



Thomas Deichmann, Sabine Reul, Slavoj Zizek

About War and the Missing Center in Politics

Sabine Reul and Thomas Deichmann talk to philosopher Slavoj Zizek.

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has gained something of a cult following for his many writings – including *The Ticklish Subject*, a playful critique of the intellectual assault upon human subjectivity. At the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2001, he talked to Sabine Reul and Thomas Deichmann about subjectivity, multiculturalism, sex and unfreedom after 11 September.

Sabine Reul & Thomas Deichmann: Has 11 September thrown new light on your diagnosis of what is happening to the world?

Slavoj Zizek: One of the endlessly repeated phrases we heard in recent weeks is that nothing will be the same after 11 September. I wonder if there really is such a substantial change. Certainly, there is change at the level of perception or publicity, but I don't think we can yet speak of some fundamental break. Existing attitudes and fears were confirmed, and what the media were telling us about terrorism has now really happened.

In my work, I place strong emphasis on what is usually referred to as the virtualisation or digitalisation of our environment. We know that 60 percent of the people on this Earth have not even made a phone call in their life. But still, 30 percent of us live in a digitalised universe that is artificially constructed, manipulated and no longer some natural or traditional one. At all levels of our life we seem to live more and more with the thing deprived of its substance. You get beer without alcohol, meat without fat, coffee without caffeine...and even virtual sex without sex.

Virtual reality to me is the climax of this process: you now get reality without reality...or a totally regulated reality. But there is another side to this. Throughout the entire twentieth century, I see a counter-tendency, for which my good philosopher friend Alain Badiou invented a nice name: 'La passion du réel', the passion of the real. That is to say, precisely because the universe in which we live is somehow a universe of dead conventions and artificiality, the only authentic real experience must be some extremely violent, shattering experience. And this we experience as a sense that now we are back in real life.

SR & TD: Do you think that is what we are seeing now?

SZ: I think this may be what defined the twentieth century, which really began with the First World War. We all remember the war reports by Ernst Jünger, in which he praises this eye-to-eye combat experience as the authentic one. Or at the level of sex, the archetypal film of the twentieth century would be Nagisa Oshima's *Ai No Corrida (In The Realm Of The Senses)*, where the idea again is

that you become truly radical, and go to the end in a sexual encounter, when you practically torture each other to death. There must be extreme violence for that encounter to be authentic.

Another emblematic figure in this sense to me is the so-called 'cutter'— a widespread pathological phenomenon in the USA. There are two million of them, mostly women, but also men, who cut themselves with razors. Why? It has nothing to do with masochism or suicide. It's simply that they don't feel real as persons and the idea is: it's only through this pain and when you feel warm blood that you feel reconnected again. So I think that this tension is the background against which one should appreciate the effect of the act.

SR & TD: Does that relate to your observations about the demise of subjectivity in *The Ticklish Subject*? You say the problem is what you call 'foreclosure'— that the real or the articulation of the subject is foreclosed by the way society has evolved in recent years.

SZ: The starting point of my book on the subject is that almost all philosophical orientations today, even if they strongly oppose each other, agree on some kind of basic anti-subjectivist stance. For example, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida would both agree that the Cartesian subject had to be deconstructed, or, in the case of Habermas, embedded in a larger inter-subjective dialectics. Cognitivists, Hegelians – everybody is in agreement here.

I am tempted to say that we must return to the subject – though not a purely rational Cartesian one. My idea is that the subject is inherently political, in the sense that 'subject', to me, denotes a piece of freedom – where you are no longer rooted in some firm substance, you are in an open situation. Today we can no longer simply apply old rules. We are engaged in paradoxes, which offer no immediate way out. In this sense, subjectivity is political.

SR & TD: But this kind of political subjectivity seems to have disappeared. In your books you speak of a post-political world.

SZ: When I say we live in a post-political world, I refer to a wrong ideological impression. We don't really live in such a world, but the existing universe presents itself as post-political in the sense that there is some kind of a basic social pact that elementary social decisions are no longer discussed as political decisions. They are turned into simple decisions of gesture and of administration. And the remaining conflicts are mostly conflicts about different cultures. We have the present form of global capitalism plus some kind of tolerant democracy as the ultimate form of that idea. And, paradoxically, only very few are ready to question this world.

SR & TD: So, what's wrong with that?

SZ: This post-political world still seems to retain the tension between what we usually refer to as tolerant liberalism versus multiculturalism. But for me – though I never liked Friedrich Nietzsche – if there is a definition that really fits, it is Nietzsche's old opposition between active and passive nihilism. Active nihilism, in the sense of wanting nothing itself, is this active self-destruction which would be precisely the passion of the real – the idea that, in order to live fully and authentically, you must engage in self-destruction. On the other hand, there is passive nihilism, what Nietzsche called 'The last man' – just living a stupid, self-satisfied life without great

passions.

The problem with a post-political universe is that we have these two sides which are engaged in kind of mortal dialectics. My idea is that, to break out of this vicious cycle, subjectivity must be reinvented.

SR & TD: You also say that the elites in our Western world are losing their nerve. They want to throw out all old concepts like humanism or subjectivity. Against that, you say it is important to look at what there is in the old that may be worth retaining.

SZ: Of course, I am not against the new. I am, indeed, almost tempted to repeat Virginia Woolf. I think it was in 1914 when she said it was as though eternal human nature had changed. To be a man no longer means the same thing. One should not, for example, underestimate the inter-subjective social impact of cyberspace. What we are witnessing today is a radical redefinition of what it means to be a human being.

Take strange phenomena, like what we see on the internet. There are so-called 'cam' websites where people expose to an anonymous public their innermost secrets down to the most vulgar level. You have websites today – even I, with all my decadent tastes, was shocked to learn this – where people put a video-camera in their toilets, so you can observe them defecating. This a totally new constellation. It is not private, but also it is also not public. It is not the old exhibitionist gesture.

Be that as it may, something radical is happening. Now, a number of new terms are proposed to us to describe that. The one most commonly used is paradigm shift, denoting that we live in an epoch of shifting paradigm. So New Age people tell us that we no longer have a Cartesian, mechanistic individualism, but a new universal mind. In sociology, the theorists of second modernity say similar things. And psychoanalytical theorists tell us that we no longer have the Oedipus complex, but live in an era of universalised perversion.

My point is not that we should stick to the old. But these answers are wrong and do not really register the break that is taking place. If we measure what is happening now by the standard of the old, we can grasp the abyss of the new that is emerging.

Here I would refer to Blaise Pascal. Pascal's problem was also confrontation with modernity and modern science. His difficulty was that he wanted to remain an old, orthodox Christian in this new, modern age. It is interesting that his results were much more radical and interesting for us today than the results of superficial English liberal philosophers, who simply accepted modernity.

You see the same thing in cinema history, if we look at the impact of sound. Okay, 'what's the problem?', you might say. By adding the sound to the image we simply get a more realistic rendering of reality. But that is not at all true. Interestingly enough, the movie directors who were most sensitive to what the introduction of sound really meant were generally conservatives, those who looked at it with scepticism, like Charlie Chaplin (up to a point), and Fritz Lang. Fritz Lang's *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, in a wonderful way, rendered this spectral ghost-like dimension of the voice, realising that voice never simply belongs to the body. This is just another example of how a conservative, as if he were afraid of the new medium, has a much better grasp

of its uncanny radical potentials.

The same applies today. Some people simply say: 'What's the problem? Let's throw ourselves into the digital world, into the internet, or whatever.' They really miss what is going on here.

SR & TD: So why do people want to declare a new epoch every five minutes?

SZ: It is precisely a desperate attempt to avoid the trauma of the new. It is a deeply conservative gesture. The true conservatives today are the people of new paradigms. They try desperately to avoid confronting what is really changing.

Let me return to my example. In Charlie Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator*, he satirises Hitler as Hinkel. The voice is perceived as something obscene. There is a wonderful scene where Hinkel gives a big speech and speaks totally meaningless, obscene words. Only from time to time you recognise some everyday vulgar German word like 'Wienerschnitzel' or 'Kartoffelstrudel'. And this was an ingenious insight; how voice is like a kind of a spectral ghost. All this became apparent to those conservatives who were sensitive for the break of the new.

In fact, all big breaks were done in such a way. Nietzsche was in this sense a conservative, and, indeed, I am ready to claim that Marx was a conservative in this sense, too. Marx always emphasised that we can learn more from intelligent conservatives than from simple liberals. Today, more than ever, we should stick to this attitude. When you are surprised and shocked, you don't simply accept it. You should not say: 'Okay, fine, let's play digital games.' We should not forget the ability to be properly surprised. I think, the most dangerous thing today is just to flow with things.

SR & TD: Then let's return to some of the things that have been surprising us. In a recent article, you made the point that the terrorists mirror our civilisation. They are not out there, but mirror our own Western world. Can you elaborate on that some more?

SZ: This, of course, is my answer to this popular thesis by Samuel P Huntington and others that there is a so-called clash of civilisations. I don't buy this thesis, for a number of reasons.

Today's racism is precisely this racism of cultural difference. It no longer says: 'I am more than you.' It says: 'I want my culture, you can have yours.' Today, every right-winger says just that. These people can be very postmodern. They acknowledge that there is no natural tradition, that every culture is artificially constructed. In France, for example, you have a neo-fascist right that refers to the deconstructionists, saying: 'Yes, the lesson of deconstructionism against universalism is that there are only particular identities. So, if blacks can have their culture, why should we not have ours?'

We should also consider the first reaction of the American 'moral majority', specifically Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, to the 11 September attacks. Pat Robertson is a bit eccentric, but Jerry Falwell is a mainstream figure, who endorsed Reagan and is part of the mainstream, not an eccentric freak. Now, their reaction was the same as the Arabs', though he did retract a couple of days later. Falwell said the World Trade Centre bombings were a sign that God no longer protects the USA, because the USA had chosen a path of evil,

homosexuality and promiscuity.

According to the FBI, there are now at least two million so-called radical right-wingers in the USA. Some are quite violent, killing abortion doctors, not to mention the Oklahoma City bombing. To me, this shows that the same anti-liberal, violent attitude also grows in our own civilisation. I see that as proof that this terrorism is an aspect of our time. We cannot link it to a particular civilisation.

Regarding Islam, we should look at history. In fact, I think it is very interesting in this regard to look at ex-Yugoslavia. Why was Sarajevo and Bosnia the place of violent conflict? Because it was ethnically the most mixed republic of ex-Yugoslavia. Why? Because it was Muslim-dominated, and historically they were definitely the most tolerant. We Slovenes, on the other hand, and the Croats, both Catholics, threw them out several hundred years ago.

This proves that there is nothing inherently intolerant about Islam. We must rather ask why this terrorist aspect of Islam arises now. The tension between tolerance and fundamentalist violence is within a civilisation.

Take another example: on CNN we saw President Bush present a letter of a seven-year-old girl whose father is a pilot and now around Afghanistan. In the letter she said that she loves her father, but if her country needs his death, she is ready to give her father for her country. President Bush described this as American patriotism. Now, do a simple mental experiment – imagine the same event with an Afghan girl saying that. We would immediately say: 'What cynicism, what fundamentalism, what manipulation of small children.' So there is already something in our perception. But what shocks us in others we ourselves also do in a way.

SR & TD: So multiculturalism and fundamentalism could be two sides of the same coin?

SZ: There is nothing to be said against tolerance. But when you buy this multiculturalist tolerance, you buy many other things with it. Isn't it symptomatic that multiculturalism exploded at the very historic moment when the last traces of working-class politics disappeared from political space? For many former leftists, this multiculturalism is a kind of ersatz working-class politics. We don't even know whether the working class still exists, so let's talk about exploitation of others.

There may be nothing wrong with that as such. But there is a danger that issues of economic exploitation are converted into problems of cultural tolerance. And then you have only to make one step further, that of Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Etrangers à nous mêmes', and say we cannot tolerate others because we cannot tolerate otherness in ourselves. Here we have a pure pseudo-psychoanalytic cultural reductionism.

Isn't it sad and tragic that the only relatively strong – not fringe – political movement that still directly addresses the working class is made up of right-wing populists? They are the only ones. Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, for example. I was shocked when I saw him three years ago at a congress of the Front National. He brought a black Frenchman, an Algerian and a Jew on the podium, embraced them and said: 'They are no less French than I am. Only the international cosmopolitan companies who neglect French patriotic interests are my enemy.' So the price is that only right-wingers still talk about

economic exploitation.

The second thing I find wrong with this multiculturalist tolerance is that it is often hypocritical in the sense that the other whom they tolerate is already a reduced other. The other is okay in so far as this other is only a question of food, of culture, of dances. What about clitoridectomy? What about my friends who say: 'We must respect Hindus.' Okay, but what about one of the old Hindu customs which, as we know, is that when a husband dies, the wife is burned. Now, do we respect that? Problems arise here.

An even more important problem is that this notion of tolerance effectively masks its opposite: intolerance. It is a recurring theme in all my books that, from this liberal perspective, the basic perception of another human being is always as something that may in some way hurt you.

SR & TD: Are you referring to what we call victim culture?

SZ: The discourse of victimisation is almost the predominant discourse today. You can be a victim of the environment, of smoking, of sexual harassment. I find this reduction of the subject to a victim sad. In what sense? There is an extremely narcissistic notion of personality here. And, indeed, an intolerant one, insofar as what it means is that we can no longer tolerate violent encounters with others – and these encounters are always violent.

Let me briefly address sexual harassment for a moment. Of course I am opposed to it, but let's be frank. Say I am passionately attached, in love, or whatever, to another human being and I declare my love, my passion for him or her. There is always something shocking, violent in it. This may sound like a joke, but it isn't – you cannot do the game of erotic seduction in politically correct terms. There is a moment of violence, when you say: 'I love you, I want you.' In no way can you bypass this violent aspect. So I even think that the fear of sexual harassment in a way includes this aspect, a fear of a too violent, too open encounter with another human being.

Another thing that bothers me about this multiculturalism is when people ask me: 'How can you be sure that you are not a racist?' My answer is that there is only one way. If I can exchange insults, brutal jokes, dirty jokes, with a member of a different race and we both know it's not meant in a racist way. If, on the other hand, we play this politically correct game – 'Oh, I respect you, how interesting your customs are' – this is inverted racism, and it is disgusting.

In the Yugoslav army where we were all of mixed nationalities, how did I become friends with Albanians? When we started to exchange obscenities, sexual innuendo, jokes. This is why this politically correct respect is just, as Freud put it, 'zielgehemmt'. You still have the aggression towards the other.

For me there is one measure of true love: you can insult the other. Like in that horrible German comedy film from 1943 where Marika Röck treats her fiancé very brutally. This fiancé is a rich, important person, so her father asks her why are you treating him like that. And she gives the right answer. She says: 'But I love him, and since I love him, I can do with him whatever I want.' That's the truth of it. If there is true love, you can say horrible things and anything goes.

When multiculturalists tell you to respect the others, I always have this uncanny association that this is dangerously close to how we treat our children: the idea that we should respect them, even when we know that what they

believe is not true. We should not destroy their illusions. No, I think that others deserve better – not to be treated like children.

SR & TD: In your book on the subject you talk of a 'true universalism' as an opposite of this false sense of global harmony. What do you mean by that?

SZ: Here I need to ask myself a simple Habermasian question: how can we ground universality in our experience? Naturally, I don't accept this postmodern game that each of us inhabits his or her particular universe. I believe there is universality. But I don't believe in some a priori universality of fundamental rules or universal notions. The only true universality we have access to is political universality. Which is not solidarity in some abstract idealist sense, but solidarity in struggle.

If we are engaged in the same struggle, if we discover that – and this for me is the authentic moment of solidarity – being feminists and ecologists, or feminists and workers, we all of a sudden have this insight: 'My God, but our struggle is ultimately the same!' This political universality would be the only authentic universality. And this, of course, is what is missing today, because politics today is increasingly a politics of merely negotiating compromises between different positions.

SR & TD: The post-political subverts the freedom that has been talked about so much in recent weeks. Is that what you are saying?

SZ: I do claim that what is sold to us today as freedom is something from which this more radical dimension of freedom and democracy has been removed – in other words, the belief that basic decisions about social development are discussed or brought about involving as many as possible, a majority. In this sense, we do not have an actual experience of freedom today. Our freedoms are increasingly reduced to the freedom to choose your lifestyle. You can even choose your ethnic identity up to a point.

But this new world of freedom described by people like Ulrich Beck, who say everything is a matter of reflective negotiation, of choice, can include new unfreedom. My favourite example is this, and here we have ideology at its purest: we know that it is very difficult today in more and more professional domains to get a long-term job. Academics or journalists, for example, now often live on a two- or three-year contract, that you then have to renegotiate. Of course, most of us experience this as something traumatising, shocking, where you can never be sure. But then, along comes the postmodern ideologist: 'Oh, but this is just a new freedom, you can reinvent yourself every two years!'

The problem for me is how unfreedom is hidden, concealed in precisely what is presented to us as new freedoms. I think that the explosion of these new freedoms, which fall under the domain of what Michel Foucault called 'care of the self', involves greater social unfreedom.

Twenty or 30 years ago there was still discussion as to whether the future would be fascist, socialist, communist or capitalist. Today, nobody even discusses this. These fundamental social choices are simply no longer perceived as a matter to decide. A certain domain of radical social questions has simply been depoliticised.

I find it very sad that, precisely in an era in which tremendous changes are taking place and, indeed entire social coordinates are transformed, we don't

experience this as something about which we decided freely.

SR & TD: So, let's return to the aftermath of 11 September. We now experience a strange kind of war that we are told will not end for a long time. What do you think of this turn of events?

SZ: I don't quite agree with those who claim that this World Trade Centre explosion was the start of the first war of the twenty-first century. I think it was a war of the twentieth century, in the sense that it was still a singular, spectacular event. The new wars would be precisely as you mentioned – it will not even be clear whether it is a war or not. Somehow life will go on and we will learn that we are at war, as we are now.

What worries me is how many Americans perceived these bombings as something that made them into innocents: as if to say, until now, we had problems, Vietnam, and so on. Now we are victims, and this somehow justifies us in fully identifying with American patriotism.

That's a risky gesture. The big choice for Americans is whether they retreat into this patriotism – or, as my friend Ariel Dorfman wrote recently: 'America has the chance to become a member of the community of nations. America always behaves as though it were special. It should use this attack as an opportunity to admit that it is not special, but simply and truly part of this world.' That's the big choice.

There is something so disturbingly tragic in this idea of the wealthiest country in the world bombing one of the poorest countries. It reminds me of the well-known joke about the idiot who loses a key in the dark and looks for it beneath the light. When asked why, he says: 'I know I lost it over there, but it's easier to look for it here.'

But at the same time I must confess that the left also deeply disappointed me. Falling back into this safe pacifist attitude – violence never stops violence, give peace a chance – is abstract and doesn't work here. First, because this is not a universal rule. I always ask my leftist friends who repeat that mantra: What would you have said in 1941 with Hitler. Would you also say: 'We shouldn't resist, because violence never helps?' It is simply a fact that at some point you have to fight. You have to return violence with violence. The problem is not that for me, but that this war can never be a solution.

It is also false and misleading to perceive these bombings as some kind of third world working-class response to American imperialism. In that case, the American fundamentalists we already discussed, are also a working-class response, which they clearly are not. We face a challenge to rethink our coordinates and I hope that this will be a good result of this tragic event. That we will not just use it to do more of the same but to think about what is really changing in our world.

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