BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY & SLAVOJ ZIZEK

A Debate Instigated by Paul Holdengräber

Violence & the Left in Dark Times

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Celeste Bartos Forum

LIVE from the New York Public Library

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I am the Director of Public Programs at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. Tonight, hopefully, will be the first of a series of LIVE events from the New York Public Library, events to embody our new motto: "Expect Wasabi!" This week and next, look forward to hearing James Wood, Daniel Mendelsohn, and Pico Ayer; Robert Badinter, who was the former Minister of Justice who probably singlehandedly under the first Mitterrand

in 1981 abolished capital punishment, with Neal Katyal; then the great Portuguese writer António Lobo Antunes; Céline Curiol with Paul Auster; and to finish us up next week, certainly to finish *me* up next week, on September 26, James McBride and Spike Lee.

Let me run down a little bit how this evening will happen, or how I imagine it will happen. It may not happen like this at all. But—I am going to ask you to write legibly some questions that you might have for our two very distinguished guests. I ask you to write them legibly. They will be handed over to me in due course, and I will select a few. 192 Books will be selling Bernard-Henri Lévy and Slavoj Zizek's book after the Q&A.

Now the rules of engagement tonight. Both our guests are rather eloquent, and neither of them, I think, is pusillanimous. And though this will not be a presidential debate, or a boxing match—I don't *think* so—expect me to jump in when needed. So look for the signal, and I hope that both my talent and you will see when I am getting impatient. So watch carefully for the bell. I won't be counting points. The length tonight—I'm always asked this question by talent—is about as long as a psychoanalytical session if the analyst is not looking at his or her watch too carefully. So be prepared to listen to our two guests for about seventy-seven minutes before we get to your questions. But don't hold me to it.

Bernard-Henri Lévy, or BHL as he is known in France, is France's rock star-philosopher, hailed by *Vanity Fair* as superman and prophet. He is the author of four dozen books, among them *American Vertigo*, *Barbarism with a Human Face*, and *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* Lévy is also a filmmaker. His documentaries include *Bosna!* and *A Day in the Death of Sarajevo*. Lévy is a

cofounder of the antiracist group “SOS Racisme,” and has served on diplomatic missions for the French government. His new book, out tonight, is *Left In Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*. It is my pleasure to welcome him back to the New York Public Library, I think for the fourth time. **(applause)**

Slavoj Zizek is referred to by some as the Slovenian Elvis of cultural theory. His work triggers continuous controversy. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, his analysis of 9/11, was attacked as Anti-Semitic in Israel and as Zionist in Egypt. He is the author of some three dozen books and the subject of a documentary, *Zizek*. His own documentary, *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, was the subject of a film retrospective in 2007 at MOMA. One week ago, he was the guest director at the Telluride Film Festival. His new book is *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections.* It is my pleasure to welcome him back to the New York Public Library, I think for the third time. **(applause)** So—mission accomplished!

(James Bond theme rises)

Please help me welcome now Bernard-Henri Lévy and Slavoj Zizek.

(James Bond theme continues)

Okay. Let’s set the stage for understanding the unrest and rebellion and revolts in the *banlieue* in the autumn of 2005 in Paris, as you magnificently do, Bernard-Henri Lévy, in your new book, *Left in Dark Times*. Since we are in a library, I would like to read very quickly a page from your

book, to also give people the flavor of your writing, to give people a sense of what you are trying to do. Since we are in a library, I also think it is not such a bad idea to read Victor Hugo. This is from page 42 of your new book:

"I am looking at the poem Victor Hugo wrote just after the insurgents burned the Tuileries Library, the same poem I gave Ségolène Royal at the beginning of her campaign. The poet is preaching to one of the arsonists. He accuses him, as we do today, of the unheard-of crime of burning a cultural site. He shows him that the books he burned were the light of his soul, the torch itself that ought to guide him along the road to happiness and progress. 'The light was yours,' he insists in the poem. 'The book was your liberator, your doctor, your guide, your guardian. And it was all that, all these priceless goods, these talisman, these flowers of the soul, which you have chosen to annihilate.' But then he has the honesty to wonder about the arsonist's reaction. And what do we think he answers? (long pause) 'I don't know how to read.' Just a humble, 'I don't know how to read,' cutting off the wise man, the prophet, the man of the Enlightenment, who firmly believes that opening a school is tantamount to closing a prison, and who is reminded that he might have taught the arsonist to love the very books he is accusing him of profaning. This says it all.

Why does this say it all, Bernard-Henri Lévy?

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: First of all, my dear Paul, I want to make a little remark. I am just arriving from Paris. I lost my luggage, **(laughter)** I missed two planes, I am exhausted, but I am so happy to be back at the New York Public Library for the fourth time. . . . **(applause)** and I am

glad to be back and to see in this audience some familiar faces, some old friends already, some people whom I don't know, who are the friends of Slavoj, some young students from Columbia, I understood, who have come—and I'm so moved, I will not quote everybody, but so moved to see here two of my friends, which might be some common friends, I suppose. First of all Ayaan Hirsi Ali, this great lady, **(applause)** former member of the parliament in the Netherlands, condemned to death just for the crime of having proclaimed the right to enter in Islam and to go out from Islam if one wants. Condemned to death for this. She's here tonight and I really want to pay homage to her. I don't know where she is.

And I want also to salute and to welcome another of my friends who has also a very special place in my recent book, who might be in a sense the real beginning of this new book, his history, the tragedy he lived might be the beginning of the book I wrote there. It is my friend Salman Rushdie. I would like you to applaud him also. **(applause)**

Now, after Ayaan, after Salman—Victor Hugo. Why does it "say it all"? Because, at this time in 2005, of these riots in Paris, there was a tendency in France, in the intelligentsia, on the right *and* on the left, to say that these riots in the neighborhoods were just nihilist barbarian riots, without any meaning, and with a sort of savagery, barbarity, dominating the whole thing. And my impression was that, number one, there was a savagery which was before this one: which was the savagery of a society who did let create some areas of this sort. *Banlieue* in French means *lieu du ban*, place of the banishment. This is the origin of the word *banlieue*. So what is a society which allows by the constitution on its borders, on its periphery—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: —and its very language . . .

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: —places of banishment?

Number two, what struck me in this poem of Victor Hugo related to what was happening. In that, of course, this riot were weird. Of course, there was some violence in it. But at the end of the day, is not it true of all social movements? Social movements don't always look like a social movement? They don't always look like clean, perfect, without any *débordement*? Social movements?

And number three, it was clear for me that these riots were also—first of all, that they were not at all what some said at this time, a sort of groups manipulated by Islam. It was just untrue. And by the way, when the French government of this moment, Nicolas Sarkozy, minister of internal affairs—he had the brilliant idea. He said, "Come on. A lot of them are Arabs. They should be Muslims. We're going to send them some imams. The French Republican police is unable to control the situation. We are going to send imams." So he sent imams. For him, it was Arab *egal* Muslim equals imams. The youngsters in the riots just laughed at the imams, and they told them, "Go away. We are not going to obey you more than the regular police." So it was not an ethnic riot, it was not a Muslim movement. It was, on my point of view, as the rioter, the arsonist of Victor Hugo, a sort of demand of citizenship by people who were living in the *lieu du ban*, in the place of banishment of our bright cities.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A demand of citizenship. Nevertheless, Sarkozy, before sending in the imams, had also named these people in ways which were relatively derogatory, which were relatively negative. Slavoj Zizek . . .

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Sarkozy made two things which were terrible.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just one word.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Number one . . .

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No. That is already two words.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: No problem.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay. Go ahead.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I am for democratic centralism as a communist. **(laughter)** So please, go on. Yeah. **(laughter)** Afterward the central committee will make a conclusion, but now, yeah.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Central committee is him! We distributed the roles. Superman is him. I might be James Bond, we . . .

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: No. *I* am James Bond. *You* are Superman.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: No, *I* am James Bond. *You* are Superman, we said.

(laughter)

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Okay, okay.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: We are agreed on that. Central Committee is Paul.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Typecasting.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: No, Sarkozy made two things. I know it is not appropriate to speak about your president in a foreign country, but he is going to come in a few days, so we are allowed. Number one he said this word "*racaille*" about these guys and these girls. There might be a debate about the context in which . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This means "scum," for those people who don't understand French.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Everybody understands French in your house, Paul. **(laughter)** And he did another thing which was maybe more dramatic, because not subject to debate. He and the prime minister of the time, Villepin, in agreement for once, decided to resurrect, to revive for the occasion a law which had been invented in the beginning of the sixties, which had never been implemented since then, and which was a martial law of the time of the Algerian War. So the real act which really put the fire in the powder was that, to treat these arsonists demanding for citizenship, to treat them as their grandfathers were treated by the colonial power of the time of the Algerian War. This is not often quoted, but it is a fact, the resurrection of this law of the Algerian War, and this was probably one of the important moments of these French weeks. Now . . .

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Thank you. I leave to you license to kill, as James Bond says. First, let me say that, although many of my friends were shocked, "How can you talk with him, traitor and so on?" **(gasp from audience)** I nonetheless think that there are antagonisms, but as we may say as old Maoists: "All our antagonisms are not antagonisms between people and the enemies of people, some are within the people, to be resolved through dialogue." So let me be quite frank, a couple of points, I agree with you.

First, I totally agree with your basic reading which, to shock you, is also a reading of your probably enemy Alain Badiou. Namely that it is wrong to read these riots as some kind of a an Islamic fundamentalism, or what. You are totally right. The problem is purely that of exclusion/inclusion, basically it was an attempt of what we are old enough, unfortunately, to

remember, the great era of structuralism, the so-called physics of the phatic communication, where the point of the message is the message itself.

The message was “Hey, we are here, we want to be included, or whatever.” There was no deeper demand, but nonetheless this makes me a little bit sad. It is as if, for me, maybe I am wrong—you can correct me—this is for me like the last nail in the coffin of ’68 in the sense that after all those utopian projects, now you have just this zero level of protest—so protests without a program. So can I do something to transcribe to this briefly where I see how could this have happened after ’68, the limitation of ’68.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is this the part where you disagree?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: No, I think up to a point we will even agree. Don’t be afraid. There will be disagreements at the end. **(laughter)** I also want to read a poem. A short one, don’t be afraid. Let me read it:

Convert to my new faith, oh crowd.
I offer you what no one has had before.
I offer you inclemency and wine.
The one who won’t have bread
Will be fed by the light of my sun.
People, nothing is forbidden in my faith.
There is loving and drinking and looking at the sun

For as long as you want,

And this godhead forbids you nothing.

Oh, obey my call, brothers, people, crowd.

I hope you got the joke. The author of this poem is Radovan Karadzic, who is now in jail. And I think there is —if we want to understand where we are today, all the cases of so-called fundamentalist violence. I think there is a very important message here, which is the utter stupidity of the usual sociological cliché, which says something like "You know, people have too much freedom today. We are in a society of choice where you have to choose everything, your sex and so on." So people feel insecure, they look for old values, firm coordinates, so they run back into some traditional system.

I visited Belgrade in the early nineties and by chance met in a cafeteria—it was a horrible encounter—some people who were probably so-called ethnic slaughterers. And they gave me a lesson of my lifetime. They told me, "No, are you crazy?" They told me, "No, it's modern democratic society which is for us oppressive, overregulated." They told me, "As a man you are not free. You see a beautiful woman, and you cannot rape her. You cannot beat your wife, you cannot steal, you cannot kill an enemy," and so on. And they made it very clear to me that the experience of becoming a nationalist was for them a kind of a perverted fake liberation.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: To come back to the riots.

(laughter)

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Yeah, yeah.

BERNARD HENRI-LÉVY: Fight and order, that is the program you asked for?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that too much to ask for?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Yeah. Yeah. To come back to which riots?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And to come back to the riots of 2005.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I think they represented something that I'm tempted to call Malevich in politics, you know Malevich, the reduction to a minimal difference like, I think, it's black square on white surface—or whatever. It's kind of a zero-level politics, which is why I claim they are even formally similar to what people call the so-called flash mobs, you know. You just collect, you do a certain gesture and I think it is a sad monument, it tells you something about our state of things if the situation in which we are is that. The only protest that we can afford, a more radical forum, is just this kind of empty gesture to saying no without any positive project. But nonetheless, to go back to your point. I think that it is precisely this, as it were, closure, which then opens up the space for . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: To remind you of what you wrote in the book, you speak about "hermeneutic temptation." The hermeneutic temptation to try to interpret the riots of 2005, and your interpretation is that everybody got it wrong.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Yes, but I was basically paraphrasing what he was saying. Which is that it is wrong to look at this as a specific group with specific demands and translate it into concrete demands like we want more, I don't know, education, social services or whatever. No, as we both know, the first thing these young people burned were their own mosques and community centers, and so on, and so on.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So let's go backwards in time, if we could, since we are celebrating in some form or fashion forty years of May '68.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Now you are moving into my terrain. Sorry.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, no, please.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: No, you go on.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think we—it's a fair question to ask you both how you view the legacy of 1968. How you understand it, how retrospectively now you interpret it? Bernard, let's start with you. You write about it in that chapter that I quoted with Victor Hugo.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: In that chapter and in other chapters there is a part of the book where I try to retrace the history—the intellectual history of my generation. And one of the important steps, stages of this history, is May ’68. For me, May ’68 is a very key, important, unique event. For many reasons—for at least two or three reasons.

Number one, it was the first time, in May ’68, where people said—The old Communist Party about the revolution, always said, “not here, not today, and not you.” “Not here, in Cuba, in China, in Soviet Union.” “Not today, tomorrow,” the tomorrow which we are seeing. “Not you, simple students, simple workers, but the Bolshevik Party.” May ’68 was the first time—this was the part of the uniqueness of the event—when a crowd of youngsters said, “Here, now, and us. Here, in France. Now, at this very moment, without waiting for anything—no tomorrow we will sing, and us, not the Party, all of us.” Number one.

Number two, the originality of May ’68 is that it was a sort of reversal in act of the old political philosophy; it happens that the whole philosophical tradition can be reversed by an event. The whole philosophical tradition said, what is—asked the question, What is the relationship between those who govern and those who *are* governed, should we reverse the relationship? Should we reform the relationship? Would the people who are governed take the place of those who govern? And so on and so forth. These were the philosophical questions since Aristotle to Hegel to the dialectical of the slave and the master.

May ’68 for me was the first time, during a few weeks, when it was said, “We want a world where there is—the very relationship explodes, the very relationship is suppressed. The universe,

a world of pure," to speak it again, in the categories of the philosophy, and of Spinoza, for example, "a society where there will be no passivity, only activity. Where everybody will be active; not everybody will be a master, not everybody will be a chief, no. Everybody will be, pure intensity, others would say, pure affirmation. This was the second point.

And the third point, on which maybe we shall disagree, Slavoj and I: that it was also, I think, the grave and the burial of the—what would I say?—of Marxism, surely, of the proletarian thematic, probably also. May 1968 was the first revolution—act of revolution—which had at the end of the day nothing to do with "*le monde ouvrier*," the class ouvrier. The proletarian class.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you fought in the streets.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Yes—but it was—first of all, it was the center of Paris. It was not as today the suburbs. The center of Paris, the Paris of Walter Benjamin and of Charles Baudelaire, was in riots. It was the intellectual petit bourgeoisie. And it was of course some workers, the world of the unions, but precisely not the union, not the Communist Party, not the proletariat as it is embodied by the old institutions of before. The workers which were involved in May '68 were, for example, unemployed workers, or fired workers, or the part of the working class which was lied to, which looked like, which had something to do with this petit bourgeoisie intellectuals.

So it was a very strange event, and, the proof of that is that the end of the movement of '68 came when, of course the left, François Mitterrand and so on, whistled the end of the game. When the

right, General de Gaulle, whistled also, it end. But when the unions said there was a very famous sentence at this time: *Il faut reprendre la revolution des mains tremblants des etudiantes*. We have to take over the revolutionary dream from the shivering hands of the students. The moment when this was expressed, when the common program of the left and the right, was to take all these poetic dream of this moment from the shiv—from the supposed shivering hands of the students, it was over. It meant that the unions will speak with the patron, the tycoons, with the government, and that order will come back again in the streets, and in the heads.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Slavoj, do you agree with this diagnosis?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I agree vaguely with this diagnosis.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Vaguely?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: No, no, no, I will see how where I see the problem just in how to interpret it. The problem I see I will try to be very frank is the following one: It is basically the same at a different level as the problem of what happened a couple of months later, August 1968 in Prague. The commonplaces are: The brutal Soviet invasion, the tanks, crushed the spring of the Prague—crushed the hope of the Prague Spring. I claim the opposite: They saved the dream. In what sense? Let's be cynical and imagine the Soviet Union would not intervene in Prague. I don't think there was a serious possibility of a new truly democratic socialistic country—uh, state. What would have happened if the Soviet Union would not integrate is that either Czechoslovakia would simply have become part of the West, or at a certain point like before and after with

liberal communism, they would have to stop it. I think that paradoxically the Soviet intervention kept the dream alive. Or what would have been if the Soviet Union were not to intervene?

And I have the same problem with May ’68. My problem is yes, I agree with what you said this pure revolution, intensity, no party state to take it over, but did it—what was the ultimate possibility in doing it? Did it really get—if the Communist Party wouldn’t manipulate, or others would allow them, would support them. Do you really think there was a chance of a new society? Or what? I think no. I think that the lesson for the left was that there was a possibility—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you think no?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Do you think there was a possibility for a new society there?

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Of course not. There was the possibility of what happened after, which was a huge intellectual, moral, and political reform of France. The world changed in France because of this attempt of ’68. The women were more free, the gays were more affirmative, the power had less power, the people had more rights. It is an important moment for that also because there was a multiplication of rights after May ’68, and because of May ’68, which we did not see in the last decades, and this is the real product of this Miracle Russe moment a few weeks we were—I remember this moment well myself. I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty. It was a moment, maybe because of material conditions—it was the epoch of the thirty glorious,**[confirm]** as we say, a period of great prosperity, a period when the Western Europe believed, stupidly, but believed that the resources were infinite. That it was, that scarcity did not

exist, and so on. And here was a feeling of youth and of immortality, an immortal youth was the feeling, the main whiff, the main smell of all those people demonstrating and so on and so on.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: But here I see again, here this is now we have a nice debate. Because now you appear more leftist than me in the sense of trusting the Reds, I have two problems here, I think that this dimension I'm first to agree with—

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: This is why I wrote the book, by the way. I wrote to be more leftist than you.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Okay. And we know that there is nothing but pretension—okay, let me go on. So, but you know where I see the problem. I'm the first to agree with you that these are real achievements, we shouldn't make fun of them, like gay rights, feminism, even the way authority functions, and so on, but nonetheless it fascinates me how—and again I'm here referring vaguely, not only to then, but to the famous book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and so on. In what—how ideally the new—how ideally May '68, that's for me a kind of Hegelian cunning of reason, helped to give a new push to capitalism and I'm not saying this is bad, I'm just saying as a diagnosis. It's not only new freedoms, it's the entire new logic, I claim, of marketing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you say it's not bad, do you mean it?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Sorry?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You said it's not necessarily bad.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: No, it's just a new phase, I mean, everything in the world, most of the things, okay, are bad and good, I mean, that's the paradox. But let me make the point I want to make. The way—how—how—Let me go here to the United States. How do we consume today? When you have a commodity to buy, it's no longer the primitive level—buy this car because it's the best, uses less gasoline, whatever. It's also no longer the competitive logic of keeping up with the Jonases, like status symbol. Isn't it that today that we are more and more addressed even by publicity as "buy this car because for example, it's a Land Rover, you can drive into nature, you can realize your authentic self, it's part of self-realization, and so on and so on. **(laughter)**

And let me go to the extreme here. This is why I find so problematic this whole stuff with organic food and so on. Do you really believe that if you the buy the apples—so-called organic apples, which are usually more rotten and cost half more, do you really believe that they are more healthy? No. It's also not competition, but it makes you feel well, you know, like, "My God, I participate in something great. I am not just a stupid consumer. **(laughter)** I show solidarity with it." It's the threat that I encounter here every day when I unfortunately have to go to Starbucks coffee. You know, like, practically they make you feel that with each cup of coffee you save some Guatemalan kid from starvation or whatever. **(laughter)** I mean, let's just be aware that's one dimension of '68, which, again, I sincerely mean that it's not bad, it's not a priori bad. No, I think there are—how should I put it?—ethical awareness did grow up with this, I'm the first to admit it. All I'm saying is as an old-fashioned, half-Marxist pessimist, how

should I put it, now, let's look what baggage comes with it, you know. For example, what do you think about—I want to ask you now a question.

What I find dangerous with charity. Charity is *in* now. It's no longer as it was one hundred years ago with Carnegie something idiosyncratic guys, today, everybody does charity. But what is the message we get? You see that poster everywhere, some deformed black child and then "for a price of one cappuccino you can save his life," whatever. The message, I think, if you read it between the lines, it's a pretty cynical one, is, "Pay a little bit and it will make you feel better and you don't have to worry about it and you don't have to politicize it and so on and so on." I think that charity—no wonder Bill Gates likes it today—no wonder that if you notice something a certain rhetorics which twenty years ago when we were young, was the rhetorics of the left, saying to us living relatively comfortable lives, "are we aware that we live in ivory tower and out there people are starving?" Today the mainstream is saying this all the time. It's one way to—to—to—depoliticize us.

My idea is that today's ideology is the ideology of depoliticization. We are no longer predominantly addressed as sacrifice, except for strange countries, strange parties where you see the poster "Our Country First," but that's another thing. It's no longer "sacrifice yourself." How are we today addressed by our society to be what we are? Isn't the main address, kind of a spiritualized Orientalism? Like be true to yourself, realize your potentials, and so on and all that stuff and I think *this* legacy of '68 I find problematic.

Which is why, let me find the further contact with you, and I will stop now and return the question to you, I hope we share another point, which is—to be brutal—hatred of Emir Kusturica. I—we do agree here. *Underground* I think is one of the most horrible films that I've seen, because it's as if this poem that I quoted was set to film there. What kind of society you see—Yugoslav society in Kusturica's *Underground*, a society where people all the time fornicate, drink, fight, a kind of eternal orgy, and here what you referred to as this eternal youth, excessive energy, one path, I'm not saying the only one. One path leads to Radavan Karadzic, I claim. I claim that the duty—moral duty today—I am maybe in a different way a moralist like you. The moral duty today is precisely to problematize this—how should I call it?—carnivalesque transgressive model—"order is bad, let's suspend the rules, let's have a free access," and so on.

Do you know a detail which maybe will interest you—you know he's more popular in France than here—how's the guy called, sorry, Mikhail Bakhtin, the great author of theory of carnival, you know that a Russian friend told me that now they discovered some private papers from the thirties when he was writing his book on François Rabelais, and you know what was his model of carnival? Stalinist purges, that's the true carnival. Today you are a member of Central Committee, tomorrow you are a English spy, piece of shit and so on, so I claim that there also is a legacy of—we have to see '68 in all its ambiguity—strike back, strike back, strike back.

(uproar from audience: applause and boos)

No, no—I'm sorry for this Stalinist gesture. Did you notice this point, that in Stalinism—In Fascism, you are a leader, you give a speech, people applaud, you just accept it. In Stalinism, the leader joins the applause, **(laughter)** so we are on the good side, okay. **(laughter)** Strike back.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: There is a famous story of Robespierre speaking on the tribune of the national assembly, and he's looking at two MP in the balcony and suddenly one is—seems frightened, is shaken by fear. And his neighbor says, "What is the matter? Why do you—are you shaken by fear?" and he said, "Robespierre is looking at me. He will believe I think something." **(laughter)** No, to answer your two questions—Kusturica and the charity. On Kusturica, strangely enough, this event is really, really an opening event of the season, because everything is unpredictable for you—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just as I like it.

(laughter)

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Just as you like. I don't agree about Kusturica. About a man, of course, yes, of course. Not that I'm his enemy. I'm the enemy of nobody except Putin, Milosevic, Karadzic, but I think I am *his* enemy, so—but *Underground* is not a bad movie, is not a bad movie, and I think that formally speaking, on the level of narrative and so on, I would not be so severe, and I would say that Kusturica is one of the cases, and we have some writers like this, where the man is so, so, so more stupid than his work. **(laughter)** You have Céline, you have a lot of writers who are stupid in their life and who make great books.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Alas.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: No, better, I prefer that the man is less stupid than his work than the reverse. If Kusturica was brilliant and the movie was zero, it would be much worse. We have the good combination about charity. Am I allowed to answer?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For the time being, yes.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Okay, you will whistle the end of the recreation as the police in '68. About charity, I agree partly with you, partly only because I think that nevertheless there is a sort of grandeur and nobility in the charity and so on. All that means that one is concerned by the other, all that can make that I am ashamed even one second of what is happening outside my private world, is good. I really believe that, I really believe.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This library wouldn't be here, quite frankly, if it weren't for Carnegie and charity.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I think that there is a good use of the shame, *bon usage de la honte*, of the scruple, of the shame, in politics, and that to terrorize a little the people even if it is at dinnertime, even if it is between the soup and the cheese, even five minutes, is not so bad, and that's why I was involved in my youth in some charity movement, that's why I went, I was a fellow companion of the movement inventing the duty of involvement and so on. All these things

are not so bad, and when you travel a little, as you do, as I do, when you go in the really damned place of the world, when you go in the black holes of the planet, in Africa, places like that, in Angola, in Burundi, sometimes the more clever people, the most informed, the only who maintain alive a little spark of the universality of man are these charity guys or women who are trying to help and so on. It is a sort of little spark of universal values in a world which ignore that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you know, Zizek didn't say what he writes in the book, but in the book he says "charity is a humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation." You do! **(applause)** and it's a strong comment. I mean, you speak about Carnegie as a man of steel and a heart of gold.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Let me finish—to ask Carnegie to give a little, will be never bad, I will never cry if we help Carnegie to empty a little his pocket.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He did it himself.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: No, he does not do it himself. He does it because he's under moral blackmail of some opinion leader, of some journalist, and so on. That is never bad. Now the real problem with charity, and on this point I would agree with you but I will maybe express in other words. Number one, it replaced politics and when it replaced politics, it's a disaster, and I saw that myself.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: In *Bosna!*, you should know this.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I saw it, I more than noticed, I shot a movie about that, the way in which the great powers said, “we deliver to you blankets in which we shall put your corpse, and for the price of that let us in peace and don’t ask us anything else,” was really disgusting. And the charity people themselves, the average humanitarian girls and boys, knew that they were doing this task, knew that they were manipulated by the powers, by the states, who had washed their hands of the flesh and the blood of the Bosnians and who just asked as an illusion, as a cloud of ink, the humanitarian to do their job. This is one real more than limit, one real perverse effect of the humanitarian and the charity.

The other one, which I have observed not in Bosnia but in Rwanda, and in Africa in general, but especially in Rwanda, and my friend Philip Gourevitch, who is here, know that also and better, maybe better than I—he devoted a book to that, a part of a book to that. The charity movement, the way, the fact of seeing the world with the eyes of charity has also the effect of transforming the human being, which is a complicated thing at the end of the day, which is not a thing, which is a body, which is a mind, an articulation between the two, and so on. The charity business has the result of transforming the human being into a single, a simple body; that is the bodification of the subject, a flesh-icization of the human being.

And in Rwanda it was very clear, how many times I heard—the politics of my country of some big humanitarian consciousness of my country, saying, “we did a lot in Rwanda,” okay but what did they do? After the genocide, when the genocide was over, they went to give food, and to give

goutte à goutte, drop by drop to the murderers, to the people who did the genocide. They did not even ask the question, people being just bodies without soul or the charity having the duty, the task, to manage the bodies and not to know anything about the souls, the question to know if one was a executioner or a victim which is a question that was not raised at all. So this is the other perverse effect, terrible one, and I saw that again in Rwanda, but not only in Rwanda, it is caricatural, it is something terrible and it might be this sort of case one of the worst and most terrible form of despise of the other and even of racism: "You, black people from Rwanda, are just good to be fed, and shut up—your soul, your destiny, your political role in this tragedy, we don't want to know anything about that."

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Thank you for defending me, because you see, that's my point, my problem with charity. Let me make a step further, where I think it's the clear-cut case, we all know, and again my source here are not some crazy marginal leftists, but mainstream United States. Two years ago in the summer there was a cover story in the *Time* magazine about Congo claiming that in the last ten years around 4 million people died there of unnatural causes and so on and so on. Of course you can approach it in this patronizing way as a problem of charity mixed with despising the local military, because that's a very fine form of racism. Poor Africans are good as victims, in the sense of objects of charity. The moment they take things into their own hands, they become warlords and so on.

But the problem I have in Congo is this one. We have there what? A state which de facto more or less doesn't exist as a state. It's cut into local areas where local warlords, local armies, rule. But what keeps all of it alive? Here a little bit of Marxist analysis is helpful. All these local warlords

are of course connected each with another, foreign company doing mining, diamonds, zinc, and so on and so on, and that's how the entire system perfectly works. It's the best deal. Local warlords got their money, get rich, foreign companies don't have to deal with taxes, all that stuff and so on and so on. You have the greatest, probably at this moment, humanitarian catastrophe in the world. Like—if I may put it in my extravagant words, an average Congolese citizen would probably have sold his mother into slavery to be able to move to the West Bank, where some food is. It's infinitely worse, but it's not in, it's not in because it fits perfectly all agents. Local warlords, military, and foreign companies.

So isn't it a nice example of instead of playing charity there, let's just do something at the level of how we control companies, the relationship of capital, and maybe we can do something. It's not basically a problem of charity, which is always also a problem then of implicitly treating others as, you know, "we must teach them democracy" and all that stuff. But since I mentioned West Bank, I propose if we all agree, like Comrade Stalin says, I put this to the Central Committee, shall we move to a more difficult topic, since I mentioned West Bank, where is the misunderstanding about Israel, Palestine, and anti-Semitism today, and so on? Do you want to start with your statement?

(laughter)

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Misunderstanding between who and who?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Maybe there is—you know, I'll tell you a nice story. You know—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Wait for the story.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: It's a very short story. It's one sentence.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, okay, it's a haiku.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: In the end of the *Gone with the Wind*, Rhett Butler says to the woman, Scarlett O'Hara, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," like F-three-points-off. In Japan, I was told, where they are very polite, you know how they translated this line when they subtitled the film? Something like, "Frankly, my dear, I think there is a slight misunderstanding between the two of us." **(laughter)** So in this sense maybe there is a slight misunderstanding, maybe.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I don't know, I don't know, I don't know what you think about that. As for myself, I think the same—I have the same opinion since unfortunately forty years, it might even have been the first article I ever wrote in '69, two years after the war of the Six Days. I believe in the solution of two states, a Palestinian state and an Israeli state, recognizing each other and living in peace. This is my position, I never moved from that. I think that you have some enemies of this solution in the Israeli society, but I think that you have also enemies and *more* enemies in the Arab world and in the Palestinian world, in the Palestinian camp, more enemies because you have today what you had already since the beginning, inside the Palestinian people and the Palestinian leadership a real split between some democrats who really want a compromise, who really want a good divorce, a good political solution, a sharing of the earth,

and some people who were the inheritors of a very well-known Arab leader called Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, who was a Nazi, who was in Berlin during the Second World War, who was very proud to have met Hitler, who went to Auschwitz and who said that he had never seen something more great than Auschwitz and who was the mentor of some of the leaders of the Palestinian movement, including Yasir Arafat, so this part of the Palestinian leadership, of course, cannot believe in this political, reasonable, acceptable solution of a good divorce and a good sharing of the earth, because they do believe—before the existence of Israel they already believed that the Jewish people here and elsewhere should be erased and exterminated.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Let me let me illuminate maybe two, three points of where I, while basically agreeing with many things that you put, I would just shift the accent maybe if I can have now my three, four minutes and then, I'm looking at you as my superego. Okay. First, I agree with you unconditionally that there should be no compromise with anti-Semitism, in the sense that I totally reject those so-called leftists who claim, you know, "Arabs are"—they don't say it but they mean it—"Arabs are primitive, so we should excuse them if they sound sometimes anti-Semitic, they suffered so much under Israeli occupation and so on and so on." Yes, ruthlessly, no compromise here, but my "but" is the following one.

Now comes the problematic thesis—would you agree with it or not? When I visited a couple of times Israel I encountered in the way they—some of the Israeli establishment—criticizes those groups who have doubts about the politics of the state of Israel. I couldn't not have noticed it but they criticized them in how do they construct those Jews who are not fully Zionist? I'm sorry to tell you there is only one historical analogy. They categorized them in exactly the same way as

one hundred years ago at that point of the beginning of the early twentieth century, anti-Semitism in Europe, local nation-states, dismissed the Jews. The idea is “you appear to be one of us Jews, but you are not really one of us, you are rootless,” and so on.

And a proof, a shocking proof, I defy you to visit it. This is an extreme point of this development. There is a Web site which shocked me, pretty much. It’s called www.masada.com. It has a list of four thousand Jews who are designated at this site as shit, shit, la merde, shit, which then they interpret, since hating Israel, terrorizing Jews. It’s a horrible list, each of them as evil a photography as possible, even the blah-blah-blah, and my first idea was “My God, did these guys hire an old Nazi to do this?”
So—I hear my verbosity, just let me just finish the thought.

You know where my problem started, when something unnatural happened in this country. My big basic hypothesis is that if ever there is a group which should be by its nature anti-Semitic, it’s American Christian fundamentalists. It’s in their nature to be anti-Semitic. So how is it, my God, that all of a sudden now—did you know this?—they fanatically support the Zionist project? I think because they sympathize with what runs against a certain aspect of being Jewish.

Let me finish with a joke. Wonderful caricature recently in Austria making fun, you know, of the usual defense of Jewish establishment, which say, “of course you can criticize Israel as much as you want, but don’t use the critique of Israel, state of Israel, for anti-Semitic purposes.” This caricature shows two big, fat Nazi-looking Austrians. One shows to the other an article and says, “Look, yet another example of how a totally justified anti-Semitism is brutally misused for an

unfair critique of the state of Israel," and so on. **(applause)** No, that's the logic of them. That's where I see the danger. One should ever bear in mind of this most precious inheritance of Jewish tradition, which comes precisely of them being—as French political philosophers would have said—*la partie non partie*, the ones who precisely not being part of the organic social community stand directly for the dimension of universality. And I'm not simply accusing Israel. I see this as a very tragic development that now even something that I'm tempted to call with all respect as a defense of all of my Jewish friends, Zionist anti-Semitism is appearing in the sense that what they criticize is precisely a certain figure which sounds familiar in Europe. Do you find this problematic?

(laughter)

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I agree on two points and I disagree strongly on the third one. The American neo-Christians, the nature of their support to Israel, I am like you, I am suspicious. As a friend of Israel, as a very devoted friend of Israel, I know that Israel has no so many support, so okay, when I often say to my friend in Tel Aviv or in Jerusalem, "take the support but keep the gun and the torpedo, because they are probably not the most sincere friends that you can have." **(applause)** And a friendship based on a misunderstanding is not a true one, and you know on what point this friendship is based. The neo-Christian Americans just want a Israel clean, ready, and in peace for the landing of the messiah—as Ahmadinejad, who asks the street of Tehran to be enlarged because in a few minutes, the last Imam, the Hidden Imam, is going to arrive, and we have to be—we have to make big avenues, like Baron Haussman in Paris you have exactly the same in in a way some American Christians who say Israel has to be in order of march for the

day of the return of the messiah. On this I agree they are strange friends and I would advise to be very careful about that, Israel, and my friends of Israel.

I'll agree, also, I'll more than agree, I'm glad to hear that in your voice, that of course no compromise with anti-Semitism whatsoever, and I even feel that in this way which some have to ask some accounts to all countries in the world about their past Nazism. We asked Germany to be accountable of their Nazism. We asked Italy to be accountable, to tell us about, to be of a sorrow, to make the mourning of their Fascism. We ask it of France. Except for the Arabs. They are, for some so-called liberals, for some people of left doctrines the only ones who should not be accountable of, who should not be asked about, who should not be helped to go out also of the nightmare of Nazism is the Arabs and this is unbearable and this supposes, yes, a sort of racism—they are not really responsible, they are not really political subjects, and we do not have to have the same exigencies, the same demands toward them than toward civilized people. This is disgusting for them. And I know again a lot of people in territories, average citizens in many Arab countries who said that, who say, "Why should we be the only one treated as children who should not be bothered too much about their past fascism because it is going to make us mad?" It's unacceptable.

About Israel and the birth of Zionist anti-Semitism, I think, my dear Slavoj, maybe on this point, maybe you don't know enough Israel. Maybe you don't know enough Israel because probably this exists. You have stupid people everywhere, you have an extreme right everywhere and also in Israel. You have also a great rabbi who said a few years ago that the Shoah, the Holocaust, was the punishment for crimes committed by the most innocent people of the holy story, which

were the poor Jews of Eastern Europe, and so on and so on. So you have stupid guys in Israel, too. And you have also, this you are right, you have a real movement, which is called the Canaanian movement, people who do believe that there is no other destiny for a Jew then to be downrooted solidly in the earth and in the race and in the blood of the ancestors and who are against any solution, diaspora, and so on, and who would say that the values of the diaspora are bad values, corrupted, and so on.

It is real, but I think really it is a tiny, tiny minority and the proof of that, the proof of that, is that Israel is the only country in the world—I don't know so many—where you have not only in the society but in the political debate, and not only in the political debate, but in the parliament, you have some people who are officially—whose program is anti-Zionism, you have some members of parliament who are anti-Zionism. It is as if we had in France some member of parliament who were in favor of the dissolution of France, in favor of the illegitimacy of France, you have that in the Knesset, you have some members of the parliament who say that. You have some political parties of extreme left, you have an Arab party who do really believe that Zionism is a mistake, that the creation of Israel is a mistake, and not only they are tolerated, but they are member of the debate.

And I say extreme leftist movement and I say an Arab party but not only. You have also in a great part of Jerusalem, which is called Meah Shearim, which is a place vibrant of faith and of creed and of spirituality, the people there, the men in black, who are completely devoted to the Torah, to the study and so on, they don't recognize Israel, they are like the Amish in America. They do believe that Israel is a mistake, that they are here only because they are closer to the sky,

but they don't recognize this state and so on. So a state which admits, in its cities, in its political institution, in the core of the debate, the denial of its very essence is a country which does not look like the caricature which was offered to you by the friends you made. So I make you a proposal, seriously, let's go together in Israel and I will show you another face of the country.

(applause)

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Okay, no, but I often go to Israel, but let me make you another proposal. Do you agree to go with me to West Bank, then? No, no, no, no, wait a minute. You see, because that's what is for me missing in your book, you know. First, let me make it clear, I don't buy these stupid stories you know, Israelis are the new Nazis, and you know, this kind of story, yeah, yeah, maybe they suffered a little bit the Jews, in World War II, but what they were doing—what Nazis were doing to them, they are now doing to the Arabs, I don't buy that. But nonetheless, it's very instructive to visit the West Bank and to observe the what—my source here is not some crazy left-winger; it's Tony Blair.

I read an interview with him and he said he was shocked by what maybe in the terms in Michel Foucault we can call this microphysique of bureaucratic power, this incredible network of small measures to annoy the Arabs, to humiliate, and so on. That was breathtaking to me—you cannot solely justify it by any rational security measures. For example, the example is from Tony Blair, not from my sources in al-Qaeda or whatever, no. **(laughter)** That, for example, if you are a farmer, Palestinian or Jewish, in the West Bank, you know how much more water per capita you get if you are a Jewish farmer? Do you know that if you want to dig for water—Blair is my

source—as a Palestinian farmer you can dig three feet deep. I don't know what they are afraid, if they will dig a tunnel for terrorists or what. You know, this is what is making life so unbearable for them. It's a systematic politics.

My second thing—you know where I'm a little bit more pessimist than you. Unfortunately I don't think—now I think *you* simplified it a little bit. It's not as simple as Bad Arabs—and they are bad, I agree there with you, I don't think, as some of my ex-friends think, that Hamas is the new Leninist party or whatever, no. But you don't get on the one hand Hamas, on the other hand some more secular democratic, blah blah blah. First, I claim that there is a long-standing catastrophe of Western politics there. Do you know, again my source is *New York Times* here. Do you know that until five, six years ago, that's what I read in *New York Times*, the state of Israel, or maybe now it's seven, eight years ago, was supporting financially Hamas because they wanted to weaken Arafat, divide and rule, and so on. What the catastrophe for me is that some time ago, don't ask me when, I hope we agree here, the West made, it started in Afghanistan and elsewhere, a fateful wrong decision claiming that religious fundamentalists are better than the secular Left and we are all paying a terrible, terrible price for that.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would—what I propose to both of you is that I go on these journeys with you, but what I would like to say now is that let's move away from Israel for a moment, come back to it—

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Islamofascism. I want Islamofascism. **(uproar from audience)** No, I don't *want* it. I want to debate it. No, very sincerely, can I make it a short point, please. Let me ask you a question. What I like in your idea of Islamofascism is to politicize it. Islamic fundamentalism, my God, we are not talking about a spiritual movement, we are talking of a violent political movement, so let's at least use some political term, okay. I find nonetheless two things problematic. First one, then let's call it simply fascism, you know. If we talk about Islamofascism, would you agree to call Mussolini or Hitler Christofascism or what? But a more fundamental problem—I see and this is not—please—this is not a refined way to try to diminish it, claiming they are any better and so on. There is for me one big difference which strikes the eye. For the Nazis and European fascists, the dangerous Jew was not the Jew with a state, was the stateless Jew who was like, you know, microbes—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Slavoj, it's great, but is there a question?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Yes, the question is—don't you find this big difference, that for the old Nazis, the enemy is the stateless Jew who penetrates everywhere, which is why the Nazis, before they decided on the Holocaust, they even *supported* the idea of the state of Israel, just to have the Jews then together out of us. Why? Whatever you say, except if you are a madman, for the majority of Arabs, the problem is on the contrary the Jewish state, they don't mind if the Jews are wandering around, just don't give them land and state. It's for me an important opposition. You don't think it's—

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I don't think so, no. Because I listen carefully what Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, says, he gave many interviews where he said precisely the contrary: "My enemies are not only the Jews living in Israel, but they are the Jews living out of Israel." I know that before the creation of Israel, you had an Arab Nazism, an Arab fascism, who said exactly what Hitler said, "I hate the Jews as a virus, microbe, infiltrating everywhere." When Husseini was in Berlin, when the Muslim Brothers were founded in Egypt, there was not Israel. There was a little issue, that was the Balfour Declaration, and a little group of two hundred or three hundred thousand people in the place of Palestine—there was no state, and the anti-Semitism was rampant also in the Arab world.

So I think that an anti-Semite has a proper peculiarity. He really hates Jews in any form. When they have a state, he hates the state. When they don't have the state, he hates them stateless, when they have both a state and where they are dispersed, spread, he hates it, too, and he tries to fight them too. This is really the peculiarity of this strange and weird hatred. He hates Jews in all forms. Should I call the Mussolini Christianofacism and Hitler, why not, I would, but then let's be precise. I could call Mussolini a Latin fascism; I could call Hitler a pagan fascism. Yes, why not? A pagan fascism. Hitler—it was not a Christian fascism, the Nazism was also an anti-Christian movement, as you know. The project of Hitler was to—was to build a sort of new national church of the Third Reich and so.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Hitler was a New Ager ahead of his time, I think.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Of course. Of course. So we have to—why not—to precise and I'm ready to make the precision in each case. The only thing I ask is to relieve this sort of strange extra-territoriality and fear which seize us when the moment comes to characterize and to denounce, for the sake of the Muslims themselves, the fascism which enrages parts of the Muslim world.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let me take back the power just for one minute.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: You never lost it, Paul. You never lost it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I never lost it. I never had it.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: You are invited in Israel and in Ramallah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's just a marvelous proposition. I would like to come back, Bernard-Henri Lévy, to your book and to on the one hand the elegiac quality of it and the hopeful quality. You were talking about being rather more pessimistic. You, in some way, are—and maybe you can start by relating this famous phone call you got from Sarkozy—You are in some way telling us that it still makes sense to be a man on the Left. —"I am irreducibly a man of the left," you write BHL. "And if that expression makes you laugh, you're nothing but a buffoon." And in some way I would like you to explore with us, to unpack for us, what it means for you to still in this day and age be a man on the left if it makes any sense really to differentiate left and right quite as much as you do and to speak, generally speaking of your hope for a left.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Number one, yes, I think that we have to—it's a duty if not—there is no politics and maybe no society any longer. We have to distinguish a right and a left. We have to feed all that can make debate. The cities, the societies, where there is no longer political debate, which could be the dream of some, and maybe of Sarkozy, I assume that they are mature for the worst, which is dictatorship. So I do believe, of course, I do believe, you have to have a right, you have to have a left. It is not the only opposition. You have to have also inside the left, you have some debates. This is a purpose of my book. You have a left which is unfaithful to anticolonialist tradition and you have a left also who being faithful to the anticolonialist tradition tries to be faithful to the antitotalitarian movement and so on. So the more you have debates, the more you have dividing lines, the more you have political quarrels, the best, the better for the democracy, the better for the multiplication of powers, rights, for the simple people.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You talk of a left you dream of, even though it is a corpse.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: About Sarkozy—about Sarkozy in this conversation which opens the book, and which was the—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Impetus.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Yes, the *occasion d'cause* I would say of the book. I said two things to Sarkozy. He calls me to enlist me, to ask me, "why don't you, what are you waiting to endorse me?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "Your friends have endorsed me."

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: "A lot of your friends have done it, have written articles in *Le Monde* and so on. What are you waiting for?" We knew each other, we were even in the past years sort of buddies, he married my brother. We were rather close.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Not your brother, he didn't marry your brother.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: He married my brother with his wife, yes, he was the mayor of the city.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, because I thought, even in France.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I told you this would have been one of the result of May '68, Nicolas Sarkozy marrying my brother. **(laughter)** A mix between May '68 and my terrible English could give this sort of atypical adoration. He married, he organized the wedding, he celebrated the wedding of my brother, so we had reasons to be close, and he had reasons to call me this day in this kind and gentle way, to which I replied in a gentle but very firm way I said him "no," and then I said him, "no," but I told him two things which are really for me, the bottom of this book, the depth of this book.

I told him that as an intellectual, as a writer, as a citizen, as everybody, I think that we have two duties. We have a duty of faithfulness and we have a duty of unfaithfulness. We have a duty to be faithful to our tradition, to our intellectual family, to the patterns, to the models, which made, molded each of us, and for me my family is that. My father was a former fighter in the Spanish War. I was bred in the idea that the left was better than the right, that there was a part of dream there, which you know you could not find on the right, so I was faithful to that. And I told him also and this is the real spark of the book that a duty of faithfulness is worth nothing if it is not accompanied by the duty of unfaithfulness, which means when your family turns back to what you believe to be the justice, the truth, and so on, then you have to be unfaithful to your family, then you have to contest, to fight against but from inside your family.

And when I see so many leftists in my country today, who in the name of anti-imperialism, for example, accept some crimes. Who in name of anticolonialism because Sudan is a former colony, refused to condemn what is happening in Darfur because condemning what is happening in Darfur would mean to reproduce the old argument of the colonial time. When I see some of them, leftists, in the name of tolerance, in the name of the idea that each opinion is equal to every one, refused to condemn those who condemn to death Ayaan Hirsi Ali because it is an opinion. They say, you have some leftists today, some liberals in France, who say it is Ayaan Hirsi Ali has an opinion, which is a provocative one, which is—which consists in saying that Islam is a bad thing and she wants to go out. Provocative means that it provokes another opinion, which consists in banning her and not only banning but prosecuting, prosecuting and not only

prosecuting but condemning her to death. So when I see that in the left, I do believe that I have—I would not be, I would not be faithful to myself if I was not also unfaithful to this left in—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That line of Saul Bellow, when he says, "One doesn't love *because* but *in spite*." In some ways you remain faithful to the left in spite—

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I remain faithful to the left, yes, in spite, but not only in spite. I do believe—I think that there is an emergency to explain to the left, for example, that tolerance is good, but secularism is good, too. It is urgent to say to the left that even if America supports Darfur, Darfur remains a cause that they have to support. I think it is urgent to say to the left, that even when it is said in the leftist rhetoric, anti-Semitism is unbearable, and so on, so not only in spite. I think that the battle has to be waged *inside* the left, which is in a terrible state in Europe and also in America, and this battle has to be waged, and that is why I wrote this book.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think for you, Slavoj, remaining faithful to the left, if indeed you are, means something slightly different.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Yes, it means crazy, **(laughter)** and if you allow me to explain it briefly why. In some sense I still consider myself a communist. Why? When we talk about the left today, for me in a somewhat simplified way, the problem is Fukuyama or not? That is to say, in the same sense as thirty, forty years ago we were dreaming about socialism with a human face, what most of the left today—so-called third-wave left and so on—effectively strives after is global capitalism with a human face, a little bit more tolerance, more this, more that, and so on. Against

this I still believe what? First, and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough. I accept all your points about anti-Semitism and so on and so on, but on one point I insist.

The conflict which is presented to us by the media and so on as the main conflict, between tolerant democratic openness, whatever, human rights and fundamentalism, this conflict with which we are bombarded is not the true conflict. It's in some sense a false conflict. Something is missing in the equation between liberal democracy, let's call it vaguely, and fundamental. I think that both poles are here caught into each other are part of the same self-propelling movement. What is missing is the left. And I hear poor old Walter Benjamin who said that if I accept your designation of fundamentalism as fascism then every fascism is a signed of a failed revolution. Let's say it's easy to mock—the left is already died. Yes, that's why we have what we have today. **(applause)**

Second thing, the next question, now I will be here very rational, not in any way pathetic, you know, I'm open here, my God, maybe liberal capitalism works. I'm the first to admit that, let's be frank, that probably no society in human history—large group. There was no society in entire human history where such a large number of people lived such a relatively comfortable, safe, and free lives as they did in Western Europe in the last fifty, sixty years. One has to admit it. But I see dark spots, dangers on the horizon. And now I come to the crucial question—to put it in these bombastic, old Marxist terms. Are there antagonisms visible which I think it will not be able to solve them with the means of global capitalism as we have it today? I think there are.

(A), ecology. I know the market works wonders and so on, but I claim there is—Yeah, not these days. **(laughter)** But they claim—the risks are too high. (B), biogenetics. Even Fukuyama, as we know, he changed his position, he admits now that the biogenetic prospect ruins his notion of the end of history. Then we have the problem of intellectual property. I claim intellectual property is a notion which in the long term it will not be able to include it into private property. It cannot—There is something in intellectual property which is, as it were, in its nature communist. It resists private property.

And the last point, new walls everywhere, new forms of apartheid, and so on and so on. It is as if ironically the truth of globalization is not just that Berlin Wall fell. Berlin Wall fell, but now we have new walls all around. And again, I don't have any naïveté here, I am not saying oh, there will be a new Leninist Party. No, that story is definitely over, I agree with you. But some kind—why communism? Because (a), all these problems that I indicated, ecology, intellectual property, and so on, are problems of commons, of something which is the shared substance of our life. And some—in ecology, it's clear, some kind of new form of collective activity, but I totally agree with you, nothing to do with Communist Party, state, or whatever, that story's over. We'll have to be inventive.

If not, if the system as it is will go on and on and on, then I think something will be going on which I fear very much. What in some of my books I called a "soft revolution." We are not even aware of how, slowly, things are already regressing. At the level of ethical standards, even. For example, do you agree with this? When friends tell me, "Why such a fuss about Guantanamo, torturing, but isn't it clear that in China they torture infinitely more?" I say, "Absolutely," I

agreed, I am not a hypocrite here. What matters to me is surface appearances. Don't you find it—what worries me is that twenty, thirty years ago, if somebody were to advocate publicly torture, he or she would have been dismissed as an idiot. Like you don't even have to argue. It would have been the same as to argue about rape. I would be very worried if I were to live in a society where one would have to argue all the time that one shouldn't rape women, how should I put it, no?

And it's not only the fact that we talk about torture in this way and numerous other facts, point toward something which I find a little bit worrisome and here, in a strange way, I find some contacts with you when you attack false notions of tolerance and so on. The problem is how a certain way of false politically correct tolerance is—is—how tolerance overlaps with new forms of oppression, paradoxically, paradoxically, with new forms of censorships and so on and so on. So I find that although apparently we don't live in dynamic times in the sense of big struggles, it seems that we all agree somehow since our happening in—how should I put it?—sooner or later we will have somehow to confront the problem, which was at the same time the basic problem of communism and the problem basically also of '68. Let's not forget'68 was also a radical questioning of the existing global system.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Things are happening, but the response on both of your sides is quite different. For you, in your book *Violence*, basically one of the things you're saying is we should have a kind of Bartleby politics, "I prefer not to, I remain disengaged, I will . . ."

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I've talked too much. I would love to explain this, but then I monopolize the—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, and in your case there is no doubt whether it's Malraux or Sartre or other people who matter to you today, you continue to believe in a world that you will confront yourself with and that by knowing it you will try in some form or another to change it. You say in the book *Violence*, I don't have time now to read those passages, but basically let's sometimes—there's an urgency for us to act. Let's stay out of it. No, no, I will ask Bernard.

(laughter)

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: But then don't ask me, my God.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Ask what? I reply to Slavoj or what is your question?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My question is if for you engagement is still paramount?

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: I will reply to Slavoj first and then I will go to your question.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: To what will you reply? Sorry.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You said a lot of things before.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Yes, you asked me about torture, about Guantanamo, I do agree hundred percent and, for me, when I wrote *American Vertigo* a few years ago one of the most shocking things through which I went during my journey and my journey among intellectuals was the fact that there was a debate about torture. This—and among leftists, among intellectual leftists, I don't want to quote them here, they might not be here, so—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Or they might be here, actually.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: They might be here. If they are here, they can raise hands. But the resurgence in America of a debate on the question of under which circumstances torture should be tolerated, the ticking-bomb theory, there is a bomb ticking somewhere and that if you can spare some thousands of lives, would you not accept torture and so on. All these debates among scholars and intellectuals were such a regression related to the text of Albert Camus saying that in every case torture is unacceptable. On this I agree. If communism means, and this I'm surprised, if communism means just that we have some things in common, that we have a common world to take care of, like ecology and so on, if communism is just that, then I am a communist, too.

(laughter)

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: It's a little bit more.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: That's what you said. If communism is that, if it means that we are living again a strange time, which is also a regression regarding to our youth, where nations are building borders more and more constraining, a world where the sense of internationalism is withdrawing and so on, I agree with that. And for me, one of the most despairing characteristic of this time is, for example, the dream of internationalism, the dream of cosmopolitanism, the dream of a world where, of course, there will be some borders, but some borders which are made to be respected and to be crossed. This dream is fading more and more because of sovereignism, as we say in Europe, because of nationalism, as it is said in other parts of the world and so on. So against that, I would love more commonality, a world more in common and if that is communism, I take it.

About fundamentalism and liberalism, then, we don't agree at all. I am ready to accept, of course, that liberalism produces some monsters, produces some horrors, produces some gaffes, and we know it yesterday and today in this very place we saw how liberalism of the Bush sort, of the cut-tax sorts can produce nearly disaster—okay, Fannie and Freddie and Merrill Lynch, blah blah blah, and all that is the product of a certain liberalism and it is—it might lead this society to chaos, of course. Nevertheless, I think that there is a great difference with fundamentalism, which is that I do believe that America will correct that. I do believe that if Barack Obama is elected, according to what he said, to his record track about this subject, there will be some regulation on financial speculation and so on, which will make that this sort of madness will not happen or not in the same way.

The fundamentalist societies are societies closed in on themselves, based on humiliation and humiliation in particular against this part of humanity which we saw in our youth the liberation of, which are the women. The fundamentalism—the thing which is unforgivable, the political fundamentalism, is the status of the women, a world where half of humanity has to veil his face, a world where half of the humanity is considered not to be a real human being but to live in provocation, a world where you are a tool to reproduce the species, the human gender, and not a normal human being, in a world which is deeply, on moral grounds, corrupted and this cannot be accepted and cannot be compared to the mistakes and even to the crimes of liberalism.

(applause)

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I totally agree; my problem is only the following one. Let's take today's fundamentalism. Where does it come from? We all know and I hope we agree, today's fundamentalism has nothing to do with some ancient traditions, even when it has the form of returning to an ancient tradition. It is something which is generated by today's global capitalist process.

(applause)

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Why?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Well, where did that come from? Sorry, but where? Okay, it's a reaction to it. Of course it's a reaction to it!

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Of course, it's a reaction to it. It's already not the same sort of causality. Okay, a reaction to the capitalism, maybe. So for this reason you think that what, we should—

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: What I think is that is that you cannot really fight fundamentalism—my problem is not—I don't want to do any kind of a compromise, in the sense of—You know, I'm not this pseudo-Hegelian dialectician—I hope none of us is—who says, on the one hand, fundamentalism, too much community, on the other hand, liberalism, too much individualism, so let's strike the proper measure. No! What I'm saying is that, is that, it's—liberalism is not enough to fight fundamentalism. It always gets caught into liberalism as it were generated cannot stand on its own. For theoretical reasons, for other reasons, and so on.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: There are many reasons for fundamentalism; there are of course these reasons you say.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Isn't fundamentalism—did you read the wonderful book of Sayyid Qutb, how is it called, the philosopher of al-Qaeda who was studying in America. You know, him, the big guy. Okay. Isn't it absolutely clear that he was shocked by what he saw and it was a reaction to liberalism only in this sense?

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: He was shocked by what? He was shocked by the freedom. He was shocked by the free speech, he was shocked by the face of the women in the street. So

should we suppress the face of the women in the street in order to help them not to react and not to be fundamentalist? I think that this is never the way. No, because he says, what this sort of guy says is that—Mohamed Atta said that. We have the confession of his roommate in Hamburg who says exactly that. Mohamed Atta, the man who was on the World Trade Center, was shocked to see these girls with miniskirts, was shocked to see this free speech in cafés and so on in Berlin. He was shocked by this atmosphere of corruption in the great city and that's why he became a terrorist.

So, two ways of reacting to that. First way, we have to suppress big cities. We have to imprison our women not to provoke the reaction of Mohamed Atta. I think it is not the right way to do. The other way to do is to say that the free speech, the equality between men and women, the human rights in general are values which can be generalized, universalized, without breaking the balance, the cultural ecology of this or that country, we can imagine, and we have to imagine, and this is the demand of all the democrats of the Arab countries. We have to imagine, for example, Arab countries, but not only, also in Asia, who remain what they are, who remain faithful to the best of their culture, who remain faithful to the best of their tradition, and who add to that the equality between men and women, who add to that the fact of not killing the gays because they are gay, who add to that the freedom of the press.

We had this debate in Europe. Twenty years ago in France, twenty years ago we had some people, some great thinkers, some real philosophers, who said, "Don't touch the death penalty in France. If you touch the death penalty, to read Hegel, read Kant, Emmanuel Kant, or read all the big minds**,** Beccaria and so on, you will destroy the state. The whole system holds by the key of

the death penalty. If you separate the key, everything will fall into ruins." Thank God, if I daresay, we had this guy, this man you are going to invite in a few days, Robert Badinter, who said, "Wait a minute. We are going to suppress death penalty and you will see the French society will stay alive, the state will continue to function," and he was right and François Mitterrand was right.

One century ago, two centuries ago, you had people in France who said, "If you accept the right to mock God, if you accept the right to blaspheme, if you accept the right to go out of Christianity it will be the end of the world." And people thought that so much that people like Chevalier de La Barre, defended by Voltaire, was tortured, cutted to pieces, because he refused to take off his hat on the procession of priests. These people said "If you accept this way of being irreligious, if you accept the secular reason, it is the end of the world."

At the end of the day the secular reason triumphed in France. You have the right to mock God. You have the right to say that you don't believe in God. You have the right to say—to make some cartoons about Islam and about Christianity, and the real faithful to Islam, the real worshippers of Christianity, remain, maybe they are offended. The same thing can and should happen in the rest of the world. There is no reason to accept the moral blackmail of those who tell us, "If you impose us the equality between men and women, if you impose us the right to mock God, our societies will be destroyed and will explode." So the real point is should we universalize **(applause)** or not the human rights, or should we under the pretext that they are European values coming from the Western world and so on, not do it? I think that we *have* to do it and it is what the average silent majority of this country are waiting for us.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I think this solution doesn't work.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I give you two minutes. I give you four minutes—go ahead.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: [microphone troubles: some inaudible speech] I think that fundamentalism is—which is why I think that fundamentalism will not disappear, my God, you think you praise this country when this country is now on the verge of a catastrophe. Where do you see this liberalism? You will have Sarah Palin as a president. **(laughter)** And now I come to the weakness of liberalism. **(applause)** You will have her exploiting precisely the weaknesses of the left. What are her advantages? First, I claim, the left is paying the price, (a), for its total ignorance of the working class. United States multiculturalist left, they don't like the working class. So you have now first Palin—they want that. (b), our common friend, I think, Jacqueline Miller wrote a nice comment, maybe you read it in *Le Point* where he made another wonderful simple point that Sarah Palin is a new type of woman politician. It's no longer the old type, which was to use somewhat descriptively naïve terms, more phallic than men themselves, like Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, we may be women but we are tougher than and so on. No. She fully displays her femininity and so on.

Isn't this an incredible paradox that the Republicans took over what was supposed to be the Democratic ideal and so on and so on? Things are, of course, more complicated here. Because I think that there are many paradoxes here. The main one is this one. When the Republicans say, "Change, we stand for change." Of course the message between the lines is *plus ça change, plus*

c'est la meme, no, we will do the necessary changes to make it sure that nothing will really change as is clear from their program. But I fear something, and I here share your fears. They, of course, are probably cynics and consciously manipulative. Like to use the famous lipstick metaphor, McCain is Bush with lipstick, **(laughter)** with lipstick of no bullshitting and so on and so on, it's the same politics. What I am afraid of is, as we are both aware, words are never only words. So what I am afraid—it's not that they are cheating, but that they are not cheating, that they will really change something and I really don't like to think what they will change, how should I put it?

But to go back to your point—you see, that's my simple problem. Yes, liberalism, of course, I am for everything there what you said. My God, of course. My point is only that there is something, a flaw in liberal project, which generates fundamentalism. I don't have time to develop it now, it's not even very original, and my problem is the same as yours. Of course, I don't want the fundamentalists to fill in this gap. I totally agree with you. That's where we need the left. Liberalist legacy, for which both of us care. What you said, my God, automatically, I admit it, equality of sexes, no racism, blah, blah, blah, can only be—

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: But everywhere?

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Absolutely everywhere. Wait a minute. I am not any kind of cultural relativist and so on. I wrote even a treaty here we agree against tolerance, against the falsity of tolerance, against how today we tend to mystify and use the term "tolerance" to justify moral indifference and so on and so on. Like racism—Did you notice—this is where my—and I hope I

will now awaken some of your old Marxism if I say this. You need to be re-ed—don't be afraid, when we take over, you will not go to gulag, just two years of reeducation camp would be good for you. **(applause/laughter)**

So the beginning of reeducation—didn't you find it strange how today when we talk about racism, it's automatically a question of tolerance? But as we old leftists know, read Martin Luther King. He, as far as I know, never uses the term "tolerance." It would be for him humiliating to say, "Blacks need to be more tolerated." No, as you said, for him racism is a problem of not enough universal values, legal rights, economic exploitation, and so on and so on and so on. Why do we today automatically transform racism into a problem of tolerance? Because, as you said, politics is receding in a new technocratic world. The only conflicts which remain are cultural conflict, and all you can do there is to tolerate differences and so on and so on. So on this question of universality, I am here even more than you, I would do one step further against aggressive universality. And I will say, "Know who is at the end of this universal line," that may be Robespierre, no, but that's another question, no, where we maybe disagree.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: On tolerance, we have even a great French writer who said, "Tolerance. We have houses for that."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Paul Claudel.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: And houses for that—it is "maison d'tolerance," it is the code name of brothels.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: Paul Claudel—I love him.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Paul Claudel who by the way in 1941, I quote that in a chapter of the book, evokes the Nazism, evokes this sort of barbarity taking birth in the heart of Europe and says, “It is a sort of Islamic fundamentalism.” On Sarah Palin, what do you want to? Of course the race today is Barack Obama against Sarah Palin. John McCain has disappeared. There is not even a candidacy John McCain. It is Sarah Palin against Barack Obama and we have just to hope that this does not turn to the catastrophe.

The only real point of disagreement is nevertheless about liberalism. I do believe that you can turn it the way you want. There is a part, a real part, of the innate heritage of the left, which is linked to liberalism. Liberalism is not only Wall Street, the tycoons of the big companies, and so on. Liberalism is Delacroix, liberalism is Gavroche, liberalism is the Commune, the Commune of Paris. They had the flag of liberalism, they praised the liberalism of the press, the liberalism considered as a freedom of meeting and so on. Liberalism belongs to the tradition, to the innate heritage, to the wealth of the left, and what I see today really—and it is this despairing tendency of the left in Europe and in America to let, to drop flat the innate heritage, to leave the liberalism to the right and to the tycoon of Wall Street, and this is very strange, because the same leftists, for example, when they come to the question of nation—They say, “We have not to abandon the question of nation. Nation does not belong to the right. We should wage the battle.”

Okay, why not? Sometimes about the flag. They say, “We have to deliver, to wage the battle of the flag.” Strangely enough, they don’t do the same about liberalism. They quit the field, they abandon the fight, and this for me is one of the worst symptomatic signs of the period in which we live. This amputation of the progressive camp, of the liberal camp, in America and in France, of this whole part of its innate heritage, is mysterious and dramatic and deserves at least a reflection.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Not strangely enough, might I say, not strangely enough all the questions I got here have been amply covered in this conversation.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: This evening is a disaster, by the way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Really?

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: You hoped a fight, and a quarrel, and you had not so much.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I believe in failure. Slavoj, do you want to say something very quickly, you have sixty seconds.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: First, at the level of facts, I don’t quite follow your diagnosis because for example, let’s take here quickly in the United States, maybe I should take you on a tour to the

United States, another one, **(laughter)** what here presents itself as the radical left, a radical politically correct left. It is for me strictly a radicalized liberalism. What is political correctness, if not a certain kind of false, I even tend to agree with you, liberalism brought to extreme? So maybe of course it's true at the level of some debates, but basically I think that the left on the contrary perceives itself as a radicalization of liberalism, and even worse, it's a kind of a totally depoliticized liberalism.

What I—I hope we agree here. Where I oppose today's predominant American academic left is that instead of politics we get legalism and moralizing—it's moralizing, horror, racism, and so on, and then legalism in the proper place for political action, for political action is disappearing. Very briefly—I must stop that—as to your point of engagement and so on. No, I am also very engaged and so on. What I only mean is the following thing, and if you read closely my book I put it in this way. First, isn't it that often there is a false engagement in the sense that—okay, in what sense? Let me tell you a short story—don't be afraid— what happened to me in my psychoanalysis—as you can imagine, I talked all the time.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It wasn't successful.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It wasn't successful.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: I talked all the time! Why? Because I was afraid that if I stopped talking for a second, the analyst may ask me a truly pertinent question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I have been feeling this all evening. **(laughter)** I feel like your analyst.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: What we intellectuals engage in, all these protest activities and so on, are, as it was very well described already by George Orwell in the late thirties, he said, the left, the British liberal, okay, liberal, officially socialist left, talks so much about change as a superstitious item, let's talk about it so that nothing will really change, how can I put it? All I am saying is that sometimes when, with your apparent even critical activity, you keep things going on—the truly subversive thing is not to be violent but to do nothing and that's what I say in the book. **(applause)** Maybe, it's a very modest proposal. Do it—maybe I'm much more modest than I appear here. Do we really know where we are today? Do we even have a good theory about what goes on?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But your reaction is not to step back.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: To step back into thinking, into thinking—

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: No, I—my reaction is not to step back and what I see, what I see, and which is maybe a common point and for myself the origin of this book is a general step back in our societies. Step back on the question of liberalism. There was a time when the left believed

that it could be faithful to equality and to freedom at the same time. Today you have more and more people on the left who say equality, yes, freedom, we'll leave it to the right. This is a step back.

Step back on the question of the women, on the question of the feminism. It was a huge—one of the most important conquests, and victory of the last forty years, this equality in France, in America. Political correctness means also in America the fact that you have not the right to mock a woman as you had in the old times in France. This is a real accusation of this type. It is a step back. You have more and more liberals who say, "Okay, women, freedom, and so on, it depends where, it depends what is your region. The right is not the same according to the place where you are born and the place where you live."

Another three, another step back, which frightens me, which is a step back regarding another conquest, another great victory of the past generation, which was the dream, of a world, as I said before, where the borders will be less heavy, where the internationalization of the minds and of the body will be more real. This was May '68. When the people of Paris screamed, twenty years after the Second World War, "We are all German Jews!" There was the word "Jew," but there was also the word "German." Twenty years after the war, the people of Paris said "We are all German," so there was a sense of crossing the borders, of building a real fraternity, which was part of the project of the left. Today, we see the contrary. We see nationalisms, sovereignism, republicanism opposed to democraticism and so on.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which is why you wrote the book.

BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY: Which is also a step back. So these steps back—these are not mine, but are a real concern and it is a reason to involve, at least for me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen—

SLAVOJ ZIZEK: One more sentence. My God. This is purely a linguistic misunderstanding. When I thought about step back, I didn't mean step back as a regression, but step back as step back and think. We don't know—we don't even have a clear theory what is going on today. That's all I wanted to say.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This has been a double psychoanalytical session. Thank you very much! Bernard-Henri Lévy, Slavoj Zizek!

(applause)