

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

A PERMANENT ECONOMIC EMERGENCY

DURING THIS YEAR'S protests against the Eurozone's austerity measures—in Greece and, on a smaller scale, Ireland, Italy and Spain—two stories have imposed themselves.¹ The predominant, establishment story proposes a de-politicized naturalization of the crisis: the regulatory measures are presented not as decisions grounded in political choices, but as the imperatives of a neutral financial logic—if we want our economies to stabilize, we simply have to swallow the bitter pill. The other story, that of the protesting workers, students and pensioners, would see the austerity measures as yet another attempt by international financial capital to dismantle the last remainders of the welfare state. The IMF thus appears from one perspective as a neutral agent of discipline and order, and from the other as the oppressive agent of global capital.

There is a moment of truth in both perspectives. One cannot miss the superego dimension in the way the IMF treats its client states—while scolding and punishing them for unpaid debts, it simultaneously offers them new loans, which everyone knows they will not be able to return, thus drawing them deeper into the vicious cycle of debt generating more debt. On the other hand, the reason this superego strategy works is that the borrowing state, fully aware that it will never really have to repay the full amount of the debt, hopes to profit from it in the last instance.

Yet while each story contains a grain of truth, both are fundamentally false. The European establishment's story obfuscates the fact that the huge deficits have been run up as a result of massive financial sector bail-outs, as well as by falling government revenues during the recession; the big loan to Athens will be used to repay Greek debt to the great

French and German banks. The true aim of the EU guarantees is to help private banks since, if any of the Eurozone states goes bankrupt, they will be heavily hit. On the other hand, the protesters' story bears witness yet again to the misery of today's left: there is no positive programmatic content to its demands, just a generalized refusal to compromise the existing welfare state. The utopia here is not a radical change of the system, but the idea that one can maintain a welfare state *within* the system. Here, again, one should not miss the grain of truth in the countervailing argument: if we remain within the confines of the global capitalist system, then measures to wring further sums from workers, students and pensioners are, effectively, necessary.

One often hears that the true message of the Eurozone crisis is that not only the Euro, but the project of the united Europe itself is dead. But before endorsing this general statement, one should add a Leninist twist to it: Europe is dead—OK, but *which* Europe? The answer is: the post-political Europe of accommodation to the world market, the Europe which was repeatedly rejected at referendums, the Brussels technocratic-expert Europe. The Europe that presents itself as standing for cold European reason against Greek passion and corruption, for mathematics against pathetics. But, utopian as it may appear, the space is still open for another Europe: a re-politicized Europe, founded on a shared emancipatory project; the Europe that gave birth to ancient Greek democracy, to the French and October Revolutions. This is why one should avoid the temptation to react to the ongoing financial crisis with a retreat to fully sovereign nation-states, easy prey for free-floating international capital, which can play one state against the other. More than ever, the reply to every crisis should be *more* internationalist and universalist than the universality of global capital.

A new period

One thing is clear: after decades of the welfare state, when cutbacks were relatively limited and came with the promise that things would soon return to normal, we are now entering a period in which a kind of economic state of emergency is becoming permanent: turning into a constant, a way of life. It brings with it the threat of far more savage austerity measures, cuts in benefits, diminishing health and education

¹ Thanks to Udi Aloni, Saroi Giri and Alenka Zupančič.

services and more precarious employment. The left faces the difficult task of emphasizing that we are dealing with *political* economy—that there is nothing ‘natural’ in such a crisis, that the existing global economic system relies on a series of political decisions—while simultaneously being fully aware that, insofar as we remain within the capitalist system, the violation of its rules effectively causes economic breakdown, since the system obeys a pseudo-natural logic of its own. So, although we are clearly entering a new phase of enhanced exploitation, rendered easier by the conditions of the global market (outsourcing, etc.), we should also bear in mind that this is imposed by the functioning of the system itself, always on the brink of financial collapse.

It would thus be futile merely to hope that the ongoing crisis will be limited and that European capitalism will continue to guarantee a relatively high standard of living for a growing number of people. It would indeed be a strange radical politics, whose main hope is that circumstances will continue to render it inoperative and marginal. It is against such reasoning that one has to read Badiou’s motto, *mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désêtre*: better a disaster than a non-being; one has to take the risk of fidelity to an Event, even if the Event ends up in ‘obscure disaster’. The best indicator of the left’s lack of trust in itself today is its fear of crisis. A true left takes a crisis seriously, without illusions. Its basic insight is that, although crises are painful and dangerous, they are inevitable, and that they are the terrain on which battles have to be waged and won. Which is why today, more than ever, Mao Zedong’s old motto is pertinent: ‘Everything under heaven is in utter chaos; the situation is excellent.’

There is no lack of anti-capitalists today. We are even witnessing an overload of critiques of capitalism’s horrors: newspaper investigations, TV reports and best-selling books abound on companies polluting our environment, corrupt bankers who continue to get fat bonuses while their firms are saved by public money, sweatshops where children work overtime. There is, however, a catch to all this criticism, ruthless as it may appear: what is as a rule not questioned is the liberal-democratic framework within which these excesses should be fought. The goal, explicit or implied, is to regulate capitalism—through the pressure of the media, parliamentary inquiries, harsher laws, honest police investigations—but never to question the liberal-democratic institutional mechanisms of the bourgeois state of law. This remains the sacred cow, which even the

most radical forms of ‘ethical anti-capitalism’—the Porto Allegre World Social Forum, the Seattle movement—do not dare to touch.

State and class

It is here that Marx’s key insight remains valid, perhaps today more than ever. For Marx, the question of freedom should not be located primarily in the political sphere proper, as with the criteria the global financial institutions apply when they want to pronounce a judgement on a country—does it have free elections? Are the judges independent? Is the press free from hidden pressures? Are human rights respected? The key to actual freedom resides rather in the ‘apolitical’ network of social relations, from the market to the family, where the change needed for effective improvement is not political reform, but a transformation in the social relations of production. We do not vote about who owns what, or about worker–management relations in a factory; all this is left to processes outside the sphere of the political. It is illusory to expect that one can effectively change things by ‘extending’ democracy into this sphere, say, by organizing ‘democratic’ banks under people’s control. Radical changes in this domain lie outside the sphere of legal rights. Such democratic procedures can, of course, have a positive role to play. But they remain part of the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie, whose purpose is to guarantee the undisturbed functioning of capitalist reproduction. In this precise sense, Badiou was right in his claim that the name of the ultimate enemy today is not capitalism, empire or exploitation, but democracy. It is the acceptance of ‘democratic mechanisms’ as the ultimate frame that prevents a radical transformation of capitalist relations.

Closely linked to the necessary de-fetishization of ‘democratic institutions’ is the de-fetishization of their negative counter-part: violence. For example, Badiou recently proposed exercising ‘defensive violence’ by means of building free domains at a distance from state power, subtracted from its reign (like the early Solidarnosc in Poland), and only resisting by force state attempts to crush and re-appropriate these ‘liberated zones’. The problem with this formula is that it relies on a deeply problematic distinction between the ‘normal’ functioning of the state apparatus and the ‘excessive’ exercise of state violence. But the ABC of Marxist notions of class struggle is the thesis that ‘peaceful’ social life is itself an expression of the (temporary) victory of one class—the ruling one. From the standpoint of the subordinated and oppressed, the very existence of the

state, as an apparatus of class domination, is a fact of violence. Similarly, Robespierre argued that regicide is not justified by proving the King had committed any specific crime: the very existence of the King is a crime, an offence against the freedom of the people. In this strict sense, the use of force by the oppressed against the ruling class and its state is always ultimately 'defensive'. If we do not concede this point, we *volens nolens* 'normalize' the state and accept its violence as merely a matter of contingent excesses. The standard liberal motto—that it is sometimes necessary to resort to violence, but it is never legitimate—is not sufficient. From the radical-emancipatory perspective, one should turn it around: for the oppressed, violence is always legitimate—since their very status is the result of violence—but never necessary: it is always a matter of strategic consideration whether to use force against the enemy or not.

In short, the topic of violence should be demystified. What was wrong with 20th-century Communism was not its resort to violence *per se*—the seizure of state power, the Civil War to maintain it—but the larger mode of functioning, which made this kind of resort to violence inevitable and legitimized: the Party as the instrument of historical necessity, and so on. In a note to the CIA, advising them on how to undermine the Allende government, Henry Kissinger wrote succinctly: 'Make the economy scream'. Former US officials are openly admitting today that the same strategy is applied in Venezuela: former US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said of the Venezuelan economy on Fox News: 'It's the one weapon we have against [Chavez] to begin with, and which we should be using, namely the economic tools of trying to make the economy even worse, so that his appeal in the country and the region goes down'. In the current economic emergency, too, we are clearly not dealing with blind market processes but with highly organized, strategic interventions by states and financial institutions, intent on resolving the crisis on their own terms—and in such conditions, are not defensive counter-measures in order?

These considerations cannot but shatter the comfortable subjective position of radical intellectuals, even as they continue their mental exercises so relished throughout the 20th century: the urge to 'catastrophize' political situations. Adorno and Horkheimer saw catastrophe in the culmination of the 'dialectic of enlightenment' in the 'administered world'; Giorgio Agamben defined the 20th-century concentration camps as the 'truth' of the entire Western political project. But recall the figure

of Horkheimer in West Germany of the 1950s. While denouncing the ‘eclipse of reason’ in the modern Western society of consumption, he simultaneously defended this same society as the sole island of freedom in a sea of totalitarianisms and corrupt dictatorships. What if, in truth, intellectuals lead basically safe and comfortable lives, and in order to justify their livelihoods, construct scenarios of radical catastrophe? For many, no doubt, if a revolution is taking place, it should occur at a safe distance—Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela—so that, while their hearts are warmed by thinking about faraway events, they can go on promoting their careers. But with the current collapse of properly functioning welfare states in the advanced-industrial economies, radical intellectuals may be now approaching a moment of truth when they must make such clarifications: they wanted real change—now they can have it.

Economy as ideology

The state of permanent economic emergency does not mean that the left should abandon patient intellectual work, with no immediate ‘practical use’. On the contrary: today, more than ever, one should bear in mind that communism begins with what Kant, in the famous passage of his essay, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, called the ‘public use of reason’: with the egalitarian universality of thought. Our struggle should thus highlight those aspects of the current ‘re-structuring’ that pose a threat to trans-national open space. One example would be the EU’s ongoing ‘Bologna Process’, which aims to ‘harmonize the architecture of the European higher education system’, and which is in fact a concerted attack on the public use of reason.

Underlying these reforms is the urge to subordinate higher education to the task of solving society’s concrete problems through the production of expert opinions. What disappears here is the true task of thinking: not only to offer solutions to problems posed by ‘society’—in reality, state and capital—but to reflect on the very form of these problems; to discern a problem in the very way we perceive a problem. The reduction of higher education to the task of producing socially useful expert knowledge is the paradigmatic form of Kant’s ‘private use of reason’—that is, constrained by contingent, dogmatic presuppositions—within today’s global capitalism. In Kantian terms, it involves our acting as ‘immature’ individuals, not as free human beings who dwell in the dimension of the universality of reason.

It is crucial to link the push towards streamlining higher education—not only in the guise of direct privatization or links with business, but also in this more general sense of orienting education towards the production of expert knowledge—to the process of enclosing the commons of intellectual products, of privatizing general intellect. This process is itself part of a global transformation in the mode of ideological interpellation. It may be useful here to recall Althusser's notion of 'ideological state apparatuses'. If, in the Middle Ages, the key ISA was the Church, in the sense of religion as institution, the dawn of capitalist modernity imposed the twin hegemony of the school system and legal ideology. Individuals were formed into legal subjects through compulsory universal education, while subjects were interpellated as patriotic free citizens under the legal order. The gap was thus maintained between bourgeois and citizen, between the egotist-utilitarian individual concerned with his private interests and the *citoyen* dedicated to the universal domain of the state. Insofar as, in spontaneous ideological perception, ideology is limited to the universal sphere of citizenship, while the private sphere of egotistical interests is considered 'pre-ideological', the very gap between ideology and non-ideology is thus transposed into ideology.

What has happened in the latest stage of post-68 capitalism is that the economy itself—the logic of market and competition—has progressively imposed itself as the hegemonic ideology. In education, we are witnessing the gradual dismantling of the classical-bourgeois school ISA: the school system is less and less the compulsory network, elevated above the market and organized directly by the state, bearer of enlightened values—liberty, equality, fraternity. On behalf of the sacred formula of 'lower costs, higher efficiency', it is progressively penetrated by different forms of PPP, or public–private partnership. In the organization and legitimization of power, too, the electoral system is increasingly conceived on the model of market competition: elections are like a commercial exchange where voters 'buy' the option that offers to do the job of maintaining social order, prosecuting crime, and so on, most efficiently.

On behalf of the same formula of 'lower costs, higher efficiency', functions once exclusive to the domain of state power, like running prisons, can be privatized; the military is no longer based on universal conscription, but composed of hired mercenaries. Even the state bureaucracy is no longer perceived as the Hegelian universal class, as is becoming evident in the case of Berlusconi. In today's Italy, state power is directly

exerted by the base bourgeois who ruthlessly and openly exploits it as a means to protect his personal interests.

Even the process of engaging in emotional relations is increasingly organized along the lines of a market relationship. Such a procedure relies on self-commodification: for internet dating or marriage agencies, prospective partners present themselves as commodities, listing their qualities and posting their photos. What is missing here is what Freud called *der einzige Zug*, that singular pull which instantly makes me like or dislike the other. Love is a choice that is experienced as necessity. At a certain point, one is overwhelmed by the feeling that one already is in love, and that one cannot do otherwise. By definition, therefore, comparing qualities of respective candidates, deciding with whom to fall in love, cannot be love. This is the reason why dating agencies are an anti-love device *par excellence*.

What kind of shift in the functioning of ideology does this imply? When Althusser claims that ideology interpellates individuals into subjects, ‘individuals’ stand here for the living beings upon which ideological state apparatuses work, imposing upon them a network of micro-practices. By contrast, ‘subject’ is not a category of living being, of substance, but the outcome of these living beings being caught in the ISA *dispositif*, or mechanism; in a symbolic order. Quite logically, insofar as the economy is considered the sphere of non-ideology, this brave new world of global commodification considers itself post-ideological. The ISAs are, of course, still here; more than ever. Yet insofar as, in its self-perception, ideology is located in subjects, in contrast to pre-ideological individuals, this hegemony of the economic sphere cannot but appear as the absence of ideology. What this means is not that ideology simply ‘reflects’ the economy, as superstructure to its base. Rather, the economy functions here as an ideological model itself, so that we are fully justified in saying that it is operative as an ISA—in contrast to ‘real’ economic life, which definitely does not follow the idealized liberal-market model.

Impossible

Today, however, we are witnessing a radical change in the working of this ideological mechanism. Agamben defines our contemporary ‘post-political’ or biopolitical society as one in which the multiple *dispositifs* desubjectivize individuals, without producing a new subjectivity:

Hence the eclipse of politics, which supposed real subjects or identities (workers' movement, bourgeoisie, etc.), and the triumph of economy, that is to say, of the pure activity of governing, which pursues only its own reproduction. The right and left which today follow each other in managing power have thus very little to do with the political context from which the terms that designate them originate. Today these terms simply name the two poles—the one that aims at desubjectivation, without any scruples, and the one that wants to cover it with the hypocritical mask of the good citizen of democracy—of the same machine of government.²

'Bio-politics' designates the constellation in which *dispositifs* no longer generate subjects ('interpellate individuals into subjects'), but merely administer and regulate individuals' bare life.

In such a constellation, the very idea of a radical social transformation may appear as an impossible dream—yet the term 'impossible' should make us stop and think. Today, possible and impossible are distributed in a strange way, both simultaneously exploding into excess. On the one hand, in the domains of personal freedoms and scientific technology, we are told that 'nothing is impossible': we can enjoy sex in all its perverse versions, entire archives of music, films and TV series are available to download, space travel is available to everyone (at a price). There is the prospect of enhancing our physical and psychic abilities, of manipulating our basic properties through interventions into the genome; even the tech-gnostic dream of achieving immortality by transforming our identity into software that can be downloaded into one or another set of hardware.

On the other hand, in the domain of socio-economic relations, our era perceives itself as the age of maturity in which humanity has abandoned the old millenarian utopian dreams and accepted the constraints of reality—read: capitalist socio-economic reality—with all its impossibilities. The commandment YOU CANNOT is its *mot d'ordre*: you cannot engage in large collective acts, which necessarily end in totalitarian terror; you cannot cling to the old welfare state, it makes you non-competitive and leads to economic crisis; you cannot isolate yourself from the global market, without falling prey to the spectre of North Korean *juche*. In its ideological version, ecology also adds its own list of impossibilities, so-called threshold values—no more than two degrees of global warming—based on 'expert opinions'.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?*, Paris 2007, pp. 46–7.

It is crucial to distinguish here between two impossibilities: the impossible-real of a social antagonism, and the ‘impossibility’ on which the predominant ideological field focuses. Impossibility is here redoubled, it serves as a mask of itself: that is, the ideological function of the second impossibility is to obfuscate the real of the first. Today, the ruling ideology endeavours to make us accept the ‘impossibility’ of radical change, of abolishing capitalism, of a democracy not reduced to a corrupt parliamentary game, in order to render invisible the impossible-real of the antagonism that cuts across capitalist societies. This real is ‘impossible’ in the sense that it is the impossible of the existing social order, its constitutive antagonism; which is not to imply that this impossible-real cannot be directly dealt with, or radically transformed.

This is why Lacan’s formula for overcoming an ideological impossibility is not ‘everything is possible’, but ‘the impossible happens’. The Lacanian impossible-real is not an *a priori* limitation, which needs to be realistically taken into account, but the domain of action. An act is more than an intervention into the domain of the possible—an act changes the very coordinates of what is possible and thus retroactively creates its own conditions of possibility. This is why communism also concerns the real: to act as a communist means to intervene into the real of the basic antagonism which underlies today’s global capitalism.

Freedoms?

But the question persists: what does such a programmatic statement about doing the impossible amount to, when we are confronted with an empirical impossibility: the fiasco of communism as an idea able to mobilize large masses? Two years before his death, when it became clear that there would be no all-European revolution, and knowing the idea of building socialism in one country to be nonsense, Lenin wrote:

What if the complete hopelessness of the situation, by stimulating the efforts of the workers and peasants tenfold, offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilization in a different way from that of the West European countries?³

Has this not been the predicament of the Morales government in Bolivia, of the Chavez government in Venezuela, of the Maoist government

³ V. I. Lenin, ‘Our Revolution’ [1923], in *Collected Works*, vol. 33, Moscow 1966, p. 479.

in Nepal? They came to power through 'fair' democratic elections, not through insurrection. But once in power, they exerted it in a way which is partially, at least, 'non-statal': directly mobilizing their supporters, by-passing the party-state representative network. Their situation is 'objectively' hopeless: the whole drift of history is basically against them, they cannot rely on any 'objective tendencies' pushing in their way, all they can do is to improvise, do what they can in a desperate situation. But, nonetheless, does this not give them a unique freedom? And are we—today's left—not all in exactly the same situation?

Ours is thus the very opposite of the classical early 20th-century situation, in which the left knew what had to be done (establish the dictatorship of the proletariat), but had to wait patiently for the proper moment of execution. Today we do not know what we have to do, but we have to act now, because the consequence of non-action could be disastrous. We will be forced to live 'as if we were free'. We will have to risk taking steps into the abyss, in totally inappropriate situations; we will have to reinvent aspects of the new, just to keep the machinery going and maintain what was good in the old—education, healthcare, basic social services. In short, our situation is like what Stalin said about the atom bomb: not for those with weak nerves. Or as Gramsci said, characterizing the epoch that began with the First World War, 'the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters'.