

“Taking Zizek Seriously...Or Not Seriously: The Economy of Political Demand and Political Supply”

Does not my title itself suggest a simple “Zizekian” resolution in so far as it poses a miserable and unproductive question? At least retroactively, in the failed afterglow of real and existing *Marxist* analysis, it invites us to engage in the more liberating project of *Marxian* inspired psychoanalysis. Once we have made such a paradigmatic shift we can instead ask the question: why do we take Zizek seriously or not seriously? The short answer to this question, I suspect, is that the analyst holds out a promise to the liberal citizen analysand, cultural critic analysand, Leftist hysterical analysand, and, even the capitalist exploiter analysand. What we are promised is a taste of subjective destitution that will allow us to stand back and release ourselves from our vicious fixation inside such miserably deep matters.

But, it goes without saying, that this is a very difficult and rather cosmopolitan process for some of us Hamiltonian and other backwater Marxist intellectuals. What sustains our collective stance is precisely this manic exercise of “real” cement and asbestos analysis. How can we take him seriously? How seriously should we take him? How do we go about taking him seriously? The problem is exacerbated by the fact that no matter how thoroughly we approach Zizek’s work something material remains lacking. The content is transparently vacuous...without real substance. Take for example these lines on late capitalism and liberal democracy:

There are necrophiliacs who would like to do it with dead bodies. Isn’t it oppressive that we don’t give them a chance? So they are debating that if there are non-identified corpses couldn’t they be put at the disposal of, and so on and so on...I think [this is] the paradoxical product deprived of its malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol, and I think we can go on here. What about virtual sex? Sex without sex, or safe sex? (Zizek, *Manufacturing*).

Isn’t this the empty content -- deprived of property -- around which texts like *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), *Revolution at the Gates* (2002), and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) are structured? Let us look at a similar instance from the afterword to that tiny Lenin volume:

Everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic: the prospect of global ecological catastrophe; violation of human rights; sexism, homophobia, anti-feminism; growing violence in far away countries, but also in our own megalopolises; the gap between First and the Third World, between rich and poor; the shattering impact of the digitization of our daily lives...today, there is nothing easier than to get international, state or corporate funds for a multi-disciplinary research project on how to fight new forms of ethnic, religious or sexist violence (*Revolution*, 167-68).

This commentary is certainly not the labour of a classical materialist critic. The “real” content repeatedly falls and fails to arrive: or, since I agree that the letter never fails to arrive at its destination, this could more accurately be restated in terms of a bulk mailing that always arrives at the door and never fails to disappoint the eventual receiver. Many communists read Zizek’s *Revolution at the Gates*; but, it fell disappointingly short with only **forty-three percent Leninist** content!

By this criteria I could stop right here and say, I will not take Zizek seriously because he does not enter into the world of objects except, as he notes in *Enjoy your Symptom!*, “to pinpoint some detail of no significance whatsoever”(15). Or not, because of course, it is clear that my problem rests precisely with the act of taking Zizek too seriously: the act of misrecognizing his text through my own fetishized critical relation to the category of content. After all, I am not picking up a copy of the *Monthly Review* here to get a geopolitical survey proper. Nor, am I consuming an essay in *Topia* that will explicate the material-ideologic of a certain object in the process of production and appropriation. The successful encounter with the Lacanian analyst does not reproduce the latent within a redoubling interpretation, it aims only at providing the apparatus to mirror the fantastic structure itself of the social field. Here is the formula played out in one example that solves my problem with the insubstantiveness of Zizek’s writing: capitalist dominance is defined by its frantic basic sameness (post-ideological fantasy). There is a doubling of this frantic basic sameness in participatory liberal and radical social discourse (post-ideological fantasy); there is even a redoubling in the engagement of cultural studies work that attempts to map and counter the cultures of frantic basic sameness (post-ideological fantasy); and, finally, the hysterical left itself enters into this contained process of rumination with its real and existing analysis of late capitalist frantic basic sameness (post-ideological fantasy). But, the buck stops here. Lacanian psychoanalysis put to work is privileged

because it throws into relief the limits imposed by this structured fantasy: it does not get trapped inside the insignificant detail world of decaffeinated coffee, ex-lax, alcohol-free beer, fat-free cream, fair trade, green industry, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-globalization, anti-capitalism, etc.

Having clarified the “Zizekian” modus operandi we are now back on track taking him seriously not in the descriptive realm, but at the framing level of a structuring logic. For instance, here is an application clearly satisfactory in its agreement with the conventional Marxist bloc line. Today’s basic politico-ideological conjecture is defined by a hegemonic deadlock in which the middle-class liberal engages with late capitalism only inside the parameters of what is considered possible in the immediate existing constellation. For instance, the post-Keynesian economist neo-nostalgically demands:

- Capital with controls,
- Global cosmopolitanism with the domestic welfare state,
- Finance with regulation,
- Wage labour with support for trade unions,
- Corporations with public accountability,
- Free commerce with fair trade.

This is now the primary political example of the power sustaining circuit of identification as misrecognition: a system “without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation” (*Sublime*, 23).

What we are talking about here is the reproductive circuit that constitutes the closed economy of political supply and political demand. Some more amusing examples, albeit with unexpectedly serious consequence to which I will return at the end of this paper, can be found in civil cyberspace among the emerging “world councils” and “world federations” publicized at sites such as <http://www.worldfuturecouncil.org> and <http://wfuna.org>. Just take a look at the list of twenty-four proposed steering committees to be established by the World Future Council (WFC):

Good Work for All	Conventional Weapon Disarmament
Reform of Money & Taxation System	Peace Education & Conflict Healing
Responsible Entrepreneurship	Healthy Food for All
Opportunities & Limits to Commerce	Integrated Medicine
Protecting indigenous & Community Values	Clean Water for All
Intelligent and Sensitive Building	Revitalizing Democracy
Sustainable & Liveable Cities	Cultural Diversity & The Media
Safe Energy for People & Planet	Life-Long Learning
“Closed Loop” No-Waste Production	Spirituality & the Sciences
Preserving Biodiversity	Children’s Rights
Sustainable Use of Forests & Oceans	International Institutions
Nuclear Disarmament	Human Rights & Responsibilities

(WFC)

The first impulse is to misrecognize and categorize these goals as impossibly utopian. However, they are only *literally* utopian: a world in which we all do wage-labour, pay our taxes, open businesses, regulate populations, punish equitably, watch corporate television, and vote by proxy. In other words, this nonsense is about replacing the dream of a better non-place with a set of reasonably literal and liberal utopian non-demands. Let us look at another example of this “Third Way” better world as found in the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) report “*We The Peoples: A Call to Action for the UN Millennium Declaration* (2002):

Values for a New Century	Objectives for Today
Freedom	Peace
Equality	Development & Poverty Eradication
Solidarity	Protecting Our Common Environment

Tolerance
Respect for Nature
Shared Responsibility

Human Rights
Democracy & Good Governance
Protecting the Vulnerable
Meeting the Special Needs of Africa
Strengthening the United Nations

(Wells, 2)

How does such expansive material constitute “a fundamental Denkverbot” (Zizek, *Revolution*, 167)? The same way in which the open restructuring of Perestroika set out that the sole path for reforming communism lay with the road to market socialism. All roads lead to the Capitole, Capitol, and Capital! This is why cynical intellectuals rightly do not take these demands for “Values for a New Century” and “Objectives for Today” very seriously as a fundamental program.

But, if we don’t believe in reform who will? And, since this raises a second question, what does it matter if some dupe believes in these wish list reforms? The problem is that this sort of question goes unanswered precisely because enlightened readers take Zizek far too seriously when he does not take hyper-liberal discourse seriously enough. Your typical bourgeois academic happily occupies the dismissive Yogi Bear position: “we are liberals who are smarter than the average liberals.” Not only do these intellectuals labour under the illusion of superior recognition, but also under the delusion that such a knowledge will allow them to stand above the effects of the social fantastic. These closet idealists end up occupying a degraded and infantile ultra-Leftist position like that of Guy Aldred, cofounder of the Scottish Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, who was an anarchist in league with communists against left-liberals who were in his eyes sustaining capitalism unawares. In his 1911 pamphlet *Trade Unionism and the Class War* he wrote:

I do not deny that men and women must function under capitalism and engage constantly in petty disputes. I only insist that such disputes are not ‘vital.’ By preaching up dissatisfaction, I am removing the tendency to engage in worthless palliative effort, and hastening the crisis. After all, action which accomplishes nothing, is not of much movement (Aldred, 1).

Standing aloof the self-aware and destitute analysand recognizes that there is nothing beyond the administration of *social matters within the framework of the existing socio-political relations* (Zizek), or, the *worthless engagement in petty and palliative disputes of no movement* (Aldred). But, for how long can one stand above the fray and outside the social and historical symbolic machine?

Zizek would be the first to recognize that such a position merely functions to sublimate certain real anxieties through the false assertion of mastery. He clearly distinguishes himself from the generic liberal crowd. His own position, at an advanced level, is that of not very seriously not taking liberal demands seriously, or, to put it another way, of recognizing that it is *in itself* of no movement to identify these demands as being of no movement. But, what about our own demands in the “anti-capitalist” camp? Are they serious? In the weeks leading up to the U.S invasion of Iraq the Communist Party of Canada called for mass protests that would put pressure on world leaders to avert the outbreak of a “not inevitable war.” And yet, the same press release correctly identified the inevitability of the war:

Undoubtedly, the mass upsurge of anti-war protests around the world has forced U.S. imperialism to manoeuvre. It is pressuring and bribing other permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council to submit to its dictates, even if this means violating the very principles of the UN Charter itself. But if Washington fails to coerce the SC into granting ‘authority’ for a U.S. military strike, it is preparing to act unilaterally (CPC).

This sort of analysis/demand paradox defines the Marxist participation in the economy of political supply and political demand. Indeed, Zizek correctly identifies in this impulse a fundamental similarity between hyper-liberals, naïve critical liberals, and hysterical Leftists:

When today’s Left bombards the capitalist system with demands that it obviously cannot fulfill (Full employment! Retain the welfare state! Full rights for immigrants!), it is basically playing a game of hysterical provocation... The problem with this strategy, however, is not only that the system cannot

meet these demands, but that those who voice them do not really want them to be satisfied...they can count on the fact that their demands will not be met - in this way, they can hypocritically retain their clear radical conscience while continuing to enjoy their privileged position.

(Zizek, *Puppet*, 44)

Liberals demand cleaner water, fresher air, safer parks, and nicer schools. This is why the middle class have what might accurately be called *petty objets a*. The hysterical Left, which calls for universal education, liberated environments, and the emancipation of the atmosphere, makes demands of a qualitatively different sort. It nurtures its own revolutionary *object petit a* in the form of radicalism as a posture. The effective transformative capacity of these crazy utopian demands turns out to be as limited as that of liberal literal utopian non-demands.

This diagnosis of the hyper-liberal, naïve critical liberal and hysterical Leftist program leads directly into the clinical legitimization of a certain political strategy. As opposed to tepid, disdainful, or hysterical demands, Zizek suggests that we must catch capitalism at its own game: “the system will be more and more obliged to break its own rules, and this will more and more open up a space for Leftist contestation that will catch the system at its own work, to measure it by its own standards” (Zizek qtd Henwood). Let capitalism reveal itself “reduced to [its] bare existence of objectal remainder” as it falls and fails against the impossible kernel of the democratic real (*Enjoy*, 5)! Perhaps. But, prior to committing to the Zizekian international, we must first test the *a priori* hypothetical premises that inform his negative appraisal of the normative factional spectrum (right conservative-- centre liberal -- radical left). Remember, the key distinction that Zizek makes is that liberal demands can be met but don't matter. Left demands cannot be met so they don't matter. Neither position cuts to the empty core of democratic capitalism and forces us to confront it directly and ask ourselves whether it is worth loving!

It turns out that these conclusions are based on a singular misunderstanding of western capitalism which only a detour through the general science of historical materialism can lay bare. But, just to satisfy everyone, I will make a detour redoubled through the regional science of psychoanalysis. Let us put to use the formula ($I = \mathbf{I} = \mathbf{O\mathbf{I}}$). Identification (I) is a misidentification (\mathbf{I}): more precisely it is an identification with the way the Other misperceives me ($I = \mathbf{I} = \mathbf{O\mathbf{I}}$). Here is the basic example that Zizek provides the reader with in *The Fragile Absolute*:

As a father, I know I am an unprincipled weakling: but, at the same time, I do not want to disappoint my son, who sees in me what I am not: a person of dignity and strong principles, ready to take risks for a just cause - so I identify with this misperception of me, and truly “become myself” when I, in effect, start to act according to this misperception (ashamed to appear to my son as I really am, I actually accomplish heroic acts). In other words, if we are to account for symbolic identification, it is not enough to refer to the opposition between the way I appear to others and the way I really am: symbolic identification occurs when the way I appear to others becomes more important to me than to psychological reality “beneath my social mask,” forcing me to do things I would never be able to accomplish “from within myself.”

(*Fragile*, 50)

For a social example with world historical repercussions we need only to turn to that famous “kitchen table debate” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev at the Moscow World Fair on July 29th, 1959. This is the struggle of the worker state versus the capitalist state. Nixon gets the upper hand by turning the discussion from racist imperialism to the colour television (just another form of racist imperialism!): “wait till you see the picture.” Khrushchev is caught off guard and promises that the output and quality of television production in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics will outstrip production in the United States of America:

Nixon: “You see, you never concede anything.”

Khrushchev: “I do not give up.”

(The Kitchen Debate, 3)

Nixon, the representative of capitalist interests, can imagine no system other than commodity production and a social landscape defined by the manufacture of desire. Khrushchev, with his Bolshevik refusal to concede on any single issue, enters into the Other's misrecognition precisely by committing his society to a

victory on the consumer front. If Khrushchev, the bearer of worker interests, had simply accepted that U.S. based multi-national corporations were equipped to surpass the USSR in the industrial production of televisions sets, the USSR might have avoided this false identification of the self in the Other's misrecognition ($I = \mathbf{I} = \mathbf{O\mathbf{I}}$) and followed the official anti-Stalinist line of humanist socialism in a project of unalienated labour and aesthetics. There is some historical reality to such an equation. The Soviet Union falls and fails not as a socialist project to communism, but as an inefficient and moribund state capitalist economy. Of course, serious historical materialists such as Richard Woolf and David Resnick would place this misrecognition at a much earlier and more structural level as they have done in their recent book *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR* (2002). The struggle between communism and capitalism never materializes since from the beginning the USSR develops a variant of capitalist industry and farming that is incapable of generating enough capital accumulation to meet the consumer demands of the population.

The more pressing issue, the economy of political supply and demand within the frantic basic sameness of western capital, can also be approached productively through this lens. In fact, the formula of inter-subjectivity provided here ($I = \mathbf{I} = \mathbf{O\mathbf{I}}$), pseudo-scientific equations aside, allows us to bring the class struggle proper into psychoanalysis. What if we identify the father figure as the bearer of capitalist interests? Instead of the only hero worshipping son we now have a more frenetic kitchen table debate with a throng of demanding mouths to feed. In particular, and to return to Žižek's diagnosis of the political subject, there is a well tempered naïve liberal son and a hysterical Leftist daughter. Anybody familiar with the patriarchal and paternalistic discourses of the early industrial capitalist class will recognize the similarity between the ideologically implied position of the son and daughter and that of the subordinated classes who emerged during the first industrial revolution. The father enters the symbolic as a capitalist who believes (but is never adequate for this mandate as the 19th century cycle of recession depression clearly evinces) in a *perfect economic system in which the means of commodity production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and development is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of profits gained in a free market*. And yet, social and socialist history clearly documents that the working class emerges as a collective identity as they actively misperceive, intentionally and unintentionally, the role of the capitalist father as the bloke in charge of a "system designed to provide some kind of widespread growth and reasonable prosperity for most of the working classes" (Crotty).

This, of course, is not capitalism! The fact remains, though, that even provocative Leftist children like Lewis Corey, who are fully aware that capitalism is not designed as a system of general welfare, insist on treating it as if it were. In *The Decline of American Capitalism* (1934) the author has no illusions about how the system functions, who benefits, and what it delivers. His stand as a founding member of the leadership group of the ACP (American Communist Party), before an ensuing career as a Cold War anti-communist, is that "capitalism is bedlam" and that "depression is as characteristic as prosperity" (Corey, 13). But, at the same time he points to an absolute contradiction at the level of income distribution he also presents this as a problem for the capitalist state to solve (Over 79% of America's wealth is in the hands of a relatively small upper and middle bourgeois strata at the end of the 1920s. What will you the government do about that?). So, it doesn't matter that Corey believes that this is one of the iron law contradictions that will eventually catch up with capitalism in the form of the imbalance of variable and fixed capital, the falling rate of profit, and as a crisis of accumulation. It does not even matter that this might be a hysterical demand that Corey neither believes can be met, nor perhaps hypocritically, wants to be met. What matters is only that the father figure and capitalist class identifies itself in this slightly disingenuous misrecognition. The New Deal was a historical peculiarity precisely because it sought to solve the unsolvable problem of the free market's systematic irrationality! Add to this the genuine misrecognition of the good son who wants more libraries and wading pools and we realize what Žižek fails to take note of when he labels liberal demands as secondary and insignificant, or leftist demands as hysterical and unanswerable, is that they are part of the symbolic world that constitutes the capitalist class and determines the formation of historical conditions of possibility -- the economy of political supply and demand.

Here, then, we have to recognize that the objective conditions of revolution have nothing to do with the *idea*. Within the economy of political supply and political demand crisis comes about as "a development in which the qualitative changes occur not gradually, but rapidly and abruptly, taking the form of a leap from one state to another; they occur not accidentally but as the natural result of an accumulation of imperceptible and gradual quantitative changes" (Stalin). Increasingly after 1935, and right up to the reactionary 1970s, those who remained in the capitalist camp did so because they came to misrecognize capital as a system of both private freedom and social provision. In doing so, they had acquiesced to a

number of tepid and hysterical demands that accumulated imperceptibly as the gradual quantitative changes from the industrial state apparati to the welfare state apparati. This sets up the whole chain by which the “Golden Age” system functioned. The communist misrecognition of itself in the Other’s misrecognition of it resulted in Soviet state capitalism; the capitalist misrecognition of itself in the Other’s misrecognition resulted in Keynesian state capitalism. It should be remembered that, as Winston Churchill famously noted, the West sailed to prosperity on an ocean of debt. Capitalist development was premised on deficit financing and an explosion of credit. It was capitalism on borrowed time! The economic crisis of the mid-1970s was the result of a high level of state expenditure during the boom period, which rather than acting as a means of avoiding slump, ended up becoming a destabilizing source of both fiscal and ideological inflation. The western system came close to total breakdown not because of the demands of liberals and Leftists themselves, but because their accumulation effected the behaviour of the capitalist class, who acting as the hero we are all nostalgic for, bumbled into a situation in which it was forced to do things it would never be able to accomplish “from within itself” such as full employment, health care, public housing, recreation centres, public transport, accessible universities, etc).

I do not have the space to go into the specific political-economic conjuncture of the 1970s and 1980s; however, it is worth concluding by pointing out the way in which the capitalist class (which was digging its grave by acting on the Other’s misrecognition) was saved precisely because it stopped seeking to supply these demands. This is an inversion of the rather standard position that sees the post-war compromise from a top down perspective as a purely palliative mechanism that contained wage-labour. This is why the role of Margaret Thatcher was of such import in breaking this cycle (although I am sure she would never have been caught dead in the position of the analysand). The capitalist class was saved from its own suicidal heroics by a Prime Minister who stepped outside this vicious fixation by recognizing the logic of identification as misrecognition:

I think we’ve been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it’s the government’s job to cope with it. “I have a problem, I’ll get a grant.” “I’m homeless, the government must house me.” They’re casting their problem n society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society.

(Thatcher qtd Keay, 8)

For the capitalist there is no such thing as society: there is only an economy system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and development is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of profits gained in a free market. That is capitalism!

This brings into perspective the objective position we should have now to hyper-liberal, hysterical-leftist demands (reformist and revolutionary). The battle is not against a monolithic system that we can step outside of and show to be breaking its own rules. Rather, it is a class struggle in which the enemy (capitalists as a class) can be weakened precisely by being made to misperceive the situation. Those ridiculous and reformist “world councils” and “world federations” are no friends to the radical Left; however, they are good friends and a bad influence on the capitalist.

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