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Psychoanalysis and the Post-Political: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek

Christopher Hanlon

FOR MANY, Jacques Lacan represents postmodern theory at its height—that is, at its worst. Lacan, so say his detractors, made a career out of obscurantism, and may not even have believed very much of what he said. Noam Chomsky once indicated such a hypothesis when he explained that “my frank opinion is that [Lacan] was a conscious charlatan, and he was simply playing games with the Paris intellectual community to see how much absurdity he could produce and still be taken seriously.”¹ Even Lacanians might find it in their hearts to forgive Chomsky such a remark, since it was Chomsky who, after asking Lacan a question concerning thought (at the latter’s 1968 presentation at MIT), received the reply, “We think we think with our brain; personally, I think with my feet. That’s the only way I come into contact with anything solid. I do occasionally think with my forehead, when I bang into something.”² As if to condense the aura of contrariness and enigma he cultivated in such exchanges, Lacan often relayed his teachings through now-infamous maxims and mathemes, those Zen koans of the French postmodern era: “Desire is desire of the Other,” “There is no sexual relation,” “The Woman does not exist.”³ No wonder Chomsky and many others turn their heads in exasperation.

The best counterpoint to suspicions such as Chomsky’s may well be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek, whose frenetic endorsements of Lacanian theory achieve a dense complexity even as they provide moments of startling (and typically humorous) clarity. Take Žižek’s way of explaining why even one of the most banal features of late twentieth-century culture, the laugh-track of situation comedy, is itself an illustration of the Lacanian thesis that “desire is desire of the Other”:

... let us remind ourselves of a phenomenon quite usual in popular television shows or serials: “canned laughter.” After some supposedly funny or witty remark, you can hear the laughter and applause included in the soundtrack of the show itself—here we have the exact opposite of the Chorus in classical tragedy; it is here that we have to look for “living Antiquity.” That is to say, why the laughter? The first possible answer—that it serves to remind us when to laugh—is interesting enough, since it implies the paradox that laughter is a

matter of duty and not of some spontaneous feeling; but this answer is not sufficient because we do *not* usually laugh. The only correct answer would be that the Other—embodied in the television set—is relieving us even of our duty to laugh—is laughing instead of us. So even if, tired from a hard day's stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television set, we can say afterwards that objectively, through the medium of the Other, we had a really good time.⁴

Whimsical and yet theoretically earnest solutions to everyday conundrums such as this can have the effect of seducing even Žižek's most skeptical readers, but this is not to say that Žižek's work hasn't earned him opponents. For many, Žižek's Lacanian analyses of contemporary culture cannot quite shed the burdens of classical psychoanalysis itself: in an academy happily enamored of historicism and often disinclined toward universalisms of any kind, Žižek's mostly ahistorical, psychoanalytic defense of the Enlightenment draws criticism from various epistemological camps. One of the most persistent reproaches, for instance, has been voiced by Judith Butler, who asks rhetorically, "Can Žižekian psychoanalysis respond to the pressure to theorize the historical specificity of trauma, to provide texture for the specific exclusions, annihilations, and unthinkable losses that structure . . . social phenomena . . . ?"⁵ Others have raised suspicions about the political implications of the Žižekian subject: "[Žižek] views the modern individual as caught in the dichotomy between his or her universal status as a member of civil society, and the particularistic attachments of ethnicity, nation and tradition, and this duality is reflected in his own ambiguous political profile—*marxisant* cultural critic on the international stage, member of a neo-liberal and nationalistically inclined governing party back home."⁶

I recently met with Žižek in order to discuss such complaints, as well as to elicit his opinions on the ongoing crises in the ex-Yugoslavia, Žižek's country of birth. The latter topic has become a heated subject for Žižek, who ran a close campaign for the presidency of Slovenia in 1990, and who views the resurgence of nationalism in the Balkan states as a phenomenon that has gone completely misunderstood by the West. Since the Bosnian conflict began near the outset of the last decade, ex-Yugoslav politics have taken up more space in Žižek's thinking, but still, there is probably no dominant feature within the contemporary landscape he analyzes. For Žižek, one quickly realizes, life is essentially an excuse to theorize; hence, his Lacanian commentary on the psychopathology of everyday existence rarely ceases. As we packed into a crowded elevator in New York's St. Moritz hotel, for instance, the panel of control buttons caught Žižek's eye, provoking an excursus on the faulty logic behind the hotel's symbolic exclusion of the thirteenth floor. "You

cannot cheat God!" he proclaimed, drawing bewildered glances from the people around us. "They shouldn't call it the fourteenth floor—they should just make the thirteenth floor an empty mezzanine, an ominous lack in the midst of the others." Somehow, the commentary slid effortlessly, naturally, into the subject of voyeurism, and from there, to the Lacanian distinction between the gaze and the look. Our later conversation partook of a similar, free-associative pattern even as it returned to a few fundamental concerns: the position of Lacanian theory in today's academy, Žižek's friendly antagonism with Judith Butler, Žižek's own polemic against multicultural identity politics. And talking with Žižek, one realizes that these issues are all of a piece with a larger problem: What kinds of political ontology—what manner of social perception, for that matter—does today's theoretical constellation allow or, more particularly, foreclose?

Christopher Hanlon: *Your home city, Ljubljana, is home to a number of prominent Lacanians today. Was there something particular about the Slovene—then the Yugoslav—scene that made Lacan particularly crucial during the 1980s, when you were first formulating your project?*

Slavoj Žižek: I believe it was simply some incredible contingency. The first thing here is that, in the ex-Yugoslavia, the phenomenon is strictly limited to Slovenia—there are practically no Lacanians in the other Yugoslav republics. But I'm often asked this question: "Why there?" The only thing I can say is that there were some marginal, not-sufficient, negative conditions. One was that the intellectual climate was very open; or rather, the regime was open if you didn't directly pursue political opposition. There was intellectual freedom, borders were open, and so on And the other thing was that Slovenia was, far from being isolated from Europe, a kind of microcosm, in the sense that all of what went on in the philosophical scene around the world, all main orientations, were fairly represented. This is to say, there was a clear Frankfurt School or Critical Theory orientation, there was a Heideggerian orientation, there were analytical philosophers, and so on and so on But within this constellation, I don't have a precise theory, though it's something I'm often asked. Why there? One thing is that in other areas—around Zagreb and Belgrade, in Croatia and Serbia—they have much more substantial psychoanalytical traditions, and maybe this is what prevented them from appropriating Lacan. In Slovenia, there was no psychoanalytic tradition, so we were starting from a zero-point.

For me, the original spark came out of the confluence of two traditions: Frankfurt School marxism and, of course, Lacanian psychoanalysis. When I was a young student in Slovenia, the intellectual scene

was divided between Heideggerians and the Frankfurt School. Under Yugoslav Communism, that is, dialectical materialism was dead; it was no longer the State philosophy. It was some kind of vague humanist marxism, linked to the Frankfurt School. At least in Slovenia, the main opposition was Heideggerian: this is why my first book was on Heidegger and language. But what made me suspicious was this phenomenon, as it seemed to me, by which both Heideggerians and the followers of the Frankfurt School began to speak the same language. This precisely aroused me.

CH: *Though Slovene culture and politics play a pronounced role in your later work—say, from The Metastases of Enjoyment onward—American popular culture remains the central touchstone. Do you see America as more pathological, more ripe for analysis?*

SŽ: This is perhaps the result of my personal trauma, which was that my relationship with Slovene art, especially with Slovene literature and cinema, was extremely negative. In Slovenia we have a cult of literature, especially poetry, as “the fundamental cornerstone of our society”; the idea is that the Slovene poets effectively created the Slovene nation, so there’s a false veneration of poetry. On top of it, most Slovene writers now are, in no uncertain terms, right-wing nationalists, so I’m happily not on speaking terms with them—it’s a kind of negative gesture of pride for me to turn to American pop culture. Although, in the last few years, I have been turning toward so-called “literary” or high culture; my new book will deal with Shklovsky, Tchaikovsky, and so on.

CH: *Another new book? Does Verso at all worry that you might flood the market?*

SŽ: There have been some surprises here. For example, they were worried about *The Ticklish Subject*. “After so many books, who will buy such a thick book, 400 pages . . .” But OK—I know that I am very close to flooding the market; the next thing will be that next month a short book on David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* will come out by the University of Washington Press, Seattle. Then it will be this other book, this big triple-orgy, this dialogue, between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and me. The idea was that each of us should write an opening statement, maybe fifty pages, defining his or her position toward the other two. Then two rounds of questions and answers; it grew into a big book, about three hundred printed pages. And it’s very interesting to me, because it isn’t a polite debate; it’s nasty, nasty—it almost but I hope didn’t ruin our personal relationships. We’re really pretty good friends, but it does get

nasty, with all these rude expressions, you know: “He’s totally missing the point,” “He didn’t do his homework,” “Sounds like she’s decided to tone it down a little bit,” and so on and so on.

CH: *I want to ask about one common critique of your work, most recently voiced by James Hurley, that centers on what we might call your “intrapsychic” focus.⁷ For you, of course, ideological coercion occurs at the libidinal level, at the constitutive level of a subject who “is” a disjunction between the Symbolic and the Real. But some commentators have expressed concern that this intrapsychic focus has the effect of leaving us little to do by way of intervening upon specifically institutional mechanisms of coercion. Do such objections concern you?*

SŽ: No, because I think that such criticism misses the point of Freudian subjectivity. I think that the very term “intrapsychic” is misleading; I think that, at least for Lacan, who emphasizes this again and again, the proper dimension of the unconscious is not “deep inside.” The proper dimension is outside, materialized in the state apparatuses. The model of split subjectivity, as later echoed by Louis Althusser, is not that there is something deep in me which is repressed; it’s not this internal psychic conflict. What subverts my conscious attitudes are the implicit ideological beliefs externalized, embodied in my activity. For instance, I’m interested in this new fashion of Hollywood Holocaust comedy. Have you noticed how, starting with *Life Is Beautiful*, we have a new genre, repeated in *Jakob the Liar*, and so on? Apropos of this, I ask, “Why do Holocaust tragedies fail?” For me, Spielberg is at his lowest during a scene from *Schindler’s List*, when the concentration-camp commander faces the Jewish girl and we have this internal monologue, where he is split between his attraction to the girl and his racist tract: you know, “Are you a rat? Are you a human being?” and so on. I think this split is false. I take here quite literally Lacan’s dictum that psychoanalysis is not psychology, that the ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that when you analyze phenomena like Nazis or Stalinism, it is totally wrong to think that you will arrive at any pertinent result through so-called in-depth profiles of figures like Stalin or Hitler. Here there is a lesson to be learned from Hannah Arendt—though at a different level I disagree with her—about the banality of evil. The banality of evil means for me that the key is not, for example, the personality of Eichmann; there is a gap separating the acts of Eichmann from Eichmann’s self-experience. But what I would add is that this doesn’t mean that Eichmann was simply innocent in the sense that he was possessed by some kind of brutally objective logic. My idea is more and more that we are dealing with—to reference my eternal idea about canned laughter—what I am tempted to call a kind of canned hatred. In the same way that the TV set laughs

for you, relieves you of the obligation to really laugh, Eichmann himself didn't really have to hate the Jews; he was able to be just an ordinary person. It's the objective ideological machinery that did the hating; the hatred was imported, it was "out there."

CH: *He even reported that he admired the Jews, that he used to literally vomit with disgust at the efficiency of the extermination . . .*

SŽ: Yes! So again, I would say that this reproach misses the point in the sense that the fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis is that the unconscious is outside, crystallized in institutional practices. This is why, for me, commodity fetishism is a nice example of this—not collective, I'm not speaking of course about some Jungian collective unconscious—unconscious in the sense of the set of presuppositions, beliefs. The subject is not aware of these beliefs, but the beliefs are materialized in the social practices, rituals, institutions in which the subject participates. So in this sense, I claim that this idea that when you analyze in psychoanalytic terms what are ideological phenomena, you translate them into intrapsychic phenomena, definitely does not hold for Lacan. If anything, Lacan can be accused of the opposite mistake, of externalizing these issues. For example, in a friendly discussion with him years ago, this is what Fred Jameson reproached me with: that the inner self-experience disappears with me, that I externalize everything into social rituals.

Let me put it this way: Lacan is an author with which it's incredible how "anything goes." It's incredible how whatever comes to our head, you can attribute to Lacan—people are very insensitive to the things Lacan actually says. OK, he's a difficult author, but nonetheless, some of the things he says are formulated very clearly. Just to give you an example: though I appreciate her very much—especially her late work, *The Psychic Life of Power*—Judith Butler repeatedly makes this strange claim, this strange thesis, that for us Lacanians (not for her), "unconscious" is Imaginary resistance to the Symbolic Law. Where did she find this? I'm almost tempted to say, "Wait a minute! If there is one phrase that is the first commonplace about Lacan, the first association, it is 'The unconscious is structured like a language!'" The unconscious *is* the Symbolic order. Where did she find this idea that the unconscious is Imaginary resistance? I know what she means—her idea is that we are caught in the web of social relations which are the Symbolic order, and that unconsciously, our resistance is to identify with the set of social norms, and so on and so on. OK! An interesting thesis, but unfortunately, it has *absolutely* nothing to do with Lacan.

CH: *I'd like to discuss your ongoing debate with Butler, but first, could we talk about another more general facet of your reception? I've seen you speak on several occasions now, and each time, I notice the same split within your audience. On the one hand, there's a kind of weird delight you can elicit, an experience of almost fanatical excitement, but on the other, one also observes a deep displeasure. Of course, many public intellectuals gain both followers and opponents, but with you, there's almost no middle ground between these two extremes . . .*

SŽ: . . . I know. My friends tell me that if you check the amazon.com reviews of my books, I get either five stars or no stars. You know, either, "It's total crap!" or "It's a revelation!" Never, "It's a moderately good book, not very good, but some solid achievements." This is an interesting point in the sense that—this is true especially in England, with *Radical Philosophy*; they don't like me there—there are these fantasies circulating around me, that I shouldn't be trusted; beneath this apparently marxist, left-wing surface, there is this strange, decadent, even nationalistic attachment . . .

CH: *Peter Dews has indicated such a suspicion [in The Limits of Disenchantment].*

SŽ: Yeah! And I'm still on speaking terms with Peter Dews, but I told him, "My God!" Where did he get that? Because the irony is that in Slovenia, nationalists cannot stand me. In Slovenia, I'm always attacked as a "national nihilist," a "cynicist," and so on . . . The idea that I'm a nationalist seems simply ridiculous to me, a kind of propaganda. The catch is the following one: I come from Slovenia, and for a lot of Western left-wingers, we Slovenes committed the original sin. The idea is that we were the first ones to leave Yugoslavia, that we started the process and then hypocritically escaped the consequences. We stepped out when the house of cards was starting to collapse, and started it all, and we didn't even suffer for it. It's incredible how strong this accusation is. So Dews's big reproach is "Why didn't you oppose the disintegration of Yugoslavia?" First, I was pretty much indifferent to this at the time. But the thing that surprises me about this is that—typically in England—the very same people who are opposed to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, if you ask them about, for instance, Ireland: all these principles are suddenly reversed. So *that* is not nationalist madness?

I guess I would say that at least one level of this political suspicion against me is conditioned by what I call this politically-correct Western-leftist racism. In the aftermath of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a new entity was produced with which I don't want to have anything to do: the

traveling post-Yugoslav academic. You know, going around, telling the world how horrible it is, all this nationalist madness, blah, blah, blah . . .

CH: *"How can you stand up here talking about David Lynch when your country is in flames . . .?"*

SŽ: Yeah, yeah, that kind of stuff. And I've never wanted to play that game, to present myself as this kind of victim. This is one aspect. The other aspect is a general resistance to Lacan. Let's put it this way: vaguely, we have three orientations today. For phenomenologists or Heideggerians, Lacan is too eccentric, not to be taken seriously. For Habermasians—though Dews is usually an exception here—Lacanianism is some kind of protofascists, irrationalists, whatever; basically, they prefer not to enter into discussion with us. For example, in one of her last articles, I saw Nancy Fraser make a line of distinction between Kristeva and Lacan, claiming that Kristeva may be of some use, but that Lacan can be of absolutely *no* use. . . . With deconstruction, it's the same—you know, this incredible tension between Lacan and Derrida. Then, of course, for cognitivists, Lacan is simply deconstruction. So all main orientations definitely reject the Lacanian approach.

CH: *Well, apropos of this Habermas/Lacan division you mention . . .*

SŽ: . . . But wait a minute—who stands for Lacan? I don't think we are strong enough Lacanians to function as opposition. The debate is usually either Habermas versus communitarians, who consider Habermas too much of a universalist, or on the other hand Habermas versus deconstructionists, who again question whether we need universal norms. The point is . . . don't you think that for Habermasians we rarely even enter the picture? The big debate is, for example in the feminist circle, Nancy Fraser or Seyla Benhabib against Judith Butler, against Wendy Brown—you have that opposition. Or deconstruction versus neopragmatism—we simply do not enter the picture.

CH: *Well, here in the States, the opposition seems to me, more and more, to be between neopragmatists—I'm not thinking of Habermasians so much as I am about people like Richard Rorty, Walter Benn Michaels—and "the theorists," in a totalizing, reductive sense. For instance, a couple of years ago, I saw Cornel West intone a kind of neopragmatist complaint against you during a roundtable discussion: how do you justify your highly abstract work, when there are concrete political battles to be waged, and then call it liberal?*

SŽ: Cornel West? Was that the Harvard roundtable?

CH: *Yes. In any case, I point out the instance as an indication that perhaps it's theory itself that is discounted, or discountable, right now, rather than Lacanian theory in particular.*

SŽ: Well, I don't think that . . . OK, Cornel West did say that. But I nonetheless don't think that he perceives us as the main opponent. Because this very reproach that you mention is not a reproach that can be addressed specifically to Lacan. My idea is the old marxist idea that this immediate reference to experience, practice, struggle, etcetera, usually relies on the most abstract and pure theory, and as an old philosopher I would say, as you said before, that we simply cannot escape theory. I fanatically oppose this turn which has taken place in social theory, this idea that there is no longer time for great theoretical projects, that all we can do is narrativize the experience of our suffering, that all various ethnic or sexual groups can ultimately do is to narrate their painful, traumatic experience. I think this is a catastrophe. I think that this fits perfectly the existing capitalist order, that there is nothing subversive in it. I think that this fits perfectly today's ideology of victimization, where in order to legitimize, to gain power politically, you must present yourself, somehow, as the victim.

An anecdote of Richard Rorty's is of some interest to me here. You know Rorty's thesis—and you know, incidentally, I like Rorty, because he openly says what others won't. But Rorty once pointed out—I forget where—how if you take big opponents, such as Habermas and Derrida, and ask them how they would react to a concrete social problem, whether to support this measure or that measure . . . Are there any concrete political divisions between Habermas and Derrida, although they cannot stand each other? There are none! The same general left-of-center, not-too-liberal but basically democratic vision . . . practically, their positions are indistinguishable. Now, Rorty draws from this the conclusion that philosophy doesn't matter. I am tempted to draw a more aggressive, opposite conclusion: that philosophy *does* matter, but that this political indifference signals the fact that although they appear opposed, they actually share a set of presuppositions at the level of their respective philosophies. Besides, not *all* philosophers would adopt the same position; someone like Heidegger definitely would not, and a left-winger like [Alain] Badiou definitely would not.

The big question for me today concerns this new consensus—in England it's the “third way,” in Germany it's the “new middle”—this idea that capitalism is here to stay, we can maybe just smooth it out a little with multiculturalism, and so on . . . Is this a new horizon or not? What I appreciate in someone like Rorty is that at least he openly makes this point. What annoys me about some deconstructionists is that they adopt

as their rhetorical post the idea that what they are doing is somehow incredibly subversive, radical, and so on. But they do not render thematic their own deep political resignation.

CH: *You've been a long-time opponent of what you call postmodern identity politics, and especially the subversive hope some intellectuals attach to them. But with your newest book, this critique acquires a more honed feel. Now, you suggest that partisans of the identity-politics struggle have had a "depoliticizing" effect in some way. Could you hone your comments even further? Do you mean that identity politics have come to supersede what for you are more important antagonisms (such as that between capital and democracy, for instance), or do you mean something more fundamental, that politics itself has been altered for the worse?*

SŽ: Definitely that it has been altered. Let me put it this way: if one were to make this reproach directly, they would explode. They would say, "My God, isn't it the exact opposite? Isn't it that identity politics politicized, opened up, a new domain, spheres of life that were previously not perceived as the province of politics?" But first, this form of politicization nonetheless involves a transformation of "politics" into "cultural politics," where certain questions are simply no longer asked. Now, I'm not saying that we should simply return to some marxist-fundamentalist essentialism, or whatever. I'm just saying that . . . my God, let's at least just take note of this, that certain questions—like those concerning the nature of relationships of production, whether political democracy is really the ultimate horizon, and so on—these questions are simply no longer asked. And what I claim is that this is the necessary consequence of postmodern identity politics. You cannot claim, as they usually do, that "No, we don't abandon those other aspects, we just add to politics proper." No, the abandonment is always implicit. Why? Take a concrete example, like the multitude of studies on the exploitation of either African Americans or more usually illegal Mexican immigrants who work as harvesters here in the U.S. I appreciate such studies very much, but in most of them—to a point at least—silently, implicitly, economic exploitation is read as the result of intolerance, racism. In Germany, they don't even speak of the working class; they speak of immigrants . . .

CH: *"Visiting workers."*

SŽ: Right. But the point is that we now seem to believe that the economic aspect of power is an expression of intolerance. The fundamental problem then becomes "How can we tolerate the other?" Here,

we are dealing with a false psychologization. The problem is not that of intrapsychic tolerance, and so I'm opposed to this way in which all problems are translated into problems of racism, intolerance, etcetera. In this sense, I claim that with so-called postmodern identity politics, the whole concept of politics has changed, because it's not *only* that certain questions aren't any longer asked. The moment you begin to talk about . . . what's the usual triad? "Gender . . ."

CH: *"Gender/Race/Class"?*

SŽ: Yes. The moment you start to talk this way, this "class" becomes just one aspect within an overall picture which already mystifies the true social antagonisms. Here I disagree with Ernesto Laclau's more optimistic picture of the postmodern age, where there are multiple antagonisms coexisting, etcetera . . .

CH: . . . *But aren't you then subordinating what is "merely cultural" to a set of "authentically" political problems?*

SŽ: No, no. I'm well aware, for example, that the whole problematic of political economy also had its own symbolic dimension. . . . I'm not playing "merely cultural" problems against "real" problems. What I'm saying is that with this new proliferation of political subjects, certain questions are no longer asked. Is the state our ultimate horizon? Is capitalism our ultimate horizon? I just take note that certain concerns have disappeared.

CH: *Let's talk about another aspect of this critique you lay out. Part of your polemic against this "post-political" sphere concerns the great premium you place on the "Lacanian act," the gesture that resituates everything, creates its own condition of possibility, and so on. Could you specify this further by way of pointing to an example of such an act? In culture or politics, is there some instance of an authentic Lacanian act that we can turn toward?*

SŽ: [...] You've got me here, in that sense. But I'm not mystifying the notion of act into some big event What I'm saying is that the way the political space is structured today more and more prevents the emergence of the act. But I'm not thinking of some metaphysical event—once I was even accused of conceiving of some protofascist, out-of-nowhere intervention. For me, an act is simply something that changes the very horizon in which it takes place, and I claim that the present situation closes the space for such acts.

We could even draw the pessimist conclusion—and though he doesn't

say so publicly, I know privately that Alain Badiou tends to this conclusion—that maybe politics, for some foreseeable time, is no longer a domain where acts are possible. That is, there were times during which acts did happen—the French Revolution, the October Revolution, maybe the '68 uprisings.

I can only say what will have been an act: something which would break this liberal consensus, though of course not in a fascist way. But otherwise, there are examples from culture, from individuals' experiences; there are acts all around in this sense. The problem for me is that in politics, again, the space for an act is closing viciously.

CH: *Let's move on to another topic. I have to ask you about your reaction to what may be Derrida's last word on his whole conflict with Lacan, published in Resistances to Psychoanalysis. Without retracting any of his original theses concerning Lacan's seminar on "The Purloined Letter," Derrida now insists that "I loved him and admired him a lot," and also that "Not only was I not criticizing Lacan, but I was not even writing a sort of overseeing or objectifying metadiscourse on Lacan,"⁸ that it was all part of a mutual dialogue What is your response to this?*

SŽ: I would just like to make two points. First, I still think, as I first developed in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, that "resistance" is the appropriate term here. In deconstructionist circles, you can almost feel it, this strong embarrassment about Lacan. So they can buy Lacan only, as it were, conditionally, only insofar as they can say he didn't go far enough. I claim that the truth is the exact opposite; the only way they can appropriate Lacan is to submit him to a radical misreading. You know, all the time we hear about the "phallic signifier," and so on, and so on, but the figure of Lacan they construct is precisely what Lacan was trying to undermine. For example, one of the standard criticisms of some deconstructionists here in the States is that Lacan elevates the "Big Other" into some kind of non-historical, a priori symbolic order My only, perhaps naïve answer to this is that the big Lacanian thesis from the mid-fifties is that "The Big Other doesn't exist." He repeats this again and again, and the point of this is precisely that there is no symbolic order that would serve as a kind of prototranscendental guarantor. My second point would be a very materialist, Althusserian one. Without reducing the theoretical aspects of this conflict, let's not forget that academia is itself an "Ideological State Apparatus," and that all these orientations are not simply theoretical orientations, but what's in question is thousands of posts, departmental politics, and so on. Lacanians are excluded from this. That is to say, we are not a field. You know, Derrida has his own empire, Habermasians have their own

empire—dozens of departments, all connected—but with Lacanians, it's not like this. It's maybe a person here, a person there, usually marginal positions. So I think we should never underestimate this aspect.

I think it would be much nicer, in a way, if Derrida said the opposite: not that "I really hated him," but "there is a tension; we are irreducible to each other." This statement you point out is the kiss of death. What's the message in this apparently nice statement from Derrida? The message is that "the difference is really not so strong, so that our field, deconstruction, can swallow all of this; it's really an internal discussion." I think it is not. I'm not even saying who's right; I'm just claiming—and I think this is more important than ever to emphasize—the tension between Derrida and Lacan and their followers is not an interfamilial struggle. It's a struggle between two radically different global perceptions. Even when they appear to use approximately the same terms, refer to the same orders, they do it in a totally different way, and this is why all attempts to mediate between them ultimately fall short. Once, I was at a conference at Cardozo Law School where Drucilla Cornell maintained that the Lacanian Real was a good "first attempt" at penetrating beyond this ahistorical Symbolic order, but that it also retains this dimension of otherness that is still defined through the Symbolic order, and that the Derridean notion of writing incorporates this otherness into the Symbolic order itself more effectively, much more radically, so that the "real Real" lies with Derrida's *écriture*, Lacan's "Real" is still under the dimension of the metaphysical-logocentric order, and so on. This is typical of what I'm talking about. We should simply accept that there is no common language here, that Lacan is no closer to Derrida than to Hegel, than to Heidegger, than to whomever you want.

CH: Judith Butler—with whom you have engaged in ongoing if cordial debate—maintains that the Lacanian topology is itself dubious for its nonhistorical, transcultural presuppositions. You yourself have written that "jouissance is non-historical"⁹—How do you respond to complaints such as Butler's?

SŽ: Ah! This is what we are struggling with for dozens, maybe hundreds of pages, in this book. My answer is to say that *she* is non-historical. That is to say, she presents a certain narrative, the same as Ernesto [Laclau]. With Ernesto, it's that we have an older type of essentialist class politics, then slowly, slowly, essentialism starts to disintegrate, and now we have this contingent struggle for hegemony where everything is open to negotiation With Judith Butler, there is the same implicit narrative: in the old times, there was sex essentialism, biologically-identified; then slowly, slowly, this started disintegrating into a sex/gender distinction, the awareness that gender is not biologically—

but rather culturally—constructed; finally, we come to this performativity, contingency, and so on and so on. So the same story, from essentialist zero-point to this open contingency where we have struggles for hegemony which are undecided. My first reproach as a philosopher to this is that here, some metanarrative is missing. To ask a very stupid, naïve question: why were people one hundred and fifty years ago essentialists? Were they simply stupid? You know what I mean? There is a certain, almost teleological narrative here, in which from the “bad” zero-point of essentialism, slowly we come to the “good” realization that everything is a performative effect, that nothing is exempted from the contingent struggle for hegemony. But don’t you need a metanarrative if you want to avoid the conclusion that people were simply stupid one hundred and fifty years ago?

CH: Well, perhaps not a metanarrative in the sense of a guiding historical trajectory, but an acceptance of a loosely Foucauldian premise, that one hundred and fifty years ago there were in place certain institutional mechanisms, power-discourses, which coerced belief from their subjects, engendered them . . .

SŽ: Ah! But if you accept this Foucauldian metanarrative, then things get a little complicated. Because Foucault is not speaking about truth-value; for him, it is simply the change from one episteme to another. Then . . . OK, I ask you another question—let’s engage in this discussion, with you as Butler. So: is there a truth-value distinction between essentialism and the performativity of gender or is it simply the passage from one episteme to another? What would you say?

CH: I won’t speak for Butler, but if I were a Foucauldian, I would say that the latter is the case, though I may prefer the later episteme in light of my own political objectives.

SŽ: Yeah, but Butler would never accept that.

CH: You don’t think so?

SŽ: You think she would? Because I think that the epistemic presupposition of her work is implicitly—even explicitly, at least in her early work—that, to put it bluntly, sex always already was a performative construction. They just didn’t know it then. But you cannot unite this with Foucauldian narrative, because Foucauldian narrative is epistemologically neutral, in which we pass from one paradigm to the other. You know, sex was confessionary then; sex is now post-confessionary, pleasurable bodies, whatever But OK: Foucault would be one possible

metanarrative. Marxism would provide the other one, in the sense that “the development of capitalism itself provoked a shift in subjectivity,” whatever. But again, what I claim is that there is some unresolved tension concerning historicity and truth-value.

I ask you a different question. Both in Laclau and in Butler, there is a certain theory: Butler—and I’m speaking of early Butler; later, things get much more complex, much more interesting, a more intense dialogue becomes possible . . .

CH: *So we’re talking about Gender Trouble, parts of Bodies That Matter . . .*

SŽ: Yeah, I’m talking about *Gender Trouble* with Butler, and about *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* with Laclau. Why? Because let’s not forget that these two books were the only two authentic “big hits” of the time. . . . I’ll tell you why: both *Gender Trouble* and *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* were read as a model for a certain political practice. With *Gender Trouble*, the idea was that performativity and drag politics could have a political impact; it was, to put it in naïve, Leninist terms, “a guideline for a certain new feminist practice.” It was programmatic. It was the same with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It was a justification for the abandonment of so-called essentialist class politics, after which no specific struggle takes priority, we just have to coordinate our practices, cultivate a kind of “rainbow coalition,” although Ernesto rejects the term Now, what are these theories? Are they universal theories—of gender or of social/political processes—or are they specific theories about political practice, sex practice, within a certain historical/political moment? I claim that the ambiguity is still irreducible. At the same time that it’s clear that these theories are rooted in a certain historical moment, it’s also clear that they touch upon a universal dimension. Now my ironic conclusion is that, with all this anti-Hegelianism, what both Ernesto and Judith do here is the worst kind of pseudo-Hegelian historicism. At a certain point, it’s as if the access to truth or what always already was true is possible only in a certain historical situation. So in other words, philosophically, I claim that beneath these theories of contingency, there is another narrative that is deeply teleological.

CH: *But either Butler or Laclau might rebut this reproach by pointing out that even such an embedded teleology is no worse than a matrix of non-historical Lacanian presuppositions.*

SŽ: But my God, this is the big misunderstanding with her! Butler systematically conflates what she calls “Real” with some nonhistorical

symbolic norm. It's interesting how, in order to qualify the Lacanian notion of sexual difference as a nonhistorical Real, she silently slips in this nonhistorical gender norm, to then claim that "we homosexuals are excluded from this," and so on. So her whole criticism inveighs against this notion that Lacan thinks of sexual difference as part of a non-historical, heterosexual normativity, and that this is what should be subverted Of course, my counterpoint is that "Real," for Lacan, is the exact opposite. "Real" is that on account of which every norm is undermined. When [Butler] speaks of historicity, my point is not that there is something nonhistorical which precedes us. My point is that the Lacanian Real, in a way, *is* historical, in the sense that each historical epoch, if you will, has its own Real. Each horizon of historicity presupposes some foreclosure of some Real. Now, Judith Butler would say "OK, I agree with this, but doesn't this mean that we should re-historicize the Real, include it, re-negotiate it?" No, the problem is more radical Maybe the ultimate misunderstanding between us—from my perspective—is that for her, historicity *is* the ultimate horizon. As an old-fashioned Freudian, I think that historicity is always a certain horizon which has to be sustained on the basis of some fundamental exclusion. Why is there historicity? Historicity doesn't simply mean that "things change," and so on. That's just stupid evolutionism; not in the biological sense, but common sense. Historicity means that there must be some unresolved traumatic exclusion which pushes the process forward. My paradox would be that if you take away the nonhistorical kernel, you lose history itself. And I claim that Judith Butler herself, in her last book, is silently approaching this position. Because in *Gender Trouble*, the idea that your psychic identity is based on some primordial loss or exclusion is anathema; it's the Big Bad Wolf. But have you noticed that, if you read it closely, in *The Psychic Life of Power* she now accepts this idea of a primordial loss when she speaks of these "disavowed attachments"? The idea is now that we become subjects only through renouncing the fundamental passionate attachment, and that there's no return, no re-assumption of the fundamental attachment. It's a very Freudian notion. If you lose the distance, the disavowal . . . it's psychosis, foreclosure.

The big problem I have with this shift is that it's a very refined political shift of accent. What I don't quite accept in her otherwise remarkable descriptions is how, when she speaks about the "marginalized disavowed," she always presupposes—to put it in very naïve terms—that these are the good guys. You know: we have Power, which wants to render everything controllable, and then the problem is how to give voice to those who are marginalized, excluded . . .

CH: *You see it as a kind of vulgar Bakhtinianism?*

SŽ: Yeah, yeah—you know what I’m aiming at. What I’m aiming at is . . . aren’t racist, anti-Semitic pogroms also Bakhtinian carnival? That’s to say that what interests me is not so much the progressive other whom the power is controlling, but the way in which power has to disavow its own operation, has to rely on its own obscenity. The split is in the power itself. So that . . . when Butler argues very convincingly against—at least she points to the problematic aspects of—legal initiatives that would legalize gay marriages, claiming that in this way, you accept state authority, you become part of the “visible,” you lose solidarity with all those whose identity is not publicly acknowledged . . . I would say, “Wait a minute! Is there a subject in America today who defines himself as marginalized, repressed, trampled by state authority?” Yes! They are called survivalists! The extreme right! In the United States, this opposition between public state authority and local, marginalized resistances is more and more an opposition between civil society and radical right-wing groups.

I’m not saying we should *simply* accept the state. I’m just saying that I am suspicious of the political pertinence of this opposition between the “public” system of power which wants to control, proscribe everything, and forms of resistance to subvert it. What I’m more interested in are the obscene supplements that are inherent to power itself.

CH: *Has this relatively pro-State position played a role in your decision to support the ruling party in Slovenia?*

SŽ: No, no . . . that was a more specific phenomenon, a very naïve one. What happened was that, ten years ago, the danger in Slovenia was the same as in all the post-Communist countries. Would there emerge one big, hegemonic, nationalist movement that would then colonize practically the entire political space, or not? That was the choice. And by making some compromises, we succeeded. In Slovenia, the scene is totally different than in other post-Communist countries, in the sense that we don’t have—as in Poland, as in Hungary—the big opposition is not between radical, right-wing, nationalist movements and ex-Communists. The strongest political party in Slovenia is neither nationalistic, nor ex-Communist . . . it was worth it. I’m far from idealizing Slovenia, but the whole scene is nonetheless much more pluralistic, much more open. It wasn’t a Big Decision; it was just a very modest, particular gesture with a specific aim: how to prevent Slovenia from falling into the Serb or Croat trap, with one big nationalist movement that controls the

space? How also to avoid the oppositions I mention that define the political space of Hungary and Poland?

CH: *Could we talk about Kosovo? In The Metastases of Enjoyment, when the Bosnian conflict was still raging, you insisted that the West's inability to act was rooted in its fixation with the "Balkan victim"—that is, with its secret desire to maintain the Balkan subject as victim. More recently, when the NATO bombings were under way, you claimed that the act came much too late. Now, the West seems to have descended into a period of waiting for a "democratic transformation" of Serbia . . .*

SŽ: . . . which will not happen, I think. Let me end up with a nice provocation: the problem for me is this abstract pacifism of the West, which renders publicly its own inability to act. What do I mean by this? For the West, practically everything that happens in the Balkans is bad. When the Serbs began their dirty work in Kosovo, that was of course bad. When the Albanians tried to strike back, it was also bad. The possibility of Western intervention was also bad, and so on and so on. This abstract moralism bothers me, in which you deplore everything on account of . . . what? I claim that we are dealing here with the worst kind of Nietzschean resentment. And again, we encounter here the logic of victimization at its worst, exemplified by a *New York Times* piece by Steven Erlanger.¹⁰ He presented the crisis in terms of a "truly human perspective" on the war, and picked up an ordinary [Kosovar] Albanian woman who said, "I don't care who wins or who loses; I just want the nightmare to end; I just want peace; I want to feel good again. . . ." This, I claim, is the West's ideal subject—not a conscious political fighter, but this anonymous victim, reduced to this almost animal craving . . . as if the ultimate political project is to "feel good again."

CH: *In other words, a subject who has no stake in whether Kosovo gains independence or not . . .*

SŽ: No stake, just this abstract suffering . . . and this is the fundamental logic, that the [Kosovar] Albanians were good *so long* as they were suffering. Remember the images during the war, of the Albanians coming across the mountains, fleeing Kosovo? The moment they started to strike back—and of course there are Albanian excesses; I'm not idealizing them in this sense—they become the "Muslim danger," and so on. So it's clear that the humanitarian interventions of the West are formulated in terms of this atmosphere of the protectorate—the underlying idea is that these people are somehow not mature enough to run their lives. The West should come and organize things for them, and of

course the West is surprised if the local population doesn't find such an arrangement acceptable.

Let me tell you a story that condenses what I truly believe here. About a year and a half ago, there was an Austrian TV debate, apropos of Kosovo, between three different parties: a Green pacifist, a Serb nationalist, and an Albanian nationalist. Now, the Serb and the Albanian talked—of course within the horizon of their political projects—in pretty rational terms: you know, the Serb making the claim that Kosovo was, for many centuries, the seat of the Serbian nation, blah, blah, blah; the Albanian was also pretty rational, pointing out that since they constitute the majority, they should be allowed self-determination, etcetera. . . . Then the stupid Green pacifist said, "OK, OK, but it doesn't matter what you think politically—just promise me that when you leave here, you will not shoot at each other, that you will tolerate each other, that you will *love* each other." And then for a brief moment—that was the magic moment—I noticed how, although they were officially enemies, the Albanian and the Serb exchanged glances, as if to ask, "What's this idiot saying? Doesn't he get it?" My idea is that the only hope in Kosovo is for the two of them to come together and say something like the following: "Let's shoot the stupid pacifist!" I think that this kind of abstract pacifism, which reformulates the problem in the terms of tolerance . . . My God, it's not tolerance which is the problem! This is what I hate so much apropos of Western interventionism: that the problem is always rephrased in terms of tolerance/intolerance. The moment you translate it into this abstract proposition which—again, my old story—*depoliticizes* the situation, it's over.

Another aspect I want to emphasize apropos of Serbia: here, my friend/enemy, a Serb journalist called Alexander Tijanac, wrote a wonderful essay examining the appeal of Milošević for the Serb people. It was practically—I wondered if I could have paid him to make my point better. He said that the West which perceives Milošević as a kind of tyrant doesn't see the perverse, liberating aspect of Milošević. What Milošević did was to open up what even Tijanac calls a "permanent carnival": nothing functions in Serbia! Everyone can steal! Everyone can cheat! You can go on TV and spit on Western leaders! You can kill! You can smuggle! Again, we are back at Bakhtin. All Serbia is an eternal carnival now. This is the crucial thing people do not get here; it's not simply some kind of "dark terror," but a kind of false, explosive liberation.

CH: *Do you see a viable political entity in Serbia that might alter this?*

SŽ: I can give you a precise answer in the guise of a triple analysis. I am afraid the answer is no. There are three options for Serbia: one

possibility is that Milošević's regime will survive, but the country will be isolated, ignored, floating in its own shit, a pariah. That's one option. Another option that we dream about is that, through mass demonstrations or whatever, there will be "a new beginning," a new opening in the sense of a Western-style democratic upheaval. . . .¹¹ But I think, unfortunately, that what will probably happen if Milošević falls will be what I am tempted to call the "Russia-fication" of Serbia. That is to say, if Milošević falls, a new regime will take over, which will consist of basically the same nationalists who are now in power, but which will present itself to the West—like Yeltsin in Russia—as open, and so on. Within Serbia, they will play the same corrupt games that Yeltsin is now playing, so that the same mobsters, maybe even another faction of the mafia, will take over, but they will then blackmail the West, saying that "If you don't give us economic help, all of these nationalists will take over"

CH: *The "democratic resistance" in Serbia, in fact, is also deeply nationalistic, right?*

SŽ: Of course! What you don't get often through the Western media is this hypocritical . . . for instance, when there was a clash between the police and anti-Milošević demonstrators, you know what the demonstrators were shouting? "Why are you beating us? Go to Kosovo and beat the Albanians!" So much for the "Serb Democratic Opposition"! Their accusation against Milošević is not that he is un-democratic, though it's also that: it's "You lost Bosnia! You lost Kosovo!" So I fear the advent of a regime that would present itself to the West as open and democratic, but will play this covert game. When pressed by the West to go further with democratic reforms, they will claim that they are under pressure from radical right-wing groups.

So I don't think there will be any great transformation. Now that the Serbs have lost Kosovo, I don't think there will be another great conflict, but neither do I think there will be any true solution. It will just drag on—it's very sad.

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NOTES

1 See "Noam Chomsky: An Interview," *Radical Philosophy*, 53 (Autumn 1989), 32.

2 See Elizabeth Roudinesco's account of this moment in her biography *Jacques Lacan*, tr. Barbara Bray (New York, 1997), pp. 378–79.

- 3 See, respectively, Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, tr. Alan Sheridan and ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1981), p. 235; Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, tr. Bruce Fink and ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1998), pp. 12, 72–73.
- 4 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York, 1989), p. 35.
- 5 See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), p. 202.
- 6 See Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment* (New York, 1995), p. 252.
- 7 See James Hurley, "Real Virtuality: Slavoj Žižek and 'Post-Ideological' Ideology," *Post-Modern Culture*, 9.1 (September 1998).
- 8 See Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford, 1998), pp. 56, 63.
- 9 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York, 1997), pp. 48–54; see also his *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York, 1999), pp. 313–20.
- 10 See Steven Erlanger, "In One Kosovo Woman, An Emblem of Suffering," *New York Times* (12 May 1999), p. A 13.
- 11 Since this interview took place, of course, precisely such a scenario has played out in Belgrade, though we cannot yet see whether Vojislav Koštunica's brand of Serb nationalism will be at all preferable to Milošević's.