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Why Do We All Love to Hate Haider?

Slavoj Žižek

The prospect of Joerg Haider's Freidemokraten participation in the Austrian government aroused horror in the entire spectrum of the "legitimate democratic" political block in the Western world: from the Social Democratic Left to the Christian conservatives, from Chirac to Clinton - not to mention, of course, Israel -, they all expressed "worries" and announced at least symbolic measures of Austria's diplomatic quarantine, untill this disease disappears or is proven not really dangerous.

Some commentators perceive this horror as the proof of how the basic post-World-War-II anti-Fascist democratic consensus in Europe still holds - are, however, things really so unequivocal? The first thing to do here is to recall the well-concealed, but nonetheless unmistakable, sigh of relief in the predominant democratic political field, when, a decade ago, the Rightist populist parties became a serious presence in Europe. The message of this relief was: finally the enemy whom we can all together properly hate, whom we can sacrifice - excommunicate - in order to demonstrate our democratic consensus! This relief is to be read against the background of what is usually referred to as the emerging "post-political consensus."
The two-party system, the predominant form of politics in our

post-political era, is the appearance of a choice where there is basically none. Both poles converge on their economic policy - recall recent elevations, by Clinton and Blair, of the "tight fiscal policy" as the key tenet of the modern Left: the tight fiscal policy sustains economic growth, and growth allows us to play a more active social policy in our fight for better social security, education and health... The difference of the two parties is thus ultimately reduced to the opposed cultural attitudes: multiculturalist, sexual etc. "openness" versus traditional "family values." And, significantly, it is the Rightist option that addresses and attempts to mobilize whatever remains of the mainstream working class in our Western societies, while the multiculturalist tolerance is becoming the motto of new privileged "symbolic classes" (journalists, academics, managers...). This political choice - Social Democrat or Christian Democrat in Germany, Democrat or Republican... - cannot but remind us of our predicament when we want artificial sweetener in an American cafeteria: the all-present alternative of Nutra-Sweet Equal and High&Low, of blue and red small bags, where almost each person has his/her preferences (avoid the red ones, they contain cancerous substances, or vice-versa), where this ridiculous sticking to one's choice merely accentuates the utter meaninglessness of the alternative.

And does the same not go for late TV talk shows, where the "freedom to choose" is the choice between Jay Leno and David Letterman? Or for the soda drinks: Coke or Pepsi? It is a well-known fact that the "Close the door" button in most elevators is a totally disfunctional placebo, placed there just to give the individuals the impression that they are somehow participating, contributing to the speed of the elevator journey - when we push this button, the door closes in exactly the same time as when we just pressed the floor button without "speeding up" the process by pressing also the "Close the door" button. This extreme case of

fake participation is an appropriate metaphor of the participation of individuals in our "postmodern" political process.

And this brings us back to Haider: significantly, the only political force with the serious weight which DOES still evoke an antagonistic response of Us against Them is the new populist Right - Haider in Austria, le Pen in France, Republicans in Germany, Buchanan in the US. A strange thing took place in New York politics at the end of November 1999: Lenora Fulani, the Black activist from Harlem, has endorsed Patrick Buchanan's Reform Party presidential candidacy, declaring that she will try to bring him to Harlem and mobilize the voters there on his behalf. While both partners admitted their differences on a number of key issues, they stressed "their common economic populism, and particulary their antipathy for free trade." Wherefore this pact between Fulani, the far-Left espouser of Marxist-Leninist politics, and Buchanan, a Reaganite cold warrior and the leading Right-wing populist figure?

The liberal common wisdom has a quick answer to it: extremes - Righ and Left "totalitarianism" - meet in their rejection of democracy, and especially today, in their common inability to adapt to the new trends of the global economy. Furthermore, do they not share the anti-Semitic agenda? While the anti-Semitic bias of the radical African-Americans is well-known, who does not remember Buchanan's provocative designation of the US Congress as an "Israeli occupied territory"? Against this liberal platitudes, one should focus on what effectively unites Fulani and Buchanan: they both (pretend to) speak on behalf of the proverbial "disappearing working class." In today's ideological perception, work itself (manual labor as opposed to "symbolic" activity), not sex, becomes the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from

the public eye? The tradition which goes back to Wagner's Rheingold and Lang's Metropolis, the tradition in which the working process takes place underground, in dark caves, today culminates in the millions of anonymous workers sweating in the Third World factories, from Chinese gulags to Indonesian or Brasil assembly lines - in their invisibility, the West can afford itself to babble about the "disappearing working class." But what is crucial in this tradition is the equation of labor with crime, the idea that labor, hard work, is originally an indecent criminal activity to be hidden from the public eye.

Today, the two superpowers, USA and China, more and more relate as Capital and Labor. The US is turning into a country of managerial planning, banking, servicing, etc., while its "disappearing working class" (except for migrant Chicanos and others whi work predominantly in servicing economy) is reappearing in China, where the large part of the US products, from toys to electronc hardware, is manufactured in conditions ideal for capitalist exploitation: no strikes, limited freedom of movement of the working force, low wages... Far from being simply antagonistic, the relationship of China and US is thus at the same time deeply symbiotic. The irony of history is that China fully deserves the title "working class state": it is the state of the working class for the American capital.

The only place in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its intensity are when the action hero penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there the site of intense labor (distilling and packaging the drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York...). When, in a James Bond movie, the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory, is this not the closest

Hollywood comes to the socialist-realist proud presentation of the production in a factory? And the function of Bond's intervention, of course, is to explode in firecraks this site of production, allowing us to return to the daily semblance of our existence in a world with the "disappearing working class"...

This brings us to the reason why the new populist Right plays the key structural role in the legitimacy of the new liberal-democratic hegemony. They are the negative common denominator of the entire center-left liberal spectrum: they are the excluded ones who, through this very exclusion (their inacceptability as the party of the government) provide the negative legitimacy of the liberal hegemony, the proof of their "democratic" attitude. In this way, their existence displaces the TRUE focus of the political struggle (which is, of course, the stifling of any Leftist radical alternative) to the "solidarity" of the entire "democratic" bloc against the racist neo-Nazi etc. danger. Therein resides the ultimate proof of the liberal-democratic hegemony of today's ideologico-political scene, the hegemony which was accomplished with the emergence of the "Third Way" social democracy. The "Third Way" is precisely social democracy under the hegemony of liberal-democratic capitalism. i.e. deprived of its minimal subversive sting, excluding the last reference to anti-capitalism and class struggle.

Furthermore, it is absolutely crucial that the new Rightist populists are the only "serious" political force today which addresses the people with the anti-capitalist rhetorics, although coated in nationalist/racist/religious clothing (multinational corporations who "betray" the common decent working people of our nation). At the congress of the Front National a couple of years ago, le Pen brought to stage an Algerian, an African and a Jew, embraced them all and told the gathered public: "They are no

less French than I am - it is the representatives of the big multinational capital, ignoring their duty to France, who are the true danger to our identity!" Hypocritical as such statements are, they nonetheless signal how the populist Right is moving to occupy the terrain left vacant by the Left.

Here, the liberal-democratic New Middle (as it is called in Germany) plays a double game: it puts forward Righist populists as our common true enemy, while it effectively manipulates this Rightist scare in order to hegemonize the "democratic" field, i.e. to define the terrain and win over, discipline, its true adversary, the radical Left. And in the events like Haider's party's participation in the government (which, let us not forget, has a precedent in the Fini's neo-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale's participation in the Berlusconi government a couple of years ago in Italy!), the post-political and post-ideological New Middle gets its own message back in its inverted - true - form. The participation in the government of the far Right is the price the Left is paying for its renunciation of any radical political project, for accepting market capitalism as "the only game in town".