab the power which at that moment as it were lies on the street, IS for grab, and then fortify its hold on power, building repressive apparatuses, etc., so that, once the moment of confusion is over, the majority gets sober and is disappointed by the new regime, it is too late to get rid of it, they are firmly entrenched...

C&C: In your work you have offered a peculiar assessment of both Soviet and Chinese socialist experiences, criticizing both communist Parties not for their seduction by State power, but rather for their minimal distance from the State. This critique carries an underlying hypothesis: that the withering of the State is not a thesis about the dissolution of all representative spheres logically located above civil society, but about the dissolution of the State into a mediating instance. This hypothesis seems find a good case study in Fredric Jameson’s “American Utopia”, where the army serves as a model for a mediating infra-structure into which the State is slowly diluted. Seeing that both you and Jameson remain committed Hegelian Marxists, could we claim that this position proposes a “speculative identity” between Party and State?

S. Ž. I agree with the basic thrust of your question (if I understand it correctly): the last Leftist fetish to be abandoned is anti-statism, and the big problem and task is how to transform state apparatuses. I also find wonderful your formula of the speculative identity between Party and State, where the term “speculative identity” has to be given all its Hegelian weight: we are not talking about some higher unity but about the highest “contradiction” - a State necessarily fails in its task and Party is an immanent corrective of this failure.

But I’ve written about this enough, so I would like to add another critical point about China and Mao. In his speech at the Lushan party conference in July 1959, when the first reports made it clear what a fiasco the Great Leap Forward was, Mao called the party cadre to assume their part of responsibility, and he concluded the speech with admitting that his own responsibility, especially for the unfortunate campaign to make steel in every village, is the greatest – here are the last lines of the speech:

“The chaos caused was on a grand scale and I take responsibility. Comrades, you must all analyze your own responsibility. If you have to shit, shit! If you have to fart, fart! You will feel much better for it.”

Why this vulgar metaphor? In what sense can the self-critical admission of one’s responsibility for serious mistakes be compared to the need to shit and fart? I presume the solution is that, for Mao, to take responsibility does not mean so much an expression of remorse which may even push me to offer to step down; it’s more that, by doing it, you get rid of responsibility, so that no wonder you “feel much better for it” like after a good shit – you don’t admit you are shit, you get rid of the shit in you...

this is what the Stalinist “self-criticism” effectively amounts to. I am not making here a sentimental point about the “inhumanity” of Stalinism and Maoism, but a much more serious theoretical point of the space for self-critical analysis in Stalinism and Maoism.

C&C: Historical materialism is usually concerned with critically analysing the material basis of each historical sequence, looking for the social contradictions, which opens up the possibility for revolutionary action. However, an analysis of the material determinations of socio-historical situations must also include an analysis of the experience of history – that is of the specific impossibilities of this or that historical period – in each conjuncture, since the emergence of new (potential) political subjects does not simply activate a given possibility of revolutionary subjectivisation. Beyond the hegemony of late capitalist discourse and the ideology of the “end of history”, are there signs that our experience of historical time has changed after the Russian Revolution? Does it represent a true historical break and rupture? So that today it must be taken into account in all emancipatory political activity and strategy?

S. Ž. What signs would a Leninist view on our predicament discern? A whole bunch of them, I think.

First, Lenin would have immediately noted the supreme irony of how ideology functions today: it appears precisely as its opposite, as a radical critique of ideological utopias. The predominant ideology today is not a positive vision of some utopian future but a cynical resignation, an acceptance of how “the world really is”, accompanied by a warning that if we want to change it (too much), only a totalitarian horror can ensue. Every vision of another world is dismissed as ideology. Alain Badiou put it in a wonderful and precise way: the main function of ideological censorship today is not to crush actual resistance – this is the job of repressive state apparatuses – but to crush hope, to immediately denounce every critical project as opening a path at the end of which is something like gulag. This is what Tony Blair had in mind when he recently asked “is it possible to define a politics that is what I would call post-ideological?”

Second sign: although Marx provided an unsurpassable analysis of the capitalist reproduction, his mistake was not just that he counted on the prospect of capitalism’s final breakdown, and therefore couldn’t grasp how capitalism came out of each crisis strengthened. There is a much more tragic mistake at work in the classic body. Marxism, described in

precise terms by Wolfgang Streeck – Marxism was right about the “final crisis” of capitalism, we are clearly entering it today, but this crisis is just that, a prolonged process of decay and disintegration, with no easy Hegelian *Aufhebung* in sight, no agent to give to this decay a positive twist and transform it into the passage to some higher level of social organization.

The paradox of our predicament is thus that, while resistances against global capitalism seem to fail again and again to undermine its advance, they remain strangely out of touch with many trends which clearly signal capitalism’s progressive disintegration – it is as if the two tendencies (resistance and self-disintegration) move in different ontological levels and cannot meet, so that we get futile protests in parallel with immanent decay and no way to bring the two together in a coordinated act of capitalism’s emancipatory overcoming. How did it come to this? While (most of) the Left desperately tries to protect the old workers’ rights against the onslaught of global capitalism, it is almost exclusively the most “progressive” capitalists themselves (from Elon Musk to Mark Zuckerberg) who talk about post-capitalism – as if the very topic of passage from capitalism as we know it) to a new post-capitalist order is appropriated by capitalism...

The next thing a Leninist would have done is to avoid any simplistic romanticization of the refugees. Some European Leftists claims that refugees are a nomadic proletariat which can act as the core of a new revolutionary subject in Europe – a claim which is deeply problematic. Proletariat is for Marx composed of exploited workers disciplined through work and creating wealth, and while today precariat can count as a new form of proletariat, the paradox of refugees is that they are mostly in search of becoming proletariat. They are “nothing,” with no place within the social edifice of a country where they took refugee, but from here it is a long step to proletariat in the strict Marxian sense.

So instead of celebrating refugees as nomadic proletarians, would it not be more appropriate to claim that they are the more dynamic/ambitious part of their country’s population, those with a will to ascend, and that the true proletarians are rather those who remained there and were left behind as strangers in their own country (with all the religious connotation of “left behind”: leftovers, those not taken to god by rapture).

Last but not least, with his extraordinary sensitivity for the relations of power and domination, a Leninist would wholeheartedly embraced Rebecca Carson’s insight into how the financialization of capital (where most profit is generated in M-M’, without the detour through valorisation (Verwertung) of the labor force which produces surplus-value) paradoxically leads to the *return of direct personal relations of domination*

– unexpectedly since (as Marx emphasized) M-M' is capital at its most impersonal and abstract. It is crucial to grasp here the link between three elements: fictitious capital, personal domination and the social reproduction (of labor power. Financial speculations take place before the fact (of valorization): they mostly consist of credit operations and speculative investments where no money is yet spent on investment in production; credit means debt and therefore the subject or bearers of this operation (not just individuals but banks and institutions that manage money) are not involved in the process as subjects to the value form only, but are also creditors and debtors and so they are also subject to another form of power relation that is not based on the abstract domination of commodification.

This, of course, in no way implies that, in this new relations of domination, money plays no role, i.e., that we are dealing with direct domination: money continues to play a crucial role, but insofar as its distribution is no longer grounded in the process of valorization (workers paid for their labor, etc.), it begins to function as direct means of domination. In other words, money is used as direct means of political power, as a way to exert this power and control its subjects. Furthermore, although some theorists claim that we thereby move beyond relations of commodity exchange and exploitation-through-valorization, one should insist that valorization through the circulation of capital remains the ultimate horizon of the entire process of economic reproduction.

The expected outcome is that other divisions and hierarchies emerge: experts and non-experts, full citizens and the excluded, religious, sexual, and other minorities. All groups not yet included into the process of valorization, up to refugees and citizens of “rogue countries,” are thus progressively subsumed to forms of personal domination, from the organization of refugee camps to judicial control of those considered potential law-breakers – a domination which tends to adopt a human face (like social services intended to ease the refugees’ smooth “integration” into our societies).

C&C: We usually get one of two positions when political thinkers are confronted with the problem of how normal people would deal with a non-capitalist regime: either we assert that our history has made us all too egotistical and self-centred to live in a more communitarian environment, and therefore a ‘moral revolution’ would be needed, so that a society based on solidarity could be possible, while others defend the position that we are inherently cooperative in our nature, and capitalist social relations hide this aspect of ourselves, so that, when faced with the possibility of

living in a more just and egalitarian society, people would embrace this. Your position, however, seems to be neither one of the two: not only have you constantly argued against sympathy and love as the basis for social relations in post-capitalist societies, praising the possibility to keep a ‘safe’ distance from one’s neighbour, but you have also suggested that, against the common doxa, it is capitalism itself which is not egotistical enough, for the well-being or satisfaction of the bearer of capital imposes no limit on capital’s cycle of self-expansion, even when such process can drive us all into self-destruction. Does this recognition that post-capitalism will not demand of us a fantasmatic and excessive love for one another mean that a ‘moral revolution’ is not a pre-requisite for political transformation or that it is a different moral transformation that we need? Furthermore, how should we equate this defense of rational egotism with your fidelity to psychoanalysis and your praise of the productive or emancipatory dimension of the death drive?

S. Ž. Very good question – you (almost) caught me with my pants down here (as they say). My statement on “rational egotism” just wants to make clear that capitalism is NOT the reign of rational egotism but, as Benjamin pointed out, a new religion relying on an obscure “dark theology”. However, this “dark theology” has to remain implicit, i.e., it necessarily appears (in the consciousness of individuals) as its opposite, as rational egotism. And, maybe, we can venture that a radical emancipatory movement (which effectively serves the long-term rational interests of humanity, and is in this sense grounded in “rational egotism”) also has to appear in the guise of its opposite, as implying the stance of selfless dedication to a Cause.

C&C: After August 1914 Lenin, as is well-known, went to Switzerland to do something that cannot but seem ridiculous at the first sight. He indulged in a quasi-academic exercise of studying Hegel – and Aristotle. He read his *Logic* and his *Philosophy of History*, documented in hundreds of pages of notes and in his famous Blue Notebook. How do you make sense of this surprising gesture? Is there a need for what Althusser once, apropos Machiavelli, called a necessary moment of “solitude”? You always suggested that one should today – at least sometimes have the courage to – refrain from directly engaging in some particular situations, as this would simply reproduce the very coordinates one tends to fight. Is thus a retreat necessary? One might also remember in this context your claim that Hegel is maybe the only

philosopher in the history of philosophy who did not actually try to change the world. So, there seems to be even a redoubled “solitude” or subtraction from the world – first as Hegel, but then also as Lenin (studying Hegel) first as substance but then also a subject. Would you agree with this? Are you yourself repeating the Leninist gesture by your turn to Hegel?

S. Ž. Maybe I am, but in a more “pessimist” way – let me resume my argument. We should return to Hegel since his and our epochs are both epochs of passage from the Old and the New. A certain epoch is coming to an end (for Hegel pre-modern society, for us capitalism), but the failure of the Marxist revolutions makes it clear that we can no longer rely on the eschatology of the New-to-come – the future is open.

From the standpoint of emancipatory struggle, it is thus crucial to take into account how, in the process of the actualization of a goal, of a Notion, this notion itself changes (into its opposite). And the purest this Notion is, more brutal is this reversal. This is why Marx is “too (pseudo-) Hegelian,” he really counts on the “synthesis” of Communism as the overcoming of all hitherto history. At a general formal level, let us imagine a dialectical process which points forwards towards its resolution – the exemplary case of such a process is Marx’s vision of history in *Grundrisse* where the progress goes from substance to alienated subjectivity, i.e., subjectivity separated from the objective conditions of its labor; this development reaches its apogee in capitalism, in the figure of proletariat as substanceless subjectivity; however, this point of extreme alienation is in itself already a resolution, i.e., it opens up the perspective of its own overcoming, of the collective subjectivity re-appropriating its objective conditions – this time not by being substantially immersed into them, but by asserting itself as the subject of the entire process. From a strict Hegelian standpoint, such a teleological process always goes wrong, the intended goal turns into its opposite (a standpoint, one might add, confirmed by the very revolutionary experience of the reversal of the radical emancipation into the Stalinist nightmarish horror). The standard Marxist counter-argument would have been here that such a reversal of the intended *telos* into its opposite is precisely the basic feature of the “alienated” history in which individuals are playthings of an impenetrable substantial process.

For Hegel, however, the self-transformation of the goal during the process of its actualization is not an effect of the “alienated” character of the process in which subjects are caught into an impenetrable substance – on the contrary, the idea that the process is dominated by a substantial big Other is in itself an ideological illusion. The Hegelian matrix of the

dialectical process is thus that one fails in reaching the goal, the intended reconciliation turns into its opposite, and only then, in a second time, comes the true reconciliation when one recognizes this failure itself as the form of success.

So where are we today in this regard? Radical historical self-reflection (a philosophy has to account for its own possibility, i.e., how it fits its own historical constellation) remains a full necessity – as Foucault put it, every thought, even a reflection of the ancient past (like his own analysis of the Ancient Greek ethics) is ultimately an “ontology of the present.” However, our self-reflection can no longer be the one of direct revolutionary Marxism whose exemplary case is Lukacs’s *History and Class Consciousness* (self-consciousness as the practical act of self-awareness of the engaged revolutionary subject).

Our moment is more a Hegelian one: not the moment of the highest tension when the teleological (re)solution seems near, but the moment after, when the (re)solution is accomplished, but misses its goal and turns into nightmare. At this moment, the Hegelian problem is: how to remain faithful to the original goal of the (re)solution, how not to turn towards a conservative position but learn to discern the (re)solution in/through the very failure of its first attempt to actualize it? Hegel, of course, refers here to the French Revolution: its attempt to realize freedom ended in revolutionary Terror, and Hegel’s entire effort goes into demonstrating how, through this very failure, a new order emerged in which the revolutionary ideals become actuality.

Today, we find ourselves in a strictly homologous Hegelian moment: how to actualize the Communist project after the failure of its first attempt at realization in the XXth century? What this impenetrability of the future, this impossibility for the agent to take into account the consequences of its own act, implies is that, from the Hegelian standpoint, a revolution also has to be repeated: for immanent conceptual reasons, its first strike has to end as a fiasco, the outcome has to turn into the opposite of what was intended (emancipation into terror), but this fiasco is necessary since it creates the conditions for its overcoming.

In this sense, the Leninist gesture of returning to Hegel implies for me the renunciation to the historical teleology that is still operative in Marx, and the full acceptance of the impenetrability of the historical process inclusive of emancipatory movements. To paraphrase Saint-Just, Lenin fully accepted that a revolutionary is not an instrument or purveyor of a deep social necessity but more a navigator on an uncharted sea.

C&C: It is often argued that with Lenin’s turn to Hegel something analogous happened to the ‘epistemological break’ that

Althusser saw at work in the transition from early (humanist) to late (structuralist, so to speak) Marx. Lenin became a proper dialectician only after studying the *Logic*. Yet, Althusser himself suggested that Lenin did read the *Logic* long before he actually read the *Logic*, namely by properly reading *Capital* – which can only be properly understood, as the story goes, if one knows the *Logic* (and without the *Logic* one does not get anything). So, Lenin was the first true reader of *Capital* because he read it as if he already read the *Logic* (whereby he then proved afterwards to have understood the *Logic* before having read it). It is similar to your own example of a movie made out of a novel, and when the movie is not so good, this often suggests that the novel must be better than the movie. But if one then returns to some novels they are even worse than the movie, whereby the novel that one imagines by watching the movie (the novel that is better than the movie made of it, and thus even better than the actual novel) is a peculiar pure virtual object. Do you think a similar logic applies to Lenin's reading of *Capital* and the *Logic*? Does *Capital* suggest a *Logic* (of Hegel) that is somewhat better (i.e. more materialist) than the actual *Logic* (which seems to be Althusser's claim)? Or do you think that Lenin's reading of Hegel still provides a contemporary way to go (one might bear in mind that he praised also the passages on the absolute idea as profoundly materialist)?

S. Ž. To cut a long story short, I think that what Lenin really learned from Hegel was the concept of concrete universality and its use in politics. "Concrete universality" means that there is no abstract universality of rules, no "typical" situations, all we are dealing with are exceptions; however, a concrete totality is precisely the totality which regulates the concrete context of exceptions. We should thus, on behalf of our very fidelity to concrete analysis, reject any form of nominalism. Let me give you (strange, perhaps) example. In Orwell's *1984*, there is a famous exchange between Winston and O'Brien, his interrogator. Winston asks him: "'Does Big Brother exist?' 'Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party.' 'Does he exist in the same way as I exist?' 'You do not exist,' said O'Brien." Should we not say something similar about the existence of universality? To the nominalist claim that there is no pure neutral universality, that every universality is caught into the conflict of particular ways of life, one should reply: no, today it's the particular ways of life that do not exist as autonomous modes of historical existence, the only actual reality is that of the universal capitalist system. This is why, in contrast to the identity politics which focuses of how

each (ethnic, religious, sexual) group should be able to fully assert its particular identity, the much more difficult and radical task is to enable each group the full access to universality. This access to universality does not mean a recognition that one is also part of the universal human genus, or the assertion to some ideological values which are considered universal. It means recognizing one's own universality the way it is at work in the fractures of one's particular identity, as the "work of the negative" which undermines every particular identity.

C&C: There seems to be an interesting agreement between you and Louis Althusser regarding Lenin. You both argue that as a 'theorist' he is very weak (you have argued on numerous occasions that his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is one of the worst books ever written; Althusser claims that once Lenin attempts to rise above a certain level of abstraction, he becomes "very weak"). However, you both regard him as one of the greatest political minds, his analysis of concrete situations, etc. In this sense, what is interesting about Lenin from the standpoint of philosophy? And did his philosophical weakness contribute to his political genius?

S. Ž. I think that your final question touches the true sore point: yes, paradoxically, Lenin's philosophical weakness contributed to – and was even a condition of – his political genius. So although Lukacs in the early 1920s (in his *History and Class Consciousness* and *Lenin*) was right to interpret Lenin's thought and action as grounded in the structure of Hegelian subjectivity, with proletariat as the historical subject-substance, it was not clear to him that, for complex reasons of historical dialectics – a Lenin fully aware of what he is doing would not be able to do it. Another case of the strange dialectic of not-knowing as a condition of doing, and the surprise is that this case occurs in the work of Lukacs, a philosopher whose notion of class consciousness implies precisely the self-transparent identity of knowing and doing (the very act of arriving at class consciousness is for the proletariat a practical act, a doing, a simultaneous change in its actual social being).

As for the relationship between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital*, I think we should not be sentimental and awed by Lenin's statement that anyone who didn't read Hegel's *Logic* cannot understand *Capital*: Lenin himself read *Logic* but he didn't really understand it (his limit was the category of *Wechselwirkung*), plus he didn't really understand *Capital*. Here one should be precise: what Lenin did not understand was the – let's risk this term – "transcendental" dimension of Marx's critique of political economy, the fact that Marx's critique of political economy is not just a

critical science of economy but simultaneously a kind of transcendental form which enables us to articulate the basic contours of the entire social being (inclusive of ideology) in capitalism.

C&C: Let us speak a bit about Trotsky. There is an apparent change of position, say from his *Communism and Terrorism* and his support of the militarisation of labour, to the positions he held later in his life. How should we account for it?

S. Ž. If anything, Trotsky's position in *Communism and Terrorism* is much closer to me than his later anti-Stalinism. His true tragedy is for me his behaviour in the early and mid-1920s, when he totally miscalculated how Stalin was gaining power through strengthening his power-base, the new bureaucracy. I think that Trotsky's behaviour in these years disqualifies him as a potential serious leader.

C&C: When we speak, think or write about the Bolshevik Revolution, we usually think of a handful of names, from political, economic, artistic, et cetera practices. What about the unsung 'heroes' of the revolution and its afterlife? We are thinking more of a militant, an artist, a philosopher or a theorist, or even a political, economic or artistic movement which is worthy not so much of 'repeating', but of remembering and thinking about?

S. Ž. A beautiful question. My main candidate for such an "unsung hero" is Andrei Platonov whose two great novels from the late 1920s (*Chengur* and especially *The Pit*) are usually interpreted as a critical depiction of the Stalinist utopia and its disastrous consequences; however, the utopia Platonov stages in these two works is not that of the Stalinist Communism, but the Gnostic-materialist utopia against which the "mature" Stalinism reacted in the early 1930s. Dualist-Gnostic motifs prevail in this utopia: sexuality and the entire bodily domain of generation/corruption are perceived as a hated prison to be overcome by the scientific construction of a new ethereal and desexualized immortal body. (This is why Zamyatin's dystopia *We* is also not a critical portrayal of the totalitarian potential of Stalinism, but the extrapolation of the Gnostic-utopian tendency of the revolutionary 1920s against which, precisely, Stalinism reacted. In this sense Althusser was right and not involved in cheap paradoxes when he insisted that Stalinism was a form of humanism: its "cultural counter-revolution" was a humanist reaction against the "extremist" Gnostic-utopian post-humanist 1920s.) We should also bear in mind that Lenin was from the outset opposed to this

Gnostic-utopian orientation (which attracted, among others, Trotsky and Gorky) with its dream of a short-cut to the new Proletarian Culture or the New Man. Nonetheless, one should perceive this Gnostic utopianism as a kind of "symptom" of Leninism, as the manifestation of what made the revolution fail, as the seed of its later "obscure disaster." That is to say, the question to be raised here is: is the utopian universe depicted by Platonov the extrapolation of the immanent logic of the Communist revolution, or the extrapolation of the logic that underlies the activity of those who precisely fail to follow the script of a "normal" Communist revolution and engage in a millenarist short-cut destined to end in dismal failure? How does the Idea of a Communist revolution stand with regard to the millenarist Idea of the instant actualization of the utopia? Furthermore, can these two options be clearly distinguished? Was there ever a "proper" and "ripe" Communist revolution? And if not, what does this mean for the very concept of the Communist revolution?

Platonov was in a permanent dialogue with this pre-Stalinist utopian core, which is why his last "intimate" ambiguous love/hate engagement with the Soviet reality related to the renewed utopianism of the first 5-years plan; after that, with the rise of the High Stalinism and its cultural counter-revolution, the coordinates of the dialogue changed. Insofar as High Stalinism was anti-utopian, Platonov's turn towards a more "conformist" Socialist-Realist writing in the 1930s cannot be dismissed as a mere external accommodation due to much stronger censorship and oppression: it was rather an immanent easing of tensions, up to a point even a sign of sincere proximity. The High and late Stalinism had other immanent critics (Grossman, Shalamov, Solzhenytsin, etc.) which were in "intimate" dialogue with it, sharing its underlying premises (Lukacs noted that "One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich" meets all formal criteria of Socialist Realism).

This is why Platonov remains an ambiguous embarrassment for later dissidents. The key text of his "Socialist Realist" period is the short novel *The Soul* (1935), and although the typically Platonian utopian group still here - the "nation," a desert community of marginals who lost the will to live -, the coordinates have totally changed. The hero is now a Stalinist educator, schooled in Moscow; he returns to the desert to introduce the "nation" to scientific and cultural progress and thus restore their will to live. Platonov, of course, remains faithful to his ambiguity: at the novel's end, the hero has to accept that he cannot teach others anything.

C&C: In your book *Disparities* you develop a very interesting and yet 'controversial' thesis on equality as, let's call it, a non Marxist political position/premise. Following Marx, you locate it within the

bourgeois horizon. Your 'heretical' position is: equality is immanent contradiction to capitalism itself. In fact, Marx very rarely mentions equality, and when he does, it is used in the context of portraying the bourgeois political system in general. Instead, you propose the axiom of the political intervention in the points of the impossibility that in a formal democratic equality appears as possible (i.e. debts, healthcare, et cetera). The point is that any radical change must take place outside of the 'democratic procedures', as the latter have already adapted to the structure of capitalism.

S. Ž. First, I think that equality and democracy (in the sense of democratic procedures) do not necessarily fit together – maybe they are even ultimately incompatible, so that Balibar's well-known new word *equaliberte* is more an ideological condensation blurring a gap than a concept. But I see the actual problem you are aiming at: the second round of the French presidential elections in May 2017 confronted us with the old dilemma of the radical Left: vote or not (in the parliamentary elections)? Although the miserable choice le Pen / Macron exposed us to the temptation of ceasing to vote altogether, of refusing to participate in this more and more meaningless ritual, a decision here is full of ambiguities.

The argumentation against voting subtly (or openly) oscillates between two versions, the "soft" one and the "strong" one. The "soft" version specifically targets the multiparty democracy in capitalist countries, with two main arguments: (1) media controlled by the ruling class manipulate the majority of voters and do not allow them to make rational decisions in their interest; (2) elections are a ritual that occurs every four years and its main function is to passivize voters in the long periods between the two elections. The ideal that underlies this critique is that of a non-representative "direct" democracy with continuous direct participation of the majority. The "strong" version makes a crucial step forward and relies (explicitly or not) on a profound distrust of the majority of people: the long history of universal suffrage in the West shows that the vast majority is as a rule passive, caught in the inertia of survival, not ready to be mobilized for a Cause. That's why every radical movement is always constrained to a vanguard minority, and in order for it to gain hegemony, it has to wait patiently for a crisis (usually war) which provides a narrow window of opportunity. In such moments, an authentic vanguard can seize the day, mobilize the people (even if not the actual majority) and take over. Communists were here always utterly "non-dogmatic," ready to parasitic on another issue: land and peace (Russia), national liberation and unity against corruption (China)... They were always well aware that

mobilization will be soon over, and were carefully preparing the power apparatus to keep them in power at that moment. (In contrast to the October Revolution which explicitly treated peasants as secondary allies, the Chinese revolution didn't even pretend to be proletarian: it directly addressed farmers as its base.)

One should always bear in mind that a permanent people's presence equals permanent state of exception – so what happens when people get tired, when they are no longer able to sustain the tension? Communists in power had two solutions (or, rather, two sides of one and the same solution): the party reign over passive population and a fake popular mobilization. Trotsky himself, the theorist of the permanent revolution, was well aware that people "cannot live for years in an uninterrupted state of high tension and intense activity", and he turns this fact into an argument for the need of the vanguard party: the self-organization in councils cannot take over the role of the party which should run things when the people get tired...

Q: Lenin can be put into a line with great tacticians and strategists, from Machiavelli through Clausewitz and others. Do you think there is something like a Leninist tactics and strategy that needs to be re-invented (for) today?

S. Ž. Again, with his honesty and disregard for liberal sensitivities, the first rule of Lenin's strategy is the full awareness of how social relations are ultimately relations of brutal power struggle. If Marx defined bourgeois human rights as those of "*liberte-egalite-fraternite* and Bentham," the proletarian and properly Leftist version should be, precisely, "Liberty-Equality-Freedom and TERROR," terror of being torn out of the complacency of bourgeois life and its egotistic struggles. Bentham or terror – this, perhaps, is our ultimate choice, and Lenin was fully aware of it.

Second point: Lenin was fully aware that, in every political struggle, one should always stick to the basic Marxist insight: Communism is not an ideal, a normative order, a kind of ethico-political "axiom," but something that arises as a reaction to the ongoing historical process and its deadlocks. So when we talk about the continuing relevance (or irrelevance, for that matter) of the idea of Communism, we should not conceive this Idea in the Kantian sense of a regulative idea but in the strict Hegelian sense – for Hegel, "idea" is a concept which is not a mere Ought (*Sollen*) but contains the power of its actualization, i.e., towards which actuality itself strives. The question of the actuality of the idea of

Communism is thus that of discerning in our actuality tendencies which point towards it, otherwise it's an idea not worth losing time with.

So how will a radical social transformation happen? Definitely not as a triumphant victory or even catastrophe widely debated and predicted in the media but "like a thief in the night": "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and security,' destruction will come upon them suddenly, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." (Paul, 1 *Thessalonians* 5:2-3) Is this not already happening in our societies obsessed with, precisely, "peace and security"?

Berlin/Ljubljana/Prishtina
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