

Gospel Truth in St. Paul, Dostoyevsky, and Zizek

After reading a survey of modern western history I feel the need to reflect further on some of my Marxist rumblings (see blog posts from Jan-Feb 2006). What impressed me in reading about the rise of socialist/communist expressions was the extreme difficulty encountered in achieving consensus among various organized political bodies or individuals. Marx and Engels foresaw a movement that could hopefully transcend political boundaries. However, as the possibility of this emerged from inside and outside of Russia it became apparent that just what that looked like was by no means clear. Now this should not surprise anyone who has tried to achieve common consensus among a group of people. Indeed the liberal/capitalist movements still had much of their momentum from the Protestant sentiment that no one could dictate how an individual should think or act. In this way they could side-step the immediate issues of dissension by progressively moving towards more inclusive forms of democracy (however that was understood to be achieved). From my cursory reading it appeared that when socialist/communist thinking was applied (even at the beginning of Stalin's reign) it offered an effective (superior?) alternative to capitalist economies. Now of course when you drop the word 'Stalin' dark clouds immediately descend upon the horizon. The cost for maintaining socialist/communist "unity" (and later fascism) was of course too high. Now Dostoyevsky understood this well already in 1865. In *Crime and Punishment* the angst ridden Razumikhin unleashes upon materialist responses to social issues such as crime.

"Their point of view is well known: crime is a protest against bad and abnormal social conditions and nothing more. . . . They reduce everything to one common cause – environment (here you should be reminded of Marx and Engels response to the "religious" critique of materialism in my Feb 14 post). Environment is the root of all evil! A favourite phrase. And the direct consequence of it is that if society is organized on normal lines, all crimes will vanish at once, for there will be nothing to protest against, and all men will become righteous in the twinkling of an eye. Human nature isn't taken into account at all. Human nature is banished. Human nature isn't supposed to exist. They deny that mankind, following the lines of historical development to the very end in a *living* way, will at last be transformed into a normal society. On the contrary, they maintain that a social system, emerging out of someone's brain, will at once organize mankind and transform it in an instant into a sinless and righteous society. . . . They don't want a *living soul*! A living soul makes demands, a living soul scoffs at mechanics, a living soul is suspicious, a living soul is retrograde! The sort of soul they want may smell of carrion, and it may even be possible to make it of rubber, but at least it is not alive, at least it has no will, at least it is servile and can be guaranteed not to rebel! . . . Human nature wants life. It has not completed the living process. It is too soon to be relegated to the graveyard. You can't jump over human nature by logic alone! Logic can only foresee three possibilities, but there is a whole million of them!"

I have no doubt that this rant was directed at more than one target. However, I believe it foresaw the difficulties that socialist/communist thought would encounter. Now to our present situation. The little I know of current materialist thought (by materialist I am

referring to the broad concept of social thought which only accounts for “material” conditions; often associated with Marxist thought) is that there are certain thinkers who have, surprisingly to many, turned to St. Paul as a source of potential insight. It appears that a major difficulty in historical communist/socialist expressions was the inability to gain unified momentum. Looking at St. Paul, Slavoj Žižek, (apparently known as the ‘the wild man of theory’) in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* writes,

“My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach – and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist (Marxist), one should go through the Christian experience.”

I do not claim to understand all that Žižek intends here. However, I want to key in on the second half of his statement about becoming a true dialectical materialist. What is necessary for this movement to work is actualizing something as powerful as the Christian expression of *conversion*. Only then will one have the wherewithal to transcend divisive issues (Lord knows that church hasn’t quite figured that out yet either).

Here Dostoyevsky and Žižek may share some common ground. Dostoyevsky recognized that what was being looked for was the changing of men “in the twinkling of an eye”. I imagine this is a direct allusion to Paul. Perhaps it has taken materialist thinkers some 150 years to understand that depth of what is required for their goals resonates most strongly with notions of being “re-born”. Now thinkers such as Žižek and Badiou are explicitly atheist and the question remains whether the resources of a materialist view are rich enough to continually neglect (or at least ultimately discard) the claims of transcendence which Paul’s Gospel requires.