

Critical Response

I

A Symptom—of What?

Slavoj Žižek

My first and immediate reaction to Geoffrey Harpham's essay was that of perplexity (Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Doing the Impossible: Slavoj Žižek and the End of Knowledge" *Critical Inquiry* 29 [Spring 2003]: 453–85). Since I consider him not only a perspicacious mind free from any jargon, but also a person of ethical integrity, I could not but wonder at the sheer number of misrecognitions and erroneous attributions in his resume of my work. Here are some of the more outstanding passages:

Žižek's Marx, by contrast, is not the originator of a discourse, but a key figure in the Enlightenment tradition that began with Descartes, continued through Kant and Hegel, and culminated—no further advance is anticipated—in Lacan. Marx did not disprove in advance the individualist bias of psychoanalysis; he precipitated Freud, and thus anticipated Lacan, by "inventing the symptom," as Žižek puts it in *Sublime Object*. [Pp. 460–61]

If we ignore the weird attribution of the idea that Marx invented the symptom (an old thesis of Lacan) to me, the curious detail in this passage is the "no further advance is anticipated"—as if, for me, Lacan is the highest, unsurpassable, point of theoretical truth. The problem here is not only that this is simply not the case (in all my most recent books, I dwell in detail on the final deadlock of Lacan's thought) but that Harpham's ironic remark fits perfectly the predominant attitude towards Lacan in cultural studies. My work is often described as Lacanian dogmatics; however, one should just compare it with, say, the works of the leading Derrideans today. How many of them directly address the limitations of Derrida? So why is being a Derridean considered a normal orientation, while being a Lacanian is as

a rule disqualified as quasi-theological dogmatism? On a more general level, I think Harpham's remark relies on one of the most deplorable postmodern clichés: the avoidance of firm and straight positions. Instead of a clear conclusion, a typical postmodern essay ends with a putative rhetorical question, along the lines of, May we then, perhaps, suggest a possibility that . . . —a case of arrogance masked as false modesty if ever there was one.

In our politically correct times, it is always advisable to start with the set of unwritten prohibitions that define the positions one is allowed to assume. The first thing to note with regard to religious matters is that reference to deep spirituality is again in. Direct materialism is out; one is rather solicited to harbor openness towards a radical Otherness beyond the onto-theological God. Consequently, when one directly asks an academic, "Okay, let's cut to the chase: *do you believe in some form of the divine or not?*" the first answer is an embarrassed withdrawal, as if the question is too intimate, too probing. This withdrawal is then usually explicated in more theoretical terms: "It is the wrong question to ask! It is not simply a matter of believing or not, but, rather, a matter of certain radical experience, of the ability to open oneself to certain unheard-of dimensions, of the way our openness to radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to participate in certain unique social practices, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment." Against this, one should insist more than ever that the vulgar question "Do you *really believe* or not?" *matters*—perhaps more than ever.

What we are getting today is a kind of suspended belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. This suspended status of our beliefs accounts for the predominant antidogmatic stance: one should modestly accept that all our positions are relative, conditioned by contingent historical constellations, that no one has definitive solutions, just pragmatic temporary solutions. G. K. Chesterton denounced the falsity of this stance: "At any street corner we may meet a man who utters the frantic and blasphemous statement that he may be wrong. Every day one comes across somebody who says that of course his view may not be the right one. Of course his view must be the right one, or it is not his view."¹ Is the same falsity not clearly discernible in the rhetoric of many a deconstructionist? Is their apparently modest relativization of their own

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, 1995), p. 37.

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position not in actuality its very opposite, the privileging of one's own position of enunciation, in order to effectively claim that the self-relativizing stance is a key ingredient of today's rhetoric of power? Compare the struggle and pain of the fundamentalist with the serene peace of the liberal democrat who, from his safe subjective position, ironically dismisses every full-fledged engagement, every dogmatic taking of sides. Consequently, I plead guilty: in this choice, I without hesitation opt for the fundamentalist position. This makes all the more strange the following passage:

[Žižek] is equally hard on utopian political visions, or any projection to a postdialectical state beyond class conflict; for Žižek, any such projection, like any identification with the Cause, is inherently "Stalinist." Worse yet, from the point of view of orthodox academic Marxism, Žižek attributes the very foundation of Marxist thinking, the dialectical method, not to Marx but to Hegel, and defines it not as the steady advance on truth by way of confrontational testing but rather as a corrosive, antimonist instrument of negation and desubstantialization. [P. 00]

Where do I say that *any* identification with a Cause is inherently Stalinist? And is not the attribution of the "dialectical method" to Hegel the feature of every classical Marxism, from Lenin's "Three Sources of Marxism" onward? And, incidentally, the notion of dialectical method as "the steady advance on truth by way of confrontational testing" is more Popperian than Hegelian. The following passage contains the same strangely false attribution: "From Marx to the Frankfurt school and beyond, alienation was figured as the disaster wrought upon human beings by capitalism. For Žižek, it is the plain truth of the human condition" (p. 462). Really? Do I not spend many pages in most of my books explaining how alienation is not the ultimate horizon of the human existence, how it is followed by what Lacan called separation? Harpham's strategy of inventing false oppositions culminates in the following passage:

It is pointless to try to manage the force of ideology in our lives by vowing, for example, to respect Jewish otherness or to see Jews as they really are; we must instead traverse the fantasy and confront the Real of our desire to persecute Jews. In contrast to prevailing leftist views, then, Žižek insists that roots of ideology are psychoanalytic rather than social or historical. [P. 472]

A totally false opposition (between respecting the otherness and traversing the fantasy): my point is that, in order to be able truly to respect the otherness of the Other, one should precisely traverse the fantasies that structure

our perception of this Other—concretely, in the case of anti-Semitism. It is not enough to perceive the Jews “as they really are”; one should also address the question of why *we* needed anti-Semitism, what role the figure of the Jew played in the ideological imaginary that sustains our practice. The second false opposition is, of course, between “psychoanalytic” and “social or historical”: why should this couple be exclusive? Why couldn’t a psychoanalytic approach also be historical? The obverse of such false oppositions is the fabrication of weird and totally contingent links: “Mussolini and Žižek agree on the fundamental premise of a crack in the ontological heart of human existence, but disagree on whether the Big Other can cure this wound” (p. 475 n. 35). Here, one effectively does not know what to do, protest, laugh, or cry. Is a “a crack in the ontological heart of human existence” a strong enough feature to legitimate a link between Mussolini and me? (And, to go further, I even think that “Mussolini and Žižek” also agree on “whether the Big Other can cure this wound”: I guess we would both say that it cannot cure it.) However, is the list of philosophers, religious thinkers, and ideologists who assert this crack—St. Paul, Luther, Malebranche, Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Castoriadis, Laclau, Butler—not practically endless? In short, this list is strictly *meaningless* without the articulation of the concrete theoretical horizon that in each case overdetermines the specific meaning of this crack. If one remains at Harpham’s abstract level, one can easily fabricate endless similar and similarly tasteless variations: Hitler, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Judith Butler agree that. . . . From such passages, one can guess the general tenor of Harpham’s evaluation of me—my true face is the advocacy of terror and violence without any constraints:

The new order Žižek envisions in the exalted conclusion to his dispute with Laclau and Butler, an order in which we would have “no taboos, no a priori norms (‘human rights’, ‘democracy’), respect for which would prevent us also from ‘resignifying’ terror, the ruthless exercise of power, the spirit of sacrifice.” We must be prepared to confront the worst, to break with ourselves, to bomb the other: “If this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as *Linksfaschismus*,” he proclaims, “so be it!” (*CHU*, p. 326). If Žižek were in charge, life in the Balkans and elsewhere would not exactly be a cocktail party. [Pp. 481–82]

Is it then prohibited to question the way the reference to human rights and democracy functions in today’s ideologico-political discourse? Should probing these two notions remain a taboo? Harpham seems opposed to the

NATO bombings in the last years; but were these bombings not legitimized precisely by reference to human rights and democracy?

Along the same lines, I think one should also problematize the main points of reference of today's "radical" theoretical discourse. The post-colonial critique of Eurocentrism is, in its intellectual background and the tools it mobilizes, a Eurocentric endeavor *par excellence*. Perhaps nowhere does this hidden Eurocentric bias emerge more forcefully than with regard to the opposition between essentialism and contingency; all the usual bashing of Eurocentric essentialism should not blind us to the key fact that, ultimately, the opposition of essentialism and contingency is a new name for the old opposition between the traditional fixity of social roles and modern (*European*) social dynamics. In short, essentialism is the latest name for premodern social logic.²

As to *Linksfaschismus*, Harpham is probably not aware that I am here ironically referring to Habermas who, in the late 1960s, came into conflict with the more radical leftist students and designated their orientation as *Linksfaschismus*—this term is now used in Europe to designate the moderate-liberal Left's rejection of the more radical Left. The last phrase is, of course, yet another weird manipulation. I *was* (not in charge but at least) involved in political "life in the Balkans," and my political positions concerning the post-Yugoslav conflict are well-known from a series of texts I published on this topic; so, instead of speculating how things might have been, why not simply look at my texts? Unperturbed by minor considerations that could disturb his overall narrative, Harpham mobilizes in his attempt to characterize me the joint powers of Stalinism and Hollywood B-production horror movies: "Is [Žižek] a sublime theorist, a perfectly equipped academic mind capable of transcending the limitations that inhibit others, or an obscenity-obsessed Thing emerging from the black lagoon of Stalinism, dedicated to the overthrow of Western academic thought?" (p. 467). Is Harpham aware of what a weird opposition he has constructed here? Is this alternative really exhaustive? Is anyone who deploys a critical distance towards the predominant model of academic knowledge really either pretending to be a genius transcending the limits of ordinary mortals or an obscene Thing? Here is an even stronger formulation of the same alternative:

2. Furthermore, the opposition between essentialism and contingency is ambiguous with regard to progressive politics itself. In the eighteenth century, the assertion of freedom mainly referred to the essentialist notion of human nature with its inalienable human rights, while conservative reasoning was much more open to contingency (one of the predominant modes of conservatism was the theory of historical right; authority is based on tradition, and one should obey tradition without probing into its origins because, as conservatives were fully aware, these dark origins always involve some founding instance of violence).

If we took Žižek as a guide to the real character of conventional academic methods and practices, we would be forced to revise—actually, to discard—all our assumptions about academic work and indeed about rational thought as such. For if Žižek's practice were to be universalized, the result would be the destruction of the very idea of a field, a specialized professional discourse that arrives at a true account of a limited domain by progressive and rational means. It would mean the end of life as we know it. [Pp. 467–68]

Again, is it really as simple as that? Is Harpham aware of what he is claiming in this—literally—the craziest exercise of binary logic known to me? First, he conspicuously identifies “rational thought” with “the ordinary canons of argument” and “the society that sustains them”; then, with incredible hyperbole, he proclaims that the ultimate consequence of questioning these canons is not only the end of rational thought but “the end of life as we know it”! Is the underlying logic of this argumentation not homologous to that of the recent “war on terror”? First, democracy is identified with the present American political establishment; then, every questioning of the democratic canon is denounced as supportive of terrorism; finally, the true pearl, the actual point of madness, where, under the pretense of describing the concrete historical context that gave birth to my theory, Harpham literally gets caught in his own delirium:

Picture the scene at a bar following a raucous meeting of the Slovene Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis in the heady atmosphere of new and widening freedoms, including imminent elections, in the late 1980s. Imagine a regular crowd of students, journalists, artists, filmmakers, poets, actors, all stifled in various ways by a political culture that tolerated but did not fully support them—thus producing a sort of democracy of unrealized talent—a noisy and disorderly group, the clink of glasses, an old jukebox, occasional small fights breaking out in corners of the room resolved with laughter and another round—and, in the thick of it, a bearded young spellbinder, an academic Prince Hal (actually running for the presidency!) taking on all comers. To some, such a scene constitutes an academic heaven, but it is more accurately considered as para-academic, for it exists not in the university but on its margins. Žižek's work, too, might be considered para-academic rather than sublime-academic, antiacademic, or essential-academic. Indeed, if Žižek were taken as a model for normal academic practice, the old notion that the purpose of a liberal education is to provide one with conversational artillery for the proverbial cocktail party would acquire a fantastic new validation. [Pp. 468–69]

To this, I can again answer only: *totally wrong*, according to the very criteria of scientific research so dear to Harpham. First, at the basic empirical level, anyone who knows me even a little bit knows how intimately I detest the scenery described by Harpham. Such “para-academic” social events as imagined by Harpham were perhaps part of the dynamic intellectual life in the last years of decaying socialism; they were surely *never* part of the life of our Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis (which, incidentally, was not named “Slovene”—as antinationalists, we rejected this name); we were always elitist abstract intellectuals, avoiding pseudo-intellectual socializing more than a vampire avoids garlic!

And insofar as the intellectual life under socialism was “para-academic,” taking place in private homes, cafes, or bars, it was not because intellectuals subscribed to the idea that “the purpose of a liberal education is to provide one with conversational artillery for the proverbial cocktail party,” but because the normal academic outlet was prohibited to them. (Say, is Harpham aware that I was not allowed to work in my domain, philosophy, until 1990? That after years of jobless existence, I had to work on marginal sociological research with no connection whatsoever to my theoretical interests in order to survive? Furthermore, is Harpham aware that his formulation repeats the standard accusation of the Communist *nomenklatura* against the dissident theorists forced to work outside academic institutions?)

However, the scenery imagined by Harpham is not simply empirically wrong with regard to this specific case; at a more substantial level, this is not how Lacanian intellectual communities function. Let me be quite frank. In my long years of travels and visits to academic institutions all around the world, on five continents, I encountered only one type of place that (more or less) fits Harpham’s description: the type of intellectual discussions that take place at receptions after cultural studies colloquia, where theorists, artists, curators, and the like mingle, throwing around pretentious judgements on how we live in a post-Kantian universe, or how the subject is turning into an impersonal field of virtual intensities. What, then, to make of Harpham’s conclusion?

If we could imagine Žižek as a *symptom* of the academic West, we might come to a sharper appreciation of the snags and inconsistencies in our own institutions and premises. The enthusiastic reception accorded to Žižek despite his bitter opposition to our most fundamental values and practices suggests that we are, as he would say, “enjoying our symptom,” but also that, in our eager preoccupation with enjoyment itself, we have so far failed to understand what our symptom is a symptom of and what it might, properly decoded, teach us about ourselves. [P. 485]

If the final statement is not to be taken as a mere rhetorical gesture, a semblance of deep thought appropriate to conclude a critical essay, it should have been at least minimally elaborated upon. Okay, I am a symptom—of *what*? *What* is wrong with the standard academic procedure; what are its “snags and inconsistencies”? What if the true symptom is not me, but the image of me Harpham seems compelled to paint? The way I see it, Harpham’s distortion of my position is not simply a misreading but a misreading overdetermined by the very “snags and inconsistencies” of what passes in American academia for the liberal-democratic critical discourse.

Harpham posits my work as the big Exception, the Enemy, the Foreign Body, with regard to the twin ideologies of political liberalism and the “objective” scientific quest for truth. Why me? Isn’t, in the precise sense in which Harpham seems to use the term, the entire “French” or even “German” orientation a symptom of these twin ideologies? Doesn’t deconstruction teach us to render problematic a naive, direct reliance on the predominant forms of the assertion of freedom, democracy, human rights, and so on, as well as the predominant form of the scientific quest for objective truth? And doesn’t the tradition of the Frankfurt school, in its critique of late capitalist civilization and modern science, accomplish a similar thing in a different way? Harpham’s question (rhetorical, in my view, not because the answer is obvious but because it is literally *posed in order not to be answered*) about the way in which I am a “symptom” of American academia and its ideology should be addressed to this entire field: why did deconstruction and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the Frankfurt school, enjoy such success in American academia, although both traditions are fundamentally foreign to the so-called American spirit? As to the questioning of the predominant democratic consensus—of the untouchable, properly fetishist, status of democracy as our Master-Signifier—I am also far from alone in this orientation; apart from Foucault, Badiou, and others, it suffices to recall Gilles Deleuze’s clear and unambiguous statement: “There’s no democratic state that’s not compromised to the very core by its part in generating human misery.”³

In a further complication of the analysis, one could argue not only that the American reception of Derrida and Foucault involved a clear misreading of their fundamental thrust, but that, at a certain point, Derrida and Foucault somehow *accommodated themselves to this American (mis)appropriation*; aren’t Derrida’s texts from the last two decades more American than European? We encounter here the topic of the American reception of “French” theory. Let us take recent references in American scholarship to Giorgio

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, 1995), p. 173.

Agamben's work. We need to acknowledge the radical implications of Agamben's questioning of the very notion of democracy, which means his notion of *homo sacer* should *not* be watered down into an element of a radical-democratic project whose aim is to renegotiate/redefine the limits of in- and exclusion, so that the symbolic field will be more and more open to the voices of those who are excluded by the hegemonic configuration of public discourse. For Agamben there is no place for the democratic project of renegotiating the limit that separates full citizens from *homo sacer* by gradually allowing their voices to be heard; rather, his point is that, in today's post-politics, the very democratic public space is a mask concealing the fact that, ultimately, we are all *homo sacer*. Does this, then, mean that Agamben fully and simply participates in the line of those who, like Adorno and Foucault, identify as the secret telos of the development of our societies a total closure of the administered world in which we are all reduced to the status of objects of biopolitics? Although Agamben denies any democratic way out, in his detailed reading of Saint Paul he violently reasserts the revolutionary Messianic dimension—and if this Messianic dimension means anything at all, it means that mere life is no longer the ultimate terrain of politics.⁴ That is to say, what is suspended in the Messianic attitude of awaiting the end of time is precisely the central place of mere life; in clear contrast to it, the fundamental feature of postpolitics is the reduction of politics to biopolitics in the precise sense of administering and regulating mere life.

This (mis)appropriation of Agamben is just one in the series of cases which exemplify a tendency of American “radical” academia (even more exemplary than Agamben here is the case of Foucault): *the appropriated European intellectual topos with its emphasis on the closure of every democratic emancipatory project is reinscribed into the opposite topos of the gradual partial widening of democratic space*. The obverse of this apparent political radicalization is that very radical political practices are conceived of as unending processes that can destabilize and displace the power structure without ever being able to effectively undermine it; the ultimate goal of radical politics is to gradually displace the limit of social exclusions, empowering the excluded agents (sexual and ethnic minorities) by way of creating marginal spaces in which they can articulate and question their identity. Radical politics thus becomes an endless mocking parody and provocation, a gradual process of reidentification in which there are no final victories or ultimate demarcations.

The hegemonic attitude of academia is that of resistance—all the poetics of the dispersed marginal sexual, ethnic, lifestyle multitudes (the mentally ill, prisoners) resisting the mysterious central (capitalized) Power. Everyone

4. See Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta: Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Torino, 2000).

resists, from gays and lesbians to rightist survivalists—so why not make the logical conclusion that this discourse of resistance is the norm today and, as such, the main obstacle to the emergence of the discourse that would effectively question the dominant relations of Power?⁵ So the first thing to do is to attack the very core of this hegemonic attitude, the notion that respect for Otherness is the most elementary ethical axiom:

I must particularly insist that the formula “respect for the Other” has nothing to do with any serious definition of Good and Evil. What does “respect for the Other” mean when one is at war against an enemy, when one is brutally left by a woman for someone else, when one must judge the works of a mediocre “artist,” when science is faced with obscurantist sects, etc.? Very often, it is the “respect for Others” that is injurious, that is Evil. Especially when it is resistance against others, or even hatred of others, that drives a subjectively just action.⁶

The obvious reproach here is this: don't Badiou's own examples display the limit of his logic? Yes, hatred for the enemy and intolerance towards false wisdom, but isn't the lesson of the last century that, even and especially when we are caught in such a struggle, one should respect a certain limit—the precise limit of the Other's radical Otherness? We should *never* reduce the Other to our enemy, to the bearer of false knowledge; there is always in him or her the Absolute of the impenetrable abyss of another person. The twentieth century's totalitarianism, with its millions of victims, shows the ultimate outcome of following to the end what appears to us a “subjectively just action”—no wonder, then, that Badiou ended up directly supporting Communist terror. *This*, precisely, is the line of reasoning one should reject; let us take the extreme case, a mortal and violent struggle against a Fascist enemy. Should one display here a respect for the abyss of the radical Otherness of Hitler's personality beneath all his positive acts? It is here that one should apply Christ's well-known words about how he brings sword and division, not unity and peace: *out of the very love for humanity*, including (whatever remains of) the humanity of Nazis themselves, one should fight them in an absolutely ruthless and respectless way. In short, the Jewish

5. Along these lines, one should especially emphasize the ambiguous (undecidable, to use the fashionable term) nature of contemporary feminism in the developed Western countries. The predominant American feminism, with its legalistic twist *à la* Catherine MacKinnon, is ultimately a profoundly reactionary ideological movement, always ready to legitimize U.S. army interventions with feminist concerns, always there to make dismissive patronizing remarks about Third World populations (from its hypocritical obsession with cliterodectomy to MacKinnon's racist remarks about how ethnic cleansing and rape are in Serb genes).

6. Christoph Cox and Molly Whalen, “On Evil: An Interview With Alain Badiou,” *Cabinet* 5 (Winter 2001): 72.

saying often quoted apropos of the Holocaust (“Whoever rescues a single life earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world.”) should be supplemented with: “Whoever (not rescues but) takes a single life of a true enemy of humanity earns as much merit as though he had rescued the entire world.” The true ethical test is not only the readiness to save victims, but also—even more, perhaps—the ruthless dedication to annihilate those who made them victims.

No wonder that radical statements such as those of Badiou are either passed over in silence or disqualified; the logical obverse of the accommodation of “French” thought to the American hegemonic ideological universe is the demonization of those European theorists who resist such domestication (reinscription into a multicultural-postcolonial radically democratic project of opening up sites of resistance to the discourse of power), and I read along these lines Harpham’s elevation of me into a threat to “life itself.” In order for his line of argumentation to hold, Harpham has to present me as a caricatured postmodern denier of rationality—how, then, to account for the fact that, in the very books Harpham refers to (especially in chapter 5 of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*), I defend the claims of science against the postmodern dismissal of science as just another historically conditioned narrative or symbolic fiction?

The philosophical problem that underlies these debates was formulated long ago by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: how can one submit the predominant form of rationality to a severe critique without abandoning a commitment to reason and regressing into a new irrationalism? The gap that separates Habermas from Adorno runs along these lines: Habermas sees Adorno as already abandoning too much of modern rationality and conceding too much to the romantic critique of modern rationalist civilization, thus paving the way for postmodern irrationalism, while for Adorno, Habermas is not critical enough of the project of rationalist modernity, refusing to acknowledge the destructive potentials that dwell in its very core.

Perhaps this is also the proper place to answer Harpham’s query about why I ignore the work of Chomsky, since, in spite of his radical critique of U.S. politics and ideology, the form of rationality that sustains his work remains indebted to what Harpham refers to as the “standard format”—no wonder he is so dear to Harpham. Let me first make clear my deep sympathy and respect for Chomsky, and political solidarity with him, in spite of my obvious theoretical disagreements. In contrast to hundreds of cultural studies writers who, from the safety of their academic positions, resist the hegemonic discourse, Chomsky stands for *effective opposition* to the existing power structure in the U.S.—a much rarer position than it may appear. The

first thing to note about Chomsky is how his political interventions are ignored and/or ridiculed not only by the mainstream liberal media but also by the predominant schools of critical thought in the U.S. If Chomsky is effectively as central as Harpham claims, shouldn't Harpham address the question of why he is ignored to such an extent? May it not be because he stands for actual opposition? And does this not tell us a lot about the falsity of cultural studies resistance?

From my perspective, the main problem with Chomsky is his lack of social theory proper. What we find in his written oeuvre is, on the one hand, his linguistic writings, and, on the other hand, his critical political interventions, which are ultimately examples of engaged investigative journalism, although of the highest quality. Perhaps this absence of social theory proper also explains some of his statements and positions that I cannot but qualify as mistakes: from his misjudgement of the post-Yugoslav war (basically adopting the standard racist-liberal perspective that all sides were equally guilty) to his misplaced defense of Faurisson, the French Holocaust-denier, on behalf of freedom of speech. Furthermore, in judging Chomsky's contribution to linguistics, one should at least take into account the detailed and highly qualified criticism elaborated by contemporary French linguists (Oswald Ducrot, Jean-Claude Milner), a criticism that, as far as I can judge, appears fully pertinent.

However, let me return to the key problem. What Harpham describes and refers to as "the standard format, the ordinary canons of argument, and the society that sustains them" (p. 467), are not as neutral as it may appear. It seems to me that the philosopher who articulated most explicitly this "format" was Karl Popper, with his notion of science as a gradual infinite approach to truth, based on the procedure of forming a hypothesis and then attempting its empirical falsification, and the political obverse of this notion, his resentment against the totalitarian imposition of a universal obligatory truth and the advocacy of democratic debate and consensus.

Self-evident as it may appear to be (who would dare to argue against it?), I nonetheless claim (and am far from being alone in claiming it) that this "standard format" is *ideology at its purest*, the "spontaneous ideology of scientists" in a liberal-democratic society. What I find problematic here is the implicit equation of scientific truth and democratic consensus. I think both sides are losers in this equation; science is deprived of its dignity, the unconditional search for truth irrespective of predominant opinions, and the political process is also constrained to a debate on opinions, excluded from the dimension of truth. Furthermore, the key philosophical problem here is the underlying Popperian notion of truth, which is philosophically very problematic; the least one can say is that there are two other modes of truth

operative in post-Kantian philosophy: the transcendental-hermeneutic truth and the Hegelian self-reflexive one.

When a transcendental-hermeneutic philosopher analyzes life, what he aims at is not the scientific question of what life really is, but our pre-understanding of life implicit in our dealing with living creatures; so it is not a question of gradually approaching the truth of life, but of formulating the pre-understanding which always-already guides us. When Hegel speaks of “the truth of” the analyzed phenomenon, he also does not have in mind what this phenomenon “really is,” independently of our partial opinions and surmises; what he does is to confront our abstract notion of the phenomenon in question with our actual practice of dealing with it. Recall the well-known case of asceticism: Hegel simply compares the ascetic subject’s statements (of the nullity of bodily existence and terrestrial pleasures) with his life practice with its constant focus on the body that is disciplined, tortured, exposed to temptations to be resisted. What refuted the ascetic idea is thus not the comparison with an external truth (say, that our bodily pleasures are an important component of our lives), but its reflexive comparison with *itself*, the life-practice entailed by it. It is difficult to render full justice to the productive potentials of this notion of truth; it is operative in the Marxist critique of ideology (which also endeavors to refute an ideological edifice by way of pointing out the way it inconsistently relates to the social practice in which it is embedded and which it legitimizes), as well as in Freudian psychoanalysis. (A symptom is not false because it renders a false image of how things really are; it is false because it conceals its own true motivational structure. Pathological jealousy is false not because my partner is not really cheating on me but because it is driven by *my own* disavowed desires and conflicts.)

Which modality of truth is operative in today’s cultural studies? One should begin with a naive question: *who* in cultural studies, or even in philosophy, effectively proceeds in the Popperian way Harpham labels the standard format? One can safely surmise that the answer is: *no one*. According to my simple observations, a great part of argumentation in cultural studies consists of a simple denunciation of the opponent for what he/she *is*, with no further arguments needed. Three decades ago, when I was a student of philosophy in the old socialist Yugoslavia, a hard-line Marxist professor used to criticize bourgeois philosophy by claiming that it is nondialectical (positivist, idealist, irrationalist). In short, his basic reproach was that bourgeois philosophy is not Marxism—he rejected it simply for *being what it was*. And I could not avoid the same impression apropos of most of the critics of my work who also, as it were, knock on an open door. I directly and openly claim what they are trying to unearth through a critical analysis. I who openly designate myself as a Eurocentrist, who explicitly argue for

the unique position of the Judeo-Christian tradition, am usually reproached—for what? *For my Eurocentrism and for privileging the Judeo-Christian tradition.* And, of course, the same goes for the advocacy of Oneness (against multitude), for the uncritical reference to the phallic signifier, and so forth. These are clichés, not arguments, just attacks on what I am.

However, I in no way want to claim that cultural studies can be dismissed in such a simple way. As far as I can judge, at their best, the works of cultural studies (as, incidentally, is the case with most of the social and human sciences) rely on three closely intertwined procedures: sheer explanatory power; demonstrating the inconsistency of the opponent's position (a typical cultural studies work targets the figure of an opponent who stands for the hegemonic—metaphysical, humanist-subjectivist, patriarchal, essentialist—tradition, and then presents itself as a radical break with this tradition); and the accordance with an implicit ethico-ideological background. This background is formed by the set of (often more implicit than explicit) theoretical, ideological, and ethico-political prohibitions and injunctions. For the last two decades, multitude has been in, unity out; contingency in, necessity out; subjectivation in, subject out; multiculturalism in, the European legacy out; difference in, universality out; antinomy in, contradiction out; resistance in, revolution out; up to much more refined injunctions concerning style. (Of course, breakthrough books succeed in changing—some of—these coordinates.)

Let me take an example that is foreign to my orientation and also does not belong to cultural studies, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. It exerted such a profound influence because (1) it offered a grand scheme purporting to resolve the big enigma of the progressive theories of the twentieth century (why people act against their own interests and even passionately support and participate in political ideologies that legitimize their own enslavement and misery); (2) it claimed to expose the inherent weaknesses and inconsistencies of its main theoretical opponent and critical target, Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis with its notions of the Oedipus complex as the ultimate framework of interpretation, of a fundamental lack (castration) as constitutive of desire; (3) with its focus on the notions of impersonal desiring machines, dynamic multitudes, resistances, and its radical opposition to any form of prohibition, law, or lack, it fully met the demands of the moment. (This, of course, does not mean that *Anti-Oedipus* simply fit the spirit of the age, that it was the right book at the right moment. What such a historicist understanding misses is the fact that important books such as *Anti-Oedipus* define or constitute the right moment that they exemplify: they do not simply fit a given standard, but (re)define this standard.)

My problem with cultural studies lies elsewhere. Even when individual

works do meet these standards, cultural studies, at least in its predominant form, involves a kind of cognitive suspension (the abandonment of the consideration of the inherent truth-value of the theory under consideration) characteristic of historicist relativism; when a typical cultural theorist deals with a philosophical or psychoanalytic edifice, the analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, or identitarian bias, without even asking the naive, but nonetheless necessary question: okay, but what *is* the structure of the universe? How *is* the human psyche really working? Such questions are not even taken seriously in cultural studies; they simply get reduced to the historicist reflection upon conditions in which certain notions emerged as the result of historically specific power relations. Furthermore, in a typical rhetorical move, cultural studies denounces the very attempt to draw a clear line of distinction between, say, true science and prescientific mythology, as part of the Eurocentrist procedure to impose its own hegemony by means of the exclusionary discursive strategy of devaluating the Other as not-yet-scientific. In this way, we end up arranging and analyzing science proper, premodern wisdom, and other forms of knowledge as different discursive formations evaluated not with regard to their inherent truth-value but with regard to their sociopolitical status and impact (a native “holistic” wisdom can be thus considered much more “progressive” than the “mechanistic” Western science responsible for the forms of modern domination). The problem with such a procedure of historicist relativism is that it continues to rely on a set of silent (non-thematized) ontological and epistemological presuppositions on the nature of human knowledge and reality—usually a proto-Nietzschean notion that knowledge is not only embedded in but also generated by a complex set of discursive strategies of power (re)production. So, again, it is crucial to emphasize that, at this point, Lacan parts with historicist cultural studies; for him, modern science is resolutely *not* one of the narratives in principle comparable to other modes of ideological cognitive mapping—modern science touches the real in a way totally absent in premodern discourses.

Cultural studies has to be put here in its proper context. After the demise of great philosophical schools in the late 1970s, European academic philosophy, with its basic hermeneutical-historical stance, paradoxically has shared with cultural studies the stance of cognitive suspension. Excellent studies have recently been produced on great past authors, yet they focus on the correct reading of the author in question, while mostly ignoring the naive, but unavoidable question of truth-value—not only, Is this the right reading of Descartes’s notion of the body? Is this what Descartes’s notion of the body has to repress in order to retain its consistency? but also, Which, then, *is* the true status of the body? How do *we* stand towards Descartes’s

notion of the body? And it seems as if these prohibited ontological questions are returning with a vengeance in today's third culture. What signals the recent rise of quantum physics and cosmology if not a violent and aggressive rehabilitation of the most fundamental metaphysical questions, such as the search for the origin and the putative end of the universe? The explicit goal of people like Stephen Hawking is a version of the TOE (Theory Of Everything), the endeavor to discover a formula for the structure of the universe so basic that one could print and wear it on a T-shirt (or, for a human being, the genome that identifies what I objectively am). So, in clear contrast to cultural studies' strict prohibition of direct ontological questions, the proponents of the third culture unabashedly approach the most fundamental pre-Kantian metaphysical issues (the ultimate constituents of reality; the origins and end of the universe; the nature of consciousness; the emergence of life) as if the old dream, which died with the demise of Hegelianism, of a large synthesis of metaphysics and science, the dream of a global theory of *all* grounded in exact scientific insights, is coming alive again.

In contrast to these two versions of cognitive suspension, the cognitivist approach that predominates today opts for a naive direct inquiry into the nature of things (What is perception? How did language emerge?); however, to use a worn-out phrase, it throws out the baby with the bathwater: the dimension of the proper philosophico-transcendental reflection. That is to say, is the historicist relativism (which ultimately leads to the untenable solipsist position) really the only alternative to the Popperian naive scientific realism (according to which, in the sciences and in our knowledge in general, we are gradually approaching the proper image of the way things really are, independent of our consciousness of them)? From the standpoint of a proper philosophical reflection, it can easily be shown that both these positions miss the properly transcendental-hermeneutical level. In what does this level reside? Let me take the classical line of realist reasoning that claims that the passage from premodern mythical thought to the modern scientific approach to reality cannot simply be interpreted as the replacement of one with another predominant narrative—the modern scientific approach definitely brings us closer to what reality (the hard reality existing independently of the scientific researcher) effectively is. A hermeneutic philosopher's basic response to this stance would be to insist that, with the passage from the premodern mythic universe to the universe of modern science, the very notion of what reality means, of what counts as reality, has also changed, so that we cannot simply presuppose a neutral, external measure that allows us to judge that, with modern science, we came closer to the same reality as that with which premodern mythology was dealing. As Hegel would have put it, with the passage from the premodern mythical

universe to the modern scientific universe, the measure, the standard that we implicitly use or apply in order to measure the reality of what we are dealing with has itself undergone a fundamental change. The modern scientific outlook involves a series of distinctions (between objective reality and subjective ideas or impressions of it in the subject; between hard neutral facts and “values” that we, the judging subjects, impose onto the facts) that are *stricto sensu* meaningless in the premodern universe. Of course, a realist can retort that that is the point, that only with the passage to the modern scientific universe did we get an appropriate notion of what objective reality is, in contrast to the premodern outlook that confused facts and values; against this, the transcendental-hermeneutic philosopher would be fully justified in insisting that, nonetheless, we cannot get out of the vicious circle of presupposing our result: the most fundamental way reality appears to us, the most fundamental way we experience what really counts as effectively existing, is always-already presupposed in our judgements on what really exists. This transcendental level was very nicely indicated by Thomas Kuhn when, in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he claimed that the shift in a scientific paradigm is *more* than a mere shift in our (external) perspective on or perception of reality, but nonetheless *less* than our effectively creating another new reality.⁷ For that reason, the standard distinction between the social or psychological contingent conditions of a scientific invention and its objective truth-value is too short here; the least one can say about it is that the very distinction between (empirical, contingent, sociopsychological) genesis of a certain scientific formation and its objective truth-value, independent of the conditions of this genesis, already presupposes a set of distinctions (such as between genesis and truth-value) that are by no means self-evident.

So, again, one should insist that the hermeneutic-transcendental questioning of the implicit presuppositions of a theoretical edifice in no way endorses the historicist relativism typical of cultural studies. And it is at this level that one should also problematize the “snags and inconsistencies” of the Popperian “standard format.” In his critical analysis of my work, Harpham pretends to rely on this “format” in spite of his final rhetorical distance from it; however, in his actual work of reading, he definitely does not follow it. I think the true reason he falsifies my position is that his procedure ultimately obeys a different compulsion, that of storytelling, of a good and effective narrative. Is his critical essay on me not a simple, but dramatically effective, narrative? Does it not *make a good story*? A guy from the Balkan-Stalinist swamp comes and seduces American academia, issuing

7. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).

statements that echo Mussolini and thus pose a threat to rationality, democracy, life itself. Compelled by this urge to make a good story, one can effectively let oneself go, to the point of imagining scenes in the night cafes in which dissidents passionately argue—how much easier it is to tell such a story than to tackle directly the problem Harpham himself acknowledges is the crucial one?

I am, of course, in no way claiming that such an analysis would simply prove Harpham's diagnosis of my work wrong. In a way, he *is* right, and I fully assume his central thesis that my work presents a threat to the Western way of life. More precisely, I *hope* this thesis is true, because I am not playing intellectual games and my ultimate aims *are* ruthlessly radical. I only claim that, if one accomplishes the critical analysis of the "standard format" Harpham rhetorically demands, this ultimate aim of mine no longer appears as an intrusion of irrational (self)destructiveness, but as a *rational* aim based on the critical dissection of the existing order. Furthermore, I claim I am not as alone as it may appear; it is difficult to overlook the contours of the new orientation forming itself out of the crisis of deconstruction and cultural studies—names like Badiou, Agamben, up to a point Deleuze himself (an antideconstructionist, if there ever was one—the *total* absence of any reference to Derrida in his work is a clear signal of it), and others. What these names share, in spite of their obvious differences, is an unabashed return to philosophy, often practiced even in a theologico-dogmatic mode, combined with a political engagement that thoroughly questions the very essentials of the hegemonic liberal-democratic ideology (and the social reality that sustains it).

Sometimes, declaring the need to do something is the way *not* to do it. And it seems to me that therein resides Harpham's predicament. He should directly task the question of the "snags and inconsistencies" of the standard format that serves as his reference—nothing else will do the job. Otherwise, the admission that my theory is a symptom of this format signaling its weaknesses is exactly the same hypocrisy as Bill Clinton's admission, apropos the battle of Seattle, that we—the representatives of establishment—should listen to the message of the protesters on the street because they are telling us something about what is wrong with our world. It is as simple as that.