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FODI || THE IN-BETWEEN

Episode 04: Eleanor Gordon-Smith & Slavoj Žižek | The age of doubt, reason and conspiracy

The In-Between theme music

Slavoj Zizek the secret premise of conspiracy theories is that we live in a godless world. The only thing that can save us is a bad God

Eleanor Gordon-Smith We started this Enlightenment era in an environment where knowledge was scarce and it was morally imperative to go after it. And now we live in an era when knowledge is utterly drenching us from all corners

Danielle Harvey: Welcome to The-In Between, an audio project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, presented by the Ethics Centre. I'm Festival Director, Danielle Harvey.

This podcast was produced on Gadigal land. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations people listening.

Doubt, reason and the pursuit of knowledge have defined how we evolved through the period known as the age of enlightenment.

But in today's world, how can we make sense of conspiracy theories, tribalism, and deepening divisions between our beliefs?

Today we sit between two great minds to understand the history of thought that led us to this point. What will it mean if the age of Enlightenment comes to an end? What lessons can we take from our past into an uncertain future?

Slavoj Zizek is a public intellectual who has published over 50 books on topics ranging from philosophy to theology, film, opera and politics.

He is a professor of philosophy at The European Graduate School and a senior researcher at the Institute for Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana.

Eleanor Gordon-Smith is a writer, broadcaster and ethicist currently based at Princeton University, where she is a Graduate Fellow of the University Centre for Human Values. She has spent much of her career exploring belief and reason, and her book *Stop Being Reasonable* explores how we might change the minds of others in an increasingly divided world.

This conversation was recorded in November 2021, and is moderated by FODI Co-Curator and Director of the Ethics Centre, Simon Longstaff.

Theme music out

Slavoj Zizek: Mine was no freedom for enemies of freedom, what will be your test motto?

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Eleanor Gordon-Smith: I like the Douglas Adams quote that no one capable of making himself president should, on any account, be allowed to do the job.

Slavoj Zizek: Absolutely. Yeah.

Simon Longstaff It is-.

Slavoj Zizek Okay Losing time.

Simon Longstaff Okay, nah that's good.

Slavoj Zizek Will you, the boss, make an introduction?

Simon Longstaff OK, look (laughs). First of all, Eleanor, can you just tell us a little bit about where you actually are at the moment, because normally we'd be having one of these meetings face to face, but with the effects of COVID, we're spread around the world. So can you describe something about your environment and more particularly how you came to be where you are in your career, in philosophy at the moment?

Eleanor Gordon-Smith Yeah, of course. I'm in New Jersey, in the United States of America, right now. I'm in Princeton, which is where I'm doing my PhD. It's just started to get really cold here. So from my apartment window, I can see a lake which has just started to freeze over, which is going to get very treacherous and romantic in the near future. And I'm here because when I first started thinking about what I wanted to do with life, I found that every path that I considered, whether it was being a journalist or being a politician, or you know, this career or that career, I found that I just kept returning to the same foundational questions, and eventually I thought, Well, I might as well make a career out of asking them if I'm going to be asking them anyway.

Simon Longstaff And Slavoj you're in Slovenia, I think. Can you describe a little bit about where you are?

Slavoj Zizek I'm in the apartment where I have some books, as you can see behind me. I'm in, Ljubljana, capital of Slovenia, and maybe what's of more interest to our listeners is that Slovenia, which is now near the top of all the countries in the world with regard to per capita infections, Slovenia is really as our beloved - bad joke - ex-President Trump said, a shithole of a country. We kind of combine the worst possible. Why? We have a strong anti-COVID explosion, which is linked in a horrible way to the violence, which is justified - not violence, but demonstrations and so on - against a right wing nationalist government, which is really right wing. I even like to use the term that this is the new axis of evil. Poland, Hungary, Slovenia. But the tragedy is now that these two oppositions struggle against protective anti-pandemic measures and struggle against the government. This is a terrible mistake. They got combined into one large protest movement. What should happen or happens as a rule more is a right wing protest, like right wing libertarian protest. Here, the left presence is also very strong in it. So we have leftist conspiracy theories and the situation is very sad. We are, more than the world in general, approaching a kind of collective madness.

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And here I would like to connect, she can directly reply to me, with Eleanor. Her work is also focussed on this. How do we make decisions? How do we decide that we know something, knowledge, belief and so on and so on? I think that the COVID pandemic confronted us even in our daily lives, forcefully with this basic question apropos conspiracy theories and so on. How do we decide that we know something? How do we decide to ignore something? I'm not saying that we were ever really rational. We were never deciding for pure, rational reasons. But all that was just like slowly growing beneath the surface is now coming open. I cannot even imagine five or 10 years ago such open, what appears to me at least, irrationalities as we see them now.

Music bridge

Simon Longstaff: The dangerous idea we're exploring is that the historical period that we call the Enlightenment is coming to an end. And my first question is to ask you whether or not you think there are any signs that you can see in popular culture that indicate that that is true or not? Can you see any sense of an unraveling taking place? Eleanor, do you want to pick up on that notion about this tragic moment in which irrationality is bubbling to the surface and what do you make of that discourse that Slavoj was just offering?

Eleanor Gordon-Smith Yeah, I couldn't agree more. This is a moment in which not just rationality is being challenged but the very models of rationality and being challenged know so the kind of presiding and prevailing ethics of belief and background questions about when we should believe something, and under what circumstances we consider ourselves entitled to know something. Simon, you ask about whether the Enlightenment era is coming to an end. I think one really important dimension of that question is, what would it mean to say that the Enlightenment era is coming to an end? And one gloss on that question is, are the current models that we have and that we inherited from the Enlightenment of what a belief is when it's rational and when it's entitled to countless knowledge, are those models adequate right now for the crisis that's confronting us?

Slavoj Zizek In spite of all this doubt and so on, and so-called irrationalities, the reason I still consider myself a partisan of Enlightenment, is that from the very beginning, the way I see it, Enlightenment was not just, rationality, clear reasoning. But at the same time, a kind of reflexive movement of self doubt of, do we really come at our convictions with reasons?- For example, you find this in Immanuel Kant. In his anthropology he wrote a lot about, how important are these daily rituals of, we follow unwritten rules, we pretend something, although we know we don't mean it seriously. The truth is in the forum, and this is so important today that's what I find dangerous in today's conspiracy theorists. They don't believe. Belief, authentic belief is never dogmatic. Believe means, you precisely don't know.

What I've found so horrible about the conspiracy theories is that it's not belief, they act as if they know. They begin in a very non dogmatic way. Don't believe, don't take too seriously official science doubt it and so on and so on. But it's just the first step, then at a certain point, not even belief, but knowledge itself. And I think conspiracy theorists are a return of some back pre-modern era, not even of belief, but of knowledge. Even the hypothesis of conspiracy theories - I read it very pessimistically - today we live in this crazy, plural universe. Everybody

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has this knowledge. We are divided into tribes and so on. There is no big other in the Lacanian sense of shared ethical substance or divinity to which we can all refer. So for me, the secret premise of conspiracy theories is that we live in a godless world. The only thing that can save us is a bad God, because the assurance that you get from conspiracy theories is, there is a God, it may be a God who pulls the strings and so on and so on. But as Robespierre said, we are not lost in a storm on the sea. There is some folks which pulls the streets. True enlightenment for me is ready to drop this. We are on an open sea. We don't have a compass.

Simon Longstaff Eleanor, you're in the land of conspiracy theories, I think, in the United States. They seem to abound there. What do you make of this?

Eleanor Gordon-Smith Yeah, I love this idea. That belief is precisely that you don't know. So I think one of the open questions that confronts us, the descendants of the Enlightenment in opposition to the conspiracy theories as Slavoj was just talking about, is look, having been sold on the moral and political virtue of pursuing enquiry. How do we know when to stop enquiry? Because that's an equally important question. How do we know when enough enquiry has been enough and enough evidence has been enough and we can kind of consider a question answered. So I think there are many, many circumstances in which we decline to avail ourselves of certain beliefs or certain candidate truths because we're being very Cartesianly responsible and we're declining to encounter the possibility of doubt. And meanwhile, while those of us who are sort of warriors for the enlightenment of being very epistemically polite and trying to only believe those things that we're allowed to do so on, the conspiracy theorists, meanwhile, consider themselves a veil of knowledge, which then they deploy in a very different way. And so I think one significant hazard of the Enlightenment and for its descendants is the possibility that in the search for truth and in the quest to conduct responsible enquiry, we in fact wind up, because of the presence of doubt, making sure that we will never be able to consider that enquiry closed.

Eleanor Gordon-Smith I think a lot about William James, the American psychologist and the brother of Henry James. Who was a- totally fantastic and fascinating figure in many ways, like a father of American psychology. And he had this really interesting idea that one way you can be justified in holding a particular belief is if it's true and, belief for you, great, you've got a great belief there. But another way that you can be justified in holding a particular belief, and this is true for like a very restricted set of beliefs, is that believing it would make it true. There's a sort of self-fulfilling, self-reinforcing character. So, for instance, all the sailors on the ship need to all believe that when they say 'heave', the others will. Such that with each of them individually believing that they have this power collectively, they make it the case that they do. So sometimes James thinks that we're entitled to believe certain things when believing it will fulfill something that we have an interest in fulfilling. And, I guess I wonder a lot about whether in the political and the personal sphere. There are beliefs like this that it would be self-fulfilling in a kind of galvanising and potentially beautiful way for us to believe. You know, beliefs in each other's democratic capabilities, or beliefs in each other's solidarity, or belief in each other's power, that we don't avail ourselves of because we're busy being very cautious and seeing which beliefs will hold up under the scrutiny of doubt. And then maybe, you know, that means that we deprive ourselves of some of the beliefs that would, in fact, self fulfill if we had them and deliver us into a world that we want to be in.

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Slavoj Zizek Can I enter?

Simon Longstaff Yeah, yeah, please just jump in when you're ready, then.

Slavoj Zizek Well, I'm always ready. (Eleanor laughs) No. I want to say that I am deeply impressed by what Eleanor just said because I think that one thing is this, total skeptical doubt, self-destruction of reason and so on and so on. But the best philosophical tradition does something else. The goal is not to destroy beliefs, but to make them obvious. That's why I like Eleanor's work where she raises this question, this self-fulfilling prophecy and so on. Yes, I think that Hegel himself uses, in this sense, even very materialist one, the notion of spirit. Hegel says literally in his phenomenology, that spirit is not some deeper substance which pulls the strings. Spirit is something that is alive only in so far as there are believers who take it seriously. So, Hegel is very clear here. The said, the only thing that actually exists are individuals who are interacting. But to live in the spiritual society means, I'm almost tempted to say, that it's necessary, a minimal reification here. We cannot just say we trust each other. No, we must in a way that reify, or fetishize even, our trust in some entity. Like, communism only exists in so far as people are acting for communism.

So, if I may conclude with another example that I like of the Enlightenment at its best. Before Hume, there comes John Locke and I was shocked to discover, reading recently a book on Locke, do you know that Locke justified displacing, even annihilating, we called them at that point Indians, Native Americans. You know what was his reasoning? That's what shocked me, Locke's principle position was that if you have nice, fertile land, then only those who really productively work on the land should own it. One thing he said, but look, Indians and just hunting for buffaloes there they are not really using the Earth productively. So ha ha, we have the right to displace them and so on and so on. So, you know, this is what interests me. How even the best idea can have dark consequences.

And Eleanor, I wonder if, I hope you will agree with me here. This search for a point of catastrophe, you know, like Marx, was good. Well, with Lenin things go back. Or Lenin was still good, but Stalin is bad. So if only that's their dream. Lenin were to survive for three four years, made a pact with Trotsky. We wouldn't have Stalinism and so on. So we do nothing, no, we should. just be aware of how interventions, changing society, changing nature even today, it's a highly risky activity. And as a rule, it first fails. We have to do it again and again, and so on and so on. As Walter Benjamin, the fellow traveller of Frankfurt school, said beautifully. Our task today is not to write the train of history, which goes towards progress, but to pull the brake, to stop the train. Thinking that you can do this perfect planning, is I think what we should problematise in Marxist tradition.

Simon Longstaff Eleanor, this notion that thinking is running aground on itself, which I think is a paraphrase of what Slavoj said, does that ring a bell with you in terms of what you're experiencing?

Eleanor Gordon-Smith Yeah. And I want to ask, if I can, I'd like to ask Slavoj sort of a material question about how we enact that. Simon, you asked earlier about whether we see any signs in pop culture that the Enlightenment era is sort of drawing itself to a close. I think

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one of the most striking things about the pop culture era that we live in is quite how dramatic the proliferation of knowledge has been. So we think about like, what was the Enlightenment and what words organising principles. The Enlightenment was about the entitlement and the imperative to pursue knowledge. The entitlement because like beforehand, it just sort of wasn't the purview of the everyday person to pursue knowledge or even consider themselves like a possible source of knowledge. Knowledge was very fiercely guarded by the Church and the Crown. Once we had the idea that we could have knowledge, a lot of these Enlightenment figures we're talking about thought that you had like a very serious ethical duty to seize it. So there's this very mobilising animating idea that we have a very serious duty, not just in epistemic duty, but a moral or a virtuous one to go after knowledge. So it's kind of tragic in sort of like a Greek tragic way, that now 400 years later, when I look at pop culture, I feel this very specific fatigue from being utterly gorged on knowledge like I know what Ariana Grande had for breakfast. I know who Kim Kardashian is dating. I know the oil prices absolutely 100 percent of the time. I know what strangers think of me. I know what I look like. I know what you look like. I know what everyone's had for breakfast. It's just like an astonishing proliferation of knowledge. And I think that's kind of definitive of the moment that we're in. Like, I think about my time here in the US, towards the end of the Trump administration. And it was like there was an inflation on knowledge. Like journalists were walking down the street with wheelbarrows full of news and they couldn't give it away. Like every day, there were stories of something so improbable and so implausible. Like, do you remember, there was a guy named Joe Pizza who told the president that hydroxychloroquine was going to cure COVID? That was like a big news story for a brief heartbeat. And no one remembers it anymore because there's so much available knowledge it all just kind of becomes awash.

An interesting inversion that we're living through in pop culture now is that we started this era, this Enlightenment era in an environment where knowledge was scarce and it was morally imperative to go after it. And now we live in an era when knowledge is utterly drenching us from all corners. So much so that its value, I think, has been subject to a kind of inflation. So the question then is how do you restore the emancipatory potential of knowledge that the Enlightenment founders saw? How do you get back the kind of bravery, the self-development, the political resistance, the independence in the act of knowing in this particular moment? So, I suppose the question to Slavoj about Walter Benjamin and pulling the handbrake is, is there a way to restore the bravery and the value of knowledge in an environment where it's so cheap and so readily available?

Slavoj Zizek I'm like that doll, which always has an answer. (Eleanor laughs) So I think I have at least that general direction of a possible answer. To emphasise another thing which was developed then by Freud, other psychoanalyst, this logic of in French, you say je sais bien, mais comme meme. 'I know very well, but...'. How even if you know something, you act as if you don't know it. My favourite story here, the one about Niels Bohr, who had a horseshoe at the entrance of his country house. A scientist friend visited him and asked, My God, you are a scientist, you don't have superstitions. Why do you have a horseshoe there? Because in Europe, at least, horseshoe means a magic item. preventing evil spirits to enter the house. And Niels Bohr, who was an authentic genius, Niels Bohr's answer was a perfect one. He said, I'm a scientist, of course I don't believe in it, but I have it because I was told that it works, even if you don't believe in it! (Eleanor laughs) This is more and more today our attitude. We are cynical. We don't believe, we know it's not true, but nonetheless we act upon

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it. On the other hand, the opposite thing, don't also fetishize belief. For example, I spoke recently in Korea with a defector from the North. And they asked him the typical naive European Enlightenment question. When you read in your media, he confirmed this to me that the crazy thing that when Kim Il-Sung, the founding father died, even birds descended from the sky and cried on his grave, or that Korean leader Kim Jong Il, now Kim Il-Sung, are so clean that they don't defecate and so on. And he told me, Of course, it's not true. You should look at these items as enacted rituals. It's a kind of folklore that we respect because it keeps us together and so on and so on.

You know, the wonderful book that I would advise everybody to read? Paul Veyne *Did the Ancient Greeks Believe in their Gods?* And he proves convincingly that no, no ancient Greek really believed if you climb to the top of the mountain Olympus, you will see that, whatever, Zeus screwing Aphrodite or whatever. They knew this. But nonetheless, it worked as a form of politeness, of social cohesion, inclusion and so on. So the mistake is, and I think it's a very important one that the bad Enlightenment, the naive, vulgar Enlightenment tend to falsify the past, the pre-Enlightenment era as if they were naive idiots who believed. No belief in pre-modern era, they were not idiots. Like, I really think it was something much more ambiguous. Mysterious. So modernity is not just knowledge. It's also on the other side, a certain regression to primitivity.

The first lesson of good enlightenment is don't simply fight your opponent. And that's what's happening today. You know that one figure who solicited pro-Trump revolt and so on was brought to court, and she gave an incredible answer. She pleaded not guilty. She said, But isn't it clear that what I was saying there, QAnon and all those, that it's obviously not true, so I didn't mean it seriously. That's the enigma I find today. On the one hand, this paranoia certainty. But at the same time, this totally cynical indifference. I don't really mean it seriously and so on and so on.

Music bridge

Simon Longstaff We began, Slavoj, with your very eloquent expression of what's going on in Slovenia and what you talked about, not just there, of course, about this burgeoning irrationality and conspiracy theories. And Eleanor, I think you affirmed you sense something the same where you're living in the United States, and I think it might be a more general phenomenon. And I'm still wondering, do we think that the Enlightenment ideal is unraveling? And if so, if you have any hint of what might come. And then finally, what do you think we ought to rescue from it and carry forward into whatever future is emerging? So perhaps, Eleanor, if you don't mind those three questions, if you could give, if possible, a brief response as well.

Eleanor Gordon-Smith I'll try to synthesise into a condensed caramel of knowledge.

Simon Longstaff Laughs.

Eleanor Gordon-Smith I don't feel confident pronouncing that an Enlightenment era is coming to an end. I think it's wavering, and I think it faces important challenges. I think one of those challenges has to do actually with a lot of what we've spoken about here today, which

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is about how to distinguish enquiry and the self formation and emancipation of good enquiry from mere and knowledge and cheap belief. I think there are ways of knowing and having and formulating beliefs that come relatively for free. You know, ones, we've talked about conspiracy theories, the things that advertisers want you to believe, the things that powers want you to be content with. And these are basically forms of believing what you're told or believing what's in front of you conceptually speaking. And these are fine, I think, as far as they go. But they're not where the ideal of the Enlightenment lies. The ideal of the Enlightenment and the promise of the Enlightenment was always in enquiry as an active verb, as an activity rather than as a passivity. And that is an activity that we're not used to, you know, Kant said in *What Is Enlightenment* that we are at first going to be incapable of using our own understanding because we've never been permitted to try it. And I think that's kind of the spirit of what in a very modern and fragmented way we're living through right now is quite how unsteady on our feet many of us feel when it comes time to actually enquire for ourselves in that sort of richer way.

So I think one hazard that we face in this era now is that the proliferation of knowledge all around us makes it the case that we are less likely to realise that we're ignorant in that sort of second richer way. Sometimes you have to get really uncomfortable in order to want to change, and the risk with the environment that we're in right now and sort of information saturation and the perspective saturation is that we never feel the level of discomfort. We never feel the amount of ignorance that would drive us to correct. It obscures the feeling of ignorance that would be a motivation or a drive to that sort of true independent enlightenment spirit form of enquiry. So I don't I don't feel like the Enlightenment era is drawing to a close. But I do think that it's a a critical and pressing question how we - in the current kind of modes of production that we live in, in the sort of media environment that we live in - can reclaim some of that rich a sense of enquiry rather than just being buffeted between kinds of knowledge and belief.

Simon Longstaff Slavoj.

Slavoj Zizek I'm in very hard predicament now because at the end, I want that somehow to stab you in the back, Eleanor, but I agree with (Eleanor laughs) you, it's a fiasco. Why? Let me go step by step. It's very important what you said. Where I disagree with naive Enlightenment, if that we have a desire for knowledge, knowledge brings joy. No. True knowledge hurts. (Eleanor Mm-Hmm) Basically, we don't want to know too much. And it's very sad how some of today's Enlightenment philosophers, although they don't say follow this old Catholic line with regard for example to biogenetics, how our brain works, basically if we get to know too much about it, we will objectivise ourself, we will lose our personal dignity, so to retain our freedom it's better not to know too much. No. For me, true knowledge hurts. That's why, precisely. I cannot fully support today's official pro-Enlightenment guys like Steven Pinker, so-called rational optimists. They somehow missed this (Eleanor mm hmm) painful moment.

Just to close, Enlightenment again, I hate myself, but I agree with you, Eleanor. (Eleanor laughs) It's an open moment. We are in the middle of the fight. We are not at the end of the story. We cannot afford ourselves this retroactive view in the sense of, Oh, who cares what is done is already done? No, we are in the middle of the struggle. Just think how the pandemic changed our everyday experience. It's clear that, and here I respect - don't agree with them -

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some people who protest COVID lockdown and so on measures, because they see the notion that they have of what constitutes a free human being threatened by these measures. Is it true or not? How to redefine our freedom and so on and so on. We live in an era where it's not simply Marx Theses 11. Philosophers have only interpreted the world, we have to change it. My provocation of my Marxist friend is that maybe that to begin today with real work, which should turn around Thesis 11, maybe in the 20th century. We tried to change the world too quickly without really adequately interpreting it. And my motto would have been a 20th century leftists were just trying to change the world. The time is also to interpret it differently. That's the challenge.

The In-Between theme music

Simon Longstaff Well, look, that's a really, really interesting conversation. Can I thank both of you for that and for this notion of being in the midst of the struggle at the moment? That's something which I think it's a really interesting way to articulate what I think a lot of people seem to be feeling

Eleanor Gordon-Smith Thank you so much. This has been an absolute honour. It's been a real pleasure.

Slavoj Zizek It was really a pleasure for me, because I admire how you try to connect thinking with this simple doubts... (fades)

The In-Between theme music

Danielle Harvey: Thank you to Slavoj Zizek, Eleanor Gordon-Smith and Simon Longstaff. Accompanying this episode is a short response in sound, featuring a computer in the future attempting to record the experience of watching a dancer.

In our next conversation, we sit between Joanna Bourke and Toby Walsh for a conversation about pain, killer robots and what it means to be human.

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