



# The 'divine violence' of Slavoj Žižek

Looking for a reason to riot? Look no further than this publicity-conscious Marxist philosopher, writes **Chris Berg**.

Nearly half a century after 1968, Europe is again seized by sporadic outbursts of anarchic, seemingly-purposeless violence.

The extraordinary violence in Greece brought about by that country's sovereign debt crisis is both unfocused and unjustifiable. In May, three people died, trapped in a bank that had been firebombed by rioters.

It's been less than two years since the December 2008 Greek riots over the police shooting of a teenager, which also involved firebombs, the overturning of cars, the burning of hotels, shops and banks, and violent clashes with the police. Across the continent in France, torching cars has almost become a tradition in the Parisian banlieues. The strikes and protests over the French economic situation in January 2009 turned quickly violent. In Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania, there were 10,000 person strong mass protests over the economic climate—before the global financial crisis, mind you—and all have been characterised by violence.

According to Slavoj Žižek, the radical academy's new superstar philosopher and cultural critic, that's good violence. Or, more specifically, it's 'divine'.

Žižek is the next Noam Chomsky. He's been a visiting professor at seemingly every top-tier university: Columbia, Princeton, Chicago, and New York. He's the author of nearly 60 books, and the star of half a dozen fawning documentaries.

He is studied in symposiums at Melbourne University, in cultural studies and social theory subjects at Monash University, in film screenings at Sydney University, and in cinema studies at the University of Queensland. Žižek's name pops up in *The Canberra Times*, *The Sun Herald*, and *The Australian*. He even made *The Age's* 'Green Guide' TV supplement. He appeared last year at a Melbourne architecture conference, and has philosophy symposiums dedicated to his writing. Clive Hamilton, the former Greens celebrity candidate for Peter Costello's former seat of Higgins, quoted him approvingly in a column earlier this year.

*The Times Literary Supplement* calls him 'one of the most innovative and exciting contemporary thinkers of the left'. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* describes him as 'The Elvis of Cultural Theory', but his stage presence—with academic superstars it is fair to describe their performances—is more like Robin Williams with a thick Eastern European drawl.

Indeed, Žižek has a taste for the theatrical. His 2006 documentary where he applies psychoanalytic philosophy to popular movies titled *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema: 'Cinema'*, Žižek claims, 'is the ultimate pervert art'. He has written introductions to collections of writings by Trotsky and Robespierre, including in both cases partial apologies for both the men and their methods. And the cover of a recent book, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, is illustrated with a picture of a guillotine.

Such publicity-consciousness has its rewards. The Slovenian psychoanalytic philosopher is as close to a cult figure as the academy's post-modernist community can produce.

Žižek has a habit of throwing broad and shocking statements that slam down on the table, then quietly adding caveats, before finally and confidently arguing the opposite.

Good showmanship, sure, but it has a theoretical basis. Žižek is a follower of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was himself a follower of Freud. Žižek uses Lacan's concepts of the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary—they all require capitalisation—to describe, not things which are real, symbolic, or imaginary, but things which are true to themselves, or symbolic

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in the realm of pure language.

That's only the half of it.

Lacanian psychoanalytic philosophy is infamously impenetrable. Alan Sheridan, who first translated Lacan into English described this lack of clarity as wilful. 'Lacan,' Sheridan argued, 'doesn't intend to be understood... He designs his seminars so that you can't, in fact, grasp them.'

For all the complexity of postmodernism, when you read such post-modern luminaries such as Lacan, you can't help but get a nagging feeling that it is an elaborate prank.

Žižek wears the clothes of postmodernism, and that parodic sensation is more overt. There is the same wordplay with jarringly capitalised adjectives, and reference to the 'master-signifier' pattern that controls history, but it feels like criticising Žižek does nothing more than broadcast that you have missed his joke. One could not describe the Disney movie *Kung-Fu Panda* as the best description of contemporary political ideology without some degree of ironic detachment.

Nevertheless, for all of Žižek's movie analogies, his blurry theory and his post-modern theatricality, they have a largely simple message.

More openly than his academic rockstar predecessors Chomsky, Foucault and Sartre, Žižek is an unashamed and unremitting revolutionary Marxist. As Johann Hari wrote in the *New Statesman* in 2007, 'When you peel back the patina of postmodernism, there is old-fashioned philo-tyrannical nonsense here.'

According to Žižek, capitalism is violence: 'the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital runs the show', providing the 'fundamental systemic violence of capitalism... this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "ob-

jective", systemic, and anonymous'.

The market economy may seem like a web of peaceful interactions for mutual benefit, but really it is supported by aggression and oppression. When the government of a nominally capitalist country goes to war, the marketplace is to blame.

The awful events that occurred in Abu Ghraib were not crimes, but manifestations of the American economic system: 'Iraqi prisoners were *effectively initiated into American culture*'.

So, for Žižek, the clash between Islamist terrorism and the Western world is not a clash between barbarism and civilisation, but between two types of barbarism, 'a clash between anonymous brutal torture and torture as a media spectacle'. Žižek's 2009 book, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, expands on this theme. The two big events of the first decade of the twenty-first century—the destruction of the Twin Towers, and the Global Financial Crisis—spell the end of the liberal order, destroyed once by the violence of radical Islam, and then again by the violence of the collapsing share market.

What is striking about Žižek's argument so far is how common this view is.

Žižek is clearer than most, but the moral equivalence of capitalism and barbarism has been one of the radical left's primary themes since well before September 2001.

Michael Leunig wrote in *The Age* in March this year that 'Our culture has thrived on the stabbing impulse ... If schoolboys stopped being violent, the empire and the free market would surely crumble ... Our unique brand of civilisation depends as much upon conflict and annihilation as it does upon co-operation.'

When we read that the ever-repeated claim that the Iraq War was a war for oil we are being told that maintaining the 'system' of trade and globalisation, by definition, requires the occasional violent invasion of other countries.

Never mind that a much cheaper way to acquire Iraqi oil would have been to do the capitalist thing and just buy it. The cost of the Iraq war is now well over one trillion dollars.

Still: in the minds of many in the radical left, warfare is not only a necessary condition for the existence of capitalism, but its most pertinent feature.

Žižek and his co-ideologists use the literal violence of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to damn what they imagine is the more perverse violence of the competitive marketplace.

These beliefs allow writers like John Pilger to claim, as he did in *New Statesman* in May, that the International Monetary Fund and 'neoliberalism' is an 'occupying force', writing that the Greek protestors 'are clear who the enemy is and regard themselves as once again under foreign occupation. And once again, they are rising up, with courage.'

It is in those protests that Žižek detects 'divine violence'. Divine violence is an act of violence not for revenge, or to achieve a political goal, but an act of violence so extreme that it upsets the fabric of the social order; terror deployed for political purpose, but with no political goals, outside the disestablishment of the status quo. The Terror of the French Revolution was divine violence—a radical break with the past—as the revolutionaries who rejected the social norms and habits of society.

It is only through extreme violence—which is gasping out in contemporary Europe—that the world can



Riots in Athens in December 2008

earn its redemption, and the break from capitalism can finally be made.

This distinction between violent acts and divinely violent acts is Žižek's key to history, allowing him to dismiss the monsters he dislikes, and defend those whose aims he supports.

Adolf Hitler may have been a brute, but he was a brute in Žižek's eyes, because his Holocaust was fundamentally conservative—it sought to defend a status quo rather than traumatise the world into a higher level. In *Violence*, Žižek writes:

If one means by violence of the basic social relations, then as crazy or tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough.

In *In Defence of Lost Causes*, he writes:

... crazy, tasteless even, as it may sound, the problem with Hitler was that he was not violent enough, that his violence was not 'essential' enough. Nazism

was not radical enough, it did not dare to disturb the basic structure of the modern capitalist social space (which is why it had to focus on destroying an invented external enemy, Jews).

... Hitler did not 'have the courage' to really change things; he did not really act, all his actions were fundamentally reactions, that is, he acted so that nothing would really change, he staged a great spectre of Revolution so that the capitalist order could survive.

This is, incidentally, a charge he apparently also lays at the feet of Pol Pot in his upcoming book, *Living in the End Times*—that Pot did not go 'far enough'. (The moral contrast with John Pilger, who played the major role in exposing the murderous Pol Pot regime to the West, could not be stronger.)

To those who might object, Žižek quotes Robespierre's denunciation of critics of divine violence who focus on the victims of terror: 'A sensibility that wails almost exclusively over the en-

emies of liberty seems suspect to me. Stop shaking the tyrant's bloody robe in my face, or I will believe that you wish to put Rome in chains.'

That, certainly, is the message sent by the anarchist faction of the Greek rioters, whose response to their government's austerity measures was to murder three bank workers. Writing of the mob violence of Haiti under Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Žižek says:

Although we are dealing with what can only appear as 'immoral' acts of killing, one has no political right to condemn them, because they are a response to years, centuries even, of systematic state and economic violence and exploitation.

For those Greek rioters, this makes sense.

If James Bond is granted a licence to kill by the state, the mob is granted a licence to indiscriminate terror by Slavoj Žižek.

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