

# Revolution at the Gates

by Slavoj Zizek

*Reviewed by Andy Ryder*

The 1990'S saw the central tenets of official postmodernism – collapse of grand narratives, unsettling of the subject, skepticism towards reference to centralized power or nature, the rejection of philosophy's claim to truth – degenerate from being a threat to civilization itself, as commentators on the Right charged, to being simply a facet of consumer capitalism, the "cultural logic of late capitalism," as Duke professor and leading Marxist critic Frederic Jameson named it.

The recognition of this impasse has engendered a number of responses from the radical wing of theory, but the most unlikely might be the reinvigoration of the revolutionary Marxist tradition; attested to on one hand by the success of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, on the other by the growing prominence of hard-line communists Slavoj Zizek and Alain Badiou. At this juncture, Zizek seizes upon Lenin as the most scandalous symbol for what he would like to achieve – a true revolutionary moment, an actual shift in power relations and economic organization, and the eventual overthrow of capitalism itself, rather than merely a Foucauldian schema of multiple sites of struggle.

Zizek bookends his writings around a selection of Lenin's work written between the elimination of the Tsar in the February revolution and the decisive seizing of power by the Soviets in October 1917. In this interim period, the Social Democratic government made Russia the most democratic country in Europe. A revisionist, liberal democratic history would seize on the Bolsheviks as one of the great political disasters of the 20th century, comparable, in fact, to the ascent of the Fascists. Zizek reminds us, through Lenin's own polemics, that the Social Democrats inexplicably continued participation in the First World War; were in the process of negotiating and reinstating Tsarist power and allowed the country to exist on the brink of famine. Without any compromise with the Stalinist disaster or apologies for the atrocity of "really existing Socialism" in the 20th century, Zizek points out that it was Lenin who ended the war for Russia, who advanced a logical and effective plan for including the peasants in a primarily industrial worker's revolution, and who demonstrated a real and effective means of social organization outside of rule by the economic elite.

Zizek opposes this commitment and pragmatism to a withering portrait of "pseudo-radical academic Leftists who adopt an attitude of utter disdain towards the Third Way, while their own radicalism ultimately amounts to an empty gesture which obliges no one to do anything definite." Zizek finds his name for everything wrong with leftist academia in the name Political Correctness. Originally attacked by theorists and leftists (c.f. Stanley Fish) as a polemical tool of the right, an attempt to assert a more "plain-spoken" wisdom à la Reagan or even Dubya in opposition to attempts at cultural criticism by the left, Zizek accepts the idea on its own terms. The Left did become mired in attempts to be "sensitive;" it did waste its time

campaigning for more positive and numerous representation of minorities on television; it did concern itself with the civil rights of imprisoned serial killers. Everything conservatives ever said about bleeding-heart liberals had its elements of truth. Zizek points out the necessity of the ethnic jokes common to the Yugoslavian nations; "the shared experience of high culture is not enough – we have to exchange with the Other the embarrassing idiosyncrasy of obscene enjoyment." Only when the jokes stopped did the violence begin. Zizek's target, ultimately, is the widely hated namby-pamby liberal – "Clintonite yuppies who do it without inhaling (or have sex without actual penetration, or food without fat, or...)"

Zizek's point is that Lenin, far from advancing a terrorist campaign of intimidation by a small revolutionary elite, understood revolutionary practice because he understood economic organization in society; he understood how it could be changed; and he didn't shrink from the necessity of enacting these changes. The niceties of political correctness and the nihilistic outbursts of terrorism, are, in Zizek's view, two sides of the same coin; psychological responses to the privations and social impoverishments of capitalist life, lacking any real effect on the means of production and distribution.

His argument proceeds by salvos, without clear organization, leaping from attacks on Political Correctness to discussions of German Idealists, Kiesowski, Kant, Kierkegaard, Hitchcock, Pasolini, Patricia Highsmith, M\*A\*S\*H\* ... Zizek's view of popular culture is almost like French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's famous omnivorous assemblages of every possible medium, acquainted with critical theory founder Theodor Adorno's classicist scorn.

At times his wandering narrative fails to elaborate connections implied by his argument – for example, he charges the film *Dancer in the Dark* with an unacknowledged *schadenfreude*, sadism towards its female protagonist, then praises the film *Fight Club* for its investigation of masochism. Isn't there a connection between the pathologies representing in these films? Isn't *Fight Club* participating in a similar voyeuristic sadism? The characters in that film, to be sure, embrace suffering as a calling, while Selma in von Trier's film is assaulted by circumstance beyond her own control – but – inasmuch as Selma and Tyler are both enacting a fidelity to values above societal or economic demands, and both are represented as oppressed by their employment, don't they suggest a certain affinity? Could Zizek's reading be unconsciously affected by a belief that men enjoy and seek out physical suffering, while women are passive victims?

Zizek occasionally loses his point in his attempt to out-radicalize everyone. His constant maneuver is essentially to identify common conservative wisdom on a topic; identify its usual leftist correlative; then attack the moorings of both before revealing his own ultra-radical position. Occasionally he slips into nonsense and bad faith. In his analysis of the World Trade Center attack, he declares that the leftist narrative of understanding of the political causes of terrorism, the investigation of American policy and its historical ramifications, is as bad as the jingoism of the Right inasmuch as it mitigates the suffering of the victims – "the only appropriate stance is solidarity with all victims." You should never qualify your empathy.

However – he falls back on the leftist viewpoint – it is necessary to make comparisons to how much worse things are outside America, the AIDS deaths in Africa, how New York City sustained one tragedy in comparison to the multitude of tragedies in Sarajevo – but these comparisons must never get "involved in the obscene mathematics of guilt." Whatever that means. He then changes the subject.

Zizek's real weak point in this writing is his inability to come to terms with violence. His ultimate thesis – gutless liberalism and right-wing terrorism speak to the same resentments and fantasy resolutions of material inequalities – has a certain validity and originality. But the fact is, beneath that, Lenin did kill a number of people. In the foreword, Zizek argues that Lenin's "alleged 'ruthlessness' has exactly the same status as his love of cats and little children in the Stalinist hagiography." The fact that Lenin relied on vio-

lence as a tactic, and discusses ruthlessness as a necessary quality for a revolutionary in his writings, while he penned few odes to felines or infants, apparently escapes Zizek.

Zizek is willing to discuss the need to move beyond parliamentary democracy, to eschew the liberal value of tolerance, but when he gets to real violence, he begins speaking as a Kantian or even as a follower of ethicist Emmanuel Lévinas. This contradiction reaches its peak when he begins discussing the necessity of revolutionary violence in terms of Russian revolutionaries smashing bottles of wine in the Tsar's palace (a scene in Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's *October*) and the Chinese Cultural Revolutionaries destroying ancient vases – ignoring that this revolutionary moment also included a number of popular and judicial executions. On the rightness or wrongness of this, he is notably silent.

Along with Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, Zizek is one of the most important theorists on the radical left. This writing's polemical value, as a call for the Left to abandon its weakness, is particularly timely. Further, Zizek's lively mix of cultural commentary and philosophical investigation gives to him the potential to achieve a worldwide recognition as a public intellectual that hasn't been seen since Sartre. With his unimpeachable importance recognized – his argument must be subjected to scrutiny and argument. After all, even Lenin's genius as a revolutionary, organizer, and theorist didn't prevent a few rather notorious slip-ups.