

Discussion about the Phony Windbag Žižek

[This is a series of emails between me and various friends and comrades, from Nov. 20-29, 2007. They are in approximate date order. With a couple exceptions (in brackets) which affected intelligibility I have not dared to make any corrections to the obvious typos in the letters my friends wrote. —S.H.]

Date: Nov. 20, 2007

Subject: Phony academic “Marxist” Zizek says capitalism is “indestructible”

Hi everybody,

One of the strange developments in this relatively reactionary period over the past quarter century is that there has appeared a bunch of phony “Marxists” in academia who have managed to gain some considerable fame and respect from those who would rather read their puffed up nonsense than the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao.

One of these phonies is Slavoj Zizek. As far as I know he has made no worthwhile contributions of any sort to MLM revolutionary theory, let alone to revolutionary practice. (If any of my readers disagree, please let me know what they are supposed to be!)

Zizek now has a new article, “Resistance is Surrender”, in the *London Review of Books*. I haven’t seen the article itself, but the following opening excerpt is now being quoted on the Web:

“One of the clearest lessons of the last few decades is that capitalism is indestructible. *Marx compared it to a vampire, and one of the salient points of comparison now appears to be that vampires always rise up again after being stabbed to death. Even Mao’s attempt, in the Cultural Revolution, to wipe out the traces of capitalism, ended up in its triumphant return*”

What I have always wondered is why those who have barely begun to scratch the surface of all the revolutionary wisdom in the writings of the great creators of MLM spend so much time with fools like Zizek!

—Scott

From: F.....

Date: Nov. 21, 2007

Scott,

I think you should [read] through the article from which you are quoting from, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01.html>, Zizek is not stating this is his belief. In fact if you

read through, he is criticizing the Third Way Social-Democratic politics and advocating for organized resistance that aims for social-revolution and not for infinite demands from the Capitalist system.

I think this article is seriously being misread since I have already gotten two other emails on it.

F-----

Date: Nov. 21, 2007

Hi F-----,

Thanks for the note. I've followed your link and have now read the article. It does appear that Zizek *probably* doesn't believe what he strongly claims in the first sentence of that article (that "One of the clearest lessons of the last few decades is that capitalism is indestructible"). The question then is, why does he say it? Is there something about his milieu that leads him to provocatively claim what he does not at all believe in order to get people to start thinking? Maybe. Or is he just so confusing and so confused himself that he really means what he says in that first sentence *as well as* what he says later? That also seems to be a possibility, at least! Given his other writing, I see no reason to simply *assume* that he is fully coherent and sensible!

The same goes for the title: "Resistance is Surrender". It may be that for many radical-liberals their resistance to the things like the war in Iraq is mere token resistance, and therefore really a type of surrender to the enemy. Perhaps that is the point of Zizek's article. But damn it all, can't the man write better? Can't he write without putting things in terms which are either literally ridiculous and erroneous, or at least can so easily be construed that way? After all, genuine resistance is *not at all* surrender!

Mike Ely also wrote me a longer email about what I said about Zizek, so I'll have to respond to that. I *hate* having to spend any time even discussing Zizek, but I opened the door myself so now I have to continue at least for a bit. Serves me right! Personally I think that Jerry Leonard hit the nail on the head when he called Zizek a "windbag"! Alas, it is sometimes necessary to spend time puncturing windbags. Engels had to do so at length against Dühring. But I don't have nearly as much patience as that!

Scott

From: F-----

Date: [circa 11/25/07]

Com. Scott,

This is standard Hegelian writing to do this, speaking with two voices in articles is common. Zizek sets up the first statement to begin a dismantling the conception. Particularly in this article he is attacking Professor Critchley who teaches at the New School in NYC and has the ear of many radical intellectuals. The position in the first statement is precisely his, and from there Zizek attacks this as inherently contradictory in the premises. If Capitalism is indestructible, then what is the point of making demands of it, it can't face? This is the main criticism.

I feel this article is actually very good, and I am glad popular intellectuals like Zizek are coming out strongly against the liberal-Left.

I would like to get in the “discussion” more thoroughly, but at the moment I am so busy with work.

—F-----

Date: Nov. 29, 2007

Hi F----- and all,

Everything that is true about the world cannot be said all at once. This is partly because not all truths have yet been discovered, and partly simply because in saying one thing we are not yet saying everything else that needs to be said. This is why we have to present information in a dialectical manner. That is, we should start by putting forward the most essential thing, and then gradually add more, which to some extent modifies or contradicts what has already been said.

Thus when confronted with the task of explaining how the very complicated capitalist mode of production works, Marx had to first explain the situation on the basis of some simplifying assumptions (such as that commodities are exchanged at their [value](#)—for the precise amount of socially necessary labor time used to create them). After doing that, he could get into the complicating factors which modify the basic picture.

However, it is interesting that even this dialectical procedure employed by Marx has created many problems for people trying to understand *Capital*. Lenin went so far as to say that those who haven't understood dialectics are not able to really understand Marx. But, in part, Marx should bear some of the blame for this. He should have made it much clearer to new readers just what he was doing, and reminded them more frequently about it. Nevertheless, as I say, Marx was forced into this sort of dialectical presentation because of the complexity of his subject.

But when we turn to people like Zizek we see a complete and totally unnecessary perversion of this dialectical (or “Hegelian”) method. It is not only *NOT* necessary to first say “One of the clearest lessons of the last few decades is that capitalism is indestructible”, before perhaps saying something that might be construed as going against that, it is downright *wrong* to say this. Not only is this bound to be widely misinterpreted; not only does saying such an erroneous thing make it *imperative* that the opposite be extremely *strongly and clearly stated* later on (which in

my opinion Zizek doesn't do); but even more basic than that, the dialectical method requires you to at least start with the most essential truth of the matter (which may then need to be adjusted or quibbled with to some degree). Instead, what Zizek does is start with the diametrical *opposite* of the truth, and put it forward as if it were the most essential truth. This is very wrong indeed! It is a method of confusing the issue, not of clarifying it.

Zizek strikes me as someone who has become infatuated with the dialectical method without quite understanding how it really works. It is really simple minded to portray this method as first putting forward the *opposite* of what you are really arguing for! That's just plain nutty!

So I still conclude that either Zizek is confused and inconsistent *himself* or else he is—through his own ineptness—confusing and misleading those who read him.

You suggest that what Zizek is really trying to do is sort of a *reductio ad absurdum* proof. That is, start with an assumption and show that upholding it leads to an absurd conclusion. This sort of thing works well in mathematics (as in proving that there is no largest prime number). But it is not so easy to use when the issue is not one of formal logic. Moreover, if someone *does* try to use such an argument in politics, what possible reason is there for not making it perfectly clear that this is what they are up to?! Is the goal to write things that only make sense to those who are in on the secret of how to interpret what is being said?

It may well be true that in certain narrow intellectual circles Zizek's approach is understood and appreciated. But that is at best for a very small number of people who are never likely to actually do much to help bring about a revolution in any case. We should not be playing these sorts of intellectual games. We need to mostly write for the masses. But even when we write for very well educated academic types we should still write clearly and in as straightforward of a manner as we can. And that means we should despise those, like Zizek, who do just the opposite.

(Well, that's my opinion! Fortunately in our group multiple opinions are not only allowed, but encouraged! If you still think Zizek is playing a positive role, I won't hold it against you!)

Comradely,
Scott

From: J---
Date: Nov. 21, 2007

[To Scott]

Ah, come on... Zizek isn't as bad as Duhring. I mean, he doesn't think he's solved all the problems of the world with a new metaphysical system; neither is he anti-semitic.

Of course, Zizek really gets on my nerves. Although I appreciate the fact that he's

repopularized Lenin in academia, I get annoyed with the way he talks about people like Lenin and Mao. Plus, every book that he's written is a 20:250 page ratio of interesting thoughts to meandering psychobabble. I blame this on the fact that he is a Lacanian. Thus perhaps the confusing nature of his writing is due to the fact that he's a very bad and disorganized writer.

J---

From: Scott H.
Date: Nov. 21, 2007

Hi J---

Zizek may not be as bad as Duhring, and he certainly isn't as important to criticize as Duhring was. (At the time Engels wrote "Anti-Duhring" the guy had a large and growing following among intellectual members of the German workers' party that in turn had a major influence among the masses.) And you're right that Duhring imagined that he had constructed a whole new metaphysical system and thereby put "socialism" on a whole new fully "scientific" basis. As far as I know Zizek hasn't made grandiose claims like that, nor is he anti-semitic like Duhring.

But there still are a number of parallels between the two. They are definitely both self-important windbags. Actually I think Zizek may be even the bigger of the two when it comes to that! Both of them also address themselves primarily to intellectual or academic Marxists or Marxist-influenced people. Both of them mix in anti-Marxist ideas together with Marxist ideas. (In Zizek's case, the nutty Lacanian psychoanalytical theory for example.) Both are poseurs—people who present themselves as vastly more knowledgeable and sophisticated than they really are. Both of them—though probably Zizek even more than Duhring—seem to write more to obscure than to clarify. (And that is one of the biggest tipoffs that a writer is a phony.)

I think you are really right to mention the superabundance of "meandering psychobabble" in Zizek's writings. I haven't read much of his stuff, though I've made attempts at a couple of his books. (In both cases I eventually gave up in disgust, muttering to myself "What the hell is all this bullshit?!") But what I have read by him is nothing if not meandering and incoherent. Even his introductions to other people's books are like that!

It is true that he talks about Lenin and Mao; but what has he said that is useful or worthwhile about either of them? It is true that he has edited small collections of their writings. No doubt that is useful to some degree since their writings are getting more difficult to find these days. But Zizek's introductions to these books are terrible blights on them. Even his intro to the Martin/Avakian book is goofy. (Or should I say there is more of an excuse for that one to be goofy!) In my opinion people are still better off trying to find collections of Lenin, Mao, Marx & Engels, Plekhanov, etc. in used book stores. They cover much more ground, for one thing, than do Zizek's collections.

But my big beef with Zizek is that I still know of no good reason to take him seriously as a

revolutionary writer.

Best,
Scott

From: J---
To: Scott
Date: Nov. 21, 2007

You are right about Zizek being a self-important windbag. I don't think anyone but pomo [postmodernist] influenced theory heads, though, take him that seriously as a revolutionary writer. Have you read his intro to the new Mao collection by the way? Perfect example of Zizekian fluff.

J---

From: mike ely
Date: Nov. 21, 2007

thanks for sending this comment. I will go and read the essay "resistance is surrender." And I look forward to regularly sharing with you emails with interesting links and articles as we come across them.

So thanks.

On another tip: my approach to such things, is a bit different from yours.

1) I think we should engage the new and influential writers, not just say in a cranky way "it is better to read marx, engels, lenin, mao."

In fact if we don't engage the world and new ideas, reading the "classics" will just be dogma.

2) I don't think it is right to criticize articles and writers you haven't read -- methodologically it is wrong. And in the final analysis, with such a semi-religious method, you actually can't create a correct summation of anything. (I have been struck when talking to certain kinds of religious people, that they don't actually CARE what my ideas and experience are - - it is enough for them that I disagree, and therefore need to hear THEIR ideas, which they believe are fixed, correct and known. We should never adopt a secular equivalent of such methods.)

3) It sounds like you are unaware that Zizek has (personally!) just republished a prominent new collection of Mao's writings and published a previous new collection of Lenin's work from 1917. In other words, you claim it is better to read "Lenin, Mao" -- but this is the man who (rather bravely) has dared to say that reading lenin and mao are philosophically important TODAY, and is REINTRODUCING a whole generation of students to a fresh reading of those works. If you not aware of such things, doesn't that too betray a rather wrong method?

4) I have been reading Zizek to understand what the attraction is. He is a highly eclectic provocateur, says one thing here and another thing there. He has a politics that is odd and hard to pin down, and a

philosophy that sprawls all over the place. Some of it is interesting, some is odd. His point seems provocation, not coherence. How do you suggest we approach something like that?

5) I have included a quote from Žižek in my polemic -- to make a number of points by including it. The main reason i quote him is that i think he makes a very important point, and that he makes it in a way that is "heard" by the people who need to hear it. Here is the section in which I quote him:

Dealing with Errors and Failure

Since we are talking bluntly here about failure, we need to talk about context. Reading the provocateur Žižek recently, I stopped hard on this sentence: "The greatness of Lenin was that in this catastrophic situation, he wasn't afraid to succeed – in contrast to the negative pathos discernible in Rosa Luxemburg and Adorno, for whom the ultimate authentic act is the admission of the failure which brings the truth of the situation to light." [1]

Yes! There is far too much of this "negative pathos" around, as if we communists should chant, "We're not worthy," alongside Wayne and Garth. And as if a shuffling, round-shouldered self-hatred would be the only possible proof that we communists "get" the true extent and lessons of our own past. That would be exactly wrong.

We need to excavate our shortcomings and listen to the criticism of others. But we will do so because the people of the world *need* a radically reconceived communist project. And they need revolutionary internationalists in the U.S. to do our part well, here, now. We have something worthy to bring to this passage of history. And for that we must emulate Lenin's hunger to win and his focus on grabbing the chance within the maelstrom.

Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, Verso, 2002. The "catastrophic situation" he mentions is the disaster that enveloped Europe during World War 1 – including the collapse of widespread belief in linear progress, and the continent-wide failure of Social Democracy.

* * * * *

Please tell me, brother: is it wrong to quote Žižek like this? What do you think of his passage and my commentary on it?

yours in respect and struggle,
Mike E

Date: Nov. 21, 2007

Hi Mike,

Thanks for the thoughtful criticisms! You definitely raise some points that both contain at least some partial validity to them, and also deserve to be further discussed.

In your point 1) you say:

- > 1) I think we should engage the new and influential
- > writers, not just say in a cranky way "it is better to

- > read marx, engels, lenin, mao."
- > In fact if we don't engage the world and new ideas,
- > reading the "classics" will just be dogma.

I partly agree with that (much more than I implied in my email). And not just “new and influential writers”, but also ordinary comrades. And it is for that reason that I pay careful attention to what *you* write, and other *comrades*. And also to what leaders or partisans of various contemporary revolutionary parties write, such as (especially) the Maoist parties in Nepal, India, the Philippines, and even Avakian in the U.S. (though I have to admit I pay a whole lot less attention to him specifically than I did in previous decades).

But there is also another side to this issue. The main reason that folks like this are so important to pay careful attention to is that we know they are largely writing from the same perspective that we have. That is, they are (generally) writing from a solid standpoint of MLM. In other words, these people are those who have themselves *internalized* much of the genuinely correct basic outlook of MLM based on their own *previous* serious study of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao and other Marxist writers as well as their own experiences in struggle. That is *why* these people should be paid more careful attention to than others who are coming from quite different places politically.

I'm not at all saying that we have nothing to learn from non-Maoist revolutionaries, radical intellectuals, or even outright anti-Marxists. I probably read more of this sort of stuff than you might imagine, and maybe even spend too much time on it. I especially tend to read a lot of non- or anti-Marxist books on science, economics and philosophy. (I could do a *lot* better when it comes to history and literature, however!)

However, my view is that while we do need to “engage the world and new ideas”, we still need to do so from an essentially MLM standpoint. This is an application of the Marxist theory of knowledge: We start from what we know (or think we know) and try to learn everything we can from whatever source to help us extend or modify that starting knowledge. But while this is indeed from “whatever source”, most extensions and modifications to our existing ideas are likely to come from sources that share most of our own basic views.

Moreover, when we see young people coming forward who are enamored with some of the new flashy leftist intellectual stars who are all the rage in academic circles, such as Badiou and Zizek, but who at the same time have not really read or internalized all that much of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao, then we really should try to steer them toward these much more profound and correct writers first, so that they will have a better foundation on which to evaluate semi-Marxists like Badiou and Zizek. The place to start when trying to master Marxism is not Badiou and Zizek and their kin, but Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao. We *call* our science after those people for very good reasons—they created it!

Consider an analogy: Suppose you are a biology teacher and some of your students are reading stuff by creationists or perpetrators of so-called “intelligent design” theory or even blends of what is correct and what is not correct. What should you do? Just say, by all means confront the

“new and influential writers”? Or, “Maybe you should get a good grounding in Darwin’s writings and genetics first. Have you read *Origin of Species* yet?”

I think you would probably agree with me about most of this.

Your second point is:

- > 2) I don't think it is right to criticize articles and writers
- > you haven't read -- methodologically it is wrong. And
- > in the final analysis, with such a semi-religious method,
- > you actually can't create a correct summation of anything.
- > (I have been struck when talking to certain kinds of
- > religious people, that they don't actually CARE what
- > my ideas and experience are -- it is enough for them
- > that I disagree, and therefore need to hear THEIR ideas,
- > which they believe are fixed, correct and known. We
- > should never adopt a secular equivalent of such methods.)

Well, again I partly agree with this—more than I think I implied in my email. But once again there is also some dialectical counterpoint that we need to keep in mind here.

First, it is impossible to read everything. Much of our opinions about other writers and their views simply have to come from book reviews, or other indirect methods. If we have read even just one book or article by someone we already have *some basis* for generalizing about them in other cases. Sometimes this is a very good basis. Sometimes we can even have a fairly reasonable basis for doing this based on mere associations and a vague knowledge of someone’s general stance. I have never read any books, and probably no articles by William Kristol, the editor of the neo-conservative magazine *The Weekly Standard*, but I don’t think I would be wrong to put a severe knock on any new book he might write before I read a word of it.

In the case of Zizek I have actually done a little reading of his stuff. I’ve never actually completed any of his books! (I gave up on two of them in complete disgust, muttering to myself “What the hell is all this bullshit?!”) One other time I spent an hour and a half reading (or attempting to read) his book on “Political Ontology” while sitting in a book store before I finally walked out without buying it. I’ve also read his introductions to at least three books (including the Martin/Avakian thing)—none of which were worth a half-hearted fart! So I do know a bit about this guy, and none of what I know is at all positive. I think I know enough about him already to correctly categorize him as a poseur and a phony.

At the time I sent out my [first] email I hadn’t read the article that the quoted paragraph came from. Since then a comrade gave me a link to it (http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01_.html) and I’ve read it now. Here is my opinion now that I have read the piece:

“Hi ----

“Thanks for the note. I’ve followed your link and have now read the article. It does appear that Zizek *probably* doesn’t believe what he strongly claims in the first sentence of that article (that ‘One of the clearest lessons of the last few decades is that capitalism is indestructible’). The question then is why does he say it? Is there something about his milieu that leads him to provocatively claim what he does not at all believe in order to get people to start thinking? Maybe. Or is he just so confusing and so confused himself that he really means what he says in that first sentence *as well as* what he says later? That also seems to be a possibility, at least! Given his other writing, I see no reason to simply *assume* that he is fully coherent and sensible!

“The same goes for the title: ‘Resistance is Surrender’. It may be that for many radical-liberals their resistance to the things like the war in Iraq is more token resistance, and therefore really a type of surrender to the enemy. Perhaps that is the point of Zizek’s article. But damn it all, can’t the man write better? Can’t he write without putting things in terms which are either literally ridiculous and erroneous, or at least can so easily be construed that way? After all, genuine resistance is *not at all* surrender!”

In general, when writing a review of something one certainly should read it first! But when passing on a quote from something, and disparaging it based on what it says, it does not always seem necessary to do that. Yes, perhaps the context will change our understanding of the quote (as it did slightly for me in this case). But I’m still not sorry I sent it out, or lambasted Zizek while doing so.

Some authors, and some points of view, are simply so bad that they should not be taken seriously. Certainly this goes for creationists and astrologers (though of course anyone writing a serious critique of such views would have to read them carefully and quote them accurately). For most of us, a simple dismissive insult of such views is quite appropriate.

Does this apply to Zizek? I tend to think that it does!

Your 3rd point is that Zizek has edited and published some collections of Mao’s writings on philosophy and Lenin’s writings from 1917. I agree that this is a good thing to do, though his introductions to those books are garbage (and as I said to someone else a “blight” on the books). Is it really that hard to come by better collections of Mao’s or Lenin’s writings in used book stores? Even if not, I would agree that new editions of their works are always welcome, and no doubt serve a useful purpose. I have yet to see any of Zizek’s *comments* about Marx, Lenin, or Mao that are useful, however.

I think there is a lot to your 4th point, that Zizek is sort of an “eclectic provocateur”. It is quite possible that this might sometimes be somewhat positive in the milieu in which he operates. But I also see the negative influence, not only of his Lacanian psychoanalytical nonsense, but of a whole lot of other nonsense, and even of his making that milieu itself, which is so divorced from mass struggle, more respectable than it should actually be considered. On balance is his influence more positive than negative? Perhaps, but I honestly doubt it.

I have no objection to your quoting Zizek or anything like that. In fact that one quote is kind of interesting. However, I doubt if I would often quote him myself. I would fear that doing so would tend to mark me as being in a milieu which I do not care to be identified with! (Academic Marxism divorced from mass struggle.) Sometimes, though, we do have to risk such a thing. (That's why I occasionally quote some of Gramsci's profound remarks—even if his legacy has been largely kidnapped by non-revolutionary academics.)

On the whole, based on my admittedly very limited reading of Zizek I would say that (as another comrade put it) he is a windbag and that much of his writing is close to incomprehensible or even “meandering psychobabble” (as yet another comrade put it). And I still have never seen any contribution by him to revolutionary Marxism that could be considered significant. In short, he is someone who—to my knowledge—is simply not worth bothering with.

Best wishes,
Scott