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*Conversations
with
Žižek*

Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly

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First published in 2004 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Editorial office:

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:

Blackwell Publishing Ltd

108 Cowley Road

Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Distributed in the USA by

Blackwell Publishing Inc.

350 Main Street

Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN: 0-7456 2896-6

ISBN: 0-7456 2897-4 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and has been applied for from the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Berling

by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd. Hong Kong

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website:
www.polity.co.uk

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Introduction: Risking the Impossible

Glyn Daly

An anecdote by Lacan recounts a chance remark made by Freud to Jung. Following an invitation from Clark University, the two psychoanalysts travelled to the United States and upon arrival in New York harbour Freud gestured towards the Statue of Liberty and said, 'They don't realize that we're bringing them the plague' In today's world we might say something similar about Žižek. That is to say, in the context of the platitudes and triteness of a predominantly postmodern culture Žižek represents the philosophical equivalent of a virulent plague or perhaps, to update the metaphor, a computer virus whose purpose is to disrupt the comfortable appearances of what might be called the matrix of global-liberal-capitalism. Continuing in a certain Cartesian tradition, what Žižek infects us with is a fundamental doubt about the very presuppositions of our social reality. But this is merely the starting point of a much wider ethico-political engagement with a radical emancipatory universalism; one that is capable of taking on the increasingly prohibitive nature of contemporary capitalism and its corresponding forms of political correctness and 'multiculturalism' ¹

Žižek's work has been at the forefront of philosophical, political and cultural debate for more than a decade. From the theory of ideology to the critique of subjectivity, ethics, globalization, cyberspace, film studies, cognitivism, theology, music and opera, Žižek's influence extends far and wide and his interventions continue to provoke controversy and to

transform the way we think about these and other topics. To pick up a text by Žižek is to be confronted with a heady mix of elements: bold propositions, bravura of style and an intellectual audaciousness that does not flinch from moving between the heights of conceptual abstractions and the seemingly base and voluptuary aspects of popular and sensuous life. The latter however is not simply an exercise in cerebral pyrotechnics but aims at something more precise. Indeed, we might characterize Žižek's discourse as an ongoing demonstration of the inextricable connection between what might be called the levels of the divine, or eternal, and our immediate lived realities. From Kant to cunninglingus Žižek seeks to remind us that, in the Hegelian sense, the spirit is always a bone and that we cannot separate the most intimate of physical experiences from their transcendental dimensions.

It would be futile to try and summarize the work of someone who is without doubt one of the most prolific and prodigious thinkers of our age. In this brief introduction I will instead focus on certain fundamental themes that run throughout Žižek's thought and elaborate these in the context of his more recent, and ongoing, interventions in philosophico-cultural and political life.

The constitutive madness of being

The Žižekian paradigm – if we can speak of it in those terms – draws its vitality from two main philosophical sources: German idealism and psychoanalysis. In both cases, Žižek's central concern is with a certain failure/excess in the order of being. In German idealism this aspect is made increasingly explicit through reference to what can be called an unaccountable 'madness' that is inherent to, and constitutive of, *cogito* and subjectivity as such. For Kant this is the dimension of 'diabolical Evil' while for Schelling and Hegel it is the 'night of the self' and the 'night of the world' respectively.

The point is that, in each of these cases, there is an increasing emphasis on negativity as the fundamental (and ineradicable) background to all being.

As Žižek makes clear in *The Ticklish Subject*, what German idealism accomplishes is a displacement of the usual opposition between the idea of the savage 'pre-human' self and the symbolic universe of 'civilized' human subjectivity (where in the Enlightenment tradition the latter is identified with the Light of Reason and as something which affects an ultimate mastery, or pacification, over the former). Instead, what is affirmed is a view of subjectivity that can only come into being as a passage through madness; as an ongoing attempt to impose a symbolic integrity against the ever-present threat of disintegration and negativity (Žižek, 1999: 34–41).

In psychoanalysis this thematic aspect of dislocated subjectivity is developed further in respect of the Freudian notion of death drive. Death drive emerges precisely as a result of this gap in the order of being – a gap that simultaneously designates the radical autonomy of the subject – and is something that constantly threatens to sabotage or overwhelm the symbolic framework of subjectivity. In Freud the category of death is not simply a cancellation but refers rather to the (immortal) dimension in subjectivity that persists beyond mere existence or biological life. As Žižek puts it: 'Human life is never "just life," it is always sustained by an excess of life' (Žižek, 2001: 104). This excess of life is death drive. And it is in the context of the latter that both Freud and (especially) Lacan identify the peculiarly human motivation in regard to *jouissance*: that is, a basic compulsion to enjoy; to achieve consummate satisfaction and thereby heal the gap, or 'wound', in the order of being.

The human condition is marked by an eternal and impossible attempt to bring about some sort of resolution to this drive; a paradoxical drive to resolve drive as such. In this way, drive becomes attached to certain 'objects of excess' (the ideal experience, lifestyle, possession etc.) Lacan's *objets petit a* – that hold the promise of, at least partial, fulfilment

but which can never fully deliver it in a once-and-for-all way. The *objets petit a* exist in a permanent state of displacement and are always elsewhere.²

It is in these terms that Žižek insists on a Lacanian reading of the subject. In certain post-structuralist and deconstructivist circles – where the emphasis is on a notion of multiple-being that is always provisionally configured within sliding planes of *différance* – the idea of the subject has become rather unfashionable as it allegedly conjures up the image of a unified Cartesian identity or some kind of centre to subjectivity. But as Žižek has consistently stressed, the subject is neither a substantial entity nor a specific locus. Rather, the subject exists as an eternal dimension of resistance-excess towards all forms of subjectivation (or what Althusser would call interpellation). The subject is a basic constitutive void that drives subjectivation but which cannot ultimately be filled out by it (Žižek, 1990: 254). It is simultaneously the lack and the leftover in all forms of subjectivation. This is why the Lacanian mark for the subject is \$ (the ‘barred’, empty subject). The subject cannot find its ‘name’ in the symbolic order or achieve full ontological identity. Using Lacan’s expression, the subject always remains as a ‘bone stuck in the throat of the signifier’ And insofar as the subject is linked with the radical negativity of the death drive it also reflects the same kind of tension identified in German idealism. Thus the subject is both the movement away from subjectivation – the excess that engulfs symbolic coherence in an entropic night of the world – and the very drive towards subjectivation as a way of escaping such a condition (Žižek, 1999: 159). In this sense identification is always structured in terms of a certain being-towards-madness.

A scene from Scott’s *Bladerunner* provides a useful example. Using the ‘voigt-kampff’ machine, Deckard (Harrison Ford) interrogates Rachel (Sean Young) at the Tyrell Corporation in order to test her empathic responses and thereby to establish whether she is truly human or a manufactured ‘replicant’ Rachel’s answers are slick and sure-fire and indicate well-rounded subjectivation. The final

question, however, leaves Rachel floundering in a state of confusion as she cannot find a point of positive identification (in the symbolic order) and the machine registers a chilling wipe-out – the void of \$. What is compelling about the scene is that, far from separating Rachel (and the other replicants) from ‘us’, it serves to underscore her human condition as a being whose subjectivation is prone to failure and negative distortion. It is precisely this malfunctioning element (the bone stuck in the symbolic order) that confers human status. Thus what is masked in this projection of failure on to Rachel is the traumatic knowledge that it is ‘us’ who cannot resolve the question of ‘who am I?’ in an ultimate sense or completely fill out the void of \$.

At the same time, it is through this very resistance-excess towards subjectivation – and the consequent drive to resolve impossible questions concerning identity, destiny, divinity and so on – that human beings are essentially open to the possibility of developing new forms of subjectivation. In this way, the subject is both the transcendental condition of possibility and impossibility for all forms of contingent subjectivation.

And it is interesting to see how the subject persists even more obstinately in the context of today’s attempts to either eradicate or supersede it. Two examples are informative here. In deconstructionist philosophy, Derrida has tended to reject the idea of the subject in favour of a conception of subjectivity that is based on a kind of ephemeral decisionism (the multiform processes of becoming/unbecoming) that cannot find an ultimate edge. In support of this, Derrida refers to Kierkegaard and his famous assertion that ‘the moment of the decision is the moment of madness’ From a Lacanian perspective, however, it is precisely this moment of madness that marks the constitutive dimension of the subject.

In biogenetics, by contrast, there is now the capability of determining the human genome and our basic DNA coordinates. Yet it is precisely at this point of total disclosure that the mystery deepens and we are drawn more and more into confrontation with the very incapacity to represent or resolve

the gap between subjectivation and that which constantly overflows it: death drive and its characteristic forms of animus, impulsion, desire and so on. Far from capturing the essence of the human being, a paradoxical result of biogenetics is that it brings us into increasing proximity with the very 'inhuman' excesses that are constitutive of humanity as such – the Lacanian 'in us more than us' – and which testify to the ineradicable nature of the subject.

Dimensions of the Real

Through a widening analysis of death drive and the various aspects of negativity that are inherent to being, the later Lacan advanced his crucial generic formulation of the Real. Under the leadership of J.-A. Miller, the concept of the Real has been at the centre of the Paris-based 'new school of psychoanalysis' in which Žižek has played a key role.

Lacan identifies the Real in relation to two other basic dimensions – the symbolic and the imaginary – and together these constitute the triadic (Borromean) structure of all being. For Lacan, what we call 'reality' is articulated through signification (the symbolic) and the characteristic patterning of images (the imaginary). Strictly speaking both the symbolic and the imaginary function within the order of signification. As with Einstein's 'general' and 'special' theory of relativity, the imaginary may be regarded as a special case of signification. What differentiates them is that while the symbolic is in principle open-ended, the imaginary seeks to domesticate this open-endedness through the imposition of a fantasmatic landscape that is peculiar to each individual. In other words, the imaginary arrests the symbolic around certain fundamental fantasies. As an illustration of this, Žižek (1993: 48–9) takes the relationship between Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) at the centre of Demme's film, *The Silence of the Lambs*. In a close approximation to a Lacanian psychoanalyst, what Lecter

seeks to discover is the specific way in which the symbolic universe of Starling is structured (in tendential terms at least) around a fundamental fantasy – the crying of the lambs and the failed attempt to rescue one of them. The point is that Starling makes sense of her world (she is able to narrate symbolically ‘who she is’ for the Other) precisely through a certain arresting fantasy at the level of the imaginary. In this way, the fantasy-imaginary dimension is drawn into focus at those (nodal) points where we expect to be taken most seriously in respect of the mythical narration of who we *really* are (‘it was in that moment that I knew I wanted to be ’).

The Real, by contrast, does not belong to the (symbolic-imaginary) order of signification but is precisely that which negates the latter; that which cannot be incorporated within such an order. The Real persists as an eternal dimension of lack and every symbolic-imaginary construction exists as a certain historical answer to that basic lack. The Real always functions in such a way that it imposes limits of negation on any signifying (discursive) order and yet – through the very imposition of such limits – it serves simultaneously to constitute such an order. The Real in this sense is strictly inherent to signification: it is both the unsurpassable horizon of negativity for any system of signification and its very condition of possibility.

While the Real, by definition, cannot be directly represented, it can nonetheless be alluded to in certain figurative embodiments of horror-excess. In Žižek’s famous example, it is alluded to in the monster from Scott’s film, *Alien*, whose blood literally dissolves the fabric of reality (Žižek, 1989: 78–9). And just as the unity of the protagonists in this film is constituted against the threat of the Alien, so reality itself is always constructed as an attempt to establish a basic consistency against the disintegrative effects of the Real. Just as being may be understood as being-towards-madness, reality is always reality-towards-the-Real. Every form of (symbolic-imaginary) reality exists as an impossible attempt to escape the various manifestations of the Real that threatens disintegration of one kind or another: trauma, loss, anxiety and so on.

In Žižek's early works the Real tended to be characterized in terms of some kind of force of negation (the Alien, the Medusa's head, forces of nature and so on). In the later works, however – e.g. *The Ticklish Subject*, *The Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief* – Žižek has been concerned to emphasize the more subtle dimensions of the Real. Thus the Real does not simply function as an external (hard) limit to signification, it also plays a more intangible role on providing a certain invisible-immanent twist that gives shape and texture to reality. Taking an analogy from art, this intangible Real could be said to function like the 'vanishing point': i.e. something that cannot be represented but which is nonetheless constitutive of representation.³ In quantum physics, by contrast, the Real would be the curvature space: something that cannot be dimensionally determined but which creates the conditions of possibility for dimensionality as such. Or, if we take Luhmann's systems theory, the Real is present in terms of the constitutive paradox whereby a system is able to establish its forms of internal coherence and unity only insofar as it cannot systematize its own principles of constitution.⁴ The point is that the Real should not be identified exclusively as an explicit force of negation; it also plays a more implicit and evanescent role in the construction of our everyday forms of social reality.

It is in this context that Žižek has engaged in a certain 'deconstruction' of the real-symbolic-imaginary triad, such that each of these terms should be regarded as fractally integrated or mapped onto each other. In the case of the Real then we have the real Real, the symbolic Real and the imaginary Real (Žižek, 2001: 82–3). The real Real is the shattering experience of negation (the meteors, monsters and maelstroms of trauma). The symbolic Real, by contrast, refers to the anonymous codes and/or structures (vanishing points, space curvature, scientific formulae and so on) that are meaningless in themselves and simply function as the basic abstract 'texture' onto which (or out of which) reality is constituted. Žižek argues that in the contemporary era it is capital itself that establishes the essential backdrop

to reality and which, therefore, may be regarded as the symbolic Real of our times (Žižek, 1999: 222; 276). In this way the new cyber stockmarkets – with their constant digital output – can be seen to function as a kind of oracular network of sacred information that in an abstract indifferent way determines the fate of the Enrons, the Worldcoms and entire national and international markets.

Finally we have the imaginary Real in which again there is an emphasis on an invisible-immanent twist that gives structure and specificity to the imaginary realm. The (imaginary) dream landscape is a clear example of this. In dreams there is often a sense of infinite possibility. However, where one encounters a particular image of horror-excess (an immanent marker of the Real) – where the dream turns into a nightmare – there is an immediate compulsion to turn away and escape back into reality; to wake up. These immanent markers of the Real establish a kind of ‘cartography’ of the imaginary realm.

This is also what gives cyberspace (the postmodern digitalized imaginary) its ambiguity. The celebrationist (Gnostic) view of cyberspace is that of a free-floating universe, impervious to the Real, where identities can be manipulated and fantasies played out. Yet cyberspace can also function as the very medium that brings us into proximity with our most intimate fears and anxieties: fetishistic/morbid obsessions; fascination-repugnance towards certain sexual/social practices; an insufferable association with Otherness (‘I might be like them’) and so on. To put it in the vernacular, there is always the possibility of clicking on a window too far; one that sends us rebounding back towards everyday reality in order to avoid confrontation with those markers of the Real, of traumatic excess, that are inherent to the imaginary. It is this theme of attempting to escape back into reality that is explored in some of the more intelligent films in the horror genre: *Jacob's Ladder*, *Flatliners*, the Freddie Krueger *Nightmare* series and so on.

Yet it is not simply at the level of cinema and cyberspace that the imaginary Real is experienced. The tragedy of

11 September 2001 can also be looked at from this perspective (Žižek, 2002). In a way we could say that, especially for Americans, the trauma was doubly inscribed. First there was the cataclysmic event itself but, second, there was this dimension of the imaginary Real in which popular fantasies regarding the orgiastic destruction of New York (viz. *Independence Day*, *Godzilla*, *Deep Impact* to name but a few) seemed to erupt through to reality – and thereby to render meaningless any escape back to reality. In this way the trauma of 11 September was intensified precisely as a result of this transdimensional breach; this transgression of the subliminal injunction that fantasies should ‘stay there’ and not pursue us.

Ideology and the status of the impossible

It is in the light of this more subtle perspective on the Real that Žižek has also revised his approach to the question of ideology. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek developed his famous inversion of the classical ‘false consciousness’ thesis. Thus ideology does not conceal or distort an underlying reality (human nature, social interests etc.) but rather reality itself cannot be reproduced without ideological mystification (Žižek, 1989: 28). What ideology offers is the symbolic construction of reality – the ultimate fantasy – as a way to escape the traumatic effects of the Real. Reality is always a ‘virtual’ take on the Real; a virtualization that can never fully overcome the Real or achieve homeostasis. In the language of Laclau and Mouffe, this means that Society as an integrated unity is universally impossible precisely because of the constitutive excess of the Real qua the unmasterable negativity upon which every positivization finally depends.

And it is here that ideology performs its supreme conjuring trick. What ideology aims at is a fantasmatic re-staging of the encounter with the Real in such a way that the impossibility of Society is translated into the theft of society by some historical Other. In Nazi ideology, for example, it is the

contingent figure of the Jew who is made directly responsible for the theft/sabotage of social harmony – thereby concealing the traumatic fact that social harmony never existed and that it is an inherent impossibility (1989: 125–7; 1993: 203–4). By imputing the status of the Real to a particular Other, the dream of holistic fulfilment – through the elimination, expulsion or suppression of the Other – is thereby sustained.

More recently, however, Žižek has developed a new twist to this perspective. Ideology not only constructs a certain image of fulfilment (Plato's City of Reason, the Aryan Community, multiculturalist harmony etc.), it also endeavours to regulate a certain distance from it.⁵ On the one hand we have the ideological fantasy of being reconciled with the Thing (of total fulfilment), but, on the other, with the built-in proviso that we do not come too close to it. The (Lacanian) reason for this is clear: if you come too close to the Thing then it either shatters/evaporates (like the frescoes in Fellini's *Roma*) or it provokes unbearable anxiety and psychical disintegration.

Crucial here is the status of the category of the impossible. For Žižek impossibility is not the kind of neutral category that we tend to find in Laclau and Mouffe (as in their impossibility-of-Society thesis) where it tends to connote a basic constitutive frontier of antagonism. Like the immanent markers of the Real, impossibility gets caught up in ideology and is configured in such a way that it both structures reality and determines the coordinates of what is actually possible. As Žižek argues in this book, beyond the *prima facie* ideological operation of translating impossibility into an external obstacle there is a further deeper stage to the operation: that is, the 'very elevation of something into impossibility as a means of postponing or avoiding encountering it' Ideology is the impossible dream not simply in terms of overcoming impossibility but in terms of sustaining that impossibility in an acceptable way. That is to say, the idea of overcoming is sustained as a deferred moment of reconciliation without having to go through the pain of overcoming as such.

The central issue is one of proximity; of maintaining a critical distance by keeping the Thing in focus (like the image on a screen) but without coming so close that it begins to distort and decompose. A typical example would be that of someone who fantasizes about an ideal object (a sexual partner, promotion, retirement etc.) and when they actually encounter the object, they are confronted with the Real of their fantasy; the object loses its ideality. The (ideological) trick, therefore, is to keep the object at a certain distance in order to sustain the satisfaction derived from the fantasy 'if only I had x I could fulfil my dream' Ideology regulates this fantasmatic distance in order to, as it were, avoid the Real in the impossible: i.e. the traumatic aspects involved in any real (impossible) change.

This allows for a more nuanced reading of ideologies. Let us take the case of an international crisis: the so-called 'liberation of Kuwait' during the 1990s Gulf conflict. Here the ideological discourse tended to operate along the following lines: 'we must achieve the liberation of Kuwait while recognizing that any true liberation (i.e. abolishing Kuwait's feudal dynasty and setting up democratic structures) is currently impossible.' And do we not have something similar with the so-called New World Order? Any real (or indeed Real) attempt to establish such an order would inevitably require traumatic far-reaching changes: global democracy based on universal rights, popular participation, the eradication of poverty and social exclusion (etc.) as part of a genuine 'reflexive modernization' However, what we actually have is the routine invocation of the New World Order in terms of an indefinite ideal that functions precisely as a way of preventing any real movement towards it. In the Kantian terms of the sublime, any convergence with what might be called the Bush-Blair 'axis of Good' would become an unbearable evil. So we have the same type of ideological supplement at work: 'we are moving towards a New World Order that will not tolerate the Saddam Husseins of this world while recognizing that a true New World Order (one that would be intolerant of *all* the autocrats, royal families and the corpo-

rate dictatorships of global capitalism) is currently/always impossible. In this way, impossibility loses its innocence and, far from comprising a simple repressed dimension, is rather something that can be seen to function as an implicit-obscene ideological supplement in today's realpolitik.

Politics and radical incorrectness

The notion of impossibility lies at the root of Žižek's political perspective. And here we get a different spin on the very compelling post-Marxist advances of Laclau and Mouffe and their demonstration that a transparent antagonism-free Society is inachievable. For Žižek the key question is not so much whether Society is (im)possible, but rather *how* is society impossible and how is impossibility understood politically? In today's postmodern culture, the idea of the impossible is one that tends to feed into a language of 'provisionality' 'partiality', 'precariousness' and so on. Every gesture is in a way already disavowed through a sense of irony, ersatz and supersession. The problem, therefore, is that the postmodern enthusiasm for impossibility is one that lends itself too readily to a type of politics that *itself* becomes overly partial and provisional; where political ambition is already limited by its own sense of limitation as such.⁶ In other words, the potential danger is that we are left with a politics that stops at the level of impossibility without ever seeking to, as it were, possibilize the impossible.

The political consequences of this type of perspective are already clear. The so-called ethical approaches to foreign policy, third world debt, immigration, social redistribution and so on are always works-in-progress; so many expressions of the Third Way passion for focus groups ('listening to all sides', 'feeling their pain' ...) without ever passing to the act proper. So perhaps the political spirit of the postmodern age is not so much the Derridean one of Hamlet's ghost (of infinite indictment etc.) but of Hamlet himself who, in the sense

of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, constantly resolves to do but instead ends up constantly resolving. In a further twist on Žižek's argument – where, in the Hegelian sense, something retroactively posits its own conditions of possibility – we might say that with today's political culture we have a clear example of the simultaneous retroactive positing of the conditions of impossibility.

There is a further potential danger. This concerns especially orthodox trends in politically correct multiculturalism and their distortion of a certain type of alliance politics that seeks to establish chains of equivalence between a widening set of differential struggles around gender, culture, lifestyles and so on. While there is nothing wrong in principle with establishing such forms of solidarity, the problem arises where this type of politics begins to assume, in a common-sense way, a basic levelling of the political terrain where all groups are taken to suffer equally ('we are all victims of the state/global capitalism/repressive forces'). In other words, there is a danger that equivalential politics becomes so distorted that it becomes a way of disguising the position of those who are truly abject: those who suffer endemic poverty, destitution and repressive violence in our world system. In this way, the abject can become doubly victimized: first by a global capitalist order that actively excludes them; and, second, by an aseptic politically correct 'inclusivism' that renders them invisible inside its postmodern forest; its tyranny of differences.

For Žižek it is imperative that we cut through this Gordian knot of postmodern protocol and recognize that our ethico-political responsibility is to confront the constitutive violence of today's global capitalism and its obscene naturalization/anonymization of the millions who are subjugated by it throughout the world. Against the standardized positions of postmodern culture – with all its pieties concerning 'multiculturalist' etiquette – Žižek is arguing for a politics that might be called 'radically incorrect' in the sense that it breaks with these types of positions⁷ and focuses instead on the very organizing principles of today's social

reality: the principles of global liberal capitalism. This requires some care and subtlety.

For far too long, Marxism has been bedevilled by an almost fetishistic economism that has tended towards political morbidity. With the likes of Hilferding and Gramsci, and more recently Laclau and Mouffe, crucial theoretical advances have been made that enable the transcendence of all forms of economism. In this new context, however, Žižek argues that the problem that now presents itself is almost that of the opposite fetish. That is to say, the prohibitive anxieties surrounding the taboo of economism can function as a way of not engaging with economic reality and as a way of implicitly accepting the latter as a basic horizon of existence. In an ironic Freudian-Lacanian twist, the fear of economism can end up reinforcing a *de facto* economic necessity in respect of contemporary capitalism (i.e. the initial prohibition conjures up the very thing it fears).

This is not to endorse any kind of retrograde return to economism. Žižek's point is rather that in rejecting economism we should not lose sight of the systemic power of capital in shaping the lives and destinies of humanity and our very sense of the possible. In particular we should not overlook Marx's central insight that in order to create a universal global system the forces of capitalism seek to conceal the politico-discursive violence of its construction through a kind of gentrification of that system. What is persistently denied by neo-liberals such as Rorty (1989) and Fukuyama (1992) is that the gentrification of global liberal capitalism is one whose 'universalism' fundamentally reproduces and depends upon a disavowed violence that excludes vast sectors of the world's population. In this way, neo-liberal ideology attempts to naturalize capitalism by presenting its outcomes of winning and losing as if they were simply a matter of chance and sound judgement in a neutral marketplace.

Capitalism does indeed create a space for a certain diversity, at least for the central capitalist regions, but it is neither neutral nor ideal and its price in terms of social exclusion is exorbitant. That is to say, the human cost in terms of

inherent global poverty and degraded 'life-chances' cannot be calculated within the existing economic rationale and, in consequence, social exclusion remains mystified and nameless (viz. the patronizing reference to the 'developing world'). And Žižek's point is that this mystification is magnified through capitalism's profound capacity to ingest its own excesses and negativity: to redirect (or misdirect) social antagonisms and to absorb them within a culture of differential affirmation. Instead of Bolshevism, the tendency today is towards a kind of political boutiqueism that is readily sustained by postmodern forms of consumerism and lifestyle.

Against this Žižek argues for a new universalism whose primary ethical directive is to confront the fact that our forms of social existence are founded on exclusion on a global scale. While it is perfectly true that universalism can never become Universal (it will always require a hegemonic-particular embodiment in order to have any meaning), what is novel about Žižek's universalism is that it would not attempt to conceal this fact or to reduce the status of the abject Other to that of a 'glitch' in an otherwise sound matrix.

Risking the impossible

The response of the left to global capitalism cannot be one of retreat into the nation-state or into organicist forms of 'community' and popular identities that currently abound in Europe and elsewhere. For Žižek it is, rather, a question of working with the very excesses that, in a Lacanian sense, are in capitalism more than capitalism. It is a question, therefore, of transcending the provincial 'universalism' of capitalism. To illustrate the point, Žižek draws attention to the category of 'intellectual property' and the increasingly absurd attempts to establish restrictive dominion over technological advances genetic codes, DNA structures, digital communications, pharmaceutical breakthroughs, computer programs and so on – that either affect us all and/or to which there is a sense

of common human entitlement. Indeed, the modern conjuncture of capitalism is more and more characterized by a prohibitive culture: the widespread repression of those forms of research and development that have real emancipatory potential beyond exclusive profiteering; the restriction of information that has direct consequences for the future of humanity; the fundamental denial that social equality could be sustained by the abundance generated by capitalism. Capitalism typically endeavours to constrain the very dimensions of the universal that are enabled by it and simultaneously to resist all those developments that disclose its specificity-artificiality as merely one possible mode of being.

The left, therefore, must seek to subvert these ungovernable excesses in the direction of a political (and politicizing) universalism; or what Balibar would call *égaliberté*. This means that the left should demand more globalization not less. Where neo-liberals speak the language of freedom either in terms of individual liberty or the free movement of goods and capital the left should use this language to combat today's racist obsessions with 'economic refugees', 'immigrants' and so on, and insist that freedoms are meaningless without the social resources to participate in those freedoms. Where there is talk of universal rights, the left must affirm a responsibility to the universal; one that emphasizes real human solidarity and does not lose sight of the abject within differential discourses. Reversing the well-known environmentalists' slogan, we might say that the left has to involve itself in thinking locally and acting globally. That is to say, it should attend to the specificity of today's political identities within the context of their global (capitalist) conditions of possibility precisely in order to challenge those conditions.

Yet here I would venture that, despite clearly stated differences (Butler et al., 2000), the political perspective of Žižek is not necessarily opposed to that of Laclau and Mouffe and that a combined approach is fully possible. While Žižek is right to stress the susceptibility of today's 'alternative' forms of hegemonic engagement to deradicalization within a

postmodern-p.c. imaginary – a kind of hegemonization of the very terrain (the politico-cultural conditions of possibility) that produces and predisposes the contemporary logics of hegemony – it is equally true to say that the type of political challenge that Žižek has in mind is one that can only advance through the type of hegemonic subversion that Laclau and Mouffe have consistently stressed in their work. The very possibility of a political universalism is one that depends on a certain hegemonic breaking out of the existing conventions/grammar of hegemonic engagement.

It is along these lines that Žižek affirms the need for a more radical intervention in the political imagination. The modern (Machiavellian) view of politics is usually presented in terms of a basic tension between (potentially) unlimited demands/appetites and limited resources; a view which is implicit in the predominant 'risk society' perspective where the central (almost Habermasian) concern is with more and better scientific information. The political truth of today's world, however, is rather the opposite of this view. That is to say, the demands of the official left (especially the various incarnations of the Third Way left) tend to articulate extremely modest demands in the face of a virtually unlimited capitalism that is more than capable of providing every person on this planet with a civilized standard of living.

For Žižek, a confrontation with the obscenities of abundance capitalism also requires a transformation of the ethico-political imagination. It is no longer a question of developing ethical guidelines within the existing political framework (the various institutional and corporate 'ethical committees') but of developing a politicization of ethics; an ethics of the Real.⁸ The starting point here is an insistence on the unconditional autonomy of the subject; of accepting that as human beings we are ultimately responsible for our actions and being-in-the-world up to and including the construction of the capitalist system itself. Far from simple norm-making or refining/reinforcing existing social protocol, an ethics of the Real tends to emerge through norm-breaking and in finding

new directions that, by definition, involve traumatic changes: i.e. the Real in genuine ethical challenge. An ethics of the Real does not simply defer to the impossible (or infinite Otherness) as an unsurpassable horizon that already marks every act as a failure, incomplete and so on. Rather, such an ethics is one that fully accepts contingency but which is nonetheless prepared to risk the impossible in the sense of breaking out of standardized positions. We might say that it is an ethics which is not only politically motivated but which also draws its strength from the political itself.

For Žižek an ethics of the Real (or Real ethics) means that we cannot rely on any form of symbolic Other that would endorse our (in)decisions and (in)actions: for example, the 'neutral' financial data of the stockmarkets; the expert knowledge of Beck's 'new modernity' scientists; the economic and military councils of the New World Order; the various (formal and informal) tribunals of political correctness; or any of the mysterious laws of God, nature or the market. What Žižek affirms is a radical culture of ethical identification for the left in which the alternative forms of militancy must first of all be militant with *themselves*. That is to say, they must be militant in the fundamental ethical sense of not relying on any external/higher authority and in the development of a political imagination that, like Žižek's own thought, exhorts us to risk the impossible.

The following conversations were conducted in English in two main stages and were completed in London during the summer of 2002. They were organized in a semi-structured way with a core set of questions of which Žižek had no prior knowledge. Although the questions served as a general guide, Žižek's responses would invariably take unpredictable twists and turns, opening up entirely new avenues of enquiry. While editing has been undertaken by myself, this has been kept to a minimum in order to preserve as much of the rhythm and tenor of the discourse as possible.

The conversations were designed to develop thematically – moving from the biographical to questions of philosophy,

science, culture, ethics and politics – and to offer scope for commentary on major events like 11 September 2001. Within this framework, Žižek not only advances a series of compelling insights but also develops, perhaps for the first time, a number of crucial revisions and critical reflexive interventions in respect of his own thought. In this regard, the conversations will appeal both to the novitiate and to elder readers of Žižek. What is recorded here is a living engagement by one of our most formidable thinkers with some of the most pressing problems of our age.

There are a number of people to thank: John Thompson, Elizabeth Molinari and Sarah Dancy at Polity for supporting this project and for their patience over deadline transgressions; Mari for being there; Hilly and Con for being who they are. Above all, I would like to thank Slavoj Žižek for his continued good humour throughout the proceedings. I can only hope that these conversations have captured something of his intellectual vibrancy and generosity of spirit.

Notes

1 As Žižek has pointed out in a number of texts, today's form of multiculturalism comprises a culture that tends to view every culture as a particular difference *except* itself, and to tolerate everything *except* criticism.

2 Lacan's *objet petit a* (object small a) refers to a certain excess that is in the object more than the object – the object-cause of desire. We might say that it is not so much the object of desire as the desirous element that can reside in any object: the drive towards some elusive point of consummation that may be quite incidental to the object itself (e.g. a shirt that was once worn by Elvis). It is that which 'authenticates' the object and/or the experience of having it (e.g. the idea of virginity in Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*). If we take Tarrantino's *Pulp Fiction* then we see that the narrative ultimately revolves around a lost/stolen object inside a case that must be retrieved by Vincent and Jules. This object cannot be seen and is only alluded to in the reflective glow of the protagonists' faces. This is the *objet petit a*: something whose authenticity cannot be represented or substantialized and which is but a reflection of the

drive to complete the (broken) circuit of enjoyment and to be reconciled with (impossible) desire itself.

3 In this sense we might say that the vanishing point is the very 'subject' of (visual) art.

4 For example a system of law requires a basic code for distinguishing what is lawful and what is not. However, the legal/illegal distinction cannot be determined outside the system of law. Moreover, the question as to whether the system of law *itself* is legal or illegal is strictly unthinkable within the terms of the latter.

5 See also Daly (1999) for a discussion of this point.

6 To avoid any misunderstanding: there is no suggestion that Laclau and Mouffe's perspective necessarily leads in this direction; merely that it is a potential distortion of their perspective. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe have been concerned to fundamentally distance themselves from this type of distortion in their explicit critique of Third Way politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xv).

7 Perhaps we could add here that the political – as conceived by Lefort (1989) and developed by Rancière (1999) and others – is always 'incorrect' in that it represents some kind of rupture with/challenge towards received conventions and ordering principles. In this sense it could be said that political correctness marks a further (regressive) attempt to eliminate the dimension of the political.

8 This derives from Lacan (1992) and his view of an ethics of psychoanalysis. More recently, Žižek has developed the idea of an ethics of the Real – or a Real ethics – in numerous texts. For an extended, and brilliant, analysis of an ethics of the Real, see Zupančič (2000).

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Conversation 1

Opening the Space of Philosophy

GLYN DALY *You grew up in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, in postwar Yugoslavia. By your late teens you had already decided to become a philosopher. What prompted this decision?*

ŽIŽEK The first thing I have to say is that philosophy was not my first choice. An old thesis developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss affirms that every philosopher, every theoretician, had another profession at which he failed and that failure then marked his entire being. For Lévi-Strauss, his first choice was to be a musician. This was his kind of constitutive melancholy gloss. For me, as is clear from my writings, it was cinema. I started when I was already about 13 or 14; I even remember which movies absolutely fascinated me when I was young. I think two of them left a mark on me: Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*. I saw each of them at least fifteen times. In fact, I was somewhere between cinema theory and cinema practice, because I also had a Super-8 camera. So the original decision was not to be a philosopher; this was kind of a secondary choice, the second best thing.

Did you make a film with the Super 8?

Yes, but that is a strict state secret! I made a 20–30-minute amateur film and I think I destroyed it; I am not sure. But if

anyone comes up with it now he or she will certainly disappear! It is a strict state secret because, of course, it was an exegesis of early adolescent love affairs and so on – that traumatic teenage period which is best forgotten. So just to make it clear, this melancholic structure was with me from the start. Philosophy was something that came second, as a replacement for, as Judith Butler would have put it, a 'primordial passionate attachment' It's as if I need this structure.

While we know from psychoanalysis that every symptom has the structure of a primordial loss, at the same time I don't think there are any big secrets to be found there. Before I started as a philosopher, I had already, in my late teens, published some cinema reviews – even some attempts at theory in Slovene cinema journals. But my ironic comparison would have been with St Paul when he was still a tax collector before his conversion on the road to Damascus. Wouldn't it be nice if we were to find today that he had left some notes about how to collect taxes on the streets and to publish these as his early writings? You know that St Paul, in affirming redemption through faith – the meaning of Christ's sacrifice – often uses this financial metaphor: Christ is paying for our sins. Now I can imagine that a deconstructionist reading of these imaginary early writings would find there a similar paradigmatic structure: one family member pays the tax and thus pays for the freedom of all the others. But nonetheless I don't think we should pursue this line of thought.

The second point I want to make is that it is interesting how my philosophical development went step-by-step, almost following the trend, as a kind of recapitulation of the typical situation in Eastern Europe at that point. I started when I was about 15 years old reading the standard Marxist classics stuff – dialectics and so on – and my first breakthrough was when, seduced by the Praxis group (this was a semi-dissident journal of so-called Humanist Marxism), I established my first distancing from official ideology. I started to read this journal and then, because in Slovenia

there was a strong Heideggerian presence, I passed to Heidegger. Then, as a next step, I discovered the so-called French structuralist revolution. So there was this strict succession. Interestingly enough, although I knew them very well, I never was influenced by the Frankfurt School.

What did you understand to be the purpose of philosophy and your role as a philosopher?

Oh my God, I don't think there was a clear vision of philosophy! I'm almost tempted here to quote the jargonistic Lacanian statement, 'It was something in me more than myself which decided', because it wasn't even a clear idea. But if I were to locate a specific insight I would say that – and this is something that stays with me even now – retroactively, at least, I only understood what philosophy was at a certain elementary level when I arrived at the Kantian transcendental dimension. That is to say, when I understood the central point that philosophy is not simply a kind of megalomaniac enterprise – you know, 'let's understand the basic structure of the world' – that philosophy is not that. Or, to put it in more Heideggerian terms: while there is a basic question of understanding the structure of the world, the notion of the world is not simply the universe or everything that exists. Rather, the 'world' is a certain historical category, and understanding what the world is means, in transcendental terms, understanding some pre-existing, at least historically, a priori structure which determines how we understand how the world is disclosed to us. This for me is the crucial turn.

When I understood that this is not to do with megalomania, in the sense of the standard counter-attack of naive scientists, namely, 'we are dealing with hard facts, with rational hypotheses, but you philosophers you are just dreaming about the structure of everything', I then realized that philosophy is in a way more critical, more cautious even, than science. Philosophy asks even more elementary questions. For example, when a scientist approaches a certain question, the

point of philosophy is not 'What is the structure of all?' but 'What are the concepts the scientist already has to presuppose in order to formulate the question?' It is simply asking about what is already there: what conceptual, and other, presuppositions already have to be there so that you can say what you are saying, so that you understand what you understand, so that you know that you are doing what you are doing.

In this sense Kant was always a model philosopher. For example, even in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant's problem is not speculation about mortality of the soul. He asks a simple question: 'What is it that we have to presuppose is true by the mere fact that we are active as ethical agents?' Kant's answer is quite consequent – and at a different level affirmed even by Derrida. His answer is that, at least in the common understanding of ethics, people effectively presuppose the immortality of the soul and the existence of God; they silently presuppose this. That is what philosophy is about, not 'I philosopher believe in a certain structure of the universe etc.', but an exploration of what is presupposed even in daily activity.

So contemporary philosophical endeavour (if we can call it that) lies not so much with grand or specific questions as such, but in what lies behind them, what allows them to be formulated in the first place?

Yes, and in this sense I think (and here I am still unabashedly modern) that from today's perspective it is in a way clear – and now I will say something horrible for which some people, especially historians of older philosophy, would lynch me – that Kant was the first philosopher. With his transcendental turn, I think that Kant opened up a space from which we can in retrospect read the entire canon of previous philosophy. Pre-Kantian philosophy cannot think this transcendental aspect. And, interestingly enough, do you know who thought the same, if you read him closely? Heidegger, the early Heidegger. It is quite clear he thinks that Kant made

the great breakthrough by enquiring about the conditions of possibility. His idea is just that Kant wasn't radical enough; that he still remained in debt to some substantialist ontology that was too naive. But essentially, Heidegger's endeavour is to take this basic Kantian insight into conditions of possibility – or what he calls horizons of minute – and then to go back and to read Descartes and Aristotle in this way. Incidentally, this is why I also think that Heidegger was on to something before he reversed his position – in the passage from early to late Heidegger in the early 1930s. Later, Heidegger abandoned his basic orientation towards Kant. At that point Kant's transcendental turn was, for Heidegger, simply another regression into metaphysical, subjectivist nihilism. But I think this is a great loss. I think that perhaps the key insight of the early Heidegger is that the whole previous history of metaphysics has to be reread through that transcendental turn.

And it is through this turn that all previous philosophers should be read. Let's take Aristotle as an example. Here I agree with Heidegger and Lacan, who say that Aristotle's so-called biological writings are the key. What Aristotle advances in his description of the structure of a living being, as that which moves itself out of itself, is not so much a theory of the world as it is a theory of what we mean when we say this is alive: that is to say, he engages with what pre-understanding we have when we, say, identify something as a living being. It is really in this sense a hermeneutical procedure not an ontological one. It is not a question about what it objectively scientifically means to be alive. It is, rather, a question of how, in our daily lives when we experience something as alive (an animal is alive, a stone is not alive), we apply certain criteria that we already have in ourselves: it's this hermeneutical approach. In this sense, again maybe behind all these names which I have mentioned, Kant is crucial.

You studied philosophy at the University of Ljubljana and wrote a doctoral thesis on Heidegger. Why did you choose Heidegger?

Maybe I should just add that while my doctoral thesis is on Heidegger, my first book – published when I was 22 – wasn't my thesis, it was my graduation paper. It was a mixture of Heidegger and Derrida with a very embarrassing title: *The Pain of the Difference*. It is another of those books which it is better not to mention in my presence! It's an early work, and a pretty confused one. After that, my Master's thesis was on French theories of symbolic practice, covering Derrida, Kristeva, Lacan, Foucault and others, but its orientation wasn't really clear. It was only with my second doctoral thesis, in the late 1970s, that a clear Lacanian orientation emerged.

But why Heidegger, since we are returning so much to Heidegger? I must say that I am more and more convinced that Heidegger, in spite of all the criticism which he deserves, is the philosopher who connects us in the sense that, in a way, almost every other orientation of any serious weight defines itself through some sort of critical relation or distance towards Heidegger. I mean this in the sense of Foucault, who said somewhere that all philosophy is anti-Platonic (every philosopher has to designate, to mark, his or her distance towards Plato), or as in the nineteenth century when it was possible to articulate an anti-Hegelianism, but this meant precisely that: a distance towards Hegel. I think that in our context it is a distance towards Heidegger that is critical.

And it is typical that this distance as a rule takes the form not of an absolute limitation but a kind of ambiguous conditional: you endorse part of it and then you say but Heidegger didn't go far enough. For example, Marxists would have said 'Yes, *Being and Time* is a great breakthrough, with its abstract theoretical notion of ego as the subject of perception, *Dasein*, that is engaged or thrown into the world', but they would say that Heidegger had missed the social dimension.

Even, for example, someone like Derrida would have said, 'yes, Heidegger started the critique of metaphysics of presence, but his notion of the event of appropriation is still too closed' Heidegger almost did it, but he didn't go far enough. In this sense I think that Heidegger is in a way a key figure

here. To go back to the situation in Slovenia at that point, I think I was lucky in the sense that precisely because Slovenia wasn't a strong international philosophical presence (in other republics, such as Croatia and Serbia, there was, in the guise of this Praxis School of Humanist Marxism, more of an international presence), there existed representatives of all the other predominant orientations of philosophy. We had the Frankfurt School, Marxists, we had the Heideggerians, we had analytical philosophers and so on. So I was lucky enough to have been exposed to all the predominant orientations.

How strongly were you aware of the Derridean interpretation of Heidegger when you were undertaking your research?

Very much so. I remember it clearly as a key shift, a great discovery, already in early 1968 when I was in the first year of my university studies. To be quasi-religious for a moment, it was almost mysterious in the sense that I remember that I barely spoke French, but, with some friends whose French was better, we started reading Derrida's *Grammatology*. It was like a magic year when the three books appeared at practically the same time: *Grammatology*, *Voice and Phenomenon* and *Writing and Difference*. There was really a structure of revelation (although later I turned away from Derrida); it was 'That's it!' – we somehow knew that this was it, even before understanding it. In retrospect I discovered that I had misunderstood many things, but the immediate insight was, 'My God, this is the real thing' and we somehow knew that we should follow that. So not only was I aware of Derrida's reading of Heidegger, but this was precisely what interested me. I think that without Derrida I would probably have ended up as a Heideggerian. It was Derrida who provided this first impetus to move away from Heidegger. What I was looking for in Derrida was how to break away from Heidegger, and I remember how frustrated I was that in this first very great book, Derrida himself avoided the topic of Heidegger. It is only in some later writings, I think in the early 1970s, that Derrida directly approached Heidegger.

So, yes, Derrida was crucial to my move away from Heidegger. In fact, for a couple of years, under the influence of Derrida, myself and my group were moving in a kind of naive ecumenical spirit, trying to take in everything which came from France: Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan and so on.

At the beginning, of course, Lacan was totally incomprehensible to us and it took us some years – to be quite honest, up until around 1975/6 – before, after a further quasi-religious revelation, finally we made the choice: Lacan. So this period was one of confusion and experiment. But it is interesting to note that in the 1967–8 winter issue of our Slovenian journal, *Problemi*, which is even now still our journal, we had already published a translation of two chapters from *Grammatology*. I think that this may be the first translation, not of the whole book, but of some chapters of Derrida into a foreign language.

By the early 1970s you had completed a doctoral thesis on Heidegger and had published your first book. For most postgraduates this would have signalled a promising career in higher education, but instead you found yourself rather marginalized in Yugoslavian academia. Can you explain these circumstances?

Yes – in fact I found myself unemployed. The period 1971–2 until the late 1970s represented an Indian summer of hard-line communism and it was very difficult to get a job – practically impossible to get a teaching job – without being a Marxist. The professors in my department had promised me a job and I had already made the application to become an assistant in the Department of Philosophy. The post that was meant for me was as Assistant in Modern Contemporary Bourgeois Philosophy (of course I like this title – these were Marxist times after all!). But then at a certain point I heard rumours that things were looking bad for me and then all of a sudden I was informed ‘you are out’. After that I was unemployed for four years, from 1973 to the end of 1977.

Why were you considered not to be a Marxist?

I would say two things. First, in a way I wasn't a Marxist; I was some way between Heidegger and Derrida, and even when I moved more towards people like Althusser it would be difficult to claim that I was truly a Marxist. But what was more complicated was that all the predominant orientations in Slovenia – Marxists, the Frankfurt School, analytic philosophers, Heideggerians and so on – were ferociously opposed to French thought: structuralism, post-structuralism etc. So I would say that the latter was even more of a problem than not being an orthodox Marxist.

Your interest in French thought was seen as a threat?

Absolutely, yes. But officially they didn't put it this way. For them this was just a cheap fashionable phenomenon not to be taken seriously. So it was simply dismissed. I remember that when I finished my Master's thesis, I had to write a special supplement because the first version was rejected for not being Marxist enough! So I was unemployed for four years and then came a paradox: I worked for two years in something called The Marxist Centre in the Central Committee of the Party. This is a typical ex-Yugoslav paradox. I wasn't good enough from the Marxist standpoint to work at the Department of Philosophy, but I was good enough for the Central Committee – although it was rather meaningless work that involved taking minutes in minor meetings for different organs. It was somewhat cynical.

Maybe they wanted to keep an eye on you

Definitely. But I think nonetheless that the professors who organized this were basically looking out for my interests. I was young, I had a child, I was unemployed and, to their credit, they were quite honest about the situation. They told me that in the present political situation it would be out of the question for me to become a teacher: it would be too

problematic and politically too risky. So they tried to organize a research job for me as a temporary measure. But there were further complications, and it wasn't possible for me to get the job that they had wanted for me as a philosophical researcher. So when I saw that this was a deadlock, in 1979, through my Heideggerian friends, I got a job at the Department of Sociology in the Institute for Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. And for about eleven years I didn't work in what was my domain. Everybody knows that I am really a philosopher, that I have nothing whatsoever to do with sociology, but I had to pretend.

What I was doing was what I was always doing – philosophy – and they simply tolerated it. So I am not complaining. I think that this was all – as you can see I am in a theological mood – controlled by the hidden hand of destiny. I think this was all a blessing in disguise. You know, when I was young I read about a verger – the one who assists the priest. It's a nice story about a guy who had been doing his job for twenty years when all of a sudden there was an order from the church hierarchy that everyone employed by the church had to be literate. The priest discovers that the verger is illiterate and says 'I am very sorry but I have to expel you; you can no longer be employed here' So the guy is furious, goes home and wants to buy a cigarette, but he notices that on the long way home there is no tobacco shop. So he puts the little money he has into opening a tobacco shop, is able later to open another one, and then more and more, until, after a few years, he is rich. He then has so much money that at a certain point he goes to the bank to open an account, whereupon he is taken to see the director of the bank. When the director discovers that he doesn't know how to fill out the forms or sign his name, he exclaims, 'My God, even though you are illiterate you have earned so much money; imagine what you could have been if you were literate.' And the guy replies: 'I know exactly what I would have been: a poor underpaid helper in a church.'

I think it is exactly the same with me. I think that if I were to have got a job at that point, I would now be a poor stupid

unknown professor in Ljubljana, probably dabbling in a little bit of Derrida, a little bit of Heidegger, a little bit of Marxism and so on. So undoubtedly it was a blessing in disguise, not only because this pushed me towards going abroad – I went to Paris, gave lectures there to survive and then studied with Miller and others – but even more important was the fact that I was not allowed to teach and was given a research post, and from that time on I have desperately tried to cling to research positions. This means, of course, a permanent sabbatical. So again, I think that if we read my life from an eschatological perspective, a theological hidden hand of God, I almost think that everything which appeared originally to be a misfortune turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

This is similar to Kieślowski's Three Colours White

You can say the same thing: without the misunderstanding, what would he have been but a poor hairdresser in Paris, and now he is a rich millionaire in Poland. Absolutely the same story – yes.

In the early 1980s you embarked on a further doctoral project at the Université de Paris VIII – this time on Lacanian psychoanalysis. What was the background to this decision and what drew you to the Parisian School of Psychoanalysis?

We are talking now about the early 1980s: yes, I had a doctorate and I was employed by this marginal institute – not marginal in the sense that it was bad, but many people there were dissidents or semi-dissidents for whom there were no jobs at proper departments. Why Paris? One reason was simply that progress was more or less blocked in Slovenia. There were no prospects there for me. The second thing was that at that point we (myself and my group) had been ultra-orthodox Lacanians from roughly the mid-1970s onwards. We already had links with Jacques-Alain Miller and we organized a big colloquium through a little bit of cheating, and by some miracle we got some money for it. I think the title

was 'Psychoanalysis and Culture' – something like that (we had to have culture in the title). We invited J.-A. Miller and some other Lacanians, such as Gerard Miller and Alain Grosrichard, and it was like a great public event. There was tremendous enthusiasm, with people standing outside in the corridors to listen to the presentations. It was a kind of mystical/mythical founding event of the Slovenian Lacanian orientation. Subsequently, Miller offered one of us the post of Foreign Assistant at Paris-VIII – each year they have one or two posts for foreigners – and he offered this post to me. I stayed there for a year and then I stayed a couple of further times, for one semester, once even again for the whole year in Paris. And that's where I got my Lacanian training for a couple of years or so.

I still think that in those years in Paris, I learned most in the sense that this was my education. Whatever people think about J.-A. Miller, he was the best pedagogue that I know. He has this absolute miraculous capacity for explication: you have a page of Lacan which appears to you totally incomprehensible, then you talk with him and it is not only that you understand, but it is totally transparent to you, and you think 'my God, how is it that I didn't get it, it is so clear?' So I must say this quite openly that my Lacan is Miller's Lacan. Prior to Miller I didn't really understand Lacan, and this was for me a great time of education. At this time Miller also conducted public seminars with hundreds of people in attendance. And then the next day there was usually a closed seminar. In the beginning there were only about fifteen, maybe twenty, of us having intense discussion, making interventions – and this was like a miracle. For a whole semester we studied *Kant with Sade*, line by line, then we went on to 'Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire', and so on. Again, this really opened up Lacan to me. Without that, it would be something totally different probably. That was my big formative experience.

Returning to ex-Yugoslavia, I must say that two further experiences were also very instructive for me, and which even now mark my approach to ideology: the Yugoslav army

and working at the Central Committee and being able to observe how the power of the Communist Party works from within. There I had already learned from life itself the basic idea of the cynical functioning of ideology: that in order to function ideology shouldn't take itself too seriously. What shocked me was the extent to which not only the top party nomenclatura didn't take their own official ideology seriously, but to what extent those who took it seriously were perceived as a threat. That is to say, it was a kind of positive condition not to take it seriously. The idea was that if you took things too seriously this was already a step towards dissidence.

There was one occasion when one of the top people in the Slovenian Communist Party gave a speech to us Young Communists, emphasizing that we should all read both volumes of *Das Kapital* and that we should all follow in our lives the fourth thesis of Feuerbach: you shouldn't only interpret the world, you should change it. Of course he paraphrased this thesis in a very vulgar way – for example, 'let's not just talk and philosophize, let's do some work' Then of course I approached him afterwards and asked him: 'Don't you know that there are three volumes of *Das Kapital* by Marx, and that this is thesis 11, not thesis 4?' And I got a marvellous answer: 'I know, but that was my message, it doesn't matter who knows this.' This is a wonderful example of how it functions. The message was this indifference. The message was 'I don't care'

Is there a psychoanalytic dynamic here, that one mustn't get too close to the (Stalinist) Thing itself?

If there is a psychoanalytic dynamic, then it is a strange one which is going on even now, because all my friends know, and laugh at me about it, that I still live so much in this universe of Stalinist metaphors. I am absolutely obsessed by this. The movies that I watch are often old Stalinist movies, the songs that I listen to are old Communist songs, and even at the everyday level I try to use these Stalinist notions of – you

know – traitor, objective truths, deviation and so on as much as possible in my daily life. So, if anything, the transference is still going on, I am not yet over it. I fully admit it, but it is also my pleasure.

In the late 1970s you founded, with others, the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis. What were the main aims and objectives of the Society? How was it organized?

The main reason we founded it was because we were excluded from academia – at least the Lacanian orientation was. As a Society, we had the right to organize lectures and courses, which we did to propagate the theory. But these were still communist times and you could not organize spontaneously; you had to have some institutional coverage. That was one reason. The other reason was to secure the autonomy of our publications, because again, as a Society, we had the right to publish things.

But establishing the Society was very complicated, and this was reflected in its rather strange title: Society for *Theoretical* Psychoanalysis. The way it was done was that proposals for new societies had to be sent to certain umbrella socialist organizations which would then ask other similar societies – in this instance, the philosophical, sociological and psychological societies – whether a new society was needed. This was a very tense moment for us. We were lucky in that the philosophers and sociologists didn't block us. The problem lay with the psychologists, and especially the psychiatrists, who were concerned that we would be competing with them. So it was a condition for establishing the society that we add the word 'theoretical' to the title: in other words, nothing practical, no clinics. This was purely a pragmatic matter.

The organization of the Society was essentially non-existent. In all the time that the Society has existed, I don't think that there has been even one official meeting of it. No, it's all done in a totally improvised way. It was effectively run by me and one or two of my friends. It's purely a prac-

tical business to control money, to promote publications (the journal, *Problemi*, and the book series, *Analecta*) and so on. I had to laugh, and this I think is a nice example of transference, when some foreign friends of mine, some younger students, suggested that 'we would like to write the history of the Lacanian School, and could we see the archives of your Society?' My God – there is nothing, there are no archives, there is nothing, it doesn't exist! It is a non-existing School!

Did you not use any of your Central Committee skills?

No, but we did use some other Central Committee skills to good Stalinist effect. For example, we would often proclaim an individual to be a 'non-person', changing the dates retrospectively and so on – we did all that stuff. We were quite manipulative, but the Society was always simply an instrumental tool for us to develop publications, the occasional conference and so on. In Slovenia, the good thing is that there is still great state support for publications and for journals, but they don't give it to private persons; it must be an institutionalized journal. So we needed the Society in order to get these funds.

In many ways it reflects a perfect Lacanian structure: the idea of *das Ding* (the Thing) – in the middle is a void, nothing. Many of my friends think that if there is a Slovenian Lacanian School and we publish so much abroad, then what must happen at the centre? The answer is nothing, absolutely nothing. So it is tragic in a way. It is almost as if we are caught with our pants down when somebody comes to Ljubljana and then we just have to tell him nothing is happening here. There are three of us who simply meet as friends, and that's it. Here again you have your KGB Stalinist troika – you know how Communists were always organized as troika, as units of three, to liquidate people, or whatever. It's strictly a troika now, with Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar and myself.

The Lacanian structure is, up to a point, the result of my private pathology. What I mean by this is that I have an incredible resistance to rituals of power. For example, I often

get into problems when I am on a committee at which a student has to defend his or her graduation paper. My question is always, why do it? My idea is always, why go through the ritual at all? Let's simply sign the documents and just go to a restaurant and have a nice meal. But I noticed how people liked the spectacle, the ritual, otherwise they are disappointed. But I have a deep resistance towards rituals.

Which, again, is why this Society is ideal, for absolutely nothing happens. But we can produce any document you want in a year. This was always my private pleasure. To give you an idea – I will not name any names, as people may sue me – whenever I was visiting an American university, and I probably visited more than a hundred of them, under the excuse of 'Oh my God, maybe I don't have anything to write on', I tried whenever possible to steal some headed paper with envelopes. In this way, during the 1990s, I always had at home official stationery from thirty or forty different universities.

Now in Slovenia the structure was that if you wanted to go abroad as a researcher you had to submit an invitation, and if the invitation was a serious one, then it was pretty automatic that you got the money. So, for example, a typical scene consisted of one of my friends coming to me and saying he wanted to go abroad. I say, 'fine, where do you want to go?' He says 'Chicago' I say 'let's see what I have for Chicago' At some stage I think I have picked up notepaper from the University of Chicago's German Department, and I think I have something from Northwestern also. 'So, OK, here is the option, which would you prefer?' He chooses one, and I then ask what kind of colloquium he would like to be invited to? So we faked it all, whatever was needed, all the data – and of course we always invented the colloquium. I mean, I simply said 'on behalf of' and I faked the name so that none of my friends would be offended if it all came out. At some point I remember once that there truly was a colloquium, but I said, no, this is not ethical and so I invented another one. I said I cannot stand writing the truth, it must be a lie. So although it would have been easier to tell the

truth, I invented the colloquium. I am a workaholic: I do my work, but I have this terrible desire to fake things at this level; to fake institutional things. I think that everything to do with institutions should be faked. I don't know what this is, I never analyse myself. I hate the very idea of analysing myself.

So the Lacanian organization of the School also developed a nice twist on the notion of the letter that always arrives at its destination?

Yes, yes, but again you know that, crazy as this sounds, such an organization is extremely practical. There are no problems like 'My God, what if there are different factions ?' 'What if we people agree with this or not?' Everything can be done instantly. For example, once we wanted some money for some publication and we were told that since this was a large project, we must have an editorial committee in the Society which should discuss the project and approve it. I said, OK, we have it. Then I went home and in half an hour I wrote the document, backdating it – you know, it was possible to fake everything in a minute. Everything was totally operative, so in a deeper sense I don't think we were cheating. The work was always done, which is why I am telling this so publicly. If anyone had told us, 'Wait a minute, you are cheating; what about others' projects?' my answer would be that what the Slovenian state got from giving money to us was much more than it would have got if it had given money to other publications. Formally, it was cheating, but it was extremely efficient.

In 1989 your book, The Sublime Object of Ideology, was published by Verso and became an instant classic. How do you account for its success?

The interesting thing is that long before this I already had some publications in France but they were rather a failure and did not do well. Now when you say that the *Sublime Object* was an instant classic, I don't think it's up to me to

judge, but what I would say – to give an old-fashioned boring explanation – is that it's more the place this book occupies. It's not so much its inherent quality, it's more that, unknowingly, I hit on a certain note or tone. I think that probably people were tired with the standard discourse analysis stuff and that, simply, the time was right for such a move – I just happened to be there at the right moment. There is always this moment of luck. For example, Heidegger's *Being and Time* – yes, it is a great book, but it's also this moment of luck in the sense that it arrived at the right moment.

If you ask me, I think that, for example, my second book, *For They Know Not What They Do*, was more substantial theoretically, but it is typically less popular with fewer obscene jokes and so on. So much depends on circumstances. You know that my first French book (not counting the collected volume on Hitchcock), *Le Plus Sublime des Hystériques*, up to two-thirds of which I would say overlaps with *The Sublime Object*, while not a total fiasco, did not leave any serious impact. So you can see here how contingent these things are. For something which explodes here can practically disappear elsewhere.

It was very popular among postgraduates.

Yes, I must say that this is what I like about the popularity of the book, this kind of working-class solidarity: the lower you got on the academic level, the more it was popular. All around I heard the same story: it was among graduate students that my stronghold existed, not among the top professors. I kind of like this.

Soon after the publication of The Sublime Object you established your own book series with Verso under the title Wo es War. Can you elaborate on this project and its general orientation?

The *Wo es War* series represents a certain reading of Lacan which is philosophical and which at the same time goes beyond the limitations of standard cultural studies in terms

of its political orientation. My big ambition was to enable other people close to me, especially my Slovenian friends Alenka Zupančič and Mladen Dolar, to publish abroad. This was another reason why I wanted the series. But the basic orientation is the philosophical reading of Lacan plus this specific political twist. For this, I needed a series in order to develop a coherent project with a clear direction.

I believe here I am a kind of a Stalinist insofar as I believe in collectivity; not at the level of immediate work – I don't think you can write with others – but there has to be some shared project. And here I am very dogmatic. It took me some time to learn this, but I think that I truly became a philosopher when I understood that there is no dialogue in philosophy. Plato's dialogues, for example, are clearly fake dialogues in which one guy is talking most of the time and the other guy is mostly saying 'yes, I see, yes my God it is like you said – Socrates, my God that's how it is' I fully sympathize with Deleuze who said somewhere that the moment a true philosopher hears a phrase like 'let's discuss this point', his response is 'let's leave as soon as possible; let's run away!' Show me one dialogue which really worked. There are none! I mean, of course there were influences that pass from one philosopher to another, but it can always be demonstrated that they were really misunderstandings. No, I think that with all radical, true philosophers, there is a moment of blindness, and that is the price you have to pay for it. I don't believe in philosophy as a kind of interdisciplinary project – this is the ultimate nightmare. That's not philosophy. We philosophers are madmen: we have a certain insight that we affirm again and again. This is why, although there are now some political and theoretical misunderstandings between Ernesto Laclau and myself, I think that here you can see that he is a true theoretician philosopher. He has a certain, what Germans would call in their nice way, *Grundeinsicht*, a fundamental insight, and he clarifies again and again the same points: antagonism, hegemony, empty signifier. Doesn't he basically tell the same story again and again? This is not a criticism. I think this is the proof that he

is the real one, the real quality. I mean, a philosopher is not the one who says, let's write about this, let's write about that and so on.

So in this sense, this is how we work (the troika with Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič). That's my idea of a philosophical community. We talk a lot, we discuss, but ultimately we are alone, and this works perfectly I think. We don't take any workshops together. When we need to talk, we talk. There is an old romantic formula: the true company is only when you can share your solitude, or some such rubbish. And that's how we function.

Since The Sublime Object, you have averaged something like a book a year with numerous supplementary publications. Is this an expression of psychoanalytic drive?

Yes, and do you know in what sense? My reference here would be Stephen King's *Shining*. What people tend to forget is that this novel is basically about writer's block. In the film version the Jack Nicholson character always types the same sentence, cannot start his text, and then the situation explodes into axe killings. But I think the true horror is actually the opposite one: that you have the compulsion to write on and on. That's much more horrifying than writer's block I think. In the same way as when Kierkegaard refers to the human being as an animal that is sick until death, the true horror is immortality; that it will never end. That is my horror – I simply cannot stop.

And I hate writing. I so intensely hate writing – I cannot tell you how much. The moment I am at the end of one project I have the idea that I didn't really succeed in telling what I wanted to tell, that I need a new project – it's an absolute nightmare. But my whole economy of writing is in fact based upon an obsessional ritual to avoid the actual act of writing. I never begin with the idea that I am going to write something. I always have to begin with one or two observations that lead on to other points – and so on.

So it's almost like tricking yourself into writing?

Absolutely, yes.

Is that why so many examples from popular life abound in your writings?

Yes. And there is a dialectical movement in my work which I think is similar to that of Lacan. What is so nice to observe when you read Lacan is how he uses a certain example, which he then returns to again and again. There is always more in an example than a mere example. For instance, the story of three prisoners in his early writings on temporal logic and the three basic moments: the time to see, the time for understanding, the time for conclusion. It is interesting how, from his first interpretation, around 1945, he returns to this logic again and again, giving totally different readings.

Even if you read closely the way in which Lacan refers to the Freudian fort/da game, it is not the same at all, as again and again he returns to it in a different way.¹ In the end the fort/da element – the small piece of wood that the child throws into the water, fetches, throws again – does not function as a signifier at all but rather as the object; it's the disappearance of the object. So again I have noticed how often the same thing happens to me. When I first use an example, I am usually too stupid to understand fully its implications – I am not yet at the level of this example. It's only in the next book, or even later, when I return to the same example that I fully develop its potential.

1 Freud interprets the infant's obsessive game of throwing away a cotton reel ('fort' = gone) and then finding it again ('da' = here) as a way of coping with the absence of the mother (and with absence generally). Through the game, the child learns to symbolize the traumatic absence of the mother so that her absence is no longer simply absence but is transformed into a *moment* of an ongoing presence-absence succession.

This is one of the reasons why some of my readers, I know, get annoyed, that some of my books may appear repetitive. But this is not simple repetition; it is, rather, that I have to clarify, I have to make the point which I missed the first time. So this would be the logic of my reference to examples, this inherent necessity to clarify things.

At the same time, in a Hegelian context, the way to overcome an idea is to exemplify it, but an example never simply exemplifies a notion; it usually tells you what is wrong with this notion. This is what Hegel does again and again in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He takes a certain existential stance like aestheticism or stoicism. Then how does he criticize it? By simply stating it as a certain life practice, by showing how the very staging actualization of this attitude produces something more which undermines it. In this way, the example always minimally undermines what it is an example of.

However, another aspect of my drive for examples can also be to conceal, to repress, a kind of fascination that I get from these examples. The idea is that of course I am a sort of super-ego personality – indeed, the basic super-ego, whose every direct enjoyment is prohibited. So you know I am only allowed to enjoy things if I can convince myself that this enjoyment serves something, serves a theory. For example, I cannot directly enjoy a good detective movie; I am only allowed to enjoy it if I can say, ‘OK, well maybe I can use this as an example’ So I always live in this state of tension: it is really at the everyday level almost. I am practically unable directly, naively to enjoy the movie. Sooner or later I have this bad conscience, like, wait a minute, I must put this to use, use it somehow.

So maybe again it is complex at this level. But another argument from another aspect is my deep distrust of this kind of Heideggerian pathetic style. I have a kind of absolute compulsion to vulgarize things, not in the sense of simplifying them, but in the sense of ruining any pathetic identification of the Thing, which is why I like to jump suddenly from the highest theory to the lowest possible example. For

example, again, in a new book on opera (co-authored with Mladen Dolar),² I argue that the opposition between Rossini and Wagner should be conceived along the lines of the two modes of sublime: the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. In order to make the point clear, I take a very basic example which I read about somewhere: that of cunnilingus. When men perform cunnilingus on women, when they strike the right note and the woman says 'yes, yes, more please', then what usually happens is that men perform it faster and stronger – but this is a mistake. They should just do it quantitatively more. The difference is that women think in terms of the mathematical sublime – quantitatively more – whereas men think in terms of the dynamic sublime, and then they ruin it. It is an example confirmed to me by many friends. The usual mistake is that if the woman is saying 'yes, yes, that's it', the men think they mean faster and stronger – but it's precisely not that.

You are well known for taking strong positions in your philosophy. Is this a deliberate strategy against the more interdisciplinary approaches of postmodern and post structuralist thought?

On the one hand, I do consider myself an extreme Stalinist philosopher. That is to say, it's clear where I stand. I don't believe in combining things. I hate this approach of taking a little bit from Lacan, a little bit from Foucault, a little bit from Derrida. No, I don't believe in this; I believe in clear-cut positions. I think that the most arrogant position is this apparent, multidisciplinary modesty of 'what I am saying now is not unconditional, it is just a hypothesis', and so on. It really is a most arrogant position. I think that the only way to be honest and to expose yourself to criticism is to state clearly and dogmatically where you are. You must take the risk and have a position.

2 S. Žižek and M. Dolar, *Opera's Second Death*, London: Routledge, 2001.

On the other hand, as is clear from all my work, what I am struggling against is a certain spontaneous classification, which emerged some fifteen or twenty years ago, according to which, at least in the Anglo-Saxon domain, Lacan is counted as one of the so-called post-structuralists. I think, as I have argued elsewhere with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau,³ that the term 'post-structuralism' is itself a fake. I think it's typically a term that doesn't exist at all. Nobody uses the term 'deconstructionism' or 'post-structuralism' in France itself. It is purely what Hegelians would have called a reflexive category. Post-structuralism appears only from the Anglo-Saxon German voice. It's very mysterious how everybody talks of this as a category of French philosophy, but nobody talks of this category in France. I think this is simply a category which tells a lot about the Anglo-Saxon or German perception of French thought.

Within this perception the typical doxa is that we have Heideggerians, we have, ...let's say, the Frankfurt School, Habermasians, we have deconstructionists and post-structuralists and, at a certain point, Lacan is included with the latter. What I am trying to render is how, in order to understand Lacan properly, we should change the whole philosophical map. I don't think that these are the right distinctions at all. First, I think that – and this idea was originally suggested to me by Simon Critchley (although he is in fact more sympathetic to the deconstructionist orientation) – that as a matter of fact, if you look at it closely, the opposition between Habermas and Derrida is not such a radical opposition as it may appear. I think that they are almost the front and the back sides of the same coin. The problem for both of them is the same one. It's the problem of openness towards Otherness; how to break out of this self-enclosed subjectivity; how to open oneself towards Otherness. And I

3 Žižek is here referring to the three-way debate in: J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso, 2000.

think that – to use this cheap old Lacanian phrase – each of them simply gives to the Other their own message: the repressed truth of each other. That is to say, against Derrida, Habermas is right that when you emphasize only the radical openness towards the Other, it can amount to an extremely idiosyncratic closure if you do not operationalize this openness into a set of established rules. Otherwise you have only this radical openness towards Otherness, and this can also be the name for a closure. On the other hand, I think Derrida is right against Habermas, that if you translate openness towards the Other into a set of positive communicational norms, you also close the dimension of Otherness. In this way each of them might be said to supplement the other one. So again, my first intervention here would be that Habermas and Derrida are not at all opposites.

And I would even go a stage further. Let us take the recent developments of Derrideans in terms of the Levinasian theological twist – not in the sense of a positive metaphysical theology, but rather the idea of an undeconstructible kernel of deconstruction as the call of unconditional Otherness – where the foundation of ethics is given in terms of an infinite responsibility towards the abyss of Otherness that addresses us. This does not constitute the ethical horizon for Lacan. Here again, we need to change the coordinates.

Often, my Derridean friends attack me, saying: ‘but why do you always insist on this difference against Derrida?’, the idea being that surely we are nonetheless members of the same general orientation. No, I don’t think so. And I am not saying this in order just to emphasize the gap in the petty way of the narcissism of small differences. I think that whenever it is claimed that Lacan is one of the deconstructionists, ultimately this designation is not neutral; the deconstructionists proper have already won. That is to say, it’s clear that within this scope Lacan is then perceived as someone who is still a little bit into metaphysics of presence, not quite right, and so you already have a normativity, and what appears to be a neutral field is already hegemonized by a certain version of deconstruction.

I think we should insist more than ever that Lacan's position is very radical. He belongs neither to the field of hermeneutics, nor to the field of standard critical theory, the Frankfurt School, nor to the field of deconstruction. He is totally out of these coordinates.

And again I think that, especially today, when all these standard philosophical options – in particular the three main orientations identified with continental European philosophy (hermeneutics, the Frankfurt School, deconstructionism) are clearly in some kind of a crisis and appear to have exhausted their possibilities, it is more important than ever for Lacanians to clearly designate the distance between them and not to get dragged down into the same abyss.

On the other hand, you have also criticized certain modern philosophers for manufacturing fake crises. What do you mean by this?

A favoured exercise of intellectuals throughout the twentieth century – which can also be taken as symptomatic of what Badiou calls the 'passion of the Real' (*la passion du réel*) – was the urge to 'catastrophize' the situation: whatever the actual situation, it *had* to be denounced as 'catastrophic', and the better it appeared, the more it solicited this exercise. Heidegger denounced the present age as that of the highest 'danger' the epoch of accomplished nihilism; Adorno and Horkheimer saw in it the culmination of the dialectic of enlightenment in the administered world; up to Giorgio Agamben, who defines twentieth-century concentration camps as the 'truth' of the entire Western political project. Recall the figure of Horkheimer in the West Germany of the 1950s: while denouncing the 'eclipse of reason' in the modern Western society of consumption, he at the same time defended this same society as the lone island of freedom in the sea of totalitarianism systems and corrupt dictatorships all around the globe. It was as if Winston Churchill's old ironic quip about democracy as the worst possible political regime, and all other regimes worse than it, was here

repeated in a serious form: Western 'administered society' is barbarism in the guise of civilization, the highest point of alienation, the disintegration of the autonomous individual, etc. – however, all other socio-political regimes are worse, so that, comparatively, one nonetheless has to support it.

So I am tempted to propose a radical reading of this syndrome: what if what the unfortunate intellectuals cannot bear is the fact that they lead a life which is basically happy, safe and comfortable, so that, in order to justify their higher calling, they have to construct a scenario of radical catastrophe?

By the late 1980s profound changes were taking place in the socio political landscapes of Eastern Europe. You had already been very active in the 'alternative movement' of Slovenia, and in 1990 you stood as a candidate in the first multiparty elections of the newly founded Republic of Slovenia. Was this a deliberate action to break out of any 'beautiful soul' syndrome? Can you explain the circumstances surrounding this?

I must say that although I was kind of semi-dissident, and unemployed, my active political engagement began relatively late, in the second half of the 1980s, because before that radical politicized dissidents were either Heideggerians or post-Marxists, and we did not have good relations with any of them. The aim of my political engagement was a very limited one. It was simply to prevent Slovenia turning into another country like Croatia or Serbia, where one big nationalist movement hegemonized the entire thing. In that we succeeded, Slovenia is a country with a much more dispersed sense of place and the nationalist temptation is dissipated. So it wasn't a fundamental political engagement.

As to that famous presidency – first it is a presidency, not the president. I was a candidate in 1990 for a collective body that makes up the presidency. I ended up fifth. I lost, but I didn't take it too seriously. In terms of political posts, I was never interested in doing any cultural politics or whatever. 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 had wanted it years ago, then I could have got one of these posts.

I think you would have been good as the Head of the Secret Service.

But you know what my friends told me? Fine, perfect, just tell us a week in advance and we'll leave the country! The idea was a bit crazy. No, but I did seriously consider it, but then of course I immediately learned that it would be a twenty-four-hour job. I mean you cannot really do that and continue doing theory as well – and it is physically impossible for me to drop theory. So that was that.

Again, you are right in suggesting in your question that what drew me into so-called 'real politics' was this absolute urgency to avoid any beautiful soul syndrome – you know, like the worst thinker doing all the better because he or she can then write a good critique of how things are going. No, I think that if you play politics you should go to the end in a cruel pragmatic way. I didn't have any problems at that level.

This is also one of the things you admire about Lenin.

Yes, but with Lenin it was always a substantial commitment. I always have a certain admiration for people who are aware that somebody has to do the job. What I hate about these liberal, pseudo-left, beautiful soul academics is that they are doing what they are doing fully aware that somebody else will do the job for them. For example, this goes to the absurd with many of my American friends who pretend to be left-wingers, anti-capitalist and so on, but who also play the stock market – and so they secretly count on things functioning, on stocks and shares doing well, and so on. I admire people who are ready to take over and do the dirty job, and maybe

this is part of my fascination with Lenin. He never adopted the position of 'oh, we are not responsible, things move differently, what can we do?' No, we are in a way absolutely responsible. This has nothing to do with conformism: quite the contrary. If you are in power, really in power, it means something very radical. It means you have no excuse. You cannot say, 'Sorry, it's not my fault' I have considerable respect for people who don't lose their nerve; for people who know there is no way out for them.

And finally, let me ask you a typical populist question: if you had to take one book, one CD and one video to a desert island, what would they be?

Here, you are in for a surprise. Book: Ayn Rand, *Fountainhead* – the proto-fascist classic about a fanatical architect. Yes, absolutely, it's that one. The CD would be the one by Hanns Eisler – the Brecht composer who wrote the GDR national anthem. There is a CD by him called *Historische Aufnahmen* (Historical Recordings), which mostly brings together texts by Brecht from immediately after World War II (most of these were recorded in the early 1950s), and especially the recording of Brecht's 'Mother', *die Mutter*, sung by the great Stalinist East German singer, Ernst Busch. And the video – that's absolutely clear: Veit Harlan's *Opfergang*. Veit Harlan was the great Nazi director. He also directed *The Jew Süss* and *Kolberg*, but in 1944 he shot the ultimate romantic melodrama, *Opfergang*, which means 'sacrificial' or 'sacrifice' Without doubt, I'd take these three – no question, not even a minute of reflection. It's madness, but that's life.

Conversation 2

The Madness of Reason: Encounters of the Real Kind

GLYN DALY *Let me begin by asking you about philosophy in general and the role that it is supposed to play. Can we speak about philosophy in terms of a specific role?*

ŽIŽEK Often, other disciplines take over (at least part of) the 'normal' role of philosophy: in some of the nineteenth-century nations like Hungary or Poland, it was literature which played the role of philosophy (that of articulating the ultimate horizon of meaning of the nation in the process of its full constitution); in the USA today, i.e. in the conditions of the predominance of cognitivism and brain studies in philosophy departments, most of 'Continental philosophy' takes place in departments of comparative literature, cultural studies, English, French and German (as they say: if you analyse a rat's vertebra, you are doing philosophy; if you analyse Hegel, you belong to CompLit!); in Slovenia in the 1970s, 'dissident' philosophy took place in sociology departments and institutes. There is also the other extreme of philosophy itself taking over the tasks of other academic (or even non-academic) practices and discipline: again, in the late Yugoslavia and some other Socialist countries, philosophy was one of the areas where 'dissident' political projects were first articulated – it was effectively 'politics pursued by other means' (as Althusser put it apropos Lenin). So where did philosophy play its 'normal role'? One usually evokes Germany – however, is it not already a commonplace that

the extraordinary role of philosophy there was grounded in the belatedness of the realization of the German national political project? As Marx has already put it (taking a cue from Heine), Germans had their philosophical revolution (German idealism) because they missed the political revolution (which took place in France). Is there then a norm at all? The closest one can come to it is if one looks upon the anaemic established academic philosophy, such as neo-Kantianism a hundred years ago in Germany or French Cartesian epistemology (Leon Brunschvicg, etc.) of the first half of the twentieth century – which was precisely philosophy at its most stale, academic, dead and irrelevant. What if, then, there is no ‘normal role’? What if it is only exceptions themselves that retroactively create the illusion of the ‘norm’ they allegedly violate? What if not only, in philosophy, is exception the rule, but also philosophy – the need for the authentic philosophical thought – arises precisely in those moments when (other) parts-constituents of the social edifice cannot play their ‘proper role’? What if the ‘proper’ space for philosophy consists of these very gaps and interstices opened up by the ‘pathological’ displacements in the social edifice?

To what extent have the parameters of philosophy shifted in the contemporary era?

I don’t think that philosophy can any longer play any of its traditional roles, as in establishing the foundations of science, constructing a general ontology and so on. Rather, philosophy should simply fulfil its task of transcendental questioning. And this role is more necessary than ever today. Why? Because, to put it in slightly pathetic terms, today we live in extremely interesting times where one of the main consequences of such developments as biogenetics, cloning, artificial intelligence and so on is that for the first time maybe in the history of humanity we have a situation in which what were philosophical problems are now problems that concern everyone, that are discussed widely by the public. Biogenetic

interventions, for example, confront us directly with questions concerning freedom of the will, the idea of nature and natural being, personal identity, to name only a few. Our time is one in which we are increasingly confronted with problems that are ultimately philosophical in nature. Again, to take the debates surrounding biogenetics, the only way to adopt a consistent stance is to address (implicitly at least) certain questions – like what is human dignity? where does moral responsibility lie? and so on – that traditionally have been philosophical questions. And I think that it's clear that the traditional Enlightenment attitudes of people like Habermas do not work; they are insufficient. Not only do I not believe that the time of philosophy is over, but I think that more than ever philosophy has a role to play.

In a sense, would you say that the age of biogenetics/cyber-space is the age of philosophy?

Yes, and the age of philosophy in the sense again that we are confronted more and more often with philosophical problems at an everyday level. It is not that you withdraw from daily life into a world of philosophical contemplation. On the contrary, you cannot find your way around daily life itself without answering certain philosophical questions. It is a unique time when everyone is, in a way, forced to be some kind of a philosopher.

Your own philosophical perspective draws extensively on the psychoanalytic tradition. However, there are those who would claim that psychoanalysis is being superseded steadily by technological developments in the realms of cognitivism, neurosciences and so on. How would you respond to this?

The first thing is that cognitivism and all neurosciences definitely have to be taken seriously. They cannot be simply dismissed in transcendental terms as merely ontic sciences without philosophical reflection. I see cognitive science as a kind of empirical version of deconstructionism. What is usually associated with deconstructionism is the idea that

there is no unique subject, there is a multitude of dispersed processes competing between each other, no self-presence, the structure of *différance* and so on. And if we take this structure of *différance*, with its emphasis on deferral, one of the interesting conclusions of cognitive science is that, literally, we do not live in the present time; that there is a certain delay from the moment our sensory organs get a signal from outside to its being properly processed into what we perceive as reality, and then we project this back into the past. So that our experience of the present is basically past experience, but projected back into the past.

The second nice result of cognitivism is that in a way it over-confirms Kant in the sense that not only is what we experience as reality structured through our perception, that empirical impulses are coordinated through some universal categories, but that it's even more radical: it's that even what we perceive as immediate reality is directly a judgement. Let's take a standard example from a typical cognitivist book: when you enter a room and you see all chairs there are red, and then you move immediately to a second similar room, you think you see exactly the same. But it has been repeatedly demonstrated that our perception is much more fragmentary than it appears – a significant number of the chairs in the second room have different shapes, colours, etc. What is happening is that you see just a couple of fragments and then, based on your previous experience (and this all happens in this immediate moment of perception before proper conscious judgement), you make a judgement – 'all the chairs must be red' The point being that what you see is the result of your judgement – you literally see judgements. There is no zero-level sensory perception of reality which is then later coordinated into judgements. What you always already see are judgements.

Then of course there is the extremist pandemonium theory of mind which states that there are just competing agencies, there is no unique mind, there is no Cartesian centre, and so on. So all these developments in cognitivism resonate in a way with certain philosophical and even deconstructionist perspectives.

Does cognitivism merely restate, in different terms, certain abiding philosophical issues? Are there limits to cognitivist discourse? If so, how should we understand those limits?

The central problem, as I see it, is consciousness itself. This is the problem with the cognitivist conception of the human being in terms of a computer model – an organism that processes data. Computers can now perform many functions – they organize and process data, react in a certain way, and so on – but they are not (at least today's computers are not) aware of this. So the mystery for cognitivists is to explain the simple fact of awareness. Why can't our bodies simply function as a blind machine? What is the point of being aware at all?

What is already established by cognitivists themselves is that awareness is actually a reductive mechanism. Your brain and body process millions of impulses and pieces of data – sensory input is extremely rich – but it is well known that your consciousness can only operate at a maximum of seven bytes per second. So it's not the case that consciousness is a response to increasing complexity and the need to coordinate more and more operations, but quite the opposite. Consciousness is the great simplifier and reflects what Hegel would have called the power of abstraction and reduction. Consciousness ignores 99 per cent of sensory input, so the question persists as to why awareness is needed at all in order to function. The majority of cognitivists admit that this is an enigma.

And it is interesting to see how all the standard philosophical options are reproduced within cognitivism. You have materialists who think that consciousness is a pseudo-problem. There is a well-known metaphor of the user's illusion where, when you work with a PC you think that the PC thinks, but there is nothing on the other side of the screen, it's just a meaningless mechanism. And the idea is that it is the same with our consciousness: our brain is just a meaningless set of neuronal processes. And so this type of materialism claims that consciousness is just a kind of perspective

illusion. All that goes on is a kind of blind process. But the more they succeed in explaining it away, the more the enigma remains. If our consciousness is just a kind of structural illusion, a phenomenal illusion, then why this illusion at all? It remains a strange excess.

And although it is usually perceived to be focused on the unconscious, it is precisely here that psychoanalysis, with its notions of fantasy, *points de capiton* (nodal points), quilting and so on, can be of some help in filling this gap between phenomenology in the sense of introspection and these blind processes. The psychoanalytic problematic concerning identification and its failure is, if anything, more pertinent than ever in today's world. Let's take the example of the genome and the idea that the human being can be objectively determined, reduced to a basic formula. Let's say a neurobiologist shows you a genomic formula stating that 'this is you' you encounter yourself objectively. Isn't it precisely in this encounter of 'this is you' that you will experience the gap of subjectivity at its purest? Along these lines, I would say that Hegel would have laughed at the idea of genome. For Hegel, this would be the ultimate example of spirit as a bone, spirit as a stupid meaningless formula. Because, in the very experience of 'that's me', you will, as it were, look at yourself from the outside. And so this dream of total self-objectivization will also confront us radically with its opposite, with the gap of subjectivity.

Will these developments transform the very experience of subjectivity?

Undoubtedly. A rather pessimistic hypothesis would be that consciousness as such (as we know it), or subjectivity as such, might disappear altogether. Maybe it will no longer be what we call the experience of subjectivity.

There is an interesting perspective developed by Stephen Pinker, in *How the Human Mind Works*, who advocates a very Kantian theory: that there is nothing mysterious in the fact that we cannot explain consciousness, because in evolution-

ary terms it was not designed to do this. Consciousness emerged in order to cope with practical instrumental problems of survival, how to interact with other people, how to interact with nature and so on. So the idea is that our consciousness is originally object-orientated. In the same way that an animal may not be able to see certain colours because of its characteristic evolutionary logic, human beings cannot account for self-awareness: there is no mystery, simply an evolutionary limit.

Here I am tempted to return to Heidegger, who asserted that what characterizes the human being, in the sense of *Dasein* (being there), is that it's a being that asks questions about its own being, that adopts a self-questioning attitude. So the mystery is, if all that cognitivists say is true, why is humanity obsessed with these existential questions? If self-questioning and probing the mystery of mind is not inscribed into the evolutionary function of awareness, why then does this question pop up with such persistence? What is missing is precisely a theory of – as Kant already put it in his *Critique of Pure Reason* – why human beings are destined to ask themselves questions which they cannot answer.

Consciousness functions as a basic experience of impossibility; a paradoxical effect of being through non being.

And again, how would you explain this in evolutionary terms? Because then the paradox goes further. Isn't it that all the so-called progress of humanity emerged through people asking themselves impossible questions like: what is the ultimate structure of the universe? What is the meaning of life? And so on. As our friends from NATO would have put it, progress developed as a collateral damage of these meta-physical questions.

This applies also to the empirical sciences. The origins of science are clearly ideological in character, developing from certain religious-philosophical views of 'science'. So even the evolutionary function of science – to heighten our chance of

survival, to enable us to live better and so on – was a kind of by-product, the collateral damage, as it were, of this enigmatic totally aimless status of our permanent drive to ask these impossible questions.

Of course it is easy to account for this enigma in idealist terms: to say that consciousness cannot be accounted for in evolutionary terms and therefore you need a spiritual dimension. But I think that psychoanalysis allows us to formulate an alternative perspective. What I am currently engaged with is the paradoxical idea that, from a strict evolutionary standpoint, consciousness is a kind of mistake – a malfunction of evolution – and that out of this mistake a miracle emerged. That is to say, consciousness developed as an unintended by-product that acquired a kind of second-degree survivalist function. Basically, consciousness is not something which enables us to function better. On the contrary, I am more and more convinced that consciousness originates with something going terribly wrong – even at a most personal level. For example, when do we become aware of something, fully aware? Precisely at the point where something no longer functions properly or not in the expected way.

Consciousness comes about as the result of some Real encounter?

Yes, consciousness is originally linked to this moment when ‘something is wrong’, or, to put it in Lacanian terms, an experience of the Real, of an impossible limit. Original awareness is impelled by a certain experience of failure and mortality – a kind of snag in the biological weave. And all the metaphysical dimensions concerning humanity, philosophical self-reflection, progress and so on emerge ultimately because of this basic traumatic fissure.

So, on the one hand, I think that we should first accept the challenge of the neurological sciences, cognitivism and its consequences for philosophy. And in this regard a certain image of humanity, of what a human being means, is clearly

over – we can no longer return to some kind of naive position. On the other hand, I think that you do nonetheless find certain deadlocks within cognitivism itself. One deadlock would be that the more you explain it, the more consciousness turns into precisely what Lacan would have called ‘object small a’ – this totally meaningless remainder. Why? The more you explain how a certain mental process works, the less you need consciousness – after you explain it, the question pops up: ‘So why does it need to be conscious? Why does it not simply go on as a blind process?’ That’s the paradox. A further paradox is that cognitivists are, I think, unable to account for the status of their own insight.

So let me clarify my position. On the one hand I am definitely opposed to the simplistic cognitivist view that psychoanalysis is redundant, that psychoanalysis is merely a naive introspective descriptivism linked to nineteenth-century physics, and that now we have a true neurological understanding of what the human mind is. The point, however, is not simply to reject cognitivism but rather to identify the very deadlocks for which it cannot account.

On the other hand, I am also strictly opposed to the quick philosophical or transcendentalist dismissal of cognitivism that carries the following type of argument: even if they find a genetic or neuronal chemical base for neurosis, or whatever, it still remains a fact that we, as speaking human beings, will have somehow to subjectivize it, to symbolize it in a certain way, and that this will always be the domain of psychoanalysis. This is too easy a way out, because the moment you scientifically objectivize such phenomena, this at least deeply affects the way it is symbolized. As Heidegger was already aware – where he speaks about *Gefahr* (danger) – there is something in this type of radical self-objectivization which threatens at a fundamental level our very understanding of humanity and the human being.

So I am against both temptations. Far from being afraid of cognitivism, or ignoring it, I think that one should fully accept the challenge and fight through it. If psychoanalysis cannot survive this encounter, then it is truly finished.

In combination with psychoanalysis, you have also been concerned to bring about a certain return to Hegel. What is it that you find so compelling in German idealism?

I think that this can be connected to the previous question. In cognitivism we encounter a dysfunctional paradox: that awareness and the human mind presuppose a certain non-economic gesture, a certain failure. So you get the contours of a certain fundamental malfunction which cannot be explained in terms of cognitivist evolutionism.

Now, of course, the rabbit that I now pull out of my hat is that German idealism and psychoanalysis have specific terms for this malfunction: in German idealism it is absolute self-relating negativity; in psychoanalysis it is the death drive. This is at the very centre of what I am doing generally. My basic thesis is that the central feature of subjectivity in German idealism – this desubstantialized notion of subjectivity as a gap in the order of being – is consonant with the notion of the ‘object small a’ which, as we all know, for Lacan is a failure. It’s not that we fail to encounter the object, but that the object itself is just a trace of a certain failure. What I am asserting here is that this notion of self-relating negativity, as it has been articulated from Kant to Hegel, means philosophically the same as Freud’s notion of death drive – this is my fundamental perspective. In other words, the Freudian notion of death drive is not a biological category but has a philosophical dignity.

In trying to explain the functioning of human psyche in terms of the pleasure principle, reality principle and so on, Freud became increasingly aware of a radical non-functional element, a basic destructiveness and excess of negativity, that couldn’t be accounted for. And that is why Freud posed the hypothesis of death drive. I think that death drive is exactly the right name for this excess of negativity. This, in a way, is the big obsession of my entire work: this mutual reading of the Freudian notion of death drive with what in German idealism is rendered thematic as self-relating negativity.

Is there not a basic tension, however, between Hegel's rationalistic tendencies and the introduction of a logic of contradiction and conflictuality – a logic that is developed more fully in psychoanalysis – that undermines all rationalism?

I don't think that in Hegel one can simply oppose rationalism with a logic of contradiction and conflictuality. Now, of course, we can discuss to what extent Hegel really succeeded in bringing these two aspects together, but the fundamental insight was not that, on the one hand, we have some rational structure and then, on the other, we have the conflictuality of life, and that somehow we should bring the two together. On the contrary, Hegel's idea was that contradiction and conflictuality are at their greatest in the conflictuality of reason itself.

Reason for Hegel is not a pacifying network that simply resolves or overlays contradictions, explosions, madness and so on. It is the opposite: reason is the ultimate madness for Hegel. We might say that reason is the excess of madness. This is true in quite a literal way. Here one would only have to reassert the logic of the Lacanian insight into Kant with Sade. That is to say, the Sadean perversion is not something outside reason, it is precisely pure reason – because if you are outside the infinity of reason, you are at the level of empirical pleasures.

The idea of the Sadean absolute crime, as a radical destruction of the life chain, is in the strict Kantian sense an idea of reason. In Kant, the impossible idealized states – total realization of the good, the total overcoming of material inertia, total justice in the world, total peace and so on – are all ideas of reason: global realizations of reason that serve as regulative ideals but which cannot be ever realized. The point is that these ideas of reason function as an infinite dimension that exists beyond our empirical limitations. And isn't this exactly the idea of the Sadean crime? The Sadean crime is not empirical madness; it is the madness of reason. Only reason in its perversity can imagine such a radical crime.

So, yes, I agree with you that there probably is in Hegel a tension between the rationalistic side and that of contradic-

tion and conflictuality. But I would say only that this tension is inherent to reason itself: that in fighting this excess of violence and contradiction, reason is fighting its own excess. It's not reason against some primitive irrational aggressivity. It's reason against its own excess of madness. But if you accept this, then, no matter what your solution, even if you say they cannot be reconciled, you are already within Hegel; for to be an Hegelian it is enough to say that, in fighting its opposite, reason is fighting its own excess. This is the minimal formula of the Hegelian internalization of the conflict: that when you think you are fighting the Other, you are fighting your own kernel; you are fighting the very fundamental installing constitutive gesture of reason. In this sense I think that, even when I try at times to be critical of Hegel, I remain Hegelian. Again, the main point for me is that the excess of reason is inherent to reason itself. Reason is not confronted with something out of itself; rather, it is confronted with its own constitutive madness. And this brings us back to death drive, because death drive is exactly the name for this constitutive madness of reason.

In terms of its philosophical trajectory, it has been argued that psychoanalysis is concerned fundamentally with the domain of truth. How would you characterize the relationship between psychoanalysis and truth?

I think that once Lacan became fully aware of the dimension of death drive as excess, this dimension no longer functioned within the domain of truth. Actually, this is a central theoretical problem: to what extent is the horizon of truth still the horizon of psychoanalysis? In the late 1950s, when Lacan gave the account of psychoanalysis in terms of symbolization, the horizon there was undoubtedly the horizon of truth. The idea was that through psychoanalysis you have to be able to symbolize your problems, to formulate the truth of your desire. But I think that when, later, Lacan confronted the more radical dimension of subjectivity, this dimension was no longer simply the dimension of truth.

A crucial, but very difficult, psychoanalytic insight to swallow is that the ultimate dimension of our experience is not the dimension of truth, no matter how we conceive it – even if we conceive it in Heideggerian terms of disclosure. At the most radical level of subjectivity and experience, there is some initial moment of madness: the dimensions of *jouissance*, of negativity, of death drive and so on, but *not* the dimension of truth.

My speculation here is that what Freud calls death drive – if we read it with regard to its most radical philosophical dimension – is something that has to be already operative to open up, as it were, the space for truth. Let's take Heidegger quite literally here: truth is always a certain openness, in the sense of an opening of horizons, an opening of the world, disclosure through speech and so on. But a condition of possibility for the opening of such a space is precisely what, in psychoanalysis, we would call the primordial repression: some original withdrawal, which again is already signalled by radical negativity. And the point I would emphasize here is that, in philosophical terms, psychoanalysis is extremely ambitious. Psychoanalysis is not a simple story of basic instinctual problems; it is concerned, rather, with a formulation of what had to happen in order for the world to open itself to us as an experience of meaning. We are here moving at a very radical level in which the dimension of truth is not the ultimate dimension.

At this radically elementary level, truth is not yet operative, because truth is operative the moment we are within the symbolic order. What psychoanalysis enables us to grasp is that death drive is a kind of inherent condition of symbolic order. To put it in slightly simplistic terms: at its most elementary, symbolization exists as a kind of secondary stop-gap measure in the sense that it consists of an attempt to patch things up when something goes terribly wrong. And what interests me is this dimension at which something goes terribly wrong. There we are not yet in the dimension of truth. To put it in a different way, what interests me so much

already in German idealism is the idea that with negativity (death drive) there is neither nature nor culture, but something in between. We cannot pass directly from nature to culture. Something goes terribly wrong in nature: nature produces an unnatural monstrosity and I claim that it is in order to cope with, to domesticate, this monstrosity that we symbolize. Taking Freud's fort/da example as a model: something is primordially broken (the absence of the mother and so on) and symbolization functions as a way of living with that kind of trauma.

This would be my fundamental model. It is this primordial dimension, this transcendental condition, which interests me. Why? Because of course this dimension is here all the time. It's not primordial in the sense that it happened before and now we are within the domain of truth. No, it is a dimension which, as it were, sustains us all the time; threatening to explode.

This brings us to the question of transcendentalism, which does not always sit easily with the postmodern critiques of difference, the emphasis on context and so on. How is this dimension of the transcendental formulated in psychoanalytic theory?

The usual perception of Lacan – and at the same time the usual criticism of Lacan – is that he remains too much of a transcendentalist. There are two different, and even opposing, transcendentalist tendencies that can be identified in Lacan. The first concerns the idea that we always live within the horizon of a certain symbolic order and that the latter functions as a kind of transcendental a priori. This is what the Lacan of the early 1960s would have claimed. The later Lacan moves away from this idea of an a priori symbolic structure. What the later Lacan stresses is a certain non-historical proto-transcendental a priori which is the condition of possibility and, at the same time, the condition of impossibility, of the symbolic structure itself: for example, symbolic castration, the opening of the primordial lack and so on. However, I don't

think that this transcendental reading is the ultimate horizon of Lacan. This is a critique that I am developing now.

The standard perception of Lacan is as a transcendentalist who emphasizes symbolic castration and that this means that with the entry into the symbolic order the primordial object of desire is lost: it is turned into an impossible thing which is absent, and every empirical object of desire that we get is merely a stand-in secondary ersatz, a supplementary embodiment of the primordial lost object. The argument is that the very fact of subjectivity means that the object is lost and that the imaginary illusion is precisely that the object can be regained so that we don't accept the radicality of the loss – we want to render the Real possible. On the basis of this illusion, different versions of idealized states are generated from subjective harmony to perfect sexual bliss right through to the utopian visions of social reconciliation in which the radical primordial gap is overcome, or where the primordial impossibility of encountering the Thing is suspended. Against all these illusive tendencies the idea is that we have to accept the primordial loss as the *a priori*. For more and more reasons I find this argument problematic.

Does this modify the view of the Lacanian Real as a transcendental impossibility?

The notion of the Real presupposed here is the Real-as-impossible in the sense of the big absence: you always miss it, it's a basic void and the illusion is that you can get it. The logic is that whenever we think we get the Real, it's an illusion, because the Real is actually too traumatic to encounter: directly confronting the Real would be an impossible, incestuous, self-destructive experience. I think that I am partially co-responsible for this serious revisionism, to put it in Stalinist terms. I am co-responsible for the predominance of the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing: something that we cannot directly confront. I think that not only is this theoretically wrong, but it has also had catastrophic political consequences insofar as it opened up the way towards this

combination of Lacan with a certain Derridean-Levinasian problematic: Real, divinity, impossibility, Otherness. The idea is that the Real is this traumatic Other to which you cannot ever answer properly. But I am more and more convinced that this is not the true focus of the Lacanian Real. Where then is the focus?

With the logic of Real-as-impossible you have this notion of the unattainable object – the logic of desire, where desire is structured around a primordial void. I would argue that the notion of drive that is present here cannot be read in these transcendentalist terms: that is to say, in terms of an a priori loss where empirical objects never coincide with *das Ding*, the Thing. The vulgar example that I would give here is the following. Let us say you are in love with a woman. and that you are obsessed with her vagina. You do all the possible things: you penetrate it, kiss it, whatever – it's your problem; I won't go into that. Now, from a transcendentalist perspective the idea is that this is a typical illusion: you think the vagina is the Thing itself, but really it's not, and you should accept the gap between the void of the Thing and the contingent object filling it up. But when you are in such an intense sexual love relationship, I don't think the idea can be that the vagina is just an ersatz for the impossible Thing. No, I think that it is this particular object, but that this object is strangely split. There is a self-distance – you know it is the vagina, but you get never enough – the split is within the object itself. The split is not between the empirical reality and the impossible Thing. No, it is rather that the vagina is both itself and, at the same time, something else.

So in a way you do encounter the impossible. You cannot say this is mere transcendental illusion of confusing an empirical object with the impossible Thing. The vagina is impossible, but it is not simply an illusion. The point is that the objects of drive are these privileged objects which are somehow a double in themselves. Lacan refers to this as *la doublure* (doubling). There is kind of a safe distance, but it's a safe distance within the object itself: it's not the distance between the object and *das Ding*.

In On Belief you advance a radical rereading of the Lacanian Real especially in relation to the two other dimensions of the Borromean triad: the imaginary and the symbolic. Can you expand on this?

I'm more and more convinced that there are at least three notions of the Real. I would say that the very triad of real, symbolic and imaginary is in a way mapped onto or projected into the Real itself. So we have to put it in brutal terms: real Real, imaginary Real and symbolic Real. First, real Real would be the horrible Thing: the Medusa's head; the alien from the movie; the abyss; a monster. But then there are two other Reals that we tend to forget in Lacan. There is symbolic Real, which is simply meaningless scientific formulae. For example, quantum physics can be understood as symbolic Real. In what sense Real? Precisely in the sense that we cannot integrate it into our horizon of meaning. As Richard Fineman, the great quantum physicist, himself liked to emphasize, you cannot understand quantum physics, you cannot translate it into our horizon of meaning; it consists of formulae that simply function. And I think it is from here that we should reread Freud's dream of Irma's injection in which this formula of trimethylamine appears at the end.¹ This is not meaning; this is precisely the meaningless Real. We might call it the scientific Real, based upon a meaningless, almost presubjective, knowledge. This would be symbolic Real.

And then we have a further aspect which interests me more and more: the imaginary Real. Using an expression from Alenka Zupančič, this designates not the illusion of the Real, but the Real in the illusion itself. Let's take the example of low-level racism in which there is some feature, some *je*

1 This refers to Freud's analysis of his own dream in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1900]), ch. 2. The dream concerns Irma, a female patient of Freud, who, in the dream, is suffering from an illness which is attributed to an (inappropriate and/or unhygienic) injection of trimethylamine administered by Freud's friend, Otto.

ne sais quoi, in Turks, Arabs, Jews or whoever, that bothers you. This is the imaginary Real; this elusive feature which is totally non-substantial, but it annoys you. This is the point of the Real in the Other.

This category of the imaginary Real I think, is, in a way, the crucial one because it points out that for Lacan, the Real can also appear as something fragile (this, incidentally, was why I entitled my book *The Fragile Absolute*). The Real is not necessarily or always the 'hard real' It can also have this totally fragile appearance: the Real can be something that transpires or shines through. For example, when you talk with another person and you are charmed by him or her – from time to time you perceive some traumatic, mystical, tragic, whatever, dimension in him or her. It is something that is Real, but at the same time totally elusive and fragile. That would be the imaginary Real.

So the true Lacanian knot of the real, imaginary and symbolic is more a three-dimensional configuration. That is to say, each of these categories can be mapped onto all the others. For example, we also have, within the Symbolic order, the symbolic Symbolic, the real Symbolic and the imaginary Symbolic. The real Symbolic is the same as the symbolic Real. These are meaningless formulae. The symbolic Symbolic is simply speech as such, meaningful speech. And the imaginary Symbolic consists just of archetypes: Jungian symbols, and so on.

At the level of the Imaginary, we have the imaginary Imaginary, the real Imaginary and the symbolic Imaginary. The real Imaginary would be the horrible thing. The imaginary Imaginary would be image as such, the seductive image. And the symbolic Imaginary would be symbols. The point is that these three notions – real, imaginary and symbolic – are really intertwined in a radical sense; like a crystal structure in which the different elements are mapped onto and repeat themselves within each category.

The result of all this is that, for Lacan, the Real is not impossible in the sense that it can never happen – a trau-

matic kernel which forever eludes our grasp. No, the problem with the Real is that it happens and *that's* the trauma. *The point is not that the Real is impossible but rather that the impossible is Real.* A trauma, or an act, is simply the point when the Real happens, and this is difficult to accept. Lacan is not a poet telling us how we always fail the Real – it's always the opposite with the late Lacan. The point is that you *can* encounter the Real, and that is what is so difficult to accept.

What consequences does this perspective hold for the theory of ideology? Does it mark a departure from the psychoanalytic view of ideology that offers a construction of reality as a way of escaping the horrifying condition of the Real?

I am no longer satisfied with my own old definition of ideology where the point was that ideology is the illusion which fills in the gap of impossibility and inherent impossibility is transposed into an external obstacle, and that therefore what needs to be done is to reassert the original impossibility. This is the ultimate result of a certain transcendentalist logic: you have an a priori void, an original impossibility, and the cheating of ideology is to translate this inherent impossibility into an external obstacle; the illusion is that by overcoming this obstacle you get the Real Thing. I am almost tempted to say that the ultimate ideological operation is the opposite one: that is, the very elevation of something into impossibility as a means of postponing or avoiding encountering it.

Again, I am almost tempted to turn the standard formula around. Yes, on the one hand, ideology involves translating impossibility into a particular historical blockage, thereby sustaining the dream of ultimate fulfilment – a consummate encounter with the Thing. On the other hand – and this is something you have already touched upon in your excellent 'Ideology and its Paradoxes' paper – ideology also functions as a way of regulating a certain distance with such an encounter. It sustains at the level of fantasy precisely what it seeks to avoid at the level of actuality: it endeavours to con-

vince us that the Thing cannot ever be encountered, that the Real forever eludes our grasp. So ideology appears to involve both sustenance and avoidance in regard to encountering the Thing.

Let's take love or a sexual relationship. What people usually miss is that courtly love for Lacan is a big fake. Courtly love is precisely a way of avoiding the trauma of the encounter. As is well known, Lacan affirms that there is no sexual relationship, which means that when you are fully engaged in a sexual relationship there is a difficult traumatic phase, but as such you have to endure it. What courtly love does is, through positing the latter as impossible and indefinitely postponed, to avoid the trauma of actually risking it. So it is the opposite logic: an elevation into impossibility as the fundamental operation – this is the ideological dimension. We see the same with false love – the idea that the world is not for us, if only we could live in a different time, true love is somewhere else, if only the circumstances were right, etc. This again is another way of avoiding the encounter.

So, to be clear, the Real is impossible but it is not simply impossible in the sense of a failed encounter. It is also impossible in the sense that it is a traumatic encounter that *does* happen but which we are unable to confront. And one of the strategies used to avoid confronting it is precisely that of positing it as this indefinite ideal which is eternally postponed. One aspect of the Real is that it's impossible, but the other aspect is that it happens but it is impossible to sustain, impossible to integrate. And this second aspect, I think, is more and more crucial.

This is why I am so deep in this problematic of 'love thy neighbour' For Lacan, the neighbour is the Real. When he introduces the Real for the first time systematically in the seminar on ethics, the Real is the neighbour. This means that the Real is not impossible – there are neighbours. The point is that an injunction like 'Love thy neighbour' is precisely one of the ways of avoiding the trauma of the neighbour. This dimension is more important than simple impossibility.

That reminds me of a periodic television programme we have here called Neighbours from Hell. Against the typical ideological version of the neighbour that you find in the Australian soap, Neighbours, this programme shows that the leafy suburbs of Britain are fraught with tensions and that people are often at each other's throats.

'Neighbours from Hell' – my God, I like that expression! Let me just add to that. Especially today, I claim that all this preaching about tolerance, love for one's neighbour and so on are ultimately strategies to avoid encountering the neighbour. One of my favourite examples is that of smoking. I am deeply suspicious about all this anti-smoking propaganda. Firstly, I don't smoke, and I am not commissioned by any tobacco companies. But what I find suspicious (and it's even medically problematic) is the idea of passive smoking where the focus is on how non-smokers are affected. I think that what is really at issue is that there are Others who, through smoking, are enjoying themselves too intensely in a self-destructive way – and this is unbearable. Here I think you have at its purest the figure of the intrusive neighbour who enjoys him or herself too much.

Also, more generally, I find the topic of sexual harassment extremely suspicious because harassment is really another name for encountering your neighbour. Let's be clear: every true encounter with your neighbour is a form of harassment. Even when another person presents you with good news – for example, if a potential sexual partner, in a reciprocal manner, openly declares his or her passion for you – isn't there always something embarrassingly violent in it? To be the object of another's passion is a difficult position to be in.

So I claim that all these anti-harassment struggles are really so many reflections of the fight against this annoying neighbour. The ultimate logic of tolerance and anti-harassment is 'I want to be alone': it's about how to have contact with others, but contact without contact; how to keep a proper distance. This is exemplified in the legal Order of Restraint, where an instance of harassment has been established and an

injunction is made to prevent a person from going within a 500-yard or so radius of the complainant. This is typically where we are today. The whole obsession that we have today with different forms of harassment – smoking, sexual, social, etc. – is simply how to keep the neighbour at a proper distance. So, again, here we have the neighbour as Real: a Real which is all too possible, and *that* is what is traumatic. With the intrusion of this Real, the almost central obsession of our times has become how to maintain a proper distance.

I would say that this is also why humanitarian causes are so popular. They are not simply an expression of love for your neighbour, they are exactly the opposite. That is to say, the function of money in giving to humanitarian causes is the same as the function of money as isolated by Lacan in psychoanalysis: money means I pay you so that we don't get involved.

You stay there!

Yes exactly, 'You stay there!' Like the male chauvinist idea that women like to be paid for sex because it doesn't involve them too much: you get your pleasure but no commitment. And I think this is the ultimate function of giving money for humanitarian causes, so that they stay there.

To what extent does psychoanalysis allow for the possibility of transcending the ideological?

The way I read Lacan is not as an affirmation of an eternal pessimism in the sense of 'we can for a brief moment get an insight into how ideology works but nonetheless there is some fundamental illusion inscribed into the very functioning of reality so that at the end of the day we have to return to illusion' I think that Lacan's final perspective is not that of a necessary illusion to which we should return and that although we can analyse the mechanism of this illusion we are nonetheless obliged to live within this illusion. This would be more of a Kantian transcendental perspective: that

there is an illusion, misrecognition, inscribed into the very notion of subjectivity. I don't think this is Lacan's perspective. Or to put it in yet another way, Lacan's perspective is not that of the eternal status of ideology.

In the psychoanalytic approach to ideology there is a compelling emphasis on how a certain historical Other comes to embody the transcendental impossibility of Society. In acting as a 'threat' to the fullness of society, this Other plays a constitutive role in respect of a given social formation – in your example, the unifying effect achieved in Nazi Germany through the ideological articulation of the 'Jewish threat' Is this constitutive Otherness (whether in terms of 'the Jew', 'infidel', 'Gypsy', 'underclass' or whatever) an ontological condition of all social reality?

Here I think there is a possible reproach to not only certain versions of psychoanalysis but also to a certain version of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of antagonism. The idea is that there is an empty place of impossibility, of the Thing, and that in one historical form or another there is always some group or figure occupying this place. As you put it, it can be 'Jews', 'Gypsies', 'underclass' or whoever. There is always a kind of ideological short circuit. There is always some group, like 'the Jews', which embodies, externalizes in the guise of a positive obstacle, this fundamental impossibility, and the best we can do is become aware of the contingency of the agent which occupies this place. This conclusion is unavoidable precisely insofar as we are speaking of what I call a transcendental logic: central space of impossibility and then different contingent elements embodying it. With this notion of the Real-as-impossible then, of course, the illusion is irreducible.

Now here we encounter the political significance of the different notions and functioning of the Real that I emphasized before. The Lacanian notion of drive allows for different configurations of the Real. Of course, Real-as-impossibility is an a priori, but there are different constellations as to how you deal with the Real. For example,

in the history of religion, with the passage from paganism to the Judaeo-Christian universe, the entire constellation of the Real is transformed. Whereas in paganism the Real concerned the sacred domain of the orgies, in Judaeo-Christianity the Real is foreclosed and what remains as the Real is the divine name itself: the Real is in a way symbolized. And it is through this Real that the pure tautology of the empty space is asserted: 'I am that I am', and so on.

The point is that the Real-as-impossible allows for radically different social constellations. This transcendental constellation where the Real is the void of impossibility is just one possible constellation. So I don't think that Lacan can be accused in this sense of non-historicity, of kind of eternalizing a certain specific constellation.

That's a crucial point, because it would seem that Lacan is too often portrayed as someone who is not sensitive to historical development (especially modernity) and who has too rigid a conception of the symbolic order.

And it's interesting to note that those who criticize Lacan for elevating a certain historical constellation into a kind of transcendental a priori are usually themselves guilty of doing exactly that. Let's take Judith Butler, who has provided probably the most elaborate version of this type of criticism of Lacan. Her basic argument is that Lacan is elevating into a transcendental a priori what is actually effectively only the reified result of performative practices. But is she not also operating with a certain non-historical a priori, which is precisely this performative practice? Her idea is that *every* historical epoch, whatever this epoch perceives as its symbolic form, is the result of certain contingent performative practices. In this sense I am tempted to say she is also elevating a certain experience which is radically modern. That is to say, this notion that what we are is the result of our contingent performative symbolic practices is a characteristically modern notion. Similarly, all those who claim that there is no firm symbolic order, that every symbolic order is the result of fluid

social practices, are also elevating precisely these *social practices* into this kind of a priori. So I don't think they fare any better. I think that Lacan is far more accurate, because what he elevates into this position is not a particular constellation – performativity, social practices or whatever – it's rather a negative form of a priori. What is a priori is just a certain negativity or impossibility. And this a priori is not only not fixed but it's that which ultimately undoes, or destroys, or causes the failure of, every determinate symbolic form.

So my point is simply an old philosophical one: that the old-fashioned radical historicism is a self-defeating attitude. It cannot account for itself; it is philosophically inconsistent. Historicity itself silently presupposes, and is constitutively sustained by, a central impossibility. And Lacan should be given credit for keeping this impossibility, as it were, open. What all epochs share is not some trans-epochal constant feature; it is, rather, that they are all answers to the same deadlock. I think this is the only consistent position.

On these grounds I don't think it's factually or even theoretically true that you always need somebody to embody impossibility; especially not in the form of Otherness. There are different ways of embodying impossibility which do not necessarily require a particular enemy in the conventional sense. It can be embodied, for example, in certain forms of ritual. There is in every society – and here I am almost approaching the topic of Georges Bataille – some kind of excess; something which disturbs you. But again it is absolutely not necessary for this excessive element to assume the image of the enemy. And even within the enemies – 'Jews', 'Gypsies', or generally Others – they also function in different ways. The figure of the 'Jew', for example, tends to function in a very specific way as the embodiment of modernity, financial capital and so on. 'Jews' do not fill the same empty place as, for example, do Gypsies or foreign immigrant workers. These all involve different logics.

On the question of antagonism, are we not dealing with fantasies about antagonisms that do not necessarily exhaust the

possibilities for perceiving or constructing the latter? An antagonism may be constructed in terms of an external blockage to a utopian holism. On the other hand, an antagonism may be constructed on the basis of more limited demands and less exalted expectations. For example, while in Nazi Germany 'the Jew' is constructed as a fictitious obstacle to/support for the Aryan fantasy, the Jews themselves are presented with very real obstacles and are indeed antagonized by Nazi aggression (despite the fact that some Jews may harbour certain ideological fantasies of their own). Does this allow for an anti ideological approach to antagonism? In other words, is it possible to enter into an antagonism with a certain group (a fascist organization for example) while being fully aware that they do not constitute an ultimate obstacle to the fullness of Society?

That's a very nice question. I think it's the crucial one. Yes, to put it very simply, how do actors relate this a priori impossible antagonism and the empirical Real – Real in the sense of reality antagonism? For example, as you point out, Nazi politics was a very real obstacle for the Jews, so is there an anti-ideological approach to antagonism?

The first thing here is that I am not quite sure if the notion of antagonism is necessarily synonymous with the Real. I don't think that, to put it in somewhat bombastic terms, the Real necessarily appears in the guise of antagonism. Of course, in the sense that you indicate, there are real obstacles. Let's take the relationship between Jews and Nazis. From the Jews' perspective this is not simply a manifestation of impossibility. Nazis were a real obstacle that had to be overcome so that effectively there would be no threat for the Jews. This is the level of reality.

What I would nonetheless claim is that we don't have a neutral space within which we can simply locate the tension between Jews and Aryans. What it is impossible to do – and this reflects the radicality of the notion of the Real – is to say that first we can provide an objective neutral social description of social reality which locates Jews here and Aryans there, like an objective social constellation, and from this develop the idea of fantasy as simply a secondary epiphenomenon.

Here I would agree with Laclau and Mouffe's notion that society doesn't exist: that there is no neutral space, no neutral reality that can be first objectively described and from which we then develop the idea of antagonism. Again, this would be my idea of fantasy as constituting reality. Of course Nazis are a real obstacle, but the question is, *why* are they a real obstacle? The answer is, because they are sustained by a certain fantasmatic universe. That is to say that of course you can describe the way Nazis are a real threat, how they threaten social reality for Jews, but the reason they are a threat in reality has to do with fantasies about radical antagonism. In this sense, the only thing I am claiming is that you cannot account for antagonism as Real in the terms of just a reflection or an effect of some conflicts in social reality.

To return to the notion of real Real and reality, the crucial point to bear in mind is that, again, the Lacanian Real is not some kind of a hard kernel: the true reality as opposed to only our symbolic fictions. This is why the notion of the imaginary Real, which I evoked before, is so important. I think that the Real is in a way a fiction; Real is not some kind of raw nature which is then symbolized. You symbolize nature, but in order to symbolize nature, in this very symbolization, you produce an excess or a lack symmetrically: and *that's* the Real. This is the crucial Lacanian lesson. It's not, as it is sometimes misrepresented, that you have – let's call it naively pre-symbolic reality: you symbolize it and then something cannot be symbolized and that is the Real. No, this is just a kind of stupid reality; we don't even have an ontological name for it. It is, rather, that the very gesture of symbolization introduces a gap in reality. It is this gap which is the Real and every positive form of this gap is constituted through fantasy.

So again the crucial thing is to avoid any reification of the Real. The Real can be considered almost as a topological term, a topological twist, and any substantialization of the Real is a kind of a perspective-illusion. Real is a purely topological category. With reference to the passage from special to general theory of relativity in Einstein, one could put it in

these terms: through symbolization space itself is curved, and the Real is the illusion that this curvature of the space is caused by some positive entity. But the whole point about the Real is that the impossibility is not the result of some positive obstacle, but is purely inherent: the impossibility is produced as the very condition of symbolic space. That is the ultimate paradox of the Real. You cannot have it all, not because there is something opposing you, but because of this purely formal, structurally inherent, self-blockade.

Conversation 3

Subjects of Modernity: Virtuality and the Fragility of the Real

GLYN DALY *You have consistently emphasized the persistence of the subject as a dimension of radical negativity for all being. The typical 'postmodern' attitude, however, is characterized by a fierce resistance to the notion of the subject. What do you think is behind this resistance?*

ŽIŽEK To answer your question in direct and vulgar terms: because the subject is the Real, and every resistance ultimately is the resistance to the Real. The critics who believe that we should overcome subjectivity are engaged in a pseudo-struggle against a limited notion of the subject (like the self-transparent Cartesian subject). However, they are implicitly aware of what a subject stands for – radical negativity, the dimension of death drive, and so on – and that this is what is truly at stake. There is almost a hysterical structure here in the sense that the resistance is towards the constitutive intermediate dimension of the Real, which is neither nature nor culture but the gap as such: the point of primordial madness, primordial foreclosure. In this sense I think that the ultimate ground of resistance is one that concerns the dimension of an unbearable excess which is precisely the dimension of the subject. Getting rid of the subject means attempting to get rid of this disturbing excess, which is nonetheless a transcendental condition of culture: a kind of malfunction which acts as a necessary vanishing mediator between nature and culture.

Some of the resistance at least is directed specifically at the psychoanalytic view of the sexuation of the subject. Why is the male/female distinction considered to be a primary Real antagonism? Is it different to other forms of antagonism?

I think first that maybe the term antagonism is not quite appropriate here. Of course there are different forms of antagonism; I don't have any problem here. The Lacanian thesis is that while sexual difference, in the specifically human sense, cannot be understood in biological terms, neither can it be understood as a simple symbolic difference – as in John Gray's book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (i.e. from different symbolic universes). The point is that sexual difference is something that is co-substantial with universal humanity. There is no neutral definition of the human being without a reference to sexual difference. What defines humanity is this difference as such. In this sense, sexual difference is a kind of zero-level definition of what a human being is. So it's not that you have a universal set of defining human features (speaking, reason, language, production, or whatever) and that on top of that there are men and women. No, it's the opposite: to be human means precisely to be differentiated along the lines of sexual difference.

In Lacan's theory, sexual difference is inscribed into the very structure of the symbolic order. It is not a difference between two modes of symbolization, but the difference that pertains to a certain fundamental deadlock of the symbolic order. This is more subtle than it may at first appear, because again the point is that difference as such is universal. To be a human being means to be able to differentiate yourself in a certain way: to live a certain difference. This is the radicality of Lacan's approach.

Against the Lacanian approach to the subject the name Deleuze is often invoked. What is your view of the Deleuzian trend in modern philosophy?

The problem with Deleuze is that there are *two* logics, *two* conceptual oppositions, operating in his work. This insight

seems so obvious – almost what the French call a *lapalissade* – that one is surprised by the fact that it has not yet been generally perceived. On the one hand, there is Schellingian logic, which opposes virtual and actual: the space of the actual (real acts in the present, experienced reality, and subjects as persons, formed individuals), accompanied by its virtual shadow (the field of proto-reality, of multiple singularities, impersonal elements which are later synthesized into our experience of reality). This is the Deleuze of ‘transcendental empiricism’, the Deleuze that gives to Kant’s transcendentalism its unique twist: the proper transcendental space is the virtual space of the multiple singular potentialities, of ‘pure’ impersonal singular gestures, affects, perceptions, which are not yet the gestures-affects-perceptions of a pre-existing stable and self-identical subject. This is why, for example, Deleuze celebrates the art of cinema: it ‘liberates’ gaze, images, movements and, ultimately, time itself from their attribution to a given subject – when we watch a movie, we see the flow of images from the perspective of a ‘mechanical’ camera, a perspective which does not belong to any subject; through the art of montage, movement is also abstracted/liberated from its attribution to a given subject or object, it is an impersonal movement which is only secondarily, afterwards, attributed to some positive entities.

On the other hand, there is the more traditional logic which opposes production and representation: the virtual field is (re)interpreted as that of the generative, productive forces, opposed to the space of representations. Here we get all the standard topic of the molecular multiple sites of productivity constrained by the molar totalizing organizations, and so on.

It is under the heading of the opposition between becoming and being that Deleuze appears to mobilize these fundamentally incompatible logics – and one is tempted to attribute the ‘bad’ influence that pushed him towards the second logic to Felix Guattari. The line of Deleuze proper is that of the great early monographies, of *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, of some shorter introductory

writings like *Proust and the Signs* and *Introduction to Sacher-Masoch*; in his late work, it is the two cinema books which mark the return of the topic of *The Logic of Sense*. This series is to be distinguished from the books Deleuze and Guattari co-wrote, and one can only regret that the Anglo-Saxon reception of Deleuze, and also the political impact of Deleuze, are predominantly that of a 'Guattarized' Deleuze: it is crucial to note that literally none of Deleuze's own texts is in any way directly political – Deleuze in himself is a highly elitist author indifferent to politics. The only serious philosophical question is thus: what inherent impasse caused Deleuze to turn towards Guattari? Is *Anti-Oedipus*, arguably Deleuze's worst book, not the result of escaping the full confrontation of a deadlock via a simplified 'flat' solution, homologous to Schelling escaping the deadlock of his *Weltalter* project via his shift to the duality of positive and negative philosophy, or Habermas escaping the deadlock of the dialectic of enlightenment via his shift to the duality of instrumental and communicational reason? Our task is to confront again this deadlock.

And is this opposition not, yet again, that of materialism versus idealism? In Deleuze, this means *The Logic of Sense* versus *Anti-Oedipus*. Either the Sense-Event, the flow of pure Becoming, is the immaterial effect (neutral, neither active nor passive) of the intrication of bodily material causes, or the positive bodily entities are themselves the product of the pure flow of Becoming (of Sense?). Either the infinite field of virtuality is an immaterial effect of the interacting bodies, or bodies themselves emerge, actualize themselves, from this field of virtuality. In his *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze himself develops this opposition in the guise of two possible geneeses of reality: the formal genesis (the emergence of reality out of the immanence of impersonal consciousness as the pure flow of Becoming) is supplemented by the real genesis, which accounts for the emergence of the immaterial event-surface itself out of the bodily interaction. Sometimes, when he follows the first path, Deleuze comes dangerously close to 'empiriocriticist' formulas: the primordial fact is the pure

flow of experience, attributable to no subject, neither subjective nor objective – subject and object are, as all fixed entities, just secondary ‘coagulations’ of this flow.

These two logics (Event as the power which generates reality; Event as the sterile pure effect of bodily interactions) seem also to involve two privileged psychological stances: the generative Event of Becoming relies on the productive force of ‘schizo’, this explosion of the unified subject in the impersonal multitude of desiring intensities which is then constrained by the Oedipal matrix; the Event as sterile immaterial effect relies on the figure of the masochist who finds satisfaction in the sterile repetitive game of staged rituals whose function is to postpone forever the sexual *passage à l’acte*. Effectively, can one imagine a stronger contrast than that of the schizo throwing himself without any reservation into the flux of multiple passions, and of the masochist clinging to the theatre of shadows of his meticulously staged performances which repeat again and again the same sterile gesture?

Picking up on the question of the Oedipal matrix, to what extent do you think that the new forms of sexuality, biotechnology, parental identities and so on are impacting on this matrix? Are they leading to a decline of Oedipus, or a reworking of its principles?

First I don’t think that Oedipus is co-substantial with sexual difference as such. I think that Oedipus is just one of the forms. As I see it, the true problem does not so much concern these post-Oedipal forms of mixed parental identities; the true problem centres on the prospect of cloning and on the new forms of reproduction (the possibility that women can be inseminated purely through cell manipulation) and the complete disappearance of traditional notions of parenthood. What will happen here?

I think that one shouldn’t be afraid to draw extremely radical conclusions. On the one hand, one should abandon

this old humanist idea that, whatever happens, a certain form of human dignity will be maintained or reasserted. This is simply cheating. Such a perspective assumes dogmatically that a basic notion of humanity will somehow survive all these socio-technological transformations. But I also don't buy the opposite notion of those who think that until now we were constrained through a certain patriarchal structure and that the possibility of genetic manipulations gives a new plasticity, a new freedom. I don't know what the result will be. What I am convinced of is that if these tendencies continue, then the very status of what it means to be a human being will change. Even the most elementary things like speaking, language, emotional sense and so on will be affected. Nothing should be taken for granted and it would be inconsequent to be either optimistic or pessimistic.

Given the radicality of sexual difference – that the very sense of humanity is structured through sexual differentiation – then if this structure does not survive I am almost tempted to say that a new species will emerge. Maybe it will no longer be a human species: it all depends on what new form the impossibility of the Real could assume.

Your analysis of contemporary forms of subjectivity is frequently linked with the Lacanian concept of the objet petit a (object small a). Can you elaborate on the functioning of this elusive object?

One of the popular chocolate products on sale all around Central Europe is the so-called *Kinder*, an empty eggshell made of chocolate and wrapped up in lively coloured paper; having unwrapped the egg and cracked open the chocolate shell, one finds in it a small plastic toy (or small parts from which a toy can be put together). Is this toy not *l'objet petit a* at its purest – the small object filling in the central gap, the hidden treasure, *agalma*, in the centre? A child who buys this chocolate egg often nervously unwraps it and just breaks the chocolate, not bothering to eat it, worrying only about the

toy in the centre – is such a chocolate-lover not a perfect case of Lacan's motto 'I love you, but, inexplicably, I love something in you more than yourself, and, therefore, I destroy you'? This material ('real') void in the centre, of course, stands for the structural ('formal') gap on account of which no product is 'really that', no product lives up to the expectation it arouses. In other words, the small plastic toy is not simply different from chocolate (the product we bought); while materially different, it fills in the gap in chocolate itself, i.e. it is on the same surface as the chocolate. (In France, it is still possible to buy a desert with the racist name *la tête du nègre* (the nigger's head): a ball-like chocolate cake empty in its interior ('like the stupid nigger's head') – the *Kinder* egg fills this void. The lesson of it is that we *all* have a 'nigger's head', with a hole in the centre.) And this egg provides the formula for all the products which promise more ('buy a DVD player and get five DVDs for free', or, in an even more direct form, more of the same – 'buy this toothpaste and get one third more for free'), not to mention the standard trick with the Coke bottle ('look on the inside of the metal cover and you may find that you are the winner of one of the prizes, from another free Coke to a brand new car'): the function of this 'more' is to fill in the lack of a 'less', to compensate for the fact that, by definition, a merchandise never delivers on its (fantasmatic) promise. In other words, the ultimate 'true' merchandise would be the one that would not need any supplement, the one that would simply fully deliver what it promises – 'you get what you paid for, neither less nor more' No wonder, then, that these eggs are now prohibited in the USA and have to be smuggled from Canada (and sold at three times the price): behind the official pretext (they solicit you to buy another object, not the one publicized), it is easy to discern the deeper reason – these eggs display too openly the inherent structure of a commodity.

This being a typically Lacanian structure without positive content, but which revolves around an infinitely translatable void?

Yes, and is there not a clear structural homology between this structure of the commodity and the structure of the bourgeois subject? Do subjects – precisely insofar as they are the subjects of universal human rights – also not function as these *Kinder* chocolate eggs? Would the humanist-universalist reply to the *tête du nègre* not be precisely something like a *Kinder* egg? As humanist ideologists would have put it: we may be indefinitely different – some of us are black, others white, some tall, others small, some women, others men, some rich, others poor, etc. etc. – yet, deep inside us, there is the same moral equivalent of the plastic toy, the same *je ne sais quoi*, an elusive X which somehow accounts for the dignity shared by all humans.

Two decades ago, the German left-wing weekly journal *Stern* carried out rather a cruel experiment: it paid money to a couple of destitute homeless people, a man and a woman, who allowed themselves to be thoroughly washed, shaved and then delivered up to top designers and hairdressers. In one of its issues, the journal then published two large parallel photos of each person, first in his or her destitute homeless state, dirty and with unshaved faces, and then dressed up by a top designer. The result was effectively uncanny: although it was clear that we were dealing with the same person, the effect of the different dress etc. was that this belief of ours – that, beneath the different appearance, there is one and the same person – was shaken. It was not only the appearance that was different: the deeply disturbing effect of this change of appearances was that we, the spectators, somehow perceived a different personality beneath the appearances. *Stern* was bombarded with letters from readers, accusing the journal of violating the homeless persons' dignity, of humiliating them, submitting them to a cruel joke – however, what was undermined by this experiment was precisely the belief in Factor X, in the kernel of identity which accounts for our dignity and persists through the change of appearances. In short, this experiment in a way empirically demonstrated that we all have a 'nigger's head', that the core of our subjectivity is a void filled in by appearances.

So let us return to the scene of a small child violently tearing apart and discarding the chocolate egg in order to get at the plastic toy – is he not the emblem of so-called ‘totalitarianism’ which also wants to get rid of the ‘inessential’ historical contingent coating in order to liberate the ‘essence’ of man? Is not the ultimate ‘totalitarian’ vision that of a New Man arising out of the debris of the violent annihilation of the old corrupted humanity? Paradoxically, then, liberalism and ‘totalitarianism’ share the belief in Factor X, the plastic toy in the midst of the human chocolate coating.

This returns to a constant theme that you emphasize in your work, which is the relationship between the universal and the particular. How do you view this relationship?

What fascinates me about Lacan, and what I think makes him a true dialectician, is that he avoids this false opposition of either universal truths – i.e. old-fashioned metaphysics about how the world is structured – and this historicist position where everything is rooted in special circumstances and so on. Dialectic proper means that concrete historical struggles are at the same time struggles for the absolute itself; that each specific epoch, as it were, has its own ontology. This is the true nature of dialectics. And that is why I’ve always liked the radical eschatological Christian vision whereby the idea is that when humanity fights for salvation, for good against evil, then this is something that not only concerns humanity but, in a way, concerns the fate of the universe and the fate of God Himself. Along these lines, a particular social struggle is at the same time the struggle in which the fate of the entire universe is being decided. It is simply a false choice to say that either we move at the level of concrete social analysis – historicist relativization – or that we concern ourselves with eternal questions.

The whole dialectical point is to historicize these so-called eternal questions, not in the sense of reducing them to some historical phenomenon but to introduce historicity into the absolute itself. That is the difficult thing to do. And here again

we are back to Hegel and Schelling, because if there is anything to learn from German idealism it is precisely this dialectical attitude. This can also be found in Heidegger and his perspective of how the disclosure of Being requires the human in the sense of *Dasein* (being-there). That is to say that contingent humanity is at the same time the only site of disclosure of the absolute itself.

Could it be said that the fate of the Real is also being decided through contingent developments? For example, the new forms of biotechnology already appear to be bringing with them a new experience of the Real.

There is a widespread anxiety associated with what Lacan would have called knowledge in the Real. And it is very traumatic to assume knowledge in the Real. While we know that genes are not our fate, that it all depends on the interaction with the environment and so on, let's take one of the few cases where determinism is more or less perfect: Huntington's disease, where the genetic code repeats itself too often and you get a kind of writing error. By analysing the blood/gene pool of an individual, it is now possible to predict up to a month or two when he or she will get the first symptoms and when death will occur.

Now this is simply a matter of fate. The question is, are people ready for this knowledge in the Real? An interesting detail that points towards the implicit problem of subjectivization is that Huntington himself, although this disease is present in his own family, did not want or dare to apply the test on himself. So Huntington can be seen almost as a paradigmatic figure in the modern encounter with the new scientific Real. And as every survey on this question shows, the vast majority of people actually prefer not to know – the only exception being parents with small children who would need to plan for future provision.

This is an interesting paradox which is connected to another paradox of probability that illustrates what Lacan means when he claims that unconsciously we all believe in

God, in our immortality. Let us imagine a conflict situation in which there are four of us who have to perform a commando action. If all four of us carry out this action, then it is practically 100 per cent certain that half of us will die. So if we do it together, I have a 50 per cent chance of dying – but one doesn't know in advance who will die.

Alternatively, another possibility is that one of us could sacrifice him or herself: for example, a suicide bombing. That person will die for sure, but in this way only one quarter of us dies. So the question is what would you do? Do we do it together with a 50 per cent possibility of dying, but without any knowledge of who will die? Or do we draw straws so that the death rate is only 25 per cent, but then you will at least know in advance who will die? Practically everybody chooses the first possibility, because it's terrible to know for sure that you will die. You want to have that hope. This is a good Lacanian illustration of our secret belief in our special relationship with God. Here we see the work of fantasy.

And the fantasmatic process allows for a certain recursivity with these types of knowledge-in the-Real predicaments?

Up to a point, although there is considerable complexity here. For example, what would be a fantasmatic solution to a genetic disorder? Suppose that I were to have Huntington's disease in my family and there is a certain chance that I have it. What would I do? This is a fantasy, but let's say that I have a close friend who is a doctor with access to all the necessary poisons. I would ask him to apply the test but not to tell me anything – only he will know the result as to whether I have the disease. If it turns out positive, then a month or two before the onset of the illness he would put poison in my food without my knowing it. For me, that would probably be the perfect fantasy solution: I don't know anything, and at a certain point I will just fall asleep happily as usual and will not awaken.

But it doesn't work from a Lacanian perspective, because the most problematic category for Lacan is not simply

knowledge, but knowledge about the Other's knowledge. This I think is the fundamental lesson of Lacan. It's not simply what you know, but that you know that the Other knows. The Other's knowledge would bother you all the time, traumatizing you.

You might feel anxious about accepting dinner invitations from your friend?

Yes, you cannot erase the fact that the Other knows. So again, the only perfect solution here would have been to have some anonymous state agency that does it for all of us, without any one of us knowing it. But of course this is a perfect totalitarian fantasy, isn't it?

This is the same point that I have made apropos the type of situation explored in Scorsese's *Age of Innocence*, where a man is cheating his wife thinking that she doesn't know it. But when he learns that she knew it all the time, it ruins everything. Although nothing has effectively changed, the only thing you now know is that she knew all along, so the situation becomes extremely humiliating. So again, knowing what the Other knows, knowing that the Other knows, is an extremely complex dialectical category.

To what extent do the new forms of scientific knowledge in the Real impact on the traditional Enlightenment based approach to science and progress?

A central paradox here concerns the way in which traditionalist philosophers, like Habermas, try to keep alive the conventional humanist heritage. Habermas recently held a conference on how biogenetics will impact on ethical questions and crucial Enlightenment themes. I think that his position signals important concerns, but it is also deeply flawed. Habermas's thesis is that if it becomes possible to directly intervene into a person's biological inheritance formula, to change his or her psychic/physical features, then this potentially undermines our very sense of autonomy, freedom, personal responsibility and so on.

Habermas is quite right to point out that the traditional idea of education, as a civilizing influence, could be overthrown. If someone is uneducated, not in the sense of not being able to read but in the sense of being too wild and uncivilized, then the whole idea of moral struggle is that, through personal endeavour, they learn how to control themselves; to become civilized. But if scientists intervene in an individual's genetic code and make them less violent and more compliant, then education as a moral process in personal development is simply bypassed – it becomes redundant. So Habermas's first point is that the notion of the individual as an autonomous agent is undermined. His second point is that intersubjective relations would also be compromised and that we might get two classes of human being: those who in the traditional sense are fully 'human', and those whose genetic codes have been manipulated and who come to be perceived as either sub- or super-human. For Habermas, this would destroy the very conditions of social equality and effective symmetry that are necessary for a proper ethical relationship. The idea of the human collective and the potential for achieving a democratic community of equals through undistorted communication is consequently disabled. This is the threat.

I do agree with Habermas that biogenetics poses a threat because, as we all know, biogenetics means the end of nature. That is to say, nature itself is experienced as something which follows certain mechanisms which can be changed. Nature becomes a technical product that loses its spontaneous natural character. And Habermas is right to point out that it's only against the background of this natural spontaneity that modern notions of human freedom and dignity have tended to operate. But basically, Habermas's solution is death: that because the perspective of biogenetic manipulation affects our senses of autonomy and freedom, then we should prohibit it, constrain it.

I think that this solution simply doesn't work, not only because of the vulgar reason that people will do it anyway, but because once we know that genes can be manipulated,

then you cannot undo that knowledge. This would be a fake, a kind of fetishist split where you would have the situation of knowing how to manipulate genes but at the same time pretending not to know it in order to save freedom. So the paradox here is that Habermas, the great Enlightener, adopts basically the old Catholic strategy of 'better not to know': in order to save human dignity, let's not probe too much. Paradoxically, Habermas is forced to adopt an anti-Enlightenment stance.

Against this anti Enlightenment stance, can an alternative view of freedom and autonomy be developed?

Habermas's conservatism derives from a standard notion of freedom and autonomy. The idea is that, since scientific advances threaten this notion, then let's simply prohibit these advances. The problem that I find with this is that the properties that we experience as our spontaneous tendencies are determined by a totally contingent meaningless genetic constellation. So the paradox is the following one: in order to retain human autonomy, dignity and freedom, Habermas wants to constrain our freedom (the freedom to manipulate ourselves through science, specifically). However, this constraint does not work. If I manipulate your genetic inheritance, you are not free, but once you are aware of the mere possibility of my manipulating your genes, you also already lose your freedom – why should you be more free if you are aware that it is the pure stupid natural contingency which determines what you are? The moment the prospect of biogenetic manipulation is here, freedom in the standard classical sense is lost. Habermas fails here, and it is surprising for someone who claims to be a big Enlightenment partisan to repeat the old conservative notion that in order to retain freedom we have to limit our knowledge – the condition of moral freedom, dignity, autonomy, is not to know too much about what you objectively are.

The question that really needs to be addressed is, are we really simply determined by genes? To put it in naive terms,

is it possible to save human freedom in the face of the prospect of the full definition of one's genome, of our biogenetic formula? The true philosophical challenge that I see here is to reformulate the notion of human freedom in the very context of genetic knowledge, and to develop in what sense we would still be free, what autonomy means and so on. I think it can be done precisely through psychoanalysis, and especially the notion of death drive. Death drive is not something that is in our genes; there is no gene for death drive. If anything, death drive is a genetic malfunction.

And as a genetic malfunction, death drive presumably is not something that could be cloned?

The problem here is not with cloning as such, but with the confrontation with that which cannot be cloned. With cloning, we get all the old paradoxes of the double. Let's take the standard situation evoked: parents have a child who has died and they would like to get a copy of this child. But I think that the situation would actually be monstrous. With the clone, you would have someone who looked, talked and acted exactly like the first child, but you would know that with regard to the person he or she is not your first child. I think that the second child would be experienced as a monstrous usurpation: an encounter with the double at its purest. It would be like that old Marx brothers joke, at the beginning of *Night at the Opera*, when Groucho is seducing a typical dowager and he says: 'Your eyes, your nose, everything of you reminds me of you — everything but yourself!' That would be the situation. So I think that all this prospect of cloning and biogenetics confronts us with fundamental philosophical issues. We are forced in our daily lives to confront philosophical problems.

We also live in an age where there is the prospect of cloning reality as virtual reality. How should the relationship between reality and virtual reality be conceived?

First, I don't think that virtualization is as simple as it may appear. The way in which digitalization will affect our lives is not inscribed in technology itself. I think that the first lesson of virtualization is a Hegelian one. It is not that before there was reality and that now we are in virtual reality, it's rather that retroactively we learn that there never was a 'reality' in the sense of an immediate (or un-mediated) experience. Retroactively, virtualization makes us aware of how the symbolic universe as such was always already minimally virtual in the sense that a whole set of symbolic presuppositions determine what we experience as reality. We don't experience something directly as reality, and because of this the Real, precisely in the sense of the raw Real, is experienced as spectre and fantasy; as that which cannot be integrated into reality.

If we take virtual reality versus real reality, then the Real should not be conceived as that part of real reality which cannot be virtualized. In order for there to be virtualization, we must ask a more radical question: how is virtualization of reality possible at all? How can a space for virtualization emerge within reality itself? The only consistent answer is that reality in itself, to put it in Lacanian jargon, is not-all; there is a certain gap in reality itself, and fantasy is precisely what fills this gap in reality. Virtualization is made possible precisely because the Real opens a gap in reality which is then filled in by virtualization.

To put it in even more classical naive philosophical terms, the true problem is not, how do we get from appearances to reality, but rather how can something like appearance emerge within reality? How can reality redouble itself into an appearance? The only solution is a Hegelian-Lacanian one: because reality itself needs appearance, reality itself is not-all. Appearance is precisely not an epiphenomenon. Appearance is inherent to reality. In other words, the Real persists as that failure or inconsistency of reality which has to be filled in with appearance. Appearance is not secondary; rather, it emerges through the space of that which is missing from reality.

Just to be clear: the argument is not only that reality can never coincide with itself where appearance, or virtualization is always possible because of an inherent gap in the order of reality – but also that reality itself is impossible without the Real?

I am even tempted to claim that there is a certain echo between this notion of the Real and, at the very general level, the results of the cosmological speculations in quantum physics where you also have this idea that, looked at from outside in its totality, the universe is a void. This is the materialist position that Deleuze called universalized perspectivism. It does not mean that there is no reality, since everything is just a subjective perspective; it is more radical than this. If we perceive a thing from a certain perspective, our immediate impression tends to be that that perception belongs to a distorted vision of what the thing is in itself. But the more radical conclusion of universalized perspectivism is that if you take away the distorting perspective, you lose the thing itself. Reality itself is the result of a certain distorting perspective.

There is no positive reality outside these distortions. This insight – and here, my God, I will turn almost New Age – is also present to some extent in Nagarjuna, the founder of Mahayana Buddhism. What Nagarjuna argues is that where Buddhism affirms the notion of void *sunyata* (emptiness/nothingness), it is not nothingness in the simple sense that there is nothing. The idea is, rather, that every positive entity emerges from a distorted perspective and that nothing exists objectively or independently from it. Objectively nothing exists, and entities only emerge as the result of perspectival differentiation in which every differentiation is a partial distortion.

Here we can see in what sense Lenin, in his *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism*, tried to be materialist: he was obsessed with the notion of the mind reflecting an objective reality existing outside. However, such a notion relies on a hidden idealism, because the idea that outside of our reflections there is objective reality presupposes that our mind,

which reflects reality, functions as a gaze somehow external to this reality. Universalized perspectivism rejects any such gaze. The point is not that there is no reality outside our mind, the point is rather that there is no mind outside reality. The distortion of reality occurs precisely because our mind is part of reality. So when Lenin claims that we can only arrive at objective reality in an endless asymptotic process of approximation, what he overlooks is that our distortions of reality occur precisely *because* we are part of reality and therefore do not have a neutral view of it: our perception distorts reality because the observer is part of the observed. It is this universalized perspectivism which, I think, contains a radically materialist position.

The true formula of materialism is not that there is some noumenal reality beyond our distorting perception of it. The only consistent materialist position is that the world does not exist – in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole. The notion of the world as a positive universe presupposes an external observer, an observer not caught in it. The very position from which you can perceive the world as a self-enclosed whole is the position of an external observer. It is thus paradoxically this radical perspectivism which allows us to formulate a truly materialist position, not that the world exists outside our mind, but that our mind does not exist outside the world. Lenin put the accent on the wrong point. The problem of materialism is not ‘does reality exist outside?’ The problem is ‘does our mind exist?’ How does my mind exist and how is it inherent to reality?

Nonetheless, there would seem to be a certain ambiguity here. Although (retrospectively) we can see that ‘real reality’ has always been virtual in a certain sense, you argue (in the Plague of Fantasies) against the idea that real reality should be understood as simply another ‘window’ in virtual reality; as virtual reality writ large.

Yes, what needs to be avoided is precisely the idea that real reality, so to speak, is simply one in the multitude of virtual

realities; or, as it is sometimes put, that reality is one more computer window. Here we are confronted with a false opposition between two equally wrong conceptions of reality: either we have a fullness of reality outside of the virtual universe, or there is no external reality and real life is merely another window. These are two sides of the same coin, two temptations to be resisted.

This false opposition is typically at the root of both the optimistic and pessimistic attitudes concerning cyberspace. On the one hand, there is the vogueish tendency to celebrate cyberspace as a new domain of proto-communist unity where human beings will be transformed into virtual entities floating freely in a shared space – this is a variation of Gnostic idealism. On the other hand, there are the techno-conservatives who see in cyberspace only an illusory trap that undermines human potential and its capacity for exercising real freedom and autonomy. It is, rather, this very idea of authenticity which is illusory. Hubert Dreyfuss is one example of this kind of authenticity. Since the ultimate referent of our experience is the real-life-world, cyberspace activities which tend to disrupt our connection with the latter generate phenomena like self-mutilation ('cutters') or the fascination with catastrophes and so on – phenomena which are to be understood as so many desperate attempts to return to the Real. But, again, what needs to be displaced is precisely the idea of the Real as the ultimate life-world – the Lacanian Real is precisely 'more real than reality' – as such, it intervenes in the ruptures of reality.

In what precise sense is the Real on the side of virtuality against 'real reality'?

Let me take the case of pain. There is an intimate connection between virtualization of reality and the emergence of an infinite and infinitized bodily pain, much stronger than the usual one: do biogenetics and virtual reality combined not open up new 'enhanced' possibilities of torture, new and unheard-of horizons of extending our ability to endure pain (through

widening our sensory capacity to sustain pain and, above all, through inventing new forms of inflicting pain by directly attacking the brain centres for pain, bypassing sensorial perception)? Perhaps the ultimate Sadean image of an 'undead' victim of torture, who can sustain endless pain without having at his or her disposal the escape into death, also waits to become reality. In such a constellation, the ultimate real/impossible pain is no longer the pain of the real body, but the 'absolute' virtual-real pain caused by virtual reality in which I move (and, of course, the same goes for sexual pleasure). An even more 'real' approach is opened up by the prospect of the direct manipulation of our neurons: although not 'real' in the sense of being part of the reality in which we live, this pain is impossible-real. And does the same not go for emotions? Recall Hitchcock's dream of the direct manipulation of emotions: in future, a director will no longer have to invent intricate narratives and shoot them in a convincingly heart-breaking way in order to generate in the viewer the proper emotional response; he will employ a keypad connected directly to the viewer's brain, so that, when he presses the proper buttons, the viewer will experience sorrow, terror, sympathy, fear — he will experience them for real, in an amount never equalled by the situations 'in real life' which evoke fear or sorrow. It is especially crucial to distinguish this procedure from that of virtual reality: fear is aroused not by generating virtual images and sounds which provoke fear, but via a direct intervention which bypasses the level of perception altogether. This, not the 'return back to real life' from the artificial virtual environment, is the Real generated by radical virtualization itself. What we experience here at its purest is thus the gap between reality and the Real: the Real of, say, the sexual pleasure generated by direct neuronal intervention does not take place in the reality of bodily contacts, yet it is 'more real than reality' more intense. This Real thus undermines the division between objects in reality and their virtual simulacra: if, in virtual reality, I stage an impossible fantasy, I can experience there an 'artificial' sexual enjoyment which is much more 'real' than anything I can experience in 'real reality'.

Consequently, cyberspace has a radically ambiguous status. While it can function as the medium of foreclosure of the Real, of an imaginary space without obstacles, at the same time it can be a space where you can approach the Real whose exclusion is constitutive for your experience of social reality. Cyberspace is both a way of escape from traumas and a way to formulate traumas – and in this sense it follows the paradox of Wagner's *Parsifal*, where the wound can only be healed by the spear that smote it. On the one hand, there is the danger of being caught in a kind of imaginary internal circular movement, but, on the other, cyberspace opens up a space for encountering the Real precisely in the terms of what I called the imaginary Real: that is, the Real of illusion, the traumatic dimension which we foreclose in our reality.

So cyberspace is not only another way of encountering (or evading) the Real, but also another way of experiencing the Real?

The standard formulation of the experience of the Real in cyberspace tends to be in terms of a kind of physical limit, of bodily inertia. The idea is that no matter how deep you are into virtual reality you are nonetheless attached to a real body (prone to ageing, functional breakdown and so on) which cannot be abstracted from, and that therefore the Gnostic dream of the transformation of human beings into virtual entities is an impossibility. But I don't think that this remainder of the body constitutes the ultimate horizon of the Real. On the contrary, the Real has to be redefined as an impossibility which you encounter within cyberspace itself. It is strictly inherent to it.

For example, one possible encounter with the Real in cyberspace would be the construction of a fantasy that was so extreme that you would, as it were, escape back into 'real life'. Something like this occurs in the Freudian case of the father who dreams that his son is reproaching him with the words 'can't you see that I'm burning?' and who then escapes back into waking life in order to avoid this traumatic

encounter. In the case of cyberspace, we are always presented with the possibility of approaching the basic coordinates of our fantasy space. But, as Lacan points out, fundamental fantasies are unbearable; unbearable in the sense that a person can never fully subjectivize them. So the Real is not simply the external limit of symbolization, it is strictly inherent: gaps that are produced by symbolization itself. The Real in this sense has an almost fragile quality in relation to the symbolic texture.

This notion of the imaginary Real is something that you also explore in a recent text on the events of 11 September 2001, the title of which, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, is an ironic reference to the Wachowski brothers' film, Matrix.

The reference to 'welcome to the desert of the real' is made in a very precise sense. To begin with, it does not mean that 'the Americans', or, more generally, 'Westerners', were until now living in an artificial universe and that now they have been jolted back into the real world. From the American perspective, it was not that reality intruded into a highly developed virtual universe but, rather, that what was experienced as spectral virtual fantasy intruded into reality. Issues of third world terror, disasters and so on were typically perceived as something fantasmatic and unreal. Where such issues were referred to or represented, in the news or on film, it was always through a certain gaze that distanced them from the general experience of daily reality. So what happened with 11 September was not that reality intruded into our imaginary world, but precisely that what was perceived fantasmatically on our distant screens intruded into reality. And this is why 11 September was also accompanied with a certain effect of derealization, because although it was traumatic it was also somehow unreal in the fundamental sense of not being part of American reality.

Here we have a nice example of how the Lacanian notion of the Real involves the opposite logic to that developed by Roland Barthes, who, in *The Effect of the Real*, prefigures the

standard deconstructionist critique of any reference to immediate reality. For example, Barthes referred to writers like Flaubert, who mentioned a whole series of non-functional superfluous details in their description of a room, and the idea is that these produce the effect of the Real. And of course the point of deconstructionist criticism is to demonstrate how what we experience as reality on this daily level is effectively a construct of symbolic procedures.

But the Lacanian perspective is precisely the opposite. Against the usual prohibition that symbolic fiction should not be confused with, or mistaken for, reality, the central insight of Lacan is that the Real should not be mistaken for symbolic fiction. That is to say, the true philosophical art is not to recognize fiction behind reality – i.e. you experience something as reality and through the work of deconstructive criticism you unmask it as mere symbolic fiction – but to recognize the Real in what appears to be mere symbolic fiction. It's the other way round. The true undertaking is not the identification of reality as symbolic fiction, but to show that there can be something in symbolic fiction which is more than fiction. It is this surplus dimension which functions as the Real. We might say that in the big opposition between reality and these spectral fantasies, the Real is on the side of fantasies. This is the crucial point. The idea of the Real as simply an ultimate traumatic unacceptable hard kernel should not be considered today the ultimate one. This is not the main axis of the Lacanian Real – the Lacanian Real manifests itself in far subtler ways.

And if the Real is linked to fantasmatic processes, then, as a historical horizon, can it also affect our sense of the possible?

The fundamental idea around which everything turns is that reality itself is already based on some exclusion or inconsistency – reality is not-all. So how does the Real function? Let's take a very simple example of a historical situation where the opportunity arose to start a revolution. Let's say that this opportunity was missed and history took a different, less

radical, path. The Real here is precisely that missed opportunity: the trauma of betrayal, of what might have been. The alternative history fantasy of what might have happened is not simply an illusion, but functions as a betrayal or haunting of the Real.

Here I think we can give a more radical twist to Derrida's notion of haunting (hauntology) and the way it operates today. The paradigmatic example is that of the alternative history scenarios that are so popular in commercial cinema – i.e. the representation of history as a realm of multiple paths and developments (*It's a Wonderful Life*, the *Back to the Future* trilogy, *Sliding Doors* and so on). I think that this phenomenon is much more ambiguous than it may appear. First I'm tempted to claim that the popularity of alternative history scenarios is not so much an expression of the fact that we live in a society of free choice, where we can always make different choices, but almost the opposite: that these scenarios are, rather, a signal of the fact that we do not have any fundamental choices.

The usual lesson of alternative history films is either that choices don't matter or, more typically, that any intervention in, or alteration to, history inevitably produces a catastrophic result. It is precisely through the representation of history as a realm of infinite possibility and permutation that the ideological fantasy of a naturalistic course to the latter is reproduced. The alternative history scenarios end up as representations of ultimate closure.

This idea of de facto closure would seem to run counter to the celebrationist view of cyberspace.

I think that the ideology to be avoided apropos of cyberspace is simply to concede that it is a limitless horizon of free-flowing digitalization, indeterminacy, choices and so on. At a superficial level this may appear to be the case, but I think that we effectively have very little choice. I think that our societies have never been more self-enclosed than they are today. Of course, we are all the time bombarded with

choices, but we actually have very little real choice. And again, here the Real refers to the lack of any fundamental choices. The latter are precisely excluded by the contemporary field of choices; they have become invisible in a world of seemingly infinite choice.

And if the capacity to make real choices is diminishing, then does this also affect our sense of responsibility regarding our actions in the world?

A key issue here is the way in which we relate to the death penalty. I am basically in favour of the death penalty (or at least the idea of the death penalty), but that is not the main point. The main point is that those who argue against the death penalty – if we push their argument to its limit – accept ultimately the Nietzschean position of the ‘Last Man’ Nietzsche’s Last Man perspective is that there are no big historical missions, there is nothing worth dying for, that the highest value is continuation of life itself and so on. It’s a kind of survivalist attitude. I don’t accept this perspective.

I think that Nietzsche’s opposition of active to passive nihilism – i.e. that it’s better to actively will nothing itself than not to will anything – curiously reflects the modern condition. Set against the perceived fundamentalism of the fanatical Other, what we have today is the hegemonic figure of the liberal subject who, like Nietzsche’s Last Man, is concerned only with the pursuit of private pleasures and ideals of happiness; a pure survivalism without any sense of historical mission or engagement.

Now those who are against the death penalty, I would say, are deeply rooted in this Nietzschean problematic of the Last Man. Against this – and following, up to a point, Agamben in his *Homo Sacer* – we should ask a simple question, which is, what kind of biopolitics is implicit in those who oppose the death penalty? I think that the answer is precisely this Nietzschean biopolitics of survivalism and the Last Man: that life has no ultimate meaning and that the only goal is personal happiness. So this problematic of an effective ending

of history is accompanied by a certain suspension of historical responsibility. On the other hand, what is also emerging today, with writers like Badiou and others, is a new set of developments (of which I am also a part), which, to put it simply, could be characterized as a post-deconstructionist paradigm.

Is the Last Man perspective also another version of the traditional ideological promise of overcoming the Real?

I think so. For example, in today's market we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight. .)? Virtual reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real – in the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, so virtual reality is experienced as reality without being real.

Is this not the attitude of the hedonistic Last Man? Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, but deprived of the substance which makes it dangerous. (This is also the Last Man's revolution – 'revolution without revolution'.) Is this not one of the two versions of Lacan's anti-Dostoevsky motto, 'If God doesn't exist, everything is prohibited'? (1) God is dead, we live in a permissive universe, you should strive for pleasures and happiness – but, in order to have a life full of happiness and pleasures, you should avoid dangerous

excesses, so everything is prohibited if it is not deprived of its substance. (2) If God is dead, superego enjoins you to enjoy, but every determinate enjoyment is already a betrayal of the unconditional one, so it should be prohibited. The nutritive version of this is to enjoy directly the Thing itself: why bother with coffee? Inject caffeine directly into your blood! Why bother with sensual perceptions and excitations by external reality? Take drugs which directly affect your brain! And if there is a God, then everything is permitted – to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of His will; clearly, a direct link to God justifies our violation of any ‘merely human’ constraints and considerations (as in Stalinism, where the reference to the big Other of historical Necessity justifies absolute ruthlessness).

Where you refer to a post deconstructionist paradigm, does this imply a rejection or abandonment of deconstruction as such?

No. It does not consist of any kind of return to metaphysics. It fully endorses the results of deconstructionism; its emphasis is on contingency. To give you some idea, let’s take the example of the contemporary return of the religious that is being developed within a strictly materialist perspective.

Now it’s crucial to distinguish the sense of the religious that I would endorse – and which can also be found in the work of Badiou, Agamben and others – from the late deconstructionist Levinasian-Derridean view of a return of the religious. With the Levinasian and late deconstructionist return of the religious we have this idea of radical Otherness and the sense of an unconditional openness and responsibility towards it. By contrast, the type of religious sensibility of which I am speaking concerns much more this idea of (and we should not be afraid to use the term) a heroic decisionism in which there is a strong emphasis on risking outcomes and taking responsibility for them in real terms. To return to the example of the death penalty, my problem with those who claim to be against the death penalty is their implicit assumption that there is nothing worth dying for.

This would be a religious sensibility without the traditional religiosity: that is, a sensibility that is opposed to an infinite commitment either to God or Otherness, but which at the same time sees in life something more than mere survivalism?

And here I'm quite a traditional ethical figure. I think that there are things like honour, shame, freedom and so on which *are* worth dying for. Life is not merely life. Life is always accompanied by a certain excess; something for which one can put at stake life itself. This is why I think that one should today more than ever rehabilitate terms like eternity, decision, valour and heroism. On this matter I am very much in agreement with Badiou. Let me tell you that in one of my conversations with Badiou, when we talked about our private tastes, I discovered with extreme surprise and satisfaction that he is very fond of American Westerns. Now you would never expect this of Badiou – the modern-day Mallarmé, Francophile, supposedly anti-American and so on. And when I asked him why, he told me it was because this is the only genre that focuses on courage.

Now if we take today's paradigmatic movie, it is the war movie. It's, for example, Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, where you have a representation of endless horror, meaningless slaughter and violence. Spielberg's perspective is again that of the Last Man: that is to say, war is simply a nightmare, incomprehensible, a pathetic waste of human life. But I think that what we should not lose sight of is that there was heroism of purpose and ethical struggle in World War II and the D-Day Invasion, and that there are causes and ideals that are worth dying for. This, incidentally, also reflects the overwhelming trend in today's ideological discourse to consign those who are prepared to risk their lives in the name of a certain cause or purpose to the realms of mindless fanaticism.

The crisis of the Western genre, starting from the late 1940s, might be said to be part of this ideological drift – although of course there have been the so-called meta-Westerns that incorporate other genres. But nonetheless

there was in the mid-1950s a brief revival of Westerns. These already reflected some kind of melancholic nostalgic attitude, but they are wonderful. The first one in this series, which would be emblematic of Badiou's courage Western (although it is not the best), is, of course, *High Noon*. But I think that there are two other films that are even more critically important in this series and which are almost my most beloved Westerns. These are not the films of Anthony Mann, who is usually referred to, but those of Delmer Daves: *3 10 to Yuma* and *The Hanging Tree*. These films are both about ethical ordeal, courage and risk: for what would you risk everything? This is the central concern of Westerns generally – at what crucial point do you gather the courage to risk life itself?

So I think that in no way should one dismiss the Western as some kind of American ideological fundamentalism. On the contrary, I think that we need this heroic attitude more and more. In this context, what comes after deconstruction and the acceptance of radical contingency should not be a universalized ironic scepticism where whenever you commit yourself to something then you should be aware that you are never fully committing yourself – no, I think that we should rehabilitate the sense of full commitment and the courage to take risks.

Would you say that the ultimate risk of the 'risk society' is that we don't take risks?

Absolutely. From the very beginning I think that's the point. Yes, the 'risk society' is a kind of misnomer. There are no choices. And if there are any risks, they are passive risks. That's for me the fundamental paradox of the risk society. For example, let's take the recent collapse of Enron and Worldcom. I mean, it's unfair to characterize these events simply in terms of a risk society, because the poor employees who lost their job didn't take any risks. They experienced this as pure irrational fate. And I think here when risk society theorists bombard us with notions such as 'you are free to choose today, to take risks', they are, up to a point at least,

doing the old job of ideology in the sense of interpreting as our risk choices what is imposed on us as blind fate. Let's take a poor mid-level Enron or Worldcom employee who lost his or her job, all their life savings and so on. What choices did that person make? Did he have any rational way of establishing why Enron/Worldcom, and not some other big company, should collapse? Risk is here absolutely objectified as a kind of anonymous fatum. Yes, in this sense I would totally agree.

Conversation 4

Tolerance and the Intolerable: Enjoyment, Ethics and Event

GLYN DALY *A central Lacanian category in your work is that of jouissance, or enjoyment. Enjoyment is viewed as something that has to be renounced as a condition of entry to the socio symbolic order, and yet that order is itself sustained by certain fantasies that stage the loss and recovery of enjoyment. Can you elaborate on this?*

ŽIŽEK Yes, we have to renounce enjoyment in order to enter into the symbolic order, but, again, the crucial Lacanian point is to avoid the illusion that we are renouncing something which we previously possessed. This is the fundamental Lacanian paradox: that in the very gesture of renunciation we create the spectre of death that we were supposed to lose. The second point about enjoyment concerns the link between fantasy and enjoyment. Fantasy is ultimately the fantasy about the sin of enjoyment, but in a double sense. Fantasy not only articulates the sin of enjoyment but, as you nicely indicate in your question, it stages the mythical narrative of how enjoyment was lost. This is the more important function of fantasy. It is not so much, 'Oh my God, we have it' that concerns fantasy, but how enjoyment was lost, how it was stolen.

Stanley Kubrick's movie, *Eyes Wide Shut*, is an extremely interesting film that concerns precisely the notions of shared enjoyment, theft of enjoyment and the power of fantasy. Many critics reproached the film for its sterility. But I think

that, far from being a failure of the film, Kubrick's genius is that he understands the utter sterility of fantasy. What the film shows is that instead of penetrating into a world of enraptured ecstasies, the deeper you go into fantasies the more fatuous and empty they appear, until, towards the end of the film, we have the famous collective orgy that is totally aseptic.

Sexual difference is also crucial here because the two perspectives that Kubrick explores are not symmetrical. At first glance we have a married couple – Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise – and in each of them the fantasy explodes. And the idea is that each of them goes to the end, exploring the depths of fantasy. But if you look closely at what happens, it is only in the man that this explodes. The authentic fantasy – the fantasy that holds any real meaning – is her fantasy and what he desperately tries to do is to match up to, or resuscitate, something that would be at the level of her fantasy. Ultimately, he fails.

The standard interpretation of the film is that you have a self-complacent married couple who get seduced into fantasizing and then, just before getting lost in this abyss of all-consuming desire, they control themselves and step back. But I think what the film really shows is a traversing of the fantasy through experiencing its stupidity. In this sense, it's a much more depressing lesson. It's not that fantasy is a potent abyss of seduction that threatens to swallow you but quite the opposite: that fantasy is ultimately sterile.

And this would be another example of the Real of fantasy?

There is one aspect of the film which I think is crucial from a Lacanian point of view, and which tells us a great deal not only about the relationship between reality and fantasy but also about the nature of the act and in what sense an act can be false. I am referring, of course, to the last scene of the movie where, after they admit their fantasies to each other, Nicole Kidman says to her husband, 'now we should do something as soon as possible'; he asks what, and she says 'we

should go to bed: fuck' Here we have the lesson of fantasy, because the simple ending would have been that they are fantasizing just because they didn't get enough good real sex. The idea being that you don't have it in reality, so you fantasize it. The belief is simply that with a little bit of good sex you get real satisfaction, so who needs to fantasize?

But I think that their sexual act will be an escape, a false act. Her message is not, let's have real sex so that we no longer need to fantasize, but, rather, that you can get lost in fantasy, that it can overwhelm you, and that a real sexual act is a defensive measure to control this explosion of fantasy. So in a way the Real here is in the fantasy and you escape into reality to somehow control this excess of fantasy. It's a defensive act: you turn into reality in order to control, to stifle, the fantasmatic explosion.

How does fantasy relate to the dimension of impossibility in the sexual relationship?

To elaborate the role of fantasy, the crucial thing is to secure the elementary distinction (which is too often collapsed) between the object of desire and the object-cause of desire. The object of desire is simply the desired object: let's say, in simple sexual terms, the person whom I desire. The object-cause of desire, on the other hand, is that which makes me desire this person. And the two are not the same. Usually, we are not even aware of what was the object-cause of desire – it requires psychoanalysis to learn what, for example, made me desire that particular woman. This is something along the lines of what Freud already called the unary feature (*der einzige Zug, le trait unaire*) – and on which Lacan later developed a whole theory: i.e. some feature which triggers my desire in the other.

And I think this is how one should read Lacan's statement that there is no sexual relationship. This means precisely that it is never simply me and my partner. There is at the centre of any relationship the object-cause of desire – I develop this in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* The gap between the

object of desire and its object-cause is therefore crucial, a feature which triggers and sustains my desire. It is possible that I am not aware of this feature, but what often happens is that I am aware of it but I misperceive it as an obstacle. For example, when somebody is in love with another person and says, I find her really attractive except for that detail – I don't know, the way she laughs, the gesture she makes – this bothers me. You can be sure that, far from being an obstacle, it is, in fact, the cause of the desire. The object-cause of the desire would be that strange imperfection which disturbs the balance, but if you take it away the desired object itself no longer functions, i.e., it is no longer desired. It is a paradoxical obstacle which constitutes that towards which it is an obstacle. It is in these terms that we can also understand the nature of the melancholic position. A melancholic is somebody who has the object of desire but who has lost the desire itself. That is to say, you lose that which makes you desire the desired object.

In your work you have stressed that the dimensions of fantasy and enjoyment not only affect psychic life but also, more broadly, the cultural and political life of society. How do these dimensions operate?

When we speak about fantasy and enjoyment, the first elementary point to make is that enjoyment, in psychoanalytic terms, is not the same thing as pleasure. Enjoyment is beyond the pleasure principle. Whereas pleasure exists along the lines of balance and satisfaction, enjoyment is destabilizing, traumatic and excessive – the Freudian pleasure in pain and so on. Now what I find so interesting is how this level of excessive enjoyment is operative at a multitude of levels in politics – this is what I try to develop in most of my books. For example, in our officially tolerant times I claim that everyday racism survives precisely at this level of being disturbed by what is perceived fantasmatically as the other's excessive enjoyment. Today's racist usually no longer says that Arabs, Turks or Indians are simply stupid or disgusting.

No, he says that they are quite normal, that he likes them, that they are his friends and so on, *but* that there is something about them which bothers him, some detail: their smell, their food, their music. Or it might even be something more intellectual – linguistic orientation, cultural attitudes, the work ethic. It is some feature that is perceived as excessive. And this is why I think it is so difficult to struggle against racism at the everyday level.

But also, more generally, all politics relies upon, and even manipulates, a certain level of economy of enjoyment. For me, the clearest example of enjoyment is the speech by Goebbels in 1943 – his speech on so-called total warfare, *Totalkrieg*. After the Stalingrad defeat, Goebbels gave a speech in Berlin in the conclusion of which he asks for total war: let's abolish the last remnants of normal life and let's introduce total mobilization. And then you have this famous scene where Goebbels is addressing a series of rhetorical questions to a crowd of 20,000 Germans and asking them if they want to work even more, 16–18 hours a day if necessary, and the people shout 'yes' He asks them if they want all the theatres and expensive restaurants closed down, and the people again shout 'yes' Then, after a series of these kinds of question, which are all about renouncing pleasure and enduring even more hardship, he finally asks an almost Kantian question – Kantian in the sense of evoking the unrepresentable sublime – he asks, 'do you want a total war, a war so total that you cannot even imagine today how total it will be?' And a fanatical ecstatic shout comes up from the masses: 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'

Here I think you have enjoyment as a political category at its purest. It's absolutely clear, if from nothing else than simply the dramatized expressions on the people's faces, that this injunction, demanding from the people to renounce ordinary pleasures, provides an enjoyment of its own; this is enjoyment.

But to emphasize the point above, enjoyment is not exclusively the perverse product of authoritarian regimes . . .

Yes, many standard Marxist and psychoanalytic critiques of fascism acknowledge that totalitarianism relies on a certain perverse economy of enjoyment. But you cannot simply say that if you get simple direct satisfaction then you don't need these perverse kinds of enjoyment. The problem with enjoyment is that it never functions directly; it always gets disturbed. In today's permissive societies, for example, we have the opposite paradox. This is to say, officially, we get the permissive society, we are allowed to enjoy ourselves, or, rather, to have pleasure: we are allowed to organize our lives around how to get as much satisfaction as possible, to realize our ego and so on. But the fundamental result is what? The inherent, necessary result is that in order to truly enjoy life, we have to follow so many regulations and prohibitions: no sexual harassment, no smoking, no fat food, no alcohol, no eggs, no stressful situations, etc. The paradox is that if you posit pleasure directly as a goal, then you are obliged to submit to a number of conditions – for example, fitness regimes in order to remain sexually attractive – so your immediate pleasure is again ruined.

The central paradox of *jouissance* is that you cannot directly target it; it is always a by-product. This paradox is easily discernible in some intelligent melodramas that show how true love is never simply a symmetrical relationship between two people seeing eye to eye and forgetting about the world. It is what Bertholt Brecht called *das Lob der dritten Sache*, the praise of the third thing. This is for me almost a personal motto. In order to have a happy love relationship, you must have a third common cause. You don't see eye to eye – rather, you both look to the common cause, and this is how you can be happy in your interpersonal relationship.

This was the big mistake of the hippy movement of the 1960s and the politics of enjoyment that emerged from it. Against so-called bourgeois repression, they targeted sexual pleasure directly as a political category. What they meant by this is that against patriarchal renunciation we must learn to live, to enjoy spontaneously sexuality, life, whatever, and that this will render us less aggressive, less authoritarian and so

on. If anything, it backfired. It's quite clear – and I'm saying this as a leftwinger and from the perspective of someone with a number of friends who lived in one of these anti-authoritarian communes – how this apparent abolishment of authority generated an even more stifling authority: a kind of fake egalitarian community where prohibitions were even more radical and intrusive.

You mention the idea of a common cause in relationships, but how does the economy of enjoyment function in relation to the question of love and Otherness?

Let me approach this question through an improvization of Kierkegaard. I think that Kierkegaard, 150 years ago, formulated the truth of the type of multiculturalist tolerance that dominates the contemporary social attitude: namely, the idea that what we call tolerance is really the ultimate form of intolerance towards the Other's enjoyment. In his *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard states in a shockingly explicit way that the ultimate neighbour whom a Christian should love is a dead neighbour; that proper love is the love for the dead neighbour. With pagan pre-Christian love, you love the other on account of his or her excellent outstanding qualities. A poet loves a lady because of her beauty, a pupil loves his teacher because of his wisdom, or whatever. The point is that there is some outstanding quality: you love the beloved because of his or her *specific* quality. But then Kierkegaard introduces a nice opposition between two modes of perfection of love: perfection of the object of love, and perfection of love itself. And Kierkegaard claims that pagan love is love for the perfect object: you are imperfect and you love another since he or she is more perfect – perfect beauty, perfect wisdom. But he claims that, as such, this type of love is imperfect because it is contingent, because it hinges on contingent particular qualities of the object. The only perfect love is love for an imperfect object, for *any* object. And then the paradox, of course, is that the one great equalizer, the one real universal, is death. So in order to truly love your neigh-

bour you must forget all his qualities, all that makes him a specific human being, which means that you must treat him as if he is already dead. And my thesis is that this is something which comes very close to intolerance towards the Other, because basically what Kierkegaard is saying is that you should forget the particular idiosyncrasy of the Other's enjoyment. You must abstract it; you must love the Other as reduced to the empty universality of death. What death stands for here is the erasure of enjoyment, of the substance of enjoyment. It's just the abstract Other.

Incidentally, I think that in this connection Kierkegaard was right in characterizing Don Juan as a Christian seducer. Don Juan seduced all of them. It didn't matter whether they were old, young, beautiful, ugly and so on. It was the abstract Other that he pursued. In other words, he loved a dead woman; it didn't matter which one. And I think that this is actually the truth of contemporary multiculturalist tolerance: we experience as violent 'intolerance' every proximity of the Other's enjoyment. Tolerance means: leave me alone, I don't want to be disturbed too much by you.

Is this attempt to abstract the Other – to impose death simultaneously an attempt to conceal a deeper horror of the Other?

Let me tell you a strange thing which happened to me recently in Los Angeles. I was listening with some friends to a woman singing a blues song on the television and I said that, judging from the voice, she would seem to be Black African American, although her name is very European. And I was immediately ferociously attacked for being politically incorrect. They claimed that it is incorrect to identify people by natural characteristics, that this is reductive and so on. I asked them whether I'm allowed to identify people in any way, and they replied, no. So what we have is a total prohibition of any particular kind of identification, which means precisely that you must read the Other as an abstraction, as if they were already dead. This is the truth of their position.

So again, I like this quick jump from Kierkegaard to California because here you can see how what Kierkegaard describes as a kind of theological madness is something that is fully operative in today's political correctness and its logic of tolerance, which is against tolerance for the Other and which means mortification of the Other; the Other who shouldn't disturb you. And I think that the horror of harassment accompanying this mortification is part of a general movement today which in primitive psychoanalytic terms could be called a movement towards a logic of pathological narcissism, where again you have this central concern with how to avoid being disturbed, how to retain the proper distance from the Other.

Presumably the attempt to isolate oneself from the Other, in a total sense, is also self defeating and creates its own pathologies?

One of the political problems today I would have said is that this logic of no harassment from the other contains catastrophic psychic consequences and is at the root of the experience of loss of reality; of derealization. I think that many phenomena can be read as desperate attempts to regain some sense of touch with the Real. For example, a phenomenon that is typical of today is the so-called cutter (especially in the United States). These are mostly (but not exclusively) younger women who have an incredible compulsion to cut themselves – usually with razors. For a long time psychologists assumed that this was a phenomenon of thwarted suicidal attempts: you want to kill yourself, but you are afraid to go all the way. But now it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not the case. Rather, cutting yourself functions as a kind of terribly distorted strategy of regaining contact with the Real. Again and again, if you read interviews with these unfortunate women, their point is: 'I feel unreal. I feel as if I don't exist. I feel as if I am in a purely virtual state. And when I cut myself, when I feel the warm flow of blood on my skin, I feel then that I am reconnected; that I am back in contact with reality.'

And here also I see, for example, the importance of a film like David Fincher's *Fight Club* – a favourite movie of mine in the last few years. The film is the story of a man who is totally alienated, an insomniac, losing contact with reality and then trying desperately to reconnect. First, through love-for-the-neighbour sympathy, he visits various support groups for people suffering from severe illnesses (basically a voyeuristic sadistic experience). Finally, he gets involved with a group of people who meet regularly at weekends and just beat each other. And the idea is that they do it in a loving friendly way as a healthy outlet, as a way of reconnecting with the Real. In terms of the criticism that it received, I think that it is indicative of the hegemony of this narcissistic ideology of false tolerance that the movie was mostly rejected for its alleged celebration of proto-fascist male bonding. And where it was endorsed, it was done so on the grounds of a critique of this attitude.

Few saw in the film something which I think we should have the courage to accept. That is, the emancipatory dimension of this self-beating, and that, in a way, we need to take a risk through this kind of violence. When we live in a virtual isolated space, every reconnection with the Real is, of course, something shattering; it is violent. This is why, today, cyberspace virtualization is necessarily supplemented by different forms of the 'return of the Real' – from politically 'regressive' activities like new racisms to body mutilations and so on – these two sets of phenomena are strictly correlative.

This recalls your earlier point about passing to the act as a defence against being overwhelmed by phantasmatic introspection – as a way of escaping the Real. Although here you seem to be suggesting that passing to the act can also be more ambiguous.

With *Eyes Wide Shut*, the sexual union is precisely a passing to the act in order to avoid the symbolic deadlock. One of the key insights of psychoanalysis is that you cannot simply oppose speech to acts – as in mere talk and authentic acts.

There are acts which are false acts, where you do something in order to avoid confronting some fantasmatic or symbolic entity. For example, you are hyperactive in order to avoid confrontation with some traumatic truth, which happens again at the end of *Eyes Wide Shut*. And I think that in this sense, when we speak about death drive, suicide bombings and so on, all these phenomena can be explained precisely by this opposition between *passage à l'acte* and an authentic act. *Passage à l'acte* is false in the sense that it is undertaken in order to avoid a symbolic deadlock. Instead of confronting the deadlock, you pass to the act. Suicide is an example of this false *passage à l'acte*. The symbolic deadlock becomes so unbearable that simply by killing yourself you resolve it.

On the other hand, we also have the act as an effective intervention, which is not this kind of escape. However, if we return to *Fight Club* I would emphasize that nonetheless the two dimensions – the violent *passage à l'acte* and the act proper – cannot always be clearly distinguished. Sometimes, when you are in a certain symbolical ideological deadlock, you have to explode in a violent *passage à l'acte* and then, a second time, this opens up to you a certain emancipatory perspective of passing to the act proper.

My argument is that this can be applied to certain ideological predicaments where there is a double-bind; where the system is giving you one type of message at the public level but simultaneously, at a deeper implicit level, an entirely different message. Let's again take today's discourse on tolerance. At one level this discourse preaches universal tolerance, but if you look closer there is a set of hidden conditions that reveals that you are tolerated only insofar as you are like everyone else – the discourse establishes what is to be tolerated. So, in reality, today's culture of tolerance subsists through a radical intolerance towards any true Otherness; any real threat to existing conventions.

I think that the only way an oppressed people or individual can react initially to such a situation is through some kind of irrational violent outburst which simply allows them to acquire a certain distance towards it. In this sense, I think

that we should return to the problematic of Franz Fanon – which is now rather neglected by most postmodern theorists – and the question of at what level some kind of violence is necessary. I am not thinking about legitimizing street gangs or violence against others. What we need more is a certain violence against ourselves. In order to break out of an ideological, double-bind predicament, you need a kind of violent outburst. It is something shattering. Even if it is not physical violence, it is extreme symbolic violence, and we have to accept it. At this level I think that in order to really change the existing society, this will not come about in the terms of this liberal tolerance. It will explode as a more shattering experience. And this is, I think, what is needed today: this awareness that true changes are painful.

And perhaps could we not also speak here of the violence of the political itself?

If, following Fanon, we define political violence not as opposed to work, but, precisely, as the ultimate political version of the ‘work of the negative’, of the Hegelian process of *Bildung*, of educational self-formation, then violence should primarily be conceived as self-violence, as a violent reformation of the very substance of subject’s being – therein resides the lesson of *Fight Club*.

In many of the smaller American cities with a large unemployed working-class population, something like ‘Fight Clubs’ is recently emerging: ‘toughman-fights’ in which only amateur men (and women also) engage in violent boxing matches, getting their faces bloody, testing their limits. The point is not to win (losers are often more popular than winners), but, rather, to persist, to continue standing on one’s feet, not to remain lying on the floor. Although these fights stand under the sign of ‘God bless America!’ and are perceived by (most of) the participants themselves as part of the ‘war on terror’, one should not dismiss them as a red-neck ‘proto-Fascist’ tendency: they are part of the potentially redemptive disciplinary drive.

Contemporary multiculturalism is allegedly based on some universal notion of respect for the Other, difference and so on. You insist, however, that ultimately there is something fake about this discourse. Can you expand on this?

One of the best examples of the falsity of today's multiculturalist tolerance is McDonald's. Recently in India there was a wide, almost popular, movement which mobilized against the food preparation of the McDonald's Corporation. McDonald's was importing French fries from Europe where they were first prepared using fat that came from beef. So this raised the whole religious problem of sacred cows and so on. McDonald's recognized the complaint and promised that it would no longer use fat from beef.

Now some of my multiculturalist friends hailed this as some kind of political victory along the lines of increased tolerance, taking into account cultural differences, respect for Otherness and so on. But I have problems with this. OK, it's a nice thing that this happened, of course, but first I think that it is definitely not a victory against globalization in favour of cultural autonomy. I think that globalization reproduces itself precisely by taking into account particular cultural identities. We have a totally wrong notion of globalization if we think that it means that everyone will just eat McDonald's or American fast food. No, globalization means precisely what we already have in our large cities: Chinese, Indian, Thai, Italian, whatever. So globalization already has a form of tried different national identities. That's my first point.

Second point: when I asked my friends who were defending this measure, saying isn't it nice that McDonald's has to respect local traditions, my question was, but wait a minute, what about a simple fact, which may sound horrible, that it is not true that cows are really sacred and that, to put it in very vulgar terms, this is simply a stupid religious belief? Then they ask me, but aren't you just imposing the Western objective notion of truth? Here problems begin for me. I am not fetishizing Western objectivity; all I am saying is that

we should not accept this kind of respect for the Other's ideological-religious fantasy as the ultimate horizon of ethics. The ultimate horizon of ethics is not to respect Other's illusions for two reasons at least. First, I think that there is something fake and patronizing about this kind of respect. The logic tends to be either: we will respect it formally in an empty non-substantive sense; or, as with children who have a certain idea, we say we know that this is nonsense but so as not to hurt them we will respect it. The point is that we are not taking it seriously. It is one thing to ask McDonald's to respect local customs, but quite another to engage with Indians against the economic model for which McDonald's stands. I simply cannot accept that these two levels are of equal value. I think that this level of respecting the Other's religious beliefs is relatively superficial. The fundamental problem is not with types of fat but with the economic model of globalization that is ruining national resources and destroying traditions of farming and self-management. If we want to fight corporations like McDonald's, the correct strategy of attack is not this one of respect for the Other's fantasies.

The second reason is that if we begin from the position of respect for the Other's passionate religious identification, we become embroiled in an ideological complex that obliges us not only to respect the sacredness of cows, but also far more unpleasant ideas and rituals: for example, the ritual of burning the wife after the husband has died, which is practised in parts of India. Now let's ask the same people who demand respect for beef-free products whether they also demand us to respect the burning of wives. They would, of course, say no. This is the lie of their position. We in the West – we Western liberals that is – already presume the authority of neutral judgement, but we do not accept the Other as such. We implicitly introduce a certain limit. We test the Other against our notions of human rights, dignity and equality of sexes and then, to put it in slightly cynical terms, we say we accept those of your customs which pass this test. We already filter the Other, and what passes the filter is allowed.

But what is allowed is this relatively insignificant superficial aspect which doesn't bother anyone. What we get at the end is a censored Other. The Other is allowed but only insofar as it passes our standards. So again this logic of respect for the Other cannot be the ultimate horizon of our ethical engagement.

The question of ethics in psychoanalysis is especially linked to the critique of moral law and its obscene superego dimension of enjoyment. In this respect a direct relationship is established between the seemingly repressive Kant and the licentious Marquis de Sade. How is this relationship understood?

It's not clear whether Lacan knew about Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, where they developed the idea of an intimate connection between Kantian ethics and the universe of the Marquis de Sade well before Lacan. But when Lacan develops his theories I don't think that Kant versus Sade is simply symbolic moral law versus the superego. It is not simply that Sade is the truth of Kant. I think it is a much more complex relationship.

Maybe the best way to grasp the connection between the two is first to focus on what is so radically new in Kantian ethics. That is to say, the ethics of the autonomy of the subject: the moral act has to be done just for the sake of it. What does this mean? As we all know, this means breaking radically with the ethics of supreme Good and of the Great Chain of Being. An ethical act is not organically built into the structure of the universe – rather, it signals a rupture, a break in the causal network or structure of the universe. Freedom is this break – something which begins out of itself.

So in this sense moral law cannot be deduced from any utilitarian consideration or natural propensities. From the standpoint of natural propensities, moral law is idiosyncratic – a caprice, something that cannot be grounded in logical foundations but, on the contrary, reveals a certain abyss. And precisely the same goes for the Marquis de Sade. For Sade the radical freedom to enjoy involves the same type of

absolute caprice. So although they are of course opposites – with Kant, it is fighting against one's natural propensity towards pleasure, just following the ethical norm, while for Sade, it is this absolute unconditional enjoyment – what they nonetheless share is the unconditional character of the act.

For Sade, the ultimate act of enjoyment is not that you simply fully live out or realize the propensities of your natural personality in a totally unconstrained way – indulging the appetites for power, sex, pleasure and so on. The idea is rather to enjoy absolutely; to follow your absolute caprice. So it's not simply a question of realizing the standard pleasures but of *breaking* with them; of challenging them on the basis of caprice as such. So what Kant and Sade both share is the aspect of rupture, of breaking out of any natural order.

Does this mean that Sade can be understood, perhaps even should be understood, as an ethical figure?

Lacan's idea is that, on the one hand, the excessive enjoyment in Sade functions as the obverse of the Kantian ethical revolution but, on the other, neither Kant nor Sade is within the domain of standard moral law and as such allows for new ethical openings. The very space for Sadean excessive enjoyment is opened precisely by Kantian radical autonomy. The ultimate caprice for enjoyment is achieved only insofar as it can acquire this Kantian status of autonomy.

In Sade you have basically two levels of pleasure. In a first move, Sade opposes theology-morality as a kind of oppressive force that prevents our true nature from expressing itself. Here, Sade seems to speak the language of nineteenth-century materialism – give way to your nature and so on. But this is not all. If this were to be all, then Sade would simply be a naive materialist who preaches the assertion of our true nature and that we find pleasure not only in love and good living but also in inflicting pain on Others. Sade is at his most radical, and reaches the level of Kant, when he becomes aware of how it is not only religion and morality that oppress our nature but that nature itself is also a kind of pre-

established limitation on our freedom; that our nature itself is something oppressive. This leads to Sade's idea of the absolute crime of breaking out of the natural order itself – which is exactly the Kantian ethical act.

In this sense, both Kant and Sade moved beyond this straightforward structure of morality and its obverse of the superego. What Kant and Sade represent are two extremes, two options, of how not to compromise, how not to give way to your desire. Sade cannot be reduced to the superego dimension precisely because the latter emerges when, on behalf of some good, you compromise your desire.

This presumably is why you would disagree with those perspectives that try to explain the holocausts of the modern world in terms of a Sadean logic?

I was always radically opposed to those readings that interpret the holocaust, and similar horrible things, as a realization of either the Kantian notion of radical evil and/or Sadean logics. I find this problematic. I don't think that there is any kind of continuity between Sade and the holocaust because the universe of Sade is the universe of radical autonomy: it is pure caprice with no positive moral norms. The basic problem with Sade is the ethical problem in the sense that there is an absolute injunction to assert your autonomy.

And this is absolutely not the case with Nazism. Nazism, on the contrary, is the ultimate perversion of the logic of supreme good. Nazism is not about the ultimate idiosyncratic assertion of autonomy. Nazism means that everything, even the worst crimes, should be undertaken for the good of the nation. The positing as a supreme good some entity, like the nation, is exactly the opposite of Sadean ethics. The logic of the holocaust is, rather, inscribed in the tension between law, moral law and its obscene underside superego.

More specifically, this also seems to be at the root of your critique of Hannah Arendt and her characterization of the holocaust in terms of a banality of evil. What is your objection to her characterization?

The positive result of Arendt's thesis of banality of evil is that it excludes the opposite: that is, the notion of the heroic or Byronic type of sublime evil. Nazis were not these kind of heroic picture-heroes of evil. It is not that the Nazi evil was something banal; it is that the executors of this evil were ordinary banal persons. Banality of evil doesn't mean that evil was just a banality. It means the people who performed these horrible acts were not, to put it this way, at the level of their act. They were simply ordinary. So an important consequence is that evil was in a way objectivized. You will not arrive at the dimension of Nazi evil by doing some sort of psychological analysis or looking for some kind of innate monster. It was anonymous objectivized evil. And that is the horror of it. That's the positive aspect of Arendt's thesis.

Where I find Arendt problematic is in her notion that this was pure bureaucratic evil: that individuals behaved as anonymous bureaucrats – caught in a machine, doing their duty and so on. The implied link between Kantian ethics of unconditional duty and the Nazi executors is totally false. Kantian duty does not mean that I will do it because it is an order; that I will follow orders whatever they are. This is not the sense of unconditional duty. The Kantian idea is rather that you are unconditionally *responsible* for what is your duty. The Kantian autonomous subject precisely *cannot* say that this is simply an order, that it is an injunction based on fear or that it is good for the nation. The Kantian position is that you are fully responsible.

But my main objection to Arendt concerns the tension between law and its obscene underbelly, which is inscribed into the very structure of Nazi evil. It isn't that people like Eichmann were simply functionaries carrying out their duty; they were functionaries in a perverse way. For example, when perverts play a sex game, their pleasure is enhanced by turning sex into some kind of almost bureaucratic ritual – planned in advance with its own codes and so on. The pleasure arises out of the tension between the purely performative instrumental activity and the secret obscene way in which it is enjoyed. I think that this is crucial to under-

standing the functioning of Nazi evil. The elaborate bureaucracies and rituals of power were all part of this obscene economy of enjoyment. The Nazis were in this sense playing bureaucratic roles in order to enhance their pleasure. Secretly, they knew that the rituals of duty were a pretence to disguise the enjoyment derived from doing something horrible – even the guilt feelings generated here served to enhance their pleasure. So it was a kind of perverted game.

And presumably this perverted game is not unique to Nazism, but is also something that you see being played out in contemporary ideologies?

What interests me at all levels of the social structure, and especially at the level of analysing ideologies and social normativity, is the functioning of what I usually refer to as the obscene supplement underbelly of the law. If we take any normative structure, then in order to sustain itself this structure has to rely on some unwritten rules that must remain unspoken; these rules always have an obscene dimension. My standard example is that of the military community where, at one level, you have a set of explicit rules (hierarchy, procedure, discipline, etc.), but in order for these explicit rules to function they need an obscene supplement: that is, all the obscene unwritten rules that sustain a military community – dirty sexist jokes, sadistic rituals, rites of passage and so on. Anyone who has served in the military knows how the whole military discipline is sustained ultimately by this obscene underbelly. And I think that it is crucial to focus on this relationship in analysing the functioning of ideology today.

This obscene dimension also seems to function in quite subtle ways in ideology. I'm thinking of the new forms of European racism and, in particular, the recent political events in France.

Alain Badiou, in his analysis of how le Pen made it into the second round in the French presidential elections of 2002, renders clear the true stakes of the widespread emotion of

'fear' and 'shame', panic even, that le Pen's first round success generated among many a democratic Leftist. The cause of panic was not le Pen's percentage as such, but the fact that he finished second among the candidates, in place of Jospin, the 'logical' candidate for this place. The panic was triggered by the fact that, in the democratic imaginary of the multi-party states in which the political field is bipolar, with the two big parties or blocks alternating in power, the second place symbolically signals the electability of a candidate: 'le Pen finished second' meant that he was considered electable, a viable candidate for power. This is what disturbed the silent pact of today's liberal democracies, which allows political freedom to everyone – on condition that a set of implicit rules clearly limits the scope of those who can effectively be elected.

So was what makes le Pen unfit to be elected simply the fact that he is heterogeneous to the liberal-democratic order, a foreign body in it? There is more to it: the misfortune (and role) of le Pen was to introduce certain topics (the foreign threat, the need to limit immigration, etc.) which were then silently taken over not only by the conservative parties, but even by the de facto politics of the 'socialist' governments. Today, the need to 'regulate' the status of immigrants, etc., is part of the mainstream consensus: as the story goes, le Pen did address and exploit real problems which bother people. The 'shame' apropos le Pen was thus the shame which is aroused when the hypocritical masks are torn down and we are too directly confronted with our true stance.

On the other hand, there are those, like Baudrillard and even Butler, who would claim that this type of explicit/obscene distinction is steadily disappearing in contemporary culture. How would you respond to this?

Especially interesting is this question as to whether in today's so-called post-ideological era we still have this logic of the obscene underbelly. Because the idea now is that perversions are public – you have internet exhibitionism, television pro-

grammes like *Big Brother*, confessionary talk shows and so on. What does this mean? Do we still have this logic? I think we do. I think that only the terms are shifting, but we still have this tension.

For example, if we take today's official logic of multiculturalist tolerance we can see how it, too, tends to be sustained by obscene forms of racist enjoyment. One dimension of obscenity which always shocks me is how, at the level of libidinal economy, there is a certain way in which people can preach tolerance and anti-racism but in such a way that they remain racist at a second degree. I even have personal experience of this. When people in Western countries professed to be shocked about Balkan ethnic cleansing, intolerance, violence and so on, it was clear that, as a rule, their very repudiation was formulated in such a way as actually to bring them a certain racist pleasure. Sometimes this even explodes openly. For example, when I, as a relatively tasteless person, make some joke or vulgar remark which is considered unacceptable, it is incredible how often those people who pretend to be ultra-tolerant and multiculturalist respond along the lines of 'maybe this goes in your primitive Balkan, but, sorry, here we are tolerant' Their very identification of me in this way engenders a specific obscene enjoyment.

I think that in our liberal multiculturalist societies this logic of obscene supplementary enjoyment is more crucial than ever. Rather than a simple social analysis of how it feeds into global capitalism, the critique of the liberal version of multiculturalism needs to focus on this inherent tension: that in order to function, multiculturalism involves a secret obscenity of its own. Along these lines, one should emphasize the ambiguous ('undecidable', to use the fashionable term) nature of contemporary feminism in the developed Western countries. The predominant form of American feminism (with its legalistic twist à la Catherine MacKinnon), for example, is ultimately a profoundly reactionary ideological movement. It is always ready to legitimize US army interventions into feminist concerns and does not shrink from making dismissive patronizing remarks about third

world populations from its hypocritical obsession with clitoridectomy to MacKinnon's racist remarks about how ethnic cleansing and rape is in the Serbian genes.

And in contrast, you would argue that with Kantian Sadean ethics it becomes possible to break free from this inherent tension between law and superego enjoyment?

Where we have a Lacanian reference to Kant with Sade, the usual idea is that Sade is the truth of Kant in the sense that Kant developed a pure ethic of duty and Sade renders visible the sadistic truth of it. So when you are thinking that you are doing your duty for the sake of duty, secretly we know you are doing it for some private perverse enjoyment. The disinterested point of the law is a fake, as there are private pathologies behind them. The proverbial example is that of the teacher who terrorizes his pupils out of a sense of duty, for their own good, but secretly he enjoys terrorizing pupils.

But I think that one cannot emphasize enough that when Lacan proposes the thesis of Kant with Sade it is not that the truth of Kant is a Sadist attitude. It is not that behind the apparent disinterested duty you should look for a secret pathological pleasure. It is the opposite. The argument is not that Kant was a secret Sadist but rather that in order to understand Sade's injunction to unconditionally enjoy you must conceive Sade as a Kantian. This is the fundamental insight of Lacan: that Sade was a Kantian. At its most radical, the only way to conceive the Sadean injunction to enjoy is to read it as a Kantian categorical imperative: that you follow it not out of any pathological considerations for your pleasures.

This domain of radical autonomy is precisely the domain outside the law/obscene superego couplet. The big opposition for Lacan and the ultimate ethical opposition is between this radical assertion of autonomy and the Kantian heteronomy; a heteronomy which means that ethics is grounded in some supreme good, and that the price you pay for it is the obscene superego dimension. For both Kant and

Sade the ultimate problem is that of human autonomy and freedom in the strict sense of, again, the ability to break the constraints of your nature. It is the assertion of pure subjectivity as the void which can cut the limitations, the constraints of your nature.

Despite this tradition, you maintain that today's (Western) societies are generally orientated towards utilitarian ethics. This form of ethics not only leads in a different direction from that of Kantian Sadean ethics but also possesses totalitarian propensities. Can you comment further on this?

The true opposite of both Sade and Kant is utilitarian ethics – the entire line from Bentham to Peter Singer – precisely because utilitarian ethics is the ethics of non-autonomy. The public position of utilitarian ethics is that each individual has the right or the natural propensity to follow his or her own pleasures. And this sounds nice: why shouldn't I have the right to maximize pleasures and not to be terrorized by some abstract moral injunction? But there is an underside to utilitarian ethics. The true wager of utilitarian ethics is that we are not autonomous: we try to maximize our pleasure, and this is a mechanism which determines our behaviour. And the one who knows this is in a position to control and manipulate our behaviour. So in utilitarian ethics there was always this totalitarian/social engineering aspect. The idea of the utilitarian subject was never simply a neutral cognitive stance. For Bentham, the central concern is with how a wise ruler should take into account what moves people in order to organize a society where people would be conditioned to act in such a way that their acts will bring as much good as possible not only to themselves but to society. The idea being that if I know what moves you, if I know the causes that determine how you will act, then I can manipulate you according to these causes; I can master you. So again, what we have is this radical opposition: utilitarianism as the ethics of non-autonomy versus autonomy.

Is there something of an irony here insofar as, on the surface, today's liberal culture appears to be constructed around the idea of individual autonomy and yet in reality the emphasis appears to be increasingly on the Other as being responsible for what happens to individuals?

One of the great *topoi* of the 'deconstructionist' critique of ideology is that the notion of the autonomous free and responsible subject is a legal fiction whose function is to construct an agent to whom the responsibility for socially unacceptable acts can be attributed, thus obfuscating the need for a closer analysis of concrete social circumstances which give rise to phenomena perceived as deplorable. When an unemployed African American who has suffered a series of humiliations and failures steals in order to feed his family, or explodes in uncontrollable violence, is it not cynical to evoke his responsibility as an autonomous moral agent? However, the old rule about ideology holds here also: the symmetrical inversion of an ideological proposition is no less ideological – are we not dealing today with the opposite tendency of putting the blame (and thus legal responsibility) on external agencies?

Recently, a man sued the fast-food burger giants in America because their food 'made him obese'. The underlying message of this complaint is clear: I am in it for nothing; it is not me; I am just a passive victim of circumstances; the responsibility is not mine – and since it is not me, there has to be another who is legally responsible for my misfortune. This is also what is wrong with the so-called False Memory Syndrome: the compulsive endeavour to ground present psychic troubles in some past real experience of sexual molestation. Again, the true stake of this operation is the subject's refusal to accept responsibility for his sexual investments: if the cause of my disorders is the traumatic experience of harassment, then my own fantasmatic investment in my sexual *imbroglio* is secondary and ultimately irrelevant.

The question here is: how far can we go along this path? Pretty far, according to recent news. Is it not significant that when the holocaust is mentioned in the media, the news, as a rule, concerns financial compensation, the amount the victims or their descendants should get from the legal successors of the perpetrators. And, since Jews are the wronged group par excellence, it is no wonder that other wronged groups are making similar claims — see the following American Press item from 17 August 2002: *'Rally for Slave Reparations'* Hundreds of blacks rallied in front of the Capitol on Saturday to demand slavery reparations, saying that compensation is long overdue for the ills of that institution. "It seems that America owes black people a lot for what we have endured", Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan told the crowd. "We cannot settle for some little jive token. We need millions of acres of land that black people can build. We're not begging white people, we are just demanding what is justly ours."

And would it not be quite logical to envision, along the same lines, the end of class struggle: after long and arduous negotiations, representatives of the working class and of the global capital should reach an agreement on how much the working class should get as compensation for the surplus-value appropriated by capitalists in the course of history. So, if there seems to be a price for everything, why should we not go to the very end and demand from God Himself a payment for botching up the job of creation and thus causing our misery? And what if, perhaps, He already paid this price by sacrificing his only son, Christ? This *reductio ad absurdum* also makes clear what is fundamentally wrong with this logic: it is not too radical, but not radical enough. The true task is not to get compensation from those responsible, but to deprive them of the position which makes them responsible. Instead of asking for compensation from God (or the ruling class, or .), one should ask the question: do we really need God?

And against utilitarian anti autonomy ethics, your argument is that psychoanalysis is on the side of Kantian-Sadean ethics?

Yes. Paradoxical as it may sound, psychoanalysis also opts for autonomy. The psychoanalytic name for this autonomy is death drive. Death drive is not something manipulated by circumstances. Death drive just is this non-functional thrust of our libido, or will, that cannot be explained in objective terms. It means that there is in human beings an aspect of behaviour that persists beyond any instrumental activity towards achieving certain goals (pleasure, reproduction, wealth, power). It's a kind of self-sabotaging drive. Against the usual inscription of psychoanalysis into the naturalistic determinist framework where the human being is controlled by unconscious desires, I think that paradoxically psychoanalysis is the strongest assertion of autonomy. Death drive is a name for autonomy.

Does the logic of autonomy allow for wider possibilities in respect of breaking with existing paradigms and historical order: the so called notion of event?

The dimension behind the notion of event is undoubtedly autonomy. It's interesting here to bring together three philosophers for whom the notion of event is central. The obvious reference is Alain Badiou and his idea of truth as an event that explodes the chain of being; it is irreducible to the order of being. But we should also consider Deleuze. In what I consider to be his best book, *The Logic of Sense*, we have an idea of the emergence of sense as an event. For Deleuze there is a substantial dark impenetrable being and then the surface of the pure fluidity, the becoming of the event of sense. And finally we shouldn't forget Heidegger, whose late thought tries to think of the so-called destinality of being as a pure event. Destiny is not grounded in some meta-entity which pulls the strings. It is, rather, a succession of the different ways that being is disclosed in specific historical constellations. These constellations are events in the sense that they are abyssal happenings; without a cause.

What I think these three philosophies have in common – although at totally different levels – is precisely this irre-

ducibility of the event to some positive order of being. With Heidegger, the point is that the event of the appropriation of being cannot be reduced to some ontic historicist order. For Heidegger, you cannot say that we moderns perceive the universe in a certain way – for example, as susceptible to technical manipulation – because of some positive social development: the development of productive forces, the advance of capitalism and so on. No, it's the other way round. The original dimension is that being is disclosed to us in terms of *Gestell*, which is usually translated as framing or enframing: that is to say, the disclosure of entities, of beings as objects of potential technological manipulation.

We have a similar point with Badiou, where the idea is that event is something that emerges out of nothing. You have in the positive reality of being what Badiou calls *site événementielle*, the potential site of the event, but the event is, as it were, an abyssal self-grounded autonomous act. You cannot derive event from or reduce it to some order of being.

Is there a certain paradox here in the sense that event represents both a break with history and at the same time requires historical conditions of possibility?

The paradox is that an event is a self-positing retroactive phenomenon. It is an act which, as it were, creates its own conditions of possibility. Badiou's example would be the French Revolution. You cannot explain the French Revolution simply from its social conditions. It was an autonomous act which allows us to read conditions as revolutionary conditions. You cannot objectivize history in this sense. Deleuze develops this argument in relation to neo-realism, but I think that an even better example would be *film noir*. Of course you can point to the circumstances which gave birth to *film noir* in Hollywood – the shattering experience of World War II, the crisis of patriarchy or whatever – but the idea is that you cannot explain it out of this. There is a kind of original act of creation; a certain universe of meaning emerges, as it were, out of nowhere.

Now my problem with this logic of event is that I am more and more convinced that it is too idealistic. In contrast, what the Lacanian notion of drive tries to account for – and this I think is maybe the ultimate materialist problem – is, to put it very simply, how an event can emerge from the order of being. How does being explode into event? Although he would reject this insinuation, I think that on this question even Badiou remains stuck in some kind of Kantian opposition between being, which is simply a deposited order of being, and the magical moment of the event of truth. The materialist problem is rather how to think the unity of being and event. That is to say, how does the order of being have to be structured so that something like event is possible? This is something that, in different ways, Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar and myself are currently working on. My particular focus is on the notion of drive and what Lacan refers to as *la doublure*, the redoubling, twist or curvature in the order of being which opens up the space for event.

Let's take the disintegration of socialism a decade or so ago. There are two main interpretations. On the one hand, there is the view that this was an event (although Badiou would deny that it was an authentic event) in the sense that something emerged out of nothing – nobody expected it. On the other, there is the view that retroactively we can see all the signs pointing towards it. I think that both interpretations are wrong. It is incorrect to claim that one can simply derive the collapse from the existing circumstances: economic deadlock, crisis of the Soviet Union, the inability to catch up with the digital revolution and so on. This is not enough to explain it. But I also think that one should not just opt directly for this notion of event as if there is simply another order; a different ontological dimension.

I think that the way to look at this is in terms of the crucial Hegelian notion of positing the presuppositions: the dialectical reversal where something emerges and then retroactively co-opts or treats its own presuppositions as posited by itself. This is how, already, Marx conceives the shift from money to capital. Initially, money is simply an agency that

mediates between commodities – it is not yet capital. The moment of capital arrives when it is able to treat its own material presuppositions – the working force, material resources and so on – as simply moments in the functioning of its own closed circulation.

And does this Hegelian reversal, of positing presuppositions, constitute something like a universal problematic?

I would even say that this reversal is inscribed into the very structure of life; a kind of living ethic. In biology, for example, you have people like Francisco Varela, Humberto Maturana, Lynn Margolis and others who are developing autopoietic theory and are addressing fundamental questions about cell life.

If you take the elementary organism, a living cell, the problem is not simply how does the cell adapt to its environment; the problem is, rather, that in order to have a cell you must have something like a membrane – a limit or frontier – that can establish a basic inside and outside that is necessary for any living organism. So the problem is, how does this limit emerge? And what Varela, and others, show in a convincing way is that you have to have this circular Hegelian self-reflexive structure. Life occurs in terms of what the theory of autopoietic systems refers to as emerging property. Something emerges which then retroactively causes its own causes. You don't have simply cause and effect. You have a cause that somehow retroactively posits, causes, its own presuppositions. You have to have this fundamental circuit. This for me is the central problematic. When we speak about a cause retroactively causing or positing its own presuppositions, we are speaking about a certain elliptic self-enclosure. And this is precisely the elementary structure of the Freudian drive.

Conversation 5

Miracles Do Happen: Globalization(s) and Politics

GLYN DALY *Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, an abiding concern of yours has been to disrupt the Western gaze and to break the spell of its fascination with the myth of Eastern Europe as a preternatural Other. Is this part of a deliberate strategy based on the Lacanian traversing of the fantasy?*

ŽIŽEK Up to a point, yes, although what interested me was this kind of mutual fascination: this is the structure of fantasy. For Lacan, the ultimate fantasmatic object is not so much what you see, but gaze itself. What fascinated the West was not the eruption of authentic democracy, but the Eastern gaze on the West. The idea is that although we know our democracy is corrupted and we no longer have democratic enthusiasm, out there are still people who look towards us, who admire us and would like to become like us; although we do not believe in ourselves, there are people out there who still believe in us. What ultimately fascinated the political classes, and even the wider public, in the West was the fascinated gaze of the East towards the West. This is the structure of fantasy: the gaze itself.

And it wasn't only the West that was fascinated with the East; it was the East that was fascinated with the West. So we have a double implication. The Bosnian-Serb movie director, Kusturica, is an interesting figure in this respect. He is a perfect example of how this fascination with some allegedly authentic not-yet-aseptic order is a fascination with some-

thing that is already staged for the Western gaze. My thesis is that Kusturica's representation of some kind of original pre-modern natural state Balkan epic is a fake. I reproach Kusturica not because he plays a primitive, or because he is too Balkanesque, but rather because of the extent to which he is caught up in the Western gaze as the very perspective for his Balkan epic.

The ultimate object of fantasy is the gaze itself. And I think that this goes not only for politics but also for sex. Here one should always ask the basic question as to how pornography is possible. The controversial answer of psychoanalysis is that it is possible because sex as sex is always already pornographic. It is pornographic in the sense that even when I am with my lover or lovers – let me stress the plural so as not to be accused of a binary logic – I always imagine a third gaze; that I am doing it for someone. One might say that there exists a fundamental structure of shame. When you are engaged in sexual activity there is always a fascination/horror as to how this would look in the Other's eyes. Even with our most intimate acts, we always act for a potential virtual gaze. So this structure surrounding the idea that somebody is observing me is already inscribed into sexuality as such. Fantasy concerns not so much the idea of observing Others having sex but, rather, the opposite. The most elementary structure of fantasy is that when I have sex I fantasize that somebody is observing me.

On this question of the gaze you also draw attention to the way in which contemporary culture itself is projected through a certain paradigm of perceived victimization; a kind of victimology. What do you mean by this?

With all due respect towards suffering and the extent to which victimization is a serious problem, I maintain that this is not a neutral fact. The ideology of victimization penetrates intellectual and political life even to the extent that in order for your work to have any ethical authority you must be able to present and legitimize yourself as in some sense

victimized. The consequent philosopher here is Richard Rorty, who gives the definition of a human being as someone who can suffer pain and, since we are symbolic animals, as someone who can narrate this pain. So, in a sense, from Rorty we get the fundamental coordinates of our postmodern predicament: we are potential victims and the fundamental right becomes the right, as Homi Bhaba puts it, to narrate; the right to tell your story; to formulate the specific narrative of your suffering. This is the most authentic gesture you can make.

But at the same time hasn't this type of narrative pluralization also contributed to a widening culture of social rights?

The problem here is that the starting point for narrative pluralization is not the right to truth (as I would have put it in more Leninist terms) but the right to narrative. The ultimate ethical dimension is to construct a space in which each group/individual would have the right to narrate their fiction, their version of events. So the dimension of truth is suspended here.

Again, the whole idea is to propose some network of tolerance. For example, we have the ultra-utilitarian, Peter Singer, who takes the next step and claims that if you look into the eye of an ape then you can see that it also suffers. His similar conclusion is that what qualifies us as ethical subjects is not human reason, dignity or whatever, but the capacity to suffer, and so, if we are consistent, why should humans have any precedence over animals? The truth of Singer's position (and this was given to me in a conversation with Alain Badiou) is that the secret model of human rights today – the liberal tolerant version where each of us has the space to formulate his or her fantasy – is that of animal rights. Isn't the hidden logic of the struggle for gay rights, ethnic rights, marginal communities and so on that we treat them as endangered species?

Now, of course, you can say, what's wrong with that? I think that what is fundamentally wrong with it is that ulti-

mate authenticity is based on the idea that only the person who is immediately affected by circumstances can tell the true story about his or her suffering – let's say only a gay black woman can really know and say what it means to be a gay black woman, and so on. But, as Deleuze puts it somewhere, the reference to your unique experience as the basis of ethical argument always ends up in a reactionary position. For example, the main excuse of many Nazis after the Second World War was always along the lines of: yes, you can condemn us in general terms, but can you imagine what it meant to be a German in the 1930s?

So against this ideology I think that the first gesture is to defend the notion of truth: universal truth – not of course in the sense of some abstract universality or eternal metaphysical truth, but simply the truth of a certain situation. When we are within a certain specific constellation, then it is important to bear in mind that the various positions are not all the same or of an equal standing. Here of course I follow the political philosophy of authors like Badiou and Rancière, who try to reassert the notion of truth as precisely linked to a certain excluded abject position.

Is there not a certain tension here (a danger even) with the idea of a particular group embodying universal truth?

This is where politicization proper enters. We are not talking about some metaphysical truth, but the universal truth of a situation. Where the logic of excluding a particular group is shown to be part of a wider problem, then you get a kind of distilled version of what is wrong with society as such. I think that we should maintain this universal dimension. And this is part of the Marxist/Leninist legacy to which I speak.

It's not that we have particular and partial experiences and then we arrive at truth when we cancel particular distortions and acquire some neutral perspective. For me, universal truth and taking sides with a partial position not only are not mutually exclusive but condition each other. When you are engaged within a specific society, the only way to formulate

the truth of that society is from a certain extreme partial position. For example, Jews were definitely a minority in Germany in the late 1930s – their position was partial. But you cannot say that Nazis were telling one story and Jews were simply telling another. You cannot say that the only sin of the Nazis was that they repressed the other story; it's not strong enough. The point is that the Jews were in a position to articulate the truth of the entire situation. In order to know what Nazi Germany was at its most essential, you shouldn't balance all discourses; you should identify with the excluded object.

And in contemporary (Western) societies your argument would be that the discourse of victimology attempts to conceal the very structure of victimization?

Universal victimization is not simply universal in the sense of a generalized logic of victimization. I think it's absolutely crucial to distinguish two levels. On the one hand we have the upper-middle-class discourse of victimization in our own societies. This is the narcissistic logic of whatever the Other does to you is potentially a threat. This is the logic of harassment: we are all the time potentially victims of verbal harassment, sexual harassment, violence, smoking, obesity – an eternal threat. This is part of our experience.

Then we have the third world catastrophes – or even with us the homeless and the excluded. But there is an invisible distance here. They are also victims, but the way they are constructed as victims always has the additional dimension which is designed to prevent them turning into active agents – the idea then is that we should be engaged in humanitarian exercises. The basic representation of third world catastrophes, for example, is typically in terms of maintaining a distance towards them: these things do not happen 'here' or to 'us' So the truth of victimology is this split. I simply find it humiliating to claim that this upper-middle-class victimology of sexual harassment, passing racist remarks and so on, can be put at the same level as the horrifying suffering

of third world victims. And by maintaining this distance, the predominant discourse of victimology functions precisely to prevent any true solidarity with third world victims.

This is also where I see a problem with the agenda of cultural studies. To be slightly cynical, if you read cultural studies texts you would think that sexual harassment, homophobic remarks and so on are the big problems of today. But in reality these are the problems of the American upper-middle classes. So I think we should take a risk and break with what is a contemporary taboo and state clearly that none of these struggles – against harassment, for multiculturalism, gay liberation, cultural tolerance and so on – is our problem. We shouldn't get blackmailed into accepting these struggles of upper-middle-class victimization as the horizon of our political engagement. One should simply take this risk and break the taboo – even if one gets criticized for being racist, chauvinist or whatever.

This argument puts you at odds with those authors and activists who are arguing for a reconstruction of the left in terms of a widening set of alliances with disaffected groups. And this in itself is perhaps symptomatic of a widespread crisis of political identity for the left. What is your assessment of the main perspectives on reconstructing the left?

First, I don't accept as the level of a modern left the so-called identitarian struggles of postmodern multiculturalism: gay rights, ethnic minority demands, tolerance politics, anti-patriarchal movements and so on. I am more and more convinced that these are upper-middle-class phenomena which shouldn't be accepted as the horizon of struggle for the left. To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not opposed to multiculturalism as such; what I am opposed to is the idea that it constitutes the fundamental struggle of today.

The second form of leftist politics – which I also reject – could be characterized as a kind of pure politics which is associated mainly with Badiou and at least a certain version of Laclau and Mouffe. What Badiou formulates (and Balibar

could also be included here) is a kind of a pure emancipatory politics, and although he would insist that he belongs to a Marxist lineage, it is basically clear that there is no need for a Marxist critique of political economy in his work. I think that Badiou is really a Jacobin; the last surviving Jacobin in the French tradition. He focuses on a pure egalitarian democratic logic, and although of course he is anti-capitalist, there are no specific political demands regarding the economy. Rather, what we have is an unconditional demand for more equality or, as he puts it, *égaliberté* – combining the notions of equality and liberty which exploded with the French Revolution. I would say that Laclau and Mouffe, with their project of radical democracy and an insistence on anti-neo-liberal hegemony, also fall into this French Jacobinism. And although the French Jacobin orientation of pure radical politics and the more Anglo-Saxon orientation of multiculturalist struggle are opposed to each other, they nonetheless share something: the disappearance of economy as the fundamental site of the struggle.

Apart from these two main orientations, we also, of course, have a classical Trotskyism which I think represents something of a tragic position because it is always addressed to the fetish of the working class as a revolutionary party. When I speak with some of my orthodox Marxist friends, it is typical how, with their vision of all the upheavals from Solidarity in Poland to the disintegration of communism and, more recently, the fall of Milošević, they are always telling the same story: that those who truly brought down these corrupt degenerate communist regimes were workers' strikes, workers' movements and so on. So the story goes that there was always a chance of an authentic workers' revolution, but since there wasn't a proper political party there, the workers' movement was co-opted either by nationalists, neo-capitalists, CIA agents or whatever. Sometimes there is an element of truth in this. With the early mobilizations of Solidarity, for example, the original demands were for greater socialism and not private property. But nonetheless, I think that the standard idea that in all these

cases we had a missed opportunity for socialist revolution is a deep delusion. It doesn't function in this way.

And then, of course, there is the 'official' discourse of the contemporary left which is Third Way politics. How do you view the development of this discourse?

Of course I am radically opposed to Third Way politics, but I'm tempted to perceive it as the most honest of these four positions, because at least Third Way ideologues played the game honestly. They openly say that capitalism is the only game in town and the whole idea is how to engage with global capitalism while maintaining a certain level of equality, social rights and so on. I doubt that even the Third Way will deliver on its own promises, but I think that what is now emerging, with figures like Berlusconi in Italy and Haider in Austria, is that you get the same politics as Third Way, but combined with not necessarily neo-fascism, but more organic nationalist notions. So what we have is a situation where global liberal capitalism can be supplemented, on the one hand, by slightly more welfare-orientated multiculturalist politics and, on the other, by new kinds of moral majority and ethnic closure. Both can coexist with global capitalism. And this is, I think, how both the right and left are restructured today.

But again, what I find honest about the Third Wayists is that at least they openly show their cards. They don't bluff in the sense of relying on some fetishist notion of the left, nor do they rely, as some multiculturalists do, on some empty anti-capitalist rhetoric which amounts to nothing. What all these four positions have in common is that either they endorse capitalism or they ignore it as a central problem.

You have argued for a leftist politics that returns to the dimension of the economy, but what exactly do you mean by the economy?

I don't mean economy in the vulgar sense of, yes we must do something for workers' lot. I am aiming here at something

more radical. I think that there is a central idea developed by Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School which, in spite of all my criticism of the Western Marxist tradition, is today more actual than ever. The idea is that the economy is not simply one among the social spheres. The basic insight of the Marxist critique of political economy of commodity fetishism and so on – is that the economy has a certain proto-transcendental social status. Economy provides a generative matrix for phenomena which in the first approach has nothing to do with economy as such. For example, we can speak about reification, the commodification of culture and of politics and so on. At the level of form, the capitalist economy has a universal scope. So what interests me is the global structuring dimension of what goes on at the level of capitalist economy. It is not just one domain among the others. Here again I disagree with the postmodern mantra: gender, ethnic struggle, gender, whatever, and then class. Class is not one in the series. For class, we read, of course, anti-capitalist economic struggle.

You insist upon the importance of class and yet the idea of class as a unified agency has been heavily critiqued from a variety of perspectives. Do you still consider the working class to be a revolutionary agency in the Marxist sense?

Well, yes and no. The problem for me is, what is working class today? I think that we should certainly abandon any fetish about the centrality of the working class. But at the same time we should abandon the opposite (postmodern) fetish: that the working class is disappearing; that it is meaningless to speak about the working class. Both are wrong.

There are a couple of trends today. One trend is the growing structural role of unemployed people. It is clear that with this new logic of contemporary capitalism, the tendency is more and more for you not to have a lifelong permanent job, but to change jobs every two or three years. Some post-modern ideologists celebrate this as a new liberation in the

sense that you don't have a fixed identity: to use the fashionable term, you have 'portfolio subjectivity' This is a typical postmodern ideological operation, where the horror of never being certain whether you have a job or not is sold as the new freedom. You are not fixed to one identity; you have to reinvent yourself every two or three years.

So this stratum of unemployed is no longer simply an excess but is something that is structurally inscribed. The working class is split into those who have jobs and those who don't have jobs. The second split which renders problematic the traditional notion of the working class is the split between intellectual and manual labour. There are two positions here. One is simply to say, yes, manual labour is disappearing from sight, but it's still present in terms of the millions who work in service economies, the immigrant workers doing the dirty jobs here, the global sweat factories in Indonesia and so on. So our societies have to rely upon the manual labour of the working class proper.

On the opposite side we have this quick sleight of hand claiming that intellectual labour is also part of the proletariat today, that all these computer programmers are also exploited and so on. Somehow I think that both positions are false and we should simply accept this split as definitive.

The third opposition, which we have already touched on, is the relationship between the first and the third world. According to traditional Marxism, true capital should be first world capital. Of course, in contrast to that we have the Maoist position, according to which class struggle is today turning into the struggle of whole countries, in the sense that there are countries, for example the United States and the United Kingdom, which are already in themselves bourgeois nations. And there are nations which, as nations, stand for proletarian nations. I oppose this, but I see in it the signal of a problem.

So to be clear, although you would reject the fetish of class, you would nonetheless ascribe a certain political priority to class struggle, at least in terms of its anti capitalism?

My position is almost classical Marxist in the sense that I would insist that anti-capitalist struggle is not simply one among other political struggles for greater equality, cultural recognition, anti-sexism and so on. I believe in the central structuring role of the anti-capitalist struggle. And I don't think that my position is as crazy or idiosyncratic as it appeared maybe a couple of years ago. It is not only the so-called Seattle Movement; there are many other signals that demonstrate that – how shall I put it? – capitalism is becoming a problem again; that the honeymoon of globalization, which lasted through the 1990s, is coming to an end. It's in this context that we can also understand the incredible success of Negri and Hardt's *Empire*, which points out that people are again perceiving capitalism as a problem. It is no longer the old story that the ideological battles are over and that capitalism has won. Capitalism is once more a problem. This would be my starting point.

And I am not thinking of anti-capitalist struggle just in terms of consumerist movements. This is not enough. We need to do more than simply organize a multitude of sites of resistance against capitalism. There is a basic necessity to translate this resistance into a more global project – otherwise we will merely be creating regulatory instances that control only the worst excesses of capitalism.

This also appears to be at the base of your dispute with Ernesto Laclau in J. Butler (et al.), Contingency, Hegemony and Universality where you seem to be arguing that the existing political struggles are already caught up in a certain liberal capitalist ethos and that the contemporary logics of hegemony are already hegemonized; already configured within the capital processes themselves

Yes, I agree with your formulation that hegemony itself is hegemonized. In what sense? I think that the idea that today we no longer have a central struggle but a multitude of struggles is a fake one, because we shouldn't forget that the ground for this multitude of struggles was created by modern

global capitalism. This doesn't devalue these struggles: I am not saying they are not real struggles. I am saying that the passage from old-fashioned class struggle to all these postmodern struggles of ecological, cultural, sexual etc. struggles is one that is opened up by global capitalism. The ground of these struggles is capitalist globalization.

In certain texts (e.g. The Ticklish Subject) you refer to capital as the Real of our age. However, if capital is the Real (where nothing is lacking), then would this not mean that there is simply no possibility of a political challenge to the power structures of capitalism?

The first point I would make is that for Lacan the Real is not what is forever there, absolutely immutable and so on. Contrary to what some people think, the Lacanian notion that the Real is impossible doesn't mean simply that you cannot do anything about the Real. The fundamental wager, or hope, of psychoanalysis is that with the symbolic you can intervene in the Real. What Lacan calls *sinthome* (his version of symptom) is Real; a symbolic Real in the sense that it structures your enjoyment. And the point is that through symbolic intervention these structures can be transformed. The Real is not some kind of untouchable central point about which you can do nothing except symbolize it in different terms. No. Lacan's point is that you *can* intervene in the Real. The fundamental dimension of psychoanalysis for Lacan, at least for the late Lacan, is no longer simply resymbolization but that something really happens. A true change occurs in psychoanalysis when your fundamental mode of *jouissance*, which is precisely the Real dimension of you as a subject, is changed. So the basic wager of psychoanalysis is that you can do things with words; real things that enable you to change modes of enjoyment and so on.

Along the same lines, when I say that capital is the Real, I mean simply that it's that which remains the same in all possible symbolization. What do I mean by this? We have a flourishing multitude of cultures, of struggles and so on, and

capital is simply the Real as that neutral meaningless underlying structure. To put it in terms of the distinctions I make between the real Real, the symbolic Real and the imaginary Real, I would say that capital is the symbolic Real; this basic neutral structure which persists.

This of course brings us to the thorny question of the nature of capitalism itself and the continuing possibilities for its development. How do you view these possibilities?

I think that many people today who oppose capitalist globalization, even those who are part of the Seattle movement, continue to count on some external limit to capital, the idea being that capitalist expansion cannot be all-encompassing and that we will encounter a certain external limit. For example, environmentalists tend to argue that at a certain point there will be an ecological limit to development and that this will force us to abandon or at least seriously restructure (to use a business term) capitalism. Others claim that there is a certain ethico-political limit. This would be, up to a point, the Habermasian-normative position where, simply put, certain ethical norms – equality, freedom, dignity, etc. – become part of our human identity and that these serve as a limit to capitalist economic development. Some social psychologists even think that there is a psychic limit, in the sense that capitalism today – and this is not such a ridiculous position as it may seem – is literally driving us crazy even in a clinical sense.

Would this be a kind of twisted version of Deleuze and Guattari?

It's virtually the opposite of Deleuze and Guattari, because they have this idea of capitalist schizophrenia, the bad paranoia, which then explodes into a good revolutionary schizophrenia. But I think that Deleuze and Guattari are dangerously close to some kind of pseudo anti-psychiatry celebration of madness. I think that madness is something

horrible – people suffer – and I've always found it false to try and identify some liberating dimension in madness. In any case, the limit that the social psychologists are referring to is of a far more straightforward kind. For example, according to some American estimates at least 70 per cent of today's academics and professors are on either Prozac or some other form of psychotropic drug. It is no longer the exception. It is literally that in order to function we already need psychopharmacy. So that is the limit: we will simply start getting crazy.

But I don't buy this notion of an external limit. I think that capitalism has this incredible capacity of turning catastrophe into a new form of access. Capitalism can turn every external limit to its development into a challenge for new capitalist investment. For example, let us assume that there will be some big ecological catastrophe. I think that capitalism can simply turn ecology itself into a new field of market competition, like, you know, who will produce the better product, which will be ecologically better.

As we already see with periodic crises, like mad cow disease and the foot and mouth virus, there is now a far more concerted drive for organic food.

Yes, and it is clear how so-called organic food, although it likes to paint itself as a kind of oriental wisdom with an anti-Western capitalist flavour, is simply turning more and more into one of the central components of agricultural marketing and production. So I think that we must stick to the Marxist insight that the only thing which can destroy capitalism is capital itself. It must explode from within.

Do you see any current signs that this kind of implosion is taking (or will take) place?

I do. And even conservative economists are becoming aware of this implosive process. For example, it is increasingly clear that these new developments in biogenetics, in digital

economies and so on are not rendering the notion of private property obsolete, but are depriving private property of its central role in the sense that it can no longer function as the axiomatic regulator of social authority. Let's take some superficial observations. If you look at the recent extreme oscillations on the stock exchange, then it is clear that the system is becoming so virtualized that what determines stock value is not only expectations but already expectations about expectations. So we are tending to get oscillations which are simply too irrational for the system to sustain them. Moreover, today's social authority – and this argument has been developed by many people, including J. Rifkin in his *Age of Access*, is increasingly linked with having access to information and this in turn is no longer regulated mainly through private property. In fact, the structure of ownership is very complex today. If you take a typical capitalist today, he or she is usually a manager in a company that is taken over by a second, which is controlled by a third, which in turn is answerable to a bank. So authority is no longer simply a question of who is at the end of this chain.

If we take digitalization or biogenetics, then the problem of so-called intellectual property becomes even more irrational. As you know, some biogenetics companies are already patenting certain human genes. What does this mean? That these companies will own us? Obviously at some point it doesn't work. If we look at multinationals, then we can also see that a typical practice is for corporations to take over smaller successful companies for the explicit purpose of prohibiting further research and technological advances. The point is that with intellectual property we are confronted with a paradoxical situation where, if the results are too strong, then we end up either giving it away free (as with internet technology) or we have a crazy situation where corporations try to control the very way we think.

To clarify: your argument is that the contemporary functioning of intellectual property is leading to certain kinds of 'excess' that open up more radical possibilities?

The paradigmatic example here is probably Microsoft. Microsoft Word has more or less established itself as the predominant computer language, but this has nothing to do with normal market logic. Why do the vast majority of people use Microsoft? Not because it's the best. Almost every hacker will tell you that other languages are better. The answer is simply one of communication. We use Microsoft because we know that this is the only way we can communicate with everybody else. Otherwise, sending files and so on becomes a nightmare. The obvious solution for me would not be to engage in the anti-monopolistic games of splitting Microsoft into smaller units, but simply to acknowledge the meaninglessness of private property. Why should a private person own the computer language that we all use? Wouldn't the obvious solution be to socialize its use?

These types of intellectual property problem signal an uncanny development. As private property becomes less able to guarantee or regulate the distribution of social power, we are thrown more and more into a critical and dangerous state. On the one hand developments in the widening of intellectual property do open up emancipatory possibilities. But, on the other hand, since social power can no longer be regulated through private property, there is a rising demand for new and more immediate forms of social domination: new racism, expert rule, etc. So an opposing tendency would be towards more immediate and anti-democratic forms of social hierarchy.

My modest prediction here is that the basic struggle will not so much be in the old Marxist terms of for or against private property – the latter will become more and more meaningless. The problem will be what comes after. Contemporary struggle will revolve increasingly around these new emancipatory potentials and new forms of direct social domination.

A central struggle taking place today concerns globalization, or, perhaps more accurately, different versions of globalization. How do you view globalization and what should the left's response be?

I think that the way to react to globalization is to endorse it and demand even more radical globalization. For me, the problem of the present form of globalization is that it involves too much exclusion. It is false not because all particular differences are erased, but precisely because it involves radical exclusions. And I think that often those people, even those on the left, who resist globalization, resist it from ultimately reactionary positions. I am even tempted to say that for many leftwingers the resistance to globalization allows them to reassert an old-fashioned patriotism and nationalism.

The main losers in the globalizing process are not the small nations, like my Slovenia, but the mid-level world powers like the UK, France and Germany. They are losing their identity and are the most threatened. This is one of the positive results of globalization. If anything, the prospect is not that the small nations like Slovenia will disappear, but, on the contrary, that ultimately these mid-level powers will be reduced to the level of nations like Slovenia within what Negri and Hardt call the new global empire. And you cannot simply say that empire, the global order, is a kind of mega-national order. It is not. I think that in global capitalism, multiculturalism is genuine. I don't think we can pretend that capitalism is a cover-up for a certain cultural domination; i.e. that capitalism really means a predominance of European, or American, culture. No, modern capitalism is truly multinational and multiculturalist, in the sense that it has no ultimate socio-cultural reference. The true horror of capitalism is that it is literally without roots. And in this sense it is Real; it is a rootless abstract symbolic machine.

And against this abstract machine, you are arguing that assertions of cultural autonomy are at best ineffectual?

I think that we should resist the temptation to endorse a false kind of anti-globalization which is effectively just the culturalist rhetoric and resistance of an old-fashioned European patriotism. This problem is especially clear in the case of France. The French are much worse than either the Germans or the British. One of the positive aspects of Britain

is that because of its type of colonization there was at least a certain multiculturalist tolerance that developed. In Germany, because of this horrible experience of Nazism, they have a kind of primordial fear of nationalism – even now it is a little bit suspect to assert German patriotism too openly. But I think in France it is a very dangerous and sad phenomenon that, in the guise of a struggle against capitalist globalization, revived forms of French patriotism and nationalism survive.

Or let's take the Yugoslavian context. I am often accused in a very strange way – which I really cannot understand – of being a Slovene anti-Serb nationalist. When I converse with members of the so-called Serb democratic opposition, they say they are in favour of a cosmopolitan democratic Serbia whose defining quality is citizenship and not national belonging. OK, I accept this. But this is where the problems begin, because if you speak with them a little bit longer, you discover a certain political vision that tries to disguise cultural particularity as democratic universalism. For example, if you ask them about Slovene autonomy, they will argue that Slovenia is a small self-enclosed nation and that they, by contrast, are in favour of an anti-nationalist democratic society which is not self-enclosed. But in reality what they are practising is a kind of two-level nationalism in which they go on to affirm that the Serbs are the *only* nation in Yugoslavia that is so structured that it can sustain this open principle of modern democratic citizenship.

So we have this double logic. On the one hand they criticize the Milošević regime from a democratic standpoint – claiming that the Serbs are fundamentally democratic and that Milošević perverted them – but, on the other, they deny this democratic potential to other ethnic groups in ex-Yugoslavia (you Slovenes want to be a state but in reality you are a primitive Alpine tribe). So this operates along the same lines as pseudo-progressive forms of French nationalism where the idea is that the French are the only, or the leading, democratic egalitarian nation; they are the only nation where democracy is inscribed into their very identity. A typical

French view here is that the Germans are too feudal and authoritarian, the English are too liberal and vulgar, and that it is only the French who have this authentic democratic pathos. In the sense, the Serbs in ex-Yugoslavia occupy a similar position to that of the French in Western Europe.

And this is often how racism functions today – at this disguised reflexive level. So we should be very careful when people emphasize their democratic credentials: do these same people also allow the Other to have the same credentials? For me a true Serb democrat would not be the one who claims that ‘we Serbs’ are truly democratic and that Milošević terrorized us, but the one who is prepared to argue that the Albanians have the same democratic potential. This is a far more difficult challenge. This is the true problem: to acknowledge the democratic potential of the Other.

This question of the democratic potential Other brings us to the ongoing crisis (or crises) surrounding 11 September 2001 and the politics of confrontation between Western liberal democracies and so called fundamentalist forces (Bush's ‘axis of evil’). How should we understand this politics?

First, I think that when one hears this phrase ‘nothing will be the same’, the first approach of a truly thinking person is simply to doubt this. I think that paradoxical as it may sound, but precisely apropos of such big shattering events, one should gather the courage and ask, is it really such a fateful break? I would say, no. I think that we need to focus here on the way in which this shattering experience is being ideologically appropriated. The typical conservative attitude can be found in the US press and a series of recent commentaries declaring an end to the ‘age of irony’ The general message is that up until now we were feeling safe in our sphere of the world, where we could play all these deconstructionist/ironic games and so on, but that now we are back to reality. Now the situation is clear. The games are over. It is us versus the enemy and you have to choose sides. This is the temptation to be resisted. I think that now more than ever the mystifi-

cation is at its greatest. It is that precisely in such moments where the situation itself appears to impose a radical transparency – stop all your bullshit analysis – it's now us versus them – that ideology is at its strongest.

The first thing to do is question the very coordinates of the problematic. The dominant representation of the conflict is in terms of the Western open liberal attitude as opposed to Muslim fundamentalist forces. But is this really the true opposition? Already at an immediate level we see that the two countries, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which were the main supporters of the Taliban, were at the same time important American allies. Now with all the talk about democracy, the fact is that it's in the interest of the USA that Saudi Arabia does *not* become a democracy, because that would mean the danger of populist intervention and the USA losing access to the oil. And as part of this game, Saudi Arabia in turn plays fast and loose with fundamentalist politics in order to legitimize itself in the eyes of its own people.

Instead of buying this simple opposition of 'we enlightened open tolerant liberals' versus 'fundamentalists', I think that we should use another general frame of reference which is already hinted at by Badiou. Badiou argues compellingly that although the key feature of the twentieth century was the so-called Cold War defining the political antagonism between capitalism and socialism, there was simultaneously a 'hot war' between the excess of capitalism itself and all the other social formations. Put simply, in order to fight communism, capitalism let the genie out of the bottle – i.e. fascism – and it then had to join forces with its true enemy to crush it. This is crucial. And here I would agree conditionally with Fukuyama who applies this term Islamo-fascism to the Taliban. But I think we should give to this term a strict Marxist meaning. Islamo-fascism means fascism as a desperate strategy in the defence of capitalism. In the same way as for all fascism, Islamo-fascism/fundamentalism is part of the spontaneous strategy of capitalist defence.

Of course I don't agree with Fukuyama, but I came across a telling irony in a copy of the *Newsweek* Year Review (one

of those stupid issues that speculates about the future) where they happened to publish pieces by both Huntingdon and Fukuyama. On the face of it they are clearly opposed: Huntingdon advances his 'clash of civilizations' thesis, and Fukuyama affirms the end of history and the demise of all basic clashes and ideological remainders. Neither of them is a serious thinker but nonetheless we arrive at an interesting result: the truth of them is to read them together, as identical. That is to say, the clash of civilizations is the politics of the end of history. When you no longer have ideological-political struggles proper, every struggle can only appear in a totally mystified way as an ethnic or religious clash of civilizations. This is the basic truth of their positions.

How would you respond to those who would argue that there are alternative, and perhaps more progressive, possibilities within Islamic discourse?

When I say Islamo-fascism, this does not mean that I am in any way anti-Islamic; quite the opposite. In our boring politically correct times, all Westerners try to appear liberal and they don't want to put the blame on Islam as such. They go to great pains to emphasize how Islam is a great religion and that the Taliban are just a monstrous degeneration of Islam. No, I think that it is a fact that of all world great religions Islam clearly has the strongest resistance to the processes of global capitalism. Other religions, like Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism and so on, have by and large adapted to global capitalism, but Islam has not.

But I don't think that this condemns Muslims to the opposition of either Islamo-fascism – the fundamentalist resistance to capitalism – or to undergoing its own reformation and finally getting ready for the modern world. What we know is that there is the strongest resistance to capitalism in Islam and this can be given a fascist twist or – why not? – a socialist twist. So while there is the danger that Islam will become a kind of emblem of fascist resistance, there is also

the possibility that it could open up a much more interesting radical perspective.

The type of radical politics that you have been arguing for appears to be based on the idea of developing a more authentic universalism in opposition to the fake universalism of global liberal capitalism. However, is not all universalism 'fake' to the extent that it requires some form of particularistic, and therefore exclusivist, embodiment (in Hegelian terms: there is no spirit without a bone)?

That's a very nice question. Every universality is, in a way, false in the sense that it is hegemonized/particularized. But my answer here is that there is nonetheless one negative point at which universality is hegemonized in a non-exclusive sense; in a different way from how it is usually hegemonized. This is precisely what I tried to develop briefly before, when I spoke about arriving at the truth of a certain situation by identifying with the moment of abjection. For example, when you have in a certain social totality those who are 'below us' – the negated or outcast – then precisely insofar as they are the abject, they stand for universality. So it's not a positive universality. I would draw here on Jacques Rancière and his excellent book, *Misunderstanding*, where he develops a perspective of a democratic logic of universality. Now of course this universality is hegemonized, but it is hegemonized by the lowest, by the excluded ones; and this changes everything.

Again, as he points out, when those who are excluded say that we stand for what is wrong with society, it would be incorrect simply to impute to them some kind of positive norm or to impose a Habermasian injunction in terms of a simple demand for more equality. Rather, the abject position stands for the lie of the existing universality and it doesn't necessarily have a direct positive dimension. In this sense the universality here is not fake, because it only embodies what is false in the existing universality. It gives body to the failure of universality and does not have any positive content. On

these grounds I think that this notion of universality can be saved.

Recently you have engaged extensively with questions of theology (e.g. The Fragile Absolute and On Belief). What kind of contribution can theology make to contemporary radicalism?

I will answer this question by focusing on a biblical text that really fascinates me: the Book of Job. Some priests told me that Job does not really belong to the Bible and that if there was a chance to re-edit it, then this book would be the first to go. There is something quite extraordinary about Job, and I would say that it is perhaps the first example of a modern critique of ideology. Job is a devout man and a model citizen who is suddenly struck with calamities. He is then visited by, one after the other, three theologically educated friends. These friends represent ideology at its purest. Each of them tries to symbolize, to give some meaning to, his suffering – God may be punishing you (even if you are unaware of your sin), God may be testing you and so on.

Now the usual perception of Job is of a patient man who simply endures his woes with dignity and remains faithful to God. But Job is not this quiet man who takes everything; he complains all the time. His complaints are not so much directed at God but at something more precise: he simply doesn't accept that his suffering has any meaning; he wants to assert the meaninglessness of his suffering. He doesn't buy the idea that any divine plan can justify his suffering. And then, at the end, when God appears, He says the three friends were totally wrong and that everything Job said was right. And the moment you accept suffering as something that doesn't have a deeper meaning, it means we can change it; fight against it. This is the zero level of the critique of ideology – when you don't read meaning into it. This is truly an incredible breakthrough.

And it is through Job that we should also read the God–Christ relationship. When God appears for the first time in Job, it's a bit like a Hollywood spectacle, where He

goes on to declare that He can create monsters with seven heads and so on. But all His boasting and declarations of power are actually an attempt to mask the opposite; what God demonstrates is His defeat. In this sense, Job's suffering points towards the suffering of Christ. We pass from Judaism to Christianity when this infinite split between Man and God – the point where Man simply cannot find meaning in his suffering – is transposed into God himself. This is how one should read Christ's desperate cry of 'Father, why have you forsaken me?' This is not to be read as 'why did you betray me?' but rather in terms of a child's expectations vis-à-vis a father who cannot help. It's a much more desperate issue. The reproach is more against the Father's impotence. God is not omnipotent and in this sense Christ represents both the impotence of God and the meaninglessness of his own suffering.

This is a crucial aspect of the religious legacy, which, I would argue, applies to contemporary globalization. We have almost the same logic as we do in Job with today's preachers of globalization, like the three theologian friends, who argue that people are suffering but that this is just a vital part of restructuring, a temporary problem in the great scheme of things and that soon life will be better. No, we should adopt a Job position and not accept any necessity or fatalism.

There is a growing tendency in contemporary thought to try and reintroduce a sense of the religious through a separation of ethics from politics. How do you view the relationship between ethics and politics?

Although I try to isolate a certain emancipatory kernel of religion, I must nonetheless emphasize that I am an absolute materialist. I think that one of the trends to which I am very much opposed is the recent post-secular theological turn of deconstruction; the idea being that while there is no ontotheological God there is nonetheless some kind of unconditional ethical injunction up to which we cannot ever live.

So what re-emerges here is a split between ethics and politics. Ethics stands for the unconditional injunction which you can never fulfil and so you have to accept the gap between unconditional injunction and the always contingent failed interventions that you make. Ethics becomes the domain of the unconditional, spectrality, Otherness and so on, whereas politics consists of practical interventions. This Levinasian Otherness can then be formulated directly as the divine dimension, or it can be formulated just as the messianic utopian dimension inherent to language as such and so on.

I think that Lacanian ethics breaks out of this. Lacan cannot be incorporated into this paradigm. What Lacan does is precisely to assert the radical politicization of ethics; not in the sense that ethics should be subordinated to power struggles, but in terms of accepting radical contingency. The elementary political position is one that affirms this contingency and this means that you don't have any guarantee in any norms whatsoever. You have to risk and to decide. This is the lesson of Lacan. Do not compromise your desire. Do not look for support in any form of big Other – even if this big Other is totally empty or a Levinasian unconditional injunction. You must risk the act without guarantee.

In this sense the ultimate foundation of ethics is political. And, for Lacan, depoliticized ethics is an ethical betrayal because you put the blame on the Other. Depoliticized ethics means that you rely on some figure of the big Other. But the Lacanian act is precisely the act in which you assume that there is no big Other.

And would this be why you see someone like Lenin as an ethical figure?

Yes. Recently, from my rereading of Lenin, I claim that Lenin was in a way practising Lacanian ethics. Probably the most fascinating period of his activity was between March and October 1917 when there was already a bourgeois democratic revolution – and even Lenin admitted that Russia was

the most democratic country in the world at that point – where Lenin had the crazy obsessional idea of pushing for an October revolution. In fact, his wife, Natasha Kutsaya, wrote to Bukharin stating that Lenin was going mad and that maybe they should get him hospitalized.

And it is interesting to look at the types of argument mounted by those who didn't want to risk the revolution. There were two main types, both of which sought a guarantee in the figure of some big Other. The first concerned the idea of the objective necessity of historical development: we must have an initial bourgeois revolution, then we must stabilize the gains of the bourgeois revolution and only then move to the next step. It was this kind of 'let's not do it too fast/the situation is not quite right' type of argument. The second form of resistance came from ethico-political considerations and with whether the majority of people would really be in favour of a revolution. The feeling was that there should be some kind of democratic legitimization; or, as Lenin puts it cynically in his ironic acerbic way: it's as if we should first organize the referendum and, if we get 55 per cent of the vote, we can then proceed to the revolution.

What is so great in Lenin is that he doesn't oppose these two types of resistance with another figure of the big Other. His idea is not 'no, the laws of history are on our side' His idea is simply that there is no big Other; you never get the guarantee; you must act. You must take the risk and act. I think this is the Lenin who is truly a Lacanian Lenin. In the same way that Lacan says the analyst is authorized only by him- or herself, Lenin's message is that a revolutionary *ne s'autorise que de lui-même*. That is to say, at a certain point you have to assume responsibility for the act.

The Lacanian politicization of ethics, in terms of the subject's full responsibility for the act, would also seem to imply that ethical acts are Real acts insofar as they do not rely on any symbolic Other. The Real in ethico-politics is not simply an ultimate blockage that we cannot do anything about, but becomes a basic dimension of any emancipatory act. In this sense is there

not also a certain politicization of our relationship with the Real; a politicization that allows for more positive openings than are usually associated with Lacan?

The usual reading of the Lacanian Real is that of a transcendental a priori obstacle which is then misrepresented as a contingent external obstacle. Here, the impossibility of the Real is understood in the sense that it is impossible to happen. This is the anamorphic view of the Real, where all you have is secondary approximations, partial approaches and so on; Real is the central thing that we cannot approach directly. The sexual act as Real would mean that it's never fully the Real Thing; you only have partial/incomplete acts. This perspective on the Real presents Lacanian theory as a kind of elevation of failure: all we can do is fail in an authentic way and then we can never get the Thing itself.

But, as I argue in *On Belief*, this is not the ultimate horizon of the Lacanian Real and that in a way Real-as-impossible means that it happens. For Lacan, miracles happen and *that's* the Lacanian Real. The Real is impossible only in the sense that you cannot symbolize or accept it. For example, when you do something crazy, like a heroic act, which goes against all your interests, there the Real happens – you cannot justify or explain it. So the Lacanian Real is not Real-as-impossible in the sense that it cannot happen or that we can never encounter it (and this point has also been well made by Alenka Zupančič). No, it happens, but it's too traumatic to assume. Let's say that the ethical act is Real. Now if we read Real-as-impossible in this basic sense of failure, then this would simply mean in Kantian terms that we cannot ever be sure that we really did the real thing; that it really was a free act. As Kant says, we cannot ever be sure that any of our acts was truly an ethical act. There is always a suspicion that we did it for some pathological reasons; even if you truly risk your life, maybe you had a narcissistic fantasy of how you would be admired afterwards and so on. So you cannot ever be sure. This would be the Real-as-impossible in this elementary sense.

But I think the proper thing is precisely to turn it around. That is to say, that we do perform the Real thing, the free act, but we find it too traumatic to accept it; which is why we like to rationalize them in symbolic terms. But Real acts do occur. This also connects with Kierkegaard's reversal of the sickness-unto-death view of human beings: the true horror is not that I am mortal; the true horror is rather that I am immortal and I try to escape that. And in German idealism it was Kant, and especially Schelling, who said that the most horrible thing to encounter for a human being is this abyss of free will; when somebody simply acts out of free will. And that's very traumatic to accept. One should also turn around along these lines the fear of biogenetical reductionism. Usually, we think it is horrible if we are reduced to biologically/genetically conditioned objects, but I think that the true anxiety is caused by the awareness that we did a free act – that's the most difficult thing to accept.

Lacan is not this kind of poet of failure. The truly traumatic thing is that miracles – not in the religious sense but in the sense of free acts – do happen, but it's very difficult to come to terms with them. So we should reject this idea of a poetry of failure. For Lacan, Real is not this kind of Thing-in-itself that we cannot approach; Real is, rather, freedom as a radical cut in the texture of reality.

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