

The dangerous dreams of Slavoj Žižek

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Žižek’s misplaced tribute to Thatcher and his diatribe against direct democracy reveal the dangerous messianic tendencies of his “radical” philosophy.

When George Orwell first sent in his celebrated dispatches from revolutionary Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s, the British socialist magazine *The New Statesman* infamously refused to publish them for being too critical of the Stalinist crackdown on the Trotskyist and anarchist militias. As editor Kingsley Martin put it in a letter to Orwell, “it is an unfortunate fact that any hostile criticism of the present Russian regime is liable to be taken as propaganda *against* socialism.” Still, Orwell, who had been embedded in the Trotskyist POUM and had fought the fascists side-by-side with many courageous anarchist comrades, remained adamant in his rejection of the authoritarian path to socialism. As he later wrote to a friend, recounting his time at the front in the egalitarian and democratically-run militia, “I have seen wonderful things and at last really believe in Socialism, which I never did before.” In this respect, the ordeal with *The New Statesman* only helped to strengthen Orwell’s belief that “as with Christianity, the worst advertisement for Socialism is its adherents.”

Slavoj Žižek: The Worst Advertisement for Socialism?

Reading Slavoj Žižek’s latest contribution to *The New Statesman* — a rambling and confused “Leftist tribute” to Margaret Thatcher — one cannot help but recall Orwell’s words. After all, Žižek, the eternal courter of controversy who is claimed to be the most influential philosopher on the Left today, used the occasion not to lambast Lady Thatcher herself but rather to criticize the leaderless anti-capitalist movements that have recently emerged to contest her neoliberal legacy. Instead of picking apart Thatcher’s ideological dogma that “there is no alternative”, Žižek chose to shoot down the only serious alternative to have emerged in response to her dogma in the past twenty years. For Žižek, the Spanish *indignados*, the Greek anti-austerity protesters and the global Occupy movement remain hopelessly mired in the “myth of direct democracy”, which obstructs a proper confrontation with the ongoing crisis of representation. Thatcher, by contrast, fulfilled the much-needed role of “the Master” in a time of crisis, single-mindedly pushing through deeply unpopular decisions in the face of widespread popular opposition. “What we need today,” Žižek polemically concludes, “is a Thatcher of the Left.” Forget all that fancy stuff about consensus-based decision-making; what we really need is a healthy dose of authoritarian leadership.

In his typical academese jargon, Žižek argues that “the ongoing popular protests around Europe converge in a series of demands which, in their very spontaneity and obviousness, form a kind of ‘epistemological obstacle’ to the proper confrontation with the ongoing crisis of our political system.” Rather than transcending the thoroughly discredited system of political representation by moving towards an emphasis on political *participation*, Žižek seems to argue that we should abolish representation and participation altogether and impose a form of authoritarian leadership by — and I quote — an “elite class” that will “act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy: the impossible ideal of the ‘omni-competent citizen’.” What we need, in other words, is a new technocratic elite. According to Žižek, the people “need a good elite” because they do not know what they want. Indeed, “it is through [the Master] that they discover what they ‘really want’.” Only the sovereign decision of a strong leader can create the preconditions for the great Rupture.

Putting the *Radical* back in Radical Politics

This seems like a strange approach to radical politics indeed. After all, the word radical refers to roots, and radical politics have historically implied an attempt to break with the paternalistic top-down process of political decision-making that characterizes bourgeois democracy. Truly radical politics have therefore always been practiced collectively at the grassroots level without the interference of hierarchical power structures or the imposition of outside leaders. Before Lenin and the Bolsheviks cracked down on them, it was the Menshevik-controlled *soviets* — the autonomous workers' councils and popular assemblies — that formed the beating heart of the Russian Revolution. The moment the radical potential of the workers' councils was repressed by the authoritarian Bolsheviks, the institutional violence of the capitalist state reasserted itself in dramatically multiplied form. In a way, by suppressing this crucial grassroots check on the counter-revolutionary accumulation of political power inside a small bureaucratic elite of party *apparatchiks*, Lenin effectively paved the way for Stalin to emerge as the ultimate nightmare vision of authoritarian state communism. The rest, as they say, is history.

The revolutionary wave of 2011 broke in dramatic fashion with this 20th century conceptualization of revolution. Refusing to get bogged down in party politics, union-based horse-trading or the formulation of specific demands, the *indignados* and Occupy movements instead decided to embrace direct action, mutual aid and prefigurative politics; collectively and cooperatively creating an embryonic vision of the new world inside the shell of the old. In this sense, the occupied squares temporarily blossomed into a globally interconnected microcosm of the world to come. As Eduardo Galeano put it during a short visit to Acampada Barcelona, “this upside-down world is shitty, but it’s not the only one that’s possible. There’s another world that awaits us — and the youth are taking it forward.” For the millions of people who passed by Puerta del Sol, Syntagma Square and Zuccotti Park on those days, it was the first time they experienced real democracy and genuine socialism in action. Millions witnessed that, apparently, it *is* possible to mobilize, organize and coordinate vast masses of people in hundreds of cities and dozens of countries without the intervention of leaders, parties or representatives.

The Bottom of the Pyramid Lasts Longest

Žižek grudgingly accepts this fact, noting that every revolutionary process has its “ecstatic moments of group solidarity when hundreds of thousands together occupy a public space,” as well as its “moments of intense collective participation where local communities debate and decide, when people live in a kind of permanent emergency state, taking things into their own hands, with no Leader guiding them.” But still, Žižek crucially argues, “such states don’t last.” Ultimately, the only thing that can guarantee the continuation of anti-capitalist struggle is its coagulation into some type of institutional project; a revolutionary party, preferably, led by a charismatic Master figure. Obviously, it is here that we need to contest the factual accuracy of Žižek’s claims most vehemently. After all, history tells us that — with the notable exception of Cuba under the Castros — it is precisely the Leader-based movements that don’t tend to last. Žižek greedily jumps on the example of Hugo Chávez, but fails to observe what is going on in Venezuela *right now*. Now that the charismatic Leader is dead, his rather bland successor only managed to secure a very narrow victory in the presidential elections. With the US-supported upper-class counter-

revolution in full-swing, the very future of the top-down Chávista project is now being called into question. In this context, only the popular base of the Bolivarian power pyramid — the grassroots social movements upon which Chávismo ultimately depended — seems capable of taking the revolutionary process forward.

But Žižek, in an extremely disdainful jibe at these grassroots movements — and the Venezuelan people more generally — makes it sound as if they are all stupid; as if the Venezuelans did not know what they wanted before Chávez came along and told them exactly what to want. The reality is that Venezuelans knew *exactly* what they wanted. In fact, a decade before Chávez had even come to power, many thousands of them had already given their lives to defend what they wanted in the tragic *Caracazo* IMF riots of 1989. In a word, what the Venezuelans wanted was very similar to what the indigenous farmers of Chiapas or the unemployed youths of Athens wanted: dignity. As Chávez himself later put it, the *Caracazo* marked “the end of a system suffocated by shame, and the start of an era of change that led to a rebirth of popular dignity.” Indeed, it is commonly recognized that the *Caracazo* and the social movements borne out of it provided a crucial backdrop to Chávez’ failed coup attempt in 1992 and his successful election campaign in 1998. Of course Chávez supported the grassroots social movements: apart from being genuinely committed to fighting poverty, his political power literally depended on it. Chávez subsidized popular assemblies, urged workers to occupy their factories, and eased legal requirements for the creation of cooperatives — but the Venezuelans did not need him to know what they wanted. They had already figured that out long before he came to power.

There Is An Alternative: The Autonomous Roots of Radical Politics

By contrast to the Chávista experiment in Venezuela, which will soon be riven with internal power struggles between competing fractions — one revolving around Chávez’ self-appointed successor, President Maduro, and the other revolving around National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello, who has the support of the military — the autonomist experiment of the Zapatistas in Mexico might move at snail’s pace but seems to be much more sustainable in the long run. Nearly twenty years after their initial uprising was suppressed by the Mexican state, the Zapatistas continue to run a large chunk of the state of Chiapas under an elaborate system of communal self-governance. And as the mass mobilization of last December demonstrated, the EZLN support bases remain as alive today as ever. The situation is similar in Europe. The mainstream media may not be paying attention to them anymore — and Žižek himself may be too uninterested in genuine forms of anti-capitalist contestation to check up on the many creative ways in which today’s movements have been evolving below the radar — but in Spain the leaderless spirit of the 15-M movement is as alive as ever, with hundreds of demonstrations taking place in Madrid every month, with self-organized activists blocking multiple home evictions per day, with occupations and faculty assemblies taking place in virtually every university, with regular free classes being organized in the streets, and with citizens’ assemblies continuing to thrive in the neighborhoods. The bottomline is that anti-capitalist struggles are bubbling below the surface everywhere, but Žižek, obsessed as ever with the models of the past, simply refuses to see it.

In this sense, the greatest success of the Real Democracy Movement lies not in uprooting Thatcher’s neoliberal legacy *per se*, but rather in helping to shatter the Thatcherite illusion that

“there is no alternative” to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. While Žižek’s great source of inspiration, the French communist Alain Badiou, argues that the movements of 2011 did not unequivocally “re-start” history, for the millions of people who in one way or another experienced the actual occupations, the year 2011 *did* mark the End of the End of History. Most importantly, however, the Real Democracy Movement helped to reinvigorate autonomous forms of grassroots resistance as the beating heart of anti-capitalist struggles around the world. The leaderless movements that blossomed into action everywhere in 2011 and 2012 helped to shake off the institutional deadweight of state-oriented and leader-dependent activism, opening up a whole new panoply of opportunities for a newly reinvigorated Left. It was precisely the horizontality and spontaneity of the 2011 uprisings that allowed them to spread so rapidly and mobilize such impressive amounts of people; and it is precisely their lack of dependence on centralized leadership that allows them to continue adapting to a changing reality in 2013.

The Messianic Mythology of the Great Obsessional

Of course, Žižek has long drawn the ire of activists involved in anti-capitalist struggles around the world. His overt authoritarianism and his apparent disdain for revolutionary practice mean that few grassroots organizers nowadays take his writings very seriously. Over the course of the past two years, Žižek has taken a number of sideways jabs at the leaderless social movements that emerged in response to the crisis of capitalism, first criticizing the Spanish *indignados* for expressing “a spirit of revolt without revolution”, then rather paternalistically urging Occupy protesters not to fall in love with themselves, and later telling activists not to act, but just to sit back and think. In an ultimate sign that he had completely misread the events of 2011, his book – *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* – confusedly interpreted the construction of hundreds of concrete Utopias around the world as little more than a “dangerous dream”. Apparently, while millions of people were organizing real alternatives on the ground, Žižek was somewhere far away dreaming about some cataclysmic future Event.

In this respect it is very interesting to explore the profound sense of religiosity that permeates Žižek’s work. Simon Critchly, for instance, has long noted how deeply Žižek’s ideas are influenced by Christianity. At the end of the day, Žižek’s conception of revolution reflects little more than the traditional Messianic vision of salvation, replete with apocalyptic references to “divine violence” and the Event of Rupture. In the conclusion to *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Žižek literally compares his idea of communism to Pascal’s *deus absconditus*, or “‘the hidden god’, discernible only to those who search for him.” In this respect, it is remarkable that Žižek would end up criticizing the really-existing forms of direct democratic self-organization for being mythological in nature, where it is really the religiosity with which he proclaims the Second Coming of State Communism that should be considered mythological. In an excellent critique of his book on violence, Critchly neatly points out this contradiction in Žižek’s philosophy:

On the one hand, the only authentic stance to take in dark times is to do nothing, to refuse all commitment, to be paralyzed like Bartleby. On the other hand, Žižek dreams of a divine violence, a cataclysmic, purifying violence of the sovereign ethical deed, something like Sophocles’ Antigone. But Shakespearean tragedy is a more illuminating guide here than its ancient Greek predecessor. For Žižek is, I think, a Slovenian Hamlet, utterly paralyzed but dreaming of an avenging violent act for

which, finally, he lacks the courage. In short, behind its shimmering dialectical inversions, Žižek's work leaves us in a fearful and fateful deadlock, both a transcendental-philosophical deadlock and a practical-political deadlock: the only thing to do is to do nothing. We should just sit and wait. Don't act, never commit, and continue to dream of an absolute, cataclysmic revolutionary act of violence. Thus speaks the great obsessional.

Myths Which Are Believed Tend to Come True

At the end of the day, however, Žižek's dangerous dreams seem to be little more than the final convulsions of a 20th century ideology that has long since paralyzed itself. As Orwell already put it in his *Homage to Catalonia*, "In every country in the world a huge tribe of party-hacks and sleek little professors are busy 'proving' that Socialism means no more than a planned state-capitalism with the grab-motive left intact. Fortunately there also exists a vision of Socialism quite different from this." Orwell saw this alternative vision of socialism in action in the militias, which, as he puts it, "were a sort of microcosm of a classless society" and a "crude forecast of what the opening stages of Socialism might be like." Crucially, Orwell added that, "instead of disillusioning me, it deeply attracted me. The effect was to make my desire to see Socialism established much more actual than it had been before." Just like Orwell, millions of people have now experienced the microcosms of real democracy in the squares and parks of over 1,000 cities in 82 countries. These experiences will not be washed away – not by the neoliberal jingoism surrounding Thatcher's publicly-funded funeral and certainly not by the dangerous messianic dreams of some defunct Slovenian philosopher who apparently sees no contradiction in praising Obama while sleeping underneath a portrait of Stalin.

Whatever the armchair revolutionaries may say, the world now knows that the real impulse of anti-capitalist resistance is coming from the anarchist, autonomist and anti-authoritarian Left. Žižek still seems to believe that it is the "myth of direct democracy", much more than the authoritarian neoliberalism promoted by Thatcher and her acolytes, that poses the greatest obstacle to humanity's collective emancipation. So be it. As Orwell once put it, "myths which are believed tend to come true," and if our widely-believed myth of direct democracy truly ends up obstructing Žižek's dangerous dreams of Thatcherite communism, this should be a source of celebration for us all. After all, in all honesty, what can we claim to have gained if we overthrow our old Master today only to wake up to a new one tomorrow? One message to Žižek now seems to be in place: *dream on Slavoj!* The salvation of your Stalinist soul depends on it.

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