

Civil Society, Fanaticism, and Digital Reality: A Conversation with Slavoj Zizek

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Editors' Note: *Slavoj Zizek, a leading intellectual in the new social movements of Eastern and Central Europe, is a researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He is the author of numerous books including Looking Awary: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture. Zizek also ran as a pro-reform candidate for the presidency of the republic of Slovenia, then part of Yugoslavia, in 1990.*

CTHEORY: Let's speak about the role of intellectuals. Before 1989, there was a strange relationship among intellectuals and those in power in Eastern Europe. Both bureaucrats and dissidents had some sort of relationship with politics. Even now, this is partly the case. In Western Europe this phenomenon disappeared and it is hard to see any relationship or even dialogue. What should be the role of intellectuals?

Zizek: Partially this is true. For me what was partially so attractive, so sympathetic about real socialism, despite being a corrupt, cynical system, was the belief in the power of the spoken word. Some twenty years ago, I was editor of a small art-theoretical journal with a circulation of 3,400. Once we published a small, obscure poem, incomprehensibly modern, but between the lines there was a dissident message. If the power would have ignored the poem, nothing would have happened. But there was an extraordinary session of the Central Committee. Okay, this is repression, but what I like about it is that the communist power took the potential, detonating force of the spoken word very seriously. They were always interested in arguing with intellectuals. Let's take an artist like Tarkovski, who was half dissident. He was half allowed to work, even if they suppressed some of his films. They were impressed, they bothered. Fredric Jameson made a nice point about this: we are only now becoming aware that what we liked about East-European dissidents like Havel is only possible within a socialist system.

Our influence, beginning in the mid-eighties, was at that time incredibly large, especially the philosophers, sociologists, literary theoreticians. But this was a very limited conjunction. Now there is the pure ignorance of the regime, which is simply not interested in ideological questions. I feel sorry for those countries in which writers nowadays play an important role. Take Serbia, where this nationalist madness was fabricated by writers. Even in Slovenia it's the same with the nationalist writers, although they do not have much influence.

CTHEORY: But you are involved in politics yourself, up until this moment. There are a lot of controversies in Ljubljana about your involvement in the governing party and the fact that you write speeches for them.

Zizek: There is a messianic complex with intellectuals in Eastern Europe. Nothing against it, but it becomes extremely dangerous in Slovenia when this messianic vision of intellectuals is combined with a vulgar anti-Americanism, which is a very popular political attitude of right wingers. America for them means no national solidarity, filthy liberalism, multi-culturalism, individualism, the market. They are afraid of a pluralistic democracy and there is a proto-fascistic potential in it. This combination of nationalist writers, whose obsession is how to retain national identity, and an anti-capitalist right-wing movement is very dangerous.

I did something for which I lost almost all my friends, what no good leftist ever does: I fully supported the ruling party in Slovenia. For this all my leftist friends hate me and of course the whole right wing. What the liberal democratic party did was a miracle. Five years ago we were the remainder of the new social movements, like feminist and ecological groups. At that time everybody thought that we would be vanishing mediators. We made some slyly corrupted, but good moves and now we are the strongest party. I think it was our party that saved Slovenia from the fate of the other former Yugoslav republics, where they have the one-party model. Either right wing like in Croatia or left wing like in Serbia, which hegemonized in the name of the national interest. With us it's a really diverse, pluralist scene, open towards foreigners (of course there are some critical cases). But the changes of a genuine pluralist society are not yet lost.

It's typical that this position triggers an enormous hatred against me. Slovene media absolutely ignore me, there is never an article about me. On the other hand, if some nationalist poet publishes a small poem in some obscure Austrian journal, it's a big success in Slovenia. I am rather perceived as some dark, ominous, plotting, political manipulator, a role I enjoy immensely and like very much.

CTHEORY: You have not become cynical about the current power struggles you are involved in?

Zizek: You do not hear me not saying that it is so disgusting. It's a simple, professional choice. Now politics is becoming business-as-usual in Slovenia. It's no longer that once a week you write a heroic article and you are a hero. It means intrigues and meetings. I simply had to choose. Do I do serious theory or politics? What I hate most are the beautiful souls of the left wing who complain about their losses, that everything is corrupted, where are the good old days of the original, left-wing dissidence? No, you must accept the rules of the game. Svetlana Slapzak (from Belgrade, now Ljubljana - GL) and the group around her present themselves as marginalized victims. But her groups control two departments and the most powerful publishing house. They get the most money from the ministry of science. And via the Soros Foundation they are selling the story of being surrounded by nationalism.

Let's take me. I was blocked from the university before; I was only teaching abroad, in France and in America. I never taught at any university in Slovenia, I am absolutely alone, without any research assistant. They just give me enough money in order to survive. My answer to Svetlana Slapzak would be: why did she become a Slovenian citizen? Her very position is a contradiction of what she says. In a state of less than 2 million we offered 100,000 non-Slovenians permanent citizenship, against terrible nationalistic resistance. There were no dirty tricks involved, like a test if you knew Slovenian. We are still in an intermediate stage. When a new political logic imposes itself, the *Sittlichkeit*, the unwritten rules are still unsure, people are still searching for a model. The question is: will we become just another small, stupid, nationalistic state or maintain this elementary, pluralistic opening? And all compromises are worth it for this goal.

CTHEORY: What is your view on the work of the Soros Foundation and the concept of an "open society"?

Zizek: If you look into my heart, you'll see I am an old-fashioned left-winger. In the short term I support it, but I don't have Popper notions about it. Soros is doing good work in the field of education, refugees and keeping the theoretical and social sciences spirit alive. These countries are not only impoverished, but the sphere of social sciences is hegemonized by Heideggerian nationalists. But the Soros people have this ethic of the bad state vs. good civic, independent structures. But sorry, in Slovenia I am for the state and against civil society! In Slovenia, civil society is equal to the right wingers. In America, after the Oklahoma bombing, they suddenly discovered that madmen are everywhere. Civil society is not this nice, social movement, but a network of moral majority, conservatives and nationalist pressure groups, against abortion, [for] religious education in schools. A real pressure from below.

For me the open society means something very practical: the unwritten rules of the political space. For example, if you oppose the present government or the hegemonic party, are you then still accepted or is there an unwritten, unspoken stigma that you are a half-nationalist traitor and so on? Up to what extent can you make a career without making political compromises? I don't have any fundamental hopes in a socialist revolution or whatever. We have several big crises coming: the ecological, the developed against the underdeveloped world and the loss of the sense of reality in the face of all the rapid changes. I don't underestimate the social impact of the loss of stability. Is the frame of liberal capitalism able to solve this antagonism? Unfortunately my answer is no. Here I am the old-fashioned left-wing pessimist. I think that ghettoisation, like half of L.A., is far stronger than the Marxist class struggle. At least both workers and capitalists still participated in legality and the state, whereas liberal capitalism simply doesn't integrate the new ghettos. Liberal democracy has no answer to these problems.

A lot of times, this Soros approach of openness indulges in its own species of covered racism. Recently at a conference in Amsterdam, Press Now asked whether it was possible to find a universal language so that intellectuals from various parts of the former Yugoslavia could start a dialogue. I find this cliché extremely dangerous, because it comes from an idea of the Balkans as the phantasmatic space of nationalistic madness. This phantasy is very well manipulated and expressed in some popular works of art, like Kusturica's film

Underground. He said himself, in *Cahiers du Cinema*, that in the Balkans, war is a natural phenomenon, nobody knows when it will emerge, it just comes, it's in our genes. This naturalisation of the Balkans into an apolitical, primordial theatre of passions is cliché and I find it very suspicious. I would like to quote Hegel here: "The true evil is an attitude which perceives evil everywhere." I am very suspicious about this apparent multi-cultural, neutral, liberal attitude, which only sees nationalistic madness around itself. It posits itself in a witness role. The post-Yugoslav war is strictly the result of European cultural dynamics. We don't need this simplistic liberal deploring of "why don't people speak to each other?" Nobody is doing power analysis.

A common Western cliché is the so-called complexity of the Balkans. This specifically allows the West to maintain its position as an excluded observer. What you should do is what I call a phenomenological *reduction a l'envers*. You should not try to understand it. Like TV, the funny effect when you disconnect the voice, you only have these stupid gestures. Cut off the meaning and then you'll get the pure power battle. The Balkans are a symptom of Europe in the sense that it embodies all that is wrong in the light of the utopian notion of the European Community itself. What is the dream? A kind of neutral, purely technocratic Brussels bureaucracy. They project their mirror image on the Balkans. What they both have in common is the exclusion of the proper political antagonisms.

CTHEORY: The campaign in Holland, Press Now, supports so-called independent media in the former Yugoslavia. One of its premises is the idea that the war started with propaganda from above through state-controlled media. Seeing that any Western intervention already came too late, it states that, for example, through independent media, one could work on a long-term solution. Do you agree with this analysis?

Zizek: Up to a point I agree with this, but I have always been in favour of military intervention from the West. Around 1992, with a little bit of pressure, the war would have been over. But they missed the moment. Now, with the shift of balance and the stronger Russia, this is no longer possible. At that time, Croats and Slovenians were in favour of independence, and the Bosnians were much more ambiguous and they are paying the price for it. The Bosnians didn't want to prepare for war, they were slower, more careful and that's why they are now so mad at the West. There was no protection of Bosnia from the Yugoslav army, despite all the guarantees. And then, after the attack, the West suddenly started talking about ethnic struggles, all sides must be guilty, and primordial passions.

I don't cry too much for Yugoslavia. The moment Milosevic took over and annexed Kosovo and Vojvodina, the balance of power shifted. There was the choice between a more federal Yugoslavia and a new, centralist one. Do not overestimate the role of the media in the late eighties. Media were allowed to play this role in order for local communist bureaucracies to survive. The key to the Yugoslav crisis is Milosevic's strategy to maintain the power of the old *nomenclatura* by raking up this national question. The media did their dirty work. It was horrible to watch day by day the stories in Slovenia about Serbs raping us and in Serbia about Albanians raping them. All the news was filtered through this poisoning hatred, from everyday crime to economics. But this was not the origin of the conflict. That was the calculation from the power elite to maintain power.

If you define independence in terms of not being supported or controlled by the state, then the worst right-wing weekly is an independent medium and should be supported by Soros. I do admit that in Serbia and Croatia there is absolute control over the media. What they allow are really small, marginalized media. Impartial, independent information can help a lot, but don't expect too much of it.

CTHEORY: In your speech during the Ars Electronica conference, you emphasized the fact that after a phase of introduction, the seduction of the new media will be over and so will "virtual sex." So the desire to be wired will be over soon?

Zizek: The so-called "virtual communities" are not such a great revolution as it might appear. What impresses me is the extent to which these virtual phenomena retroactively enable us to discover to what extent our self has always been virtual. Even the most physical self-experience has a symbolic, virtual element in it. For example playing sex games. What fascinates me is that the possibility of satisfaction already counts as an actual satisfaction. A lot of my friends used to play sex games on Minitel in France. They told me that the point is not really to meet a person, not even to masturbate, but that just typing your phantasies is the fascination itself. In

the symbolic order the potentiality already gives actual satisfaction. In psychoanalytic theory the notion of symbolic castration is often misunderstood. The threat of castration as to its effects, acts as a castration. Or in power relations, where the potential authority forms the actual threat. Take Margaret Thatcher. Her point was that if you don't rely on state support but on your individual resources, luck is around the corner. The majority didn't believe this, they knew very well that most of them would remain poor. But it was enough to be in a position where they might succeed.

The idea that you were able to do something, but didn't, gives you more satisfaction than actually doing it. In Italy, it is said to be very popular during the sexual act that a woman tells a man some dirty phantasies. It is not enough that you are actually doing it, you need some phantasmatic, virtual support. "You are good, but yesterday I fucked another one and he was better..." What interests me are the so-called sado-masochistic, ritualised, sexual practices. You never go to the end, you just repeat a certain foreplay. Virtual in the sense that you announce it, but never do it. Some write a contract. Even when you are doing it, you never lose control, all the time you behave as the director of your own game. What fascinates me is this *Spaltung*, this gap in order to remain a certain distance. This distance, far from spoiling enjoyment makes it even more intense. Here I see great possibilities for the VR stuff.

In the computer I see virtuality, in the sense of symbolic fiction, collapsing. This notion has a long tradition. In Bentham's panopticon we find virtuality at its purest. You never know if somebody is there in the centre. If you knew someone was there, it would have been less horrifying. Now's it's just an "utterly dark spot," as Bentham calls it. If someone is following you and you're not sure, it is more horrible than if you know that there is somebody. A radical uncertainty.

CTHEORY: You are famous for your film analyses. But can you imagine also using examples from computer networks, analyzing the storyline of a CD-ROM or using television material?

Zizek: The British Film Institute proposed to me to choose my own six, seven films and to do a couple of lectures there, since I use so many film examples. They came up with the idea to do a CD-ROM, because I write in the same manner: click here, go there, use this fragment, that story or scene. My books are already failed CD-ROMs, as someone told me. But because of copyright, it is extremely difficult to realize and dirty capitalism will destroy this plan. Don't they realize that if you use an excerpt of theirs, you create propaganda for them? But it is my dream to do something like this. In my favorite book, *Tarrying with the Negative*, I use some fragments of Hitchcock. How nice it would be to have it included in the text. But concerning film, I am indeed rather conservative. At this moment I am working on the theme of the role of music in cinema. The idea is that in the mid-thirties, when the classical Hollywood code was established, it was strictly Wagnerian, pure accompanying music, radical underscoring, determining your subjective perspective. It's a classical case of a conservative revolution. As Wagner said about his *Gesamtkunstwerk*: if we allow music to develop by itself, it will become atonal and inimitable.

What I also study are the soundtracks in the films of Lynch and Altman and the shift from the landscape to the soundscape. With Altman and Dolby stereo, you no longer need the soundtrack as a general frame, as if you have inconsistent fragments. The unity is no longer established at the visual level. I want to connect this with Altman's *Short Cuts*, with its series of faiths, contingently hitting each other. Very Deleuzian: global nonsense where contingency encounters produce local effects of sense in order to understand what subjective in our late capitalist society means. Or let's take Lynch's biggest failure, *Dune*. Did you notice the use of multiple inner monologues? Reality is something very fragile for Lynch. If you get too close to it you discover Leni Riefenstahl. I am not interested in direct content analysis, but the kind of purely formal changes in how we relate to the physicality of the film and the shifts in the notions of subjectivity. Of course all of this is done in a kindly anti-Derridian swing. For us, it is the sound that is the traumatic point, the cry or even the song. The point where you lose your unity and the ways the self enjoying voice always gets controlled. What interests me at the political level is how the discourse machinery, in order to function, has to rely on the obscene voice. What appears to be a carnivalesque subversion, this eruption of obscene freedom, really serves the power. But these are my B-productions, if you want to put it in Hollywood terms. The A-production of the last two years was a book on Schelling that I just finished.

CTHEORY: We recently celebrated the centenary of cinema. What's the condition of current film theory? What will come after the critical, semiological and gender approaches? It is still useful to see film as a unity or should we surf through the media, like the users do and use a variety of sources?

Zizek: Fredric Jameson has already made this point. What goes on in cinema is determined by what happens in other media. Concerning theory, there are a lot of others, the whole domain of cultural criticism in America is basically cinema theory. What attracts me, is the axis between gaze and voice and nowhere will you find this tension better than in cinema. This still is for me the principal axis. Cinema is for me a kind of condensation. On the one hand you have the problem of voice, on the other the narrativisation.

The only change I can think of is that up until twenty years ago, going to the cinema was a totally different social experience. It was a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, and this changed. But what still appears in ordinary commercial films is the shift in the notion of subjectivity. You can detect what goes on at the profoundest, most radical level of our symbolic identities and how we experience ourselves. Cinema is still the easiest way, like for Freud dreams were the royal way to the unconscious.

Maybe I am part of a nostalgic movement. Nowadays, because of all these new media, cinema is in a crisis. It becomes popular as a nostalgic medium. And what is modern film theory really about? Its ultimate object are nostalgic films from the thirties and forties. It is as if you need the theory in order to enjoy them. It's incredible how even Marxists enjoy this game. They have seen every film, I'm not joking. It's not only this paternalising notion that it is good to use examples from cinema. I would still claim that there is an inherent logic of the theory itself, as if there is a privileged relationship, like the role literature played in the nineteenth century.

CTHEORY: You have been to Japan. What's your opinion on the technological culture in that country?

Zizek: First I must say that I don't have my own positive theory about Japan. What I do have, as every Western intellectual, are the myths of reference. There is the old, right-wing image of the Samurai code, fighting to death, the absolute, ethical Japan. Then there is the leftist image, from Eisenstein: the semiotic Japan. The empty signs, no Western metaphysics of presence. It's a no less phantasmatic Japan than the first one. We know that Eisenstein for his montage of attractions used Japanese ideograms.

Then there is Bertolt Brecht as an exception. He took over elements like sacrifice and authority and put them in a left-wing context. Here in the West, Brecht was seen as someone introducing a fanatic Eastern morality. But now there's in Suhrkamp Verlag a detailed edition of his "Jasager" and his "Lernstcke". They discovered that all those moments the Western critics perceived as remainders of this imperial and sacrificing Japan were indeed edited by Brecht. What they perceived as Japanese was Brecht.

Then there is the capitalist Japan and its different stages. There is the myth of non-original Japan taking over, but developing better: Philips for the rich and Sony for the poor. Twenty years later this was of course the other way round. Then there is the Kojevian Japan. First, for Kojève the end of history was Russia and America, the realisation of the French Revolution. Then he noticed that something was missing. He found the answer in Japan, in the little surplus. If everything only functions, as in America, you would kill yourself. In the snobbism, drinking tea in a nice way, he found that life still had a meaning.

But there is another Japan, the psycho-analytic. For the multi-culturalist approach, the almost standard example is Japan and its way of *Verneinung*, saying no. There are thirty ways to say no. You say no to your wife in one way, no to a child in another way. There is not one negation. There is a small Lacanian volume, *La chose japonaise*. They elaborate the borrowing of other languages, all these ambiguities. Didn't Lacan say that Japanese do not have an unconscious?

For the West, Japan is the ambiguous Other: at the same time it fascinates you and repels you. Let's not forget the psychological cliché of Japan: you smile, but you never know if it is sincere or if you are mocking us - the idea of Japan as the impenetrable Other. This ambiguous politeness. What do they really want? There's also the idea of the Japanese as the "ersatz" Jews for the Americans. The Japanese governments together with two or

three mega companies, plotting. All this spleen, this palette of phantasies, is Japan for us. But what surprised me is that authors, whom I considered strictly European, are widely read in Japan, as for example George Lukacs.

Then there is a Japan, loved by those who criticize our Western, decadent way of liberal democracy and who look for a model that would combine the dynamics of capitalism, while maintaining some firm traditional structure of authority. And again, it can work both ways. What I like about phantasies is that they are always ambiguous. You can turn it in a negative way, Japanese pretending to play capitalism, while in reality what you have is conspiracy and authority. On the positive side you see that there is a capitalism possible with moral values.

What I liked there, in restaurants and subway stations, is the absence of English. You don't have this self-humiliating, disgusting, pleasing attitude. It's up to the foreigners to find their way out. I liked tremendously those automatic vending machines. Did you see *The Shining*, based on Stephen King's novel? This is America at its worst. Three people, a family, in a big hotel and still the space is too small for them and they start killing each other. In Japan, even when it is very crowded, you don't feel the pressure, even if you are physically close. The art of ignoring. In the New York subway, even when it's half full, you would have this horrifying experience of the absolute proximity of the Other. What I liked about the Foucault conference in Tokyo I attended was that one would expect the Japanese to apply Foucault to their own notions. But all the Japanese interventions were about Flaubert. They didn't accept this anthropological game of playing idiots for you. No, they tried to beat us at our own game. We know Flaubert better than you.

Every nation in Europe has this fanaticism, conceiving itself as the true, primordial nation. The Serbian myth, for example, is that they are the first nation of the world. The Croatians consider themselves as primordial Aryans. The Slovenians are not really Slavs, but pretend to be of Etrurian origin. It would be nice to find a nation that accepts the fact of being the second and not the first. This might be a part of the Japanese identity, if you look at the way they borrow languages.

I recently read a book on Kurosawa. It is said that *Rashomon* was seen in the early fifties as the big discovery of the Eastern spirit. But in Japan it was perceived as way too Western. My favorite Japanese film is *Sansho* by Michoguchi because it offers itself for a nice, Lacanian reading, the problem of the lost mother, the mother's voice reaching the son, etc. This is the Japanese advantage over America when the mother's voice tries to reach the son. In America one would get madness, like Hitchcock's *Psycho*, but in Japan you get a normal family.

The Balkans is now a region where the West is projecting its own phantasies, like Japan. And again, this can be very contradictory. The film *Rising Suns* ambiguously suggests that there is a Japanese plot to take over and buy Hollywood. The idea is that they do not just want our factories, our land, they even want our dreams. Behind this there's the notion of thought control. It's the old Marxist notion of buying the whole chain, from the hardware until the movie theatres. What interests me in Japan is that it is a good argument against the vulgar, pseudo-Marxist evolutionary notion that you have to go through certain evolutionary stages. Japan proves that you can make a direct short circuit. You retain certain elements of the old hierarchical superstructure and combine it very nicely with the most effective version of capitalism it pretends to be. It's a good experience in non-anthropocentrism. It's a mystery for Western sociologists who say that you need Protestant ethics for good capitalism.

What I see in Japan, and maybe this is my own myth, is that behind all these notions of politeness, snobbism etc. the Japanese are well aware that something which may appear superficial and unnecessary has a much deeper structural function. A Western approach would be: who needs this? But a totally ridiculous thing at a deeper level might play a stabilizing function we are not aware of. Everybody laughs at the English monarchy, but you'll never know.

There is another notion that is popular now amongst American sociologists, the civilizations of guilt versus civilizations of shame. The Jews and their inner guilt and the Greeks with their culture of shame. The usual cliché now is that Japan is the ultimate civilization of shame. What I despise in America is the studio actors' logic, as if there is something good in self-expression: do not be oppressed, open yourself, even if you shout and kick the others, everything in order to express and liberate yourself. This is a stupid idea, that behind the mask

there is some truth. In Japan, and I hope that this is not only a myth, even if something is merely an appearance, politeness is not simply insincere. There is a difference between saying "Hello, how are you?" and the New York taxi drivers who swear at you. Surfaces do matter. If you disturb the surfaces you may lose a lot more than you think. You shouldn't play with rituals. Masks are never simply mere masks. Perhaps that's why Brecht became close to Japan. He also liked this notion that there is nothing really liberating in this typical Western gesture of stealing the masks and showing the true face. What you discover is something absolutely disgusting. Let's maintain the appearances, that's my own phantasy of Japan.

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