Пише: Slavoj Žižek
среда, 22 јул 2009 14:26

When an authoritarian regime approaches its final crisis, but before its actual collapse, a mysterious rupture often takes place. All of a sudden, people know the game is up: they simply cease to be afraid. It isn't just that the regime loses its legitimacy: its exercise of power is now perceived as a panic reaction, a gesture of impotence. Ryszard Kapuściński, in *Shah of Shahs*, his account of the Khomeini revolution, located the precise moment of this rupture: at a Tehran crossroad, a single demonstrator refused to budge when a policeman shouted at him to move, and the embarrassed policeman withdrew. Within a couple of hours, all Tehran had heard about the incident, and although the streetfighting carried on for weeks, everyone somehow knew it was all over. Is something similar happening now?

There are many versions of last month's events in Tehran. Some see in the protests the culmination of the pro-Western 'reform movement', something along the lines of the colour-coded revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. They support the protests as a secular reaction to the Khomeini revolution, as the first step towards a new liberal-democratic Iran freed from Muslim fundamentalism. They are countered by sceptics who think that Ahmadinejad actually won, that he is the voice of the majority, while Mousavi's support comes from the middle classes and their gilded youth. Let's face facts, they say: in Ahmadinejad, Iran has the president it deserves. Then there are those who dismiss Mousavi as a member of the clerical establishment whose differences from Ahmadinejad are merely cosmetic. He too wants to continue with the atomic energy programme, is against recognising Israel, and when he was prime minister in the repressive years of the war with Iraq enjoyed the full support of Khomeini.

Finally, and saddest of all, are the leftist supporters of Ahmadinejad. What is at stake for them is Iranian freedom from imperialism. Ahmadinejad won because he stood up for the country's independence, exposed corruption among the elite and used Iran's oil wealth to boost the incomes of the poor majority. This, we are told, is the true Ahmadinejad: the Holocaust-denying fanatic is a creation of the Western media. In this view, what's been happening in Iran is a repetition of the 1953 overthrow of Mossadegh – a coup, financed by the West, against the legitimate premier. This not only ignores the facts (the high electoral turnout, up from the usual 55 to 85 per cent, can be explained only as a protest vote), it also assumes, patronisingly, that Ahmadinejad is good enough for the backward Iranians: they aren't yet sufficiently mature to be ruled by a secular left.

Opposed to one another though they are, all these versions read the Iranian protests as a conflict between Islamic hardliners and pro-Western liberal reformists. 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. This was evident in the way the crowds behaved: the emphatic unity of the people, their creative self-organisation and improvised forms of protest, the unique mixture of spontaneity and discipline. Picture the march: thousands of men and women demonstrating in complete silence. This was a genuine popular uprising on the part of the deceived partisans of the Khomeini revolution. We should contrast the events in Iran with the US intervention in Iraq: an assertion of popular will on the one hand, a foreign imposition of democracy on the other. The events in Iran can also be read as a comment on the platitudes of Obama's Cairo speech, which focused on the dialogue between religions: no, we don't need a dialogue between religions (or civilisations), we need a bond of political solidarity between those who struggle for justice in Muslim countries and those who participate in the same struggle elsewhere.

Two crucial observations follow. First, Ahmadinejad is not the hero of the Islamist poor, but a corrupt Islamofascist populist, a kind of Iranian Berlusconi whose mixture of clownish posturing and ruthless power politics is causing unease even among the ayatollahs. His demagogic distribution of crumbs to the poor shouldn't deceive us: he has the backing not only of the organs of police repression and a very Westernised PR apparatus. He is also supported by a powerful new class of Iranians who have become rich thanks to the regime's corruption – the Revolutionary Guard is not a working-class militia, but a mega-corporation, the most powerful centre of wealth in the country.

Second, we have to draw a clear distinction between the two main candidates opposed to Ahmadinejad, 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. It was a utopian dream, but one can't deny the genuinely utopian aspect of what was so much more than a hardline Islamist takeover. Now is the time to remember the effervescence that followed the revolution, the explosion of political and social creativity, organisational experiments and debates among students and ordinary people. That this explosion had to be stifled demonstrates that the revolution was an authentic political event, an *opening* that unleashed altogether new forces of social transformation: a moment in which 'everything seemed possible.' What followed was a gradual closing-down of possibilities as the Islamic establishment took political control. To put it in Freudian terms, today's protest movement is the 'return of the repressed' of the Khomeini revolution.

What all this means is that there is a genuinely liberatory potential in Islam: we don't have to go back to the tenth century to find a 'good' Islam, we have it right here, in front of us. The future is uncertain – the popular explosion has been contained, and the regime will regain ground. However, it will no longer be seen the same way: it will be just one more corrupt authoritarian government. Ayatollah Khamenei will lose whatever remained of his status as a principled spiritual leader elevated above the fray and appear as what he is – one opportunistic politician among many. But whatever the outcome, it is vital to keep in mind that we have witnessed a great emancipatory event which doesn't fit within the frame of a struggle between pro-Western liberals and anti-Western fundamentalists. If we don't see this, if as a consequence of our cynical pragmatism, we have lost the capacity to recognise the promise of emancipation, we in the West will have entered a post-democratic era, ready for our own Ahmadinejads. Italians already know his name: Berlusconi. Others are waiting in line.

Is there a link between Ahmadinejad and Berlusconi? Isn't it preposterous even to compare Ahmadinejad with a democratically elected Western leader? Unfortunately, it isn't: the two are part of the same global process. If there is one person to whom monuments will be built a hundred years from now, Peter Sloterdijk once remarked, it is Lee Kuan Yew, the Singaporean leader who thought up and put into practice a 'capitalism with Asian values'. The virus of authoritarian capitalism is slowly but surely spreading around the globe. Deng Xiaoping praised Singapore as the model that all of China should follow. Until now, capitalism has always seemed to be inextricably linked with democracy; it's true there were, from time to time, episodes of direct dictatorship, but, after a decade or two, democracy again imposed itself (in South Korea, for example, or Chile). Now, however, the link between democracy and capitalism has been broken.

This doesn't mean, needless to say, that we should renounce democracy in favour of capitalist progress, but that we should confront the limitations of parliamentary representative democracy. The American journalist Walter Lippmann coined the term 'manufacturing consent', later made famous by Chomsky, but Lippmann intended it in a positive way. Like Plato, he saw the public as a great beast or a bewildered herd, floundering in the 'chaos of local opinions'. The herd, he wrote in *Public Opinion* (1922), must be governed by 'a specialised class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality': an elite class acting to circumvent the primary defect of democracy, which is its inability to bring about the ideal of the 'omni-competent citizen'. There is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is manifestly true; the mystery is that, knowing it, we continue to play the game. We act as though we were free, not only accepting but even demanding that an invisible injunction tell us what to do and think.

In this sense, in a democracy, the ordinary citizen is effectively a king, but a king in a

constitutional democracy, a king whose decisions are merely formal, whose function is to sign measures proposed by the executive. The problem of democratic legitimacy is homologous to the problem of constitutional democracy: how to protect the dignity of the king? How to make it seem that the king effectively decides, when we all know this is not true? What we call the 'crisis of democracy' isn't something that happens when people stop believing in their own power but, on the contrary, when they stop trusting the elites, when they perceive that the throne is empty, that the decision is now theirs. 'Free elections' involve a minimal show of politeness when those in power pretend that they do not really hold the power, and ask us to decide freely if we want to grant it to them.

Alain Badiou has proposed a distinction between two types (or rather levels) of corruption in democracy: the first, empirical corruption, is what we usually understand by the term, but the second pertains to the form of democracy per se, and the way it reduces politics to the negotiation of private interests. This distinction becomes visible in the (rare) case of an honest 'democratic' politician who, while fighting empirical corruption, nonetheless sustains the formal space of the other sort. (There is, of course, also the opposite case of the empirically corrupted politician who acts on behalf of the dictatorship of Virtue.)

'If democracy means representation,' Badiou writes in *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, 'it is first of all the representation of the general system that bears its forms. In other words: electoral democracy is only representative in so far as it is first of all the consensual representation of capitalism, or of what today has been renamed the "market economy". This is its underlying corruption.'
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At the empirical level multi-party liberal democracy 'represents' – mirrors, registers, measures – the quantitative dispersal of people's opinions, what they think about the parties' proposed programmes and about their candidates etc. However, in a more radical, 'transcendental' sense, multi-party liberal democracy 'represents' – instantiates – a certain vision of society, politics and the role of the individuals in it. Multi-party liberal democracy 'represents' a precise vision of social life in which politics is organised so that parties compete in elections to exert control over the state legislative and executive apparatus. This transcendental frame is never neutral – it privileges certain values and practices – and this becomes palpable in moments of crisis or indifference, when we experience the inability of the democratic system to register what people want or think. In the UK elections of 2005, for example, despite Tony Blair's growing unpopularity, there was no way for this disaffection to find political expression. Something was obviously very wrong here: it wasn't that people didn't know what they wanted, but rather that cynicism, or resignation, prevented them from acting.

This is not to say that democratic elections should be despised; the point is only to insist that they are not in themselves an indication of the true state of affairs; as a rule, they tend to reflect

the predominant *doxa*. Take an unproblematic example: France in 1940. Even Jacques Duclos, the number two in the French Communist Party, admitted that if, at that point in time, free elections had been held in France, Marshal Pétain would have won with 90 per cent of the vote. When De Gaulle refused to acknowledge France's capitulation and continued to resist, he claimed that only he, and not the Vichy regime, spoke on behalf of the true France (not, note, on behalf of the 'majority of the French'). He was claiming to be speaking the truth even if it had no democratic legitimacy and was clearly opposed to the opinion of the majority of the French people. There *can* be democratic elections which enact a moment of truth: elections in which, against its sceptical-cynical inertia, the majority momentarily 'awakens' and votes against the hegemonic opinion; however, that such elections are so exceptional shows that they are not as such a medium of truth.

It is democracy's authentic potential that is losing ground with the rise of authoritarian capitalism, whose tentacles are coming closer and closer to the West. The change always takes place in accordance with a country's values: Putin's capitalism with 'Russian values' (the brutal display of power), Berlusconi's capitalism with 'Italian values' (comical posturing). Both Putin and Berlusconi rule in democracies which are gradually being reduced to an empty shell, and, in spite of the rapidly worsening economic situation, they both enjoy popular support (more than two-thirds of the electorate). No wonder they are personal friends: each of them has a habit of 'spontaneous' outbursts (which, in Putin's case, are prepared in advance in conformity with the Russian 'national character'). From time to time, Putin likes to use a dirty word or utter an obscene threat. When, a couple of years ago, a Western journalist asked him an awkward question about Chechnya, Putin snapped back that, if the man wasn't yet circumcised, he was cordially invited to Moscow, where they have excellent surgeons who would cut a little more radically than usual.

Berlusconi is a significant figure, and Italy an experimental laboratory where our future is being worked out. If our political choice is between permissive-liberal technocratism and fundamentalist populism, Berlusconi's great achievement has been to reconcile the two, to embody both at the same time. It is arguably this combination which makes him unbeatable, at least in the near future: the remains of the Italian 'left' are now resigned to him as their fate. This is perhaps the saddest aspect of his reign: his democracy is a democracy of those who win by default, who rule through cynical demoralisation.

Berlusconi acts more and more shamelessly: not only ignoring or neutralising legal investigations into his private business interests, but behaving in such a way as to undermine his dignity as head of state. The dignity of classical politics stems from its elevation above the play of particular interests in civil society: politics is 'alienated' from civil society, it presents itself as the ideal sphere of the *citoyen* in contrast to the conflict of selfish interests that characterise the *bourgeois*. Berlusconi has effectively abolished this

alienation: in today's Italy, state power is directly exerted by the *bourgeois*, who openly exploits it as a means to protect his own economic interest, and who parades his personal life as if he were taking part in a reality TV show.

The last tragic US president was Richard Nixon: he was a crook, but a crook who fell victim to the gap between his ideals and ambitions on the one hand, and political realities on the other. With Ronald Reagan (and Carlos Menem in Argentina), a different figure entered the stage, a 'Teflon' president no longer expected to stick to his electoral programme, and therefore impervious to factual criticism (remember how Reagan's popularity went up after every public appearance, as journalists enumerated his mistakes). This new presidential type mixes 'spontaneous' outbursts with ruthless manipulation.

The wager behind Berlusconi's vulgarities is that the people will identify with him as embodying the mythic image of the average Italian: I am one of you, a little bit corrupt, in trouble with the law, in trouble with my wife because I'm attracted to other women. Even his grandiose enactment of the role of the noble politician, *il cavaliere*, is more like an operatic poor man's dream of greatness. Yet we shouldn't be fooled: behind the clownish mask there is a state power that functions with ruthless efficiency. Perhaps by laughing at Berlusconi we are already playing his game. A technocratic economic administration combined with a clownish façade does not suffice, however: something more is needed. That something is fear, and here Berlusconi's two-headed dragon enters: immigrants and 'communists' (Berlusconi's generic name for anyone who attacks him, including the *Economist*).

Kung Fu Panda, the 2008 cartoon hit, provides the basic co-ordinates for understanding the ideological situation I have been describing. The fat panda dreams of becoming a kung fu warrior. He is chosen by blind chance (beneath which lurks the hand of destiny, of course), to be the hero to save his city, and succeeds. But the film's pseudo-Oriental spiritualism is constantly undermined by a cynical humour. The surprise is that this continuous making-fun-of-itself makes it no less spiritual: the film ultimately takes the butt of its endless jokes seriously. A well-known anecdote about Niels Bohr illustrates the same idea. Surprised at seeing a horseshoe above the door of Bohr's country house, a visiting scientist said he didn't believe that horseshoes kept evil spirits out of the house, to which Bohr answered: 'Neither do I; I have it there because I was told that it works just as well if one doesn't believe in it!' This is how ideology functions today: nobody takes democracy or justice seriously, we are all aware that they are corrupt, but we practise them anyway because we assume they work even if we don't believe in them. Berlusconi is our own Kung Fu Panda. As the Marx Brothers might have put it, 'this man may look like a corrupt idiot and act like a corrupt idiot, but don't let that deceive

you – he *is* a corrupt idiot.'

To get a glimpse of the reality beneath this deception, call to mind the events of July 2008, when the Italian government proclaimed a state of emergency in the whole of Italy as a response to the illegal entry of immigrants from North Africa and Eastern Europe. At the beginning of August, it made a show of deploying 4000 armed soldiers to control sensitive points in big cities (train stations, commercial centres and so on.) A state of emergency was introduced without any great fuss: life was to go on as normal. Is this not the state we are approaching in developed countries all around the world, where this or that form of emergency (against the terrorist threat, against immigrants) is simply accepted as a measure necessary to guarantee the normal run of things?

What is the reality of this state of emergency? On 7 August 2007, a crew of seven Tunisian fishermen dropped anchor 30 miles south of the island of Lampedusa off Sicily. Awakened by screams, they saw a rubber boat crammed with starving people – 44 African migrants, as it turned out – on the point of sinking. The captain decided to bring them to the nearest port, at Lampedusa, where his entire crew was arrested. On 20 September, the fishermen went on trial in Sicily for the crime of 'aiding and abetting illegal immigration'. If convicted, they would get between one and 15 years in jail. Everyone agreed that the real point of this absurd trial was to dissuade other boats from doing the same: no action was taken against other fishermen who, when they found themselves in similar situations, apparently beat the migrants away with sticks, leaving them to drown. What the incident demonstrates is that Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* – the figure excluded from the civil order, who can be killed with impunity – is being realised not only in the US war on terror, but also in Europe, the supposed bastion of human rights and humanitarianism.

The formula of 'reasonable anti-semitism' was best formulated in 1938 by Robert Brasillach, who saw himself as a 'moderate' anti-semite:

We grant ourselves permission to applaud Charlie Chaplin, a half Jew, at the movies; to admire Proust, a half Jew; to applaud Yehudi Menuhin, a Jew; and the voice of Hitler is carried over radio waves named after the Jew Hertz . . . We don't want to kill anyone, we don't want to organise any pogroms. But we also think that the best way to hinder the always unpredictable actions of instinctual anti-semitism is to organise a reasonable anti-semitism.

Our governments righteously reject populist racism as 'unreasonable' by our democratic

standards, and instead endorse ‘reasonably’ racist protective measures. ‘We grant ourselves permission to applaud African and Eastern European sportsmen, Asian doctors, Indian software programmers,’ today’s Brasillachs, some of them social democrats, are telling us. ‘We don’t want to kill anyone, we don’t want to organise any pogroms. But we also think that the best way to hinder the always unpredictable, violent actions of the instinctual anti-immigrant is to organise reasonable anti-immigrant protection.’ A clear passage from direct barbarism to Berlusconian barbarism with a human face.

http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n14/zize01_.html

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[1] *The Meanings of Sarkozy* by Alain Badiou, translated by David Fernbach (Verso, 117 pp., £12.99, February, 978 1 84467 309 4).