

IN CONVERSATION



From Anxiety to Enthusiasm

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK in conversation with Shuddhabrata Sengupta

Shuddhabrata Sengupta (SS): How does one begin looking at the phenomenon of fear?

Slavoj Žižek (SŽ): It's incredible, you know, what you discover when things shift, such as what happened when Communism fell. I read somewhere that the CIA was asked, when they bribed spies, why don't you spend more on intellectuals – because you don't need so much money. Intellectuals are cheap. It's incredible how, with a little bit of repression, how easy it is to corrupt the majority of intellectuals. Especially if you are in a little bit of a totalitarian country.

A model to be studied in this regard is the former Czechoslovakia after '68 – the so-called Brezhnev time – it was not 'big' terror. Let us say you were a little bit of a dissident in Dubček's Prague Spring – and the secret police would come calling and say, "We don't want to arrest you, make you lose your job", and then they would take you aside and in a friendly sort of way say to you, "We know that you are basically honest, and that you were seduced by these bad reactionaries. All we want is that you sign a text that says 'Unfortunately, I was seduced...'"

And so you put in a few names of the people who seduced you. And the secret police would stick to their word; they won't ever make either what you did or the names you named public. So if you do not sign, you not only lose your job... one of the ways to put pressure on intellectuals is through affecting the education of their children. You do not co-operate, your children never find a place in the right school or course or university. Your children become manual workers. And so you name names, you sign where they ask you to sign. And so it goes.

SS: Isn't it fascinating how intellectuals who can be very courageous in times of crisis by speaking truth to power can also give in at other times?

SŽ: I think it was Huxley or Orwell who said that most of the time when intellectuals speak about change, it has to be read as some kind of superstitious strategy, in the sense that if we talk a lot about change, then change will really not happen. And I think... I am not sure if this was true between the two world wars, but it is certainly true for the West European academic Left in the last decades.

The paradox is that to be critical of the state mechanism in a certain way is the best way to reproduce this mechanism. I think this is the best paradox of Western liberalism. It not only does not abhor criticism, it also thrives through criticism.

So, that is one thing.

The other thing is that, nonetheless, one should emphasise – and here I would like to celebrate intellectuals – theory, theoretical commitment, has a logic of its own. You can start developing a theory as a joke, or whatever, and all of a sudden, you take it more seriously. You fall into it.

So it is more ambiguous. I always like the story of Giordano Bruno. He wasn't a heroic person. He was a coward, he usually came to a city, stirred up things, provoked and then escaped and so on. All of a sudden, everybody was shocked. In the end, he said, no, I will not escape, I will stick to my positions, even if I die, or whatever.

So this process, I think, is much more interesting. This is how intellectuals occasionally become authentic. It's not that originally you are authentic, and then slowly you get corrupted. I claim, you start corrupted. I like very much the novel by Eric Ambler, the great detective writer; it's called *Journey into Fear*. In this novel, he has a wonderful sub-story of a guy who is a Communist, and he explains how this guy became a Communist. He is married to a rich woman, whom he hated. And to annoy his wife, when they received guests, he would advocate Communism, to embarrass his wife and the guests. Then, through playing this game, he started to really believe in Communism, dropped his wife and became a revolutionary.

I love this story. This is how it works, and I like really this idea that authenticity is not about throwing off the wrong glasses and looking deep into your self. No, if you look deep into your self, you find shit. Authenticity is something you have to work hard on. Even to be naïvely dedicated to a cause, you have to work really hard.

Part of the story also is how intellectuals can get caught in their own game. Which is why this would be the big lesson for me. Let's say, I am developing a theory, a radical, good theory. And you play the critical analyst. And you say, "Look, look, he is preaching this theory, but privately", let's say, "he is flying business class". But I don't think that this kind of *ad hominem* argument works. There can be more truth in theory. Which is why I like what Jacques Lacan says, when somebody accused, "Look, you're breaking your rules", to which Lacan remarked, "Don't look at what I am doing; listen to what I am saying".

I hope I am not personally corrupt, but I hope that my theory is worth the while, even if I am not.

SS: You have recently called for people to learn. To *study*. You take the example of Marx writing to Engels in the 1870s: "Can't the revolutionaries wait? I have not finished with writing *Kapital*".

SŽ: Truly, it is a wonderful letter.

SS: It is an interesting statement, because the other temptation of intellectuals is to be categorical, when in fact the grounds are for greater uncertainty. And the 'call to action', which intellectuals often make as 'tribunes to the people', may also be reflections of their own fear of admitting to their own uncertainties. And by asking intellectuals to actually attend to their study, which you have done, as an almost 'militant' invocation, you are, to my mind, asking for a return to a recognition of uncertainty as central to the intellectual's calling.

SŽ: Of course this uncertainty does not mean a kind of opportunism. First, I always hated this patronising self-humiliation of intellectuals. Terry Eagleton once told me a wonderful story about something that happened, I think, to Eric Hobsbawm. He wanted to do the 'proper thing' to prove that he was a leftist. And so he went to some modest workers' gathering, a trade union meeting or some such thing, to give a talk to them, and he started in this patronising, pseudo-populist manner by saying to the workers, "Listen, I don't know anything more than you, I came here just to talk with you as an equal", and so on. And then, a wonderful thing happened: one of the workers who was present immediately interrupted him and said, "This is fakery, fuck off, it's your duty to know more than us, that's why you are here to teach us", and so on. This, you see, is the authentic voice.

First. As intellectuals it is our duty and privilege, if we have a chance, to know and to teach others what we know. We should not be ashamed of this. Second thing, what you call 'uncertainty'. I totally agree with you, and it also fits nicely with psychoanalytic theory that 'a call to act' or sometimes even an 'act', as such, is often a desperate strategy to avoid uncertainty. I spoke with some American psychologist who did some stuff on terror. He is a nice guy because he told me he started as a CIA employee, he studied terrorism for them, and then he saw so much despair among ordinary Arab people that in the end, it was not that he became sympathetic to terrorism, but just that he decided to quit the CIA because he did not want to play their game.

He told me about the so-called 'suicide terrorists'. He said, "It's not as simple as the media presents it – they are not idiots who believe that they will get their 70 virgins in heaven or something like that once they blow themselves up – no, it is not like that often. They doubt. They are shaken by doubt, and they think that by blowing themselves up they will prove their faith.

[Phone rings]

SS: Sorry, that is my phone.

SŽ: Now, you know how my wicked mind is working? This is God calling to say, “No, no, no, I do have 70 virgins waiting, you blasphemer!”

So, let's go back to what we were talking about. You put it very nicely. Today, I claim, more than ever before, we do live in an era of uncertainty. What do I mean by uncertainty? Not this bit of post-modern jargon – “Everything is a construct that can be deconstructed”, and so on. No. I am thinking of uncertainty in another sense.

I cannot emphasise this enough: traditional theorists, liberals and Marxists, insist that we know where we are and the same story goes on. For liberals, capitalism goes on, and for Marxists, also, capitalism goes on. Yes, basically they agree here. And then, we have many of these ‘post’ theories. Post-modernism, post-risk society, post-industrial society. They say that something new is emerging, but they have basically journalistic decryptions of this new thing that is emerging. I don't think they propose new theories. And I stand here like Pascal. You know, Badiou taught me this lesson: when something new is emerging, the dialectical paradox of history, the only way to get it, is to try to be faithful to the old, and then you get what it is that is new... For example, Pascal did that with early modernity. There were all these stupid liberals who had just embraced the Enlightenment. Nobody reads them today. But Pascal. Ah, he is different. Pascal's problem was how to remain Christian in modernity. We still read him more today because he saw much more.

Or let us turn to cinema theory and practice. It was precisely those authors who at the very beginning of sound film resisted sound who realised much more deeply the true potential of sound. The early Russians, Eisenstein, and Chaplin. Chaplin's history with sound is very instructive. It happens in stages. It starts in *City Lights*. Chaplin puts in just a few sounds of objects. In *Modern Times*, you hear, very nicely, only mediated speech. You hear something when someone listens to the radio. You don't hear any direct speech. And it is only with *The Great Dictator* that you get to hear voice, you first hear the gibberish of the dictator. Chaplin was somebody who, in this sense, was conservative. He saw much more clearly the dark potentials of the new.

I am not saying that we should forget about Marxism. I am just saying that we should know that we don't yet know where we are today. Even Badiou once said, “We all know what is happening around us, we know imperialism and so on, we simply don't know how to mobilise people around what we know”. No, I don't agree with this. The problem is not simply a political one. I don't think we really know what is really going on.

SS: Is the problem you are hinting at deeper? More embedded in the structure of contemporary capitalism? And is the search for an answer to this question something that occupies you?

SŽ: This is what I will try to do, desperately, in my next few books. For example, the critique of political economy – I know that there are nowadays some very good Marxist analyses which claim that they predicted the crisis of the financial economy, and they may be right. But there is this still, a totally basic question that needs to be asked.

Marx has a certain model of exploitation. Does it still hold today? Can we still repeat the kind of critique of political economy that Marx was doing? Because, if you immediately apply Marx, you get some strange results. It does not work. Sometimes, to annoy my leftist friends, I say, "Take Venezuela; if you directly apply Marx, then you have to say that Venezuela is exploiting the United States". Because for Marx, emphatically, natural resources are not a source of value. And you know what is the irony? You know which example Marx takes for natural resources not being a source of value? It is oil! Oil itself!

What the leftist populists usually do is to simply avoid this problem and talk in these vague terms – "The natural/national resources should be owned by the people", and so on. They do not ask or answer the precise question about natural resources. One answer I have for this comes from an Italian economist, who talks about the need for us to turn our attention, in terms of looking for an answer for this question, from profit to rent. It's not that I like this, it's just that it is the only good theory that I know of at the moment. It explains both the question of the exploitation of natural resources and that Bill Gates question, intellectual property. Bill Gates' money is not profit. It is rent. This is why I try (against Marx) to rehabilitate the question of the relationship of the general intellect and the intellectual substance (intellectual property). Bill Gates monopolised, privatised, part of our general intellect, and now we are paying rent to him.

SS: What else do you think we have reason to be uncertain about?

SŽ: For example, China. Do we really know what is really going on there? And I don't mean some kind of orientalist statement about the 'inscrutable Chinese'. No, the question I am interested in is about whether or not there is something new emerging. To put it in simplistic terms, are we seeing the emergence of a new form of capitalism, which, contrary to the fond hope of the liberals, will not only not usher in democracy, but which may in fact survive even better and thrive without democracy. And the worst and most dangerous thing that Western liberals can do is to attribute this to cultural differences by saying that "the Chinese (because of cultural reasons) are incapable of democracy".

No, no, no, no.

We, in the West, are inventing our own mode of so-called 'capitalism with Asian values'. Look at Sarkozy and Berlusconi. Alain Badiou showed me what they share, despite their differences – this kind of comical authoritarian capitalism, where the authoritarian structure is not the old familiar authoritarianism. It's not as if Berlusconi will proclaim one morning an emergency state – the Italians still retain their personal freedoms, their sexual freedoms, consumerism, blah, blah – but the worrying thing is that political life proper in Italy is gradually disappearing, dying down. The truly interesting thing in France and Italy is not the vigour of Sarkozy and Berlusconi, it is the demoralisation of the opposition. The Left simply does not know what to do.

My hypothesis is: the West was usually characterised by the presence of some extreme parties: radical Communists and parties targeting some marginal populations; the centre

was occupied by two big parties addressing the entire population: Left-of-centre social democrats and, on the Right, a moderate conservative tendency. Now, I think something different is happening. The centre is occupied by a pure, neutral technocratic party, which may be even socially vaguely Left-of-centre. But the only alternative to it is a populist Right, and these are also not mutually exclusive. Berlusconi, or Putin, can be a populist and at the same time a technocrat. I think this is a very dark development because we are witnessing, more and more, even in Western Europe and the United States, an unease, a discontent (following Freud) in culture, and a discontent with liberal culture. But the tragedy is that the only big power that articulates this discontent is that of populist nationalism. We have to break out of this. And it is very difficult. This is why I am an optimist for the same time as a pessimist. Things cannot go on for a long time as they are going on. I am not a short-term catastrophist. I am not saying (like that shitty movie *2012*) that things will end in 2012. But I am also not saying that we have to wait another 200 years. I am saying that maybe in the next ten or 12 or 20 years, things will have to happen. And that is why I call our times uncertain.

SS: You've said that it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

SŽ: I took this thought from Frederic Jameson. I copied him in saying this, let me be honest. But now, I want to write a long text on this. I want to say that this is the lesson of 2009. Let's take two events of the last year. The financial crisis and the summit on climate change in Copenhagen. We all know that the climate issue is really serious, that we can all die, the planet is at risk – but what did they produce at Copenhagen? A purely verbal agreement, which is, to paraphrase the Hollywood magnate Samuel Goldwyn's (he was a genius) famous statement, "an oral agreement that isn't worth the paper it is not written on". The Copenhagen agreement is something like that.

Here, the survival of humanity is at stake, but who cares! But look at what they did with the financial crisis. Immediately, they were able to act. Here, the problem was whether or not they could commit to giving 50 billion to poor countries in ten years to help them out with the transition to less energy-intensive economies; there, they could immediately find thousands of billions to help out the banks and the financial markets. So you can see precisely that this is the attitude of capitalism. When the fate of life on earth is at stake, we must negotiate. But when the normal functions of capitalism are at risk, there is no room for negotiation even.

It's not as people say (and here psychoanalysis enters), as if the conflict is between ethics and egotism. Ecological moralists like to claim that we are obsessed with short term consumerism, and that causes us to forget larger ethical concerns. No; it is as if capitalism is some kind of evil, demonic god which demands that we do our duty. You know, the definition of duty is, as they put it in Latin, *fiat justitia, pereat mundus* [justice will be done even if the world is imperilled]. This is what capitalism does: even if we all drop dead, this fact is just an empirical, utilitarian consideration and detail, we must still follow our duty towards the maintenance of capitalism.

Something very interesting is happening here which tells us a lot about how ideology functions. Here, we can also see how wrong the conservative characterisation of capitalism as something utilitarian is. No, there is nothing utilitarian about capitalism. Capitalism is perverted duty. The message of capitalism is, "I must follow it, even if we all die following it".

SS: And the role of ideology is to love what we do in discharging that duty?

SŽ: Yes, I almost admire the trick of ideology. Let us say that we two are mobilised into some ethnic cleansing operation, we have to kill and rape people. People who are moderately decent don't generally like doing this. And the function of ideology is to make us, moderately decent people, convince us to do this. For example, Himmler, the Nazi, provided a wonderful formula for this. It doesn't ignore the uneasiness that moderately decent people have at the prospect of doing terrible things, but it interprets my attempt to act against my spontaneous ethical instinct as the true sign of patriotic greatness. Himmler says somewhere, "Nazi officers killing the Jews, they are doing horrible things, but it is their being able to withstand what they are doing that is true evidence of the true love that they have for their country". The formula recognises that your ability to suppress your spontaneous ethical repulsions for a patriotic cause must be interpreted as a sacrifice.

SS: In this way, aggressors begin seeing themselves, and not their victims, as martyrs, and their violence as somehow spiritually noble.

SŽ: I am an atheist, but I have a great appreciation of the social logics of certain religious practices. But, nonetheless, to respond to what you just said, I would quote Steven Weinberg, a cosmologist, who said something very vicious. And I like what he said. He said, "In a society without religion, good people would be doing good things, bad people would be doing bad things, but in order to make good people do bad things, you need something like religion". This is a clear example of the trick of ideology. The very spontaneous decency, and the fact that you have to violate it, is sold to you as your greatness.

SS: In fact, Himmler was a great admirer of the Bhagavad Gita.

SŽ: I know; the solution to Arjuna's problem is not so different to what Himmler proposed.

SS: That Arjuna should overcome his human decency, his spontaneous repulsion and anxiety in the face of the war, and participate in the slaughter in order to do his duty dispassionately as a warrior.

SŽ: This is why it is more and more interesting for me to consider debates in the Indian traditions. And I now want to write about this. Because here we have the site of this basic ideological tension at its purest. On the one hand, you have the *Laws of Manu* and all the

traditions linked to it, which is for me, together with the other big example, Confucius, the foundational ideological text. But then you also have with early Buddhism, despite its ambiguities, the extremely forceful egalitarian counter-attacks. This is the site of the struggle. What interests me here is how the old lessons of Manu were revived and in some senses re-invented during colonialism.

I read, in one of the books published by Navayana press [<http://navayana.org>], how manual scavenging and shit-cleaning by untouchable castes went through an explosion in the 19th century with the expansion of cities. So here is an example of how modernisation, urbanisation, actually gave new life to what we would think is the stuff of tradition. So this is a very good lesson to teach us that ideology can work in many ways. And capitalism and modernity can in fact revive and give new strength to the oppressions of the past.

I am thoroughly fascinated by the *Laws of Manu*. And I claim that it is the fundamental ideological document because it not only spells out the prohibitions and taboos, but it also tells you what will happen if you violate the laws. In fact, it lays down the laws of how to violate the laws. In other words, it lays down an extreme prohibition, knowing fully well that most people will not be able to follow it to the letter. Then it lays down what you can do to compensate for your violation. In other words, for every rule, it states the conditions of the exception.

So, if you are a brahmin, you should not sell rice. But if you are a brahmin who sells rice, at least you should not sell it on a Monday. And if you are a brahmin who sells rice on a Monday, at least you should not wear this or that garment. And so on.

The whole point of regulation is to regulate violation. So that every instance of dissent is also already scripted. Everything, every response, is already insured, already managed. This is ideology.

SS: Are you saying this anxiety about constantly negotiating violations of violations leads to a pervasiveness and a generalisation of fear? The thin spread of fear on the surface of our lives.

SŽ: Precisely. This is also what I call the politics of fear. You are never escaping fear. In societies where everything is managed technocratically, the only way to mobilise people is on the basis of fear. The fear of taboos, of pollution, of outsiders, of who knows what.

In the West, we have no longer the capacity to produce a positive vision. Everything is predicated on the technocratic management and mobilisation of fear. And Left and Right are united on this. You have rightist fears – immigrants, homosexuals, etc; you can have leftist fears – ecological devastation...

SS: So, if not fear, then what?

SŽ: Badiou and I have been debating this thing privately, and we are now going to write about it. There is one place where Lacan should be theoretically corrected. You know, Lacan, following Freud, says that the only emotion that does not cheat is anxiety. The idea is that

all others can be masks, so even love can be a mask of hatred and so on. But not anxiety. With anxiety, you encounter the Real. To this one should add: enthusiasm. Already Kant, while talking about the French Revolution, hinted that enthusiasm (as in the sublime) is where you touch the noumenal, the thing in itself.

And in politics, with enthusiasm you cannot cheat. Now, you might say, what about the fanaticism of racists, of Nazis? But that is not enthusiasm, and I can prove this. Enthusiasm is not fanaticism.

SS: How do we distinct enthusiasm from the fanaticism of the fanatic?

SŽ: By its inherent structure. My reproach to Nazism is that it is negative, it is based on fear. How should I put it... enthusiasm does not need a Jew. When you talk with an anti-Semitic racist, it is already wrong to frame the discussion on the terms of 'what Jews really are like'. Anti-Semites have no interest in finding out what Jews are really like; in fact, they were strongest in Germany in the very places where there were almost no Jews.

SS: So what is enthusiasm?

SŽ: We know that it is not fear. In a Badiou-Kantian sense, it is a commitment to an idea. The idea, in my understanding, is a Communist idea. For example, in politics, you cannot have enthusiasm for your nation. It has a universal dimension. You can have enthusiasm for equality, justice. For something greater than the particular. A certain kind of enthusiasm.

Now, you might say, what about the enthusiasm of an élitist artist? Is that universal? I would say, even in the case of a very difficult poet like Mallarmé, composers like Schoenberg, their work, despite its élitism, has an underlying enthusiastic dimension. In enjoying it, in enjoying its enthusiasm, you want to share it with everyone. It has this universal dimension. Of sharing.

I am crazy, and an old-fashioned dogmatic. I think that every form of enthusiastic politics has to be, in some sense, Communist. Now why Communist? Why keep this crazy word? I follow Badiou in this.

Badiou claims (and I agree) that '89-90 was a kind of necessary historical break. I have no mercy for 20th-century Communism. It has its own greatness, here and there, in the beginning, but it was a mega-tragic failure. But still, even in this, I insist there remains a distinction from fascism. Communism was still a properly tragic failure. There is nothing tragic about the failure of fascism, to simplify it to its utmost. They were bad guys, they said that they wanted to do bad things, they came to power and – surprise, surprise – they did some very bad things. But there is nothing tragic in their failure. This is why there are no dissidents within fascism. But with Communism, there is a genuinely tragic dimension. My god! Look at what we wanted to do, and look at the shit we produced. So it is a proper tragedy.

Now, that story is over, and we must begin from the beginning again, as Lenin would have said. So why Communism? When we were young, we used to dream of Socialism with a

Human Face; nowadays, the mainstream of the Left only basically dreams today of capitalism with a human face. Most leftists talk nowadays like Fukuyama, as if history has ended, and only some 'adjustments' have to be made.

But it is clear to me that capitalism cannot adequately address the question of the ecological crisis. The other thing that capitalism cannot solve is the question of intellectual property, and then there is bio-genetics. The market can work maybe at the city level; it cannot work at the global level. The melting of the ice at the poles cannot be solved by market forces. All these problems are problems of the commons. Nature is our commons, as is that which is called intellectual property today and our bio-genetic heritage. All these are problems of the commons. That is why I want to keep the word 'communism'. I know it has a problematic heritage. But at least we are not saying, "Oh, all we need is some more solidarity, some more kindness". Even Tony Blair wants that. No, we need a radical break, and that is why it is important to reclaim an idea that proposed a radical break. You have to signal that there is a need for real change.

The first part of the struggle is to define the co-ordinates of the struggle. It is not, as the media says, a struggle today primarily between enlightened capitalist development and fundamentalism. To me, these are two sides of the same coin. I like what Benjamin says: "Whenever you see fascism, look for a defeated revolution". Whenever you see fundamentalism, it should be seen as the sign of the failure of the Left.

The struggle is actually between Socialism and what is potentially Communism. And here, by 'socialism' I mean a kind of authoritarian, market-centred but state-managed capitalism – which is what we have and will increasingly have, and China is a great example of what this means.

The distrust of this authoritarian capitalism can make one a fundamentalist, and one becomes a fundamentalist if no other vector of critical politics is any longer available.

You know Afghanistan was once a very socially liberal place. And Kansas (in the USA) was once known for its radical political culture. You should read that book by Thomas Frank, *Whatever Happened to Kansas*. Today Kansas is the Bible belt. Today, the nature of global politics has made fundamentalists dominate both Afghanistan and Kansas.

SS: But maybe fundamentalism, which requires a lot of funding, is also on its way out, because it is too threatening to the liberal capitalist order. It is not being bankrolled any more. But that does not mean our problems are over.

SŽ: So what do you see as its replacement?

SS: You could have the choice between enthusiasm and despair.

SŽ: Despair. Yes, we should take this seriously.

Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger (not Nigeria). They no longer even dream about change. People simply accept that life is bad and it is getting worse. They no longer have space even for the

millenarian catastrophe of fundamentalism. The total resignation of an entire population.

SS: And this is much scarier than fundamentalism. It is the transition from the suicide bomber to suicide.

SŽ: Yes. Without bomb. So the alternative is to bomb or not to bomb, no? Maybe we can construct, following Jameson, a semiotic square or triangle, no? So you have one axis, suicide, another axis, bomber, and the third axis, despair. So the fundamentalists are on the suicide axis, the revolutionaries are on the bomber axis, and where are the liberals?

SS: I think the liberals are on the bomber axis. They bomb, without the suicide.

SŽ: You are right, the liberals are the bombers. And ordinary people? What about them?

SS: In despair?

SŽ: Yes. But where does that leave people like me? Neither suicide, nor bomb. But I want arms. I am going to want to keep that option open!

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