

Logos

a journal of modern society & culture

Left Dogmatism, Charismatic Authority, and the Uninitiated

by Felix Bernstein

“Who is more powerful: the one who calls another a dictator with impunity or the one so-called?”— Saint-Just (Andress, 375)

During the two and a half hour stretch of Andrzej Wajda’s 1983 historic drama *Danton*, we watch Robespierre degenerate from a composed, well-dressed statesman, arguing on behalf of Enlightenment ideals into a megalomaniac, who would kill his close friend (the titular Danton) to maintain power.



Yet more haunting than the main plot is the opening shots of Robespierre’s son, numbly repeating revolutionary maxims from Robespierre’s “The Rights of Man,” then being wacked by his mother upon messing up. The tour-de-force antics of the crazed revolutionary leader shock little in comparison to the child spoon-fed zeitgeist politics in a climate where the definition of revolutionary changed so swiftly that Robespierre too was hoisted by the tribunal’s petard.

Danton served as a potent and, at the time, highly controversial commentary on the violence of Eastern European communism and socialism (Frey, 62). But more generally, the film illustrates that

famous critique of Rousseauvian democracy's ties to totalitarianism, offered most potently by Hannah Arendt—for the general will (*volonté générale*) to manifest, it must crush the will of the people (the individual, the minority) in the name of the people (the majority, the ruler). Education is a particularly visible site to view the way the general will is inflicted onto the uninitiated. Wadja does not shy away from presenting the grotesquery of this process.

Despite the disturbing pathos of the instruction of Robespierre's son, the boy is not pictured as a clichéd pitiable, dumb, innocent, supple child being inaugurated cruelly into paternalistic rule. Rather, the child is indifferent, ambivalent, and relatively enigmatic, never seen speaking with his own words, and barely flinching from his mother's whacks. This brings the film out of a mere critique of Rousseau's political philosophy and into a critique of Rousseau's liberal education Ur-text *Emile*. Famously, *Emile*'s instructor purports to instruct towards the right, natural, pure, and uncorrupted. But at every turn, he is seen to mediate and facilitate the results of very specific moral lessons that help inaugurate *Emile* into a strictly fixed set of rules of the competitive, patriarchal marketplace.

Emile's private desires are eventually vanquished in favor of public civility. But ingeniously, at the start *Emile* is initially taught to cultivate a primal love of self (*amour de soi*). Only after he's been satiated as an individual can his selfishness be critiqued and surpassed. Finally, his desires can turn outwards towards the world, the collective, and the general will. In loving himself through the veil of the other (*amour propre*), he skirts wickedness but also makes necessary steps towards civil life. Departing from Hobbesian cynicism, Rousseau suggests that the originary passions of the heart can be led towards an uncorrupt compassion...but only if the proper leader is in place. In the woods, with only one authority, there are few variables to interfere with *Emile*'s Pygmalion development.

Today's liberal education from Montessori to charter schools is indebted to Rousseau, and almost always billed in opposition to the method where the child is tied to the chair and beaten into knowledge. There is no need to push the child, since he will rather naturally do what is right on his own, guided only by his amorous affection for his teacher. Mutual recognition creates an exact identity between teacher and student, so there is finally no need for education or manipulation or mediation—a bloodless, divine education. What is right simply falls into place. Much as the ruler and ruled ought to be equivalent in a perfect Rousseauvian society.

The romantic imagination of Rousseau saw the placid early years of the child's life as having a primal inherent goodness that is lost as the child matures. It is easy when critiquing liberal education to fall into this trap—seeing *Emile* as a once pure and playful creature, cruelly morphed into an obedient citizen by a megalomaniac father. This is a bit simple, for in this fiction, there is no “real” *Emile* that is in need of being rescued. But one must not turn all the way around and say that children are inherently under a state of biopolitical subjugation from birth (the child in capitalism is liable to be raped, sold drugs and soda, monetized, etc.), a view that would render all analyses of education to be futile, sentimental, and trivial, compared with the macro-level politics of the state. The myth that changing the macro-level of economics of the state will create an unparalleled freedom for the child, liberating him from the family romance, competitive industry, and consent laws, is a mirage that seems to entice radical Leftists as diverse as Firestone, Edelman, Foucault, and Žižek. To say nothing of the Norman O. Brown-style cult leaders of 60s and 70s utopian collectives, where child abuse ran rampant. Ultimately, this utopianism flips back to the uncritical romantic effort to save the child from one bad regime by placing them into a better regime. The reality is that once the child is liberated from serving a father or monetized system, he is only “free” to serve the general will, here meaning the will of whichever person or tribunal lords over the child at that moment.

Danton is one of many important films in the second half of the twentieth century that powerfully allegorize the horrors that hedonism, fascism, and extreme leftism visits upon youths, other films include: *Salo or 120 Days of Sodom*, *Candy*, *Wicker Man*, and *Pink Flamingos*. These films have reversed the totalizing false linkages of modernism that tended to produce affirmative and unqualified tributes to Leftist revolutions. However, even in the wake of ever-richer evidence on the terrors of Mao and Stalin, the totalizing mise-en-scene of unqualified revolutionary enthusiasm continues. Rather than affirming tyranny as if it were factually successful in any given locatable reality, today tyranny is proposed as a stunning Ideal alternative to the slow grind of bureaucratic “crippled” systems and false inclusion/tolerance. The very same aggravation with the slow system leads some to support Neo-Cons like Donald Trump, who on the surface has little in common with such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Sophie Wahnich. Their overlap is not a shared vision for the future but rather an identical anger at the present; all pointing to the same current state of emergency—that of an inefficient, “crippled,” childish, deferential, indecisive, tolerant liberal capitalism.

These arguments update the powerful critique of parliamentary democracy laid out by German political theorist Carl Schmitt, particularly *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), which helped set the scene for the German Fuhrer, but also became revered as a realpolitik masterpiece by many prominent postmodern Leftist academics. This is not too puzzling, since Schmitt offers nothing less than an all-purpose complaint against traditional rule that can serve anyone (with any politics) who wants to become a charismatic authority. The so-called crisis is only solved by resolute top-down decisionism, and the creation of a national enemy, a move towards dictatorship Schmitt found to take partial shape in the otherwise liberal Republican Rousseau.

Like Freud’s primal father, the charismatic authority (as conceptualized by Max Weber in the early 1920s) stands outside the rules of the civilization he rules. His whims are not considered arbitrary fancies but are seen by his flock as a necessity for proper governance, serving their needs as much as his own. The arbitrary, rhetorical, fanciful, hedonistic, and sadistic are considered necessary and natural. In *Emile*, after the titular student grows up, the teacher is always a hermetic poetic uncle in the background, who as an outsider inflicts top-down measures upon the family with “impartiality.” And Rousseau, himself, lived hermetically, with an up-and-down relationship with the French public, who eventually ostracized him.

Today’s charismatic authorities claim to be “outside” the chain of capitalism while playing the game of capitalist *realpolitik*, yet always appearing to be deconstructing and critiquing the system for an ultimately altruistic utopian premise. This “outsider,” steps into the slow bureaucratic world, claims that it faces a state of emergency, and then offers his own solution. A fairly nice example is Žižek, after his entrance in American universities in the 1980s, as a Slovenian, he claimed to know American culture better than Americans, and as an unorthodox Lacanian, he also knew Lacan better than the Lacanians.

By now, Žižek has cunningly developed a profitable persona, which seems to stand outside the stuffy rules of academic life, and yet profits from the academy, its students, and its various ventures into publishing and pop culture. To make an example of him is not to scapegoat him as an exceptionally complicit hypocrite, nor to outline how the rules of academic publishing, American pop culture, and Western industry constrict any attempt at Left radicalism, but rather to show how the archetype of charismatic authority functions in radical Western Leftism today.



Charismatic authorities do not need to realize their proposed utopia in order to satiate their appetites for money, fame, and power. Likewise, they do not have to exist in a Communist nation to receive the privileges of being a Communist leader. To attain the prized “booty” of charismatic authority, all you have to do is rhetorically protest profane, rational, bureaucratic, traditional, patriarchal, patrimonial rule. One does not have to alter it in any real ways: much as the religiously pious in the *Canterbury Tales* will spin any moral discourse for a buck, and the hippy gurus in the satirical film *Candy* will claim any poetic-mystical tradition as their own if it means seducing the young, sexy, and impressionable protagonist.

Rather than foster radical or even ameliorative change, the charismatic authority instead triumphs by launching complaints into a frenzy that becomes finally, “justifiably,” violent, which is what Badiou naively valorizes as the “event” (a radical break from the status quo). Weber’s catch is that such a break from tradition is followed inevitably by normalization—though Badiou would prefer to say that the period after the radical event is when the subject is formed through a fidelity to the moment of break/inception. In this period of routinization, the “anti-economic” politics are “altered” (Weber, 369)—much as when avant-garde breaks inevitably forge *Norton Anthology*-sanctioned canons. Whether or not the radical break is constructive, destructive, or subtractive—assimilationist or separatist—it is guarded and guided by a charismatic authority, who inevitably profits from this “event.”

By Žižek’s Hegelian-Lacanian-Marxist formula, after negating the big Other of traditional authority, you can traverse the fantasy (without “killing” it) and then occupy its place, in a less “feminine, crippled” manner: now with Hegel’s absolute knowledge, a *realpolitik* backbone. Žižek, like all charismatic authorities, is not against normalization, despite being anti-normal and anti-professional. Rather, he decries the regulated normalized decaffeinated antagonism of democratic ID politics (the frivolous, fanciful, and arbitrary) in favor of the hierarchically structured harmony that thrives on antagonism (the Maoist ideal).

Dictatorship becomes an easy pill to swallow after Žižek equates it with an ultra-authentic ideal of democracy, where the uncrowned for *demos* stands up against the “ruling class.” Allegedly, his utopia of proletarian dictatorship *would be* democratic, despite the fact that his masses are all lumped via a Hegelian-Marxist flight to “harmony” that is enforced with top-down measures—thus deriding any particularity—a Christian universalism against a Jewish particularism.

What Christian Universalist Freemasons miss is that despite their claims against factionalism and identity politics, they remain a faction of crusaders defending their identity. Like Badiou, Žižek claims to always be fighting for the “uncounted,” as when he states, the “dictatorship of the proletariat [means] the direct empowerment of universality, so that those who are ‘part of no-part’ determine the tone” (Žižek). What he is proposing is only a top-down speedy universalization of the particular that has no cogency. If democracy is the master-signifier that claims to have eradicated master-signifiers, then Žižek’s Communism is the transparent will-to-power of charismatic authority.

The will of the charismatic leader is not the will-of-all, and the two can never be forced into perfect equivalence—even if dissent and contradiction are incorporated into the regime, as with Maoism. But before we get ahead of ourselves, Žižek’s celebration of Mao is not quite what it seems: he is far less concerned with wrangling control of the state and more with publishing contracts, middle-class students, and cultural capital.

Where Mao or Pol Pot moved urban intellectuals to a farm, Žižek, queer theorists, and post-colonialists, only ask the reader to split-off from the part of themselves that is complicit and mindlessly, happily, engaging in Western capitalism. This bad, feminine, crippled, childish mind is sent to the work camp to be reformed, much as sensitivity training is given to comedians and politicians who “fuck up.” There is no demand to change fiscal habits or to move to a commune. Just be smarter, cooler, and more with it.

Žižek’s trick, following Rousseau’s in *Emile*, is to let you enjoy the capitalist simulacrum (*amour-de-soi*) for long enough to traverse the fantasy, with him as your master-analyst guide. Eventually, you’ll recognize that your quest for satisfaction is un-enjoyable, and that you can find more enjoyment by critiquing this quest, and surrendering your mental convictions too. As if the Coca-Cola injunction to enjoy were some stupid capitalist demand, while the academic injunction to *critique* enjoyment was holy radicalism.

What Žižek neglects to mention is that the only way to soar out of the phallic jouissance of capitalistic gambling and to enter the feminine jouissance of utopian love, is to hold all the chips. Much as free speech is only free if you have a voice. The crystallization of Žižek’s charismatic tactics is his controversial support of terror. Following a claim that the US “war on terror” is bad because it uses state interference to quench true war, war of the people, war of individuals acting in their own interest, Žižek’s position is not unlike Ayn Rand’s anti-statist libertarianism or Carl Schmitt’s argument that there can be no world peace or neo-Nazis decrying the self-righteous attempt to punish Germans for “war crimes.” From Foucault to Žižek, unmediated violence is praised for not relying on decorum and polity. Foucault and Žižek and libertarians share an idea that liberty means access to ordinary violence and/or sexuality unmediated by the biopolitics of the state. Without his utopia being realized, the only practical politics Žižek performs is that of the libertarian freedom to say what he thinks within a competitive economy, to advocate for the violent causes he supports, and to remain protected by academic presses, institutional positions, (guns perhaps), and cultural/fiscal capital—despite the fact that he seems to be anti-individualism.

What Žižek calls a passion for the real, like Rousseau’s passion for a just society, is governed always by the very primal father figure he claims to expose, one-up, denounce, and then sabotage. By suggesting that “fair and balanced” politics neglects to mention the society of control that covertly governs like a hidden maternal superego, he continually advocates a more authentic governance of real violence: nothing more than an impossible fantasy of philosopher-kingdoms. The closest thing we have is the EGS (European Graduate School).

Žižek paints a clear picture of how the game works—this is a game played across the spectrum of political leanings. All you need is the desire to have a charismatic rule. What makes Žižek exceptional is that his particular double-talk is exaggerated due to various contradictions in his career, persona, and writing—many of these contradictions showcase an acute and humorous self-awareness of his role as capitalist charlatan, which he plays up in gags, interviews, and movies.

Žižek's gift for self-conscious humor does not make him unique or a genius. Rather, it adds a component to his artistry that is endearing to the American public because an ironic awareness of contradiction is a routine part of pop culture. But politically, this allows *us* to know that *he* knows his "passion for the unmediated real" is mediated while at the same time not allowing the shared awareness of this fact to stop it from having purchasing power. Or via Lacan, even if the big Other is inconsistent and voided, he is never dead.

Žižek remains stuck in the vacuum of Western politics that resulted from the tearing down of traditional authorities (feudal, rural, religious, and patriarchal) and resulted in the reign of arbitrary discourses competing not at the level of functionality, but rather at the level of rhetorical flourish. His only way out of this mess is to assert a realer real than the rest. He even claims his real is even less "forced" than his friend Badiou's. His claimed stake of the real requires a faith from devotees that only a charismatic authority can solicit. In his attempt to surpass decadent cynical atheism and postmodern language games, Žižek reverts to the cult of Supreme Being.

"So what about Robespierre's rather ridiculous attempt to impose a new civic religion celebrating a Supreme Being? Robespierre himself formulated succinctly the main reason for his opposition to atheism: "Atheism is aristocratic." Atheism was for him the ideology of the cynical-hedonistic aristocrats who lost all sense of historical mission."
(Žižek)

Despite his vested interest in despotic charismatic rule, Žižek will opportunistically use any example to further his cause. A rhetorical game that he has made light of by noting that he has not watched several of the films he writes about. But in full sincerity he references Percy Shelley's fanciful poethical anarchy as a claim that "the Imaginary" is necessary for revolution. His appropriation of lyrical poetics for his cause is as forced as Badiou's rather safe evocations of Mallarmé. Caught in a historical-linguistic slip, Žižek fails to realize that "the Imagination" to the Romantics would have meant the category of God-given truth that Coleridge endorsed and Shelley protested. It is this sort of despotic Imagination that Žižek endorses, the sliding metaphors of Shelley are out of his particular neurotic circuitry. Similarly, Badiou ought to ignore Mallarmé's use of chance operations to produce a pure art out of moments of inspiration, since his "events" are part of an inevitable dialectic that has no room for such aesthetic fancy—especially in its un-redemptive "art for arts sake" varieties.

And yet Žižek must as a rhetorician rely on fanciful stretched metaphors to invite readers into his stale Hegelian system. He knows that terror, or "the imposition of the new on the old," can never manifest simply through abstract ideals. Instead, revolutionary terror must be the reformulation of human life itself, as in Christ's manifestation of the Idea in mortal form (to be soon universalized by Žižek's patron Saint, Paul). Language games must be surpassed and unmediated realness must prevail. That is, after they are self-consciously acknowledged. But in *Danton*, this fantasy breaks down when the child cannot repeat his father's maxims properly. The ruler and ruled cannot become truly equivalent. No wonder the Polish Left slammed the film upon its release (Frey, 62).

Sophie Wahnich's (Žižek-sanctioned) *In Defense of the Terror* makes clear that it was not "pity" for the suffering "bare life" of the child and peasant that motivated the revolution, but rather a passion for

political rights. This is alleged to be a rebuttal to Arendt's (and later Agamben's) complaint that the sentimental and abstracted appeal to "bare life" has been used to justify whatever violence a radical tribunal orders. But what it reveals is that Wahnich, in the spirit of revolutionary terror, is not interested in diverse plights but only in abstracted ideals. The trouble Arendt is raising with "pity" is not that one should *not* care but rather that one should care more precisely than what propaganda affords. Wahnich then throws out pity altogether, one-upping French revolutionary discourse, and makes her political myopia all too clear.

Arendt makes a complex critique of deferring to the private 'pathos' of the poor, which she finds leads to extreme subjectivism and solipsism, as opposed to civil discourse. It does not invite people to speak in their oppositional and diverse plurality but stifles this public action in favor of abstract speech and ideals.

"Only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities" (HC, 200).

Wahnich and Žižek opt instead for a justice that is for the greater good of all people...and when the people don't know what's good for them, it is beaten into them. This is the terror that they call virtue, the *imposition* of the new on the old. In contrast stands Arendt's praxis, *opening* up to the *novum* through action and thought, as uneventful and slow as that may seem to dictatorial minds.

To those seeking charismatic rule, uninformed children are as gullible as the other inert masses waiting to be sculpted into an ideal Platonic form. Or as Mussolini put it, "Everything depends on mastering the masses like an artist" (Chytry, 43). Liberal education can provide a foil, where the "guiding hand" of the teacher remains concealed.

Unfortunately, in the marketplace of American liberal arts education, one can easily purchase the "praxis" model or the "disciplinary" model. The two can mix, so that students are tested on Paolo Friere after reading Spark Notes. What retreats into a matter of shopping preferences is the historical and psychological stakes of education tout court. There are endless attempts to switch to a more fluid, playful, creative, integrative, safe classroom. But what wins out is the mentality that ranks schools through statistical assessments of student pleasure and post-graduate income. Ironically, some of the most competitive and expensive schools in America are globally prized because they are places to chill out and not compete, while some of the least pleasurable schools are prized for churning out moneymakers. But in the promotional catalogues of all liberal arts schools, we see students living a dream of leisure that's as free as a stroll through the forest of Rousseau's *Emile*. The guiding hand remains concealed even after it is revealed.

Notes

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