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## **TITLE: First as Tragedy, Then as Farce**

**Speakers: Slovoj Zizek**

**Chaired by:**

Date:

Venue: RSA, 8 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6EZ

### **NB**

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**Slovoj Zizek:** I want to develop a very simple linear line of thought about one point: why in our economy currently is no longer charity idiosyncrasy of some good guys here and there but the basic constituent of our economy.

I would like to start with the future of so-called cultural capitalism, today's form of capitalism, and then develop how the same thing applies also to economy in the narrower sense of the term. Namely, if in the old times - by old times I mean something very, very precise - before this '68 transformation of capitalism into, as we usually call it, more cultural capitalism, post modern caring for ecology and all that.

What changed? What changed is that if before this time there was a simple, more or less simple, opposition between ((0:01:27.5?)) consummation, you buy you speculate and so on, then on the top of it, it comes what you do for a society like Soros, he's still the old type here I claim. In the morning he grabs the money, if I simplify it, in the afternoon he gives half of the money back to charities and supporting things and so on.

But I claim in today's capitalism more and more the tendency is to bring the two dimensions together in one and the same cluster. So that when you buy something it is your anti-consumerist duty to do something for others for environment and so on, is already included into it. If you think I'm exaggerating, you have them around the corner, walk into any Starbucks Coffee, and you will see how they explicitly tell you, I quote their campaign, "It's not just what you are buying; it's what you are buying into" and then they describe it to you. Listen, "When you buy Starbucks whether you realise it or not you are buying into something bigger than a cup of coffee, you are buying into a coffee ethic. Through our Starbucks Shared Plant Programme we purchase more fair trade coffee than any company in the world, ensuring that the farmers who grow the beans receive a fair price for their hard work. And we invest in an improved coffee growing practices and communities around the globe. It's a good

coffee karma. And a little bit of the price of a cup of Starbucks coffee helps furnish the place with comfortable chairs and so on and so on.

You see this is what I call cultural capitalism at its purest. You don't just buy a coffee you buy in the very consumerist act - you buy your redemption from being only a consumerist. You do something for the environment; you do something to help starving children in Guatemala; you do something to restore the sense of community here and so on and so on. Again I could go on like the almost absurd example of this is so-called Toms Shoes - an American company who's formula is one for one. They claim for every pair of shoes you buy with them they give a pair of shoes to some African nation and so on and so on so that you know one for one. One act of consumerism but included in it you pay for being ((0:03:56.3?)) for doing something with the environment and so on and so on. This generates almost a kind of - how should I put it - semantic over investment or burden. It's not just buying a cup of coffee it's at the same time, you again, you fulfil a whole series of ethical duties and so on and so on.

And again this logic I think is today almost universalised like let's be frank - when you go to a store probably you prefer buying organic apples. Why? Look deep into yourself. I don't think you really believe that those ((0:04:33.7?)) apples which cost double than the good old genetically modified apples which we all like, that they are really any better. I claim we are cynics they are sceptics. But you know it makes you feel warm that I'm doing something for our mother earth, I'm doing something for our planet and so on and so on. You get all that.

So my point is that this very interesting short circuit where the very, as it were, act of egotist consumption and so on already includes the price for its opposite.

Based against all of this I think that we should return to old Oscar Wilde who provided the best formulation against this logic of charity. Let me just quote from the

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beginning of his *The Soul of Modern Man Under Socialism*. Where he points out, and I quote, "It is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought."

People find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this. Accordingly, with admirable, though misdirected intentions, they very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But the remedies do not cure the disease they merely prolong it; indeed the remedies are part of the disease. They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive. Or in the case of a very advanced school by amusing the poor. But this is not a solution it is an aggravation of the difficulty.

The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible and the altruistic virtues have really prevented the carrying out of this aim. The worst slave owners were those who were kind to their slaves and so prevented the core of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it. Charity degrades and demoralises. It is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property. I think these lines are more actual than ever. Nice as it sounds basic income or this kind of trade with the rich is not a solution.

There is, for me, another because a whole series of problems, I see here another problem again which is... this is for me the last desperate attempt to make capitalism work for socialism. Let's not discard the evil. Let's make the evil itself work for the good. You remember, you are not old enough - I am, how we were crazy 30/40 years ago we were bringing about socialism with a human face. Like ((0:07:39.4?)) today the utmost radical horizon of our imagination is global capitalism with a human face. We have the basic rules of the game, we make it a little bit more human,

more tolerant with a little bit more wealth and so on and so on.

First, my attitude is here let's give to the devil what belongs to the devil and let's recognise that in the last decade, at least, until recently at least in the western Europe, I mean, there is no bullshitting here, let's admit it, I don't think that in any moment in human history did such a relatively large percentage of population live in such relative freedom, welfare, security and so on. I see this gradually but, nonetheless, seriously threatened.

When I gave the interview for Hardtalk yesterday the guy, ((Sucker?)) he's a bright guy, he's not just another sucker, he told me that... "but you are basically misanthropic". I told him yes and then they praise the British nation. You know very well that there is a certain type of misanthropy which is much better as a social attitude than this cheap charitable optimism and so on. I think that a mixture of a slight, not the hard line apocalyptic vision but let me call it like we say soft, no Gianni Vattimo speaks about soft thought. I don't agree with him but I would say soft apocalyptic vision like it's not 2012 we know but we are approaching a certain zero point. Things are unfortunately... you may ((0:09:17.2?)) ecologically, socially with new apartheid and so on, we are approaching a certain point, biogenetics and so on, where I'm not saying, of course I'm not an idiot that it will be returned to the old Leninist party, absolutely not, again I am ((0:09:32.9?)) here 20<sup>th</sup> century communist experience was a mega, mega ethical, political, economic and so on catastrophe. I'm just saying that if all the cherished values of liberalism, I love them, but the only way to save them is to do something more.

You know what I'm saying? I'm not against charity. My god in an abstract sense of course it's better than nothing, just let's be aware that there is an element of hypocrisy there, that in a way you know like my argument and I don't doubt people who ((0:10:07.6?)) told me that Soros is an honest guy. But there is a paradox ((0:10:11.6?)) you

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know he's repairing with the right hand what he ruined with the left hand, ((0:10:17.0?)) put it, no? That's all I'm saying. For example, of course we should help the children, it's horrible to see a child whose life is ruined because of an operation which costs twenty dollars. But in the long term you know as Oscar Wilde would have said, "If you just operate the child then they live a little bit better but in the same situation which produced them."