A plea for leninist intolerance

an essay by Slavoj Zizek

photos by Carl De Keyzer

Slavoj Zizek (b. Slovenia, 1949) is a philosopher and psychoanalyst and founder of the Slovenian Lacan school. He teaches in Ljubljana, Paris and Princeton, New Jersey. When his first publications appeared in the late eighties he was eagerly read and defended as a welcome 'new voice'. His numerous writings are a critique of ideologies from a psychoanalytical point of view and frequently involve a political commitment expressed in provocative statements intended to set in motion the debate on the values of Western society, as is clear from such book titles as 'Everything you always wanted to know about Lacan but were afraid to ask Hitchcock.' This essay for January is the sequel to his series of articles on 'Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism' in the New Left Review. In the following essay Zizek systematically exposes a number of mechanisms, usually concealed, whereby freedom is restricted: taboos which are not recognised as such and are 'socially accepted'; and he concludes with a straightforward provocation of the so-called tolerant left-liberal establishment which has now become - or degenerated into? - the norm in West European democracy.

Carl De Keyzer (b. Kortrijk, Belgium, 1958) has published several books of photoreportage. He has also won an impressive number of international prizes, for his books 'Homo Sovieticus' about the Soviet Union, 'East of Eden' about Eastern Europe and 'God Inc.' about religious fanaticism. In recent years he has been experimenting with colour. This was the case in his monumental series 'Tableaux d'Histoire', inspired by the great history paintings but adapted to the medium of photography and bearing the mark of our era: disjointed and occasionally surreal. The photographer chose five unpublished pictures that visually capture the tone of Zizek's arguments. Carl De Keyzer is a main member of the Magnum photo agency.
What is tolerance today? The most popular TV show of autumn 2000 in France, with a viewer rating twice as high as that of the notorious "Big Brother" reality soaps, is "C'est mon choix" ("It is my choice") on France 3, the talk-show whose guest is always an ordinary person (or, exceptionally, a well-known one) who made a peculiar choice which determined his or her entire life-style: one of them decided never to wear underwear, another is constantly trying to find a more appropriate sexual partner for his father and mother - extravagance is allowed, solicited even, but with the explicit exclusion of choices which may disturb the public (a person whose choice is to be and act as a racist, for example, is excluded a priori). Can one imagine a better summary of what "freedom of choice" effectively amounts to in our liberal societies? Ulrich Beck introduced the notion of the "reflexive society" in which all patterns of interaction, from the forms of sexual partnership up to ethnic identity itself, have to be renegotiated/reinvented. Perhaps the fully FRUSTRATING dimension of this eternal stimulus to make free choices is best rendered by the situation of having to choose a product in on-line shopping, where one has to make the almost endless series of choices: if you want it with X, press A, if not, press B... We can go on making our small choices, "reinventing ourselves" - on condition that these choices do not disturb the social and ideological balance. With regard to "C'est mon choix," the truly radical thing would have been to focus precisely on the "disturbing" choices: to invite people like dedicated racists, whose choice - whose difference - DOES make a difference. Phenomena like these make it all the more necessary today to REASSERT Lenin's opposition of "formal" and "actual" freedom. Let us fearlessly evoke Lenin at his worst - for example, his polemics against the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionaries' critique of Bolshevik power in 1922:

"Indeed, the sermons which... the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries preach express their true nature: The revolution has gone too far. What you are saying now we have been saying all the time, permit us to say it again." But we say in reply: Permit us to put you before a firing squad for saying that. Either you refrain from expressing your views, or, if you insist on expressing your political views publicly in the present circumstances, when our position is far more difficult than it was when the white guards were directly attacking us, then you will have only yourselves to blame if we treat you as the worst and most pernicious white guard elements." ("Political Report of the Central Committee of the R.C.P.," March 27th, 1922)

This Leninist forced choice - not "Money or your life!" but "No criticism or your life!" - combined with his dismissive attitude towards the "liberal" notion of freedom, accounts for his bad reputation among liberals. And today, after the terrifying experience of the Realsozialismus, is it indeed not more than obvious where the fault in this reasoning resides? First, it reduces a historical choice WITHIN the coordinates of the existing power relations, while "actual" freedom designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates. The first public reaction to the idea of reactualizing Lenin is, of course, an outburst of sarcastic laughter: Marx - OK, even on Wall Street, they love him today - Marx the poet of commodities, who provided perfect...
"objective critical and scientific way," not in an attitude of nostalgic idolatry, and, furthermore, from a perspective firmly rooted in the democratic political order, within the horizon of human rights - therein resides the lesson painfully learned through the experience of 20th-century totalitarian systems. What are we to say to this? Again, the problem resides in the implicit ecological catastrophe, violations of human rights, sexism, homophobia, antifeminism, the growing violence not only in the far-away countries, but also in our megalopolises, the gap between the First and the Third World, between the rich and the poor, the shattering impact of the digitalization of our daily lives... there is nothing easier today than to obtain international, state or corporate funds for is accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for outdated ideological positions. None of us is involved in any way in any unconstitutional activities - you probably all know de Quincey's old quip about the "simple art of murder": how many people began with a simple murder which, at that point, appeared to them nothing special, and ended up behaving badly at a table! Along the same lines, we would certainly not like to follow in the footsteps of those who began with a couple of innocent Molotov cocktails and beatings of policemen which at that time seemed to them to be nothing special, and ended up as a German foreign minister. However, there is a point on which we cannot concede: today, actual freedom of thought means the freedom to question the predominant liberal-democratic "post-ideological" consensus - or it means nothing.

Although most of us probably do not agree with Habermas, we do live in an era which can be designated by his term "neue Undurchsichtigkeit" - the new opacity. Our daily experience is more mystifying than ever. Modernization generates new obscurantisms, the reduction of freedom is presented to us as the arrival of new freedoms. In these circumstances, one should be especially careful not to confuse the ruling ideology with an 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 to stay 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 free promiscuity; in art, provocations in the style of the notorious "Sensation" exhibition are the norm, the example of an art fully integrated into the establishment.

One is therefore tempted to turn around Marx's thesis: 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 - or, as Brecht put it in his Me Ti: "Thought is something which precedes action and follows experience." 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 coordinates: those who "really want to do something to help people" get involved in (undoubtedly honourable) exploits like Medecins sans frontieres, Greenpeace, and feminist and anti-

at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, an annual gathering of state and large company managers and owners "to discuss the future of the world" (1997)

qualifications which can be easily discerned by the "concrete analysis of the concrete situation," as Lenin himself would have put it. "Fidelity to the democratic consensus" means the acceptance of the present liberal-parliamentary consensus, which precludes any serious questioning of how this liberal-democratic order is complicit in the phenomena. It officially condemns, and, of course, any serious attempt to imagine a society whose socio-political order would be different. In short, it means: say and write whatever you want - on condition that what you do not effectively question or disturb the predominant political consensus. So everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic: the prospects of a global multidisciplinary research into how to fight the new forms of ethnic, religious or sexist violence. The problem is that all this occurs against the background of a fundamental Denkverbot, the prohibition of thinking. Today's liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten Denkverbot similar to the infamous Berufsverbot in Germany in the late 60s - the moment one shows the least sign of engaging in political projects that aim to seriously challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: "Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!" And it is exactly the same thing that the demand for "scientific objectivity" means: the moment one seriously questions the existing liberal consensus, one
"postmodern" era in which claims of truth 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?" a propos of one or other statement, is supplanted by the 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 literature, but also politics, religion, science, they are all different narratives, stories we are telling 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 opportunity to tell his story. THE two philosophers of today's global capitalism are the two great Left-liberal "progressives," Richard Rorty and Peter Singer - who are postmodern relativism, more topical than ever - is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but also 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. Lenin's stance against economism as well as against pure politics is crucial today, apropos of the split attitude towards economy in (what remains of) radical circles: on the one hand, there are the pure "politicians" who abandon economy as the site of struggle and intervention; on the other hand, there are the economists, fascinated by the functioning of today's global economy, who preclude any possibility of a political intervention proper. Today, more than ever, we should here return to Lenin: yes, economy is the key domain, the battle will be decided there, one has to break the spell of global capitalism - BUT the intervention should be properly POLITICAL, not economic.

The battle to be fought is thus a twofold one: first, yes, anticapitalism. However, anticapitalism without problematizing capitalism's POLITICAL form (liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how "radical" it is. Perhaps THE lure today is the belief that one can undermine capitalism without effectively problematizing the liberal-democratic legacy which - as some Leftists claim - although engendered by capitalism, acquired autonomy and can serve to criticize capitalism. This lure is strictly correlative to its apparent opposite, to the pseudo-Deleuzian love-hate fascinating/fascinated poetic depiction of Capital as a rhizomatic monster/vampire which deterritorializes and swallow all, indomitable, dynamic, forever raising itself from the dead, each crisis making it stronger, Dionysos-Phoenix reborn... It is in this poetic (anti)capitalist reference to Marx that Marx is really dead: appropriated when deprived of his political sting. Capitalism is not just one historical epoch among others - in a way, the once fashionable and now forgotten Francis Fukuyama WAS right, global capitalism IS "the end of history." A certain excess which was, as it were, kept in check in previous history, perceived as a localizable perversion, as an excess, a deviation, is in capitalism elevated into the very principle of social life, in the speculative movement of money begetting more money, of a system which can survive only by constantly revolutionizing its own conditions, that is to say, in which the thing can survive only as its own excess, constantly exceeding its own "normal" constraints. And perhaps it is only today, in global capitalism. The struggle is on, the battle is won, the war is lost.
in its "postindustrial" digitalized form, that, to put it in Hegelian terms, truly-existent capitalism is reaching the level of its concept: perhaps one should again follow Marx's old anti-evolutionist motto (incidentally, taken verbatim from Hegel) that the anatomy of man provides the key to the anatomy of a monkey, i.e. that in order to deploy the inherent notional structure of a social formation, one must start with its most developed form. Marx located the elementary capitalist antagonism in the opposition between use- and exchange-value: in capitalism, the potentials of this opposition have been fully realized, the domain of exchange-values has acquired autonomy, is transformed into the spectre of self-propelling speculative capital which needs the productive capacities and needs of real people only as its dispensable temporal embodiment. Marx derived the very notion of economic crisis from this gap: a crisis occurs when reality catches up with the illusory self-generating mirage of money begetting more money - this speculative madness cannot go on indefinitely, it has to explode in ever greater crises. In his view, the ultimate root of the crisis is the gap between the use and exchange values: the logic of exchange value follows its own path, its own mad dance, irrespective of the real needs of real people. It may appear that this analysis is more than relevant today, when the tension between the virtual universe and the real is reaching almost palpably unbearable proportions: on the one hand, we have crazy solipsistic speculations about futures, mergers, etc., following their own inherent logic; on the other hand, reality is catching up in the guise of ecological catastrophes, poverty, Third World diseases, the collapse of social life, Mad Cow Disease. This is why cyber-capitalists can appear as today's paradigmatic capitalists, this is why Bill Gates can dream of cyberspace as providing the frame for what he calls "frictionless capitalism." What we have here is an ideological short-circuit between the two versions of the gap between reality and virtuality: the gap between real production and the virtual spectral domain of Capital, and the gap between experiential reality and the virtual reality of cyberspace. It effectively seems that the cyberspace gap between my fascinating screen persona and the miserable flesh which is "me" off the screen translates into the immediate experience of the gap between the Real of the speculative circulation of capital and the drab reality of the impoverished masses... However, this - this recourse to "reality" which will sooner or later catch up with the virtual game - really the only way to operationalize a critique of capitalism? What if the problem of capitalism is not this mad solipsistic dance, but precisely the opposite: that it continues to disavow its gap with "reality," that it presents itself as serving the real needs of real people? The originality of Marx is that he played on both cards simultaneously: the origin of capitalist crises is the gap between use- and exchange-value, AND capitalism constrains the free deployment of productivity.

What all this means is that the urgent task of economic analysis today is, again, to REPEAT Marx's "critique of political economy", without succumbing to the temptation of the multitude of ideologies in "postindustrial" societies. It is my hypothesis that the key change concerns the status of private property: the ultimate element of power and control is no longer the last link in the chain of investments, the firm or individual who "really owns" the means of production. The ideal capitalist today functions in a wholly different way: investing borrowed money, "really owning" nothing, even indebted, but nonetheless controlling things. A corporation is owned by another corporation, which is itself borrowing money from banks, which may ultimately manipulate money owned by ordinary people like ourselves. In the case of Bill Gates, the "private property of the means of production" becomes meaningless, at least in the standard meaning of the term. The paradox of this virtualization of capitalism is ultimately the same as that of the electron in elementary particle physics. The mass of each element in our reality is composed of its mass at rest plus the surplus provided by the acceleration of its movement; however, an electron's mass at rest is zero, its mass consists only of the surplus generated by the acceleration of its movement, as if we were dealing with a nothing which acquires some deceptive substance only by magically spinning itself into an excess of itself. Does today's virtual capitalist not function in a homologous way - his "net value" is zero, he only directly operates with the surplus, borrowing from the future?

So where is Lenin in all this? According to the predominant dogma, in the years after the October Revolution, Lenin's lapse of faith in the creative capacities of the masses led him to emphasize the role of science and the scientists, to rely on the authority of the expert: he hailed "the beginning of that very happy time when politics will recede into the background, ... and engineers and agronomists will do most of the talking." Technocratic post-politics? Lenin's ideas about how the road to socialism runs through the terrain of monopoly capitalism may appear dangerously naive today:

"Capitalism has created an accounting apparatus in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers' societies, and office workers unions. Without big banks socialism would be impossible. ... Our task is here merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. ... This will be country-wide book-keeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the skeleton of socialist society:"

Is this not the most radical expression of Marx's notion of the general intellect regulating all social life in a transparent way, of the postpolitical world in which "administration of people" is supplanted by the "administration of things"? It is, of course, easy to play against this quote the tune of the "critique on instrumental reason" and "administered world / verwaltete Welt": the "totalitarian" potentials are inscribed in this very form of total social control. It is easy to remark sarcastically how, in the Stalinist epoch, the apparatus of social administration effectively became "even bigger". Furthermore, is this postpolitical vision not the very opposite of the Maoist notion of the eternity of the class struggle ("everything is political")? - Are, however, things really so unambiguous? What if one replaces the (obviously dated) example of the central bank with the World Wide Web, today's perfect candidate for the General Intellect? Dorothy Sayers claimed that Aristotle's Poetics are effectively the theory of detective novels, but before their time - since poor Aristotle didn't yet know of the detective novel, he had to
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...refer to the only examples at his disposal, the tragedies... Along the same lines, Lenin was effectively developing the theory of the role of a World Wide Web, but, since the WWW was unknown to him, he had to refer to the unfortunate central banks. Consequently, can one also say that "without the World Wide Web socialism would be impossible... our task is here merely to lay off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive?" In these conditions, one is tempted to resuscitate the old, opprobrious and half-forgotten Marxian dialectics of the productive forces and the relations of production: it is already a commonplace to claim that, ironically, it was this very dialectic (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 development. (In Slovenia - Henkel - Zlatarog; or our company had to SIGN A FORMAL OBLIGATION not to do any research). Paradoxes that emerge here, and 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 should 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...

Today, we see the signs of a general unease that is already exploding - I am, of course, referring to the series of events usually listed under the name "Seattle." The long honeymoon of triumphant global capitalism is over, the long overdue "seven-year itch" is here - witness the panic reactions of the big media, which - from Time magazine to CNN - all of a sudden started to warn about Marxists manipulating the crowd of "honest" protesters. The problem is now the 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 universal political demand. Otherwise, the momentum will be lost, and all that will remain is the marginal disturbance, perhaps organized as a new Greenpeace, with a certain efficiency, but also strictly limited goals, 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 only the (quite adequately named) "New SOCIAL Movements" is the same as the Jacobins' answer to the Girondin compromisers: "You want revolution without a revolution?" Today's blockade is that there are two ways open to socio-political engagement: either play the system's game, engage in the "long march through the institutions," or get active in new social movements, from feminism through ecology to anti-racism. And, again, the limit of these movements is that they are not POLITICAL in the sense of the Universal Singular: they are "one-issue movements" which lack the dimension of universality, i.e. they do not relate to the social TOTALITY.

Here, Lenin's reproach to liberals is crucial: they only EXPLOIT the working classes' discontent to strengthen their position vis-a-vis the conservatives, instead of identifying with it to the end. Is this not the case with today's Left liberals too? They like to evoke racism, ecology, workers' grievances, etc., to score points over the conservatives WITHOUT ENDANGERING THE SYSTEM. Recall how, at Seattle, Bill Clinton himself defiantly 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, which was attributed to the dangerous extremists introducing chaos and violence to the majority of peaceful protesters). It's the same with all New Social Movements, up to the Zapatistas in Chiapas: 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 and 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.

To REPEAT Lenin is not to RETURN to Lenin - to repeat Lenin is to accept that "Lenin is dead," that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving. To repeat Lenin means that one has to distinguish between what Lenin effectively did and the field of possibilities that he opened up, the tension in Lenin between what he effectively did and another dimension, that which was "in Lenin more than Lenin himself." To repeat Lenin is to repeat not what Lenin DID, but what he FAILED TO DO, his MISSED opportunities.