

# Slavoj Zizek, Sycophant of Reason

It's like the start of a bad joke: what do priestly meditative practices, animal vision and environmental catastrophe have in common? The answer, of course, is nothing, unless they are being whipped through the dialectical machine of Slavoj Zizek's thought. There was very little in his talk Wednesday at the University of Pennsylvania that someone with even a mild interest in Zizek would not have already heard – the same jokes, the same critiques, the same seemingly counter-intuitive advice. But by the end of the lecture, as Zizek further explored his current fight against deep ecology, he did manage to integrate all these disparate moments into an interesting, if still insufficient critique of the present moment and a call for greater use of human reason.

Indeed, we should give Zizek credit – in the unfolding of his talk the elements did take on a sort of dialectical whole whose sum was greater than their parts. He began with a critique of the medieval monastic practice of negating desire by imagining the innards of the loved object. Although this type of thinking of the body might seem more “real,” Zizek maintained that the truth of the human was not to be found in its immanent decay so much as its fleeting appearance as whole and beautiful. In other words, the human is more than just matter, more than just the animal.

So the second step in this process was to consider the animal. Rather than thinking about how the human relates to the animal, Zizek proposed we consider how the animal relates to the human. The interesting question then is not “are we animal” or “can they reason” but rather “how monstrous do we appear in the eyes of the animal?” The truth of the relation is not that humans are food for worms, but that humans are ghastly, unnatural things. If the dialectic is hard to follow it is because Zizek would rather tell dick jokes (and to his credit his lectures are easier to digest than most), but the point is still there: the human as beautiful and the human as monstrous are not contradictory. They are both steps in his dialectical formation of a human being completely separated from nature. They are moving the discussion towards a demand for hyper-rationalization.

But Zizek knows that he is not there yet after these two moves. Without citing the fashionable names (Foucault, Agamben) or without naming the fashionable term (biopolitics), Zizek launched next into a critique of “law's power over life.” In this phase of the talk, he critiqued the various

ways in which legal measures are used to secure rights and privileges. Though he did not entirely spell it out, within the earlier frame of the talk, the point here would seem to be that the more we rely on legalist means of securing bodily protections and freedoms, the more we reinforce the system of law which in fact inhibits freedom and traps us into the



current regime. We can sue BP all we want, but that won't help us get rid of BP. In short, three forms of understanding the human have now been negated: as matter, as animal, and as citizen.

It is only in this context of triple negation that Zizek comes to his most recent controversial claim: getting back in touch with nature is the worst possible thing humans could do. After all, the earth's climate has for most of its history been inhospitable to humanity regardless of its practices. Nature is not inherently friend or foe, it simply must be dealt with in a way outside of the current legalistic imagination. Rather than appealing to the human as nature or the human as legal citizen, Zizek thinks we should break all such bonds in the name of a hyper-rationalized subject who is truly able to think through the coming environmental catastrophes.

He gives as an example global warming and the migrations that will be caused when the desert spreads in some regions of the world and icecaps melt in others. Mass migrations of this sort have occurred throughout human history and they have tended to result in mass panic, death and disarray. Given this situation, he contends, only a subject removed from nature, capable of using foresight and rational planning, will be able to confederate humanity in a non-legalistic way (legalism would here mean a regulation of haves and have-nots in the process of migration) and ensure that such atrocities are not piled on to environmental

catastrophes.

In spite of the hyperbolic hatred of such touchstones as human rights and nature, Zizek's point is not such a bad one. Indeed it is clear that a back to the woods movement will ultimately help a smaller percentage of the population than a movement for foresight and planning. Be that as it may, there is not in

fact much historical precedent to assume that centralized planning and reason are beneficial to humanity. (Zizek, who jokingly calls himself a Stalinist, should know this.) Moreover, it seems unclear that migration will necessarily be the problem humanity needs to confront. It could just as well be a giant meteor, a glitch in atomic bomb systems, a sudden global infertility problem, or so forth.

The problem with Zizek's dialectic, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, is that it lacks mediation. A proper dialectic does not simply cancel out the terms

it refutes, it also preserves them. The body as matter and animal life cannot completely disappear. Zizek, in his canceling move of hyper-rationalization, forgets the simple corollary of embodiment: contingency. Reason can only get us so far. The basic Darwinian insight remains true: adaptability to the contingent conditions of existence has always been, and remains to be, the most important solution. Rather than a subject ever more removed from nature, we are better off with a subject ever more dialectically intertwined with nature, capable of understanding at once the potentials of thought and the inexhaustible need to adapt to conditions outside the realm of the thinkable.

As is customary now in writing on Zizek, let me end with a joke. A man goes into a restaurant and orders soup. He calls the waiter over and says “Waiter, there's something wrong with the soup. Please try it.” The waiter says, “What's wrong with the soup?” The man replies, “Just try it.” The waiter says, “Is it too hot?” The man says, “Try the soup.” The waiter says, “Is it too cold, or too salty? Is there a fly in your soup?” The man says, “Just try the soup.” The waiter says, “OK, where's the spoon?” The man says, “A-ha!” Zizek's plan risks turning us all into such waiters who think so abstractly about the world around them they are unable to see the real problem at hand.

- Avi Alpert