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The eminent thinker Slavoj Žižek tells Jonathan Derbyshire why he rejects mainstream political theory, why he supports Barack Obama, and why we need Marx more than ever.

NS: What relationship, if any, do you think your work has to the mainstream, normative, liberal political philosophy done in English and American universities?

SZ: I noticed something -- maybe I'm just generalising this; I don't know to what extent this is a rule-- I noticed how many of the people who consider themselves to be more radical than the liberal standard, the left-liberal standard, most of them do not work in political philosophy properly but, as it were, hide themselves as literary critics or philosophers. It's as if it's an excess which requires you to change genre. Another tendency of these "radicals" is moralization connected with legalization. It's a certain pose in which they want to deliver the message that they are really more radical. But this excess of radicality only concretely articulates itself in some kind of a general moralistic outrage -- "what are we doing to immigrants?!" I think they often tend to be a little bit hypocritical. I always read the liberal anti-communists, liberal leftists - they're interesting, one can learn from them. I read a wonderful essay by Orwell from 1938. There he has a wonderful analysis of the typical leftist liberal. He says they ask for a change, but they do it in a hypocritical way: they ask for a change but it's almost as if to make sure that no real change will happen.

Don't you suspect a little bit that there's something of this in today's typical radical liberal - in today's anti-immigrant campaign for instance? The standard idea is to say, like my friend Alain Badiou in France, "those who are here are from here". That is to say, no check for roots, open to all of them. Legalize everything. The problem is that they know very well that this radical opening will never happen. So it's very easy to have a radical position which costs you nothing and for the price of nothing it gives you some kind of moral superiority. It also enables them to avoid the truly difficult questions. For example, my conflict with my radical leftist friends is when they want total openness and so on. I say to them, are you aware that anti-immigrant are mostly spontaneous, lower working-class attitudes? They talk as if some big imperialist power centre decides to be against immigrants. No! If anything, capital is more liberal about immigrants. So, I think this is not a good thing - I think of all these theorists, like Giddens and Held, who are left-wing, but left within the establishment ...

NS: Would you say that thinkers of that sort, establishment leftists if you like, are insufficiently materialist?

SZ: Exactly, exactly. Apart from their very general anti-capitalist thunder -this is my biggest reproach to them. Despite the financial crisis, we do not have a serious leftist attempt to deal with what, in old Marxist terms, we called the critique of political economy. It's obvious to me that Marx has to be repeated, but repeated not as he was. Isn't it clear today that with all the problems of natural resources, intellectual property and so on, that the whole notion of exploitation, if it has any meaning at all should be radically redefined? I don't see enough work of this sort. I think it's either some kind of an abstract, moralistic politics where you focus on groups which are obviously under-privileged -other races, gays and so on- and then you can explode in all your moralistic rage. Or, another thing that I really hate as a leftist who tries to be a communist - did you notice how the standard academic left likes nothing more than an attempted revolution going on, but far away from where you are? Today it's Venezuela, which is why I like to be critical from time to time of Chavez. It's a very comfortable position: you can do all the dirty work, you struggle for your career, compromises in your country in the west, but your heart is somewhere far away but it in no way affects what you are doing. This is another thing which I think is a fake.

So, if anything was proven by this financial crisis, it is that apart from left-radical Keynesians like Paul Krugman, with whom I'm sympathetic, I don't see any serious counter-proposal by the left.

NS: So we have lost the political economy in Marx?

SZ: There are some marginal good signs - Moishe Postone is one of the few people who really asks the question, what to do with Marx's political economy today? Then there are of course some economists and so on - David Harvey, for example, But the question is not properly addressed and that's very sad. If you read the predominant cultural left, you'd have thought that Marx's Capital is some kind of treatise on commodity fetishism and other cultural phenomena. Sorry, but Marx meant it as a critical theory of society, giving a diagnosis and so on. I think things today call for analysis. Let me give me your analysis - don't be afraid, I will be short.

I claim that we have two opponents: pro-capitalist liberals and old Marxists, as far as they still exist. They claim that it's the same capitalism going on. This is obviously not true - in China and

other places, something new is emerging. Then you have all these, I call them, ironically, "post-theorists" - like Giddens, for example. I claim that their work is, unfortunately, a journalistic patchwork. Many leftists say: we know what is wrong - capitalism, imperialism. We just don't know how to mobilise people; the problem is political. But I think we don't know what's going on.

This is typical theoretical arrogance. We don't know what is going on. This is the point of my book: terrific new things are emerging. What's going on in China today is something very ominous. Here I disagree with liberals who say, wait for another ten years and we'll have another Tiananmen in China. I doubt it. Something genuinely new is emerging today in the guise of what are ridiculously called "Asian values", authoritarian capitalism. A capitalism which, we can see now, is doing better in the crisis than the west. A capitalism that is more dynamic and efficient than our Western, liberal capitalism, but precisely as such functions perfectly with an authoritarian state. My pessimism is that this is the future. This is what I think we should watch. This is why I wrote that piece about Berlusconi [in the LRB], which many people thought was crazy - Berlusconi's still democratically elected, after all. But I see signs of this new authoritarianism. There's a kind of total devaluation of politics. Of course, this new post-democratic capitalism will take different forms. There will be Asian values, more traditionally authoritarian; in Russia, it's emerging; in Italy, it's emerging in its own way. This is the fear. We who pretend in some way to be more radical, where we should make a pact with honest liberals is precisely along this axis: we should all be aware that what was precious in the liberal democratic legacy. What, for example, Hannah Arendt noticed in the US during the Vietnam War. What fascinated her was the level of public debate - people in town meetings debating. This is disappearing.

NS: Arendt thought political participation was an intrinsic good didn't she?

SZ: The problem I have with her is that she dismissed the economy as the space of truth, so to speak. For her, the economy was just utilitarian stuff. The authentic big politics doesn't happen there for her. But we need what Marx called a political economy. You know the basic Marxist insight that politics is not just politics - politics is in the economy. We should rehabilitate this. Isn't this becoming clear? And here's somewhere else where I don't agree with many leftists: you know this Toni Negri mantra - "Empire", nation states no longer matter and so on. It's crazy. If there is a lesson from so-called postmodern, post-68 capitalism, it's that the regulatory role of the state is getting stronger. So much for this stupid story, the state disappearing etc. Not true! More and more if you want to have a company today, you have to be so deeply entwined with the state apparatus.

This is was the point of my big fight with Simon Critchley. I think it's too easy to play this

moralistic game - state power is corrupted, so let's withdraw into this role of ethical critic of power. Here, I'm an old Hegelian. I hate the position of "beautiful soul", which is: "I remain outside, in a safe place; I don't want to dirty my hands." In this ironic sense, I am a Leninist. Lenin wasn't afraid to dirty his hands. That's what I miss in today's left. When you get power, if you can, grab it, even if it is a desperate situation. Do whatever is possible. This is why I supported - ok, my support doesn't mean anything, but as a public gesture- Obama. I think the battle that he is fighting now for healthcare is extremely important, because it concerns the very core of the ruling ideology. The real core of the anti-Obama campaign is freedom of choice. And the lesson, if he wins, is how freedom of choice is something beautiful, but works only against a very thick background of regulations, ethical presuppositions, economic conditions and so on. This is the problem. As I like to emphasise here in the States, there are freedoms of choice which I am glad to renounce. I like to do a parallel between healthcare and water and electricity. Yes, you can say I don't have a choice in choosing my water provider. It's imposed by where I live. But, my god, I gladly renounce this choice. I prefer to have some basic choices made by society - water, electricity, and some elementary healthcare. This precisely opens up the choice, opens up the freedom for other choices. Another important thing, and here I agree with that great British sceptic, John Gray (I don't agree with his conclusions), who says today we are forced to live "as if" we are free. We are all the time bombarded choices -and he's not making the old, boring Marxist point that these are inessential choices. No, the point is rather that you are obliged to choose without even having the background qualification to make the choice.

My position isn't that we should sit down and wait for some big revolution to come. We have to engage wherever we can. If Obama wins his battle over healthcare, if some kind of a blow will be made against this freedom of choice ideology, it will be a great victory worth having fought for.

NS: Those short-term gains shouldn't be underestimated?

SZ: No. That was Critchley's misunderstanding of me: as if I wanted to sit down and dream of a big revolution. All I'm saying is that one should distinguish between short-term battles worth fighting and short-term battles where your protest is of the kind that those in power like. There was a little bit of that in the marches against the Iraq war. Everyone was satisfied. Those who organised the protests knew they wouldn't change anything. Blair like the protests - he or Bush said, you see, this is what we want in Iraq: a society in which people will be able to protest like we do. So, one should be very careful when doing something which appears as a protest measure. How does it really function? And it's not difficult. If you look closely, you always know what you are doing.

NS: You're talking about the ideological function of protest.

SZ: More than ever, the battle to be won is ideological. I don't mean in any obscure, pseudo-Marxist sense - it's a very spontaneous ideology. But isn't it interesting that the most influential public intellectual in political matters is Noam Chomsky, who knows practically nothing about political theory. I met a guy who recently had lunch with Chomsky and he told me that Chomsky said something very sad: Chomsky said that today we don't need theory. Power is cynical and all we need to do is tell people, empirically, what is going on. Here, I violently disagree. I don't think you just have to tell the truth in this factual sense. Truth in the sense of facts - facts are facts and they are precious, but they can work this way or that. A nice example here: there is a new generation of Israeli historians who are much more open about Jewish violence against Arabs before independence. And people say, "my god, they are telling the truth!" But this truth was easily appropriated by Zionists, who say, "you see, that's how you fight wars - we had to do it." If you don't change the ideological background, facts alone don't do the job.

NS: That's an argument for theory in the critical sense then?

SZ: Yes, sorry: I'm an old fashioned continental European! Theory is sacred, we need it more than ever.

NS: The first chapter of your new book is called "It's Ideology, Stupid!" And it strikes me that ideology is, for you, the most important conceptual tool bequeathed to us by Marx.

SZ: Yes, but if you read the concept of ideology the way I develop it in my other books, I'm critical of Marx. Ideology is not so-called "superstructure", a shadowy realm and real things are happening elsewhere. For me, the core of Marx's theory of ideology is not to be found in the German Ideology, and those stupid, simplistic, youthful works, which are totally outdated. But in Capital, when Marx speaks about commodity fetishism, he speaks about fetishism as some kind of ideology, even if he doesn't use the term ideology. Here Marx outgrew his early simplicities, the distinction between the economic base and the ideological superstructure. This is the lesson of this crisis. Even intelligent neo-conservatives recognise that we are in deadlock and there is no way out. Someone like Fukuyama asks to what extent the functioning of the economy rests on people's ideological attitudes - whether they trust each other, what they think and so on. One big false rumour can practically ruin a small country today. So, I'm not saying that everything dissolves into psychology or whatever. No, the trick is precisely to see what extent the economy itself, in order to function, has to rely on the fact of ideological attitudes. And this is what fascinates me.

I don't have answers. When people ask me what we should do about ecology, the financial crisis - my god, what do I know? What I can do, as a critical intellectual, is to ask the right questions. Sometimes the way you formulate or perceive a problem can be itself be part of the problem. The classical example is tolerance. Why is it that we today automatically translate or perceive problems of racism or sexism into problems of tolerance.

NS: It's the historical legacy of classical liberalism isn't it, going back to Locke?

SZ: Yes, but on the other hand, but look at the great anti-racist struggle of Martin Luther King. He never uses the word "tolerance". For him it would have been ridiculous to say that we blacks want more "tolerance" from the whites. I think it has something to do with what you might call our cultural, post-political capitalism, in which the most passionate struggles are cultural struggles. A large majority of the left doesn't question liberal democracy and capitalism as such. In the same way that when we were young we wanted socialism with a human face, for a large part of today's left, what they want is global capitalism with a human face. This is why the only way you can perceive problems is to transform or transpose them into cultural problems. I don't find this self-evident. Critical intellectuals today should be working to enable people to raise the right questions.

NS: Unlike mainstream political philosophers, you're not that interested in the question of legitimacy are you?

SZ: This focus on legitimate power is the topic on which I would definitely not focus. It's not the topic that I think is crucial. I don't despise democracy, but, for me, democracy, in the formal sense, is precious but it is not in itself a measure of any infinite truth, authenticity or whatever. It's something precious, I know, but we all know this. You can have elections where people get seduced by right-wing populists. And here I'm an unashamed anarchist. I'm ready to say here that the result in some way untrue or false. Even Karl Popper said this. All I'm saying is that we shouldn't fetishise democracy. I'm ready to claim that you can have democratic elections where the majority for a rightist populist and that you have the right to treat that government as illegitimate. I don't think that this formal democratic procedure as such should be taken as equalling legitimacy.

NS: Let's talk about the left's response to the financial crisis. The left has consoled itself

with the idea that this crisis is some grand ideological opportunity. Whereas you write that the main victim of the crisis will not be capitalism but the left itself.

SZ: Yes. In the long term, it will work as yet another shock therapy, in the Naomi Klein sense. A kind of shattering of the system which, in the long run, will help make capitalism leaner and meaner. The battle is not lost in advance, however. In the US, for example, what is important is to make acceptable the idea of large, collective actions. We should make this idea acceptable. I'm not saying everything is lost. It's an open battle. Let's not be seduced by the simple idea that this is a crisis and we can use this opportunity to impose our agenda. When the economy is in crisis, the first reaction of the people is to cling to their fundamental principles. So you get this renewed social-democratic welfarism in the US - Krugman, Stiglitz etc. But at the same time, there was an explosion of interest in Ayn Rand. So, it's a battle and we should be aware that battles are always difficult. The only serious true serious proposal that we know about is, on the one hand this Krugman-Stiglitz leftist Keynesianism, and on the other this idea, popularised in Europe and Latin America, of basic income. I like it as an idea but I think it's too much of an ideological utopia. For structural reasons, it can't work. It's the last desperate attempt to make capitalism work for socialist ends. The guy who developed it, Robert Van Parijs, openly says that this is the only way to legitimise capitalism. Apart from these two, I don't see anything else.

NS: Van Parijs is associated, as you know, with analytical Marxism. And I was wondering what you make of that strain of Marxist theory?

SZ: I know some British guys and I had a debate with them. It's the same problem with John Rawls. Rawls himself, when he was confronted with his critics, admitted one thing: that his model of distributive justice, the difference principle etc, works on one fateful condition: that there is no resentment. That is to say, given the way we are libidinally structured in modern societies, envy and resentment are crucial. Rawls doesn't take into account the irrationality of envy. Capitalism takes much better of it. Although these analytical Marxists want to be "no-bullshit" analysts, the ultimate image of human being it is based on is way too naïve and utopian. I don't think the socialist project can be reduced to this. But nonetheless I claim that in capitalist relations today, envy is crucial. Never underestimate the power of envy. This is a psychoanalytic insight.

NS: I want to ask you finally about what you follow Alain Badiou in calling the "Communist Hypothesis". You say that the great barrier to the realisation of that hypothesis being the problem of agency. Do you see a new revolutionary agent actor on the horizon?

SZ: No, no. But let me clearly define to you the limits of my communism. My problem with Badiou is that he totally dismisses the economy as a site of political struggle. The only real question for me is very simple: was Fukuyama right or not? That is to say, do we have today antagonisms which, in the long term, can be resolved or at least coped with within the liberal-democratic, capitalist frame. This is the question. The way I see it, unfortunately, is that all the problems that we have -ecological catastrophe, problems of intellectual property and so on- can be solved within the liberal-capitalist framework. This era is slowly coming to an end. The problem for me is that if we don't want to end up in some kind of neo-authoritarian society, in which we'll have all our private freedoms (you can have sex with animals and so on), but in which the social space will be depoliticized and much more authoritarian - here we should make a pact with liberals. Only a more fundamental questioning of our society can save us. It's clear that we are approaching some kind of apocalyptic zero-point. So, no, I don't see any immediate agent. I see tendencies of proletarianization. By proletarianization I mean people being reduced almost to a kind of Cartesian zero-level - you are a free agent but deprived of substance. Then it's a question of coalitions, how to do it. My unconditional insight is that we will be pushed into a situation where we will have to make a choice: either we do something or we are slowly approaching a society I'm not sure I'd like to live in.