

Review

Slavoj Žižek

**Druga smrt neoliberalizma
(First as Tragedy, Then as Farce)**

Fraktura, Zagreb, 2010, 220 pp.

With our shepherds to the fore,
we only once kept company with freedom,
on the day of its internment.

Karl Marx

When the author, usually tagged as the “most dangerous philosopher of the West” and the “Elvis of Cultural Studies”, publishes a book about the consequences of the 2008 financial breakdown, serious editorial boards engage reviewers capable of commenting on his thoughts.¹ *The Independent* entrusted the task of reviewing Žižek’s book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* to the distinguished English political philosopher John Gray. Gray “processes” Žižek in the text in which he criticizes both *First as Tragedy...* and Hardt and Negri’s book *Commonwealth*. Without beating about the bush, but with sarcastic indignation atypical of him, Gray says: “One of history’s most discredited ideologies is having a comeback – not as a political force but as a commodity in the marketplace. No longer confined to dingy meetings of ageing Trotskyites or the longueurs of the academic seminar, communism has been reinvented as a kind of intellectual cabaret

¹ This review has previously been published in *Političke analize*, 2011, 5.

act. The 20th century’s biggest mistake is being marketed as high-end entertainment, with a modish neo-Bolshevism promising the jaded consumer an exciting experience of forbidden ideas.”

To Gray, therefore, this book – translated into Croatian as *Druga smrt neoliberalizma* (*The Second Death of Neoliberalism*) – represents a form of intellectual entertainment with harmful consequences. When it all comes from the man who himself in his later phase has been very often accused of pop-philosophy and the commercialization of abstract thought, things become even more interesting.

First as Tragedy, Then as Farce is Žižek’s attempt to reanimate the Jacobin-Bolshevik paradigm of political action. His writing is blunt as usual, while an elegant choice of the title clearly informs the reader that he will argue for a return to communism by toying with Marx’s ideas. Notions of ‘tragedy’ and ‘farce’ occur in Marx’s texts *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* and *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. In the first text, the 1793-1795 French Revolution is tragic, and the 1848-1851 one is farcical, while in the second text what is tragic is the French *ancien régime*, while the political order in Germany of Marx’s time is farcical. Tragedy and farce are two forms of the collapse of a certain world-historic fact. Žižek opens his book with the thesis that liberal-democratic utopia died two times: the first time tragically – on 9/11, and the second time farcically – through the 2008 financial crisis. The political utopia collapsed tragically, while the idea of global market capitalism collapsed farcically. The sentence which was used by Marx to underline the comical character of

the mid-19th-century Germany – “the current German regime... only imagines that it still believes in itself” – is used by Žižek to show that liberal democracy has become *ancient régime*. He therefore divides his book into two parts. The first one, ‘It’s Ideology, Stupid!’, deals with the problem of ideology in liberal democracies. In the first part Žižek criticizes various attempts to fix liberal democracy and the capitalist way of manufacturing, while in the second part, ‘The Communist Hypothesis’, he discusses the establishment of some sort of apocalyptic Leninism.

The very title of the first part of the book shows the direction of Žižek’s criticism – he changes the well-known sentence *It’s the economy, stupid* when discussing the consequences of the banking crisis. Žižek is not astonished by the financial crisis itself. On the contrary, his focus is on the triumph of the anti-liberal ideology of small government which has been brought back to the centre of political discussion by the conservative *Tea Party* movement, thus contributing to the election defeat of the Democrats. The most disturbing is the zeal of small property owners, who, voting for less taxation on the richest and economic deregulation, are voting themselves into economic ruin. The result of the crisis in the United States was not the victory of the more European understanding of the role of the state, but conservative neoliberalism. The thing that hurts Žižek the most is the lack of any serious demand for the abandonment of capitalism. “There is a real possibility that the main victim of the ongoing crisis will not be capitalism but the Left itself, insofar as its inability to offer a viable global alternative was again made visible to everyone” (p. 29). “The danger is

thus that the predominant narrative of the meltdown will be the one which, instead of awakening us from a dream, will enable us to *continue dreaming*” (p. 34). Žižek decides to do some “ideologico-critical work” in order to trash those who, in his opinion, give capitalism its human face. The object of criticism, therefore, are not capitalists and their ideologists, but the non-revolutionary reformist Left, postmodern multiculturalists, liberal egalitarians and social democrats. Žižek teases them with a joke about a Russian peasant who had to hold a Mongol warrior’s testicles while he raped his wife, so that they would not get dirty. After the rape the warrior left, and the peasant, to his wife’s horror, triumphantly concluded that he screwed up the warrior because he had poorly held his balls and they got dirty. From this joke Žižek draws an appropriate Thesis 11: liberals and reformists merely soil the genitals of those in power, whereas the point is to castrate them. This manoeuvre is also extended to the new spirit of capitalism, which successfully recuperated the “egalitarian and anti-hierarchical rhetoric of 1968”, and which is epitomized by capitalists such as Bill Gates and companies like Ben and Jerry’s or Starbucks. Ben and Jerry’s is known for the participation of its employees and co-ownership, while Starbucks highlights its fair relationship with coffee manufacturers as part of its brand’s image. All of them give a human face to capitalism. Especially lethal is the liberal conviction that it is possible to solve the problems gradually, without abolishing capitalism. Žižek openly turns back to the Cold War ideological arsenal of the Eastern Bloc, whose answer to the theory of totalitarianism – the thesis that fascism and communism, despite their

economical differences, are essentially politically the same – was the thesis that liberalism and fascism are two political faces of the capitalist way of manufacture, but, of course, he goes further. In the second part of the book the discussion focuses on a Leninism for the 21st century.

Žižek's resurrection of the Jacobin-Bolshevik paradigm is centred around the request for the return to the Idea of communism. The word 'Idea' is, of course, written with a capital letter and is related to Truth. Since contemporary society is poisoned with "cynical resignation", which makes people act like they believe in the order in which they no longer believe or they assume they do not believe in what they actually believe in, democratic elections results are always the confirmation of the ideology of capitalism.

"[I]n democracy, in the sense of the representation of and negotiation between a plurality of private interests, there is no place for Virtue. This is why, in a proletarian revolution, democracy has to be replaced by the *dictatorship* of the proletariat. There is no reason to despise democratic elections; the point is only to insist that they are not *per se* an indication of Truth – on the contrary, as a rule, they tend to reflect the predominant *doxa* determined by the hegemonic ideology" (pp. 192-193).

To the Jacobins, truth was *volonté générale*, and to the Bolsheviks, insights of historical materialism. Of course, Žižek cannot refer to either of them and is thus trying to reconstruct the whole revolutionary constellation. He needs the contents of the communist idea, a revolutionary subject and the goal of the revolution. In distinction from the Jacobins and Bolsheviks, who are radical incarnations of op-

timistic Enlightenment universalism based on the idea of progress, Žižek replaces open historical progress with the concept of Destiny. Our destiny is pretty dramatic because humankind, connected by the logic of global market capitalism, is heading towards destruction. Therefore, the task of revolutionaries is not the realization of a just political order which is growing up from internal discrepancies of the capitalist way of manufacture, but an attempt at preventing global capitalism from leading us to hell. Capitalism is not producing the preconditions of communism, but potentially fatal antagonisms. They are: the threat of an "ecological catastrophe", the "inappropriateness of the notion of private property in relation to intellectual property", the implications of techno-scientific developments "especially in biogenetics", and the creation of "new forms of apartheid". Unless we do something dramatic, the apocalyptic end of civilization is imminent.

The difficulties of Žižek's task are enormous and he reaches out for *ad hoc* solutions – when defining the Idea of communism and the subject of revolution he compiles proposals of Badiou, Rancière and Susan Buck-Morris. Badiou provides the basic concepts of a new Leninism, which are *strict egalitarian justice*, *disciplinary terror*, *political voluntarism* and *trust in the people*. Rancière helps in search for the global equivalent of the proletariat, for those who became a revolutionary power by being excluded, while Buck-Morris, in the formula Hegel + Haiti, offers the return to universal political emancipation, beyond the postmodern, postcolonial, multicultural Left. Hegel and Haiti are part of communism because the uprising of the slaves of Haiti realized the contents of the

French Revolution more clearly than the French themselves – in Haiti it really became universal.

It is not hard to notice that Žižek is not quite certain of either the idea's contents or the subjects that should realize it, while the revolution's goal is designated as the prevention of catastrophe, and this eliminates the need for the presentation of the vision of post-revolutionary civilization. Finally, Žižek encourages ex-communists to return to their religion in their final years, in the same way as Christians outlaws do. "[O]ur message today should be: do not be afraid, join us, come back! You've had your anti-communist fun, and you are pardoned for it – time to get serious once again!" (p. 212).

It is not surprising that the story constructed in this way caused various comments, from enthusiastic approval to sarcastic rejection. The most common objections are that Žižek does not answer his own questions, that he callously uses the *copy-paste tool* on his laptop and that he is a "magician with no rabbit in his hat". A great part of these objections addresses his way of writing, where his loose method is permeable to an enormous number of extraordinary puns and cultural references at the expense of coherent argument and clear exposition. Žižek became a star by using this 'method' and it is futile to expect that his book on communism and the collapse of the West would be written in a different way. Gray's critique stands out not only in tone, but in the type of objection as well. He finishes his review with these words:

"The media-confected communism of the present time has as little connection with everyday life as does reality television – possibly even less. But precisely be-

cause of its unreality, the neo-Bolshevik spectacle has a definite function in contemporary society. The clowning cabaret of 21st-century communism does what entertainment has always been meant to do. It distracts those who watch it from thinking about their problems, which secretly they suspect may be insoluble."

The problem with Žižek's manoeuvres is not that they are really potentially revolutionary, but that they are politically useless. The thing that Gray, as an anti-Enlightenment pluralist, fails to point out is the fact that it is precisely loyalty to the Enlightenment that ruins the internal constellation of Žižek's attempt to revive communism. After Marxism had vanished, its emptied place of the left wing of the Enlightenment was filled up by postmodern leftists, identity theoreticians, postcolonialists, multiculturalists and the similar company. It is indicative that Žižek, who nowhere in the book mentions any relevant contemporary liberal, introduces Rorty into the story just to show that Rorty's distinction between the private and the public is supposedly inferior to Kant's. His incorrect interpretation of Rorty aside, it is obvious that when comparing the philosopher whom Anglo-American liberal egalitarians consider their founding father with postmodern bourgeois liberals, Žižek chooses the Enlightenment. The problem here is the fact that the majority of complaints to liberals has been formed from the standpoint of Cold War communism, which claims that liberalism and Nazism are only two political faces of capitalism. The thing that makes this complaint sloppy is a correct Nazi insight that liberalism and communism ideologically overlap, which is obvious from their common principle that all people are born

free and equal. While joining the October and the French Revolutions, Žižek remains silent on the similarities between the French and the American Revolutions. He is acting like he still hasn't been informed that the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen represents one of the fundamental documents of liberalism. Hegel + Haiti is also an example of the Enlightenment-type political emancipation. Žižek's Leninism does not have a clear content and therefore he flip-flops between the defence (pp. 97-98) and criticism of fundamental bourgeois "formal" rights: "the legal-ideological matrix of freedom-equality is not a mere 'mask' concealing exploitation-domination, but the very *form* in which the latter is exercised" (pp. 176-177). When discussing Putin, Berlusconi and Ahmadinejad as non-democrats, the notion of democracy he implicitly uses is liberal democracy. When writing that trust in the people is one of the foundations of communism, he is forgetting that at the beginning of the book he showed why it is futile to lay much confidence in the people who only believe that they believe in something. Isn't that the only political sense of the distinction between Truth and *doxa* and the reason for pointing out the imminence of revolutionary voluntarism? So the problem is not only that Žižek's story superficially amuses a relatively educated audience and leaves the problems unsolved, but the fact that Žižek offers an implicit recommendation for political action which runs like this – reforms make no sense because they save capitalism, the only right action is revolutionary action in spite of the fact that we do not know either Truth or the one who would realize it if we somehow knew it. One has to ponder

deeply in order to come up with an advice less prudent than this one. With shepherds like this, we would be in the company of freedom only once, on the day of its internment.

Should we conclude that *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* should not be read? Žižek wrote it in the way a silk-worm makes silk, then he sold it to his publisher, so if you download it, you will damage global capitalism as much as you would humanize it by eating Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice-cream. Some things should be read regardless of their deficiencies, keeping in line with an American joke created before political correctness. What is the easiest way to sink a Polish battleship? To launch it. With this book Žižek announced his candidacy for the first wailer of the West, the title we all thought belonged to John Gray. *Teatro Silencio*.

The Croatian translation of the book, *Druga smrt neoliberalizma*, should not be read. It is translated sloppily and its title does not have much in common with the book's contents, since Žižek does not deal with neoliberalism at all. Had Žižek ever thought of Croatia while writing *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, the ideal recipient of his invitation to the belated, renewed conversion to communism would have been Zdravko Tomac.

Zoran Kurelić