Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Zizek Are Going to Debate Marxism and Capitalism. What Should We Expect?

At Toronto's Sony Center on April 19, Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Zizek will debate "Happiness: Capitalism vs. Marxism."

It's a rather strange umbrella subject both for the Canadian psychologist and the Slovenian philosopher. In several viral YouTube videos, Peterson has made it clear that suffering, not happiness, is the primary human condition, while in Zizek's Hegelian universe, the Absolute holds sway over any notion of human contentment. It's the words post-colon that have captured the attention of most people, prompting fans to buy tickets to the event at Broadway show levels ($166 to $420): "Capitalism vs. Marxism."

It's the very debate of our time, and while in the hands of many thinkers the subject could easily deteriorate into petty politics, Zizek and Peterson are no mere advocates for this party or that. If they are true to the work that has gained them massive followings, the pair will use the frame of this debate to trace the roots of the systems they espouse, to find some clear ground for capitalism or some certain reason for Marxism. One hopes that when the smoke clears from what promises to be an explosive confrontation, we will all have a better understanding of what is meant when we refer to the political left (Marxism) and political right (capitalism).

Marxism does not exhaust the field of leftist politics, but it does represent the left at its most intellectually developed. Similarly, the right can mean something other than capitalism (to certain Marxists, it is no more than a precursor to

fascism), but to most people, it embodies the idea of the right.

The Monumental Chomsky/Foucault Debate

The real, revealed subject of the event, then, is clear: What is meant by political right and left? And what underlying principles, if any, justify them? If this underlying theme is faced head-on, the Peterson-Zizek encounter could be the most important public debate since Chomsky and Foucault nearly half a century ago. Indeed, it would be the natural sequel to Chomsky/Foucault.

In that earlier, fabled encounter over the issue of human nature, Chomsky destroyed Foucault with a single comment.

Toward the end of their debate, Foucault put forth his familiar statement that power should be seized by those currently without power. Chomsky's replied: "But you still need a reason why." Foucault blanched, not knowing what to say.

Indeed, there was nothing to be said because this is where the fissure gapes and cannot be bridged: on one side, the idea that humanity owns a certain nature and that, from it, we can draw ideas about what is right and wrong, just and unjust, without reference to tribes, cultures, or ideologies; on the other, the belief that the attainment of power requires no grounding in human nature, as there is no such thing, and that no justification is required of the un-empowered to seize power from those who have it.

While most who have read or seen the debate cite Chomsky as the winner, it is Foucault's outlook that has come to dominate the cultural landscape in the nearly 50 years since. Political talk is today assumed to center on groups—racial groups,

ethnic groups, religious groups, gender groups—and the most generally accepted argument in polite conversation is that those groups perceived as lacking power are entitled to it. The argument has nothing to do with numbers—with majorities and minorities—but with power imbalances.

For example, women, hardly a minority, have suffered centuries of oppression under the patriarchy and are now entitled to a sort of historical balancing in which power is taken from men and given to women. At the other end of the demographic spectrum, the tiny minority of trans people is similarly entitled to cultural recognition due to the ignorant belief of the oppressing majority that there exists a biological difference between men and women.

Peterson/Zizek Is the Sequel

And this is where the Peterson/Zizek debate begins: in the context of a culture that embraces identity politics and the striving for power for power's sake. It is a premise that serves the left well—but why? What leftist beliefs are congruent with power for its own sake, with group identity as the defining condition for political action? Still more pertinently, why has the right been impotent to fight identity politics? The left has traditionally been identified as the more intellectually grounded of the two sides, and it does sometimes seem as if the right's only answer to the left's various intellectual assaults is "because tradition."

We use the terms right and left as if we have an innate understanding of them, as if their meanings are evident. But are they? The left is generally considered to be more concerned with human welfare, the planet's ecology, and "rights" construed as positive claims to such things as education, health, income, etc. It's a vague identification that breaks down when regimes that are clearly leftist are exposed as having produced extreme pollution (China) and even

outright genocide (China and the Soviet Union).

The right is thought to favor authority and control, but again, the definition breaks down when one considers, for example, the right's stand against the authority of gun legislation or, more centrally, control of the free market. The terms are of fairly recent coinage. While it is not uncommon to hear people refer to pre-18th-century societies as exhibiting left or right proclivities, the terms did not exist prior to 1789, when members of the French National Assembly who favored retaining the king sat on the right side of the chamber, while those who opposed the king sat on the left. This division persisted throughout the 1790s and blossomed into international usage in the 19th century.

In the way that words so often become parodies of themselves, the right, because of its association with the king, came to "mean" authority and order, while the left got to wear the mantle of the French Revolution's two central principles: liberty and equality. ("Fraternity," the third so-called principle, was added after the fact so each of the three colors of the new French flag had a matching principle. There were only two real generating principles of 1789, according to none other than investigator Jacques Derrida.)

But what sense can such a division make when leftist governments have been known to shut down freedom of speech and impose military rule? How can it be said of the right that it universally favors order when its central economic operating principle is *laissez-faire*—literally "let make by itself"? It is, in fact, this phrase that points to the real difference between right and left, and it has roots more than a century prior to the French Revolution.

History of "Left" and "Right"

It was in the 1680s under King Louis XIV that finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert asked a merchant named Le Gendre what

the king might do to help his business. Said Le Gendre: "*Laissez-nous faire*." "Let us do it," i.e., keep government out of our affairs. The reign of Louis XIV was the height of state power in France, but by the mid-18th century, things had loosened sufficiently that Rene de Voyer, a free-trade advocate, could cite the Le Gendre story as emblematic of the emerging freedom.

The fullest statement of this principle came from another free trader, the economist Vincent de Gournay, a kind of Hayek of his day who formulated the belief in its most complete form: "*Laissez-faire et laissez-passer, le monde va de lui meme*" ("Let things be made and pass without assistance; the world goes by itself"). King Louis XVI was not unsympathetic to the free-trade movement and was for good reason called the "Restorer of French Liberty." He paid for this at the hands of revolutionaries of an altogether different opinion about what "liberty" means.

Different epochs reveal different truths, and perhaps an epoch of truth about revolution and its aftermath is at hand. The French Revolution did not invent liberty. Liberty was already well underway when a handful of prisoners were released from the Bastille July 14, 1789. If anything, liberty was rapidly closed down over the ensuing years in the name of a second, truly new principle: equality.

This was why those who favored equality sat on the left, opposite those who supported the king; not because they championed liberty and equality over royal authority but because they viewed equality—equality enforced at the edge of a guillotine blade if necessary—as the basis of any true freedom, as more fundamental than liberty. The "superficial" freedoms of people in the market were not true freedoms. How could they be when some people wielded power, while others did not? Right-sitters, on the other hand, viewed freedom as the only foundation for human endeavor; if equality were to exist at all, it would have to be the sort of equality issued from

the free competition of individuals.

They sat on the right not because they favored authority, but because they favored the freedoms that had been assured them by the king and were rightfully suspicious that the left, for all its talk of equality as the guarantor of liberty, was out to re-install the authority of the state in pursuit of an enforced equality, thus short-circuiting the more fundamental condition of freedom.

Blurred Lines

This distinction, which is the true distinction between left and right, has come down to us today stained by history and hidden by false assumptions but essentially intact. To be on the left means to favor the enforcement of equality via the state; to be on the right means to posit liberty as the foundation of society and to let equality blossom as a result—or not. The left sees equality as prior to any authentic freedom. The right views freedom as prior to any authentic equality. This distinction is blurred, but not essentially altered, by the facts of more than 200 years of betrayals, mislabeling, and outright fraud from partisans at both ends of the spectrum.

The right, in particular, has betrayed its own principle repeatedly, allowing the state to creep into its stated platforms. If “capitalism” is spoken of today as a real, existing system, it must be recognized as largely state-created, given the market power expressed by corporations which are strictly state-created entities. Today’s “capitalism” is nowhere near the right-side end of the political spectrum but is merely a vestige or parody of *laissez-faire*.

Meanwhile, the left has stayed true to its assertion, groundless though it is, that freedom will be achieved only when there is “equality”—when all viewpoints, lifestyles, and

racial/ethnic/gender groups oppressed by the viewpoints, lifestyles, and racial/ethnic/gender groups of the past are granted by the state their full power over their previous oppressors. Such is the condition of current politics: the state on one side and the state on the other; a consistent but groundless left and a betrayed right slugging it out in pointless confrontation. If Zizek and Peterson wish to make their debate rise above the current chatter that passes for politics, that is the arena they need to enter.

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