Lacan in Slovenia

An Interview with Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl

One notable result of the recent political ferment in Central and Eastern Europe has been the emergence of new theoretical currents, often combining strands of thought which – to West European eyes – appear as starkly incompatible. Nowadays, one can meet young Soviet philosophers whose interest in the Frankfurt School, and in deconstruction, is matched by their keen advocacy of neo-liberal economics, and East European sociologists whose Foucauldian critique of Marxism and the one-party state is tempered by deep scepticism about the politics of privatisation.

*One of the most complex and intriguing of these new syntheses is the 'Lacanian-Hegelian-Marxism' which has been developed by Slavoj Žižek and his colleagues at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, the westernmost republic of Yugoslavia. In his two full-length books published to date (**Le plus sublimes des hysteriques – Hegel passe**, Paris, Point Hors Ligne, 1988, and **The Sublime Object of Ideology**, London, Verso, 1989 – reviewed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in **RP** 57), Žižek has sought to develop a novel psychoanalytical interpretation of Hegel which stresses the dimension of contingency, and – against fashionable 'postmodernist' views – the subjective resistance to closure, in Hegelian dialectic. He has also applied this approach in a series of studies of contemporary political, ideological and aesthetic phenomena. (See, for example, 'Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead', **New Left Review** 183, September/October 1990, and 'The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How popular culture can serve as an introduction to Lacan', **New Formations** 9, Winter 1989.) He has a particular interest in popular culture, and has edited an anthology of Lacanian interpretations of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, forthcoming from Verso in an updated English edition.*

*The following interview with Žižek and his colleague Renata Salecl, who also teaches at the University of Ljubljana, on the origins and politics of Lacanianism in Slovenia, was recorded in London in July 1990. The interview is complemented by an article by Žižek which condenses many of the distinctive features of his reading of Hegel (pp. 3-9, this issue). **RP** hopes to continue this coverage of philosophical developments in the 'post-communist' states in future issues. A good source of general information on recent developments in Yugoslavia is Misha Glenny's **The Re-Birth of History**, London, Penguin, 1990.*

RP: Perhaps you could begin by saying something about the history of Lacanian theory in Ljubljana, Slovenia. How did it come to develop? And what role has it played?

Žižek: It was contingent, an absolute exception. In each of the big Republics of Yugoslavia – Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia – there is an entirely different theoretical tradition which predominates. In Serbia, it is a kind of analytical philosophy, but not a good one – not one that I have found interesting – but rather the most boring kind of philosophy of science, now linked to some kind of new liberalism – Hayek, that kind of thing. In Croatia, it is the old Praxis School which predominates. In Slovenia since the beginning of the 1970s the big conflict, the big philosophical struggle, was between some kind of Western Marxism, which was more or less official philosophy, and Heideggerianism and phenomenology as the main form of philosophical dissidence. This was the struggle. And then we, the younger generation, precisely as a third option – to be a dissident but not a Heideggerian – we were a reaction to both of these.

In Slovenia, this opposition – Critical Theory versus Heideggerianism – had a totally different investment from that in Croatia. In Croatia, Western Marxism was the great dissidence of the 1960s. So the Heideggerians, who were their opponents there too, were the official philosophers. In Croatia, people would lose their jobs during the 1970s for dissidence, but their dismissal would be articulated in Heideggerian terms. There were extreme obscenities, such as a Party official saying that, for example, some Praxis philosopher does not understand some Heideggerian twist – that the essence of self-management is the self-management of essence – that kind of thing. There were extremely perverse things: a pragmatic political power structure of self-management legitimised in purely Heideggerian terms. There was even a general who became chief of staff who had been under the influence of Heideggerians as a student who wrote an article (you know that the Yugoslav notion is the self-defence of the people) saying that the essence of self-defence was the self-defence of the essence of our society. Meanwhile, in Slovenia, you had people being dismissed because they hadn't grasped Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. The two positions which usually in Eastern Europe are associated with opposition to existing power structures (Heideggerianism and Western Marxism) were the two official positions in different parts of Yugoslavia.

RP: So there was no Soviet-style dialectical materialism in Yugoslavia?

Žižek: No, it doesn't exist in Yugoslavia. You can mark the point, 1960, at some great philosophical event, when there was a last stand. But the idea of dialectical materialism was defeated. There are some pockets of resistance, but even the power structure itself does not rely on them. They are marginalised, although not in opposition. During the last ten to fifteen years, there has been a de-ideologisation of power, and Marxists have usually been more

dissident than non-Marxists. What was never reported in the West was that the people who benefited from this were the analytical philosophers in Belgrade, who were definitely not Marxists. You had a Communist regime openly supporting analytical philosophy of science. Their message to the power structure was clear: 'We are doing instrumental scientific research. We are no danger to you. You leave us alone and we will leave you alone.'

Salecl: But the Lacanian movement in Slovenia was always on the side of the opposition. In the early 1980s when new social movements began to develop in Slovenia, it was really only Lacanians who gave theoretical support to these groups.

Žižek: What you need to understand, to understand the philosophical background to the different dissidences, is that the split which is now becoming visible in, for example, Poland, between the populist right-wing nationalism of Walesa and the market liberalism of Michnik – this split was present from the very beginning in Slovenia. The opposition movement in Slovenia has two quite distinct origins. On the one hand you have a nationalist intelligentsia, nationalist poets writing about national roots, etc. Their philosophical reference is Heidegger. On the other hand, you have the remnants of an old New Left connected to new social movements – peace, human rights movements, etc., – and, extremely important, a punk movement. (The band Laibach, for example.) It is precisely through punk that the pluralist opposition reached the masses. It was a kind of political mass education, and we supported it.

RP: But how did Lacanianism come to have this resonance within Slovenian political culture in the first place? After all, to a lot of people, Lacan's theory doesn't look like an emancipatory theory at all. It is a theory of perpetual lack, of inescapeable alienation in the signifier, and so forth.

Žižek: Here, you have already produced an answer. For this was precisely the point with respect to self-management. In Yugoslavia, it was an extreme form of alienation, a totally non-transparent system that nobody, including those in the power structure, could comprehend. There were almost two million laws in operation. No one could master it. This was the paradox: this is what you get when you want total disalienation or pure transparency. This was how we experienced Laibach, for example.[1] Their fundamental cry, for us, was 'We want more alienation.' The paradox in Yugoslavia was that we had a Communist Party bureaucracy which ruled in the name of an ideology the basic premise of which was that the greatest danger to socialism was the rule of an alienated Party bureaucracy. It saw itself as the main enemy. This worked very nicely. They even succeeded in integrating the Praxis philosophers, up to a certain point. The trick was that if you wanted to criticise the system ...

Salecl: ... it was already all the time criticising itself.

RP: It sounds like Marcuse's old notion of repressive tolerance.

Žižek: Yes, but a special version of it.

Salecl: It produced a special kind of Newspeak. They changed 'business' to 'organisation of associated labour'. 'Workers' became 'direct producers'. Directors were called 'individual business organs'. The idea was that with this demystification of language self-management could be portrayed as a form of direct democracy.

Žižek: On this point, we agree with Habermas: the price of modernity is that you must accept a certain division, alienation, etc. But I disagree with the way in which Habermas understands this in relation to the postmodernism debate. For me, it is modernism which insists on the utopian idea of disalienation, while postmodernism is precisely the recognition that you accept a certain division as the price of freedom. In this specific sense, Habermas is a postmodernist without knowing it.

RP: A certain strand of postmodern thought – one thinks of Foucault in the seventies, for example – wants to reach the ultimate equation: emancipation = non-emancipation, emancipation = repression, without qualification. But you, via Lacan, seem to want to do something rather more complex. In your book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, you describe Lacan as a thinker of the Enlightenment. It seems that for you the project of emancipation doesn't always equal repression, but somehow we do have to reassess the project. By repudiating a certain conception of what the project of emancipation should lead to we somehow preserve the project. Is that a fair description of your position?

Žižek: Absolutely. This is why I insist so much on the split between Foucault and Derrida, on the one hand (despite all their differences), and Lacan. If we understand modernism in terms of the urge to demask an illusion, etc., then deconstruction is itself a most extreme form of modernism. At this general level, despite all *their* differences, Habermas and Lacan move in the same direction in accepting certain limits and renouncing certain utopian conditions on the possibility of freedom. The way these divisions have been made should be reformulated.

RP: The question of the limits of enlightenment is already there is Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' in the distinction between the public and private use of reason. To the extent to which you agree with Habermas, aren't you just reinstituting a more classically Kantian notion? Isn't your 'postmodernism' just a pragmatic enlightenment?

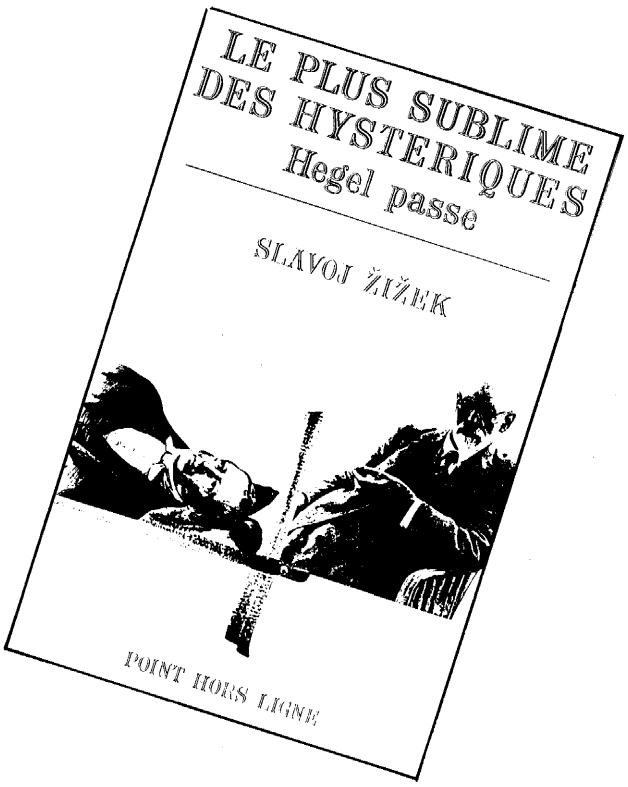
Žižek: In a sense, yes. Let's look at the process that Lacan calls 'la passe': how as an analysand you become an analyst. The basic idea is that you choose two of your colleagues, not analysts, and you tell them about the experience of your analysis, and they must be able to retell it to someone else. At this point, at which you are able to make your experience totally transmissible to a third by the intermediary of the second, this is the sign of success. Here, in the heart of Lacan, you can see the idea of making it public. This is enlightenment. You must be able to externalise your innermost experience.

HEGEL, FREUD, LACAN

RP: Perhaps we could turn to your interest in Hegel. You combine an interest in Hegel with one in Lacan in a rather unusual way. Is there not a basic irreconcilability between Hegel and Lacan that your reading covers over? After all, there would seem to be some kind of *telos* of reconciliation in Hegel. You seem to read Hegel very much through the *Phenomenology*.

Žižek: No, it is through the *Logic*. I think that Hegel wrote a book called *Logic of the Signifier*, and that by historical accident the second part of the title fell out. More seriously, take the category of reconciliation. People talk of a *telos* of reconciliation in Hegel

as if this meant some kind of radical transparency. Look at the place in the *Phenomenology* where Hegel introduces the term: towards the end of the chapter on spirit, just before the chapter on religion. Reconciliation comes about from the break-down of the condition of the beautiful soul. It means that the beautiful soul must recognise the irrationality of the world as a kind of positive position. It must accept it. There is no freedom, no acting in the world, without renouncing your narcissistic self, without accepting some basic 'irreconcilability'. When you want to actualise your non-alienated project and you are confronted with some limit, disalienation does not consist in annihilating the limit, but in seeing how this limit is the positive condition of your very activity.



It is the same at all crucial points of Hegelian theory. For example, in the logic of judgement where after the judgement of necessity you get the notional judgement (*Begriffsurteil*). You would expect a triad, but there is a fourth type of judgement. This one reintroduces contingency.

It is interesting that even poststurcturalist critics, such as Gasche in *The Tain of the Mirror*, when they criticise Hegel come up with positions which are already within Hegel. Take the idea of reflection. It is not the simple idea that I reflect myself, I am a property of the object, etc. Reflection is always redoubled with Hegel. There is a certain point in the object where the subject cannot recognise itself – a blind spot. But it is precisely this blind spot where the subject is inscribed. What the Derrideans, with such effort, try to produce as the blind spot of Hegelian dialectic: this is the fundamental mechanism of Hegel. The monarch in the *Philosophy of Right*, for example. If you want the state to be a rational totality, it must have a certain totally irrational excess or surplus, a totally idiotic presence – the King. Without it, totality cannot exist.

It is these dimensions of Hegel's thought which were opened up for me by Lacanian notions of lack in the Other, of how the final moment in analysis is your acknowledgement of your lack as the correlate of the lack of the Other, etc.

RP: But is this Lacan really Freudian? There is a whole philosophical background in Lacan – the interest in intersubjectivity, the theory of the subject – which is missing in Freud. The concept of the subject doesn't really occur in Freud's work, does it? Is Lacan explicating what is implicit in Freud or is he establishing a new theory?

Žižek: Lacan only interprets Freud *if* you conceive the idea of interpretation the way Lacan does. In the early seminars, he is close to some phenomenological approaches when he says that interpretation is not just the rediscovery of something that already exists. You are confronted in interpretation with a lot of inconsistent traces – Lacan's notion of the unconscious is a kind of creationist one – and you construct what retroactively will have been. Freud was an inconsistent author. Lacan showed one way to retroactively construct a consistency. There was a certain fundamental theoretical traumatism, an impossibility, ultimate contradiction, which generated Freud's inconsistencies. The point is not to flatten Freud out.

RP: So it's in Freud's texts, it's not in Freud?

Žižek: If you like. You can put it that way, yes. It is what's in the text which could not be written there.

RP: Perhaps we could return to the reception of Lacan in Slovenia. You spoke earlier of Slovenian Lacanians giving theoretical support to new social movements. Is there any particular articulation of Lacanianism with gender issues involved here? As you probably know, in England, the reception of Lacan has been very closely tied up with feminism. There is a certain type of feminist theory which is very Lacanian. It articulates its sexual politics through Lacan. Is there any equivalent to this in Slovenia?

Žižek: There are two issues here: the reception of Lacan in England, and the question of feminism in Slovenia. On the first one, I must make some comradely criticisms. The Lacan received in England in film theory and women's studies was already a reduced version of Lacan, mediated in part by Foucault and Kristeva. Let us take two central notions: 'suture' and the gaze. The way the idea of suture operates here is incredible. It is precisely the reverse of Lacan. It is used to mean the bad thing, the representation, the closure. Lacan's point is much more dialectically refined. For him suture is not just the moment of closure but also that which sustains openness. Take the phallic signifier, for example. For Lacan this is not just the signifier which closes the field of unlimited polymorphous perversity, it is the signifier that opens the field of plurality. The paradox of Lacan is that to have a certain field open there must be a certain closure (it is like Hegel on reconcilation). To de-suture a field you must always have another mega-suture. Take the notion of nation. The nation functions to de-suture traditional societies, but it de-sutures them by finding another central point.

The problem of the gaze is, I think, an even bigger one. The way the Lacanian problematic of the gaze works here in England is mediated through Foucault's work on the panopticon: for the male gaze, the woman is reduced to an object, etc. Whereas for Lacan it is the opposite: the gaze is the object, it is not on the side of the subject. In this way, for Lacan, it is woman who occupies the place of the gaze. If there is something totally alien to Lacan it is the idea that the male position is that of the gaze that objectifies woman.

Salecl: With regard to the other side of your question, it is important to note first of all that there is no women's movement in Slovenia. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, this lack of a feminist movement is very problematic. With the emergence of a new 'moral majority' in the opposition movement – on questions of abortion rights, for example. We do have some small groups that call themselves feminist, and their view is that psychoanalysis is very anti-feminist. But it was the Lacanian movement in Slovenia that first raised the issue of the newly emerging moral majority there. The small feminist groups which exist are dealing with the question in a very old-fashioned way, saying that all is male chauvinism, etc. They are not locating the issue properly; they are not connecting it up to the nationalist threat, for example, which we think is behind the obsession with 'morality'. The main struggle for feminists in Croatia and Slovenia, we believe, is an anti-nationalist one.

Žižek: It is a fight for the very formulation of the problems. The nationalist parties in government in Slovenia and Croatia don't accept contraception and abortion as women's problems. All that exists for them are problems of the family and low birth rates. For us, on the other hand, the 'problem of the family' doesn't exist as such. The problems are those of women's rights, rights of children, etc.

Salecl: When they say we must prohibit abortion, they do not say it for Christian moral reasons. They openly say that it is to preserve the nation. And you must not forget that they were very much a part of the old opposition movement, anti-totalitarian, etc. So they present their new morality as part of the fight against communism: freedom to abort as a brutal totalitarian intervention by the state into private life! We want to keep the old legislation on abortion.

CURRENT YUGOSLAVIAN POLITICS

RP: Slavoj, you recently stood as a candidate for the five-man presidency of Slovenia as a member of the newly-formed Liberal Party. Could you explain the current layout of the political parties in Slovenia, and in particular the nature of the Liberal Party to which you belong?

Žižek: Along with the old Communist Party, the Liberal Party is now part of the opposition bloc. But what defines the distinctive role of the Liberal Party is our opposition to the rise of this national-organic populism in Slovenia, of which we have already spoken.

RP: For people used to the ideological distinctions of West European politics, it may appear strange that the Liberal Party emerged from the youth wing of the Slovenian League of Communists. Especially since, in the information bulletins of the Ljubljana Press Centre, your party is described as affiliating to the classical traditions of liberalism. Could you explain more precisely where the Liberal Party stands ideologically?

Žižek: Our aim is to promote pluralism, and an awareness of ecological issues, and to defend the rights of minorities. This is the kind of liberal tradition we represent. Not the purely capitalist values of the free market, not Friedrich von Hayek.

Salecl: We took the name 'liberal' as a symbol of opposition to the national-organic populist tradition. In order to defend the rights of minorities, one has to reject emphatically this notion of the primacy of the nation, of the need for self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation, the idea that you can only find your place as an individual within the organic community of the nation.

Žižek: To put it in terms of Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony, we were engaged in a struggle for the re-articulation of this floating signifier, 'liberalism'. The term was associated, throughout Slovenia, with the idea of freeing ourselves from Communist domination. It was extremely important who should succeed in occupying this ideological terrain, and in fact the right-wingers were furious. We managed to force them onto the defensive, because they were then obliged to explain why *they* were also in favour of liberties, individual human rights, and so on. I think it was the proper mode of attack, which – to use the Leninist phrase – accorded with the concrete analysis of the concrete situation. It was the right gesture to make.

RP: The Liberal Party is the second biggest party in the Slovenian parliament. But what about the Party of Democratic Renewal, the former League of Communists?

Žižek: Personally, they are quite nice guys. There are a lot of younger people, and former Party dissidents. So you might ask, if they are such nice guys why didn't we in the youth wing simply stay with them? The problem was – and here I think that Foucault's analysis of 'micro-powers' has some bearing – that the general power of the Party remains intimately linked to the extremely corrupt local power structures. This was simply too much for us.

Salecl: Our crucial failing was connected with the role of the Green Party, which is rather strong. The Green Party is part of DEMOS, the ruling centre-right coalition, but this catastrophic development was purely the result of personal struggles and animosities. Formerly, the Greens were linked with the youth organization of the Communist Party. About five months ago they started moving towards DEMOS – three months before the election. The leading members of the Greens are ex-communists, and in many cases ex-hard-liners.

Žižek: They are all personal enemies of mine. They attacked me about ten years ago – they threw me out for not being enough of a Marxist. It was these long-standing personal enmities which were crucial in the decision of Greens to join DEMOS. To use Ernesto Laclau's jargon again, the Green problematic – as you know – has a peculiarly floating status within the ideological field. You can inscribe it into the field of pluralism, of new social movements and so on; or you can inscribe it into the chain of equivalences: 'pollution of the environment' equals 'pollution of our minds through cultural degeneration' and so on. This ideological shift of the Greens was a real tragedy, because without them DEMOS would not have an absolute majority – in other words, they would not have been able to form a government without us, and there would be a much stronger leftist and pluralist influence in current Slovenian politics.

Salecl: It should be remembered that the Greens allied themselves with the nationalists when it came to reopening the questions of abortion, women's rights and so on.

Žižek: However, those who now form the Liberal Party also bear some responsibility for the current situation, because we didn't take DEMOS seriously enough – I would say that even DEMOS didn't take itself seriously enough! Until the fall of the regimes in East Germany and Romania towards the end of 1989, the aspiration of DEMOS was to be strong enough to be taken seriously as an opposition. It was only after these events that they themselves saw that there was a real possibility of winning power. Neither ourselves, nor the Communist Party, foresaw that this might happen – and now the real political problem is simply to stay alive.

What I mean by this is that up till now there has been some kind of state support for all political parties. But DEMOS – arguing demagogically that we are a small, poor country – have radically reduced this money. And although they promised that being a member of parliament would become a profesional occupation, they have not professionalised it. For example, even the general secretary of the Communist Party of Slovenia has a post in a university. What this means is that there are ten or fifteen professional ideologists of DEMOS, who have ministerial posts, and nothing in between them and the common people – all the intermediary structures are being dissolved. So maybe eight or ten people get together at somebody's house and they make all the crucial decisions.

Salecl: So we have the same system as we had before!

Žižek: Furthermore, about half a year ago the nationalists began to make a great noise about how Slovenians were in danger of becoming an extinct race. They tried to calculate the date when there would be no more Slovenians! Very cleverly, they reckoned around 2040 to 2050 – not so far away as to appear unrealistic, and not so near as to make people feel insecure. Other calculations claim that by around 2050, half of Yugoslavia will be populated by Albanians.

RP: This seems an appropriate point to move on to the national question in Yugoslavia in general. In your view, will the Federation be able to hold together?

Žižek: I think the maximum that can be hoped for is a confederation. In Slovenia, this is not such a great problem because – to use a rather racist them – we are 'ethnically pure'. The real problem is not only Albania, but in Bosnia also. This is because, if a new confederation were established, the Serbs would want to change borders. They would want to incorporate parts of Bosnia and possibly also Croatia, where there are two to three million Serbs. However, I do not believe that there is any real danger of a restoration of Serbian domination, of the kind which characterized Yugoslavia before the revolution – it is too late for that. Slovenia and Croatia – the two richest republics – have now held democratic elections, and in order to reverse this situation half of Yugoslavia would have to occupy the other half – it's simply not conceivable.

Salecl: In my view, the chance for Yugoslavia to survive will depend on the outcome of the free elections which will be held in every republic before the end of this year. Strong republican governments will have to be formed, and then, hopefully, these governments will be able to agree on a new type of confederation. The problem is, however, that in republics such as Serbia and Montenegro, the left and liberal opposition hasn't really had time to organise. This opposition is based in small groups centred on the universities. The real opposition consists of far right-wing nationalists – without too much exaggeration they could be described as 'Chetniks'.[2]

Žižek: The miracle of Milosevic, the populist leader of the Communist Party in Serbia, was that he managed to synthesise some unthinkable combination of fascism and Stalinism. He promoted typically Stalinist values, but with elements which up till now were considered to be typically fascist, such as the setting-up of a violent vigilante movement, the obsession with the nationalist enemy...

RP: You suggest these are not characteristic of communist dictatorships, but what about Romania under Ceausescu?

Žižek: Romania was a totally 'closed' society, to use the categories of the unfortunate Karl Popper, whereas Serbia under Milosevic is more reminiscent of fascist Italy, where there was a certain degree of freedom, but if you dissented from the regime you were excluded, marginalised...

Salecl: I would say that Milosevic's success consisted in being able to play in two ideological registers at the same time – on the one hand defending a strong federal Yugoslavia, with a democratised and market-oriented society, but, on the other hand, behind this, always aiming – for example – to crush the Albanians in Kosovo province, and to promote the Serbian domination of Yugoslavia, without ever openly renouncing the legacy of Tito. People knew what he was aiming at, there were whole series of fantasies which he didn't have to spell out. But now there are parties of the nationalist right operating openly, and Milosevic is branded as the guy who doesn't go far enough.

Žižek: As Fred Jameson would say, a vanishing mediator...

Salecl: Milosevic is now under attack from both sides – from the right-wing 'Chetnik' movement which we have been describing, and from the small, emergent democratic parties. What is unify-

ing these two blocs is that they are both anti-communist – Milosevic still has that albatross round his neck. His charisma is already broken.[3]

Žižek: But what is also fascinating here is what we Marxists call the 'material force of ideology'. For example, according to the official statistics, which as we know always present an upbeat picture, purchasing power in Yugoslavia has declined by between 40 and 50 percent over the last decade. But despite all this, the dominating issues in the elections in Croatia and Slovenia, and this will also apply to the elections in Serbia, have not been economic but nationalistic.

RP: This raises the question of the relation between these nationalist movements and the new liberal economics of marketisation.

Žižek: The way it works is that the general economic crisis is reinterpreted through a nationalistic perspective. All would be well at home on the economic front, if we didn't have to help to support the other republics, and so on.

RP: But what about concrete policies for economic restructuring?

Žižek: People are not yet thinking on that level. Even for the Communist Party, the main economic points of reference are Thatcher, the Chicago school. Personally, I'm a pragmatist in this area. If it works, why not try a dose of it? But one should at least recognise that neo-liberal economics is not a neutral technical instrument – to use Lacan's terms, there are certain subject positions inscribed within it. We Liberals are the only political force opposed to this – the supposed 'de-ideologising' of the economy through the application of 'neutral', technically efficient measures. The tragedy is that even the communists perceive this kind of Thatcherite or Friedmanesque economics as something ideologically neutral, as not involving any class- or subject-positions.

Salecl: Now we are facing the issue of the privatisation of publicly owned property. Overnight, managers, who were formerly connected with the Communist regime and the secret police, are becoming owners. So you have this problem of former Communists who are becoming capitalists.

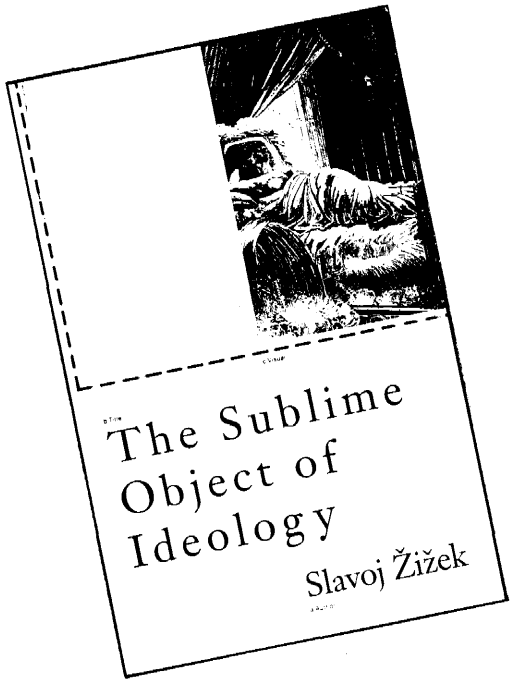
LACANIAN THEORY AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS

RP: We would like to conclude by shifting back from concrete politics towards theory. More specifically, we would like to raise some epistemological issues about your use of psychoanalytic categories in social and political analysis. For example, you have described the basic structure of capital accumulation as 'hysterical', because it is characterised by insatiable demand, irrecuperable excess. But what is the status of this description? Is it analogical? It often looks as though you are simply projecting psychoanalytic categories on the social level, without paying sufficient attention to the specificity of *social*, as opposed to *psychological*, processes.

Žižek: I am definitely not using these categories merely analogically, because Lacan is always talking about structures of discourse. I would try to avoid the very terms of your question. For me hysteria is always already a structure of discourse, in other words, a certain structuring of the social bond. Hysteria is not some kind of private psychological state. For Lacan 'discourse' is not simply another fashionable term – you know how people refer to the 'discourse' of Foucault, Derrida, etc., when all they really mean is their books or their texts. For Lacan 'discourse' refers to the social bond – 'le lien social'. In order for someone to be a hysteric, the whole intersubjective space must be structured in a certain way – it is in this sense that one can say that capitalism is 'hysterical'.

RP: But this raises a whole series of problems – because psychoanalytical terms derive their primary semantic charge from their role within a certain therapeutic relation between individuals. But what would the political correlate of the practice of analysis be? How could one 'psychoanalyse' the hysteria of capitalism in general?

Žižek: My reply would be that for Lacan the relation between 'hysteria' and 'historia' is not just a play on words. Hysteria is an eminently historical notion. Let us suppose that an Althusserian



notion of interpellation gives us the main form of subjectification – we must see that this form is always historically specified, even though Althusser didn't stress this himself. Hysteria just means that the identification which should be produced through interpellation fails. What Americans now call a 'borderline case' is not something radically new – it is just another form of the failure of identification, that is to say of hysteria. To say that the structure of capitalism is hysterical is just to say that this failure of identification is built into it, as was first perceived by Max Weber in his study of the 'Protestant ethic'.

RP: But doesn't this mean that you fall into the same kinds of difficulties that one finds in the work of some contemporary discourse theorists – discourse becomes an undifferentiated category which is supposed to exhaust the ontology of the social. From a more traditional Marxist perspective, one might object that, although we may talk about the 'material force of ideology', it is necessary to distinguish different *levels* of materiality within the social. There seems to be a kind of hypertrophy of ideological analysis implied by the concept of discourse. If one can't make a distinction between different levels of the social, for example in an Althusserian way, the

relation of such discourse analysis to political practice becomes seriously problematic. Political practice, surely, is not *just* a matter of ideological struggle.

Žižek: My reply would be that the most classical forms of Marxism, indeed in *Das Kapital* itself, notions such as 'class-struggle' occupy precisely such an unspecified place. As you know, after three volumes, the manuscript ends with the promise of a chapter on 'classes'. If you read *Das Kapital* retrospectively from this point you can see that it is not simply an objective theory of production. It becomes apparent that in concepts such as that of 'surplus-value' class struggle is already at work. The whole point is to retain this refined dialectic: not to reduce everything to class struggle, but at the same time not to reduce class-struggle simply to one of the 'instances', to say we have objective relationships, and *then* class struggle.

RP: This is a persuasive account. But could we press you again on the affinities between your work and that of the contemporary discourse-analysts, for whom politics often seems to be reduced to a matter of transforming personal identities, or of finding the right ideological 'chain of equivalences'? After all, you have written a sympathetic review of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

Žižek: I cannot emphasise enough my admiration for Laclau and Mouffe, but I do perceive a danger in the idea of radical democracy. It seems like a slip into commonsense wisdom: 'you must not be unilateral, you must listen to as many viewpoints as possible, etc...' I think the condition of being active politically is precisely to *be* unilateral: the structure of the political act as such is 'essentialist'. Furthermore, to say that we must not give centrality to any particular site of struggle represents a kind of legerdemain, since the real upshot of Lacalu and Mouffe's book is an interpretation of all struggles, social, economic, and so on, as extensions of *democratic* struggles.

RP: Could we perhaps put our basic question in one final form. For Marx, there are certain institutions and processes – money for example – which are constituted sheerly through social recognition. However, there are also for Marx other processes, such as capitalist production itself, which are not simply constituted through such recognition. Do you acknowledge the existence of this distinction?

Žižek: On this point, I think I would be willing to describe myself as a 'post-modernist'. I would say that as soon as you are within a spoken language, within a certain universe of meaning, you are automatically caught within a certain ideology. There is a certain basic misrecognition. This makes possible – on the social level – certain experiences which Lacan describes as 'traversing the phantasy', 'identifying with the symbol'. For example, the kind of discourse which emerged after Chernobyl, in which various leftist groups began proclaiming that 'we all live in Chernobyl'. This is a kind of phenomenon which the ruling ideology would like to dismiss as some marginal misadventure – the fact that people recognise something as a symptom, as precisely the exception where the repressed truth of the totality emerges.

But, to return to your point, I would say that my type of analysis doesn't exclude, but rather requires a concrete social and economic analysis. Let's return to Marx's notion of class-struggle. A direct attempt to explain everything in terms of class struggle would end up explaining nothing. But neither is it enough to say that class struggle is simply a *result* of objective conditions. We might say that – retroactively – class struggle comes to be seen as what is essential. But this retroactive standpoint is never fully available in the present – it is always the standpoint of the future perfect.

Interviewed by Peter Dews and Peter Osborne
London, July 1990

Notes

1 'Laibach' is the German word for Ljubljana. The band sought to provoke the regime through the wearing of fascist insignia, etc.

2 'Chetniks' was the name applied to members of the Second World War resistance group in Yugoslavia which was led by General Mihailovic, Minister of War in King Peter's government in exile. It found its main support in Serbia. Soon after its formation it came into conflict with Tito's predominantly communist Partisans, and a three-way struggle developed between the Germans, the Chetniks and the Partisans. The Allies supported Tito. Mihailovic was executed by the new Yugoslav regime in July 1946, on a charge of treason.

3 This turned out to be a serious under-estimation of Milosevic's capacity for survival. In the elections of 9 December 1990, he secured a substantial majority, bucking the trend in Eastern Europe for former Communist Party bosses to lose their credibility in the new political climate. The old Serbian Communist Party has renamed itself the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS).