

# From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism

2001

Slavoj Žižek

## FROM WESTERN MARXISM TO WESTERN BUDDHISM

Slavoj Žižek

The ultimate postmodern irony of today is the strange exchange between Europe and Asia: at the very moment when “European” technology and capitalism are triumphing worldwide at the level of the “economic infrastructure, the Judeo-Christian legacy is threatened at the level of “ideological superstructure” in the European space itself by New Age “Asiatic” thought, which, in its different guises ranging from “Western Buddhism” to different “Tao,” is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Therein resides the highest speculative identity of opposites in today’s global civilization: although “Western Buddhism” presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement. One should mention here the well-known concept of “future shock” that describes how people are no longer psychologically able to cope with the dazzling rhythm of technological development and the social changes that accompany it. Things simply move too fast, and before one can accustom oneself to an invention, it has already been supplanted by a new one, so that one more and more lacks the most elementary “cognitive mapping.” The recourse to Taoism or Buddhism offers a way out of this predicament that definitely works better than the desperate escape into old traditions. Instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of techno-logical progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination. One should, instead, “let oneself go,” drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being. One is almost tempted to resuscitate the old infamous Marxist cliché of religion as the “opium of the people,” as the imaginary supplement to terrestrial misery. The “Western Buddhist” meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his

*Protestant Ethic*, entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*.<sup>2</sup>

“Western Buddhism” thus fits perfectly the fetishist mode of ideology in our allegedly “post-ideological” era, as opposed to its traditional *symptomal* mode in which the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms *qua* “returns of the repressed,” cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie. The fetish is effectively a kind of symptom in reverse. That is to say, the symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts, while the fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth. Let us take the case of the death of a beloved person. In the case of a symptom, I “repress” this death and try not to think about it, but the repressed trauma returns in the symptom. In the case of a fetish, on the contrary, I “rationally” fully accept this death, and yet I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death. In this sense, a fetish can play a very constructive role in allowing us to cope with the harsh reality. Fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds. They are thorough “realists” capable of accepting the way things effectively are, given that they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality. In Nevil Shute’s melodramatic World War II novel *Requiem for a WREN*, the heroine survives her lover’s death without any visible traumas. She goes on with her life and is even able to talk rationally about her lover’s death because she still has the dog that was the lover’s favored pet. When, some time after, the dog is accidentally run over by a truck, she collapses and her entire world disintegrates.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, the line between fetish and symptom is almost indiscernible. An object can function as the symptom (of a repressed desire) and almost simultaneously as a fetish (embodying the belief which we officially renounce). A leftover of the dead person, a piece of his/her clothes, can function both as a fetish (insofar as the dead person magically continues to live in it) and as a symptom (functioning as the disturbing detail that brings to mind his/her death). Is this ambiguous tension not homologous to that between the phobic and the fetishist object? The structural role is in both cases the same: If this exceptional element is disturbed, the whole system collapses. Not only does the subject’s false universe collapse if he is forced to confront the meaning of his symptom; the opposite also holds, insofar as the subject’s “rational” acceptance of the way things are dissolves when his fetish is taken away from him.

So, when we are bombarded by claims that in our post-ideological cynical era nobody believes in the proclaimed ideals, when we encounter a person who claims he is cured of any beliefs and accepts social reality the way it really is, one should always counter such claims with the question “OK, but *where is the fetish that enables you to (pretend to) accept reality ‘the way it is’?*” “Western Buddhism” is such a fetish. It enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace

of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it; that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is; and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always with-draw. In a further specification, one should note that the fetish can function in two opposite ways: either its role remains unconscious—as in the case of Shute's heroine who was unaware of the fetish-role of the dog—or you think that the fetish is that which really matters, as in the case of a Western Buddhist unaware that the “truth” of his existence is in fact the social involvement which he tends to dismiss as a mere game.

Nowhere is this fetishist logic more evident than apropos of Tibet, one of the central references of the post-Christian “spiritual” imaginary. Today, Tibet more and more plays the role of such a fantasmatic Thing, of a jewel which, when one approaches it too much, turns into the excremental object. It is a commonplace to claim that the fascination exerted by Tibet on the Western imagination, especially on the broad public in the US, provides an exemplary case of the “colonization of the imaginary.” It reduces the actual Tibet to a screen for the projection of Western ideological fantasies. Indeed, the very inconsistency of this image of Tibet, with its direct coincidences of opposites, seems to bear witness to its fantasmatic status. Tibetans are portrayed as people leading the simple life of spiritual satisfaction, fully accepting their fate, liberated from the excessive cravings of the Westerner who is always searching for more, *and* as a bunch of filthy, cheating, cruel, sexually promiscuous primitives. Lhasa itself becomes a version of Franz Kafka's Castle: sublime and majestic when first seen from afar, but then changing into the “paradise of filth,” a gigantic pile of shit, as soon as one actually enters the city. Potala, the central palace towering over Lhasa, is a kind of heavenly residence on earth, magically floating in the air *and* a labyrinth of stale seedy rooms and corridors full of monks engaged in obscure magic rituals, including sexual perversions. The social order is presented as the model of organic harmony *and* as the tyranny of the cruel corrupted theocracy keeping ordinary people ignorant. The Tibetan Buddhism itself is simultaneously hailed as the most spiritual of all religions, the last shelter of ancient Wisdom, *and* as the utmost primitive superstition, relying on praying wheels and similar cheap magic tricks. This oscillation between jewel and shit is not the oscillation *between* the idealized ethereal fantasy and raw reality: in such an oscillation, *both* extremes are fantasmatic, i.e. the fantasmatic space is the very space of this immediate passage from one extreme to the other.

The first antidote against this *topos* of the raped jewel, of the isolated place of people who just wanted to be left alone but were repeatedly penetrated by foreigners, is to remind ourselves that Tibet was already in itself an antagonistic, split society, not an organic Whole whose harmony was disturbed only by external intruders. Tibetan unity and independence were themselves imposed from the outside. Tibet emerged as a unified country in the ninth century when it established a “patron-priest” relationship with the Mongols. The

Mongols protected the Tibetans, who in turn provided spiritual guidance to Mongolia. (The very name “Dalai Lama” is of Mongol origins and was conferred on Tibetan religious leader by the Mongols.) Events took the same turn in the 17th century when the Fifth Lama, the greatest of them all, established the Tibet we know today—again, through benevolent foreign patronage—and started the construction of Potala. What followed was the long tradition of factional struggles, in which, as a rule, the winners won by inviting foreigners (Mongols, Chinese) to intervene. This story culminates in the recent partial shift of the Chinese strategy. Rather than use sheer military coercion, the Chinese now rely on ethnic and economic colonization, rapidly transforming Lhasa into a Chinese version of the capitalist Wild West with karaoke bars intermingled with the Disney-like “Buddhist theme parks” for Western tourists. In short, what the media image of the brutal Chinese soldiers and policemen terrorizing the Buddhist monks conceals is the much more effective, American-style socioeconomic transformation. In a decade or two, the Tibetans will be reduced to the status of the Native Americans in the United States.

The second antidote is therefore the opposite one: to denounce the split nature of the Western image of Tibet as a “reflexive determination” of the split attitude of the West itself, combining violent penetration and respectful sacralization. Colonel Francis Younghusband, who in 1904 led the English regiment of 1,200 men that reached Lhasa and forced trade agreements on the Tibetans, and was a true precursor of the late Chinese invasion. He mercilessly ordered the machine gun slaughter of hundreds of Tibetan soldiers armed only with swords and lances and thus forced his way to Lhasa. However, this same person experienced in his last day in Lhasa a true epiphany: “Never again could I think of evil, or ever again be at enmity with any man. All nature and all humanity were bathed in a rosy glowing radiancy; and life for the future seemed nought but buoyancy and light.”<sup>4</sup> The same went for his commander-in-chief, the infamous Lord Curzon, who justified Younghusband’s expedition thus: “The Tibetans are a weak and cowardly people, their very pusillanimity rendering them readily submissive to any powerful military authority who entering their country should forthwith give a sharp lesson and a wholesome dread of offending.”<sup>5</sup> Yet this same Curzon, who insisted how “nothing can or will be done with the Tibetans until they are frightened,” declared in a speech at an Old Etonian banquet: “The East is a university in which the scholar never takes his degree. It is a temple where the suppliant adores but never catches sight of the object of his devotion. It is a journey the goal of which is always in sight but is never attained.”<sup>6</sup>

What was and is *absolutely* foreign to Tibet is this Western logic of desire to penetrate the inaccessible object beyond a limit, through a great ordeal and against natural obstacles and vigilant patrols. In his travelogue *To Lhasa in Disguise*, published in 1924, William McGovern “raised the tantalizing question: What provokes a man to risk so much on such an arduous, dangerous, and

unnecessary journey to a place that is so manifestly unappealing when he at last gets there?" To the Tibetans, at least, such a useless trek seemed nonsensical. McGovern wrote of his efforts to explain his motives to an incredulous Tibetan official in Lhasa: "It was impossible to get him to understand the pleasures of undertaking an adventure and dangerous journey. Had I talked about anthropological research he would have thought me mad."<sup>7</sup>

The lesson to our followers of Tibetan Wisdom is thus that if we want to be Tibetans, we should forget about Tibet and do it *here*. Therein resides the ultimate paradox: The more Europeans try to penetrate the "true" Tibet, the more the very *form* of their endeavor undermines their goal. We should appreciate the full scope of this paradox, especially with regard to "Eurocentrism." The Tibetans were extremely self-centered: "To them, Tibet was the center of the world, the heart of civilization."<sup>8</sup> What characterizes European civilization, on the contrary, is precisely its *ex-centered* character—the notion that the ultimate pillar of Wisdom, the secret *agalma*, the spiritual treasure, the lost object-cause of desire, which we in the West long ago betrayed, could be recuperated out there in the forbidden exotic place. Colonization was never simply the imposition of Western values, the assimilation of the Oriental and other Others to European Sameness; it was always also the search for the lost spiritual innocence of *our own* civilization. This story begins at the very dawn of Western civilization, in Ancient Greece. For the Greeks, Egypt was such a mythic place of lost ancient wisdom.

And the same holds today in our own societies. The difference between the authentic fundamentalists and the perverted Moral Majority fundamentalists is that the first (like the Amish in the United States) get along very well with their American neighbors since they are simply centered on their own world and not bothered by what goes on out there among "them," while the Moral Majority fundamentalist is always haunted by the ambiguous attitude of horror/envy with regard to the unspeakable pleasures in which the sinners engage. The reference to Envy as one of the seven deadly sins can thus serve as a perfect instrument enabling us to distinguish authentic fundamentalism from its Moral Majority mockery: authentic fundamentalists *do not* envy their neighbors their different *jouissance*.<sup>9</sup> Envy is grounded in what one is tempted to call the "transcendental illusion" of desire, strictly correlative to the Kantian transcendental illusion: a natural "propensity" in the human being to (mis)perceive the object which gives body to the primordial lack as the object which is lacking, which was lost (and, consequently, possessed prior to this loss); this illusion sustains the longing to regain the lost object, as if this object has a positive substantial identity independently of its being lost.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is a simple and radical one: Moral Majority fundamentalists and tolerant multiculturalists are two sides of the same coin: they both share a fascination with the Other. In the Moral Majority, this

fascination displays the envious hatred of the Other's excessive *jouissance*, while the multiculturalist tolerance of the Other's Otherness is also more twisted than it may appear—it is sustained by a secret desire for the Other to remain "other," not to become too much like us. In contrast to both these positions, the only truly tolerant attitude towards the Other is that of the authentic radical fundamentalist.

1 See Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989).

2 In a strictly homologous way, the opposition between globalization and the survival of local traditions is false. Globalization directly resuscitates local traditions, it literally thrives on them, which is why the true opposite to globalization are not local traditions, but *universality*. See chapter 4 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso Books, 1999).

3 In the classic literature, one should mention Emile Zola's *Germinal*, in which the attachment to a rabbit helps the Russian revolutionary Souvarine to survive. When the rabbit is slaughtered and eaten by mistake, he explodes in an outburst of violent rage.

4 Quoted from Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000), p. 202.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

8 William McGovern, quoted in Schell, *ibid.*, p. 230.

9 Is not the obvious thing for an analyst to root Envy in the infamous penis envy? Rather than succumbing to this temptation, one should emphasize that envy is ultimately the envy of the Other's *jouissance*. My affluent business-oriented colleagues always marvel at how much work I put into theory and, comparatively, how little I earn; although their marvel is usually expressed in the terms of aggressive scorn ("How stupid you are to deal with theory!"), what obviously lurks behind is envy: the idea that, since I am not doing it for money (or power), and since they do not understand the reason I am doing it, there must be some strange *jouissance*, some satisfaction in theory accessible only to me and out of reach to them.

## THE AUTHOR

**Slavoj Žižek** is a philosopher and a researcher at Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Vienna. He is the author of many books, including *The Fragile Absolute* and *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*.

Originally published at *Cabinet Magazine*:

<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/western.php>