Reply

Slavoj Žižek

In some debates, before one can engage in proper argumentation, a lot of time must be spent correcting inaccuracies and misrepresentations. This is unfortunately one of those debates, so let me begin with an overview of some of these inaccuracies:

Sean Homer claims that I was a member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDS), which was part of the center-right DEMOS government when it passed the anti-immigrant laws in Slovenia, and that I even defended these actions: all unambiguously false.[1] LDS was NOT part of the DEMOS coalition; the "Erased" were erased on 26 February 1992, before the DEMOS coalition fell apart and LDS entered the government in April 1992. Furthermore, these actions were criticized not only by "radicals" but by wide intellectual cultural circles and even rejected by the Constitutional Court in 1999. These actions were finally overturned by the center-left government in 2011, under the instigation of LDS and Zares, two small parties that emerged out of the original LDS. Bearing in mind the brutal attacks by the nationalists to which LDS and Zares were exposed (after every LDS electoral victory, the nationalists claimed that the victory was illegitimate since it was bought by "non-Slovene votes"), plus the extremely brutal personal attacks by nationalists to which I am constantly exposed in Slovenia, Homer's claims are simply ridiculous. Dušan Bjelić's introduction raises Homer's falsification to an even higher level. For example, he offers this reference to Homer's text: "As Homer points out, not only did Žižek not question this act of state terror but, when asked about it in an interview with Geert Lovink (1996), he fully supported his government." A careful reader can easily note the shift in this sentence: it appears as if, when asked about "it" ("state terror," the exclusion of the Erased), I supported this measure, which is patently not true—I just expressed my (at that time) general support for the LDS government that took power after the DEMOS coalition fell apart. Lovink never asked me about "this measure." Furthermore, Bjelić attached to this sentence the following weird footnote:

> In the interview with Glyn Daly, Žižek said, "I admire people who are ready to take over and do the dirty job, and maybe this is part of my fascination with Lenin." Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 50–51. Then he revealed that the ministerial position held by Igor Bavčar, the man responsible for the Erased, was first offered to him after DEMOS took over the government from the communists: "The only thing that interested me—again the old story, but it's not a joke—was either being Minister of the Interior or Head of the Secret Service, and, crazy as it may sound, I would have been considered seriously for both. Probably, if I

1. To put it with some irony, I do not even agree with Homer where Homer agrees with me: he refers approvingly to my endorsement of Alain Badiou's motto, "Those who are here are from here," which seems to me now problematic, at least in its abstract form—as I was reminded during a visit to the West Bank, every Jewish settler would have wholeheartedly supported this motto.

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> had wanted it years ago, then I could have got one of these posts" (49–50). Given Žižek's respect for the Leninist ethics of "dirty jobs," would Žižek have done the same thing as Bavčar?

All I assert in the interview with Glyn Daly is my disgust with soft liberals who silently prefer that others do the dirty job for them—the point of my suggesting that I might have become Minister of the Interior was that, if a Minister of the Interior is needed, one should not shirk from taking it over and doing the "dirty" job decently, instead of hypocritically leaving it to others (and, of course, this "dirty job" does not include any racist measures but simply refers to state security). The association of this passage with the Erased and the DEMOS government is totally arbitrary, and the last words are a pure and simple insinuation.

When Homer refers to my "extraordinary, and appalling, paragraph" about the conflict in the village of Ambrus in 2006 (incidentally, the Roma family was never attacked by the local mob, the two sides were kept apart by the police; plus there was wide solidarity with the Roma—even Janez Drnovšek, the LDS president of the republic at that time, was stopped by the mob when he tried to visit the Roma family), he totally misrepresents my point, which concerns the hypocrisy of the liberal elite (not only) in Slovenia which, of course, has no contact with the Roma. What I addressed was the crucial and highly sensitive problem of how to overcome the racism of ordinary people who regularly interact with the Roma and find that some of these interactions are unpleasant. Unfortunately, the problem cannot be resolved simply by explaining to these ordinary people that the Roma are victims of historical injustice and so on. To put it brutally, yes, the Roma are victims of historical injustices, but history pushed them into a way of life that IS full of petty crime, violence, and sexual exploitation. The haughty liberal patronizing of ordinary people and their fears is here no better that Nicolas Sarkozy's exploitation of these fears.

The statement that what is "radical" about my position is my refusal to take sides and my maintaining a position of undecidability in politics is empirically false: on numerous occasions, I quite openly took a firm stand (for the Morales-Linera government in Bolivia, for the Naxalite rebellion and the dalit movement in India, for the Green Revolution in Iran, for Syriza in Greece). When I broke with LDS in Slovenia, I did this publicly with a direct attack on President Drnovšek.

The idea of Sarajevo as a cosmopolitan multicultural city is definitely NOT "a construct of the western European media." Sorry, I was there and remember the explosion of Sarajevo rock bands (including Bijelo Dugme) and films from the 1970s on. If Sarajevo was provincial, then Ljubljana–Zagreb–Belgrade were even more so. But now comes the funniest part. Homer asserts that, "Ironically, what was crucial to the demarxification of Slovene politics was the introduction of [Ernesto] Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* into the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1980s, through the journal *Mladina* and their association with Žižek." Again, is this meant seriously? The resistance to the communist regime in Slovenia consisted roughly of two groups, the conservative nationalists (gathered around *Nova revija*) and the New Left (gathered around

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Mladina); in the last year of communist rule, the two groups split and later became radical opponents, which is why the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights of Janez Janša (and three others!) turned against Janša later, as it gained greater power. Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony* played a certain limited role (much smaller than Louis Althusser or Jacques Lacan's work) in mobilizing the New Left, but the debate about this work was critical from the very beginning; later Laclau and I split openly. If anything, books like *Hegemony* helped to keep the Marxist tradition alive in Slovenia, in contrast to other post-Yugoslav republics where it more or less disappeared. "Demarxification of Slovene politics"—yes, if you consider the totally disoriented and corrupt communist regime that was openly playing nationalist cards (postcommunist President Milan Kučan once flattered the *Nova revija* circle that communists were silently practicing what they were writing about) in any sense Marxist, which I certainly do not.

Mario Slugan claims that my assertion that the Real is "that [which] resists all symbolization" turns out to be a variant of Immanuel Kant's thing in itself, so that there is just nothing to say about it—please, do your homework! I have written dozens of pages explaining why the Real is NOT Kant's thing in itself, and how it is not external to the Symbolic but a retroactive effect of the symbolization itself.

When Slugan seems amazed that I first use the concept of the double frame ironically and then later, in the same book, use the concept seriously, does he really think that I (or the publisher's reader of the manuscript) was not aware of it? As I explained in another of my books (chapter 2 of *Less Than Nothing*), this repetition—first parody, then seriousness—was meant to make a precise and basic theoretical point that I often reiterate: even if we maintain an ironic distance toward a notion or a belief, this notion or belief can nonetheless remain operative. We believe much more than we believe to believe, as our everyday experience with superstitions demonstrates.

As to the notion of suture, I was again just baffled: Slugan's entire quite lengthy description of the "logic of suture" in three steps is the description of the standard cinema theory use of the term that is exactly the target of my criticism. My basic point is that the cinema-theory use of suture totally missed the original thrust of this Lacanian concept. In his further debate, Slugan again as a rule misrepresents my position, for example, when he claims that, for me, "the Absent One who manipulates images behind my back is none other than the author"—no, emphatically no. From my Lacanian standpoint, the absent gaze is not the gaze of a subject (of the manipulating author/director), but the gaze as object, the gaze as opposed to the eye, the gaze that cannot be subjectivized, the gaze as the point in the image from which the image returns the gaze.

Slugan's main point concerns the status of universality, and here our difference is fundamental. Slugan remains essentially within the empirical notion of universality as the common feature of many particularities, while I practice the Hegelian notion of "concrete universality"—a singular privileged point at which the universal appears as such, in contrast to its particular content. I have developed this Hegelian notion repeatedly in many of my books, and this is how one should read my articulation of the three main stages of

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Alfred Hitchcock's work. I am well aware that the maternal superego is not directly present in most of Hitchcock's films of his last stage; what I claim is that this notion provides the "specific color" that overdetermines all other narratives, even the repetitions of those from previous stages (say, *North by Northwest* [1959] as a vague remake of *The 39 Steps* [1935]).

As for Gautam Basu Thakur's article, I find his title already weird. He makes reference to a "Menon-Žižek Debate," but I am not aware of any such debate. As part of my visit to India a couple of years ago, I was invited to give a talk in New Delhi; when I arrived at the lecture hall, I was told that there would be a respondent (Nivedita Menon). After my talk, Menon read her response, to which I improvised a reply. (And, incidentally, I was slightly surprised that Menon publicly complained that I spoke for an hour while she was given only ten minutes—surprised, since I had been invited to give a lecture, not to participate in a debate with anyone.) Friends later told me that Menon posted a long text, detailing her objections, and that there was a further debate—but I was never sent any text and was never invited to participate in this debate. As to Menon's critical points against me, I have to rely here on Basu Thakur's description. First, feminism: "For Menon, Žižek's critique of contemporary (American) feminism as merely identity politics seems ignorant of the various Third World feminist movements. She argues that the characters and dispensations of these other feminist movements are very different from the white, elitist, upper-class American feminism that Žižek criticizes. Consequently, she condemns Žižek's clubbing of different feminisms and feminist movements into one singular set as yet another universalizing gesture on his part." Do I read this correctly? Of course I "ignored" Third World feminism since my target was specifically American academic feminism. Next, state power: "Menon has a foundational disagreement with Žižek's argument that the ultimate goal of revolutionary politics is the usurpation of state power. She finds the theory of assuming state power in order to make the state function in a 'non-statal' way thoroughly impractical." I simply NEVER claimed that taking state power is the ultimate goal of revolutionary politics—but it definitely is a difficult PART of it. What I reject is the comfortable position of withdrawing from the struggle for or against state power and enjoying the safe pseudo-subversive stance this distance provides. The claim that the "state is fully integrated into the network of capitalist social relations" is deeply wrong and misleading, for the simple reason that both state and capitalist social relations are not fully integrated *with themselves,* but both traversed by antagonisms, both sites of struggle.

Both Homer and Basu Thakur refer to Bjelić as one of the sources on which they rely for an analysis of my work. Bjelić recently published "Is the Balkans the Unconscious of Europe?," a critique of my political analyses whose basic thesis is clearly discernible from the abstract:

> This essay examines Slavoj Žižek's claim that the Balkans is the unconscious of Europe. To make such a claim is to treat the entire region as a subject with a failing oedipal structure, which Žižek attributes to the absence of a Cartesian tradition and the proper symbolic authority. As a result of such absence, he claims, the Balkans has withdrawn into its pathological feminine substance and needs to be conquered by the language of the universal

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> subject. This paper places Žižek's work in the context of other versions of colonial psychoanalysis, versions that justify oppression in the name of failed oedipalization.[2]

I must again confess my quite naive bewilderment: how can anyone with minimal (not even academic, but) commonsense standards write something like this? When I write about the Balkans as the unconscious of Europe, I mean not that the Balkans are effectively the primitive backyard of Europe but the exact opposite: Europe projects its ideological unconscious onto the Balkans, and this is why I repeatedly quote Gilles Deleuze's motto, "Si vous êtez pris dans le rêve de l'autre, vous êtez foutus": the Balkans are not caught up in their own dark dreams, they are caught up in Europe's dreams. Plus how did Bjelić come to think that I was identifying the Balkans as a region with a failing oedipal structure? For Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the oedipal structure is the core of the unconscious, which is why Europe projects onto the Balkans the oedipal structure that (Europe) itself failed to actualize. (The oedipal failure of modern consumerist societies is a psychoanalytic commonplace.) The "pathological feminine substance" of the Balkans? Where the hell did Bjelić get this? I only spoke of the name-of-the-Mother apropos Slovenia, mocking my own country, with no reference to the Balkans.

Back to Menon: "Žižek's insistence on reading colonialism as progressive is, in Menon's view, nothing short of appalling. She loathes the argument that colonialism was responsible for rescuing non-European societies from 'repressive traditions' through the introduction of modernity (and modernization)." In the criticized passages (in which I mostly quote Karl Marx) I never claim that western colonialism simply rescued the colonized from their "repressive traditions." Like Marx himself, I repeatedly insist on the extremely brutal and destructive character of colonialism. My point is that this very brutality of uprooting, of dissolving old substantial links, creates new space for liberation. What liberates is not colonialism, what liberates is the struggle against colonialism. This is why, with regard to global capitalism, which, although it originated in Europe, is today a worldwide phenomenon in which Europe is increasingly losing its leading role, one should be especially attentive to nonreflected anti-Eurocentrism, which can sometimes provide the ideological cover for rejecting what is worth fighting for in the European legacy. Let me explain this briefly.

In another debate during my stay in India, I heard some Indian cultural theorists complain about our use of English. The fact that they are compelled to use the English language is a form of cultural colonialism that censors their true identity: "We have to speak in an imposed foreign language to express our innermost identity, and does this not put us in a position of radical alienation—even our resistance to colonization has to be formulated in the language of the colonizer?" My answer was: yes—but this imposition of English (a foreign language) created the very X that is "oppressed" by it, that is, what is oppressed is not the actual precolonial India, but the authentic dream of a new universalist democratic India. (Malcolm X was following the same

2. Dušan Bjelić, "Is the Balkans the Unconscious of Europe?," *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 3 (September 2011): 315–23.

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insight when he adopted X as his family name: he was not fighting on behalf of the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely on behalf of an X, an unknown new identity opened up by the very process of slavery that ensured that his African roots were forever lost. X himself found this new universal identity in Islam.) The point is not that there is nothing prior to the loss—of course there was something before the loss (in the case of India, a vast and complex tradition)—but this tradition was a heterogeneous mess that has nothing to do with that to which the later national revival wants to return. This holds for all "return to origins": when, from the nineteenth century onwards, new nation-states were popping up in central and eastern Europe, their return to "old ethnic roots" generated these roots, producing what the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawn calls "invented traditions."[3] And the same holds even for the Indian tradition: no wonder the British colonial administration of India has elevated *The Laws of Manu*, the detailed description and regulation of behavior for different castes, to the privileged text to be used as a reference for establishing the legal code that would render possible the most efficient domination of India—up to a point, one can even say that *The Laws of Manu* only became THE book of the Hindu tradition retroactively, chosen to stand for the tradition by the colonizers among a vast choice.[4]

And now comes the rather boring and expected key reproach: my universality is false, a European particularity masked as universality that oppresses other (colonized) particular cultures. Here I radically disagree, and on a whole series of levels.

First, Menon relies on the standard Marxist critical procedure of discerning behind an ideological universality its hidden particular bias ("human rights" effectively privilege western traits, "freedom" is in our societies effectively the freedom of market choice, and so on) in order to denounce the hidden particularity of the western philosophical universality. What Menon neglects is the opposite procedure crucial for Marx's analysis of capitalism: as individuals caught in global capitalism, we are not only more particular than we think we are, we are also much more universal. The universality of the market is an actual universality that makes the subject in its very core abstract-universal, no longer fully rooted in its particular culture but experiencing this culture as something ultimately contingent. Or, another example from Marx: with developed capitalism, human labor becomes as such, in the very concrete experience of the worker, abstract-universal, distanced from its particular contingent form. So when we talk about universality, we should talk about "abstract" market relations as its social foundation; that totally changes the boring topic of how different cultures interact or (mis)communicate.

The second, and even more crucial, point: the universality I am talking about is not a common feature uniting different cultures or societies, but the same struggle that runs through each of them. So the topic of "the west versus

3. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983).

4. The same goes for its obscene obverse, *tantra*, a network of practices and rituals that was systematized into a coherent dark, violent, and dangerous cult by the British colonizers.

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the subaltern" is for me subordinated to the topic of "what is the struggle that we share"? What I see in the west is the ongoing struggle between the twin powers of neoliberal global capitalism and its dark shadow, new forms of racist fundamentalism, on the one side, and the forces of radical emancipation on the other side. Whenever there is a political struggle outside the west, my question is: can my and their struggle become moments of the same struggle? This is why, for example, I was able to identify fully and immediately with the Tahrir Square demonstrators in Cairo, with protests in Greece, with the antiracist struggle in Africa . . . and with Naxalite guerrillas and the dalit awakening in India. I do not see India versus Europe; I see the same struggles here and there. My India is not the India of Brahmin cultural studies but the India of Saroi Giri and other critics of colonial studies. My India is not the India of Mohandas Gandhi but the India of B. R. Ambedkar. Yes, this gesture is offensive—against whom? Against the enemy. Because we do have enemies, even if they perceive themselves as benevolent.

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