

The Lost Cause of Democracy

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Žižek strongly advocates an overturning of capitalism through a daily revolution; the latter can only become possible if our perception of society and its constructs can be changed to achieve a view of a new horizon of human possibilities. If we can relegate the ambient democratic sentiment to the background, then the much-needed *radical* democracy can appear.

Review of: Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 504 p.

What we have with *In Defense of Lost Causes* is an attempt to update Lenin's "What Is to Be Done?" With his critique of contemporary political thought and his use of Hegelian, Marxian, Freudian, Lacanian and Badiouan concepts targeted at radical political theorists, Žižek's goal is primarily theoretical: beyond his goals to remind us of the libidinal economy of politics and to pierce through the current dominant ideology, he aims to give us the means to effectively fight capitalism.

That being said, *In Defense of Lost Causes* is not a book praising political mistakes. In fact, Žižek remains far from the position of those actors and theorists he thinks have erred in politics, albeit in the right direction (namely Heidegger, Foucault, the Jacobins, or Stalinists and Maoists). There is more to their work than what they *did* think and, to take but one example, we should not “avoid the effort to *think* with and through Heidegger, to confront the uneasy questions he raised.” (117) We ought to be careful, then, not to caricature Žižek’s reliance on such potentially shocking predecessors as mere posture. Instead, we should recognize his attempt to draw lessons from the past as the beginning of an answer to a different question: how can we surpass the limits of ethics and theory when facing social relations, in order to invent a truly emancipatory radical politics?

Preparing the Terrain for Radical Politics

The opening chapter indeed seeks to show that there is a fundamental hypocrisy to all ethics: there is always a point where we close our eyes to a certain level of suffering. The same pattern of interrogation is continued in the second chapter. We only have one way to deal with the truly traumatic, with the torture we are subjected to, with the torture done *in our name* by our government, or even with Revolutions, totalitarian regimes, or the extinction of humanity: it is to bring such events down to domesticated and familiar problems such as we find in amorous or familial relationships. *That* is mystification; *that* is the function of ideology: to mask what really threatens us – real, brutal violence.

With this understanding of ethics and ideology, Žižek sets out to go beyond “impotent moralistic outrage” (102) and simple subversion. His critique of democratic ethics and ideology “is the risky but necessary gesture of rendering problematic the very notion of “democracy,” of moving elsewhere – of having the courage to elaborate a positive liveable project “beyond democracy.” (106) “Democracy” is what we must fight, because it is the dominant ideological-political form stopping us from questioning capitalism. We must overcome our belief in necessity for a necessarily democratic struggle for democracy. Only then will we see that (non-liberal) democracy equals politics, and that it is at once the regulated choice of those in power *and* the violent egalitarian imposition on the part of those who are excluded by those in power, who try to keep us depoliticized and focused on our daily lives.

Žižek seeks to answer a question that goes far beyond the traditional understanding of politics – that of the implications of Heidegger’s concept of ontological difference for politics. This problem is at the heart of the book, and as such it deserves to be explained in slightly different terms than Žižek does. Particularly in *Being and Time*, Heidegger presented under this name the idea that the very essence of human beings is what sets them apart from anything else. There would then be two levels to existence. The first, the *ontic*, is what a human being (*Dasein*) shares with everyone and everything else, it is the product of circumstances and could have happened otherwise. It is what sets apart a twentieth-century German philosopher from the pre-Socratic philosophers of Ancient Greece. Politics, or religious and secular beliefs, for instance, would belong to the ontic dimension of our lives. The second level, where the meaning of what it is to be and to exist is in question, is the ontological dimension; here we touch on the essence of being human. On one hand, with the ontic we have a horizon of meaning for our existence that disappears beyond our daily activities, because we forget about it; on the other hand, we have the emergence of this horizon as a horizon through our possibility to question it, we have ontological reflection. What might then unite us and make us properly human would be this question of being, where our very being, what we are, is in question. And since its answer is to be found beyond the ontic, we could see this distinction as leading us to put more value on the ontological and to treat politics as a secondary or lower realm of activity.

In the third chapter, speaking about Heidegger as a radical intellectual, Žižek takes on the question of ontological difference, but gives a renewed importance to the ontic: “what if there is a fundamental discordance between the ontological and the ontic, so that, as Heidegger put it, those who reach ontological truth have to err in the ontic? What if, if we are to see with the ontological eye, our ontic eye has to be blinded?” (124) Yet such a view is still not complete enough: instead, Žižek points to a politics that would be “merely ontic” (120) but would open up a space for ontological reflection, by focusing on what Lacan called the Real. Indeed, the Real is “that which accounts for the very multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real [...], the hard bone of contention which pulverizes the sameness into the multitude of appearances” (127) and we can only see the Real through fictions, ideology and symbolism – in fact, they are all that *is*.

Violence and the (non-existent) big Other

And so, by a reversal of the original question, ontological difference appears as a rift *within* the ontic, and ontological change will become possible only through ontic politics. Žižek thus seeks a renewed relation between theory and action, where each opens up new spaces for both activities, where being open to both is being open to the Event and the changes it brings, though traumatic they may be. We need *ontological* violence in order to truly achieve change – more precisely, to overcome capitalism. This form of violence is assumed as being violent without any regard for the big Other, it exceeds any end to which it might be a means, it aims at changing the very way we interact with each other, at transforming our society in its most hidden structures, at redefining the horizon that makes our lives possible and meaningful, instead of merely bringing changes within our lives. If we are to surpass ideology and thus leave behind the old social order and the old culture, we need violence and terror, and we need to realize that there is no big Other (which is “the order of public appearance” (242), “the ruling ideological gaze” (243) of... no one, it turns out) – and thus to overcome our moral qualms.

While in this manner the fourth and fifth chapters address the promises and shortcomings of Revolutionaries and Marxists, the sixth and seventh chapters criticize at length the contemporary political theorists with whom Žižek is most likely to be associated. E. Laclau, Y. Stavrakakis, S. Critchley, G. Agamben, and M. Hardt and A. Negri are all shown as recognizing the full hegemony of global capitalism and accepting the triumph of capitalism and limiting themselves to resistance. The task of “radical emancipatory politics” is instead to make precise and finite demands which cannot be dismissed by those in power in the name of realism; it is to desire and to bring into existence a revolutionary event by engaging in a movement. The goals of political action should then be limited, but its aims must be to abolish capitalism as the invisible background of our lives, first of all (as Žižek does) by rendering it visible. True radicalism consists in reorganizing daily life and the state, in changing social relations, in excessive destruction *and* in creation: “imposing on social reality a *new* lasting order. *This* is the properly “terroristic” dimension of every authentic democratic explosion: the brutal imposition of a new order.” (419) We must not only create a new society, we must create new hopes and dreams so

we always press forward and escape falling back into what we wanted to destroy in the first place.

Trespassing on Žižek's Limits

Following the re-evaluation of some of Lacan and Badiou's core concepts in the eighth chapter, the conclusion of the book is a search for the social bases of change in the main antagonisms of contemporary global politics: ecology; the slums; biogenetics; challenges to intellectual property. Along these lines of opposition, exclusion follows the privatization of what *ought* to be common to all (as the "shared substance of our social being" (428), what is immediately produced by subjectivity). A new "proletariat" has been formed by this exclusion – and with it, a revolutionary position anyone can join.

Stated as such, the conclusions of the book are disappointing and rather similar to those of the authors Žižek criticizes throughout. Of course, there is an appeal to political invention and to the assumption of the necessity of violence and terror, and there is an ascription of revolutionary agency to actual phenomena. However, his language falls short of the destruction and invention deemed necessary for politics, and we remain within the theoretical context of Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Freud, Lacan and Badiou – as important as may be Žižek's search for the correct meaning and ultimate consequences of their concepts. What is more, Žižek remains quite silent on the practical aspects, on how we can adopt a revolutionary, communist position against the destruction of the commons.

This being said, we can be more charitable to Žižek: perhaps this criticism is asking too much of one person or, more precisely, perhaps we are asking the wrong question. And so the real problem with this book might lie elsewhere – and it might be one of its strengths. Although we must read between the lines and enter into our own questioning of theory *as a practice*, the key to understand *In Defense of Lost Causes* might be to refuse to place Žižek in the position of the big Other. Above all, it is the destruction of mystifications that is the main object of this book, with Žižek bordering on theoretical excess to open up the possibility of creating something new. But if they are not to fail, his answers must be understood as provocatively allusive: through ideas like utopia, emancipatory terror, the negation of the negation, communism, or the

dictatorship of the proletariat, we *must* be provoked to go beyond his few and scarce suggestions and create new possibilities for social relations. Like him, we must act as if the future we want is already here, if we are to hope to undo what makes our destiny and act against the catastrophic outcome that is emerging in our present.

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Web links

About Žižek

Žižek's home page at the European Graduate School: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek.html>

International Review of Žižek studies: <http://www.zizekstudies.org/>

Texts by Žižek and Interviews

Žižek's contribution on political actuality in the *London Review of Books*:

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/contributors/zize01>

Synopsis of *Žižek! The movie*:

<http://www.zizekthemovie.com/>

"Lenin's Choice," from Žižek's *Repeating Lenin*:

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ot/zizek1.htm>

"Slavoj Žižek: What is the Question?"

<http://www.radioopensource.org/slavoj-zizek-what-is-the-question/>

A Discussion with Žižek on Democracy Now's Website, from March 11 and May 12, 2008 (with audio and transcript):

Part 1:

http://www.democracynow.org/2008/3/11/everybody_in_the_world_except_us

Part 2:

http://www.democracynow.org/2008/5/12/world_renowned_philosopher_slavoj_zizek_on

Many texts are also available on <http://www.lacan.com>

More About In Defense of Lost Causes

Presentation on Verso's website:

http://www.versobooks.com/books/tuvwxyz/xyz-titles/zizek_defense_lost_causes.shtml

“The phenomenal Slavoj Žižek. Is there any subject on earth that isn't grist to Zizek's intellectual mill?” by Terry Eagleton, *Times Online*, April 23, 2008

http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article3800980.ece

“Slavoj Zizek in Defense of "Lost Causes"”, by Steven Sherman, *Monthly Review*, 08/09/08:

<http://www.monthlyreview.org/mrzine/sherman080908.html>

“Superstar Philosopher Slavoj Žižek Writes in Defense of Lost Causes”, by “RS”, *New Internationalist*, September 2008, Issue 415:

<http://www.newint.org/columns/media/books/2008/09/01/defence-lost-causes/>

“With Zizek, We're All Just Left Joking Around. Terror, the Leftist Intellectual Kind”, by Andrew Bast, *The New York Enquirer*, May 17, 2008, (with an inspired picture of Žižek):

<http://www.nyinquirer.com/nyinquirer/2008/05/with-zizek-were.html>

“Uncomplicated” by Daniel Miller, *The Nation*, July 14, 2008:

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080721/miller>

Adam Kirsch (The New Republic), The Deadly Jester

<http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=097a31f3-c440-4b10-8894-14197d7a6eef>

And for a discussion of Žižek's attitude to Judaism, especially as it is expressed in this book:

“Žižek for Jews”:

http://www.jewcy.com/post/zizek_jews

Žižek's article "Smashing the Neighbour's Face: On Emmanuel Levinas' Judaism":
http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?page_id=91