Žižek, Lenin, and Colonialism

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Abstract: At first, Slavoj Žižek's provocative responses to the 2001 World Trade Center attack and the 2023 al-Aqsa Flood seem to parallel each other. Yet they were received quite differently. A closer examination reveals differences in Žižek's approach to these two political events, and these differences point to deeper conceptual and political questions. Does Žižek's thought have the resources to speak to questions of national self-determination? Turning to Lenin and Žižek's engagement with Lenin, as well as to Žižek's reflections on Ukraine and his earlier writings on Palestine, I suggest that Žižek is often dismissed too quickly from conversations about anti-colonial movements – yet Žižek has not taken up the full potential of his thought to address these issues.

Keywords: Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, nationalism, self-determination, Slavoj Žižek, Vladimir Lenin

Writing in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Slavoj Žižek diagnosed a "double blackmail" that follows from such events: "If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it, we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved."[1] But these two positions do not offer a true choice, Žižek asserts. They both are products of the same underlying logic, a moral logic, one which divides individuals into the innocent and the guilty. Such a moral logic relies on empty abstractions that do not point to the world but rather essentially confirm an ideological frame. After an event like the September 11 attacks, public discourse is pulled taut by that ideological frame. *You are with us or you are against us*, and whichever you choose, you will be fitted into and so reinforce that frame.

Having diagnosed the state of public discourse, Žižek's prescription, characteristically, was to attempt a short circuit. Instead of acceding to the choice between condemning and contextualizing the attacks, he suggests that doing both, condemning and contextualizing at once, will cause such a short circuit. Then, there will be an opening to rework the terms of public discourse in a way that stretches beyond the ideological frame. Specifically, Žižek proposes that we "accept the necessity of the fight against terrorism," but we toy with the meaning of "terrorism" "so that it will also include (some) American and other Western powers' acts."[2] If this move is successful, the fight against terrorism no longer refers to a fight against bin Laden but rather to a fight against those powerful figures around the world who exploit the powerless – in other words, the fight against terrorism becomes the fight against *both* bin Laden *and* Bush.

More than twenty years later, Žižek's response to the October 7, 2023 al-Aqsa Flood took precisely the same form. On October 13, 2023, Žižek began an article on the Hamas-led operation by writing

> The barbarism that Hamas has unleashed on Israel should be condemned unconditionally, with no 'ifs' or 'buts'. The massacres, rapes, and abductions of civilians from villages, kibbutzim, and a music festival was a pogrom, confirming that Hamas's true goal is to destroy the state of Israel and all Israelis. That said, the situation demands historical context – not as any kind of justification, but for the sake of clarity about the way forward.[3]

In other words, writing at another moment when public discourse was taut with the force of an ideological frame, Žižek refuses the choice to either condemn or contextualize. He does both. In familiar fashion, he goes on to assert, "Hamas and Israeli hardliners are two sides of the same coin."[4]

Much changed, politically and technologically, between 2001 and 2023. A quarter-century ago, Žižek's reflections were lapped up by young scholars and activists frustrated with the limits of public discourse, particularly the earnestness with which the "opposition" to the War on Terror presented itself. So-called progressives and left-liberals seemed like a loyal opposition, agreeing to the terms of debate set by the hegemon, unwilling to think the universal or the utopian. At the same time, insurgent social movements proclaimed "Another World Is Possible" as they mobilized against international financial institutions. Those protests ground to a near halt after the September 11 attacks, but the instincts that inspired them primed a generation to be receptive to novel discourses on the left such as that offered by Žižek. There was a strong desire to cleave left from liberal, there was a recognition that supposedly radical thinkers such as Jacques Derrida were ultimately liberals, there was enough historical distance from Communism to stoke renewed interest in it – just the right moment for the Slovenian philosopher to step onto the stage as a global public intellectual.[5]

In contrast, Žižek's writings and talks on Palestine in 2023 were quickly condemned by both liberals and leftists. In the intervening years, a cleavage between leftists and liberals had finally taken hold in the West, at least at the level of political identity (the question of political thought and practice is more ambiguous). At the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Žižek spoke less than two weeks after al-Aqsa Flood, the liberal audience heckled him for contextualizing (after condemning) – heckles which he used to illustrate the limits of liberal commitment to diversity and inclusion.[6] In opinion pieces and social media posts, leftists (many of whom had already soured on Žižek for other reasons) pounced on Žižek for his condemnation of Hamas's "barbarism" and allegedly genocidal intent.[7] The choose-both strategy that Žižek had employed effectively

previously now seemed to fail, with the contours and speed of public discourse altered.

But there is another story to tell about the difference between Žižek's interventions in 2001 and 2023. In the former, Žižek's attempt at a short circuit was immediately followed by an experimental reconfiguration of discourse, redefining "terrorist" in order to shift our attention to the struggle between the powerful and the powerless. In contrast, the option that Žižek describes as "utopian" in his reflections on al-Aqsa Flood, the alternative to the choice between Palestinian and Israeli "fundamentalists," is "peaceful co-existence."[8] Žižek's idea, it seems, is that the masses on both sides, and around the world, can unite in the "utopian" dream of "peaceful co-existence" and turn against the "fundamentalist" leaders on both sides. But is this really redefining the terms of the discourse? Is it not the case that the discourse (internationally and within Palestine/Israel) is configured around an opposition between nationalists and those who seek peaceful coexistence, in other words, between those who condemn and those who contextualize? This is one way of reading the reaction to Žižek's remarks at the Frankfurt Book Fair: it was transparent to the audience that he was on the side of those who contextualize, even as he tried to position himself as breaking open new discursive possibilities.

What is most interesting, in exploring Žižek's successful and failed interventions, is that the difference points to a deeper conceptual and political issue. The 2001 intervention had to do with empire and global capital; the 2023 intervention had to do with colonialism and self-determination. Do the same theoretical maneuvers that successfully address the former fail when confronting the latter?

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One of Žižek's political heroes, Vladimir Lenin, offered a remarkably subtle response to the question of national self-determination.[9] In the late nineteenth and twentieth century context in which Lenin was formed, this question was unavoidable, and it occasioned rigorous debates between leading figures in Marxism. (One of Lenin's key texts resulted from a debate with Rosa Luxemburg; Stalin would contribute to these debates as well. Of course, Fanon and others would pick up and reimagine them.) The geography and demographics of Europe and Russia both pressed Marxist theorists to reflect on self-determination – as did the existence of non-European colonies.

Lenin's reflections grow out of a struggle to define orthodoxy: to draw on authoritative texts, not only of Marx and Engels but of Party congresses, to apply their concepts to the empirical realities of the contemporary world, and to iteratively refine a political position through debate with others who hold similar commitments. Out of this process, Lenin presented a bedrock principle: every nation has the right to self-

determination. The subtlety comes in how this principle applies to the world, for Lenin concludes that just because a right exists, it need not be exercised, and it need not be a political priority. When a claim to self-determination is made, Marxists must carefully analyze the local history, economy, society, and politics to decide whether it warrants political support. Lenin makes the analogy: there is a right to free association, but that does not mean Marxists must support every association, and it may mean that they actively oppose some associations.

Beyond empirical analysis, what determines whether Marxists ought to support and prioritize a certain claim to self-determination? Marxists side with the working class, the proletariat. In many contexts where a nation is making a claim to self-determination, it is really the middle class, the bourgeoisie, that is leading – or using – the claim to further its self-interest at the expense of the working class. The Marxists' goal, famously, is to unite the workers of the world, that is, to unite the working class in each national context in order to overthrow the power of capital. It may be useful, in pursuing that goal, to support claims to national self-determination; in other cases, it may be more useful to ignore or oppose claims to national self-determination. This is where the empirical analysis comes in: the Marxist must understand the local landscape in which a claim to national self-determination arises in order to discern whether it will further or hinder the project of international proletarian revolution, the only sort of proletarian revolution that has a chance of success.

Lenin points out that, in approaching these questions, we must think about them not in the abstract, but through the eyes of a worker. Is it the case that, in the factory, working alongside colleagues from another national group, worker solidarity is growing – for example, in some areas of Russia? Might that worker solidarity diminish if the nations were separated into different political entities, with worker interests and affections redirected to their own nation-state, which may really mean, those interests and affections being captured by the bourgeoisie of their nation-state? Or, might it be the case – for example, in many non-European colonies – that the anti-colonial struggle is closely aligned with the anti-capitalist struggle, with colonial overlords representing, and in some cases precisely instantiating, the interests of capital?[10]

Here is the other subtle aspect of Lenin's account of national self-determination: Marxists must oppose ill-treatment of anyone because of their nationality, but Marxists must be wary of affirming any national culture. As Lenin writes, "Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight *for* any kind of national development, *for* 'national culture' in general? Of course not." In other words, Marxists should, say, call out the British worker for belittling their Irish brethren, but the Marxist should not prioritize celebrations of Irish culture. If the Marxist is successful at preventing ill-treatment of the Irish worker, the Irish worker's felt need for national self-determination will diminish, and their sense of solidarity with their British

brethren will increase. The Marxist, recall, continues to support the right of self-determination, but ultimately pursues worker unity; if worker unity can develop without exercising the right of self-determination, all the better. Celebrating Irish culture, say, could distort this process, blocking intuitions toward worker solidarity. Again, these determinations are complex and require careful attention to context: "The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within *definite* historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country ... that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch."

Beyond the right to self-determination and the imperative to worker solidarity, for Lenin most everything else is pragmatic, that is, matters of political judgment and practical wisdom rather than principle. The result is that Marxists may find themselves working side-by-side with liberals in pursuing national self-determination, for example, in colonial contexts. When that happens, Marxists must retain their own distinctive identity – Communist parties – within broader liberation movements. Further, Marxists must be particularly warry of alternative ideologies that seek to guide national liberation movements in the name of broader ideals while really concealing the interests of the wealthy and powerful: Lenin calls out "Pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc." (We could, of course, suggest that there are more complex ways of articulating Pan-Islamism with Marxism, as demonstrated by the Parti des Indigènes de la République in France.[11])

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In recent writings reflecting on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Žižek has embraced Lenin's ideas about national self-determination. In theory and, in the early years of the Soviet Union, in practice, Lenin held fast to the right to self-determination – in stark contrast to Tsarist Russian policy beforehand and Stalinist Soviet policy after. Indeed, in power, Lenin did more than oppose ill-treatment based on national origin. On Žižek's telling, Lenin "encouraged a revival of Ukrainian culture and language" which, coupled with Soviet social welfare programs, led to Ukrainian flourishing.[12] It was only in the 1930s that the tide turned, with Stalin centralizing power, decimating the Ukrainian leadership, and causing massive famine. Effectively, Stalin transformed an alliance of national worker parties into a colonial relationship. In Žižek's telling, Vladimir Putin is now aligning himself with Stalin (and the Tsarists) against the brief, multi-nationalist opening offered by Lenin. This allows Žižek to portray the Russia-Ukraine conflict as one of straightforward colonialism, with Putin denying the Ukrainians' right to self-determination. In the name of

“proletarian internationalism,” Žižek asserts that the left should get on board with supporting Ukraine, getting over its qualms about aligning with the NATO military-industrial machine.[13]

Before al-Aqsa Flood, Žižek was comfortable using the framework of colonialism to approach Palestine.[14] For example:

> To really condemn Russia’s colonialism, we should consider Ukraine alongside other neocolonial cases, like that of Israel and Palestine. It is true that Israel is not occupying the West Bank as the result of an invasion but after the 1967 war, which the Arab nations lost, and that its regime of military occupation has lasted for over half a century. But the fact that the large majority of West Bank Palestinians were born under occupation, without a clear prospect of gaining some kind of statehood, and forced to helplessly watch as their land gets gradually appropriated by Jewish settlers, makes their resistance more than understandable. But still, while our media are full of praise for Ukraine’s ‘heroic resistance’, solidarity with those West Bank Palestinians who resist the expansion of illegal settlements is rare.[15]

In contrast, after al-Aqsa Flood, Žižek turned away from the colonial frame. Writing in December 2023, Žižek notes the increasing “genocidal rhetoric” of Israeli politicians, and he worries that the Israeli attacks are “giving Palestinians one choice: to accept Hamas as the only voice that is fighting for them.” Žižek asserts, “Peace will only emerge when Palestinians are allowed to organise themselves as a strong independent political force, broadly democratic and rejecting all forms of religious fundamentalism.”[16] Where before, Žižek presented Palestine and Ukraine in parallel, with qualifications, now is focus is on their dissimilarity. He writes, “In the case of the Palestinians and their Israeli neighbours, a compromise between the two peoples is the only way out, while Ukraine is a victim of brutal aggression and has the full right to persevere until victory.”[17] In Lenin’s terms, Žižek’s claim might be something like: there is a right to Palestinian self-determination just as there is a right to Ukrainian self-determination, but, given the empirical texture of these contexts, Marxists (or leftists) ought to advocate for Ukrainian but not Palestinian self-determination. (This is, in fact, the opposite of Lenin’s usual instinct – that in Europe, co-existence is generally the better goal whereas beyond Europe, because of economic and political conditions, national self-determination is more often the better goal.)

But what really seems to be bothering Žižek here is something else. Why? Because it seems unlikely that either the empirical texture of Palestine/Israel changed in a way that would warrant a different framework for analysis over the course of a few months, from just before al-Aqsa Flood to just after. And Žižek gives no indication that the event itself pushed him to revise his previous analysis or notice different facts

about the situation. What seems to have changed, rather, is the role of Palestine in public discourse; specifically, in leftist discourse.

Žižek came to prominence by questioning left-liberal orthodoxies, the political views that accompanied "postmodern" philosophy and were dependent on the ideology of the powerful even as they purported to challenge those orthodoxies. After al-Aqsa Flood, Palestine became a symbol of left-liberal orthodoxy: in certain spaces, "Zionist" became almost synonymous with "fascist," keffiyehs necessarily accompanied covid masks and rainbow flags, and every article started or ended with lines from Darwish. The political terrain had shifted in ways that put pressure on Žižek's rhetorical repertoire. What had once been left-liberal was now explicitly and enthusiastically left-not-liberal, often socialist, or Marxist, or even communist.[18] The effect of Žižek's discursive maneuvering was no longer to cleave left from liberal but to indict the left – even as the aim may have remained constant, for it seems likely that, in Žižek's view, the blossoming left is still infected by liberal tendencies, they just manifest in new ways. Žižek suggests regarding a different set of issues that "woke" is the new multiculturalism and trans rights advocates are not so different from corporate feminists.

In the case of Palestine, Žižek concludes, "In the new world order that is emerging, the Gaza war is a nodal point that condenses all the defining antagonisms of the modern era. It is where everything will be decided. 'Palestine' today is a universal symbol – a stand-in for all European sins."[19] Put another way, discourse about Palestine does not disrupt or short-circuit public discourse. It serves as the loyal opposition to the ideology of the powerful, operating in the horizon set out by that ideology; indeed, naming that horizon. This is what changed after al-Aqsa Flood, it seems: what had once been one issue among many became *the* issue, a symbol of leftist identity in the same way that, a quarter of a century earlier, the World Trade Center had been a symbol of capitalist identity.

With this understanding of the discursive landscape, Žižek makes a characteristically provocative claim. In contrast to the emerging leftist orthodoxy that decolonization ought not be treated as a metaphor, that it should point to actual land return, Žižek asserts that decolonization "often *is* a metaphor for another process."[20] Specifically, he charges that decolonization often stands for the shift from one class of rulers to another, from colonial elites to postcolonial elites – with the latter at times embracing the language of decolonization to bolster their own standing. Put another way, the leftist framing of Palestine as a question of colonialism, as *the* question of colonialism, obscures the class struggle in much the same way that Žižek thinks other contemporary left orthodoxies (e.g., around "woke") obscure the class struggle. Note that this is a point about political discourse rather than political practice: it is not the result of analyzing the empirical conditions in Palestine as they relate to the class struggle in the way Lenin advised.

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This difference, between political discourse and political practice, is what especially bothers some of Žižek's critics. For Žižek himself, true to his Lacanian-Marxist commitments, there is a way in which maneuvering in discourse, including trying to short-circuit it, is all we can do: it just *is* political practice. For his leftist critics, the political discourse in which Žižek intervenes is distinctively Western and elite, or at least middle brow. For them, it is only the bourgeoisie that is trapped in discourse – The Discourse, as social media has thematized itself – while the actually existing working class, and especially the working class in the global South, encounters the friction of the world directly and so has only a surface-level investment in political discourse.

With a rather tiresome earnestness, such critics chronicle Žižek's "Eurocentrism" and his sometimes uncomfortable proximity to the centers of power that his work ostensibly criticizes.[21] Indeed, the contrast in tone is stark and telling. Žižek is famously light and witty, leaping from one corner of discourse to another to demonstrate their connections and underlying logics whereas his postcolonial and sectarian socialist critics are often attached to empirical realities which they ponderously catalog. Both of these tones contrast with that of Lenin. Yes, Lenin was a polemicist, but he was also deeply engaged in explicating a tradition of thought, moving between inherited conceptual tools and complex, changing realities – a movement grounded in and guided by a commitment to that singular phrase, *workers of the world unite*. Žižek celebrates this posture of dynamic orthodoxy, but it is not the posture that he himself adopts. In his view, it would seem, if the world is fully saturated by The Discourse, political intervention must look different than it did a century earlier.

The World Trade Center attacks were a perfect fit for Žižek's analysis. They gained their power by their theatricality, by pressing a pressure point in the cultural imaginary – and George W. Bush offered an equally theatrical response. Violent discourse was inextricably entwined with physical violence, with those killed on September 11 and the many, many victims of US empire before and after. As Žižek so effectively laid out, to respond in a tone of earnestness was to embrace the affective circuitry of the powerful. On the streets, activists who had embraced the radically utopian spirit of the World Social Forum and the global justice movement before September 11 brought some of this creative energy to protest the subsequent US invasions.[22] Like Occupy Wall Street, these were often political performances that resonated with Žižek's thought and produced moments of mutual recognition.

Struggles for national self-determination operate according to a rather different affective circuitry, even as they are, indeed, elevated into symbols that point far beyond themselves. Part of the trouble here, and Žižek's wariness, may have to do with the sense of self embedded in self-

determination.[23] When Marxism is coupled with psychoanalysis, affirming the autonomy of a desiring self begins to sound rather quaint. Žižek's instinct is always to look for splits within the self; in the case of national self-determination, that means attending to the duality of the nascent nation-state, the split between elites (e.g., Hamas) and the powerless (e.g., ordinary Palestinians). Setting aside the empirical question of whether Žižek understands Hamas properly, e.g., whether Hamas, as a national political movement, properly parallels Al Qaeda, a transnational religious movement, the general point indeed holds: the self is split, and this split sets the stage for the powerless to struggle. Lenin recognized this, too, and he warned that the manipulation of national self-determination movements was inevitable.

And yet: Lenin also saw the need for political judgment. That means appreciating complexities and risks, and making a decision – to back or oppose a claim to national self-determination, to draw attention to or away from the split self. Such a decision is taken strategically, carefully. It is a political decision, and it must not be entranced by the mythology that is, always, national culture, even as it fully supports a national cause (*mutatis mutandis*, it must not be entranced by the mythology of the human self, even as it provisionally relies on the self to pursue political projects).[24] The goal is not so different from the Žižekian short circuit. When the ostensibly benevolent, ostensibly liberal colonial overlord is exposed for what it is, for the violence and power that it wields against a national minority or colony, it primes the powerless back at home to question whether the ruling class really has their interests at heart. Then, the Palestine protest slips into a student debt protest, a labor rights protest, a climate change protest – a revolutionary movement.

Struggles for national self-determination, at their best, are opportunities to think the universal, and to taste the universal.[25] At their worst, they are tethered to the earth, to the supposed empirical realities of culture and peoplehood, which necessarily brings management and elite rulership. Žižek is right that Palestine has become a "universal symbol" – but to reach for the universal, as Žižek himself often suggests, is not necessarily a bad thing. Though it can be. In the context of such risky struggles, the properly Žižekian discursive intervention, the intervention that aims at a short circuit, is one that draws attention to those openings to the universal amidst the pull of the particular. This is where left and liberal must be clarified and cleaved today. The Palestinian struggle since al-Aqsa Flood has already made it self-evident that many supposed liberals nothing of the kind; their reactionary, genocidal impulses are exposed for all to see. The hard question, the one that needs intervention by discursive savants like Žižek, is how, in the growing solidarity movement, to direct attention away from the liberal, legalistic, and humanitarian impulses, away from adventurist enthusiasm, away from poems and textile projects, and toward the unimaginable.

1 Žižek 2002, p. 50
2 Žižek 2002, p. 51
3 Žižek 2023a.
4 Žižek 2023a.
5 Some of this context and Žižek's emergence is explored further in Bar-El 2025.
6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YXU9iFzeFI
7 For example, Khader 2023.
8 Žižek 2023a.
9 Lenin's writings on self-determination are collected: https://foreignlanguages.press/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/C40-The-Right-of-Nations-to-Self-Determination-Lenin-1st-Printing-FINAL.pdf. See also Prashad 2020.
10 National movements are a stage in the path from feudalism to capitalism, according to Lenin, but this historical path looks different outside of Europe.
11 Bouteldja 2017; Bouteldja 2024.
12 Žižek 2024b, Chapter 1.
13 See also Žižek 2022.
14 For an assessment of Žižek's earlier writings on Palestine, see Zalloua 2019.
15 Žižek 2024b, Conclusion. Žižek has a curious habit of turning his attention from Gaza to the West Bank, where it seems he has spent time and built relationships, but which presents a quite different political context.
16 Žižek 2023b.
17 Žižek 2023b.
18 While there is certainly more discursive space for unabashedly left politics in the US and Europe than there was a quarter century ago, the stability of this left space remains in question. When it comes to combatting populist-authoritarianism, when it comes to pandemic response, when it comes to elite educational institutions and, more broadly, the institutions that keep the professional-managerial class afloat, the left-liberal distinction fades.
19 Žižek 2024a.
20 Žižek 2023b.
21 For example, Menon 2010; Rockhill 2023.
22 For an account of this background, see Graeber 2009.
23 See, e.g., Žižek 1999.
24 I am obviously abbreviated and sidestepping the complex political philosophical questions here; see, for example, Johnston 2009.
25 See Wilder 2015; Hallward 2002. In other words, anti-colonial movements need not be reduced to a sort of internationalized form of multiculturalism, as Žižek at times seems to do, e.g., in Žižek 2008.

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