

Oedipus is So Bourgeois: Žižek and the Mediating Subject

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R. C. Smith

The Ticklish Subject? A Critique of Žižek's Lacanian Theory of Subjectivity, with Emphasis on an Alternative

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No slave is more deluded than one who turns dependence from a master into condescendence or, worse, appreciation for 'the way things are'. This, in a nutshell, is the dilemmatic condition of the neoliberal subject, which Smith – paraphrasing Adorno – poignantly ascribes to the workings of 'the system of capital [...] toward blocking, nullifying or stunting the emergence of true individuality and a non-alienated social world'.¹ The question that Smith addresses in his collection of essays on Žižek and Lacan's notion of subjectivity concerns, at heart, the recovery of the 'critical capacities of a well-functioning mediating ego',² as opposed to mistaking trauma and lack for the fundamental existential condition of human beings, accepting instead of questioning it, a position that he suggests is implicit in Lacan and Žižek's theories of subject formation.³

1 R. C. Smith with Elliot Sperber, *Democracy in Crisis: Toward a Foundational, Alternative Theory of Participatory Democracy* (London: Heathwood, 2013), p. 18.

2 Ibid.; quoting David Sherman, *Satre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

3 For an interesting discussion of this dilemma, see J. D. Taylor, 'Spent? Capitalism's Growing Problem with Anxiety', *ROAR Mag*, 14 March 2014 <<http://roarmag.org/2014/03/neoliberal-capitalism-anxiety-depression-insecurity/>> [31 January 2015].

The work of Žižek and Lacan provides Smith's entry point into this debate. Seeing things clearly means being able to differentiate between them so that they don't remain a blur. This entails distinguishing our experience of some 'thing' in contrast to another – in much the same way as we 'see' white only alongside another colour – so as to begin discerning the unfolding contours of what has caught our attention. In this spirit, then, my hope in picking up this slim collection of essays was that, by approaching Žižek through Smith's critical lens ('critical' in the sense Smith uses it in: of retaining an openness to alternative philosophical paradigms) I could gain a better grip on the still elusive 'thing' that Žižek's (and Lacan's) work is for me.⁴ By the end, however, I felt the gain was not so much in the synoptic view that Smith's book affords, juxtaposing 'the most dangerous philosopher in the world' to the likes of Sartre and Adorno. It was, instead, in the awareness that 'tentativeness' – that of my earlier engagement with Žižek, as I stayed open to his body of work while it simultaneously remained ambiguous for me – is not something to expunge. Quite the opposite: dwelling in the experience of some 'thing' while remaining attuned to the possibility that it might become for us other than what we hold it to be at present, is precisely the sort of practical orientation that Smith tries to advance in his collection of essays. And the political consequences of cultivating this attitude through experiments like Occupy, as I hope to illustrate below, are intensely gripping; they disclose nothing less than the promise to recover a sense of effective mediation and agency – the possibility of making a difference to one's sociohistorical conditions – from the ruins of the neoliberal deformation of the subject.

Smith's book, issued by the publishing imprint of the Heathwood Institute,⁵ is divided into three parts, devoted respectively to Lacan's theory of subject development, Žižek's reliance on it in his own political philosophy and, finally, the alternative theory of the 'mediating subject' that Smith draws out, in dialogue with the works of Adorno and Horkheimer among others.⁶

In the first part, Smith introduces his reading of Lacan's treatment of the Oedipal phase in early child development as it being constitutive of the acquisition of subjectivity. In other words, the process of becoming a subject Lacan understands - in Smith's presentation of it - as one of fundamental enclosure of the child from their immersion in a condition of sensory entanglement; an enclosure that creates a constitutive sense of lack. During the 'mirror phase', for instance,

4 R. C. Smith, *The Ticklish Subject? A Critique of Žižek's Lacanian Theory of Subjectivity, with Emphasis on an Alternative* (London: Heathwood, 2013), pp. 98–9. Subsequent references are to Smith, *Critique*.

5 ROAR Collective, 'Heathwood: Critical Theory for Revolutionary Practice', *ROAR Mag*, 4 March 2014 <<http://roarmag.org/2014/03/heathwood-occupy-critical-theory/>> [accessed 31 January 2015].

6 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).

the child becomes, so to say, ‘entrapped’ in their image as reflected in the mirror: they are animated by the unattainable desire for the stable, coherent self in the mirror, an idealisation that is not matched in the child’s experience of themselves outside of the mirror.⁷ Likewise, the child’s Oedipal desire directed towards the mother is resolved as the child gives up incestuous fantasies upon being inducted in the realm of culture and order (what Lacan terms the acceptance of the ‘Name-of-the-Father’).⁸ In this sense, therefore, the child is properly constituted as a subject through a process of double enclosure that culminates with their being assimilated into a symbolic order. As Smith puts it: ‘the zero-point in terms of subject development [for Lacan] is precisely at the point of the infant’s introduction to the symbolic order by the father’.⁹

Smith builds on this interpretation of Lacan to criticise him for assuming that the Oedipal phase – the point at which authority first encroaches on the infant’s openness to the world – is not so much a distortion, but rather an ontological necessity.¹⁰ In other words, Lacan raises the deformation of a subject’s efficacy in the Oedipal phase to a paradigm for the acquisition of subjectivity, rather than framing it as the resultant of a fundamentally traumatic process.¹¹

In Part Two, Smith then takes issue with Žižek’s reliance on Lacan’s theory of subject formation for the purpose of establishing the opposition between the Real and the Symbolic, with the latter establishing the conditions for the expression of human subjectivity. In this sense, if a subject only becomes such through an imposition (of language) that enables absolute signification, Žižek’s political philosophy never fully manages to wrangle free of the need to posit some orientation towards authority. Smith substantiates this point by suggesting that, if one begins to tackle Žižek from his roots in Lacan’s theory of subject formation, the view one likely ends up with is of the subject as ‘in need of taming’: an approach that fundamentally mirrors and underlies authoritarian pedagogies.¹² Because of his Lacanian roots, moreover, Žižek ends up in the paradox that emancipation of the subject can only occur through a new submission: ‘in order for the individuals to “reach beyond themselves”, to break out of the passivity of representative politics and engage themselves as direct political agents, the reference to a leader is necessary, a leader who allows them to pull themselves out of the swamp like Baron

7 Smith, *Critique*, pp. 5–6.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

11 See *ibid.*, pp. 52, 28; cf. pp. 38–9, where Smith describes the subject as being effective in changing the sociohistorical conditions they are born into.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 53.

Munchhausen, a leader who is “supposed to know” what they want’.¹³ For Smith, however, just like the Oedipal phase is a stunting developmental contingency, and not a necessary step to constitute oneself as a subject, so too is this (submissive) political subjectivity – which Žižek takes for granted – merely the outcome of a historical deformation. Namely, it is the realisation of a docile bourgeois subject – in opposition to the ‘mediating subject’ – that ‘intentionally constricts or narrows the horizon of experiential possibility by forcing the world of phenomena into pre-formed (already existing) frameworks of “rational” assumptions, labels, concepts, or objectifications’.¹⁴

In contrast to Žižek (and Lacan), Smith advances the possibility of a much more open form of subjectivity: one grounded (to refer to Adorno) in non-identity thinking,¹⁵ meaning a non-objectifying orientation that dwells in the phenomenon and remains open to it, a form of reason that Adorno himself termed ‘mimesis’.¹⁶

For this purpose, Smith starts from an alternative picture of child development; one where the infant is understood to be ‘already active and blossoming’¹⁷ before being inducted into language; the child is an agent and an effective subject from day one. Building on this view, he rejects the opposition between the Real and the Symbolic that presupposes an effort to fit the world into some total symbolic schema,¹⁸ and offers instead a sense of the world as emerging from the interplay of mediating subjectivities.¹⁹ Our experience of phenomena, Smith suggests, is always excessive, in the sense of manifesting an endless potential for novelty. At the same time, however, this novelty deploys itself within a history of previous sense experiences through which the phenomenon has come into being, and through which it has acquired some kind of identity,²⁰ albeit one that is always provisional, as every subject (and that again includes phenomena) is always on the way to revealing hitherto latent aspects of itself.²¹ It is in this sense that Smith can say that the world of experience emerges out of the mediation between what something has intersubjectively revealed itself to be over time, and what it

13 Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Simple Courage of Decision: a Leftist Tribute to Thatcher’, *New Statesman*, 17 April 2013 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/04/simple-courage-decision-leftist-tribute-thatcher>> [accessed 31 January 2015].

14 Smith, *Critique*, p. 61.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

16 *Ibid.*, 100; quoting Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

17 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

19 Where he understands subjects to not be just humans, but any phenomena manifested in experience; see *ibid.*, p. 65.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 67.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 73–5, 110.

could be as it unfolds further: ‘a theory of the “mediating subject” [emphasises] the alternative of keeping open to the world, to not absolutize the world of things (i.e., a critique of identity thought) *to allow for and in fact affirm the unfolding of the many dimensions of life and experience in history, and to ceaselessly and normatively reflect on the continuity of knowledge and the constantly revealing nature of all experience* (and therefore knowledge)’.²²

By positing the possibility of constant mediation – stemming from openness to novelty and the particulars of experience – Smith further draws our attention to the implicit ethical and political responsibility in our ‘everyday’ relating. To operate in a non-objectifying paradigm that moves beyond the reifying tendency of identity thinking²³ requires a willingness to remain responsively engaged with a phenomenon, taking any generalisation as always tentative and open for further specification, refinement or reconfiguration. In this sense, therefore, ethics is very much entwined with the question of the world’s mattering and the quality of our participation in it: a control-oriented approach that tries to monologically determine what matters and how it comes into being is ultimately a rejection of the contingent and the innovative. It is, in other words, the stunting of incipient new forms of life that reveal themselves as they body forth intersubjectively. In this, his position is close to Karen Barad’s view that ‘ethics is not simply about responsible actions in relation to human experiences of the world; rather, it is a question of material entanglements and how each intra-action matters in the reconfiguring of these entanglements, that is, it is a matter of the ethical call that is embodied in the very worlding of the world’.²⁴

At its heart, then, the ‘identity thinking’ that Smith criticises is rooted in a particular idea of knowledge, whereby it is meant to provide an absolute foundation for action, rather than just a provisional footing: ‘foundation’ giving the sense of something immutable and fixed, whereas ‘footing’ is more suggestive of a station in wayfaring. In this sense, power is intimately bound up with knowledge production insofar as an absolutist understanding of knowledge grounds the need for power to provide that (ultimately elusive) foundation.²⁵

Building on this idea that a foundationalist theory of knowledge grounds the need for power, Smith goes on to offer a different take on what goes on as one

22 Ibid., p. 96, my italics. See also *ibid.*, p. 113; quoting Sherman, *The Dialectics of Subjectivity*.

23 So that conceptual abstraction becomes divorced from experience, as exemplified in accusations levied at ‘the Jews’ in Nazi propaganda (see Smith, *Critique*, p. 69) and, perhaps closer to us, in the blind anti-immigrant rhetoric from the likes of the Cameron government and, of course, the infamous Nigel Farage (see Chitra Nagarajan, ‘We Need to Change the Very Language We Use to Talk about Immigrants’, *New Statesman*, 15 August 2013).

24 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 160.

25 Smith, *Critique*, p. 86.

learns, in support of an alternative, non-totalising social and political project. This point, one that is central to this book, requires that one begin with a notion of the subject that does not presuppose the establishment of some kind of symbolic order ('a one-dimensional and abstract frame of reference'),²⁶ as assumed by Žižek, and Lacan before him. In contrast to them, Smith outlines a theory of 'experiential coherence', whereby phenomena 'appear' and therefore become real and true as the different forms of being in which they manifest their qualities 'cohere'. So, for instance, he mentions 'a bodily truth, a technical truth, a sensory truth, an emotional truth, a psychic truth, an imaginative truth, an aesthetic truth, a lingual truth, and a cognitive truth':²⁷ a phenomenon appears through the mediation and quest for fittingness (amidst 'intersubjective tension')²⁸ and the resonance across all of these possible dimensions of being, and its appearance looks very much like an attempt to stabilise and square together this incipient experiential world through continuous responsive engagement with the phenomenon itself. Experiential coherence, therefore, ultimately emerges through an ongoing process of mediation between subjects: both the person who experiences a phenomenon and the phenomenon itself that bodies forth and discloses itself more richly in dialogical responsiveness to the person's tentative probing. A theory of experiential coherence is therefore compatible with an understanding of phenomena as time-shapes,²⁹ in the sense of something shining through an atmosphere of previous manifestations of itself across a range of experiential dimensions,³⁰ while still retaining an orientation towards new, as-yet-unrevealed possibilities for being.³¹ Because of the shape-shifting character of phenomena (including social phenomena)³² in their intersubjective unfolding, then, even if it is still possible to categorise things, categories are never fixed, but rather they flow in dialogue with the particulars of experience.³³

This perspective informs a different gaze into the social. With eyes no longer fixed on a monological symbolic order, but rather open to catching incipient novelty in the unfolding of a (social) phenomenon, it finally becomes possible to obtain a glimpse of emerging lifeworlds in the prefigurative experiments that Smith enumerates: from alternative educational paradigms and institutions (such as the Summerhill school, the works of whose founder, A.S. Neill, he references

26 Ibid., p. 98.

27 Ibid., p. 105.

28 Ibid.

29 John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 118, 227 n12.

30 Smith, *Critique*, p. 108.

31 Ibid., p. 110.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 109.

copiously), to Occupy assemblies.³⁴ A theory of knowledge of this sort, in fact, offers a footing through which to begin to see the incipient reality of alternative ‘sociohistorical’ conditions. In this sense, it fulfills the aspiration voiced, for instance, by Tim Ingold, to turn the practice of knowing into an opportunity ‘to open up a space for generous, open-ended, comparative yet critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life’, joining ‘with people in their speculations about what life *might* or *could* be like, in ways nevertheless grounded in a profound understanding of what life *is* like in particular times and places’.³⁵ Not just that, Smith’s non-objectifying orientation offers “road signs” needed to help navigate a change of coordinates in the process of changing our present sociohistorical situation’.³⁶ By this, I mean that Smith tries to offer not just a way of seeing alternative forms of sociality in their happening, but it also offers an anticipation to guide our relating within them, through an ethos of openness to their continued unfolding and evolution over time, so as to avoid their reification into packaged alternatives and embrace instead their evolving nature. A nature that demands our involvement as participant parts, and not as subjects of a new hierarchical system of signification that – like all ‘bad generalisations’ – would paradoxically prolong the alienation from life as it expresses itself through phenomena (an alienation that Smith traces at least to the Enlightenment’s yearning for mastery and control).³⁷

What are we to do with Žižek, then? Perhaps a little, but perhaps still a lot. Scholars committed to Žižek may read in the Slovenian philosopher’s work more than what Smith does. This is because ‘Žižek’ itself is a living tradition of argumentation, a subject not an object, that manifests itself in dialogue with readers that express their ‘phenomenological freedom’ in reacting to it in different possible ways than Smith does.³⁸ And the same goes for Žižek’s writings, which can lend new qualities to observers ready to grasp them. If anything, then, a hypothetical response to Smith, contending that Žižek has been misunderstood in his script, would be less of a rebuttal, and more of a manifestation of the very point that Smith is trying to make: that subjects (readers of Žižek) interact with other subjects (the literary and argumentative tradition presented in the works of Žižek), to etch new meanings that escape any essentialised characterisation. In this, then, lies the great value of Smith’s theory, that it is able to accompany even the process by which others committed to developing Žižek’s thought might want to react to

34 See, for example, Alexander Sutherland Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

35 Timothy Ingold, ‘Knowing from the inside: Reconfiguring the Relations between Anthropology and Ethnography’, Magisterial lecture presented at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Buenos Aires, October 25, 2012.

36 Smith, *Critique*, p. 117.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

his book, articulating their own inclination to remain open to the Žižek's work and find ways to make it speak beyond any definitional constraints put around it. For this reason, this will be a terrific read not just for those puzzled by Žižek and wanting to put in words their uncertainty, but also to the Žižek scholar that may find here the source of new orientations and hermeneutical possibilities beyond the limitations highlighted in Smith's incisive and insightful polemic.

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