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How to fall short of *realpolitik*: or, the fatal idealism of backing Mir Hossein Mousavi

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As is well known, there are two Slavoj Žižeks – the populist Žižek who shot to stardom off the back of perverse Lacanian readings of Hitchcock films and cultural miscellany; and the decidedly unpopulist, political Žižek who has made a reputation for himself as a contrarian pursuer of “lost causes.” It is this latter Žižek who we should be most grateful to. For from the *Plague of Fantasies* onwards he has made an oeuvre out of telling some hard truths to his friends on the Left.

First, there was his repudiation of the ‘end of ideology’ dogma that, whilst now seeming quaint, was once all the rage from the early 1990s through the Clinton/Blair era and beyond. Second, there was his critical disposition towards the anti (now refigured – alter) globalization movement: of its analysis (taking Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* as emblematic here), and its efficacy – arguably now vindicated by its demise. Third, was his resuscitation of Lenin within academic discourse, which has to be seen – in the context in which, with Derrida, post-colonial theory, and pluralist thinkers dominant, and with even Marx seen as a sort of bizarre throwback – as a bold gesture. Fourth, has been his quarrel with the knee-jerk anti-statism of parts of the Left; a position that has to be seen as something of a negation of the negation in regard to rebutting the widespread demonisation of state power as *the* reason for the ‘tragedies’ of the 20th century. Fifth, he

has taken on other 'deviations' within the post-modern leftwing canon – most notably Ernesto Laclau's once fashionable proposition of populism as socialist strategy, which Žižek conceives as "good enough in practice, but not in theory!" And finally, with Alain Badiou, his promotion of the 'Idea of Communism,' with all its attenuated commitments to universalism, anti-capitalism, revolution and so forth, acknowledges only one political concept has the power to challenge the seemingly limitless hegemony of global capitalism.

Of course, all this fly swatting of the array of deviant attempts to rethink left wing political thought in the post-Cold War era, although acting as a potentially invigorating act of purification, nevertheless leaves us with that timeless political question 'What is to be done?' hanging over our heads. In this regard, at least, we can note a telling vacillation in Žižek's work between the high minded idealism (possibly aloofness) of his decree to "do nothing" (a Bartlebyan "I would prefer not to") and at the same time a formalist realism – with the assertion, for instance, that Chavez, for all his flaws, deserves our support because he is at least doing something; and Obama's healthcare programme represents more hope than anything underway in Europe– more, then, by implication than France's Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste. If Žižek is anything, it thus follows that he is a realist. His attachment to what many see as a romantic revolutionary tradition centered on the October revolution of 1917, should, then, be instead read in a strictly realist fashion – the closest the Left ever came to overthrowing global capitalism was in the early years of the USSR; the only proven model of attempting to realise communism continues to be the vanguard party who seize state power and ruthlessly use terror to cement concrete changes in the economic and social fabric; the only ideology that ever became real was one that rode in the back of tanks; or, as Stalin once famously quipped in a similar sentiment: "How many divisions does the Pope have?"

One could perhaps take issue with all these assertions. Yet, measured against the idealism of the likes of John Holloway's *How to Change the World Without Taking Power*, we should welcome the introduction of Žižek's distinctive brand of realism into the debates on the Left. If the 'Idea of Communism' is something of a transcendent supplement to the overall direness of the situation intuited by Žižek's brand of hard-nosed realism, then this may not be a bad thing. The call to make the impossible –that is, communism– possible being not a wayward deviation, or a retreat into a flight of fantasy, but a rallying cry to somehow initiate a new, global communist movement precisely because even though its contours scarcely exist there is quite simply no other option available to us. Following Žižek, in a recent article *for Radical Philosophy* (forthcoming 2010) on the Occupy

California movement (a student-led anarcho-communist initiative) I also argued that the “realist nihilism” radical leftwing politics is now forced to adopt, must be fully endorsed on the grounds that to act purely, even against all the odds, and adhering to as close an objective analysis as possible, is the only viable option we have. Realism and idealism have in a certain sense come full circle.

What about in regard to the recent events in Iran – how does this analysis fare there? Surely all ruminations about “realist nihilism” or the necessity of making the impossible possible shows its limits in this case? The lines of antagonism in Iran are, to be clear, certainly not about overthrowing the Islamic Republic to instigate a new stage in a reborn global, communist movement. Even on its own terms the task is big enough: to bring down a brutal, sexist, racist, bigoted, and un-democratic theocracy. There should be no doubt from the start that whether or not such a movement acts as a stepping stone to socialism (or not, as is infinitely more likely) we should stand firmly behind the task to cast the Islamic Republic into the dustbin of history, and offer our –critical– solidarity to those who are aiming to do so. At the same time, the task being of a relatively lesser scale than re-initiating a global, communist movement should not lead to any confusion as to the enormity of the challenge facing opposition to the Islamic Republic. There is no mass political movement within Iran to bring down the Islamic Republic. Most of the Left has been either marginalized or liquidated; and more than anything the generation of young Iranians whose task it would be to push the movement to its limits have grown up in the same historical, globalised cultural-political moment of time that cannot easily conceive the self-sacrifices and long, organizational slogs necessary to effect revolutionary change. Indeed, many even see revolution itself as an undesirable phenomenon that got them into this mess in the first place. All this considered, it is hardly surprising that when it comes to the strategy of the Green Movement, what we so far witnessed is an impoverished form of the aforementioned dialectic of making the impossible possible – a distinct lack of idealism backed up by an equally unrealistic strategy.

Let me first, though, preface these remarks with a self-critical reflection that I acknowledge the fact that the Left is plagued by its enthusiastic cheer-leading, or damning criticism, of battles taking place half way around the world and regarding which we have very little capacity to influence – a trend often euphemistically, although perhaps misleadingly, called ‘internationalism’. This criticism acknowledged, what compels this commentary is that from the start the massive street protests that erupted in Tehran in the aftermath of the presidential elections inverted the above trend – thus drawing the Left’s

positioning on the protest movement inexorably into the political, discursive space. For whilst it is generally recognised that the Western Left's opinions on struggles elsewhere are at best tangential, and at worst, a self-serving echo chamber, here the logic flipped on its head. On the internet all the discussion became strangely fixated on what the Left was saying about the protest movement: What position were the staff of the *Monthly Review* choosing to take? Why were the Left portraying the Green Movement as a middle class phenomenon? Why were they backing Ahmadinijad as the authentic representative of the working class and rural poor? The content of the accusations gives away their motivation. Despite the fact that overwhelmingly the Left did not articulate this position outside some contrarian outposts such as the *Monthly Review* and Stalinist political outfits, the narrative of the Eurocentric, patronizing, out-of-touch, Ahmadinijad-supporting Western Left that needed to be battled against signals from the start what the purpose of this outrage emanating from the Green Movement was serving: deflection from the real political and strategic questions related to opposition to the Islamic Republic in Iran. And how successful this campaign was – all issues relating to the question of the movement in Iran became inverted into a quarrel on the Left regarding the question of political Islam, the role of class in revolutionary politics, Eurocentrism, and so forth.

The frame of this essay considered, one might have expected Žižek to cut through the simulacrum of so-called debate straight to the crux of the matter – namely, what represents the most credible strategy that could get rid of, or at least fatally undermine, the Islamic Republic? Instead, what Žižek offered us in his piece 'Berlusconi in Tehran' for the *London Review of Books* (2009) reflected all the tendencies he had spent the good part of nearly 20 years seeking to pick away at. At the centre of the confusion is the figure of Mir Hossein Mousavi – leading presidential candidate against incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinijad, and icon of the Green Movement. It goes without saying that there is more to Mousavi than Mousavi the man: to use a Žižekism, the universal is revealed in the particular. So whilst in the particular Mousavi the man should not go without criticism, what is of interest is precisely the question of why Mousavi the man has for the most part escaped criticism – the universal truth of the Green Movement reflected back on itself through the figure of Mousavi. And to his credit, Žižek is the first to acknowledge this imbrication of the universal and the particular:

That is why they find it so difficult to locate Mousavi: is he a Western-backed reformer who wants to increase people's freedom and introduce a market economy, or a member of the clerical establishment whose victory wouldn't significantly change the nature of the regime? Either way, the true nature of the protests is being missed.

The green colours adopted by the Mousavi supporters and the cries of 'Allahu akbar!' that resonated from the roofs of Tehran in the evening darkness suggested that the protesters saw themselves as returning to the roots of the 1979 Khomeini revolution, and cancelling out the corruption that followed it. (Žižek 2009: unpaginated)

However, the subtraction of Mousavi the man from the particularities of his program to the universal dream of the "Khomeini revolution" is rendered doubly dubious; not only because of the consistent identification of the 1979 revolution as Khomeini's in Žižek's piece, but moreover because of the idea that what simply needs to be addressed is a "corruption" upon a fundamentally utopian, revolutionary state in 1979.

In contrast, let us counterpoise this assertion with the fact that whilst it is true that it took a number of years for the full domination of post-revolutionary state and society to be pulled under the absolute rule of Khomeini, it was only a few months after the fall of the Shah's government that the referendum was passed instituting the Islamic Republic, which took effect from 1st April 1979. Periodisation in the supposed universal message of Mousavi is important. For what could be seen as a genuinely liberatory moment leading up to the fall of the Shah, and even in the immediate aftermath, was turned around remarkably quickly to the wholesale purge of the multiplicity of interests and institution of draconian Islamist laws, the initial co-option and later closure of the democratic factory shorahs (Malm and Esmailian 2007: chapter 2), and militia led attacks on political opponents. If this is the return Žižek is referring to, it is one in which the name Mousavi should operate as a warning for all that went wrong. Indeed, so enamoured was Mousavi with the events of 1979 and the following years that he took up the position of prime minister of the Islamic Republic from 1981 to 1989 – years that can be characterized by two most important events: the Iran/Iraq war (initiated by Iraq and kept ticking along by the United States), and the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners. During the long and brutal war with Iraq, we have no evidence that Mousavi did anything to prevent the needless deaths of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, who were sent on suicidal martyrdom missions over the trenches in a demonstration of authentic, patriotic, Islamic 'spirituality' by Khomeini. In regard to the

1988 executions, it is unclear the extent to which Mousavi was actively involved, or gave solely tacit support to them – what is without doubt, however, is that between 10,000 to 30,000 left wing political dissidents were rounded up, executed and dumped into mass graves in one of the largest mass purges of political opponents in the 20th century. Historical record points to the fact that even when Mousavi stepped down as prime minister of Iran, he remained on good terms with Khomeini.

What are we, then, to make of the Green Movement's elevation of Mousavi into an icon? There is a critical difference between the cynical act of voting for the potentially lesser evil of Mousavi, and turning him into what Hamid Dabashi rightly describes in this issue as a “cult of personality” (Dabashi, forthcoming 2010). There is, in other words, a difference between using Mousavi's candidacy as an opportunity to prise a space of legitimacy (against the immediate brutal repression of any genuine autonomous political dissidence), and on the other hand engaging in a revisionist historiography and uncritical personality cultism of a man whose roots lie in a mixture of opportunism and bloody repression in the Islamic Republic's early years. There should be no question of young Iranians dying on the streets of Tehran, or thousands being imprisoned and subjected to torture holding the image of Mousavi close to their chests.

It is this historical revisionism on the part of the Green Movement and its ideologues in the West which is the most disturbing phenomenon to accompany the protest movement. For instance, in a remarkably similar piece to Slavoj Žižek's, Ali Alizadeh makes only one reference to the nearly eight years when Mousavi acted as third most powerful man in Iran: “Notwithstanding the rule of the conservatives over domestic and international trade, the first decade, organized by Mousavi, is associated with the contradictory features of a strong statist economy, relatively successful social welfare programmes, and what has recently been called ‘de-proletarianization’ and ‘structural involution’.” (2009: unpaginated) In this hagiography Mousavi's time in office is rewritten as that of a radical socialist on account of his running of the war economy and egalitarian distribution of rationing.

In much the same way, we can note an incredible assertion by Žižek – a philosopher who has made it his project to revive Marx, Lenin, and the communism for the 21st century. In remarking upon the opposition candidates at the election he makes the following claim:

...we have to draw a clear distinction between the two main candidates opposed to Ahmadinijad, Mehdi Karroubi and Mousavi. Karroubi is, effectively, a reformist, a proponent of an Iranian version of identity politics, promising favours to particular groups of every kind. Mousavi is something entirely different: he stands for the resuscitation of the popular dream that sustained the Khomeini revolution. (Zizek 2009: unpaginated)

In light of all we have so far discussed, the “popular dream” of Mousavi can only be described as sheer idealism. To be clear, though, this is not based on a vindictive historiography, or demand for purity on the part of those who wish to see the downfall of the IRI – it is on realist grounds that we should reject not only the historical revisionism as regards to what/who Mousavi really is, and the possibility that any movement under his so-called leadership could lead to any genuine, radical change. That is to say, the terms under which a Mousavi focused protest movement cannot by definition stand for any serious, structural opposition to the Islamic Republic. As Mehdi Khalaji puts it:

Had Mousavi come into office following the June 12 presidential election, he would not have challenged the political order. He would have tried to fix the Islamic Republic's internal and external crises through slight policy tweaks. Nor would the West have seen an "opening" of the sort that some suggest. Indeed, Mousavi's rivalry with President Mahmoud Ahmadinijad has little to do with the current regime's foreign policy and far more to do with internal power struggles, economic policy, and, to some extent, cultural agendas. (2009: unpaginated)

Okay, it might be argued, that being the case, Mousavi's name could still act as a life-tether for the movement – as a kind of empty signifier for the hopes of more radical opposition, but ones that can still be framed in such a way that they escape the full brunt of immediate state repression. But even that argument granted a moment of fair consideration, surely the procedural dimension of leadership is to, well, act as a leader? And surely capitulation and abdication is already a sign of a deficit on that front?

In a strange piece for the *New Yorker* Laura Secor managed to make an argument indicative of the inverted world of Green Movement cheer-leading. She argued that the ‘forced confessions’ by the leadership of team Mousavi in the August show-trials showed a true spirit of resistance:

In today's Iran, the interrogator, not the repent, has become the object of rage and ridicule. Recanting under pressure, Abrahamic, is now seen as a sign not of weakness or treachery but, rather, of "being human." The display of systemic cruelty is not chilling but galvanizing.

Iran was a radical place in the eighties. Both the regime and much of its opposition were absolutist, utopian, messianic, apocalyptic. Forced confessions, so effective in that climate, convey little more than illegitimacy when they are used against an opposition that is asking for the counting of votes and the rule of law. Today's show trials are a sign of how much Iran has changed in the past thirty years, and how poorly its regime has kept pace. (Secor 2009: unpaginated)

Secor gets one thing right, though, Iran certainly has changed in the past thirty years, along with most of the world. But not, for a revolutionary, in a good way. One would have hoped at this point that Žižek revive his welcome criticisms of the viral, post-modern ideologies which repeat that we are only "being human" in all our frail finitude; all grand goals are unachievable; true commitment to a cause is the real monstrosity etc. etc.

What we needed Žižek to do in his take on Iran was provide these knock-out hard truths to Green Movement. What he needed to do was tell them that the Islamic Republic could not be brought down, or even sufficiently reformed, by a regime insider with a thuggish past as Khomeini's right hand. What he needed to say was that spontaneous street protests are not enough, and that organization and a long, ideological slog are a necessary part of any revolutionary movement. Those things absent, it should not be read as too hard a judgement that in Iran Žižek has helped spread the very plague of fantasies he has formerly tried so hard to exorcise.

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